

H. Academy 961

Chapter 961 The Antagonist

The early morning sun filtered through the tall windows of the academy's central training hall, casting long shadows across the polished stone floor. The walls were reinforced with mana-inscribed barriers that shimmered faintly-an ever-present reminder that what happened in this space would not be gentle.

The students stood lined up in neat rows, dressed in their reinforced combat uniforms, each with their weapon of choice either strapped across their back or summoned at their side.

This wasn't a strategy lecture.

This was a combat class.

And now that clubs were gone and the academy was tightening its rules, classes like these had become more intense... and more frequent.

At the center of the room stood Instructor Verren, a tall, broad-shouldered man with grey hair swept back and a voice that could silence a room with a single word. A seasoned warrior with years in the field, Verren had little patience for excuses-and even less for wasted potential.

His sharp eyes scanned the class as he spoke.

"Listen up."

The chatter immediately died.

"Without club activities and private training groups, you now have fewer outlets to develop your combat. That is no excuse to stagnate. From now on, these sessions will be held twice a week-and every time, you will fight."

There was no resistance. No one dared to complain.

He began calling names.

Instructor Verren's voice rang clear in the vast training hall, a blade slicing through any remaining tension.

"Today's sparring assignments have been pre-determined," he said. "These are mandatory. You will engage with full focus and intent. Controlled strikes only-but fight as if your advancement depends on it."

He glanced down at the slate in his hand.

"First match-Victor Blackthorn vs. Ethan Hartley."

The moment the names were spoken, a stillness fell across the room.

Dozens of heads turned at once.

Victor.

The name alone carried weight-undeniable weight.

Recently, he had become something of a phantom within the academy. Months ago, he had been omnipresent: top of the charts, impossible to ignore, a prodigy in every measurable sense.

But now, sightings of him were rare.

He'd been granted special permissions from the headmaster himself-an independent path, tailored to his "advanced pace."

Most students couldn't even recall the last time they'd seen him in class, let alone training.

And yet he was here now.

Victor stepped forward from the rear line, his footsteps calm, confident, and deliberate. His uniform was sharp, barely worn, like a blade kept in a scabbard too long. His golden eyes gleamed with amusement, as if he already knew how the match would go.

Ethan, on the other hand, said nothing. He simply adjusted the cuffs of his sleeves and stepped forward as well, his expression unreadable.

A tension began to coil in the air.

This wasn't just any match.

This was a clash of two very different forces:

Ethan-steady, dependable, principled.

Victor-blazing, dominant, dangerous.

Instructor Verren's voice broke the silence again.

"Second match-Astron Natusalune vs. Julia Middleton."

"Third match-Irina Emberheart vs. Lilia Thornheart."

Now that earned murmurs.

Even some of the instructors watching from the side turned their heads.

Two of the sharpest minds in the class, known for their icy precision and dominant battlefield control-pitted directly against each other.

Lilia glanced toward Irina with a cool nod.

Irina returned it without a word.

"Fourth-Lucas vs. Carl."

Lucas blinked, visibly relieved.

"Okay. Not a death sentence. I can work with that."

Carl rolled his shoulders with a smirk. "You sure about that?"

"Fifth-Jasmine vs. Mira Cross."

"Sixth-Layla vs. Tessa."

"Seventh-Eva vs. Noah."

Names continued down the list, but the attention in the room never strayed far from

Victor and Ethan.

Because the moment Victor's name had been called, it became clear to everyone-

This class was no longer just training.

This was something different.

A test. A message. A reckoning.

And now that Victor was back, all eyes were watching.

Verren's voice echoed one last time.

"Each pair-find your zone. Weapons ready. Matches begin in five minutes."

The students moved, not with chatter, but with sharpened focus.

Combat classes had always been serious.

But today?

The moment Julia heard the name-"Astron Natusalune"-her eyes lit up.

She couldn't help it.

That smirk? Already tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Because really, how could she not smile?

After what happened during the training simulation, she'd been itching for another round. And now, by sheer twist of fate-or maybe divine mercy-she had him. Officially. No surprise traps, no stolen victories. Just a straight-up, sanctioned duel.

She exhaled through her nose, bouncing lightly on her feet as her fingers flexed with anticipation.

"Heh," she muttered to herself, the grin spreading. "Quite lucky, I am."

Her blue eyes flicked across the hall, locking instantly onto him-quiet, composed, standing in his usual posture with his arms at his sides, silver and black combat uniform untouched, immaculate.

Astron.

He hadn't moved much when his name was called. No reaction. No visible shift in expression. But he had looked at her.

Their eyes met.

And just for a second, she caught something. Something subtle, something unreadable.

Interest? Calculation?

She wasn't sure.

Didn't matter.

She was going to drag a reaction out of him one way or another.

With a light bounce in her step, Julia strode across the hall toward him, her sword slung casually over her back, arms swinging as she closed the distance.

"You know," she said, her voice light and teasing, "if I were a little more sentimental, I might say this feels like fate."

Astron's eyes followed her calmly, his expression neutral.

"But I'm not sentimental," Julia went on, stopping in front of him and giving him a lopsided grin. "I'm just excited to hit you properly this time."

Astron tilted his head slightly. "You already tried."

Julia chuckled. "Yeah, and you ran away like a thief in the night. Now you don't get to run."

There was a long pause.

Astron blinked once. "If I recall, I won,"

Julia's grin widened. "Technicality. Not a win if I wasn't done."

Astron gave the faintest shrug, his tone as even as ever. "Is that so?"

Julia opened her mouth to retort, but paused when she noticed the others approaching. The energy in the training hall had shifted entirely-less of a school class

now, more of a staged battleground.

Lilia was the first to step into view, her pace smooth and unhurried. Her combat gear was more tactical than flashy-practical, efficient. She said nothing, her sharp emerald eyes locking instantly with Irina's from across the space.

Irina had already been walking toward them, her long red hair tied back in a tight braid, her crimson combat jacket trimmed with mana-threaded accents that shimmered faintly under the hall's light. Her movements were measured, feline- confidence woven into every step.

The two girls paused a few feet apart, neither breaking eye contact.

"Looks like we're up," Lilia said, her tone quiet but edged.

Irina's lips curved just slightly. "Don't hold back."

"I wasn't planning to."

The tension between them crackled-precision against blazing pressure. Neither had to say more. There was no teasing between them, no taunts or antics like Julia's-just raw, calculated intensity.

Behind them, Lucas and Carl made their way across the room.

Lucas looked like he was trying very hard not to appear nervous, cracking his

knuckles as if to psych himself up. "Sooo... looks like we're the most reasonable pairing here," he said to Carl with a wry grin.

Carl, the group's ever-reliable tank, didn't smile. He adjusted the gauntlets on his forearms, the reinforced plates clicking into place. His usually laid-back face had hardened into something different-stern, focused.

"Don't hold back," he said simply, voice low

Lucas blinked. "You too, huh?"

"I don't care if it's a spar," Carl added. "Instructor said fight like it's real. So I will."

Lucas swallowed, then let out a breath. "Alright. Guess I'll stop trying to be friendly."

They came to a stop beside the others, the full group now gathered, an unspoken gravity forming around

them.

Astron didn't say a word. His gaze drifted slowly across each of them, stopping briefly on Irina, then Carl, then Lilia... before returning to Julia.

Her grin hadn't faded.

"You're not nervous?" she asked him, voice light but eyes sharp.

Astron met her gaze with that same unreadable calm. "Are you?"

Julia gave a short laugh, rolling her neck. "Please. I live for this." Irina, nearby, crossed her arms. "Just don't get too distracted trying to show off."

"Says the one who's about to throw down with Lilia like it's a national event," Julia shot back.

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"Says the one who's about to throw down with Lilia like it's a national event."

Irina didn't miss a beat. "This is how I am," she said simply, her voice composed and unapologetic.

Lilia smirked, brushing a lock of hair behind her ear. "Indeed. You like to show off, Irina. You're no different from Julia when it comes to that."

Irina arched a brow, almost amused. "Guess I am."

"Oh? In denial too?" Lilia countered with a half-laugh. "You strike with a flourish every time. It's basically choreography at this point."

"Elegance isn't showing off," Irina replied, lifting her chin slightly. "It's efficiency with flair."

Julia snorted. "You two bicker like high-fashion assassins."

At that moment, footsteps approached, steady and familiar, Ethan arrived beside them, his expression unreadable, arms loose at his sides as he took in the group dynamic.

Julia's eyes sparkled instantly. She tilted her head toward him with a grin already forming. "Well, well, look who's here. Ready for your big debut, Mr. Hartley?"

Ethan gave her a wary look. "Debut?"

"With Victor," Julia gestured dramatically across the room, where the golden-eyed prodigy stood calmly adjusting his gloves, radiating quiet menace. "The matchup of the year. You versus the academy's golden myth. I've got front-row tickets and everything"

A faint bead of sweat traced down Ethan's temple, betraying the composure he tried to hold. His gaze flicked across the room once more-Victor still stood motionless, almost statuesque, like he had nothing to prove... yet everything to dominate.

Ethan exhaled quietly. "You can talk like that because you're not the one standing across from him."

Julia grinned. "Exactly. That's why I can talk like this."

But Ethan didn't sound bitter. If anything, there was a spark beneath the words. He rolled his shoulder, loosening the tension in his arm, eyes still fixed on Victor's frame as it caught the light like something carved from old war legends.

"Still," he said, voice quieter now, almost thoughtful, "I've wanted this."

Irina turned slightly toward him, arms still crossed. "You mean, to test yourself?"

Ethan nodded. "I want to see his level. Really see it. Everyone talks about him like he's already beyond us. Untouchable." His fingers curled unconsciously. "If that's true... I want to know exactly how far behind I am."

Lilia tilted her head. "That's a dangerous kind of curiosity."

Ethan gave a half-smile. "Maybe. But you don't get stronger by avoiding the best. You get stronger by standing in front of them-and staying on your feet."

Julia gave a low whistle. "Damn. That was actually kinda cool."

"Don't get used to it," Ethan muttered, the sweat on his forehead already drying as the heat of focus replaced it.

From across the training hall, Victor finally moved-just a single step forward, but it was enough. The air around him shifted, like the pressure in the room had subtly changed.

Ethan noticed.

His fingers tightened once around the strap of his glove.

Julia leaned toward Astron, murmuring playfully, "This match might actually outshine mine."

Astron didn't look at her. His eyes were on Victor too.

"...We'll see."

The arena floor was silent-polished stone marbled with faint mana lines, quiet hums of enchantments pulsing beneath Ethan's boots. The muted crowd of students lined the walls behind the barrier, murmurs muffled by a layer of sound-dampening magic. This wasn't a real tournament. No cameras. No sponsors. No declarations of glory. Just a practical training match.

Yet somehow, the weight in the air said otherwise.

Ethan stepped forward, the edge of the ring behind him, the echo of his footsteps crisp and solitary. Every breath he took felt heavier now, more real. He wasn't nervous --but there was a kind of silence before the storm, like his body understood something his mind hadn't yet accepted.

Across the arena, he stood.

Victor Blackthorn.

Dark chestnut hair, neatly swept back without seeming overly polished. Emerald green eyes, deep and unreadable-quiet, but never soft. His expression was composed, focused, as if he'd already mapped out every strike that could happen in the next ten minutes. His uniform bore not a single wrinkle, his stance completely at ease.

And still, he looked every bit the predator.

Not in a threatening way.

But in the way a falcon looks poised just before it dives-measured, silent, and utterly lethal.

Damn, Ethan thought, not without a strange admiration. He really is handsome, huh.

Victor looked like someone who had never once fallen behind, who had been carved from the shape of expectations and pressure-and still came out standing taller.

This close, Ethan could see the slight glow around Victor's boots-the micro-adjustments of mana for balance and tension, constant, precise. Not flashy. Just

perfect.

They hadn't spoken yet.

No trash talk. No bravado. Not even a nod.

Victor didn't need to posture.

And Ethan...

He inhaled, rolled his shoulders once, and took his stance.

He didn't want to posture either.

Because this was it.

A chance to see what the academy's finest looked like, not in rumor-but in flesh and motion.

Eleanor's voice echoed across the arena, clear and calm. "Begin when ready."

Ethan's head snapped up at the sound of Eleanor's voice.

"Begin when ready."

His brows knit briefly. Wait. Eleanor? When had she arrived? This session was supposed to be run by Instructor Verren, the easygoing guy with the half-permanent yawn and too much tea in his veins.

But standing just outside the boundary, arms folded behind her back, was Eleanor Virellian herself. Poised. Composed. Eyes like frost-glass.

He blinked.

Figures. Of course she's here for this.

The thought didn't linger long. He shook it off with a quiet grunt. Whatever.

Focus.

Ethan rolled his shoulders again, squaring his stance.

Across the ring, Victor remained still, the faint breeze rustling through the lower hem

of his jacket. But now, with his arms relaxed at his sides, Ethan caught sight of

something subtle-barely visible beneath the cuff of his sleeves.

A pair of restraining bracelets.

The soft, layered pattern of suppression bands shimmered faintly with every pulse of

Victor's mana.

Ethan exhaled quietly.

So his hunch was right.

Even now, they're holding him back.

Not because Victor needed fairness.

But because without those bands, the gap would be... too wide.

Ethan didn't need someone to say it. He could feel it in the air, in the way Victor's presence condensed mana just by standing still. His instincts screamed the same truth his logic had tried to ignore:

Victor Blackthorn was beyond the realm of freshmen.

Maybe even beyond the realm of most in the academy.

And yet-

Ethan's eyes narrowed.

That was exactly why he wanted this.

Not to win.

But to see. To measure. To know.

He raised his hand.

Flash-

His spear materialized in an are of lightning, surging into existence with a familiar, satisfying weight. The glow crackled at his fingertips before settling into a rhythmic

hum across the length of the weapon.

Across from him, Victor finally moved.

A breath.

A motion.

And his long sword formed silently into his grip-no dramatic light, no flare of mana.

Just clean, razor-straight steel, forged to match the man who held it. Not even the air

dared resist its arrival.

They stood now, weapons in hand, no words exchanged.

No countdown.

Just the quiet acknowledgment of what was about to begin.

Ethan tightened his grip, his heartbeat falling into rhythm with the low crackle of his
psions.

Victor didn't move.

Didn't even blink.

Let's see how far I can get, Ethan thought.

Then he dashed forward.

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Ethan dashed forward, the floor beneath his feet sparking with the discharge of lightning
psions. His spear was gripped in both hands, the tip lowered, crackling with volatile
arcs. He didn't waste time feinting-he opened with momentum, with intent.

SWOOSH!

The spear sliced through the air like a bolt unleashed, aimed clean at Victor's side.

Victor shifted.

One step-no more.

His sword came up at an angle with smooth, terrifying grace.

CLANG!

The edge of Ethan's spear met Victor's blade, the force of the impact crackling like a whip through the chamber. Lightning leapt across the clashpoint, but Victor's stance didn't falter.

He twisted.

With a single flick, he redirected the spear's momentum-his wrist rotating just enough to send Ethan slightly off balance.

THUD!

Ethan's boots skidded across the floor, heels digging in to slow himself. But he didn't. hesitate. Already, his hand snapped back, spear spinning once as he regained control. "Thunder Coil."

Electric arcs surged through the haft of his spear, wrapping around it in a spiral of energy. With a hard step, he lunged, twisting the spear into a coiling stab, aimed like a drill toward Victor's shoulder.

ZAAAP!

Victor's eyes sharpened.

He stepped aside-not away. Just to the side, narrowly dodging the coiling thrust. His sword didn't rise to block this time. Instead, he pivoted with Ethan's momentum and used the flat of his blade to push past the strike.

WHUMP!

Ethan stumbled forward, only for a second-only enough to create an opening. Victor raised his blade-

But Ethan spun low.

"Lightning Step."

CRACK!

A burst of thunder exploded beneath Ethan's foot as he vanished in a blink of static, appearing two meters to Victor's side. The dodge wasn't clean, but it bought him space.

SKRRCH!

Sparks danced as he dragged the tip of the spear across the stone floor, and then, using the momentum, he swept it in a wide arc.

Victor caught the motion instantly.

His sword was there again-CLANG! CLANG!

Two precise deflections, using minimal movement. His posture never cracked. He didn't even blink as Ethan pressed forward again.

ZAP-THRUST!

Another lightning-fueled lunge. Ethan's expression now sharpened-not with desperation, but focus. Every strike came faster, more refined, chaining into the next. "Lightning Branch-Third Form."

This time the strike wasn't linear. He feinted high, then suddenly pulled back and snapped the spear around his back in a circular whip, the blade coming up from below.

WHSHHHK-!!

Victor reacted mid-flow.

With one hand, he reversed his grip on the sword, bringing it down into a low guard.
CLANG!

The weapons clashed again, sparks flying. The recoil forced them apart for a breath. Huff... Ethan exhaled, lightning now crackling across his arms, making the very air around him hiss.

Victor didn't say a word.

But his sword... lowered.

Just slightly.

And his left foot slid forward.

A shift.

A signal.

Ethan's eyes narrowed.

He's getting serious now.

And in the silence between their next move-

The duel truly began.

Ethan's chest rose and fell steadily, each breath controlled, every nerve buzzing. The lightning psions coiled tighter around his frame now-not wild, but refined, honed into the form of his will. He didn't charge again blindly.

This time, he called upon his bloodline.

"Spear of Hartley-Form Two: Radiant Surge."

CRACK-KRAKOOM!

Lightning erupted from beneath his feet in a spiraling column. Ethan vanished in a blur of light, his form streaking across the arena like a thunderbolt let loose. The spear thrummed in his grip as he reappeared above Victor-spinning, descending.

He struck downward with explosive force.

BOOOM!

Victor moved.

Not dodging-receiving.

He raised his blade and whispered something that barely cut through the sound.

"Sword of Order-First Verse: Still Reflection."

CLANG!

The blow landed-but it was wrong.

Ethan felt it the instant their weapons clashed.

His lightning-his explosive follow-through, the recoil that usually sent opponents stumbling or sliding-it all felt like it evaporated.

ZZZT-SSHHH...

The lightning bled off his spear unnaturally fast, vanishing into the air around Victor's blade like water into sand. No shock. No rebound. No flare of impact.

Ethan's eyes widened,

What was that?

Victor's expression didn't shift. His sword glowed faintly now-not with elemental psions, but with something structured. Like it wasn't just absorbing Ethan's attack-

but redefining it.

Ethan jumped back, landing in a half-crouch. His fingers tingled. The lightning hadn't

just failed to explode-it had felt siphoned.

"Again," he muttered.

"Spear of Hartley-Form Four: Arc Reversal!"

He pivoted, launching the spear in a rapid arc, a curved throw designed to return in mid-air. A high-speed boomerang laced with electrified psions. A classic Hartley strike meant for disorientation and overwhelming angles.

Victor's eyes tracked it calmly.

He didn't step away.

He didn't raise a shield,

Instead, he spoke again-his voice low, resonant.

"Sword of Order-Second Verse: Fractured Line."

SHHNNNK-

He drew a quick slash in the air, and the moment his blade moved-Ethan's spear
changed course.

Mid-flight, the arc bent inward, sucked unnaturally toward Victor's sword like gravity
had been rewritten. Ethan's pupils shrank.

That's not natural mana manipulation.

That was domain-level interference.

He leapt forward, catching the spear just before it could be pulled completely, wrenching
it free with a hiss of raw willpower and psionic feedback.

ZZZKRKK-!!

Victor's blade held no elemental aggression. It wasn't fire or lightning or wind.

It was... order.

Everything around it followed its rules. Even Ethan's energy was being shaped into
compliance.

Ethan's grip tightened. "What is that sword style...?"

Victor's eyes flicked to him, calm and composed.

"It's not meant to overwhelm," he said softly. "It's meant to balance."

BZZT.

Lightning sparked again, more erratic now.

Ethan grinned despite himself, sweat trickling from his temple. "Tch... what a pain."

"Spear of Hartley-Form Six: Heaven's Crack!

He leapt.

Vertical thrust.

All the lightning concentrated into a single linear point.

A move meant to break through.

Victor's blade came up once more, mana condensing, singing along its edge.

"Sword of Order-Third Verse: Absolute Bind."

The clash met mid-air.

BOOOOOM!!!

A wave of compressed mana burst from the collision, rippling through the arena like

thunder turned solid.

And in the heart of it-Ethan could feel it again.

His lightning was being drained... equalized... broken down into something else.

And Victor?

Victor was still calm. Still standing.

Still waiting for the next verse.

Ethan gritted his teeth.

So this is what the top looks like. WHUMP-

Victor stepped forward.

But to Ethan, it felt like he appeared.

One moment he stood across the arena.

The next-he was right there.

No windup. No footfall. No aura spike. Just presence.

Ethan's eyes widened.

Victor's sword was already mid-swing, a downward arc that seemed impossibly fast

and entirely inevitable.

No time to parry.

No time to dodge.

Ethan's instincts screamed, but his mind was faster.

*Temporal Warding!

FWUUM-KRRZZZCH!

A shimmering, hexagonal barrier of condensed psions erupted in front of him, layers of time-mana folding outward like ripples frozen mid-air. Victor's blade collided with the barrier, and for the first time met resistance.

CRACK-SHHHNNK!

The force rebounded.

Victor's blade deflected to the side, and for a fleeting heartbeat, his posture opened.

Ethan surged forward.

Lightning exploded around him.

His body shot through the space between them like a bolt unchained.

His spear cocked back-

"Got you!" he thought, teeth clenched, his whole weight behind the thrust.

He lunged, aiming directly for Victor's core-

But then-

Something bent.

Not the spear.

The path.

It tilted.

Not much. Just enough.

The tip of his weapon veered off-course, as if the space around Victor had corrected itself.

A whisper, nearly drowned in the sizzle of psions.

"Restore the order." Victor's voice. Calm. Soft. Inevitable.

Ethan's eyes went wide as his strike passed harmlessly by Victor's shoulder.

No...!

And then-

SHHHK.

Victor's sword was at his neck.

Not pressing. Not cutting.

Just resting there.

Like it had always been.

The duel was over.

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The training hall was still.

The air, moments ago filled with lightning's hiss and mana's roar, now hung in a reverent silence. Only the echo of that final clash lingered, trailing like smoke after a fire. The other students-those who had once been sparring, stretching, waiting- stood frozen. All eyes locked on the scene at the center of the arena.

Victor stood calm, blade at Ethan's neck. Not a scratch on him. Ethan stood equally still, chest heaving, sweat trickling, his spear frozen mid-air in a strike that had gone wide at the last second.

It was over.

No declaration needed.

Only silence.

From the sidelines, Julia stared, arms crossed tight over her chest, her usual smirk absent. Her blue eyes followed the slow, inevitable way Victor lowered his sword and stepped back with quiet finality.

"...That wasn't just a fight," she murmured, barely above a whisper. "That was a freaking textbook."

Lilia didn't speak at first.

Her gaze hadn't left Victor from the moment the match began. Even now, her eyes tracked the subtle shifts in his posture-the effortless way he sheathed his sword, like nothing of importance had happened.

And yet what she had just witnessed was anything but ordinary.

Her voice finally escaped her lips, low and strained.

"Just what on earth...?"

Irina, standing beside her, arms loosely crossed, exhaled slowly. "That wasn't normal. His movements..."

"They weren't just precise," Lilia added, eyes narrowing. "They were... calibrated."

Julia finally tore her gaze from the arena to glance between them. "It's like space itself was bending around him. Like it wouldn't let him be touched."

Irina's amber eyes narrowed slightly, focused on the spot where Victor had stood. "His movements were too clean. Not just trained-unnaturally stable. There wasn't even a fluctuation in his mana stream when he deflected Ethan's spear."

"Yeah," Lilia murmured, her voice more unsettled than analytical for once. "Every time Ethan struck, something in the air... shifted. But not because of the spear. It was like- his mana didn't respond the way it should."

Julia crossed her arms again, slower this time, her brows furrowed. "So what? You think it was a skill?"

"Most likely," Irina answered. "But not one I've seen before."

"Gravity?" Lilia suggested, her tone thoughtful but uncertain. "That's the closest thing I can think of. The way Ethan's spear got pulled off-course... the curve wasn't natural. It felt like the space around Victor was heavier."

Julia tilted her head. "Then why didn't Ethan feel weighed down? It didn't slow his movement-it just kept redirecting him. Like something was shifting right before impact."

Julia's gaze lingered on the arena for a second longer before she turned, eyes sharp now-not with judgment, but with curiosity sharpened into suspicion.

"Astron," she called, her voice cutting through the murmuring quiet like a chime against glass.

He stood a few steps back from the group, one hand resting lightly against the edge of the viewing platform, posture relaxed, almost detached. His coat still held faint traces of movement from his earlier sparring-creases around the shoulders, a dusting of dried mana along the cuffs-but there was no tension in his stance. Just silence.

He glanced at her slowly, expression unreadable. "Hmm?"

Julia folded her arms, angling her body toward him fully. "What do you think that was?"

Astron shrugged. Not exaggerated. Just a subtle shift of the shoulders, a motion so casual it almost seemed dismissive.

"I think," he said calmly, "that I saw what you saw."

Lilia turned toward him as well, her brows furrowing. Irina didn't speak-just tilted her head slightly, watching.

Astron continued, voice still even. "Victor moved, Ethan couldn't hit him, and now everyone's confused. That's all."

Julia narrowed her eyes. "You're not that simple."

"I try to be."

"Cut the act." She stepped forward, just enough to close the distance without making it

look confrontational. "You know something. You're just not saying it."

His gaze met hers. Unflinching. Not cold, not mocking. Just... quiet.

"I know a lot of things," Astron replied evenly. "And I don't know a lot of things."

That answer-so deliberately useless-hung in the air for a second.

Julia stared at him, clearly weighing whether to push again. Lilia's eyes hadn't left his face. Even Irina, who rarely showed interest in classroom drama, seemed more

engaged now.

Astron exhaled slowly through his nose, as if entertaining the moment.

Then, he added, quieter:

"Victor's control is beyond what most people are trained for. That's obvious. Whether

it's a skill, a blessing, or something else... I can't say. Not yet."

"Not yet?" Julia asked, catching on,

He didn't answer.

Just turned back to the arena, where Victor was already walking off, his steps as unbothered as when he arrived-no wave to the crowd, no smile, no acknowledgment.

Only silence.

Astron watched as Victor's figure disappeared through the far exit of the training hall, his posture as composed leaving as it had been in the final moment of the duel. No acknowledgment of the murmurs, no nod to Ethan, no satisfaction. Just quiet retreat.

His gaze lingered for a moment longer.

Then, slowly, he looked down at his own hands.

They were still, relaxed at his sides. But faint traces of mana still pulsed beneath the surface-quiet, invisible to the others. He allowed his fingers to flex slightly, as if reacquainting himself with them.

There's a reason I went through all that trouble.

He didn't sigh. Didn't smirk. But the thought settled like weight behind his eyes.

The Voidborne ability... It wasn't just curiosity. Not some side objective, or a power grab.

His eyes shifted slightly, catching Ethan in the corner of his vision-still breathing hard, still gripping his spear, knuckles pale from the tension that hadn't faded.

It was for people like Victor.

People who stood outside the ordinary flow of mana. People who had crossed into the realm of Authority.

Victor's wasn't the only one, but it was active-and refined.

Ethan would have his own eventually. It was written in the bones of the world. As the protagonist, his growth was inevitable. Astron knew that. Accepted it.

But Victor was already there.

And that makes him the strongest Hunter in the current generation.

Not just in name. Not just by skill. But by truth. Because Authority changed the rules.

No-redefined them.

But Victor's Authority...

Astron's fingers stilled. His eyes narrowed just slightly, enough that none of the others would notice.

It's different.

Stronger.

Among those who'd awakened their Authorities in this generation, there were a few-outliers whose names the instructors whispered when they thought no students were listening. Astron had studied them all. Compared their combat data. Deduced the

structure of their power.

But Victor's was something else.

Not just powerful.

Fundamental.

"Order."

That was the name assigned to it, though the term barely scratched the surface of what it actually did.

Astron had watched carefully, seen it in motion-not just in this duel, but in the sparring logs, the mission footage, the way mana behaved differently around him when he was serious. It didn't flare, didn't explode-it corrected.

When Ethan's strike veered off-course in that final moment... it wasn't because Victor dodged. It wasn't a miscalculation.

It was Overwriting.

Restoring the Order, as he called it.

An external force rewriting the vector and force index of the strike mid-flight. Not through raw strength, not even mana displacement-but concept alteration.

It didn't matter how fast or precise Ethan was. If his action violated the imposed logic

Victor had declared-

Then the action would fail to exist correctly.

This isn't just defense. It's law enforcement.

Victor's Authority didn't just protect him.

It enforced a system.

A structured, invisible logic that bent the battlefield to his interpretation of balance.

Most Authorities enhanced the user. Strengthened what already existed. Pushed limits beyond natural laws.

But Victor's? It didn't break limits.

It replaced them.

Overwrite.

That was the key.

Where Ethan's future Authority would likely lean toward evolution, growth, ascension

-Victor's existed in parallel. A counterbalance. A mirror.

The rival archetype incarnate.

Which made sense. He wasn't just a powerful Hunter. He was the narrative opposite of

the Protagonist. Equal in weight. Equal in promise.

And if Ethan was a blade meant to cut through destiny-

Then Victor was the sheath that could nullify the cut entirely.

Astron's hand curled slightly, the faint hum of [Voidborne] beneath his skin pulsing in

response.

Void doesn't overwrite. It erases.

No correction. No resistance. Just nothingness.

And in a world where Authority could rewrite reality, maybe the only thing capable of

contending with it...

...was the power to undo reality altogether.

He let the thought settle in silence.

Chapter 965 Mage and Archer

The echoes of Victor's final step hadn't even faded before Instructor Verren raised a hand,

"Next match. Irina Emberheart-Lilia Thornheart."

Another ripple passed through the room-not thunderous like before, but sharp. Focused.

Even those still murmuring about Victor fell silent.

Because now came a different kind of duel.

Not one of overwhelming force... but of pressure and precision.

Irina and Lilia.

Two names that had long since carved their way into the academy's combat rankings - not with brute displays of power, but through dominance of rhythm and field. Control. Calculation. Command.

They stepped toward the central platform without a word, their paths converging at opposite sides.

Lilia moved like a shadow on still water. Unhurried, Balanced. Her bow already summoned and drawn across her back-silver limbs etched with faint runes that shimmered under the overhead lights. Her long coat fluttered lightly with each step, and her emerald eyes never once left her opponent.

Irina, in contrast, walked like a flame in still air. Poised, but dangerous. Her braid swept behind her with each measured stride, combat jacket catching glimmers of ambient mana. She said nothing as she ascended the stone steps to the elevated platform. Her hands remained at her sides, relaxed-no weapon summoned. But her presence was already igniting the space.

Amber eyes met emerald.

The audience-both student and instructor-tightened in.

Victor's fight may have stolen the spotlight.

But this?

This was the duel they were going to study.

Two battlefield generals in the making. Rank-2 against Rank-5.

Control versus control.

Lilia reached the top of the platform first and turned, drawing her bow in a smooth arc across her body. It gleamed with practiced familiarity, the string thrumming softly as she notched an arrow-not to fire, but to wait.

She did not speak.

She did not need to.

Irina stepped onto the platform a breath later, her footfalls light against the stone. She faced Lilia fully now, a thin smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

Not taunting.

Acknowledging.

"Shall we?"

Lilia answered with the faintest incline of her head.

From the side of the platform, Instructor Verren's voice rang out.

"Begin."

The arena didn't explode-it shifted.

Wind stirred. Mana rippled. Light bent.

And in an instant-

Lilia moved.

A blur of movement-graceful, clean. Her arrow loosed with pinpoint control, not aimed to kill, but to test. The shot curved in midair, guided by mana, spiraling not toward Irina's chest-but just beside her. A feint meant to trigger a dodge.

But Irina didn't dodge.

She stepped.

A half-pivot to the left. The arrow sailed by, and before the hum of its passage faded, a flare of heat coiled at Irina's heels.

She didn't retaliate immediately.

She watched.

Lilia was mapping her.

Three arrows followed in quick succession, each at a different angle-low, left, centerline. And each one was meant to provoke a reaction. Lilia didn't need a direct hit. She needed data.

Distance. Timing. Mana sync rate.

Irina gave her none of it.

She moved with the barest necessary motion, each dodge efficient and unreadable. Her mana signature remained faint, subdued-like kindling untouched by a match.

But then, the rhythm changed.

Lilia shifted position, sliding across the arena edge like water across stone, her bow already raised for the next volley. She didn't pause. Two shots fired-then three-then four, the pattern unpredictable, some fast, some delayed by half-beats.

It was a storm of control.

But Irina was waiting for exactly that.

Flick-

Her fingers twitched. Heat surged.

The air shimmered as flame burst around her in a tight, spiraling pattern-not as a wall, but a web.

Each point of fire marked a predicted line.

Every arrow that approached-met flame.

Not a wall. A net. And it caught the rhythm of Lilia's assault, choking it mid-arc.

Smoke curled into the air.

Now, Irina moved.

One foot forward. Then another.

Flames trailed her heels, tracing runes beneath her steps-temporary footholds of

heat, building something larger, unseen.

Lilia's eyes narrowed. She adjusted.

A leap. A pivot. Her arrows changed again-now not aimed to test, but to cut off.

But Irina was already there.

She wasn't fighting Lilia's arrows.

She was fighting Lilia's intention.

Every time Lilia tried to force her back, Irina stepped diagonally. Not into retreat, not into confrontation-but into the angles Lilia had not accounted for.

She was slipping out of the script.

The instructors leaned forward.

One of them, an older woman with deep-set lines around her eyes, muttered, "She's not burning through mana like most do. She's fighting inside of a rhythm." Another added, "No, she's constructing a rhythm. Look-those flames under her feet. She's laying down something. A timed formation?"

A breath passed. Then-

BAM.

A line of fire erupted across the arena, not wild, not uncontrolled-but deliberate. It split the floor between them in a sweeping arc, flames crawling like serpents along a path that had been written before the match even began.

Lilia's foot slid back, barely avoiding the blaze.

Irina's eyes lifted-sharp. Focused.

"You've mapped me," she said aloud, her voice calm, clear. "Now let's see how fast you can unlearn it."

Lilia's eyes narrowed.

But Irina was already moving again, flame coiling at her heels in elegant spirals as she paced to the left, then to the right-not chasing, not defending. Just... reshaping the tempo.

"This is different!"

She could feel it in the tight coil of her core, in the precision of her mana control, in the way her body moved before her thoughts had even fully formed. She was reading

Lilia-not by instinct, not by reflex-but by design.

And the reason?

'Astron.

Every time they trained, every time they clashed, she had felt it.

His presence on the battlefield was never bound by conventional spacing or movement. He didn't just dodge-he slipped through seams in a rhythm she hadn't realized existed. He mapped the terrain without walking it. He made her feel

surrounded even when standing still.

And though he never taught her, not really-he didn't have to.

'He made me feel how deep the field could go!

And now, standing here, trading rhythm and control with Lilia, Irina could see it. Every line of intention, every breath of misdirection in Lilia's form-like reading sheet music once the ear finally learned to listen.

"This wasn't possible before. But now? I'm not just reacting. I'm orchestrating!

Another arrow came.

It wasn't aimed to strike-it was aimed to disrupt. A tracer, meant to force her to shift.

and break the formation she'd been slowly, invisibly laying across the ground.

Irina stepped through it.

Not around. Not away. Through. Flames rose at her back like a curtain, flaring tall and wide. But even as they burned,

Lilia moved, her bow glowing with a sharp violet huc.

The tempo snapped.

Lilia leapt backward, flipping midair as her fingers drew another arrow-not a normal one. This time, her mana pulsed in short, sharp waves.

And then-

Fwip.

The arrow cut through the space between them. The instant it entered the arc of

Irina's flame-

Fssh-

The fire disappeared.

No explosion. No clash.

It just collapsed. Snuffed out. Irina's eyes sharpened. 'She just-cancelled it?'

Another arrow. Same technique. It sliced through a gout of flame as if it were mist,

leaving nothing behind but vanishing heat.

The audience collectively leaned forward. Even the instructors stilled. Lilia landed in a crouch, bow lowered, her expression cool and focused. "Your

framework is clean as usual," she said, just loud enough to be heard. "Will you enter a battle of wits?"

Irina felt the challenge in those words-arrogant, taunting.

'Heh....You tihkn I will back down!

If Lilia wanted to test her off, so be it.

She then followed with the same spell, though slightly changing the formation.

But following that, more arrows came, fired in staggered succession-not in a flurry, but in pulses, like sonar. Each one struck at a specific mana node in the arena-places

where Irina's flames were meant to bloom.

And each time-

Collapse.

The spell died before it could take shape.

"Tch.'

Irina's feet slid back slightly on instinct, her left hand raising to draw a defensive blaze

-but she stopped. Instead, her lips curved faintly.

'So that's your angle!

It wasn't raw force. It was manipulation-inversion. Lilia's mana had been tuned specifically to interfere, the way wave propagation patterns cancelled each other at the precise moment of contact. A field disruption technique, layered into each shot.

'She's not a mage. But her understanding of mana? It's surgical. As usual, classic Lilia!

And yet Irina's smile grew.

Because this wasn't discouraging.

It was invigorating.

A worthy opponent. A shifting rhythm.

And more than that-an excuse to unveil something she'd never needed before.

'You're not the only one who learned to break tempo!'

The air around her flickered.

Then-stilled.

Lilia's bow rose again, but something was different.

The flames at Irina's feet no longer swirled. They hovered-floating just above the stone, as if unbound by gravity.

And then-

Whhhhhp.

Three sigils bloomed in the air.

Not fire-based.

Force-based.

[Telekinesis]

Chapter 966 Mage and Archer

From the far side of the platform, Lilia narrowed her eyes.

The flickering sigils that hovered around Irina weren't fire-based. She recognized that instantly. No heat distortion. No mana flare matching elemental alignment. They were clean, geometric-refined.

And the moment they formed, the feel of the battlefield shifted.

Lilia adjusted her stance, sliding half a step back, not out of fear but calibration. Her fingers hovered above her quiver, her bow still pulsing with the residual mana of her last volley. She was already preparing a new technique, ready to dismantle Irina's flame paths once again-until she felt the tension in the air twist.

"That's not flame."

It had been months since she last sparred with Irina-perhaps longer. Half a year, maybe more. But in her mind, Lilia had never stopped updating the Irina-model she fought against.

Irina Emberheart: fire-aligned, aggressive caster. Blazing tempo. Strong mana bursts. Controlled, but reactive. A pure mage-strong in a straight line, vulnerable to collapse if rhythm is broken.

At least, that's how she had known her.

Yet now, none of that profile fit.

Irina wasn't just countering. She was anticipating.

The moment Lilia changed vectors, Irina was already there. When Lilia altered her pulse timing, Irina slowed hers. When she broke flame lines with inversion shots, Irina abandoned the field entirely and brought out non-elemental constructs.

And that was what unsettled her.

'She's not adapting to me. She's moving ahead of me!

Lilia exhaled slowly through her nose, the faintest furrow lining her brow.

She had fought her share of mages, and she had designed her techniques with that in mind. She understood how elemental control worked. She knew how long it took for a fire glyph to prime, how mana density impacted combustion delay. Her arrows weren't just about power-they were tools, tuned for pressure, for rhythm disruption, for overwhelming control.

But none of it was working.

Irina was weaving around her like she'd read the entire playbook already.

No, not weaving-conducting.

Lilia's fingers brushed across the fletching of a new arrow, one she hadn't used yet in this fight.

'She's changed!

That realization settled heavier than she expected. Irina's reputation had always been that of a prodigy mage-aggressive, powerful, yes, but not this. Not this kind of precision.

And now?

Lilia could feel it.

Her next three shots were already plotted, but she hesitated before firing them. That hesitation was new.

And Irina saw it.

From across the arena, Irina's eyes locked onto her, and for a moment, Lilia recognized that glint. It wasn't arrogance.

It was confidence born of understanding.

The same kind Lilia carried when she fought others.

'She knows what I'm doing before I do it. How?'

It didn't make sense. Mana recognition? Predictive movement? Mana-sensory overlap?

No.

It was deeper than that.

Irina wasn't reacting to movement-she was responding to intent.

As if she were feeling the shape of Lilia's mana before it even left her body.

And Lilia knew exactly what kind of person could do that.

Only someone who had fought in true rhythm-based warfare.

'Someone like Astron...'

She felt it. The fingerprints of his influence. Not in magic, not in technique-but in philosophy.

Irina wasn't acting like a mage. She was acting like a duelist.

.....So he changed her, is that what I am supposed to infer?"

Lilia's eyes narrowed as she traced the lines of Irina's stance. There was no aggression in it-no posturing, no wasted mana-but it radiated intent. Clean, precise, unreadable. And more than anything else... familiar.

'So he really did change you!

The thought circled once, like a calm ripple on still water. She knew Astron's influence when she felt it. That weightless pressure, that seamless flow between offense and defense-not chasing the opponent's rhythm, but reshaping it entirely. She had felt that only once before, during the one time she'd observed Astron fight not from across the field, but from above, perched in silence, watching the way he disassembled someone without lifting his voice, without raising his pulse.

And now Irina carried traces of that.

'He showed you quite a lot of things it seems...'

For a moment, Lilia didn't move. Her thoughts were quiet, not heavy. She wasn't frustrated.

In fact, she smiled.

A small, quiet thing.

'Well... let's see what you'll do!

Her fingers closed on the arrow she had selected-narrow, silver-fletched, with a head designed not to pierce, but to resonate. Its core was layered with a dual-frequency mana lacing, one that vibrated in opposing currents the moment it passed through any ambient construct.

It was a disruptor, but unlike the field collapse shots she'd used earlier, this one wasn't meant to disable formations.

It was meant to cancel spells mid-cast.

She drew it in one smooth motion. Her body moved like a note in a song-silent, deliberate, deadly. Mana pulsed down the string of her bow, syncing perfectly with the

arrow's frequency.

Fwip-!

The arrow shot forward, cutting through the lingering warmth of Irina's last spell. It passed through residual flame like mist, untethering the mana filaments in the air. A

precision kill.

And Irina felt it.

She moved.

Another arrow followed. Then a third.

A trinity of motion-angled to converge at her chest, her shoulder, and her face. Not to injure. Not yet. But to force a reaction. Even Irina couldn't remain composed with that kind of pressure coming all at once.

Lilia's eyes remained fixed on the trajectory. They were perfect. Her arrows weren't

just fast. They were inevitable.

'Let's see how you move now-

Then something shifted.

A shimmer in the air.

No-not around Irina.

Around the arrows.

Lilia's focus snapped sharper. The mana around her projectiles had begun to bend, not

like it was being resisted-but like it was being redirected. Not repelled. Not dispelled.

Just... moved.

As if space itself slid out of their way.

And then-

Phhhft.

All three arrows vanished. Not shattered. Not incinerated.

Gone.

Lilia's eyes widened a fraction.

She didn't miss. Not from that range, not from that position.

And yet-

'Where did they-?'

Then, a soft whoomph echoed behind her.

Her head turned just enough to glimpse it-her own arrows, embedded in the far wall of the arena behind her.

As if they had been folded around Irina... and sent backward.

Lilia's breath caught-not in fear, but in awe. For just a second.

...That wasn't teleportation. That was... redirection!

The sigils.

The ones she had seen before Irina made her move.

They weren't just [Telekinesis].

They were vector seals. Constructed patterns of spatial logic bound not to a target, but to a movement instruction. Something that anticipated direction and folded around it.

Lilia's eyes widened, her breath catching in the base of her throat as she stared at the distant wall-at the three arrows she had loosed just seconds ago, now embedded

neatly in the stone far behind Irina.

Her arrows hadn't missed. They had been redirected.

"That wasn't a shield. That wasn't elemental interference... That was spatial folding!

Her gaze snapped back to Irina, the flickering sigils still lingering faintly in the air like

ghost impressions of what had just occurred. That kind of manipulation wasn't just advanced-it was absurd.

To weave [Telekinesis] like that—to fold trajectory in real time, bend spatial pressure

around the curvature of incoming mana-

"The control... the precision...' Her heart pulsed once, heavy.

Lilia had seen Irina use [Telekinesis] before, sure. She always assumed it was a utility

spell a convenience. Something to nudge her environment, catch a falling flask, move a book across a desk. Even in combat, she'd seen Irina flick her blade or shift debris

with it, but it was always an afterthought.

'She had this side?"

Really?

The sudden weight of that realization pressed against Lilia's ribs-not in panic, but in

something colder, Something heavier.

She'd been wrong.

Badly.

And Irina wasn't done.

The flames at Irina's feet surged without warning, bursting forward in a crescent arc.

Lilia responded instantly-two fingers snapped against the bowstring, mana coiling down an arrow that had already been half-prepared. Her counter-technique flared to life, tuned to collapse the spell structure before it could propagate.

But-

The wave didn't collapse.

Lilia's eyes flicked across the stream, searching for the faultlines-the harmonics, the

reverse sequence patterns that would normally allow her to invert the mana and break the wave before contact.

There were none.

Or rather-

'It's layered!

Two pulses. No, three. The flame wasn't constructed on a single structure-it was

stacked, shifting frequencies just before impact, making it impossible to predict the cancelation point in time.

'She changed her flamecasting!

Lilia had no choice.

She moved.

Pivoted high, vaulting into the air as the flames roared beneath her-close enough to singe, to burn, but not strike. Her cloak whipped behind her as she twisted mid-flight, already preparing her next shot to retaliate.

Then she saw it.

A gleam.

Chapter 967 Mage and Archer

A gleam.

High above.

From the left.

A spear of flame.

Not just any flame-concentrated, sharp-edged, burning with a white-hot intensity. But more than that-

Lilia's pupils contracted.

The mana signature wasn't pure fire.

Threaded through the core-spatial psions.

'-What?'

The spear shouldn't have reached her yet. She had calculated the angle, the timing, the flame speed-she should've been safe.

But this?

This was faster.

Far faster than it had any right to be.

And in that instant, she understood.

Irina hadn't just empowered her spell.

She had layered [Telekinesis] into the projectile, amplifying its speed post-cast. The spear's kinetic force wasn't elemental anymore-it was tethered to space itself.

It struck.

Not her body-Lilia's defense spells flared just in time. But the mana impact rattled through her system like a shockwave. It wasn't the damage that mattered. It was the displacement.

Her trajectory broke.

Her focus wavered.

Her stance-compromised.

And as she hit the ground, skidding across the stone, her bow scraping beside her, the simulation flickered-

[Duel Complete.]

Victory: Irina Emberheart.

Silence fell for a breath.

Lilia's hand twitched, fingers still curled around the bow's grip. Her heart beat hard in her chest, not from exhaustion, but from the sheer shift she had just experienced.

She hadn't lost because of carelessness. She hadn't misfired.

She had been outmaneuvered.

Outpaced.

And for the first time in a long time-

She smiled.

'So that's where you are now, Irina.

It was annoying.

But it was also exhilarating.

Lilia exhaled slowly, lying on the cool stone floor for a second longer, the echo of that last impact still humming in her bones. Her eyes stayed fixed on the ceiling above, but a grin tugged at the corner of her lips.

"Wow..." she muttered to herself, voice light with disbelief. "You really stepped up your game."

Footsteps approached-light, precise.

Irina stood over her now, her usual composed expression tempered by the faintest arch of a brow. "I wasn't staying idle."

Lilia reached up, gripping Irina's offered hand. She pulled herself up with a grunt and dusted off her training gear. "Same can be said for you."

Irina's lips curved slightly. "Well, I fell short before too."

"Not today," Lilia admitted with a short sigh. "You got me."

"Happens," Irina said simply, tilting her head. "Don't fret over it."

Lilia huffed, brushing back a loose strand of hair that had fallen over her face. "I want to punch your smug face right now."

Irina blinked. "This is my neutral face."

"It's smug, and you know it."

Across the room, Julia-who'd been lounging nearby with her arms folded-watched the exchange with growing amusement. Her blue eyes lit up as she strolled over, her steps casual and easy.

"Well, well," Julia said, grinning as she arrived. "That was quite the spectacle. Fireworks, aerial maneuvers, tactical footwork... Almost makes me not want to fight either of you."

Lilia narrowed her eyes. "Don't get cocky, Jules."

Julia grinned wide, hands planted on her hips as she leaned in slightly.

"Me? Cocky? Never," she said with exaggerated innocence. "I'm just stating facts. Since

I'm stronger than both of you, I'd naturally win. That's just simple math"

Lilia rolled her eyes. "You are tripping"

"By getting launched across the floor again?" Julia teased, smirking.

Before Lilia could fire back, a new voice chimed in-calm, dry, and far too perfectly timed.

"Nah, I'd win."

The three girls turned as Lucas approached, adjusting the cuffs of his sleeves and giving Julia a look that was just a bit too smug for his usual demeanor.

Julia blinked, then narrowed her eyes. "Was that a reference?"

Lucas shrugged innocently. "I've always wanted to say it."

Julia scoffed, flicking her fingers toward him like she was brushing dust off her shoulder. "We'll see how long that confidence lasts when Carl starts swinging."

As if summoned, Carl appeared just behind Lucas, arms folded, expression unreadable. The difference in size between them was almost comical-Lucas was lean, sharp-eyed, light on his feet. Carl was broad, grounded, and built like a mobile fortress.

Lucas looked over his shoulder, caught the stare, and let out a slow breath. "Right.

Carl"

Carl nodded once. "Ready?"

Julia gave Lucas a playful pat on the back, flashing a grin that was far too cheeky for the situation. "See the big guy. Ready to take him?"

For a moment, there was silence.

Then, simultaneously, all three girls-Lilia, Irina, and even Julia herself-wincing.

Lucas slowly turned his head, staring at her like she'd just committed a war crime. His hand came up to his face. "Please don't ever say it like that again."

Irina let out a quiet sigh, pinching the bridge of her nose. Lilia just facepalmed outright.

"Seriously," Lucas muttered, dragging his hand down his face. "Sometimes I genuinely wonder how you of all people are my twin."

Julia blinked, then tilted her head with an exaggerated innocent smile. "What do you mean how? We came from the same hole."

Lucas choked. "You-!"

Lilia snorted.

Irina looked away, muttering something about needing to bleach her ears.

Julia burst out laughing, hands on her knees, doubled over with glee. "Ahahahaha!

Come on, you walked right into that!"

Lucas stared at her, utterly betrayed. "I regret everything."

Before the banter could escalate further, Instructor Verren's voice echoed across the hall like a thunderclap.

"Lucas. Carl. Platform Four."

Lucas sighed dramatically. "Saved by the bell."

"Let's go."

Julia wiped away a fake tear. "Good luck, bro. Make us proud. Or, you know, just don't get pancaked."

Lucas shook his head as he walked off. "Same hole... Unbelievable."

Carl didn't comment.

He never did, really-not unless it mattered.

As the two of them walked side by side toward Platform Four, Lucas glanced at Carl's face, searching for any reaction.

Nothing.

Stone-faced as ever, Carl marched with the same solid, unshakable rhythm he always had. His expression was unreadable, eyes forward, posture straight.

Lucas sighed, almost theatrically. "You didn't understand it, did you?"

Carl glanced sideways. "Hmm?"

That was all. Just that single sound-quiet, curious, but clearly disconnected from whatever chaos had just unfolded behind them.

Lucas almost laughed.

Of course he didn't.

He looked forward again, lips twitching into a faint smile.

'Right... Braveheart family,' he thought, watching the way Carl moved-efficient, grounded, like he'd been drilled to perfection from the moment he could walk. Lucas could see it now: the drills, the marching, the strict meals and earlier mornings. Jokes like Julia's? Probably didn't even exist in Carl's world.

He sighed again, though this one had a hint of fondness behind it. "Man, must've been wild growing up with people who saluted you for sneezing."

Carl didn't respond.

He didn't need to.

They reached the edge of the platform, footsteps echoing faintly in the hall's quiet.

Lucas flexed his fingers, eyes now sharpening just slightly. His stance shifted as he

stepped onto the dueling floor, his movements loose but measured. A glint danced across his gaze-not mischief, but something quieter, more focused. 'Let's test it, he thought, glancing at Carl again.

The corner of his mouth curled up.

Chapter 968 Illusions and Hammer

Lucas stepped onto the platform, boots tapping lightly against the stone. The ambient hum of mana from the other dueling arenas receded into background noise, blurring into the periphery. All that remained in focus was the wide stage, the space between him and Carl-and the opportunity that lay within it.

He spared a glance at his opponent.

Carl Braveheart.

Solid. Silent. A mountain carved into human form. The kind of presence that didn't demand attention through words, but through sheer immovability. And Lucas... Lucas had never liked fighting people like that.

Not because he feared them.

But because they were difficult to tilt.

'Indeed... this can be a good opportunity.

Lucas's fingers brushed the hilt of his sword, a casual motion, but deliberate. He

wasn't thinking about the crowd. Not about Julia, Irina, or the instructor standing just off the stage.

He was thinking about the system.

The pattern.

The timing.

Carl was efficient. A step in, swing. A guard. Follow-up. His entire style was clean and minimalist, designed to waste neither mana nor breath.

But Lucas?

Lucas was ghost walking in the skin of a swordsman,

'The skills from the future are still out of reach. My body can't handle the mana flow... the nerves aren't tuned yet!'

He exhaled, his other hand coming to rest behind his back in thought.

'But the illusion sequence...'

He'd been refining it slowly. One part Middleton Sword Technique. One part memory. One part adaptive spellcasting from the Arkwrights. What started as a mimicry of Damien's illusions had since diverged. Improved.

The trick wasn't just creating illusions.

It was making the opponent believe they weren't illusions.

'And it's getting better.'

He glanced at Carl again, this time not just seeing the present-but the echo of what he knew was coming.

From the future, he remembered this man. Not the quiet, watchful version standing across from him now, but the battlefield leader. The defender. The one who stood firm beside Ethan when everything else burned.

'A knight without a title. A shield without pride. You... you were like me.'

Both of them had lived in shadows. Both knew what it was like to be adjacent to

greatness without basking in it.

Carl's stance hadn't changed. He was waiting. Watching. Patient.

Lucas's lips twitched upward.

'Let's see how well you hold formation against misdirection.

Instructor Verren's voice rang out again. "Ready."

Lucas raised his sword. His mana stilled to a whisper, already threading into the ground beneath him.

Carl mirrored the movement, pulling a broad, shield from its holster as well as his huge hammer.

"Begin."

Lucas didn't move.

Not immediately.

Instead, he let the silence breathe. The air itself seemed to slow, thickening-not from pressure, but from perception. His body didn't need to shift if the world around him already started to blur.

His foot slid back half a step. His posture leaned ever so slightly to the right.

To Carl, it would seem like he was favoring that side-prepping for a diagonal feint.

That was illusion, Phase One: Assumption Seeding.

From there, it would build.

And when he moved...

Carl would think he saw the attack before it came.

That was the idea.

Lucas's sword arm tensed, and a shimmer ran through the blade-not light, not mana -but the suggestion of motion. Echoes of previous swings layered into the current moment. A false pattern.

He struck.

But not the strike Carl would see.

Not yet.

'Let's dance, Braveheart!

Because beneath the swords and footwork, this was what Lucas excelled at.

Layering moments.

Rewriting expectations.

And in this match, he wasn't fighting to win.

He was fighting to test his illusions-

And to see if someone like Carl Braveheart.... could be deceived.

SWOOSH.

Lucas moved.

A blur-not of speed, but of intent. His mana didn't flare, didn't shout. It whispered. A low hum that skated across the platform, sliding under the stone like fog between

cracks.

Carl shifted immediately.

THUD.

The sound of his boots digging into the arena floor was like a war drum. His shield came up in one smooth motion, body pivoting behind it-bracing for impact. That was Carl's way. Direct, grounded. Reliable.

But Lucas wasn't there.

SWIPE.

A streak of silver shimmered past Carl's left side, just outside of reach. The faintest shimmer-a blade? No, a suggestion of one.

Lucas appeared on the opposite side, real this time, just outside Carl's hammer radius.

Phantom Reflection - First Layer]

CLANG!

His blade tapped the rim of Carl's shield-nothing more than a testing blow. Sparks

flew.

Carl didn't flinch.

"Hmm," he muttered, low and unreadable.

BOOM.

The response came fast. Carl's hammer swept horizontally, trailing behind it a shockwave of compressed earth mana.

[Quaking Arc

CRACK.

The ground beneath the swing fractured in a shallow crescent, shards lifting. Lucas leapt back, flipping once through the air.

'Too heavy for deflection, Lucas thought mid-spin. He landed light on the balls of his feet, skidding backward. 'Good reaction time. No wasted motion. Reads the difference between real and fake well... but not perfectly!

Because-

He glanced left.

Carl's eyes had twitched just slightly at the illusion flicker earlier. A small, instinctive shift in stance. A single moment of buy-in.

It was enough.

Lucas pressed forward again. Fast this time.

TAP-TAP-TAP.

His footsteps were deliberate, light, angled.

One feint. Left.

Second feint. Overhead.

Carl brought his shield up. Reacting to the rising blade.

CLANG!

The sound of sword on metal rang loud-but Lucas was already gone.

What struck the shield was only a shadow, a lingering afterimage of blade and light.

From behind, the real strike came.

Phantom Reflection - Second Layer]

SHH-CLNK!

Carl's eyes widened as the blade grazed past his side-just a hair's width from skin. His

shield turned, but not in time. Lucas vanished into motion again before a proper

counter could form.

'He's adjusting already, Lucas noted, retreating a few steps, exhaling steady. Carl planted his feet again. The air around him began to thrum with a heavier, deeper

mana resonance.

Bastion Pulse

BOOM.

A low shockwave rippled out from Carl's body-protective mana flaring in a wide radius. A counter to illusions. To feints. A declaration: You will fight me up close, or not at all.

Lucas's eyes narrowed.

Smart.

His illusions bent perception. But Carl was using pressure, resonance, and auditory disruption to anchor his senses.

'So you do have answers!

Lucas flicked his blade once, resetting its orientation. Then, he leaned forward.

"Then let's test your depth of faith!

He moved in again, but this time, the illusion was stacked.

Not one.

Not two.

SHH. SHH. SHH.

Three.

Three versions of himself emerged across the platform. Each one slightly off-the weight of footsteps, the angle of approach, the timing of breath. Real enough to convince someone watching at full speed.

'Let's see if you can pick the thread out of the weave!

Carl's eyes scanned. His hammer rose.

Then-

BOOM!

He chose the left one-slamming his hammer downward in a crater-like burst of mana.

Stonebreak Descent

CRACK-CRACK-BOOM.

Dust kicked up. Stone fractured.

The left image exploded into a flurry of dissipating motes. Not real.

But the real Lucas came from the right, blade pointed low, twisting up for a reverse slash.

SLASH.

The edge scraped the underside of Carl's pauldron.

A clean hit.

No damage-his armor was too dense for that-but it was proof. Lucas had gotten in.

He leapt back, blade steady, chest rising and falling in quiet rhythm.

'Heh...'

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Carl turned toward him. His expression unchanged. But there was the faintest edge in his voice now, low and calm:

"...You're messing with my eyes."

Lucas didn't deny it.

Didn't need to.

'Phase Two: Confirmed. Subconscious response is starting to register false signals!

He lowered his sword slightly, stepping sideways across the platform. Calm. Composed. His mana continued to whisper beneath his feet.

Not a single chant.

Not a single visual cast.

Because his illusions weren't spells anymore.

They were integrated.

Threaded into his sword style. Layered into posture. Motion. Angle. Eye contact.

Every step was a suggestion.

Every gesture a manipulation.

And the best part?

He was still holding back.

Lucas circled again, testing Carl's shoulders. Watching where he shifted weight. He was close to identifying Carl's anchor point-the micro-habit he used to start most of his movements. Once he had that...

'One more exchange!

He blurred again-this time, less stealth, more aggression.

CLANG. CLANG. SWOOSH.

Lucas's blade moved like a ribbon of silver, sharp and flowing.

Carl blocked one strike. Dodged another. Then retaliated.

BOOM.

The hammer struck down again-intended to cage Lucas in. Lucas ducked low, spun sideways, and slid to Carl's back.

[Phantom Reflection - Third Layer]

He didn't strike.

He whispered.

"Behind you."

Carl didn't turn. Didn't react.

Smart.

Instead-

THUMP.

He slammed his shield behind him blindly.

A direct counter to Lucas's bait.

Lucas grinned, retreating just in time as the heavy metal whooshed past his nose. 'Clever boy!

He came to a stop, exhaled, and lowered his blade.

Then, Lucas straightened slowly, exhaling through his nose. The blade in his hand caught the light-angled just slightly, the flat tilting off to the side. A posture so familiar it was second nature.

The Middleton Sword Style.

He didn't need to speak. The stance said enough.

No more tests. No more simulations.

Now he would simply fight.

The sword in his hand lowered into a loose, flowing grip. His feet realigned, subtle and precise. Shoulders eased. Breath leveled. It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't loud. But the shift in aura was unmistakable.

He had stopped studying.

He was ready to play.

From the corner of his eye, he caught it.

Astron.

Standing near the edge of the platform, half-shrouded by the shadows, but watching. As he always did. Calculating. Absorbing.

Lucas's eyes narrowed just slightly.

'Indeed... with him being a possible diversion, I can't reveal too much!

Not yet.

That one-Astron-was too perceptive. Too sharp around the edges. Lucas couldn't afford to overplay his hand here, especially not with them watching from the background. Especially not when the game was far more layered than this platform. So he adjusted his output.

The illusions faded-not entirely, but just enough to blend into his rhythm. No more artificial doubles. No more external flickers. Just slight afterimages. Blade trails. Tempo breaks.

Just enough to keep you guessing.

Carl stepped forward then, slow and grounded. He lifted his shield fully and twisted his grip on the hammer, and as he did, the air around him began to hum.

THRRRRMMM.

Stone resonated beneath him. The platform trembled softly as the mana flared-low,

dense, earthen.

And then came the stance.

The Braveheart family's signature:

Fortress Form

Shield at center. Hammer poised above the shoulder. Knees bent to absorb impact. Every inch of Carl's form spoke of resistance, not just to force-but to deception. He wasn't fast, but he was rooted. Immovable.

Lucas smiled.

'So be it'

He moved.

CLANG. CLANG. SWOOSH.

The duel began again-not as a test, but as a clash of legacies.

Lucas struck with Middleton's 2nd form: Weaving Mirage

His steps were intricate, forming half-circles that danced around Carl's shield. He angled his sword in seemingly impossible arcs, flicking and rebounding from multiple

vectors.

Carl held firm.

BOOM.

Hammer swept down in a brutal arc-Lucas twisted inside the swing, sliding under the arm, blade tracing along the edge of Carl's shield.

CLANK!

The sound rang out like a bell. Carl turned, catching Lucas's retreating shoulder with

the rim of the shield.

THUD.

Lucas stumbled back a step. Not damaged. But pushed. The strength behind Carl's

shield strikes was a threat in itself.

He didn't retreat.

Instead, he responded. Middleton Sword - 4th Form: Phantom Step]

His body blurred-momentarily seeming to vanish. When he reappeared, it wasn't behind or to the side-but midair, flipping past Carl's shield, blade whistling

downward.

SLASH-CRACK!

Carl blocked it with the top edge of the shield. The force jolted his boots into the stone

-but he stayed grounded.

Lucas landed and swept low.

SWISH.

Carl raised his leg just in time-Lucas's blade only slicing cloth.

'Still too solid...'

Carl retaliated with a surge of mana.

[Braveheart Art: Stone Rebound]

He slammed his shield down into the stone.

BOOM-RUMBLE-BOOM!

A ripple burst from the impact point-echoing out in a half-circle wave that bounced

off the arena's edges and came hurtling back like a shockwave.

Lucas's eyes widened-

And smiled.

He stepped into it.

WHOOSH.

He cut through the first wave of pressure, using the force as momentum.

And then-

Middleton - 5th Form: Flickering Spiraly

His body twisted, blade spinning like a cyclone in tight motion, drilling past Carl's shield from a diagonal vector. It wasn't meant to hit-it was meant to distract.

Carl blocked high.

And in that heartbeat-

Lucas let go of his sword with one hand.

SWOOSH.

A flicker of mana.

A single illusion.

A split-second delay-an afterimage from the same angle of his previous strike.

Carl's eyes tracked it.

And in that split moment-

Lucas's real blade shot under the shield from below, dragging the flat of it just past

Carl's thigh guard.

CLANG!

A hit.

Not deep. Not decisive.

But a mark.

You fell for it again!

Carl's head tilted. Just slightly. Just enough to acknowledge it.

Then-

BOOM.

Hammer strike from above.

Lucas blocked.

CRACK.

The impact echoed through his arms. His knees buckled slightly under the sheer weight of it. Carl's strength wasn't exaggerated-he fought like a landslide. And if you stopped moving, he'd bury you.

But Lucas wasn't built to stop.

STEP. SWOOSH. SLIDE.

He circled again. This time, his movements less illusion, more tempo. Rhythm shifting unpredictably. Sometimes slow. Sometimes fast. Middleton Form 6: Ghost Edges

It wasn't about raw speed. It was about tempo violation.

And Carl-despite his strong foundation-relied on rhythm to react.

Lucas cut once, twice-then paused.

Just long enough to confuse Carl's swing.

Then struck again.

SLASH-THUMP-SHIELD! Blocked. Again.

But now Carl's breathing was heavier. His posture more tense.

The rhythm had broken.

'Got you.'

Lucas flipped the blade in his grip-gripping it reverse for a moment.

Then-

WHOOSH.

His mana surged-not for illusion, but for reinforcement.

His real strike came through. SLASH!

Carl's shield jerked sideways.

THUD!

The edge of Lucas's blade pressed against Carl's hammer wrist-forcing it away from a follow-up.

Then the flat of the blade slammed against Carl's side.

CLANK-BOOM!

Carl skidded back three steps-his boots scraping the stone.

The platform stilled.

Lucas stood upright once again, exhaling.

Not smiling.

Just... centered.

Carl straightened slowly. Rolled his shoulder.

And gave a single nod. Respect.

That was all.

But for a Braveheart, that meant everything.

Lucas lowered his blade, returning to neutral stance.

He had made his point.

He hadn't gone all out.

He hadn't needed to. But Middleton style had spoken.

And Braveheart had answered.

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The moment lingered-Lucas and Carl standing across from one another, the air between them still crackling faintly with the residue of exchanged blows. The arena was quiet now, the chaos of motion stilled, both combatants steady on their feet.

Instructor Verren's voice echoed from the edge of the platform.

"Enough. Duel over."

DING.

The mana field that encompassed the platform rippled once, then dissipated, its faint glow fading into the background.

A murmur spread through the observing cadets.

Some had been cheering for flashier matches earlier-light shows, elemental storms, flying swords and flying egos.

But this?

This was different.

This fight had been raw.

Tactile.

Two close-combatants.

No gimmicks.

No crowd-pleasing theatrics.

Just blade and shield. Pressure and response. Mind against mind, foot against ground, steel against steel.

And that made it real.

Instructor Verren stepped forward, arms folded behind his back. His voice carried clearly across the field.

"This is what a duel should look like. Controlled. Clean. Calculated."

His eyes passed over the cadets watching from the benches.

"No wild flailing. No overexertion of mana. No dragging the fight out with aimless spell exchanges. Two opponents engaged at full focus, gauging each other, reading intent, adapting in real time."

He gestured to Carl. "You held your ground without overcommitting. Calculated when to absorb and when to retaliate. That is how you make the most of your frame and affinity."

Then to Lucas.

"And you-your footwork, timing, and tempo control. Near textbook application of close-range misdirection."

Lucas gave a small nod, lowering his sword fully. His heart was still elevated-not from exhaustion, but from the pulse of satisfaction that came with sharp execution.

Not perfection.

But clean.

He liked clean.

From the benches, murmurs were already spreading.

"That was... intense."

"I didn't even notice half of what they were doing until Instructor Verren pointed it out."

"I thought Carl would dominate with the hammer, but Lucas kept slipping around him like smoke."

"Yeah, but Carl's shield work? I swear he predicted some of those fake-outs."

While other cadets were talking, Lilia crossed her arms, eyes narrowed as she watched Lucas descend from the platform.

"Middleton style, huh..." she murmured.

Irina tilted her head beside her. "He toned down the illusions partway through."

Julia, lounging nearby with a barely suppressed grin, nodded once. "Because he didn't need them."

Irina glanced toward Julia. "He did that for show?"

Julia shrugged. "He was enjoying himself. That's when he fights best."

At that moment, Carl stepped off the opposite side of the platform, sweat darkening

the collar of his uniform, but his movements steady. He offered no complaint, no praise, no theatrics.

Just a respectful nod toward Lucas from across the platform.

Lucas returned it in kind-nothing more, nothing less.

As he stepped down, he caught a faint motion from the edge of the crowd.

Astron.

Still watching. Still silent. Eyes sharp, unreadable.

Lucas didn't acknowledge him directly.

But his mind ticked.

'Let's see your duel now!'

Julia leaned back on the bench, one leg propped up casually as she watched a pair of first-years exchange clumsy swordplay down on the southern platform. It was supposed to be a match, but from where she was sitting, it looked more like a glorified dance lesson-predictable patterns, telegraphed movements, zero tension.

Her blue eyes drifted, disinterested, until they found themselves trailing back to Lucas, who was seated on the far end of the benches now, toweling the sweat from his face in silence.

She tapped a knuckle against her jaw, thoughtful.

Lucas, huh...

It wasn't like she hadn't watched him fight before. She had, many times-when they were younger, and even more recently, in academy matches. And sure, he'd always been competent. Always had potential. Their bloodline demanded at least that much.

But lately?

Something felt different.

Not just technically-though that, too. His blade was sharper, more precise. His spacing was tighter. His transitions from feint to form had nearly no excess motion. The illusion blade he'd pulled during the early phase of the duel wasn't just a flashy trick; it was measured, part of a tempo he had set and adjusted as the fight wore on.

Julia narrowed her eyes slightly.

That illusion technique...

She knew that move. Not just in theory, either. She had been working on something similar herself, in secret. A Middleton-variant to counteract Awkright illusions-to study their distortion field and repurpose it, layer it with pressure, use it for offense

rather than deception.

She'd been developing it out of spite. Out of rivalry. Out of pride.

Because the Awkright family? Yeah. They were brilliant with illusions. But Middletons were better with blades.

So the fact that Lucas had started blending both-so cleanly-without even

mentioning it to her?

That stirred something uncomfortable.

Not anger.

But something colder. Something deeper.

Yeah... there's something strange about you lately, Lucas.

From the outside, he didn't look that different. A little more muscle, sure. A little more composure in his stance. He wasn't slouching as much. But none of it was dramatic.

And yet...

Every time she looked at him now, something in her gut prickled. Her tiger senses- usually quiet unless something was off-kept bristling around him. Like there was something underneath the surface, something just a little out of rhythm.

Julia lingered in the quiet tension of her thoughts for a moment longer-then exhaled and gave her head a light shake, flicking her fingers like she was brushing the uncase

off her shoulders.

Ugh, no. Don't spiral.

She didn't want to ignore her instincts. Her senses had saved her more times than she could count, both in and out of combat. They didn't just react to danger-they reacted to deception, to pressure, to shifts in people. They gave her an edge.

But still...

Doubting your own twin? That felt... off. Wrong, even.

It wasn't like Lucas was some stranger she barely knew. They were born together. Trained together. Fought each other more times than they'd fought anyone else. If anyone knew his rhythms, his movements, his tells-it was her.

So maybe she was overthinking it.

Maybe he'd just grown sharper and didn't tell her.

Wouldn't be the first time Lucas kept things close to his chest.

She snorted under her breath.

Typical Lucas. Quiet, broody, and suddenly full of surprises.

Still... she'd be lying if she said it didn't bother her just a little. Not the growth itself-that, she could respect. But the fact that it came with this strange distance, this faint edge of unfamiliarity? That was harder to ignore.

Even so, she wasn't going to waste energy brooding.

Her eyes flicked forward to the platform, where Astron now stood-silent, poised, still as a shadow as he waited his turn.

Julia's smirk returned.

Right. She had a duel coming.

And not just any duel.

Him.

Astron was precise. Elusive. Smart. Slippery in the way that made her blood pump harder in anticipation. She'd been waiting for this rematch since the simulation, and she wasn't going to hold back. Not this time.

Her eyes narrowed slightly, a glint of mischief flickering across her face as she leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees.

She had been working on her own illusion techniques lately-nothing fancy, not the drawn-out mental tricks the Awkrights were known for, but something swift, sharp, instinctive. Meant to pressure, to disorient, to hit the split-second window of hesitation.

So when Lucas pulled out that illusion blade earlier? Yeah, it had made her blink. But it also gave her a challenge.

He used it first. So what?

She was his twin.

If he could use it, so could she.

And if it looked like plagiarism, well-he'd live. Probably gloat about it later too, knowing him.

"Let's see if Astron can keep up with both of us," she muttered under her breath, a grin

curling on her lips.

Because now?

Now she had something new to test.

And Astron-he was the perfect target.