

## H. Academy 971

### Chapter 971 Swordsgirl

As if sensing her growing anticipation, Astron turned his head slightly from where he stood, his gaze sliding toward her. Their eyes met.

Not for long.

Just long enough.

"Don't let out your intent too much," he said quietly, his tone flat and unbothered-as if commenting on the weather.

Julia blinked.

Then she laughed, loud and amused. "Wow. You could just say you're scared."

Astron didn't flinch. "I'm not."

She tilted her head, that grin still playing across her lips. "No? Could've fooled me. You're reading my intent like a book already. Nervous, huh?"

"No," he said again, the corner of his mouth twitching slightly-just short of a smirk. "I just prefer when my opponent doesn't broadcast every thought like a marching band."

Julia snorted. "Come on, admit it. You like the attention."

Astron gave her a glance that was all dry neutrality. "I've had enough attention to know it's overrated."

Julia raised an eyebrow. "That's such a dramatic answer, wow. You gonna monologue next?"

Astron blinked, then turned away slightly, adjusting his stance. "Only if you stop interrupting it with flirting."

Julia's mouth opened.

Then closed.

She squinted. "That's not flirting."

He didn't even look back. "Isn't it?"

"...No."

Astron, still not facing her, let out a breath-not quite a sigh, more like an exhale of subtle judgment. "If that isn't your version of flirting," he said evenly, "then your casual way of speaking is quite far off."

Julia raised a brow, arms crossing. "Far off from what, exactly?"

"Far off from how a lady usually behaves."

"Oh?" She leaned in slightly, a glint in her eyes. "So now you want me to have womanly charm?"

"A basic human decency would suffice."

Julia gasped, mock-offended. "Wow. And here I thought you liked my attitude."

"I didn't say that."

"Then why do you care?"

Astron finally turned his head again, his violet eyes flat but undeniably sharp. "Why? Because your attitude is often directed at me."

"So you're saying you're annoyed?"

"No," he said immediately.

Julia tilted her head. "Then why do you care?"

"Because it affects me."

"Ohhh." She gave him a knowing grin. "So it affects you by... annoying you?"

Astron stared at her for a beat. Then, deadpan:

"It affects me by making me cringe."

Julia blinked once. Twice.

Then burst out laughing. "Pff-Cringe? You cringe? That's amazing."

Astron didn't respond.

Julia's laughter didn't die down-in fact, it only seemed to pick up as Astron's silence dragged on. Most people might've backed off by now, but not her. Julia wasn't most. people. And subtle jabs? They were practically a love language to her.

"Oh man," she said, wiping a nonexistent tear from her eye. "I'm keeping that one. 'You make me cringe. Gonna quote you on that forever.'"

Astron gave her a look-flat, unimpressed, but also vaguely resigned. "You'd quote your own arrest warrant if it had enough sarcasm."

"I mean, if the wording's dramatic enough, sure."

He turned away again, muttering, "Unbelievable"

Julia leaned a little closer, grinning. "You know what's really unbelievable? That you keep talking back. You could've walked away five minutes ago."

"I could've," Astron replied evenly, "but then you'd assume you won."

"Well, you are still here, so..."

Before the banter could escalate any further, another voice joined in, calm and cool.

"Do I even want to know what this argument started from?"

Lilia had strolled over, a slight sheen of sweat still on her brow from her duel, a towel draped around her neck. She eyed both of them with an expression somewhere between amusement and tired resignation.

Julia perked up. "Oh, you know. Astron's delicate pride got wounded by my 'lack of ladylike charm.'"

"That's not what I said," Astron replied automatically.

Lilia raised a brow at him. "But... you kind of did."

"I did not."

Lilia gave a long-suffering sigh and turned away-only to pause when footsteps

echoed down the corridor.

Ethan stepped into view, fresh from the locker room, towel around his shoulders, his damp hair slightly disheveled. His expression was quiet-not downcast, but

contemplative. The mark of someone still processing something.

All three turned toward him, conversation stalling for just a breath.

Julia's grin softened slightly. "Hey, Mountain Boy."

Ethan glanced over. "You're still antagonizing people, I see."

"Hey, I'm being delightful," she said with mock offense.

"Delightful's not the word I'd use," Astron offered without looking at her.

Ethan didn't smile, but there was a faint twitch at the corner of his mouth. Still, his eyes didn't carry their usual lightness.

Lilia noticed it too, her tone quieter. "How are you holding up?"

Ethan paused. "I've been better."

There was no self-pity in it-just honesty.

Julia nudged his arm lightly. "Well, you went toe-to-toe with Victor. You earned yourself, like, three days of being allowed to brood."

He exhaled softly. "I'm not brooding"

"You're standing in a shadowy hallway with wet hair and a towel. That's, like, textbook

brooding"

Ethan didn't argue.

He didn't need to.

The silence around them wasn't uncomfortable-it was the kind that settled around

people who understood each other, even if they rarely said it aloud.

"You did better than most would have."

Ethan glanced over, and for once, there was no sarcasm in Julia's gaze this time.

Ethan nodded. "Thanks."

Julia clapped her hands together. "Alright, emotional vulnerability quota's filled. Back

to me being charming and chaotic?"

"No," Astron and Lilia said at the same time.

Julia's smile twitched-just slightly. A tiny crack in the playful mask she wore so effortlessly. Her eyes narrowed, not in anger, but with a shift in weight behind them. Not everything was a joke, even

f she wanted it to be.

"I may go quite hard on you, you know," she said, voice still light but carrying a sharp undertone. "So maybe you should start minding your words."

Astron didn't flinch. His expression remained composed, but there was a slight tilt of his head, almost like he was analyzing her reaction in real-time.

"You won't back down from a fight anyway," he replied simply. "But it seems that rather than your lack of ladylike charm annoying me, it's my words that are annoying

you."

Julia scoffed, flipping a strand of her hair back with unnecessary flair. "Heh. You wish." But her grin was a little tighter now. There was something charged in the air-not just anticipation, but tension layered beneath the banter.

Before either of them could push further, Instructor Verren's voice rang across the

hall, sharp and unmistakable.

"Astron. Julia. Platform Two."

There was a flicker of energy between them-unspoken, yet understood.

Julia rolled her shoulders, cracking her neck once. "Guess it's showtime." Astron turned without a word, already heading toward the platform with quiet,

focused steps.

Julia followed a moment later, her stride loose but eyes sharp, that grin still hanging on-only now, it was sharpened into something less playful.

Something personal.

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Julia followed Astron across the training hall, boots tapping lightly against the

polished stone floor. Her posture was as relaxed as ever-shoulders loose, arms swinging slightly-but her face twitched.

Just once.

A tiny muscle near her jaw clenched. Her smile remained in place, but a sharpness had crept into her eyes.

Lack of ladylike charm.

She clicked her tongue softly, barely audible over the ambient noise of other sparring matches. She told herself it was nothing, that Astron had just been throwing a line back at her the way she threw a dozen at him. Just another jab in their constant game of one-upmanship.

But...

Why did that one stick?

Why that phrase?

She'd heard worse, for sure. Been called worse by instructors, rivals, even passing gossipers. Julia Middleton was a storm in boots-no one expected silk gloves from her.

She fought like a brawler, laughed like a delinquent, and made no apologies for it.

So why did it grate?



Because it was him, her thoughts whispered, traitorous and precise. Because it was

Astron saying it, and because he didn't say it to cut-he said it like an observation.

Like she was lacking something obvious.

And that... that made something crawl under her skin.

Julia's hands twitched once at her sides, but she forced her fingers still. Her

expression didn't break, not outwardly, but her grin now had teeth in it-not the flirtatious kind.

This wasn't just a fight now.

It wasn't just a rematch either.

It was a correction.

Chapter 972 Swordsgirl

The platform quieted.

Not a breath from the crowd. Just two figures facing each other, ten meters apart.

Julia exhaled slowly.

5 across the board.

She could feel the restraint pulsing through her limbs like weighted cuffs-speed, strength, reaction, all pressed down to the academy's baseline.

It was an intentional handicap.

The average first-year ranker-Rank 1000-had attributes around 5. For someone like her, who played on a different scale entirely, it felt like tying weights to her soul.

But that was the point.

Since this was a practice, naturally the students who somehow ended up matching with higher ranked ones needed to be adjusted.

Else, this wouldn't become a practice.

Across from her, Astron stood still-daggers sheathed at his side, bow gripped loosely in hand. His purple eyes didn't waver. No movement. No emotion.

But she saw it.

The way his left foot was angled, barely a centimeter off center. The way his breathing slowed-not from calm, but calculation. He was already planning the first three steps of the engagement.

Smart.

Good.

Instructor Verren's voice cracked across the platform like a whip. "-Begin!"

Julia's blade snapped up.

Her foot struck stone.

BOOM!

A golden blur exploded forward.

The moment the starting signal rang out, her suppression lifted-every restraint. peeled away in an instant. And all that hidden force surged.

Speed. Force. Precision.

Julia's body snapped into motion, boots slamming off the platform as she rocketed toward Astron.

Ten meters?

She closed half the distance in less than a second.

SWOOSH-!

Astron moved instantly, no hesitation. His bow came up fluidly, a silver arrow notched and drawn in one motion-his fingers barely visible as he loosed.

TWANG!-WHOOSH!

The arrow screamed through the air.

Julia's eyes locked onto it.

She didn't dodge sideways.

Instead-

Her body dropped, knees bending mid-stride into a sliding lean-her torso angled low, shoulder brushing the platform as the arrow skimmed over her hair.

SHHHK!

Her momentum never broke.

Two more arrows flew-fast, precise.

But she was already past his range.

Her blade gleamed as she surged upward from the slide, twisting into a rising cleave-vertical, savage, meant to split his bow in two.

CLANG!

Astron spun back, his bow already discarded, twin daggers flashing into his grip as he caught the blow just before it connected with his body. Sparks erupted as steel kissed steel.

Julia's grin returned instantly.

"You really are fast."

Astron didn't answer.

He pivoted off her blade's edge, sliding to the side with minimal effort. His daggers danced around her sword's length, eyes tracking every micro-adjustment of her shoulders, hips, stance.

She pressed harder.

Her blade snapped forward again-this time a feint-then twisted into a reverse arc, slashing low across his knees.

CLANG!-CLINK!-SWOOSH!

Astron jumped-not back, but up, flipping just enough to avoid the sweep, his foot landing on the flat of her sword for a split-second of balance.

Julia blinked. Then laughed.

"You cocky bastard."

She twisted her blade sideways.

CLANG!-TCHUNK!

Astron launched off before she could dislodge him, flipping over her shoulder and landing behind.

Julia didn't wait.

Her body whipped around, the tip of her blade tracing a deadly half-moon arc as she followed through with zero delay.

He ducked.

Barely.

The wind of her strike cut across his cheek like a slap.

FWOOSH!

But that wasn't the end of it.

Her next strike was already coiled in her hips-she pivoted on her heel and unleashed

a vertical slash aimed straight at his chest.

CLANG!

He crossed both daggers to block-arms bracing against the sheer weight behind the blow.

The force slammed through his guard, pushing him backward.

Not enough to stagger him fully.

But enough to shift the tempo.

Julia advanced.

Her strikes were coming in waves now-every slash tighter, every feint sharper.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!-SWISH!-TINK!

She wasn't overwhelming him with speed alone.

She was testing him-his footwork, his rhythm, his decision-making. Watching the angle of his blocks. Tracking when he dodged, when he parried, when he pivoted.

And for every adjustment he made-

She responded with something just a little faster.

Just a little more aggressive.

But even then-he didn't crumble.

Astron's movements remained efficient. Not flamboyant, not reactive. Exact. He redirected blows without wasting energy, slipping between her strikes like a thread

through cloth.

His daggers flicked out again-short, precise jabs meant not to wound, but to check

her flow.

Julia leaned left, twisted her torso-ducked under the second blade and responded

with a high kick.

THWACK!

Her boot caught his wrist-barely-just enough to knock one dagger off its optimal

grip.

She followed with a diagonal slash-

CLANG!

Astron caught it one-handed-but slid two steps back this time.

His breath came just slightly faster.

Julia's eyes gleamed.

"Getting tired already?"

Astron flicked his blade, resetting his stance. "Not yet."

Her smirk widened.

"Good."

Her mana surged.

And then?

She vanished.

BOOM!

A burst of golden light exploded from beneath her feet-[Tiger's Pulse Step]-the

short-distance blink woven into footwork.

She reappeared just left of center, sword raised.

Astron's eyes flicked-barely a twitch,

But it was enough.

CLANG!-SWIPE!-CLANG!

He blocked.

But she didn't stop.

Her blade snapped into a second slash mid-motion-then a third. Horizontal. Vertical.



Diagonal.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

Every strike came faster. Cleaner. No wasted energy.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

Her blade blurred through the air-rising, sweeping, twisting in angles that demanded precision, And Astron? He matched each one with practiced deflection. No hesitation.

No panic. Just that same unreadable focus in his eyes.

Julia gritted her teeth, breath evening as she shifted her grip and circled.

Damn, this feels weird.

Her muscles moved, but not how they usually did. There was resistance-like her body was wading through shallow water. Her reach felt shorter. Her bursts, slower. Her instincts were fast, but her body? Lagging by a heartbeat.

No wonder people hate rank adjustment.

Still, she had asked for this. Wanted to feel what an average freshman felt like.

And now?

Now she did.

It's annoying.

Her next strike came in sharp, a slicing arc toward his midsection. He twisted at the last second, his dagger intercepting at the precise angle that sent her blade skimming wide.

CLINK!-TCH!

Julia rolled her shoulder, hopping back half a step to reset.

That dagger work...

She narrowed her eyes.

It wasn't flashy. No named art. No pressure flares or aura bursts. But the way he moved-how he read her stance before each strike, how he used the minimum effort to defend-was clinical. Surgical.

Efficient.

That word repeated in her mind as she watched his next movement. The sidestep. The guard shift. The low-angle parry to bait her into committing high.

This bastard's got good instincts.

And it pissed her off-in the best way.

She darted forward again, this time lower to the ground, testing his centerline with a tight thrust. He shifted. Slid. Parried.

CLANG!-TCHNK!-SWOOSH!

Her blade met his daggers again and again, he blocked at just the right moment, his movements sharp but compact.

That dagger form... That's not even advanced technique.

She recognized the lines-basic Hunter dagger work. The kind most students outgrew after six months.

But he's elevating it. Measuring distance perfectly. Not wasting a single twitch of his wrist.

Julia stepped back, brows drawing together as she adjusted her breathing.

No frills. No style. But clean.

She hadn't underestimated Astron-but seeing it up close, feeling the tension in every exchange, the precision in every block...

This must be why Eleanor had chosen him.

She confirmed it more.

Another parry. Another perfect deflection.

He's not stronger than me.

Her blade snapped low-feinting at his knee before twisting into a rising slash,

But he's adapting faster than most.

A fast learner was a dream for the most of the instructors.

"Heh....

And well, sadly, or not, she was also one of those.

-A/N-

I had an exam today, and the result was not as I expected.

I hate numeric answers, the error is way too small.

Chapter 973 Swordsgirl

"Heh..."

Julia exhaled, low and sharp.

Her fingers twitched against the hilt of her blade.

She had seen enough.

No flair. No wasted energy. No arrogance.

Astron fought with bare efficiency.

But that wasn't the problem.

The problem was-he was still standing.

Still blocking. Still reacting. Still matching her, step for step, even now.

And she was getting tired of playing like this.

Her stance shifted.

The moment she planted her back foot, the entire air around her changed.

Gone was the relaxed posture. The teasing grin.

In its place?

The sharpened stillness of a blade just before it strikes.

Her blade tilted downward at a shallow angle-shoulders loose, but her knees bent,

core braced. A centerline stance. Every muscle coiled.

Sword of Middleton. Core Form.

The audience might not recognize it. But any instructor watching would.

This was no longer sparring.

This was assertion.

Astron's brows furrowed-just slightly. Enough.

Julia took a step forward.

THMP.

Another.

Then-

She moved.

BOOM!

A blur of white hair and burning mana surged forward.

CLANG!

The first strike came from the left-heavy, wide, meant to shake his stance.

Astron deflected. Just barely.

But before his feet could fully set-she twisted, spinning into a rising cleave that came from the blindside.

CLANG!-TCHNK!-SKRRK!

Sparks exploded as metal kissed metal. Astron blocked-but his footing slid an inch. That inch was all Julia needed.

She pressed.

Pressed again.

Pressed harder.

CLANG! CLANG! SWOOSH! THUMP!

Every slash carved through the air with vicious efficiency. She wasn't dancing anymore. She wasn't measuring. She was attacking.

Like a predator that had found her opening and refused to let go.

And that-

That was the essence of the Middleton Sword.

Raw. Relentless. Uncompromising.

The sword of beasts.

"Try keeping up," she growled, her voice low and predatory.

Astron didn't answer.

He couldn't.

Every second was spent reading her rhythm, parrying at the last possible instant, dodging when his arms couldn't keep up. His twin daggers blurred in his hands-an endless flurry of silver arcs, trying to buy seconds. Inches. Air.

But Julia didn't give those.

Her blade came again.

Diagonal!-Horizontal!-Reverse sweep!-Thrust!

Every slash fed into the next. Her momentum was alive, evolving-not based on form, but instinct.

Astron ducked low, attempting a dagger jab at her side.

She sidestepped mid-swing, twisted with the strike-

CLANG!

Parried it with the flat of her blade, then kicked.

THWACK!

Her boot struck his dagger grip, and this time, it ripped the weapon from his hand,

sending it skidding across the platform.

"One down," she muttered, eyes gleaming. Astron reached for his spatial storage-

Too slow.

BOOM!

She was already there.

Her blade screamed toward his shoulder in a brutal arc meant to crush his guard

completely.

CLANG!



He blocked with the remaining dagger-two hands on the hilt. Braced. Defensive.

But he slid back.

TCHNK-SKRRRRRT!

His boots scraped against the platform, pushed back nearly two meters.

Julia's aura flared hotter.

He's strong. Still not cracking. Still reading.

She narrowed her eyes.

So I'll stop letting him.

Her blade pulled back-

And then-

She breathed.

"Sword of Middleton: First StripeJ

The technique unfolded instantly.

Her blade fell in a savage downward arc, fast enough to split wind and scorch the air.

CLANG!-!!

Astron blocked.

'Second Stripe]

A horizontal slash-meant to destroy retreat paths.

He pivoted-barely-dagger scraping against the strike's edge.

CLANG!-TCH-!!

Julia's eyes narrowed.

He was still standing.

[Third Stripe!]

A rising arc. Brutal. Decisive.

This one broke guards. Shattered stances.

Astron jumped.

But her sword caught his heel mid-air-

SLASH!

A shallow cut.

But enough.

Astron landed, rolling.

Julia didn't chase.

Not yet.

She watched as he straightened, one knee dipping slightly. Sweat at his temple. Breath harder now.

Still calm.

Still not speaking.

Her blade lowered-just a little.

Julia tilted her head, lips curling into a grin.

"Damn," she murmured, voice low but clear. "You're good."

Her shoulders rose, then dropped in a loose exhale.

"I was lucky to match with you."

It wasn't sarcasm. Not taunt.

It was respect.

Not many in the academy could've lasted this long. Not while facing her seriously. Not while being pushed this far, even if she wasn't going all out physically.

But Astron?

He was still there. Still reading. Still learning.

That made her want more.

Her fingers tightened slightly on the hilt of her blade.

Then let's raise the bar.

Julia inhaled, eyes flicking toward the distant benches-just briefly.

Lucas.

She remembered watching his fight. The clean lines. The illusions woven through his blade, not cast as spells but layered into motion. Into rhythm.

It had stirred something in her. Not jealousy.

But curiosity.

Enlightenment.

If Lucas could do that, then why not her?

She was a Middleton. But she wasn't just a Middleton.

Her style was meant for beasts-overwhelming strength, tempo control, oppressive pressure. But what if she could add something more?

Something slippery.

Something no monster could replicate.

Julia's aura shifted-barely visible to most. But it was there.

The subtle shimmer of layered mana, wrapping not around the sword-but behind it.

Not a projection. Not a copy.

But a phantom echo.

Her blade lifted again.

Astron's gaze narrowed. Just a fraction.

Julia smiled.

"Let's see if you can keep up now."

Then she moved.

BOOM!

Her blade struck a clean arc aimed at his right shoulder.

Astron stepped to intercept-dagger already rising.

But the blade vanished.

No impact. No pressure.

A split-second after-another blade struck from the left, low and rising.

CLANG!

He blocked. Barely.

And then another.

A flicker from above-then a slash from below.

Illusions.

Not separate entities-but perfectly layered within her swings.

Her blade cut in and out of visibility, flickering like a phantom-her rhythm disrupted, broken, reformed with every breath.

Astron's defense shifted-faster now, tighter. He ducked, slid, parried.

But she was in his face.

CLANG!-TCHNK!-SWOOSH!

● Illusory Stripe - Variant One.J "she muttered between blows.

Her own creation.

The base of Middleton's sword, but blended with spatial suggestion. The illusion was never cast. It was felt.

An extra step. An extra cut. A shadow where none should be.

And Astron?

He was getting pushed back.

His feet slid across the platform, momentum tipping against him.

Julia pressed harder-her grin widening.

Not because she had him.

But because she was creating something new.

A blade arced toward his ribs.

Astron ducked.

Another flickered at his shoulder.

He spun.

Another came down diagonally.

He blocked-but the impact never came.

It was a ghost swing.

The real strike came from below.

CLANG!

He caught it.

Just barely.

But his fingers twitched.

Julia's eyes gleamed.

"You're slipping-"

Then she froze.

His eyes.

They flared.

Just for a split second-his irises shimmered with a faint purple hue. Subtle.

Controlled.

And then-

He moved.

Not panicked. Not rushed.

He stepped into her.

His dagger rose-not to strike, but to catch.

To catch the illusion.

He ignored the fake blade slashing toward his neck and focused on the real one she

was hiding behind the rhythm.

Julia's chest clenched.

CLANK!



The parry was perfect.

Not just reactive-but predictive.

And the moment her blade rebounded, her posture tilted ever so slightly off balance-

He retaliated.

SWIPE!-CLINK!

A quick jab-not aimed to wound, but to disrupt her stance. Her foot shifted.

Then another flick-close, sharp, just behind her elbow.

Her blade wavered. Slightly.

Her illusion cycle broke.

Astron slipped in.

"Got you," he said calmly.

His voice was quiet.

But the edge in it?

Razor-sharp.

Julia growled, her footing resetting just in time to backflip out of range-her blade

raised defensively now, a gleam of sweat at her temple.

And a grin on her lips.

"You really are annoying, you know that?"

Astron didn't respond.

He adjusted his grip, readying both daggers again.

But there was no smirk. No pride.

Just focus.

Just anticipation.

Julia's stance lowered again-Middleton Sword, Core Form-but her blade shimmered subtly.

The illusion was still there.

Only now?

So was the danger.

He's not going to fall for it again...

It was her deduction.

Chapter 974 Swordsgirl

From the shaded platform above the dueling rings, Eleanor stood motionless, her arms loosely crossed, blue eyes narrowing with every exchange.

She had been present since early morning, the moment the internal message reached her:

"Victor Blackthorn had matched with Ethan Hartley. Match approved."

And she came. Not out of formality, not as an instructor obligated to supervise, but out of something else-intent. Curiosity, perhaps. Quiet concern. The kind only a teacher who had invested in her students understood.

And Ethan hadn't disappointed.

Yes, the result had been expected. Victor was, stronger, and cruelly precise. His style was less about dueling and more about dismantling. Yet Ethan, despite the pain, the disadvantage, and the weight of every blow-he endured. He resisted. Even adapted.

He was getting better.

It was rough, incomplete, a boy still trying to mold himself into something more. But it was growth. And that was enough, for now.

Still, the match had ended.

And Eleanor had remained.

Because another fight had begun.

And this one?

This one had her full attention.

Below, steel clashed with steel. Flashes of gold and silver blurred across the platform. Julia's blade, alive with motion, danced in seamless arcs of aggression. A duelist's precision. A predator's rhythm. She had always been a powerhouse in motion-but now, something had changed. There was sharpness behind her aggression. Technique layered over instinct.

Illusions...? Eleanor's gaze sharpened slightly.

Not cast, but crafted. Built into the tempo of the blade itself.

A variant.

Julia's evolving. Fast.

But the one who held Eleanor's attention-truly-was the one in front of her. Astron.

Daggers in hand. Feet sliding across the stone. Movements tight, minimalistic, but never clumsy. She could see it in how he turned his hips on a block, how he used Julia's own pressure to shift tempo. The way his eyes flicked-not in panic, but in prediction. Every illusion Julia weaved, he tracked. Every false angle she twisted, he filtered. Not all cleanly. Not without strain.

But he saw through them.

And that-

That was no accident.

Eleanor's fingers tapped softly against her forearm.

When I watched him train, she thought, I suspected it. When he mimicked the Stripes with daggers, when he closed the gap with Irina after barely holding a sword for minutes-I saw it.

Now, watching him exchange blows with Julia-a prodigy swordswoman with nobility-forged technique, aura, and physical mastery-her suspicions evolved. They solidified.

A daggerist who thinks like a swordsman.

A student who was never taught the blade, yet reacted like someone born with it.

Eleanor's thoughts grew quieter, her breath stilling as her eyes locked onto Astron's next movement.

He caught her illusion.

He cut through it.

He retaliated, not with brute force, not with a spell-but with a calculated tempo-break, slipping past her rhythm and striking the core of her form. A counter not taught in textbooks, but formed from reading.

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

He's not just mimicking. He's adapting in real time.

She watched as Julia grinned-frustrated and thrilled-and backed off, resetting her stance. A thin line of sweat traced her temple. Her core form returned. So did her illusions.

But Astron didn't flinch.

His stance adjusted.

His breathing slowed.

And Eleanor felt it again.

That anticipation.

The same quiet thrill she had felt only a handful of times in her life.

Watching the start of something rare.

My eyes weren't wrong.

She thought back to the classification board, to his trait summary, to the occupation

list that stamped Daggerist and Bowman into his profile.

But in this moment-watching the way he fought, how he thought in motion-

That label felt wrong.

Or incomplete.

He has the potential to become a swordsman.

And not just any swordsman.

One forged through adversity, silence, and efficiency.

One who had taught himself why a blade moved, long before anyone taught him how.

Eleanor exhaled slowly, her gaze unblinking.

"If someone taught him properly..."

She didn't finish the thought.

Because part of her already knew-

That she might be the one to do it.

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On the platform, Julia lunged again.

CLANG!-SWOOSH!-TCHNK!

This time, three blades came in sequence-two ghosts, one real.

The first cut was wide, aimed high-meant to bait his arms upward.

The second trailed the shadow of the first-perfectly spaced, slightly delayed.

The third? A low stab toward his ankle-meant to punish his guard shift.

Astron blocked the high slash.

Dodged the second.

And-

CLANG!

Caught the third.

Julia's brow furrowed slightly.

Again...

It had looked like he'd been caught off guard. The stagger. The tilt of his heel. The brief

delay between blocks.

But as she looked closer-read the tension in his shoulders, the calm in his eyes-

It felt fake.

She dashed right, her body twisting low, sword slashing through an illusion-imbued

are that mirrored itself a second later.

He blocked the fake one this time-intentionally.

Let the real strike skim his sleeve.

Too convenient.

Too rehearsed.

Julia's golden eyes narrowed. Her instincts flared.

You saw it, didn't you?

You knew which was real.

She struck again-harder, faster. Her illusions grew bolder, sharper, embedded in

feints and repositions.

Some he clearly missed.

Others?

He pretended to miss.

Not once did he retaliate.

Not once did he counter-strike like someone who had truly misjudged the blade.



He defended. Defended. Defended.

Even when disarmed from one hand, he retreated with precision. Dropped a dagger on purpose to bait her into overextending.

She didn't fall for it.

Instead, she pressed with a rippling combo of slashes.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!-TCHNK!

And in a blur of steel, her sword hooked beneath his remaining dagger-

CLACK!-CLATTER.

It skidded across the floor.

Astron stepped back. Open-palmed. Chest rising and falling.

The match was over.

Instructor Verren's voice rang out sharply: "That's enough!"

The mana barrier flared, then dimmed.

Silence fell across the platform.

The students in the audience exhaled-murmurs, awe, whispers of "She beat him." and

"Did you see how she pressured him?"

But Julia?

She didn't move.

Her blade stayed up for another breath. Two.

Then she finally exhaled and lowered it, gaze locked on Astron.

He stood still. Not winded. Not ashamed.

Just calm. Like always. Julia's jaw tensed. Her steps were slow as she approached him, sword at her side.

"You fought well," she said flatly.

Astron nodded once. "So did you." She blinked.

Then gave a tight smile.

But it wasn't a satisfied one.

There was no real sting of victory in her chest. No rush.

No thrill.

And that pissed her off.

No wounds. No slips. Not even a real counter in the last minute of the fight.

He could've struck back.

Could've challenged her.

But he didn't.

And that hollow feeling gnawed at her ribs like acid.

Why?

"Hey," she said quietly, voice low enough that no one else would hear. "Were you holding back?"

Astron looked at her-expression unreadable. "I lost."

"That's not what I asked."

A pause.

He tilted his head slightly. "Would it matter?"

Julia's fingers twitched around her hilt.

She didn't answer.

He stepped past her then, walking off the platform like the fight meant nothing.

And maybe to him-it didn't.

But to her? That uncertainty festered.

From the crowd, cheers rang out. Recognition. Admiration.

But in her chest?

Only frustration.

Not because she hadn't dominated the fight.

But because she couldn't be sure if she ever truly had.

Because something deep in her gut-her [White Tiger] instincts, her rhythm, her sword-was telling her the truth no one else could see:

That wasn't Astron's limit.

And the fact that he chose to hide it?

That he let her win?

That-

That was unforgivable.

Her teeth clicked softly.

Her blade slid back into its sheath with a quiet hiss of steel.

And as she turned from the platform, her smile was gone.

Not defeated.

Just-

Unsatisfied.

## Chapter 975 Future

The corridor leading to the changing rooms was quiet-blessedly so.

Astron stepped through the mana-scanned threshold, the door sealing behind him with a soft hiss. He didn't speak, didn't glance at the other lockers, most of which were unoccupied. His fingers moved automatically-cloak undone, gear stored in dimensional space, tunic peeled off with clinical efficiency. One by one, the layers

came away until only the low hum of cooling enchantments filled the space.

But his mind wasn't here.

It was still on the platform.

On the fight.

On her.

Julia Middleton.

He exhaled slowly, the faint warmth of exertion still clinging to his skin.

She's gotten better.

The illusion work had surprised him-not because of the concept itself, but because of the execution. It wasn't cast like traditional illusion spells. It wasn't projected with mana tags or visual refraction techniques.

It was built directly into her swordplay.

Woven.

A phantom edge layered into her movements-not artificial, but natural. Learned. Crafted.

That kind of adaptation didn't come from tutors or drills. It came from desire. From trial. From frustration.

Astron folded the inner layer of his tunic, eyes narrowing slightly.

She's evolving.

And not just physically.

To be frank, her swordsmanship had always leaned on brute dominance. Speed, power, bloodline-enhanced ferocity. The [White Tiger] style thrived on pressure- outpacing, outmuscling, outlasting. It wasn't built for subtlety. It didn't need it. But today?

Today, her rhythm changed. Her body slowed. Her instincts remained.

And that was what impressed him.

To fight like that-without her usual advantage-and still push that far...

That's the mark of a main cast.

He sat down on the bench near the far end of the room, running a towel across his arms, then the back of his neck.

Yes, he could have won.

If he'd revealed more, forced the tempo, used the deeper rhythms he'd crafted in silence and solitude...

The probability of victory was around 60 percent.

Not overwhelming. Not certain. But in his favor.

Still, he didn't.

Because this wasn't that kind of fight.

It wasn't about winning.

It was about seeing.

How far she's come. How far she can go.

And the answer was clear.

She has that factor.

The same intangible quality Ethan carried-the irrationality that defied statistics. The raw spike of breakthrough potential that came not from calculation, but from instinct, pressure, desperation.

A sudden leap.

A moment of evolution.

The kind of moment that renders predictions meaningless.

That's what made them protagonists.

Not power.

But possibility.

Astron leaned forward, elbows on his knees, the towel draped loosely between his hands.

And Julia... she was dangerous not because she was stronger than him.

But because she could become stronger in the middle of the fight.

Of course, that itself wasn't a bad thing.

Astron's gaze lowered, hands tightening slightly around the towel.

Growth like Julia's... isn't dangerous to me. Not yet. Not in the way that matters.

But still-

There are others.

His thoughts drifted-unbidden, but inevitable.

Lucas.

A different kind of threat. Subtle, intelligent, built not on physical power but mental precision and rhythmic deception. His blade was not fast-it was clever. His strength came from the structure of his intent, the design behind every illusion he wove into motion.

And then... there's that person.

Astron didn't linger on the name. He didn't need to. Just the silhouette-distant, cold, wrapped in too many secrets-was enough to send a familiar chill down his spine.



I can't reveal too much.

Not now. Not yet.

The time for my efforts to bear fruit is approaching. Every move must be measured.

He exhaled, leaning back against the cool metal wall. Silence enveloped the changing room-sharp in its contrast to the echo of clashing steel still playing in his thoughts. But just because he hadn't fought with everything-

Didn't mean he had gained nothing.

On the contrary.

I've learned a lot.

More than he expected.

He had never fought a swordsman like Julia before-not at that level. The others he had faced were either too raw or too predictable, relying on either brute strength or textbook technique. But Julia's fighting style?

It moved.

Her sword wasn't just a weapon-it was an extension of her rhythm. Aggressive.

Flexible. Disruptive.

It pushed him.

And it made me see the cracks in my own dagger form.

Small details-timing on his reverse grip parry, the slight hesitation in transition from block to disengage, how his footwork tilted out of alignment when responding to high

feints layered with illusions.

That slide cost me tempo.

That pivot gave her an angle.

They were things he would've missed in a standard match.

But against someone like her? Someone evolving mid-fight?

He couldn't afford to.

It's experience I needed.

Real experience. He mostly trained his form in silence. Honed the [Lethal Arsenal Ascendancy] through

repetition, dissection, and focused isolation. But today?

He felt it shift.

Subtle, but present.

That class-it didn't just grow through victory. It grew through adaptation. And

adaptation meant testing every weapon, every stance, every rhythm... against

something alive.

Understanding swords is a critical layer for improving [Weapon Master].

His class wasn't just a title. It was a philosophy. A demand. To know not just how to wield weapons-but how to understand them. Where they sang. Where they cracked.

And Julia's blade had spoken loudly.

He'd fought back with daggers, yes-but in that clash, he saw what a proper blade could do when layered with illusion, instinct, and ferocity.

Which led to the next realization.

The illusion technique she used...

Astron's fingers traced lightly over his forearm-where one of her ghost strikes had brushed. No damage. But he remembered the shape of it. The rhythm.

It was good.

Not flawless. Not deep enough to fool advanced sensory types. But good.

He'd trained under Reina. One of the best. His [Eyes] had been honed specifically to dismantle visual deception, mana irregularity, and suggestion patterns.

So yes he saw through them.

Clearly.

But even so-

He could judge their level.

Julia's illusions weren't cast-they were integrated. That's what made them special.

She was touching on the same foundation Lucas had mastered. But her approach was rawer. Wilder. Less structured.

Which made it harder to predict.

Chaos layered in discipline.

Astron closed his eyes briefly, filing the sensation away. The blur of her phantom cuts.

The delay in her breathing when shifting from illusioned stance to real attack. The slight recoil when he let an illusion pass through him.

It was all usable data.

He stood slowly, letting the towel fall onto the bench.

No damage.

No wounds.

But the fight had left its mark.

Not on his body.

On his path.

His understanding of his class, his weapon rhythm, and even illusion dynamics had all moved forward-just a little.

And that?

That was worth more than any win.

And of course, there was one more thing.

The way Julia had fought. Not just the illusion layering, not just the pressure-but the core of it. The raw, pulsing

essence of the Middleton Sword Style.

It wasn't just a set of techniques.

It was a language.

Heavy steps. Forward aggression. Relentless tempo. It didn't give space-it devoured

it. It wasn't elegant, not in the traditional sense. But there was a clarity to it. A rhythm

that came not from calculation, but from instinct honed through tradition. Through inheritance. Through bloodline. Being subjected to it firsthand...

That was a new experience entirely.

He had studied the style in theory. Watched recorded duels. Broken down footage of Julia's matches, even sparring sessions from her older cousins, the ones already graduated. But feeling it-responding to it in real-time, measuring his daggers against.

its weight- That was different.

That was invaluable.

Of course, he couldn't just learn it now. Not instantly. Not like he'd mastered other simpler forms. The Middleton sword wasn't a style you replicated-it was something that came from within.

But...

There were some pointers.

A few anchor points of structure. Muscle tensing patterns. Frame pivots. The way she used the diagonal weight transfer when chaining the Stripes.

Small, clean data.

Enough to build something from. Eventually.

'In the future, if I have the chance...'

He pulled on the last layer of his uniform, buttoned it quietly.

'I wouldn't mind sparring with her again!

Not for a mission. Not for evaluation.

Just to see what came of it. What he could learn. What he could offer in return.

That would be quite nice.

Because just like Julia-

He wasn't satisfied either.

Not with that fight. Not with the result. Not with what he'd shown, or what he'd seen.

There was more. For both of them.

Astron stepped toward the exit, boots echoing softly against the polished floor.

And in the back of his mind-

The possibility lingered.

Next time.

## Chapter 976 Future

The afternoon sun hung lower now, casting golden beams through the tall windows of the training hall as the final echoes of the last spar faded. The mana barriers surrounding the platforms dimmed one by one, signaling the end of the day's practical lesson.

Students began to gather near the central open space-some stretching, others

chattering excitedly about the matches they'd witnessed or fought in. Weapons were sheathed, towels slung over shoulders, and the ambient tension gradually eased into the casual buzz of worn-out satisfaction.

Most of the group regrouped as usual near one of the marble pillars at the edge of the dueling floor.

Ethan was already there, seated on the bench, arms resting on his knees. Irina stood nearby, speaking quietly with Carl. Lilia approached last, water bottle in hand, eyes sweeping over the group before zeroing in on Julia.

Julia stood with her arms crossed, weight shifted onto one leg, brows knitted together as she stared at nothing in particular. Her usual fire had dimmed into a faint scowl.

Lilia tilted her head. "What's with the grumpy face?"

Julia didn't answer.

Lilia leaned in slightly, smirking. "You won against him, didn't you? Just like you wanted. Why so sour now?" Her tone turned playful. "Don't tell me you're mad because you couldn't prove your ladylike charm?"

That earned a visible twitch from Julia, who scoffed audibly and looked away. "Tch. Don't be annoying."

"Oh, come on," Lilia teased, but didn't press further when Julia's eyes didn't meet hers. Irina glanced over, sensing the edge in Julia's mood but choosing to stay silent. She understood that expression well enough. It wasn't pride. It wasn't anger. It was something else-deeper. She made a mental note to keep an eye on her later.

Before the conversation could stretch thinner, the side door to the instructor's hallway opened, and Astron emerged.

He looked no different than usual-uniform neat, expression unreadable, steps calm. His silver hair caught the light, his eyes half-lidded with that same distant

attentiveness he always wore.

But the moment he entered the room, several cadets turned toward him.

"That was amazing-seriously, I thought Julia had you at one point"

"Your reads were unreal. You didn't even cast and still kept up."



"Are you really a dagger specialist? You looked like a trained swordsman out there." Astron offered them a simple nod, nothing more. No thanks, no false humility-just acknowledgment.

This kind of attention had become a common occurrence.

Astron, for all his quietness, had become one of those names people whispered about. in sparring halls and during training evaluations. No matter how intense the matchup, he remained calm, unreadable. The other cadets didn't mind the way he brushed off praise they knew by now that Astron simply wasn't the type to talk more than he needed to.

He moved through the room with his usual, collected pace, his eyes not lingering on anyone for more than a second. With quiet purpose, he headed to the far wall of the hall, where the less crowded section of the seating was.

But before he could settle in properly, Irina appeared at his side, as if she'd timed her approach perfectly.

"Quite a nice work you had there," she said with a half-smile, tilting her head slightly as her eyes glanced toward him.

Astron barely reacted. "It was mostly Julia's repression of strength."

Irina clicked her tongue. "Yeah, yeah... We both know that's not true."

Astron didn't respond.

Just the faintest pause.

Irina caught it instantly. Her smirk widened. "See?"

Without waiting for permission, she slid into the space beside him, brushing his arm slightly with her shoulder before nudging him to sit.

He complied-perhaps because he didn't mind, or perhaps because resisting Irina's insistence usually took more energy than it was worth.

Once scated, Irina turned toward him a little more, resting her elbow casually on the bench behind him.

"Did you watch my fight?"

"I did."

His answer came without delay.

Irina raised an eyebrow. "What do you think?"

She wasn't fishing for praise. Well... maybe a little. But mostly, she was curious-

because Astron didn't just watch fights. He analyzed them.

Whatever came out of his mouth next, she knew it would be honest.

And she wanted to hear it.

Astron shrugged lightly, eyes trained forward as though still watching the afterimages

of the match unfold on the wall.

"I don't have much to comment."

Irina blinked. "Huh. That's it?"

A pause. Then-

"You're as good as you are"

She tilted her head, a faint scoff escaping her. "Vague as ever."

Astron gave the barest hint of a glance her way. "To word it better," he said calmly, "it appears you've broadened your horizons."

Irina's brow twitched upward, not with offense-but with interest.

'Go on, she thought.

He did.

"If it was before... you would've thought in a more one-dimensional way. Always opting to burn through the answer. Force it. Pressure it. Outpace it with heat."

His voice wasn't cold, nor harsh. Just... precise.

"You used to set the arena on fire and call that control. But now, you're not just wielding flames. You're wielding space. You're thinking about position, intent,

psychology."

Irina didn't reply. Her gaze had turned slightly inward.

Astron continued.

"You're getting better at conceptually understanding your opponents. And that-" he

paused, "-was your biggest problem."

His words weren't a judgment. They were a statement. A recognition.

Now, Irina finally looked at him fully. Her amber eyes searched his profile for any hint of condescension-there was none. Just the same calm, grounded presence he always carried.

She leaned back a little, letting the tension in her shoulders ease.

"So you did notice."

Astron gave a soft, almost imperceptible nod. "Of course."

A short silence passed between them, quiet but not empty. The kind of pause that wasn't waiting to be filled, but simply resting in place.

Then he added, his tone still flat but firm, "Now that you're solving it... there's not much for me to say."

Irina looked ahead again, lips tugging into something close to a smile.

"Not much to say, huh?"

Irina smirked to herself, her eyes drifting toward the floor as the flicker of satisfaction settled beneath her ribs. Of course he'd say there wasn't much to comment on.

Because most of what had changed-most of what she had learned-had come from him in the first place.

Every time he stood across from her in sparring.

Every time he pointed out her tunnel vision.

Every quiet remark about her reliance on pressure, on raw force.

Every subtle correction she hadn't wanted to hear but had needed to.

Astron never lectured. He didn't explain things like a teacher. He just existed-

consistently calm, endlessly sharp-and made her see the difference between what she thought she was doing and what she was actually doing.

Now that she was seeing the fruits of that-her decisions cleaner, her rhythm more grounded, her flames no longer just a storm of emotion but a tool of precision-it felt

good.

Better than good.

It felt earned.

She leaned a little closer toward him on the bench, her shoulder brushing against his

again as she grinned sideways.

"You know," she said lightly, "you're getting a little too comfortable with not taking credit."

Astron blinked. "I didn't do anything."

Irina scoffed. "That's a lie. You basically reshaped the way I think about combat."

"I just gave you openings," he replied. "You're the one who chose to walk through them."

She chuckled, shaking her head. "Spoken like a true mentor."

"I'm not your mentor."

She arched an eyebrow, smirk deepening. "Then what are you?" Astron turned his head just enough to glance at her. "I'm your knight, remember?"

"Heh..."

Chapter 977 Future

"I'm your knight, remember?"

"Heh..." Irina blinked. Then a laugh escaped her before she could stop it. "Oh, so now you're playing into the bit."

"It was your bit to begin with."

"Yeah, but I didn't think you'd actually commit."

Astron gave the faintest shrug. "You seemed entertained."

Irina rolled her eyes, but she couldn't hide the pleased glint in them. "Great. Now I've got a man who improves my combat skills and humors my ego. What more could I ask for?"

Astron didn't respond right away. He turned his gaze forward again, back to the empty dueling floor where the afternoon sun was beginning to dip lower across the marble.

Then he murmured, just low enough for her to barely hear:

"Hopefully nothing more than this."

Irina's breath caught-not enough to show, not enough for him to notice, probably- but just enough for her grin to falter for a heartbeat.

She glanced at him again.

And for a moment, didn't say anything.

Instead, she leaned back, arms folded behind her head, her smirk returning-but softer this time.

"You really are getting good at this banter thing," she muttered.

Astron didn't respond.

But she swore-she swore-his lips twitched. Just slightly.

And it was enough.

Then....the sound of footsteps approached from the side, casual but undeniably aimed in their direction.

Julia was the first to arrive, arms crossed, jaw set, her expression carrying the same tight edge it had since the end of her match. She didn't say anything right away-just stopped in front of Astron and looked at him like she was waiting for something. A word. A confession. Anything.

Astron returned her gaze with calm indifference, his violet eyes unreadable. After a beat, he spoke.

"Is there a problem?"

Julia's eyes narrowed, but her voice came flat. "No."

A pause.

Astron gave the faintest tilt of his head before turning his attention away, as if the matter had resolved itself.

Julia didn't say anything more. She just sat down heavily on the bench beside Irina, letting out a huff that was too controlled to be a sigh but too bitter to be silence.

Moments later, Lucas wandered over with his usual loose-limbed gait, tossing a water bottle from hand to hand. He slowed as he caught sight of the trio sitting together, and the faint smirk on his lips grew into a full grin.

"Well, well. Don't you two look cozy!" He wiggled his eyebrows slightly. "What's this? Loverbirds moment?"

Irina didn't even flinch. "Are you a kid or something?"

"Everyone has that kid inside them," Lucas replied, feigning innocence.

"Yes, but not everyone feels the need to broadcast it to the entire room."

Lucas placed a hand over his heart. "Wow. And here I was trying to bring some levity to this grumpy little corner"

He gestured broadly to Carl-who had joined them silently moments ago and now stood like a wall at the edge of the group-and then to Astron, who had barely shifted since Julia's arrival.

"Look at these guys," Lucas said. "Stone-faced, steel-spined, emotionless. It's like someone handed them a tutorial on how not to smile."



Carl glanced sideways. "I smile."

Lucas raised an eyebrow. "When?"

Carl paused. "Privately."

Julia actually snorted at that, her mood easing a fraction.

Lucas turned to Astron. "What about you? Don't tell me the routine comes with a no-happiness clause."

Astron gave a quiet breath, not quite a sigh-more like a matter-of-fact exhale.

"It's not that I don't smile," he said, tone even. "I just don't have much reason to." That silenced the group for a moment-not because it was sad, necessarily, but because of how simply he said it. No self-pity. No dramatics. Just honesty, as plain as the air they breathed.

Ethan let out a soft chuckle. "Damn. That hits harder than I expected."

Lucas raised a brow, then nodded. "Yeah. Kinda relatable, actually. Though let's be real, Astron-you have to be doing it on purpose. That's peak edgelord delivery." Astron didn't even blink.

Lucas tilted his head, grinning. "No comeback? Not even a deadpan retort? You're just gonna stand there and look mysteriously tragic?"

"I'm ignoring you," Astron said flatly.

"See?" Lucas nodded sagely. "Peak edgelord."

Julia, who had been quietly absorbing the exchange, felt the last bit of tension slide off her shoulders. Her smirk returned, faint but unmistakable. And, as if instinctively, she

turned to her next target.

Her eyes landed on Ethan.

"Well, speaking of tragic," she said, stretching her arms overhead with faux innocence, "how's our brave little lightning bolt doing? Still brooding from your heartbreak with Victor?"

Ethan gave her a sidelong glance, his mouth twitching upward. "I'm not brooding."

"You're totally brooding."

"Just resting"

"With the exact facial expression of someone who watched their favorite spear get snapped in half."

"It's not broken."

"Your spirit is," she said with exaggerated sympathy, patting his shoulder.

Ethan rolled his eyes. "I'm fine, Julia."

Julia leaned in, grinning. "Aw. You sure you don't need a hug? A snack? A rematch with someone who doesn't rewrite the laws of physics mid-fight?"

Ethan's smile returned, dry and tired. "I'd rather fight Carl again."

Carl, from the side, grunted. "Accepted."

Lucas snorted. "That's what we call 'dodging the question.'"

Irina glanced between all of them, lips quirking upward as she leaned back slightly against the wall. For a group of misfits recovering from tension, defeat, and too many unsaid things, they were holding together pretty well.

Just then-

the rhythm of conversation faltered.

The sharp, measured sound of footsteps echoed across the now-quieting training hall.

Slow. Unhurried. Precise.

But the silence that followed wasn't born from curiosity.

It was pressure.

An intangible weight pressed down on the air like a tide pulling in. A presence that didn't need to declare itself. I was felt-in the shift of posture, the quieting of voices,

the sudden stillness of breath.

Victor Blackthorn had entered the room.

His uniform, immaculate as always, caught the fading light in a way that made the fine threads of its weave shimmer faintly. His golden eyes, brilliant and unwavering, swept across the hall with the detached calm of someone who didn't need to seek attention- he simply commanded it by existing.

And now that the duel was over-now that the administrative restraints on his "limited

presence" were no longer in effect-the full scope of his aura returned, as if a veil had been lifted. The air around him pulsed faintly, not with violence, but with dominance.

His mana, reined in yet undeniable, hummed in the background like a lion breathing beneath polished steel.

He made his way toward the group without hurry, his expression unreadable, posture effortless. The sea of cadets parted without needing to be asked.

When he reached them, he stopped just a few steps away.

And looked.

Not at Astron. Not at Ethan.

But at Julia.

Victor's gaze was unreadable-cool, inquisitive, intense. Not a challenge. Not quite curiosity either. Just... attention. Total and singular.

Julia, for her part, didn't move. Her eyes locked onto his the moment his presence washed over them. The weight of his gaze might've made others shift, flinch, turn away.

Not her.

She didn't smile. Didn't smirk.

But her eyes, sharp and glinting with fire, held steady. Not in defiance. Not in posturing.

Just refusal to yield. To look away. To shrink beneath someone else's shadow.

The two stood like that-silent, unmoving, the entire group suddenly subdued between them.

"What?"

Then the one to break the silence was at the end Julia.

Chapter 978 Future

"What?"

The word wasn't shouted, nor sharp-it was laced with irritation, yes, but also restraint. Julia's voice cut through the silence like a blade across silk-clean, deliberate. Her arms remained crossed, but her gaze never wavered.

She glared at Victor-not with challenge, not with flirtation, but with expectation. Because she knew him.

Far better than most in the room.

They all did, in truth. Julia, Lucas, Ethan... even Irina and Carl to an extent. Long before Arcadia Hunter Academy had drawn them into this new war-forged mold, they had crossed paths in pre-academy schools, Institutions meant to raise prodigies. To filter the exceptional from the promising.

And Victor?

Victor Blackthorn had always been exceptional.

Untouchably so.

He hadn't needed to speak much then either. He simply was, Brilliant, disciplined, devastating in battle. But even in those early days-amid duels and drills, lectures and assessments-there had been one exception to his stoic detachment.

Julia.

It hadn't been loud. It hadn't been confessed. But it had been obvious to those who knew how to look.

The way Victor used to turn his head whenever Julia entered a room, just moment longer than necessary.

The quiet shifts in his stance when she spoke-how he'd subtly align himself in her direction.

The way he used to offer her his hand first when instructors demanded paired exercises, even when it made less tactical sense.

The way he never corrected her... when he corrected everyone else.

For someone as composed and indifferent as Victor, the subtlety was the confession.

But then came the last year. The withdrawal. The long silences. The way he all but disappeared from the academy under special training orders-his presence reduced to a ghost.

And with that, the signals had stopped.

Or so Julia had assumed.

Now, here he stood. His aura returned. His strength unbound. And yet his gaze?

Still on her.

Still searching.

Victor didn't answer right away.

He didn't smile. He didn't speak.

He simply regarded her-those green eyes unblinking, that calm carved-in-marble expression betraying little. But to Julia, who'd known him longer than most... there. was a flicker there.

Victor opened his mouth, the movement subtle-like everything he did-but decisive. The pause ended, and at last, his voice cut through the space between them. Low. Clear. Strangely... careful.

"... You've gotten better."

Julia's eyes narrowed slightly. "Better?"

Victor gave a slight nod. "Yes."

It wasn't a compliment dressed in flowery language. It was matter-of-fact, unadorned. Like everything else about him, there was no effort to soften or embellish. Just the truth, as he saw it.

He shifted slightly, posture still refined, hands loosely at his sides. "I watched your swordsmanship."

Julia raised an eyebrow, her arms still folded. "You watched?"

"During the duel," he clarified, as if the distinction mattered. "The way you layered illusion into footwork. The rhythm distortion. It's sharper than before. Less instinct, more design.

Julia held his gaze for a moment longer, then tilted her head and gave a small, sideways smirk. "Of course it is."

A flicker of amusement-so faint it might've been imagined-crossed Victor's features. He looked at her for another second, longer than necessary again, before his eyes slowly slid past her-

-to Astron.

And when they landed on him, the shift was undeniable.

The coldness sharpened.

His calm never broke, but the air around him grew taut, as if invisible strings had pulled just a little tighter.

Astron didn't move.

Didn't flinch.

He simply looked back.

Violet eyes meeting gold.

One indifferent.

One unreadable.

Victor's voice returned-quieter now, but with weight behind it.

"You..."

He didn't finish right away.



Just that single word, laced with something difficult to parse. Not hatred. Not anger.

But something carved deep beneath the surface-curiosity, perhaps. Wariness. Dislike, maybe.

Or something else entirely.

Astron said nothing. Didn't blink. He simply waited. Watching. Reading.

Victor continued.

"You're not what I expected."

It wasn't praise. Nor was it contempt. It was a statement, just like before-factual, precise. But this time, the atmosphere around them bent slightly, like heat rising between two blades drawn but not yet swung.

Irina's gaze flicked between them, tension prickling at the edge of her senses. Lilia frowned faintly. Lucas and Ethan exchanged a quiet glance.

Julia... didn't look away.

Her eyes were still on Victor.

Julia's lips curved-not into her usual smirk, but something smaller, sharper. A glint of anticipation flickered in her eyes.

Now this was getting interesting.

She didn't interrupt. Didn't step between them.

She wanted to see where it would go.

Astron, still unblinking, tilted his head a fraction. His voice came calmly, devoid of heat.

or pride.

"What was it you expected?"

Victor didn't answer right away.

He studied Astron with the kind of gaze that measured weight, not worth. That examined lineage, posture, the shape of a name.

Then, at last, he spoke—each word precise, carved, like glass set into a polished frame. "I expected what you are," Victor said coolly. "An orphan. A common-born psion, scavenged from nowhere. Untrained. Unmannered. Lacking discipline. Lacking class." His words weren't raised, nor loud—but they landed like lead dropped into still water.

"I saw your file," he continued, eyes narrowing. "No affiliations. No family. No house. Just a name someone had to assign you for recordkeeping. And yet here you are—rubbing shoulders with nobles, trying to keep pace in a world that wasn't meant for you."

Lilia stiffened.

Irina's golden gaze sharpened instantly.

Lucas let out a low whistle. "Okay, and there it is."

Victor's attention didn't waver. "You should have stayed in the background. That's

where people like you survive. Where people like you belong."

Still, Astron didn't flinch.

Didn't look away.

His hands remained by his sides, relaxed.

His voice, when it came, was steady. Dry.

"You seem invested for someone who thinks I don't belong."

Victor's golden eyes narrowed further, a glint of ice sharpening behind them.

"I'm not invested," he said coldly. "Just stating the truth."

His gaze didn't waver from Astron-until it slid sharply toward Irina.

"And you..." he said, his voice tinged now with something colder, heavier, "...should know better."

Irina's brow twitched. Her stance shifted, shoulders tightening.

"He doesn't deserve to be beside you."

The words hung like knives in the air. That was the moment Irina's patience ended.

Her golden eyes blazed, and her mana flared-subtle at first, then in a sharp wave of heat and pressure, the temperature around her spiking with controlled aggression.

Flames licked along her fingers, not wild, but precise-leashed power poised for retaliation.

"I've had enough of your bullshit, Victor."

She stepped forward.

But just as the heat spiked-

A hand rose.

Astron's.

"Eh?" Irina blinked, halting mid-step, surprised not by the gesture, but by the calm behind it.

Astron simply shrugged. "Is that all?"

Silence followed.

Even Victor hesitated for a beat.

Astron's voice came again, steady as ever, gaze fixed right into Victor's. "All this weight. All this presence. And that's all you have to say?"

Victor stared at him. No movement. No flicker of emotion. But something cold stirred beneath the surface of his gaze.

Then, flatly: "It's best if you remember your place."

Astron blinked slowly. "I remember my place very well."

His voice didn't rise. It didn't shift. But there was something anchored in those words.

"That's the one thing I will never forget."

"...Is that so?" Then Victor moved.

In an instant.

No telegraph.

No flare of mana.

Just motion.

One moment, he stood a few paces away. The next-

He was there.

Right in front of Astron.

So fast that even Irina's reflexes didn't catch it.

So sudden that Lilia flinched, half-reaching for her bow without realizing. Ethan's fingers twitched near his side, and Lucas took a sharp step forward on

instinct alone.

But Astron?

He didn't move.

Not even a flicker.

His posture didn't change.

His hands didn't rise.

His eyes didn't blink.

He simply stood there, head slightly tilted up to meet. Victor's full gaze-unshaken.

The air between them was still.

Tense.

Electric.

Victor stared into him, silent. Evaluating. Prying.

Astron met his gaze with calm, unnerving clarity. "...Tch."

Victor clicked his tongue. His words came quiet, but cutting.

"You do not belong to Order."

Then, just as fast-

He stepped back.

The moment broke like glass under tension,

Victor turned, his coat sweeping behind him, and walked away without another word. But the air still buzzed in his wake.

And in the middle of it all, Astron stood still-unbroken, quiet, and utterly unchanged.

Chapter 979 What was that?

The moment Victor left their circle, the tension didn't vanish-it simply hung, coiled like smoke above a fire that hadn't quite gone out.

Silence clung to the group for a few seconds longer before Lucas exhaled, running a hand through his hair. "Okay... can we just acknowledge how weirdly intense that was?"

Lilia nodded slowly. "He moved faster than I could see."

Irina, still holding residual heat in her psions, looked at Astron, her gaze narrowed- not in suspicion, but in sheer calculation. "You didn't flinch."

Astron glanced toward her. "Why would I?"

Before she could respond, Ethan stepped up beside him, brow furrowed, concern drawn across his face like tension in a bowstring. "Astron, you good?"

Astron turned his eyes to him. Calm. Distant, as always.

"I don't mind it."

His tone was as casual as if they were discussing a mild inconvenience. "Words don't bruise."

Ethan frowned slightly but nodded. He knew Astron meant it. That didn't make it sit any easier.

Still, his eyes drifted.

Across the hall-Victor stood near the far column now, arms folded, face as still and unreadable as ever... but his gaze? It remained sharp. Focused.

Not on the crowd.

Not on the instructors.

But on them.

Ethan's jaw set slightly.

Julia noticed.

She leaned in a bit, giving him a sideways look, arms folded again. "What was that?" Ethan didn't look away from Victor. "Not sure."

Julia followed his line of sight, and her lips tugged into a smirk. "Regained your fire?" Ethan gave a quiet, half-laugh. "Something like that."

Before the conversation could deepen, the sharp clap of hands cut through the air- firm and commanding.

Instructor Verren stood at the center of the room again, his presence pulling attention like gravity.

"Form up," he barked. "Final announcements before dismissal."

Instructor Verren stood tall at the center of the training hall, his sharp gaze sweeping across the cadets now gathering back in line. Sweat clung to uniforms, a few bruises had already begun to form on arms and ribs, and the faint residual crackle of mana still lingered in the air.

But no one dared to look fatigued.

Not with Verren watching.



He clapped his hands once-sharp, commanding, final.

"Good effort today," he said, his voice booming across the training hall. "A few of you showed clear improvements in both discipline and technique. Others... still need reminding that recklessness is not strength."

His gaze didn't linger long on anyone in particular, but the weight of his words found their mark.

Then, he lifted his hand and tapped his tablet once. A projection glyph shimmered to life behind him, displaying brief clips from several sparring matches-paused at key

moments.

"First."

He gestured toward a still of Astron Natusalune and Julia Middleton, mid-clash-Julia's blade caught against Astron's forearm, his weight turned in close, her momentum half-redirected.

"Natusalune and Middleton." His tone sharpened, eyes flicking to both of them. "A textbook example of what close-quarters combat between hunters should look like." Julia's brow arched slightly in surprise. Astron, unsurprisingly, showed no reaction. Instructor Verren kept his hands behind his back, eyes flicking back to the paused frame of Astron and Julia on the projection behind him.

"Middleton," he said, tone steady but clear, "your fighting style is exactly what one would expect from someone with a strong combat intuition. Aggressive, fast, and instinctive. That kind of pressure is excellent in many encounters. You push the tempo, you force mistakes. It suits you."

Julia raised an eyebrow, unsure if it was praise or criticism.

"But," Verren continued, leveling his gaze at her, "you overextend."

The cadets stirred slightly at the shift in tone. Julia's grin faded-just slightly.

"Your rhythm is clean, but your aggression borders on recklessness. If Astron had used your momentum against you more harshly, that match would've turned quickly. Tone it down by ten percent. Learn to bait with pressure, not overcommit."

She gave a short nod, uncharacteristically subdued.

Verren gestured to the screen. "The Middleton family's sword style is beastlike by nature. It's overwhelming, unpredictable, and difficult to replicate unless you have the physicality and senses to match. Most of you won't-and shouldn't-try. But even so, there are lessons to be learned in watching how she carries that aggression. Initiative wins fights."

The screen zoomed in slightly on Astron, caught mid-block, weight turned just so. Verren's gaze shifted.

"As for Natusalune-he demonstrated something more subtle."

There was a pause.

"The art of standing your ground."

Several cadets glanced toward Astron, who, true to form, stood impassive and silent.

"You were at a disadvantage in raw skill. Everyone here knows that. But your response was controlled. Calculated. You neutralized instead of contested. That's something every hunter must learn. You will not always be the strongest in a fight-but you must always be able to withstand."

He let the words hang for a moment before swiping to the next projection.

Irina vs. Lilia.

The image displayed Irina mid-cast, fire spiraling into a lunge, while Lilia stood at

range, her arrow nocked and ready, eyes focused.

"I'll be honest," Verren said, eyes narrowing just slightly. "I didn't expect Emberheart to handle a mage-versus-ranger duel with such clarity."

There was a flicker of surprise across the room-praise from Verren was rare.

Irina didn't react much, save for a faint tightening of her arms across her chest. "She pressed without rushing. Guarded her casting with pressure. Her timing and zone control were excellent. For a duel like that, the slightest hesitation or poor footing would've given Thorneheart control."

His gaze shifted to Lilia. "As for you-your awareness of field positioning and arrow spacing was solid. You played the edge of her reach well, forced her to burn more mana than necessary. Foundationally, it was textbook ranger work. Not flashy, but efficient. That's good. Don't try to impress-control the battlefield instead."

Lilia gave a quiet nod, her expression unreadable but clearly attentive. Then the projection shifted again-this time to Lucas Middleton and Carl Braveheart. Lucas was caught mid-spin, halberd sweeping around in a wide arc, while Carl's shield was raised, hammer tight to his side in a grounded, braced position. "And this," Verren said, his tone sharpening, "was the best match of the day."

Lucas blinked in surprise, looking over at Carl, who stood relaxed, arms crossed, but with the faintest upward twitch at the corner of his mouth.

"Lucas Middleton used the same foundational sword style as Julia, but executed it through range and technique rather than raw aggression. He fought with measured strikes and tested footwork, forcing the fight to come to him before reacting with

clean counters."

Julia leaned toward her twin and muttered, "Show-off." Verren continued, "And Carl Braveheart. Hammer and Shield-a combo most

underestimate. He did not flinch, did not chase, and used timing to reduce the

effectiveness of Lucas's range. A tank-style hunter in a duel is usually at a disadvantage against a reach weapon, but Carl turned that around with discipline and explosive breaks."

He let out a slow breath.

"This was a match of rhythm vs. anchor. And both of you displayed a level of clarity

that most of your peers have not yet reached."

The cadets exchanged glances. There was no jealousy-only a deeper sense of what would be expected of them moving forward.

Verren deactivated the projection glyph and looked over the class once more. "Your progress is being tracked. These duels were observed by more than just myself. Mentors are watching. You're no longer just cadets-you are candidates. Start acting

like it."

The words rang like steel.

Chapter 980 What was that?

A stillness hung in the air as the weight of Instructor Verren's final words settled over the room.

You are candidates.

Act like it.

The cadets stood straighter, shoulders a little more squared. For a long moment, no one said a word—until a hand quietly rose from the middle of the formation.

It was Mira.

Her voice, while respectful, carried a note of genuine curiosity. "Instructor... what about the duel between Victor and Ethan?"

A hush fell across the room again, sharper this time. Everyone turned toward Verren, eyes narrowing with unspoken tension.

Even Julia, who had been leaning back lazily with arms crossed, straightened slightly. Victor's name still carried an unnatural weight-and Ethan's fight had been the quiet, thunder hanging behind every match.

Verren didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he stared down at his tablet for a long beat, as if gathering his thoughts-or perhaps deciding what to say. Then, finally, he let out a deep, restrained sigh.

"...Ethan Hartley fought as close to his limit as anyone could ask," Verren said, his voice lower now, more grounded. "He held his stance, made no critical errors, responded to overwhelming pressure with composure. That in itself is commendable.""

Ethan, who had remained silent, kept his gaze steady, though the memory of the fight still pulsed faintly in his jaw and ribs.

"But," Verren continued, lifting his gaze to meet the room again, "that match serves as a lesson of a different kind."

The students listened with breath held. Even Astron looked up.

"There are times when you will do everything right," Verren said, "and still lose."

The words struck hard. Clear. Unapologetic.

"You may face a monster," he said slowly, "that you can't outrun. Can't outfight. One that stands too far above you-individually or even as a team. No weakness to exploit. No obvious path to victory."

He paused. The room remained silent.

"In that case," Verren said, his voice like steel against stone, "you'll need to understand something many hunters refuse to accept."

He stepped forward, his gaze unrelenting.

"You will need to make a choice."

Another pause.

"Not how to win-but what you're willing to lose in order to survive."

His next words cut even deeper.

"Sometimes, you must make sacrifices."

The cadets shifted uncomfortably. No one dared speak.

"Maybe it's letting go of pride. Maybe it's leaving behind a teammate. Maybe it's yourself."

Victor, still leaning against the far column, remained motionless, his gaze flicking once - only once-toward Ethan.

Verren's eyes scanned the room once more.

"I don't say this to scare you. I say this because one day, it will be real. You'll be standing at the edge of something greater than you. And you'll need to ask yourself, not just 'Can I win?...'"

He turned away, walking slowly back to the center of the room.

"...but 'What am I willing to lose in order to survive?'"

Silence reigned.

It was no longer just a combat class.

It was a war room in disguise.

Verren nodded once more.

"Class dismissed."

The moment Verren uttered the words- "Class dismissed"-a quiet, heavy exhale swept through the room. Not relief. Not fatigue.

Weight.

The cadets began to move, slowly, hesitantly, like gears reluctantly turning in a long-dormant machine. Conversations that might've sparked after an intense match were nowhere to be heard. There were no light jokes, no friendly shoulder-pats, no post-fight banter.

Just silence.

Thick. Lingering.

Even the sound of boots against the polished floor felt subdued, as though the hall itself had chosen to mourn something unspoken.

Because no matter how strong they were-how talented, how prideful-Verren's words

had cut deep.

They weren't just students anymore.

They were candidates.

Candidates for a war none of them had truly seen.

Even Julia walked slower now, her usual fire cooled to embers. Her arms still crossed, but the confidence in her posture had dulled-not broken, but tempered. Verren's words had struck somewhere beneath her pride, somewhere she hadn't wanted to admit was vulnerable.

Lilia followed a step behind her, lips pursed, brows drawn. Her eyes weren't on anyone --just lost in that final phrase. What are you willing to lose?

It wasn't a question with easy answers.

Irina's footsteps were sharp, but quiet. Composed. Yet her mana had shrunk, pulled inward-coiled like a flame denied oxygen. There was no visible reaction, but her fingers flexed every so often, as if responding to something she couldn't quite burn

away.

And Ethan...

Ethan walked behind them, his hand resting briefly against his ribs. Not from pain- but thought. Verren hadn't needed to single him out. Everyone had already known. He

had lived those words during the duel.

He had done everything right.

And still lost.



It wasn't something he'd forget soon.

Not even Astron spoke.

He moved at his usual pace, head slightly tilted, gaze unreadable. But for those who'd come to know him-even in fragments-it was clear he hadn't dismissed Verren's words. He had logged them. Filed them away with all the others. Words like that stayed

with people like him.

And then there was Carl.

Carl walked ahead, steps solid, face as still as carved stone. No one said anything to him. No one needed to. There was something in his gaze-a weight no one else carried. Not because he'd heard words like Verren's before.

Because he'd lived them.

Carl had seen missions go wrong. Had heard the panicked breathing of wounded

allies. Had made the kinds of choices Verren spoke of.

Sacrifices.

To the others, Verren's words were a revelation.

To Carl?

They were a reminder.

The group regrouped loosely near the arched exit of the hall, but even there, no one

said anything at first.

Then Lucas finally let out a breath, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Well. That was... grim."

The silence lingered like fog-thick and unwelcome.

Everyone stood there, shifting awkwardly, their thoughts still trailing behind Verren's

heavy words. But then-

Clack.

Julia stepped forward, the heel of her boot tapping deliberately on the stone. She rolled her shoulders once, exhaled, and broke the silence the only way she knew how.

"With all due respect to our beloved grim-reaper-instructor," she said, voice light but not mocking, "I don't plan on making sacrifices."

Lilia glanced over, brows furrowed, but Julia continued before anyone could comment.

"I just need to be strong enough. That's all. Strong enough that I don't have to choose. No sacrifices. No 'what are you willing to lose.'" She gave a half-shrug, lips twitching into her usual smirk. "I'll beat whatever's in front of me and keep everyone intact.

Simple."

Lucas tilted his head with a knowing look. "That sounds like major cope, not gonna lie." Julia turned and smacked him lightly on the shoulder with the back of her hand. "Shut

up, Lucas."

"Hey, I'm just saying," he said, raising both hands defensively, though grinning. "Sounds like you're trying to shout over your own existential dread."

Julia scoffed, but the slight glint in her eyes betrayed the intention-she had lightened the mood. A little, anyway.

"Existential dread's boring," she said, flipping her hair. "I prefer winning"

Ethan finally cracked a small smile. "That's... one way to deal with it." Lilia sighed, but the corners of her mouth pulled upward. "Only you could turn a near-death philosophical lecture into motivational nonsense."

Irina, standing a bit to the side, gave Julia a sidelong glance, arms crossed. "You talk

like you've got it all figured out."

Julia smirked. "Nope. I just refuse to get depressed in a hallway."

And just like that, the tension around them began to ease-still present beneath the surface, but no longer suffocating.

Because Julia had done what she always did.

She brought the fire back.