

H. Academy 981

Chapter 981 Thoughts

The classroom was dimly lit, warm sunlight filtering in through high-arched windows, casting long rays across rows of elevated desks and flickering glyph-screens.

Professor Varn stood at the front, an elderly Hunter with a face carved from years of battlefield survival and a voice like sand scraping stone.

"The Aethermane is a Class-3 high-speed variant, most commonly found in glacial ruins. Contrary to its feline appearance, it uses wind-type psions, not ice..."

Ethan sat in the third row.

His pen hovered over his tablet, screen open to a half-filled page titled Beast Catalog: Glacial Types.

And yet he wasn't writing.

Wasn't listening.

His gaze was fixed on the glyph diagram at the front of the room, but his eyes were unfocused. Distant.

Because no matter how much he tried to immerse himself in the day's lesson... his mind kept drifting.

Back to that moment.

Back to the duel.

Victor's sword resting against his neck.

The weightless, inevitable end.

The way space had bent-just slightly-enough to rob him of impact.

The way his spear, fueled by all his will, all his training, had simply... veered.

Not because he missed.

But because reality itself had told him no.

He shifted in his seat.

The murmured voice of the professor rolled on, naming the next beast: "The Marrowback Hydra. Don't let the juvenile form deceive you..."

Ethan's grip on his pen tightened.

He'd fought so hard. Grown so much.

Lightning Step. Arc Reversal. Heaven's Crack. Every technique that had once pushed him forward now felt.... small. Predictable.

He remembered what it felt like, watching Victor lower his sword with the same. serenity someone might use to set down a book.

No arrogance.

No disdain.

Just control.

Total control.

And for the first time in a while since breaking past the barrier into mid-tier ranks, since pushing himself to the limits of his bloodline-Ethan felt small again.

Insignificant.

He exhaled through his nose, head leaning forward slightly as he rested his chin against one hand. His other hand tapped a rhythm against his thigh. Not fidgeting. Just... trying to feel like he was here.

"Mr. Hartley," Professor Varn's voice cut through the room like a whip crack.

Ethan blinked, head snapping up.

The entire class had turned toward him.

He sat upright immediately. "Y-Yes?"

Professor Varn didn't frown. He rarely needed to.

He simply raised one grayed eyebrow and gestured lazily toward the diagram floating beside him. "Since you seem so reflective, perhaps you can tell the class the primary weakness of the Mirror Stalker."

Ethan's brain scrambled.

Mirror Stalker. Mirror Stalker...

His mouth opened-but no words came out.

He knew this. He should know this. He had read about it last week. A beast that

mimicked its prey's appearance and techniques, adapting rapidly through sensory feedback.

But the answer didn't surface.

Because all he could see in his mind-

Was Victor.

Standing still.

Deflecting.

Unmoving.

Perfect.

"...Its eyes," someone else muttered. Julia, two rows up, flipping her pen between her fingers. She didn't look back. "The weakness is the eyes."

"Correct," Varn said, with only a faint tilt of the head. He looked back to Ethan. "Try to remain grounded, Mr. Hartley. Daydreams don't kill beasts. Focus does."

Ethan nodded once, sharply. "Yes, Professor."

The lesson resumed.

But Ethan... didn't.

His hand returned to his chin. His eyes returned to the glyph diagrams.

And his thoughts returned to the truth he didn't want to admit.

I thought I was getting stronger.

But if that's what strength really looks like...

Then maybe he was still at the foot of the mountain.

The thought echoed as the minutes dragged on, each word from Professor Varn flowing around Ethan without landing. Diagrams flickered. Glyphs expanded and collapsed across the air. His tablet auto-saved a half-blank page of notes. He didn't

even notice.

And then-

Briiiiing.

The bell chimed. The glyph-screens dimmed one by one.

Chairs scraped back, a few students stretched and groaned in exaggerated relief, while others grabbed their tablets and slipped out quickly, voices rising with the first taste of freedom in hours.

Ethan sat still for a second longer, watching the notes flicker off the main display.

Then, quietly, he stood.

"Ugh, finally," one cadet muttered behind him, slinging his bag over his shoulder. "That lecture felt like it lasted a year."

Another groaned, "Yeah, and now we have mentorship? Right before midterms?"
"Seriously, what kind of sadist scheduled this? We're gonna be dead by exam day"

Lilia passed them with the faintest smile. "You're Hunters. Try not to cry in public."
Julia snorted as she slid her tablet into her bag. "She's right, though. Midterms and Eleanor? If I live through this week, someone better throw me a parade."

Irina, who'd sat silently throughout the lecture, rose and gave a slow stretch. "Parade won't save your legs when Eleanor starts the agility drills."

"You say that like you're not going to smoke the rest of us," Julia muttered. "At least pretend to struggle for morale."

A few chuckles followed that, some tension easing from the room as cadets filtered out in pairs and clusters.

Ethan should've joined them.

Should've made a joke, should've exchanged a grin.

But instead, he moved past the rows with quiet purpose, his steps leading him not toward the exit-

-but toward a desk two rows over.

Astron sat there, still in his seat, his tablet closed neatly before him. He hadn't moved when the bell rang. He rarely did. The other students had long since learned not to wait for him.

Ethan came to a stop just beside the desk and spoke with a tone that wasn't loud, but not entirely casual either.

"Astron."

The violet-eyed cadet lifted his gaze slowly, as if he'd known Ethan would come, but saw no need to acknowledge it early.

Ethan rubbed the back of his neck, then lowered his voice. "You going to the mentorship session?"

Astron blinked once, then offered the faintest nod. "As assigned."

His gaze flicked over Ethan-not judgmental, but not gentle either. Just observant.

"Let's go then."

Astron's eyes lingered on Ethan for a moment longer. Then, without a word, he gave a small nod and rose from his seat.

His movements, as always, were precise-no wasted motion, no fumbling with his gear or glancing at his tablet for confirmation. He simply stood, adjusted the cuff of his sleeve, and stepped around the desk, falling into step beside Ethan as they left the

lecture hall.

The hallway outside was brighter than the classroom, afternoon light spilling through the tall windows and casting gold across the floor. A breeze passed through from the upper vents, carrying with it the faint scent of steel and ozone from the training fields beyond the academy.

The murmurs of other students drifted in from the main hall-groups gathering before dispersing toward their assigned tracks. But Ethan and Astron didn't slow. Their path was already set.

Only the two of them trained under Eleanor.

The thought lingered in Ethan's mind as they made their way down the polished corridor, each footstep echoing softly.

They turned left past the courtyard-a shortcut only used by those who didn't need directions anymore-and for a while, silence stretched comfortably between them.

But Ethan's thoughts didn't stay silent.

Eventually, he spoke.

"... What do you think separates someone like Victor from the rest of us?"

Chapter 982 Thoughts

"... What do you think separates someone like Victor from the rest of us?"

Astron didn't stop walking, but his gaze shifted slightly-just enough to show he'd heard. The question hung in the air a moment longer, like he was weighing its value.

Then, softly, he replied.

"Definition."

Ethan blinked, glancing sideways. "Definition?"

Astron nodded. "Most cadets train to be stronger. Faster. Better. But that pursuit is vague. Shapeless. Even when they improve, they don't know what they're improving toward."

His hands slid into his coat pockets as they walked.

"Victor doesn't have that problem. His strength is defined. Structured. Controlled. Every movement you saw in that duel wasn't just instinct or raw power-it was a philosophy. A law he obeys. And forces others to obey too."

Ethan frowned slightly, the memory of his spear veering off course still vivid. "You're talking about that order thing he had said."

"Yes," Astron said simply.

They continued walking, the echo of their footsteps folding neatly into the silence of the corridor.

Ethan's brows furrowed. "He said something... 'Restore the order,' right before my spear missed. That wasn't just a catchphrase. It did something. I felt it."

Astron gave a faint nod, his gaze now ahead-watching the hall stretch toward the training center, but his thoughts clearly elsewhere. "It wasn't a spell. Not in the way you or I cast them. It wasn't a technique either. What you saw..." he hesitated, only for a breath, "was a phenomenon."

Ethan looked over. "A phenomenon?"

"Mana doesn't act like that on its own," Astron said, calm and certain. "It doesn't redirect attacks mid-flight. It doesn't suppress psionic backlash without visible runes. It doesn't drain lightning as if it were steam pulled into a vent. That's not a skill or a technique. That's behavior. Environmental restructuring"

He let the weight of that settle before continuing.

"Victor spoke a phrase-and the world agreed with him."

Ethan exhaled slowly, not liking how that made his skin crawl. "That's not normal."

"No," Astron replied, "but it was complete."

That gave Ethan pause. "Complete?"

"Whatever he's doing," Astron said, "he isn't invoking it partially, like a chant or a construct. He embodies it. His every movement reflects it. That's why it can't be broken by pressure. Because it doesn't act with him. It is him."

Ethan said nothing for a moment. The words bounced around in his chest, heavy but not cold. Familiar in a strange way.

"And you think..." Ethan started, slower now, "...that's what I need to reach?"

Astron didn't answer immediately. Instead, he stopped in front of the final set of training doors-reinforced steel etched with old sigils, their edges humming with soft, defensive mana. He turned his head toward Ethan, face calm, tone quiet.

"You're not a normal Hunter, Ethan," he said.

The words weren't flattery. They weren't kind.

They were true.

"And I think," Astron added, voice low but steady, "you already know that."

Ethan looked at him, unsure what he expected to see in those pale violet eyes- disdain, maybe. Or envy. But there was none.

Only analysis. And something deeper. Something quiet.

"But that doesn't mean," Astron continued, gaze fixed now, "that you are the only abnormal one"

Ethan's eyes widened.

"You are not the only abnormal one."

Such a simple phrase.

So quiet.

So flatly spoken.

And yet it struck something in him. Something buried. Something he hadn't allowed himself to think too deeply about.

Because for all his pride, for all his discipline, there was still a part of Ethan that carried this weight like it was natural. As if it was supposed to be his burden alone.

He had always believed he was the outlier.

The anomaly.

The late bloomer who had somehow clawed his way upward through sheer will.

The truth, though, had always lingered in the back of his mind.

He had grown too fast.

Faster than anyone in his family ever had.

His brother, a well-known high-rank Hunter, had awakened at the age of nine. His sister had manifested her bloodline psions at eleven. Even his mother, a towering figure in the Hartley legacy, had never accelerated her growth like he had.

But Ethan?

Ethan had awakened late. He'd spent the first fifteen years of his life ordinary. Unawakened. Watching from the sidelines as the rest of his family-the "true Hunters"-trained, fought, advanced.

They never treated him cruelly.

But they never treated him seriously, either.

And when his awakening finally came-quiet, unexpected, unspectacular-he was already years behind.

Everyone else had years of advantage.

Everyone else had expectations built around them.

He had... nothing.

But seven months later, here he stood.

Rank 215.

He didn't brag about it. Didn't advertise it.

But the truth was, even that number was behind where he felt he actually was. The past two months had changed him. His control, his psion refinement, his ability to chain techniques in live combat-it had sharpened, accelerated. He hadn't shown

everything yet.

He was saving it for midterms.

Saving it for a moment where they would finally see.

Yet he had still told himself it was just effort. Just discipline. That this was the natural reward of late nights, early mornings, and endless repetitions.

He never allowed himself to call it what it might be.

Abnormal.

But now, standing beside Astron-who had spoken it so plainly-it hit differently.

He wasn't alone in this.

He wasn't the only one growing at a pace that defied the logic of the academy's progression curves. He wasn't the only one breaking through the glass floors faster than the world was prepared to categorize.

Astron's voice still echoed faintly in his ears. That soft, matter-of-fact cadence:

"You are not the only abnormal one."

He blinked once, the words still sinking in.

It wasn't just about him anymore.

It never had been.

And somehow, that realization didn't shake him.

It steadied him.

Maybe I've been getting arrogant...

The thought slipped into Ethan's mind, not with shame-but with clarity.

He had started to believe it was just him.

Just his fight. Just his rise. Just his proof to deliver.

But there were always exceptions to the rules. Always others like him-people who defied the curve, shattered the pattern, walked faster than the map allowed.

He wasn't the only one carrying a secret pace.

Thinking he was?

That would've been way too arrogant.

His gaze slid sideways as they entered the threshold of the training chamber. The

mana in the air shifted-colder, charged with the distinct hum of Eleanor's influence. The mats underfoot bore the soft wear of countless sparring rounds, and the walls shimmered faintly with layered reinforcement glyphs. It was a place for pushing limits.

And standing beside him, silent, composed, was Astron.

The same Astron who, not even a year ago, was ranked dead last in the academy.

The bottom.

Unawakened. Untested. Unwanted.

And now?

Now he stood among the top thousand. Unshaken. Unbothered. Unapologetic.

A quiet phenomenon moving at his own impossible rhythm.

Ethan smiled faintly, not mocking, not skeptical-just thoughtful.

He tilted his head toward him.

"Are you one of those people too?" he asked softly. "The exceptions."

Astron didn't turn.

Didn't respond.

His violet gaze remained forward, fixed on the center of the training room, where

Eleanor was adjusting a mana regulator with her back turned.

The silence lingered.

Ethan didn't press. Because that was the answer.

Astron didn't need to confirm it.

He was one of them. And maybe that was enough.

Chapter 983 Anomaly

Eleanor stood at the far end of the training hall, hands clasped lightly behind her back as she gazed at the rows of active mana regulators lining the walls. Soft pulses of energy blinked in a controlled rhythm, keeping the chamber's mana density stable, calibrated. Adjustable at a moment's notice.

It was quiet now. Only the distant hum of enchantments filled the space.

But she knew that silence wouldn't last.

Ethan and Astron would arrive soon.

And when they did, today's training would begin.

Her eyes flicked toward the doorway, then drifted back to the middle of the room where the sparring field stretched across polished stone. Everything was reinforced, not just to handle strength-but to handle intention. When people like those two fought, it wasn't just force. It was pressure. Alignment. Momentum.

Two anomalies walking a fine line between brilliance and breakdown.

Eleanor exhaled slowly, eyes narrowing.

She had watched it unfold from the beginning. Ethan's acceleration. Astron's emergence. What had once been potential now threatened to become

something else-momentum. And momentum in the wrong direction was far more dangerous than stagnation.

Not just for them.

But for everyone around them.

Especially now.

Her gaze tightened.

The guild tensions in the capital are rising again. More skirmishes between city-based Hunters. Small disputes, weapon regulation arguments, even suppression rights over dungeon gates. All of it building into something more serious. The kind of tension that didn't stay in the back alleys. It crawled into the academies. Into students' minds. Into curriculum.

If it spilled over, if things snapped-then Astron and Ethan, latter was way more likely would be pulled in faster than they knew.

Because they weren't normal cadets anymore.

Especially Ethan.

Eleanor's thoughts lingered on him a moment longer.

He had come a long way in a short time-too long, too fast. The kind of trajectory that didn't stay hidden for long. She could already see it forming around him: the buzz in instructor lounges, the subtle shifts in student hierarchy, the way eyes lingered a little longer when his name was mentioned.

If he continued at this pace-no, when he continued his name would start brushing against a different tier altogether.

And eventually?

He would meet Victor again.

Not in the practice rings.

Not under adjusted conditions.

But in the real circuits. The sanctioned duels. The tournament brackets that caught the eye of national guilds, of federations, of the political elite.

That meeting... it was inevitable.

And necessary.

Even if not everyone would like it.

Ethan was rough. Still brimming with too much rawness, too much emotional drive-but she had seen the way he responded to failure. Not with collapse. With refinement. Every duel, every loss, every mistake-he metabolized it. Converted it into something sharper.

Victor had the polish. The law. The structure.

Ethan?

He had the fire.

But fire without refinement consumes itself.

Which was why she was here.

Why today mattered.

Her gaze lifted the moment the double doors parted.

Astron stepped through first, his movements as always quiet, composed, with the silence of someone used to making decisions without alerting the world. Ethan followed a second later, rolling his shoulders with a casualness that barely disguised the calculation in his eyes.

Both stopped at the edge of the platform.

Eleanor turned to face them fully.

She didn't speak right away.

She looked.

Into their eyes.

Astron's: cool, observant, already dissecting the training space, noting mana flow, field layout, exit paths.

Ethan's: calm, but steady-not clouded by pride, not distracted by frustration. Centered. He had grown since the last time. Something had clicked.

Good.

She spoke.

"Today, we begin real training"

There was no preamble. No pleasantries.

Eleanor gestured toward the center of the chamber, where two stabilizer

pillars rose beside a long table lined with elemental crystals and psionic

channels.

"We'll focus on two things," she said, walking between them as the mana hum in the room deepened. "Weapon coating-and psion control efficiency."

Ethan's eyes narrowed slightly. Astron gave a short nod.

Eleanor continued.

"I've reviewed your practical sparring assessments," she said. "And while your external control has improved-internally, you're both still leaking power. The conversion rates are inefficient. Especially during fast switching and layered

engagements."

She paused.

"For normal cadets, that's acceptable. Not optimal, but functional."

Her gaze sharpened.

"But neither of you are normal anymore."

A beat of silence.

Eleanor turned, her coat flicking lightly with the motion, and activated the array embedded in the floor. The platform lit with soft white rings, partitioning the space into zones.

"First task: Coating calibration."

She gestured toward the crystals-each one keyed to a different elemental alignment and psionic thread.

"These are charged for feedback. Your goal is to maintain full coverage over your weapon-blade, edge, or shaft-for at least forty-five seconds without a drop below 85% cohesion."

She didn't need to explain why that mattered. In real combat, unstable coating was worse than no coating. It meant backlash. Blowback. Wasted mana and ruptured cores.

Eleanor looked back at them.

"Fail, and the crystal will resonate with your psion frequency. You'll feel the

backlash."

She let that linger.

A reminder that this wasn't sparring anymore.

It was sharpening.

Her voice lowered, but her presence grew colder.

"You're here because you've reached the point where refinement isn't optional.

From now on, every weakness I see-I will correct. Whether you like it or not."

She turned to face the field, her hand raising slightly as the system confirmed their biosignatures.

"Begin."

The crystals pulsed once as the system acknowledged the activation.

Without hesitation, Astron stepped toward the psionic focus table, his fingers brushing lightly across the handles of the training daggers laid out beside the elemental regulators. Ethan mirrored the motion-more direct, his movements steady, almost impatient in the way that suggested quiet eagerness.

Eleanor didn't speak.

She watched.

The first coating phase began-mana thread convergence. The crystals aligned to each cadet's natural frequency, forming thin channels that snaked toward the weapon surfaces.

Immediately, resistance hit.

Astron's control faltered-not in intensity, but in balance. His coating began to layer unevenly, the left blade gaining more psion saturation than the right. The cohesion dropped quickly, flickering below threshold before the system triggered a warning pulse.

His face remained still, but she saw the adjustment attempt-the micro-shift in posture, the recalibrated grip, the pulse shift in his fingers.

Too slow.

Backlash triggered.

The crystal emitted a sharp, focused resonance. Astron's left hand flinched-just slightly-as the feedback registered.

Ethan's situation wasn't better-at first.

His lightning psion flared too quickly, surging across the blade with no foundation to contain it. Sparks danced along the edge, arcing backward into the regulator node and destabilizing the feedback loop.

Warning pulse.

The psion slipped.

Backlash triggered.

But this time, Eleanor's eyes narrowed.

Because unlike Astron, who was adjusting carefully, methodically, Ethan reset.

Immediately.

She watched his core resonance shift-his breathing synced with the next

attempt, and his lightning psion did not surge.

It slid.

Clean. Refined. Still raw, but tempered.

Like someone who had just now figured out why it had failed-and how not to

let it fail again.

His second coating attempt held longer. Not stable yet, not clean. But Eleanor

could already see the arc anchoring to the hilt properly. The energy loss at the blade's midpoint was dropping.

Seventeen seconds, she counted silently. Not bad.

Astron was resetting as well, though slower. He had noticed the imbalance and

was trying to harmonize left and right simultaneously-a good instinct, but too rigid.

He'll need to loosen his frame, Eleanor thought. He's treating it like dual output.

It's not. It's parallel flow alignment. Neither passed the forty-five-second mark.

But the differences were clear.

Ethan was closer. Eleanor's gaze sharpened.

It wasn't just the speed. It was the internal adjustment.

He instinctively knew how to tame the volatility of lightning. She had expected Astron to be the more measured one here-and he still was.

But Ethan's tempo had caught up. In this specific exercise, he wasn't playing

catch-up. He was leading.

That alone was rare.

She stepped forward, the soft click of her boots echoing across the now

dimming field as the crystals reset for the next calibration cycle.

"Stop."

Chapter 984 Anomaly

"Stop."

Both halted.

Sweat beaded on Ethan's forehead. Astron's breathing had shortened slightly, his grip relaxed but not fatigued.

"You both failed," Eleanor said, flat and uncompromising. "But the failure was expected. It's your first day working with live resonance."

She turned slightly toward Ethan.

"Lightning is volatile. Few cadets grasp how to follow its rhythm before trying to force it into control." A pause. "You followed."

Ethan blinked, almost surprised by the note of acknowledgement.

She didn't linger.

Instead, she turned toward Astron.

"You understood the structure. You anticipated the imbalance. But you treated it like split mana control." Her voice lowered. "Don't. This is not dual-casting. This is convergence."

Astron's gaze didn't waver, but he gave the faintest nod.

Eleanor stepped back, arms crossing again as her analytical mind ran through timelines.

If they keep this pace...

Her thoughts mapped across days, iterations, potential breakpoints.

Eleanor's gaze drifted from their faces back to the regulators, now cycling through cooldown patterns, the glow of the elemental crystals dimming into stillness. Her arms remained folded, but her mind was moving rapidly.

Of course Ethan adjusted faster. It makes sense.

Lightning.

It wasn't just his elemental affinity. It was something deeper, more instinctive. Every inch of his psion structure responded to lightning as if it were native- coded into his body's rhythm. That kind of connection wasn't built through study or repetition.

It was felt.

He didn't tame it.

He understood it.

She had seen this before. Among those who trained early in elemental resonance. Among bloodline warriors and trait-forged heirs. But Ethan hadn't had that kind of start. No tutor-guided mana paths. No refinement chambers. And yet-

He moved like someone born to wield lightning.

It was more than control. It was intuition.

Eleanor's eyes shifted to Astron.

And him?

That was the question she still hadn't answered.

Even now-months into her observation, even after personal sessions, even with full access to his training logs-she had no idea what his elemental affinity

was.

He had never shown preference. Never leaned into any specific energy type. She had subjected him to fire, wind, ice, even high-resonance shadow induction... and none of them stuck.

Not in the usual way.

No rejection, no resistance-but no acceleration either.

Just... neutrality.

That's what made it so strange.

Elemental neutrality was rare. Suppressed affinity even more so. But him?

She studied Astron's posture-the loose readiness in his arms, the way he waited for the next command without leaning forward or backward.

No anticipation.

No hesitation.

Just balance.

It's like his mana doesn't belong to any family of elements I've shown him. As if... his affinity is hidden. Or worse-undefined.

That possibility was unsettling.

Yet it also made sense.

Because for all the vagueness of his alignment, Astron's understanding was precise. High.

When things were explained clearly-when a concept was mapped out with direct cause and effect-he absorbed it without error. His execution might lag behind at first, but only because he spent that time solving the problem, not brute-forcing it.

He didn't learn by feel like Ethan.

He learned by logic.

By structure.

If I give him the right frame, he adapts. Fast.

And that, Eleanor mused, was where the contrast lay.

Ethan's learning curve was strange. It wasn't steady. It dipped and rose in sharp bursts. There were times when he struggled with a concept for days-and then, seemingly without warning, something would click.

He would break through.

Not because of external feedback.

But because his internal world had shifted. Realigned.

That was the mark of what most instructors would call a "natural genius." Not the kind that mimicked perfectly or studied with discipline, but the kind that

internalized.

And when Ethan internalized something?

It stopped being knowledge.

It became instinct.

Eleanor's lips thinned as she completed the thought.

He leaps forward when no one's watching.

That kind of mind was dangerous. Brilliant, but volatile. Because without the right direction, those leaps could go wrong. Too far. Too soon.

She looked between the two of them now.

Astron-the tactician with undefined power and razor understanding.

Ethan the wild current shaped by discipline, waiting for internal sparks to unlock his next layer.

They were different.

But both were moving forward at speeds the academy wasn't ready to accommodate.

Eleanor turned back to the console, her fingers hovering over the next program.

Her calculation was nearly complete.

A month.

That was all it would take.

If she guided them correctly-if they kept responding as they had-then in a month, their weapon coating and psion resonance wouldn't just stabilize.

It would evolve.

She glanced back once more.

And quietly, with a note of anticipation rising in her chest-

"Let's begin again."

The final cycle of resonance dimmed with a low, harmonic chime-an audible

signal that the regulators were disengaging. The elemental crystals blinked once, then faded to their dormant states, the shimmering strands of active

mana slowly unwinding into still air.

The field stilled.

Ethan exhaled hard, his breath ragged, shirt clinging to his skin, damp with

sweat. His shoulders rose and fell with the kind of fatigue born not from exhaustion-but sustained focus. His hair was stuck to his forehead, lightning residue still faintly crackling at his fingertips before fading into silence. Astron, too, was winded. Less visibly-but the signs were there. The subtle tightness in his stance, the measured inhale

through his nose, the faint tremor at the edge of his left hand where he had kept psionic output stable longer than

before.

Their weapons lay on the racks nearby. The air between them was charged- not with mana, but with quiet, hard-earned progress.

Eleanor stepped forward at last.

She didn't smile.

She never did.

But there was a faint change in her presence. A soft recalibration of tension. A

cue that, for today, their trial was complete.

"Sit."

The command was flat, but neither of them resisted. Ethan sank onto the mat

with a muted grunt, wiping his forearm across his brow. Astron followed, silent, folding one knee beneath him in his usual disciplined posture. Eleanor summoned a slim black notepad from her dimensional seal and tapped it once. A translucent projection flared to life above the mana regulators-a rotating display of real-time resonance data, pulse feedback, and internal convergence maps.

She began the briefing.

"First: Resonance Disruption Patterns."

A graph appeared, showing a clean slope for Astron and a jagged, broken one

for Ethan. "Ethan, your lightning psion initialized too aggressively in the first cycle. That

caused your output waveform to spike-resulting in 'detached flow syndrome. That's when the element refuses to adhere to the weapon's surface tension and

instead arcs back toward the user."

Ethan grimaced. "Right. That's what burned my glove." "Yes. Because you weren't grounding the energy."

She tapped again, and the projection focused on a blade schematic.

"Lightning resonance relies on field balance-you can't anchor it the way you

would with flame or frost. You need to oscillate your core resonance to match its pulse. Think of it like surfing-don't hold the wave. Ride it." Ethan nodded slowly, absorbing it with a furrowed brow. "Your last run was much better. You started modulating your output in tandem

with exhalation. That's the correct instinct. Continue tuning that pattern."

"Astron."

The graph shifted. This time, his lines were tighter-compressed, controlled, but asymmetrical.

"Your issue wasn't surge-it was balance. You approached the dual-weapon coating as two separate resonance threads. That caused polarity conflict between the regulators. You need to unify your core before you split flow."

She flicked again, and the image now showed a dual-core diagram, with mana threads branching outward.

"Think of dual coating not as dual output, but mirrored expression. Both

weapons should reflect the same base signal. Symmetry before divergence."

Astron nodded once, quietly.

"You made significant progress by the fourth run. Good frame shift. But remember-refinement doesn't come from constraint. Stop over-managing"

A pause.

Then:

"I want both of you to write this down and internalize it-"

The projection flattened into clean lines of script:

Weapon coating principles, notes:

Resonance must match.... Stability requires...

It went like this with details that she noted.

Eleanor waited until both had memorized it. Ethan was already jotting it into

his mana-notes with a tired but focused hand. Astron, she noted, merely

scanned it twice-then nodded.

It was enough.

She turned away, walking toward the far regulator control panel, and with one

last glance over her shoulder, spoke without inflection:

"You're dismissed."

Ethan stood slowly, rolling his shoulder, offering a quiet "Thanks, Professor,"

before heading toward the door.

But before Astron could follow-

"Wait."

He stopped mid-step, turning his head slightly.

"I'd like to speak with you."

Chapter 985 Anomaly

The door sealed behind Ethan with a soft hiss, leaving only Eleanor and Astron in the training hall's quiet. The low ambient hum of mana regulators pulsed steadily in the background, a constant rhythm-unlike the silence that now stretched between them.

Eleanor didn't speak immediately.

She watched him for a moment-how he stood, not tense, not relaxed, simply still. The kind of stillness that came from someone always measuring, always processing.

Her voice broke the silence, calm and level.

"I watched your duel with Julia."

Astron didn't blink. His gaze remained steady. "I assumed."

"I wasn't the only one," she added, stepping forward slowly, hands clasped behind her back. "But I doubt anyone else saw what I did."

He didn't respond-just waited.

"I've seen plenty of students adapt to pressure. Many can copy patterns, borrow forms, even mimic techniques. But that isn't what you did."

Eleanor stopped a few paces in front of him, her eyes meeting his directly.

"You weren't mimicking. You were comprehending."

Astron's brow twitched.

She continued, her voice low. "When you fought Julia... you held back. But not because you were unsure. You were experimenting. You were learning the blade in real time."

Another step forward.

"And your body responded like it already knew how to use it."

She let the words settle.

Then, with the kind of precision that cut deeper than most blades, she asked: "Do you want to learn the sword?"

Astron's eyes sharpened slightly. His eyebrows lifted-just a fraction-but enough.

His head tilted, that subtle, familiar gesture of quiet scrutiny. "Why would I?"

A fair question. His tone wasn't dismissive. Just... curious. He didn't move. Didn't deny. Just waited for her logic.

Eleanor exhaled softly through her nose. "You're not a swordsman. That much is true. Your class is registered as Daggerist, with a secondary in Archery."

She paused, watching for a reaction.

"And yet... the Archery class wasn't present at the start of the semester, was it?" His gaze narrowed, slightly.

"I checked the records," she said. "You registered your Archer class late. After the first month."

A beat.

Astron didn't hide it. He gave a small nod. "Correct."

"So you awakened it mid-term," Eleanor concluded. "It wasn't part of your original class set. But it appeared-and when it did, you adapted to it immediately!"

Another silence passed between them.

"You were a Daggerist. Pure melee," she said. "Then suddenly, mid-semester, you gained a ranged class. With no recorded incident or awakening event

logged. No public duel. No awakening arena claim."

Astron's tone remained calm. "I never felt the need to announce it."

Eleanor nodded, unsurprised.

"I don't care about the theatrics," she said. "But I do care about what it means."

She stepped closer now-her voice lowering.

"Traits don't just evolve without cause. And classes don't shift unless the core is capable of resonating with something new."

Her gaze fixed on his eyes.

"That duel with Julia confirmed what I suspected. You can adapt to swordplay- not as a borrowed tool, but as if it belongs to you. Like Archery did. Like Daggerist once did. And if that's the case..."

She took one last step.

"...then what you are, Astron, may not be defined by a single class."

Astron held her gaze, unflinching.

There was no hostility in his eyes-just that familiar calm, veiled behind thought. He tilted his head a little, his expression unreadable, and for a moment, it almost looked like he would let her words hang unchallenged.

Then, softly-

"You're speculating too much."

Eleanor arched an eyebrow, but said nothing yet.

"I didn't learn how to use a sword during that duel," he continued. "I adapted. That's all. Adjusted spacing. Countered momentum. Measured tempo."

His tone was flat, not defensive-simply correcting her interpretation, as if laying down a more accurate report.

"From your angle, it might have looked like understanding. From mine? It was just-response."

He paused, then added, "I also didn't hide my strength, if that's what you're implying."

Eleanor's lips curled slightly.

A small, knowing smile.

"That won't work on me," she said, voice smooth. "I know you're more capable than that."

Astron didn't answer.

She stepped a little closer.

"But let's say you're right," she allowed, gesturing faintly with one hand. "Let's say I am reading too much into it. That I'm assigning too much meaning to a series of clean responses and blade familiarity."

Then, her eyes narrowed just slightly.

"Why do you hesitate?"

Astron's brow furrowed faintly. "What do you mean?"

"I'm not asking you to become a swordsman," Eleanor said. "I'm offering to teach you-personally-how to wield the blade. How to refine a skill you've

already proven capable of grasping. So I ask again..."

She looked him in the eye.

"What do you lose by saying yes?"

There was silence.

Then-Astron spoke again, a fraction softer.

"I lose my time," he said. "Time spent learning something that likely won't benefit me. I'm not a close-quarters duelist. My class synergy is between Daggerist and Archer. The blade doesn't align with either path."

Eleanor's eyes glinted. "Doesn't it?"

Astron didn't respond.

She stepped around him now, slow, deliberate, her voice steady behind him.

"You and I both know that's not true. You're already using sword structure in your dagger work. You use deflections, spacing, even reaction-based counters that are sword-adjacent. Your footwork mimics half-guard principles. Your tempo-breaking mimics single-beat assault systems."

She circled back in front of him.

"If that's not alignment, I don't know what is."

Still no reply.

Eleanor exhaled lightly.

"Don't play this game with me, Astron," she said, eyes meeting his again, this

time more serious. "This isn't a trick. It's an opportunity."

Her voice lowered.

"One that you don't want to miss."

Astron's eyes held hers, steady and unblinking.

Not defiant.

Not dismissive.

Just quiet, patient calculation.

The kind that spoke not of pride-but of caution. Of someone who measured risk not with fear, but with intention. Eleanor could almost see the weight of his thoughts shifting behind those pale violet eyes.

She said nothing more at first.

Let the silence speak.

Then-softly, but unmistakably firm:

"Whatever it is you're trying to keep hidden, Astron..."

Her voice didn't rise. It didn't need to.

"...I've already seen it. Felt it."

She took a step closer-not to intimidate, but to make the truth in her words

impossible to walk away from.

"You're more than the title written in your cadet file. More than the weapons
you choose to show. And now that I've seen that with my own eyes?"

A pause. Her tone sharpened-not cruel, but inescapably real.

"I won't let it go."

She let those words hang in the air, cool and absolute like frost beneath a blade.

"I will dig through it," she continued. "So you might as well make use of the
opportunity while it's still yours to take willingly."

Then, after a short beat, her gaze softened-just a fraction.

"You're still a kid."

It wasn't an insult.

It was a fact.

Not about ability.

About time.

About growth.

About how, even with all his control, all his silence-there was still room to shape him
before the world tried to do it in worse ways.

Astron looked at her for a long moment.

Not with challenge.

But understanding. And then-

A breath.

A shift.

A word:

"...Fine."

His tone wasn't reluctant.

It was honest. Measured.

Like someone who had calculated the cost and found the result acceptable.

"There's no point in refusing," he added after a moment, his voice even.

"And..." he said quietly, "I trust you, Professor Eleanor."

Eleanor's expression didn't change.

It wasn't supposed to. Years of discipline, of status, of commanding presence-she had trained herself

to wear composure like a second skin.

And yet.

At those words "I trust you, Professor Eleanor."

She felt it.

A subtle twitch at the corner of her mouth. So small no one would see it. Not

even him. But she felt it.

This kid...

He didn't flatter. He didn't plead. He didn't chase approval like most cadets did.

And yet, somehow-he knew exactly how to stir that quiet, dangerous part of

her that remembered what it meant to want to protect a student.

Not because they were helpless.

But because they were still unfinished.

Still forming.

Still in that precious, narrow window where guidance actually mattered.

Eleanor inhaled slowly through her nose, smoothing away that impulse with practiced control. "Good," she said at last, voice cool again, but no longer distant. She turned slightly, glancing toward the regulator panel across the hall.

"We'll begin after mid-terms."

She looked back at him, gaze sharp once more.

"Until then, focus on refining your psion efficiency and maintaining coating consistency. Swordwork training will require clear mental load capacity-and I don't want you distracted by fatigue when we begin."

Astron nodded once. Quiet, but resolute.

Eleanor gave a final nod in return.

Then, she turned.

Conversation over.

Training decided.

But as she walked back toward her console, coat swaying behind her, the faintest thought lingered at the edge of her mind.

So, he trusts me.

She didn't smile.

What an easy liar.....

But this time?

She didn't stop the corner of her mouth from twitching again.

Chapter 986 Exam prep

Under the soft veil of the approaching evening, the academy grounds carried a stillness broken only by the occasional rustle of leaves and the distant footsteps of passing students. The air was cool now, the warmth of the afternoon sun long faded, replaced by

a gentle wind that carried the scent of grass and distant mana traces from the dueling halls.

Beneath one of the tall trees lining the outer courtyard, a girl stood-half in shadow, half bathed in the silver glow of the lanterns that lined the path.

She wore casual clothes this time, a light charcoal hoodie left unzipped over a fitted maroon tank top, the fabric hugging her form just enough to suggest ease without effort. Her black joggers sat low on her hips, tucked into combat boots that looked like they'd seen both training and style. Around her neck was a faint shimmer of a charm-small, reddish-gold, and old. Her long hair-fiery gold at the tips, deeper at the roots-was tied into a high, slightly messy tail that swayed with the breeze, and a few strands had slipped loose, framing her face with deliberate chaos.

Golden eyes glanced toward the path again, narrowed slightly, then rolled upward in clear annoyance.

"He is late," she mumbled, crossing her arms beneath her chest.

He wasn't. Not really.

But that didn't stop her from saying it.

She shifted her weight onto one foot, letting her boot nudge a fallen leaf aside as she stared up at the canopy above. The branches swayed gently, the moonlight filtering between them in broken fragments, dancing over her skin. All around her, the academy pulsed with low, controlled tension. Students passed by in small groups or alone, their steps quicker than usual, their conversations clipped and focused. No casual laughter, no lingering at the corners of the walkways-just muted chatter and the rustling of pages being skimmed on glowing tablets or folded papers.

Irina's sharp ears picked up bits and pieces.

"-Professor Lorne's adding spell formation matrices again. He never does that during mid-terms."

"Someone said last year's fourth-year exam was used for the second years this time. What the hell does that mean for us?"

"...and with all this tension in the academy, who knows what the faculty will do to weed people out?"

Irina tilted her head slightly, catching more voices on the wind. The atmosphere was changing.

The exams were next week.

And it wasn't just the usual panic of unprepared students. It was deeper than that-rooted in uncertainty, in the shifting politics and unease that had been threading itself through the academy's routines for weeks.

This year, the mid-terms weren't just going to be hard.

They were going to be a test of control.

A filtering of potential threats.

She could sense it-some students were expecting the curriculum to be rewritten last minute. Others feared their results would be used to determine something beyond just rankings. Even now, conspiracy theories were bubbling beneath the surface-quiet but persistent.

She sighed. Not that she was worried about herself. But tension like this had a way of building pressure around everything, making people act rashly. Especially when the academy itself already felt like it was holding its breath. And then-

A subtle pulse.

A shift in the air, faint, almost unnoticeable.

But she felt it.

A presence brushing past the edge of her senses, moving through the crowd

with a pace too smooth, too deliberate, to be anyone but him.

She didn't even turn yet. Just waited, lips curving ever so slightly.

And a moment later, he stepped into the moonlight.

Dressed in dark casual wear-simple, clean lines, a fitted long-sleeve with muted silver trim at the cuffs, black slacks, boots silent on the stone path. His silver hair caught the light just so, and his purple eyes met hers with that same unreadable calm he always wore.

Astron.

Exactly on time.

Of course.

She smirked to herself, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear as he

approached.

"Tch," she murmured, barely loud enough for him to hear. "Still so annoyingly punctual."

She watched as he came closer, his steps unhurried, measured-like the world moved at a pace that only he dictated. His expression was the same as always: calm, unreadable, like nothing around him had the power to pull a visible reaction from his features unless he allowed it.

It was almost maddening.

Almost.

When he was close enough, she tilted her head, eyeing him with deliberate scrutiny.

"What is annoying about being punctual?" he asked without breaking stride, voice low and even.

Irina rolled her eyes, arms folding beneath her chest. "It makes me feel like you're a robot."

Astron paused in front of her, gaze leveling with hers. "I'm not a robot."

"You look like one," she replied immediately, smirking just slightly. "Like a very well-programmed, mana-efficient machine. Probably made by some recluse alchemist who hates emotional expression."

There was a flicker in his eyes. Barely perceptible.

And then-

"It must be your eyes that are the problem," he said.

Irina blinked. "Excuse me?"

"Faulty lenses," he added after a beat, as if that clarified anything. "What you perceive is not what is real."

She stared at him for a second, lips parting slightly.

"... Was that supposed to be philosophical?"

Astron tilted his head slightly, as if genuinely considering. "Accidental."

Irina shook her head, a short laugh escaping her lips. "Only you could sound like a cryptic book of ancient wisdom and a malfunctioning mannequin in the

same sentence."

Astron said nothing, simply turning his gaze to the moonlit path ahead-like he hadn't just casually said something that sounded like it belonged in a proverb.

Irina sighed, falling into step beside him.

"And they call me the dramatic one," she muttered.

"I don't," Astron said.

She smirked, glancing sideways. "Yet."

He didn't answer. But she caught the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth.

As they walked beneath the quiet sway of tree branches and lantern light, Irina glanced at him sideways again, her hands tucked into the pockets of her

hoodie.

"So?" she asked casually, voice light but curious. "How was your training just

now?"

Astron didn't look at her, eyes still trained ahead, but he answered readily. "Eleanor is finally showing what makes her one of the best."

Irina's brows rose slightly. "The Invoker?"

"...Yes."

She tilted her head, eyes narrowing with interest. "So she's started teaching you about psions?"

"Yes," Astron replied, his tone calm but not without weight. "It seems we've moved past the threshold she was waiting for."

Irina let out a low whistle. "You're quite lucky, you know. To learn from her directly?" She clicked her tongue. "Not many students ever get that far."

"I can't deny that," he said simply.

Irina smirked. There was no envy in her voice-only a flicker of admiration and a quiet challenge. "Heh... Let's hope that fancy psion training doesn't make you forget how to dodge fire."

Astron glanced at her, unbothered. "I wouldn't make such a mistake."

"Good," Irina said, giving him a small nudge with her shoulder. "Because you'll need that focus tonight."

"...You make it sound rather...."

"Embarrassed?"

"Don't push yourself."

Astron shot her a look-sharp, quiet, the kind that held a warning without needing a single word to accompany it.

Irina giggled, not even bothering to hide it. That expression of his-half annoyed, half resigned-was far too rare, and it never failed to amuse her. "Alright, alright," she said, raising her hands in mock surrender. "I'll behave."

He said nothing, but the flicker in his gaze lingered a second longer before he looked away.

Irina stepped ahead, casually tugging at his sleeve as she started walking. "Come on. Let's go before certain people gossip about the dorms...." Astron fell into step beside her without a word, his pace steady, unhurried. The path back was quiet, the soft murmur of distant conversations and the rustle of wind in the trees their only companions. But it wasn't silence born of awkwardness-it was a stillness they both understood.

Tonight, there would be no sparring. No combat drills or political maneuvering. Just the soft glow of study lamps, notebooks spread across the table, and the low hum of mid-term tension hanging in the air.

It was what they had planned.

And for now-

That was enough.

Chapter 987 Exam Prep

The soft click of the door echoed as Irina pushed it open, stepping into the cool stillness of her dorm. The lights overhead were set to a low, warm hue—calming, but bright

enough to work by. Outside the windows, the faint glow of the academy's tower lanterns shimmered through the glass, casting long shadows across the polished floors.

It was quiet.

Not just in her room—but throughout the hall.

The Top 10 dorms were always more subdued than the rest of the student housing, but this week, with mid-terms fast approaching, it felt like the entire building was holding its breath. Even the usual ambient noise—footsteps in the hallway, muted conversation, the occasional laughter—had vanished, replaced by silence and focus.

Irina didn't mind it.

She stepped aside to let Astron in, and he entered without a word, immediately removing his coat and setting it neatly over the back of a chair. He moved through the space with a quiet familiarity, as though this weren't the first time—and it wasn't.

Irina kicked her boots off, stretching slightly as she turned toward the kitchenette at the side of the room. "Make yourself comfortable," she said over her shoulder, already moving toward the small counter. "I got things ready this time."

Astron raised an eyebrow as he watched her rummage through the kitchenette, the faintest shift in his usually neutral expression betraying something that looked suspiciously like a challenge.

Irina caught it immediately.

She narrowed her eyes and turned her head, already shooting him a pointed look. "What?"

"Nothing," he replied smoothly, his tone just a little too casual.

Irina's eyes narrowed further. "You just thought of something rude."

"That depends," Astron said, glancing away as he unfastened his gloves with deliberate calm, "on what you consider rude."

She didn't answer that. She just stared—long and flat—until he finally gave in with a sigh and started walking toward the table.

"Go and sit," she muttered.

"Yes, yes," he replied mildly, as if indulging her.

Irina rolled her eyes, but her lips twitched into a grin as she turned back to the counter. A minute later, she carried over a tray loaded with everything she'd prepped: a pair of ceramic mugs, neatly stacked books and study sheets, and a plate of carefully arranged snacks—small pastries, spiced nuts, and a couple of finger sandwiches.

Astron looked down at it all with his usual unreadable expression, though she caught the slight raise of his brow again.

Irina dropped onto the cushion opposite him and set the tray between them. "Before you ask," she said, grabbing her mug, "yes. I made them."

Astron didn't immediately touch the food. Instead, he glanced over the arrangement once more—his eyes flicking from the perfectly-aligned pastries to the slightly uneven cut on one of the sandwiches, the way a few crumbs had been carefully brushed aside but not entirely hidden.

"I already knew you made them," he said, his tone even.

Irina raised an eyebrow, leaning forward slightly. "Oh?"

"You're not usually this deliberate with presentation," Astron continued. "The plating is tidy, but not natural. It's trying to follow a predetermined structure—one that doesn't come from repetition, but reference."

He picked up one of the sandwiches, rotating it slightly between his fingers. "You followed a video. Probably watched it twice. Tried to mimic what you saw—down to the angle of the tea cups."

Irina stared at him for a second, lips parted, then scoffed and looked away, brushing a hand through her bangs to hide the faint blush creeping into her cheeks.

"...So what?" she muttered, pretending to focus on her tea.

Astron didn't press, just sipped from his mug.

Irina threw him a sidelong glance. "I just didn't expect you to notice that much detail."

"Why?" he asked.

"Why, you ask?" She leaned back, arms crossed. "Because you're supposed to be the kind of guy who just eats food without thinking about where it came from."

Astron blinked. "That doesn't sound like me."

Irina snorted. "No, it doesn't." She looked at him again, this time with a smirk. "Heh... You know, I'm not some sort of sheltered princess who can't cook."

Astron paused, his eyes narrowing ever so slightly—not with judgment, just quiet skepticism.

"I'm not," she insisted, her expression tightening with playful offense.

"Yes, yes..." Astron said calmly, sipping again.

Irina gave him a flat look. "Don't patronize me."

"I wouldn't dare."

"Liar."

He said nothing, but the faint twitch of his lips gave him away.

And Irina, flustered and smug all at once, just kept drinking her tea.

The conversation tapered off into a comfortable quiet, both of them nursing their tea as the warm lamplight cast soft shadows over the textbooks and papers neatly arranged between them. The tray of snacks sat untouched for now, a small testament to the rare calm before the inevitable descent into focused silence.

Irina exhaled, setting her cup aside with a gentle clink and scooting closer to the table. "Alright, let's get to work," she said, flicking open one of the thinner review booklets. "We didn't come here just to debate my culinary skills."

Astron adjusted his posture and reached for the nearest binder without protest. He never really did. When Irina initiated something with intention, he followed. That was part of the strange rhythm they had developed over the past month—subtle, fluid, unspoken.

But this time, Irina had her own reasons.

She was the one who had proposed it.

The mid-terms were closing in, and while Astron never seemed the type to worry about his grades, Irina did. Not just her own, but his too—at least when it came to how things looked from the outside.

Because, if people were to learn that Astron—quiet, aloof, unapproachable Astron—had spent the week studying with Irina Emberheart, it would give them all a neat, clean reason to explain away the inevitable rise in his academic performance.

Especially now that rankings were becoming more than just numbers. Especially now that families and factions were beginning to pay real attention to what went on in the academy walls.

She had even considered dragging him to the main library for visibility's sake. After all, a study session under the public eye would've stirred the right whispers.

But when she went to check earlier, after her mentorship, she found the main floor already packed. Students were crammed into every available chair and bench, the air heavy with mana notes and whispered strategy theories.

So she pivoted.

Private session it was.

Still effective, still intimate—and maybe, just maybe, a little more convenient for her own reasons.

After all, it was a win-win.

Astron's reputation got the perfect academic cover, her image as a top ten strategist remained polished, and—

Well, she also got to spend a few quiet hours alone with him.

And if that wasn't productive in multiple ways, she didn't know what was.

Irina leaned forward, pen in hand, golden eyes flicking over the problem set in front of her.

[Mana Theory II]

The bane of most second-year cadets.

In the previous semester, they had slogged through Mana Theory I, which covered the fundamentals—basic mana flow, channeling stability, elemental interaction charts, and introductory circuit structuring. Most of it had been dense but manageable, and Astron, of course, had cruised through it with an almost unfair sense of clarity.

But Mana Theory II was different.

Now they were diving into the more volatile terrain: internal resonance harmonics, caster-loop feedback structures, mana rejection thresholds, and the ever-feared Phase Shift Phenomena, which required a maddening combination of theoretical knowledge and raw imagination to even conceptualize.

"Now, let's start."

Irina tapped her pen against the desk lightly, reading over the current problem.

"A third-tier caster activates a dual-element resonance cycle within a limited-containment zone....."

Chapter 988 - Exam Prep

"A third-tier caster activates a dual-element resonance cycle within a limited-containment zone. The first-phase elemental burst triggers a reverse-polarity response. Explain why the rejection spike does not destabilize the outer channel seal."

She clicked her tongue.

"Alright," she muttered, more to herself than to him. "We're dealing with containment logic now. Phase interactions, dual-elemental systems..."

Astron, sitting across from her with his usual unreadable calm, glanced at the problem sheet. "The spike is offset by the caster's pre-loop binding before the second phase begins. The rejection doesn't destabilize the seal because it's absorbed into the oscillation buffer during the harmonics delay window."

Irina raised an eyebrow. "You memorized this already?"

Astron shrugged lightly, flipping the page with his usual composure. "This question's structure is nearly identical to the one Instructor Bellis solved on the board two weeks ago. The elemental inversion model was part of the class demonstration." He paused briefly. "It's fairly easy."

Irina smirked, leaning back a little. "Indeed it is. Almost disappointingly so."

Astron didn't respond, but his eyes flicked down to the next section of the review sheet. "Which is why it won't be on the exam," he added simply. "Not this time. Not with all the rumors going around."

Irina's eyes narrowed slightly. "You think they're true? The ones about the exam being modified again?"

"I do," Astron said. "There's too much unrest lately. Someone will want to establish control again. Academic filters are the cleanest way to do it."

Irina hummed in agreement, tapping the edge of her pen against her notebook. Her gaze drifted slightly, thoughtful, and then—

"Heh," she said suddenly, a sly grin tugging at her lips. "I thought of something fun just now."

Astron didn't look up. "What?"

She leaned in a little, eyes glinting. "Let's have a competition."

Astron blinked. "What competition?"

Irina straightened, lifting her pen like it was a sword about to be drawn. "Trying to predict the exam questions."

There was a short pause.

Astron looked at her with the faintest trace of skepticism, as if deciding whether or not to humor the challenge. "That is not how studying works."

"Maybe not for you," Irina said smugly. "But if I'm going to suffer through this, I might as well make it interesting."

Astron glanced at the problem set again, then back at her. "And what would the winner receive?"

Irina grinned. "Bragging rights. And maybe..." She let the word hang for a second. "A favor."

Astron raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Irina leaned back, crossing her arms. "Well? Afraid I'll win?"

"No," he said flatly. "I just think it's a low-return gamble."

She grinned wider. "That means you're in."

Astron sighed, turning to the next page. "Fine."

And just like that, the study session shifted.

Now it was a game.

A quiet battle of minds in the warm, lamplit room—predicting which part of the academy's twisted curriculum would be weaponized next.

Irina let out a long, dramatic sigh as she leaned back, tilting her head until it rested against the edge of the cushion behind her.

"Finally it's over..."

Her arms stretched above her head as she sprawled out across the floor mat, the slow creak of her joints echoing slightly in the quiet of the dorm. She stared up at the ceiling for a moment, letting her limbs loosen, her entire posture shifting from tension to exhaustion.

"Ugh... my brain is officially fried," she muttered.

Across from her, Astron quietly lowered his pen.

The sound was subtle—just a soft tap as it came to rest atop a stack of notes now half-filled with annotations, diagrams, and mana circuit sketches. He sat still for a second, eyes scanning the last equation before finally closing the booklet in front of him.

They had gone through dozens of questions—technical, theoretical, layered with trap wording and subtle exceptions. It hadn't just been a review. It had been a full dissection of the curriculum.

And it showed.

Irina turned her head slightly to look at him. "I'd never thought about that last one like that," she admitted, nodding toward the last solved question about circuit pressure diffusion during simultaneous multi-cast. "Using the auxiliary loop as the anchor point instead of just a redundancy? That flipped the whole structure."

Astron's gaze didn't lift from the closed booklet. "Sometimes approaching it as a designer is harder to do."

Irina blinked. "Designer?"

He nodded. "You've trained yourself to think like a user. A caster. You interpret the structure as something to execute. But if you study the way it is built—" Astron started, but Irina cut in with a spark of realization lighting in her eyes.

"So like a magic engineer?"

"Yes," he said, giving a single nod. "Exactly that."

Irina leaned her head back again, letting the thought settle in her mind. "I see. That makes sense. I always knew there was a reason those weirdos could optimize circuits better than the actual casters."

Astron didn't deny it. But then, after a beat, he added, "Still... I picked up a few new things today. There were approaches in your problem-solving I hadn't considered."

Irina's head whipped toward him, smirking as if she'd just received a rare award. "Of course there were. I am the best mage in this academy, after all."

Astron blinked, entirely unamused. "You're not the best at being humble."

Irina stretched again with exaggerated ease. "That's not my forte. And you knew it from the start."

A pause. Then, quietly, "...Can't refute that."

She grinned. "Heh."

For a few seconds, they simply basked in the quiet. The dorm felt warmer now—not from temperature, but from the long hours shared, the comfortable silence earned after focus, effort, and a little well-placed bragging.

Then Irina's eyes flicked to the side—toward the corner of the room, where her console sat under the mounted screen, the glow of the interface light still faintly pulsing from standby mode.

She glanced at Astron. Her smirk returned, slowly curving across her face.

"...Wanna shift to something more fun?"

Astron followed her gaze, then looked back at her.

"You're suggesting a game?"

Irina leaned forward, her elbows resting on her knees as she gave him a mock-offended look.

"We've been studying for more than four hours, Astron," she said, drawing the words out as if making a legal case. "A little break wouldn't kill us."

Astron's eyes narrowed slightly. His gaze shifted toward the console in the corner—silent, glowing faintly like a beacon for temptation—and then slowly back to her.

"You..." he said quietly.

Irina blinked. "What?"

Astron didn't change his expression. "You're addicted."

"I am not!" she snapped back instantly, sitting upright with a sharp puff of indignation.

Astron's gaze flicked toward the floor where the spare controller still rested, barely concealed under the edge of the rug. Then, back to her.

"You played a lot by yourself, didn't you?"

Irina hesitated. Just a beat.

Then she muttered, "...I may have."

Astron didn't say anything.

The silence that followed was thick with silent judgment.

Irina crossed her arms, her tone defensive now. "But so what? You also played."

Astron nodded slightly, as calm as ever. "I played only two games a day."

Irina stared at him. "That's it?"

"I maintained balance."

"You're insufferable."

"And you're inconsistent."

She huffed and grabbed the second controller. "Fine. I'll show you inconsistency—when I crush it in the next match."

Astron tilted his head slightly. "That would be consistent with your delusions."

Irina's eyes narrowed. "Oh, you're on."

The console lit up as the controllers synced in, the warm study-lamp glow now joined by the crisp shimmer of the screen flickering to life. Books and notes still lay scattered across the table, forgotten for now.....

Chapter 989 - Mid-terms

"Pens down. Now."

The command echoed through the massive lecture hall like the toll of a bell. The proctor's voice was clipped, deliberate, and utterly merciless.

Chairs creaked. Pens dropped. A few students froze mid-sentence, desperate to squeeze in just one more word—but none dared to defy the order.

The room, thick with tension and the faint stench of stress-induced sweat, fell into a brittle silence.

Students sat slumped over their desks like defeated soldiers after a siege. The last of the theoretical midterms—four grueling hours of multi-discipline nightmare fuel—was finally over.

A low groan broke the silence. "What the hell was that third section?"

No one responded immediately. Then, from the row behind, another voice muttered under their breath. "I swear half those questions weren't even real. They made those up just to watch us suffer."

"Shhh," came the immediate whisper from the side. "He's still collecting."

And sure enough, the proctor—a tall man with a face carved from granite and eyes that missed nothing—was already making his rounds, snapping his fingers and pointing at students who lingered too long near their answer sheets.

No one wanted to test him.

Not after three days of midterms.

Not on the final hour.

So the complaints died quickly, swallowed by the sound of shuffled papers and the slow scrape of chairs being pushed back.

Outside the tall windows, sunlight slanted across the courtyard, but no one looked up. They were all still processing what had just happened.

One student leaned back slowly in their chair, rubbing both hands over their face. "We did it," they murmured. "We survived. Barely."

Someone next to them let out a bitter laugh. "If surviving means mentally disintegrating over mana displacement calculations and battle logistics from a war fifty years ago, then sure. We survived."

"Don't remind me."

The proctor loomed once more. "Exit quietly. Hall is dismissed."

And just like that, it was over.

The last page. The last pen stroke. The final exam of the theoretical midterms.

The students rose with the slow, aching shuffle of people who had fought something far larger than themselves and lived to tell about it—but only barely.

On the outer steps of the main academic wing, where a group of weary cadets spilled out into the open air like prisoners finally released from a week-long sentence. The stone beneath their boots was warm, the sun casting golden light across the courtyard—but none of them looked particularly revived by it.

Julia was the first to break the groaning silence among the core group. She stormed out of the building with her coat slung over one shoulder, hair a little messier than usual, face scrunched in visible frustration.

"I am pissed off," she announced, voice raw with indignation. "Pissed. Do you know why?"

Nobody answered.

She didn't wait anyway.

"Because for once—once!—I actually studied." Her hands went up in the air. "I stayed up. I took notes. I highlighted things. Lilia saw me. You saw me!"

Lilia, walking calmly beside her, nodded. "She did. She even color-coded."

"I color-coded," Julia repeated, stabbing a finger into the air as if accusing the world itself. "And not a single topic I focused on showed up. Not one. No supply chain optimization. No arcane reinforcement algorithms. Nothing. Just... just mana stability equations from pre-modern adaptation theory? Who even uses that?"

Lucas let out a dry chuckle as he trailed behind them, backpack slung lazily over one shoulder. "Sounds like you had a textbook-targeted betrayal."

"Don't mock me," Julia grumbled. "This is a betrayal of the highest order. My brain hurts in places I didn't know it could."

Ethan walked beside her in silence, hands in his pockets. His face was composed, but his eyes were slightly glazed—the same look of someone who had been trapped in a theoretical hellscape and was still trying to remember their name. "That third section," he murmured, "wasn't even worded like a real question."

"I know, right?" Julia snapped her fingers in his direction. "I wasn't even sure if it was a trap or if I was just losing my mind."

"Both," Lilia muttered. "It was both."

Carl, as always, walked quietly behind them, his hands clasped behind his back, posture straight despite the storm of complaints around him. He didn't groan, didn't curse, didn't vent. But his silence carried weight, the kind that said he'd also suffered, even if he wasn't vocal about it.

Lucas raised a brow toward him. "Carl, you alive back there?"

Carl tilted his head slightly at the question, his expression as neutral as ever.

"Why would I not be?" he replied, voice calm and as steady as his footsteps.

Lucas grinned. "Just checking, man. You've got that 'contemplating the fragility of life' silence going."

Carl glanced forward. "The exam was fine."

Lucas raised a skeptical brow. "Fine? That's it?"

"I'm not much of a theory guy," Carl admitted with a shrug. "But I always put in decent effort. It's not about being good—it's about being consistent."

"Huh." Lucas nodded thoughtfully. "Respect."

Ethan, who had been walking quietly beside Julia, gave a small chuckle. "Same here. I don't care too much about the theory side. I just try to pass without losing my mind."

He exhaled, gaze drifting up to the clear sky. "It is what it is."

"It is what it is," Lucas echoed at the exact same time.

They both paused, blinked—

Then burst into a shared laugh.

Julia gave them both a long, tired stare. "You two have officially synced brain cells."

Ethan smirked. "That might actually be the most productive thing I've done all day."

Lucas gave him a fist bump without breaking stride.

Julia sighed loudly, dragging a hand through her hair. "Fuck... I really don't want to care."

She looked skyward, as if appealing to the gods.

"But I'm pissed."

The group began to descend the steps, their tired complaints trailing behind them like echoes of war stories, when the door behind them opened again with a soft click.

Two more students stepped out.

One walked with an easy, confident pace—the subtle swagger of someone who was more annoyed than tired. Her hoodie was tied around her waist, and her long hair shimmered gold in the fading light as she huffed dramatically.

The other moved more quietly, not silent, but less noticed. His steps were calm, composed, deliberate. His presence wasn't loud—it was the kind that passed through crowds like mist, unnoticed until you looked twice.

Astron and Irina.

They were speaking in low voices, not joining the others just yet. Irina had her arms crossed, her expression somewhere between impressed and mildly irritated.

"I still don't get it," she muttered, her tone half-accusation, half-exhaustion. "How did you really manage to predict it that well?"

Astron tilted his head slightly, his gaze still distant as he looked ahead. "I just guessed. Got lucky."

Irina narrowed her eyes at him. "Suspicious."

"I really was lucky this time," he said again, his voice as neutral as ever.

Irina scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Humph."

Their pace slowed as they joined the back of the group, just close enough to hear the tail end of Julia's long-winded venting.

"...But I'm pissed," Julia said, still half-shouting at the sky like it had personally betrayed her.

Irina gave her a sideways glance and smirked. "You're always pissed after exams."

Julia looked back at her. "Yeah, but this time it's personal."

Irina just chuckled under her breath, then turned back toward Astron with a mutter.

"Lucky, my ass..." she grumbled, just loud enough for him to hear.

Astron didn't reply.

But his silence might as well have been another shrug.

Chapter 990 Mid-terms

Julia slowed her steps slightly, glancing over her shoulder at the pair just behind. "What even is luck, anyway?"

Irina blinked, caught off guard. "What?"

"Come on," Julia said, waving a hand vaguely toward Astron. "He pulls answers out of thin air, survives sparring matches that should've knocked him flat, and nails the hardest exam questions like it's a casual walk through the woods—and then calls it 'luck.' So what is it?"

Irina just shrugged, her smirk returning. "Nothing."

Julia narrowed her eyes. "Come on. Say it."

Irina turned forward, casual and composed. "No."

"Say it."

"I said no."

"Tch," Julia scoffed, folding her arms again. "Coward."

"I call it wisdom," Irina replied smoothly.

Lucas glanced between them. "You two gonna duel again right here on the stairs or...?"

"Don't tempt her," Ethan said, eyeing Julia warily.

She shot him a quick grin. "Relax. I don't have the energy. Yet."

The group continued descending the courtyard steps, the day finally cooling with the approaching dusk. The sunlight stretched long across the stone, painting the walls in pale gold and sleepy orange.

"So," Lilia said, breaking the lull, "now that theoreticals are over... what's the plan for the rest of today?"

"Crying," Julia offered.

Lucas raised a hand. "I second that."

"Seriously," Lilia said, ignoring them. "Practical exams start tomorrow. Should we rest up? Or hit the training room for a final warm-up?"

Carl, ever steady, spoke up from the back. "Rest is valuable. Fatigue accumulates."

Irina nodded slightly. "He's right. We've been going hard since the second week started. Burnout's real."

Ethan rubbed the back of his neck. "I was thinking of hitting the training hall for a bit. Not too hard. Just enough to keep the rhythm."

"Of course you were," Julia muttered, nudging him. "Because you're physically incapable of stopping."

Astron spoke then—quiet, but audible. "I'll go with him."

Ethan glanced at him, surprised—but nodded. "Yeah. Sure."

The moment Astron's calm voice floated through the group, several pairs of eyes turned his way.

Julia narrowed hers. Lilia raised a brow. Even Lucas, who had been halfway through stretching dramatically, paused mid-motion and looked between the two of them.

"...Of course," Julia muttered under her breath. "Of course you'd go too."

Ethan scratched the back of his head, half-apologetic. "It's just to keep the edge. Not going all-out."

Astron said nothing else. He didn't need to.

The group exchanged a few more glances, but none of them voiced what they were really thinking.

Because this wasn't new.

This was typical.

Ethan and Astron were training maniacs in their own ways—one out of self-discipline and the ever-present need to grow stronger, and the other out of... something else. Something colder, deeper, and harder to define.

Irina didn't say a word. She looked at Astron for a long moment, reading him the way only she could. But there was no flare of disapproval in her expression. Only the faintest breath of understanding.

"He's just being himself," she thought.

"Alright," Lilia said with a small sigh, lifting her hands in mock surrender. "Just don't push yourselves too hard. Or worse—start sparring each other again and forget to stop."

"No promises," Ethan said with a faint grin.

Lucas laughed. "At this point, I wouldn't even be surprised if you two study by fighting each other."

"Oh..." Lucas was still grinning when Ethan suddenly tilted his head, genuinely intrigued.

"Wait." Ethan's eyebrows lifted. "That could actually work."

He looked toward Astron, something sparking in his eyes. "If we paired off and went through the theoretical topics while sparring—like, you know, pressure-based recall—we could condition our reflexes and our retention."

Lilia groaned. "No. Absolutely not. Stop."

Julia made a choking sound. "Ethan. No."

But Ethan had already turned to Astron, fully considering it now. "What do you think?"

Astron paused.

He didn't answer right away. His eyes flicked from Ethan to Lucas—and then slowly narrowed.

Just slightly.

Lucas raised both hands innocently. "Hey, I was joking."

Astron's expression didn't change much... but it did change. The faintest crease at the brow. A thin glint in his eyes.

It wasn't anger. It wasn't irritation.

It was... a look.

A look that said: This conversation is over.

And without a word, he turned.

His coat shifted softly as he stepped off the path and began walking toward the training hall with his usual deliberate calm, only the faint weight of his silence trailing behind him.

Ethan blinked, then gave the group a quick shrug. "I'll catch you later."

And he jogged after Astron, falling into stride beside him like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"He really is too edgy..."

The quiet steps of their boots echoed lightly off the stone as they left the courtyard behind, the sun dipping lower and casting long shadows along the garden path that wound toward Eleanor's private training grounds.

The air between them was calm.

Not heavy. Not tense.

Just the quiet kind of air that always followed Astron when he walked—like the world itself moved a little slower in his presence.

Ethan walked beside him, hands tucked loosely into his jacket pockets, eyes darting between the horizon and the ground in thought. He opened his mouth—only to pause as Astron turned to look at him.

"I know what you're going to say," Astron said, not even slowing his pace.

Ethan blinked, then let out a short laugh. "Right. Of course you do."

Astron tilted his head, voice even. "You want to spar. Again."

Ethan shrugged with a crooked smile. "Why not?"

"Waste of time," Astron replied without pause.

That made Ethan frown—not annoyed, just curious. "You really think so? I think it could benefit us a lot."

Astron's gaze slid forward again, his coat catching a soft breeze as they passed a line of trimmed hedges. "I already know how you fight."

"Yeah, but we've both changed since our last match," Ethan said, stepping over a small root and matching Astron's pace again. "Besides, I am quite curious. I remember, fighting you helps me think. You don't give anything away. It's like solving a moving equation."

Astron didn't answer immediately. His eyes narrowed just a little.

Not dismissively.

But thoughtfully.

"The way you fight," he said after a few seconds, "is based on instinct paired with accumulated patterns. Rhythm and variance. You disguise predictable flows in unpredictable speed. But your mana shaping still lags slightly behind your psionic reflexes."

Ethan blinked, digesting that. "...Thanks, I think?"

"I'm saying you're improving," Astron added, still watching the path ahead. "But you don't need me to sharpen what you already know."

Ethan grinned. "No. I need you to challenge what I don't know."

Astron finally glanced at him again, faintly surprised—but he didn't deny it.

Instead, his pace slowed just a fraction, and his tone shifted—barely. Less final. More considering.

"Pressure-based recall," Astron repeated, quoting Ethan from earlier. "You believe it works?"

"It did for my brother," Ethan said. "He drilled theory while sparring—tied technical recall to combat conditions. Said it helped cement battlefield instincts and analysis under real tension."

Astron was silent again, though this time, the silence felt more like calculation.

Then, at last—

"...We'll see."

Ethan raised an eyebrow. "That a yes?"

Astron didn't answer right away.

His steps were steady, his gaze fixed ahead, and for a moment Ethan wasn't sure if he was being ignored or if Astron was genuinely weighing the offer like it was a mathematical proof.

Then—

"...After mid-terms."

Ethan let out an audible groan. "So that's a no."

"Deferred," Astron corrected, still not looking at him.

"You're so boring."

"Feel free to think whatever you want," came the flat reply.

Ethan rolled his eyes with a small sigh. "I do."

The conversation ended there—easily, naturally. Not with frustration, but with the kind of practiced rhythm they'd somehow fallen into. Trading quiet jabs between larger silences, not to dominate the conversation, but to navigate it.

Ahead, the reinforced glass-and-silver gate to Eleanor's facility shimmered into view, its edges glowing faintly with a detection barrier. As they approached, a glyph-ring pulsed outward, sensing their arrival.

Each of them raised a wrist in practiced motion, their ID bands flashing with a gentle blue light.

Access Granted.