## H. Academy 991

Chapter 991 A silent confontration

The crisp chill of a spring morning settled gently over the stone pathways of the academy. Soft golden light filtered through tall windows into the spacious administrative conference hall where the inner faculty circle had already begun to gather.

A low hum of quiet conversation passed between professors, punctuated by the occasional rustle of parchment or the flick of a stylus on a grading slate. Steam rose from cups of dark roast on the long mahogany table, mingling with the heavier tension that had taken permanent residence over the past few weeks.

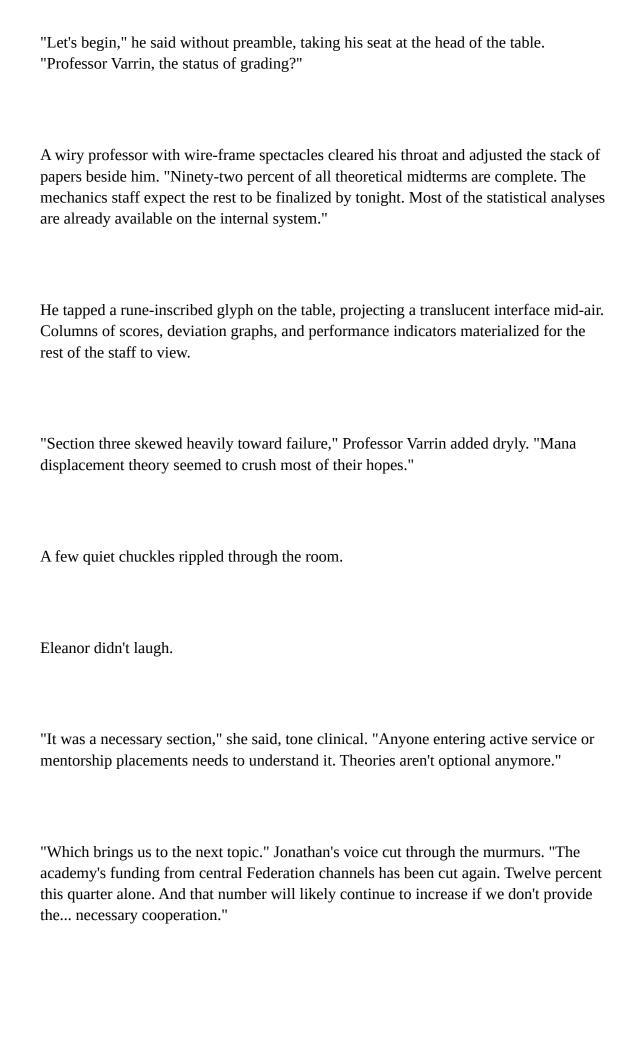
The air in the hall felt thinner than usual. Heavier.

Eleanor arrived first among the senior staff, her pace brisk, her coat sharp, and her presence composed despite the early hour. She slid into her seat with practiced ease, nodding curtly to the other professors, her tablet already in hand. The display pulsed faintly with a compiled breakdown of theoretical scores from all six classes.

Amelia arrived soon after—less stern, more openly engaged—nodding to familiar faces and exchanging a few words before she made her way toward the front, near the center of the table.

Moments later, the room hushed as Headmaster Jonathan entered.

As always, he did not need to raise his voice. He simply was. And that was enough.



A long pause followed. One of the logistics officers looked visibly uneasy. "The Ministry of Internal Coordination has re-emphasized the 'strategic role' of hunter academies," Amelia added smoothly, picking up where her father left off. "And in line with that emphasis, they've requested—and we've approved—the early attendance of guild scouts for this semester's practicals." A stir of surprise, and then tension. Professor Dahrin, an older instructor in charge of cadet fieldwork rotations, frowned. "That's usually reserved for the final semester exams. Having scouts show up mid-year, and during mentorship placement weeks no less—it sends the wrong message." Another professor chimed in, a woman with ash-blonde hair and a crisp, clipped accent. "Some families will take it poorly. They'll interpret it as the academy trying to offload cadets early. Which, to be frank, it will appear to be." Jonathan didn't flinch. "Let them interpret it however they wish. It's the scouts who requested early access, not the academy. We merely accommodated their presence." Eleanor's gaze didn't move from her screen. "They won't be allowed to interfere with the mentorship pairings or the evaluations themselves. They'll observe only. That was my condition." Another voice broke through the room's rising unease.

"And if they start making recruitment offers? What then?"

All eyes turned to Professor Ryn, seated at the far end of the table. He leaned back, arms crossed. "You and I both know that once guilds see a promising cadet, they don't wait for protocol. Especially not now, when the market for new hunters is stretched thin."

"Then they will be reminded," Jonathan said flatly, "that this academy is not a recruitment center. And that I will enforce our neutrality with the full extent of my position."

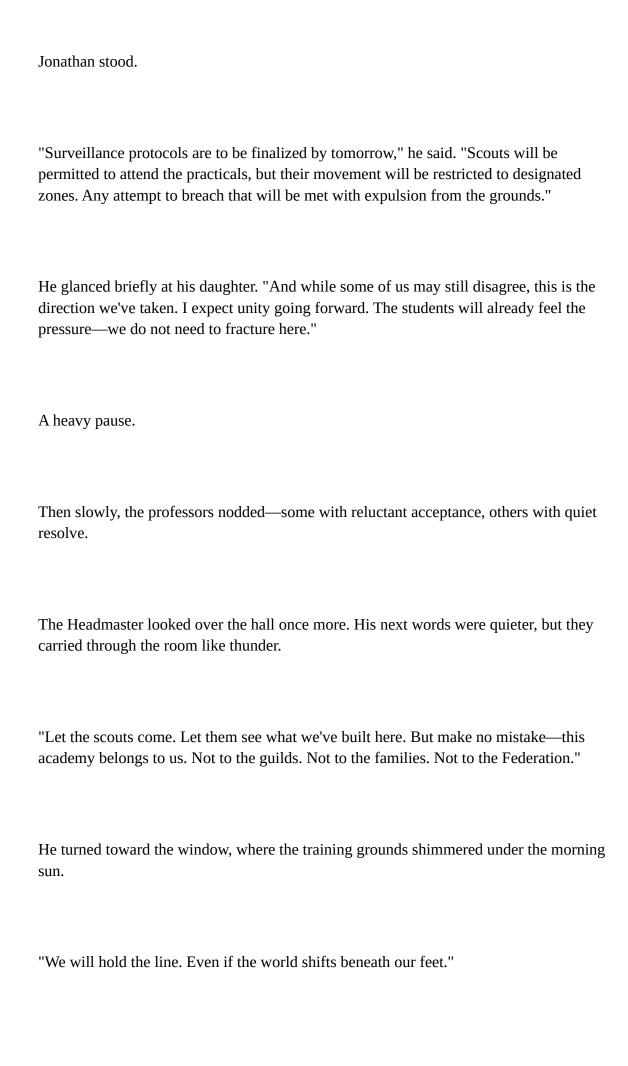
The steel in his voice made it clear the conversation on that front was over.

Still, the murmurs continued. No one said it aloud, but the message was clear—the academy was under pressure, and every decision was being made with less room to maneuver.

Amelia spoke again, gentler this time. "The scouts attending early does give some of our cadets a chance to shine. We've all seen the rising curve. Some of the first-years are catching up at frightening speeds. Ethan Hartley. Livia Kros. Jin Tae. Even among the second-years, there are anomalies this time."

Eleanor gave a slight nod. "More eyes watching will force them to mature faster. And right now, maturity is in short supply."

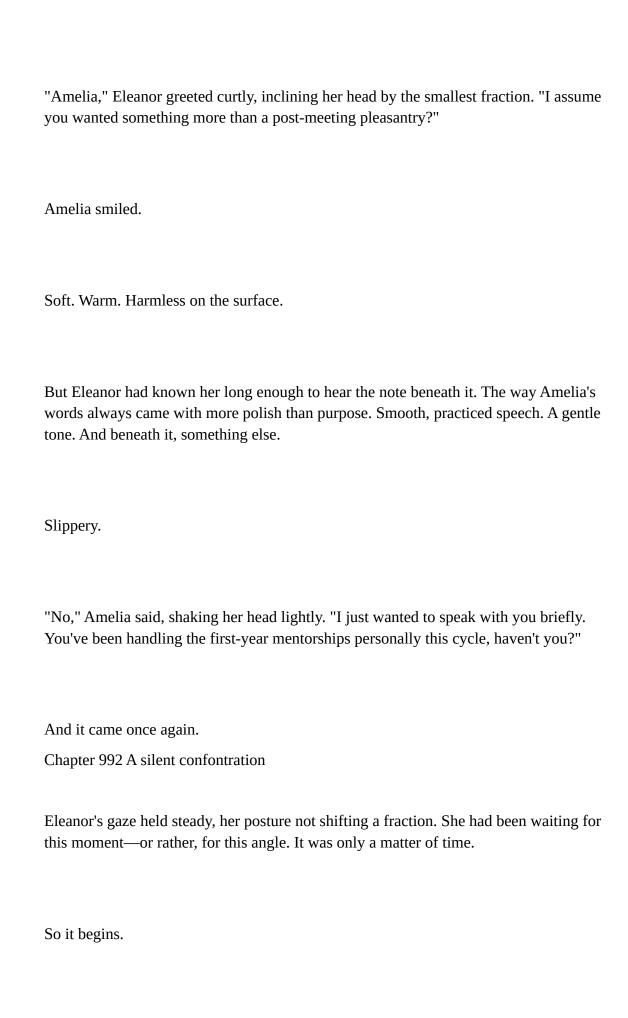
Still, the discomfort in the room remained. Change was coming fast—too fast. And even the professors, veterans of many academic reforms, felt like this one was being driven by a force they couldn't quite see or slow down.

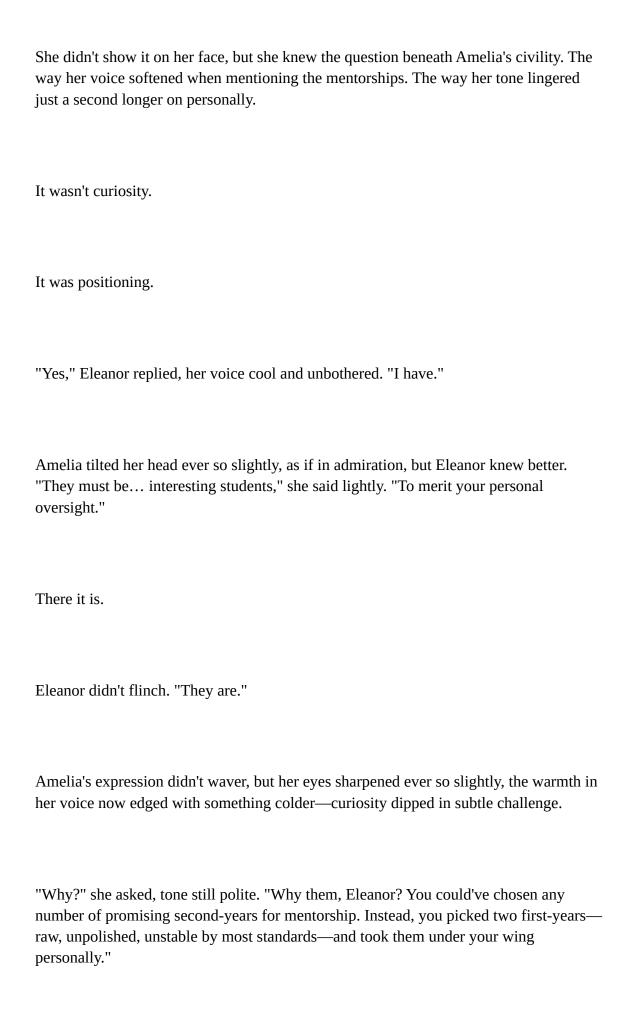


The meeting adjourned moments later.
And outside, across the academy's central yard, the wind carried whispers of movement—of new eyes arriving. Watching. Measuring.
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The heavy doors of the administrative conference hall closed behind Eleanor with a muted thud, sealing in the residue of tension, numbers, and looming political pressure. Her boots clicked steadily across the polished stone corridor, her pace brisk but controlled—precise, as always. The chilly morning light filtered through high arched windows, catching the edge of her coat in flashes of muted ivory and steel.
Her mind churned quietly as she walked.
Scouts arriving early
Scouts arriving early  It was expected. Inevitable, even. But that didn't make it less aggravating. The balance of authority between academy and guilds had always been a knife-edge—held together by protocol, reputation, and a shared understanding that cadets weren't tools to be bought early.
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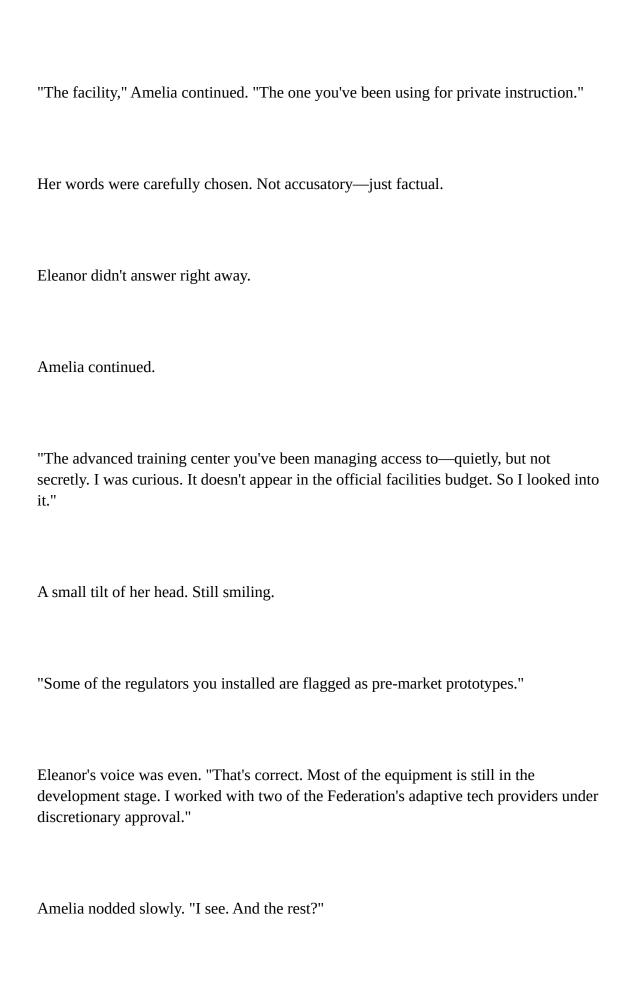
Her expression remained unreadable, but her thoughts were anything but calm.
I'll manage it. The cadets don't need to know how tightly we're being squeezed. They need direction. Control. Focus.
Especially Ethan.
Especially Astron.
Just as she reached the edge of the corridor leading toward the upper courtyard stairwell a familiar voice broke through the quiet.
"Professor Eleanor."
She stopped.
Turned her head slightly.
Amelia.
The vice-head's heels clicked softly as she approached—elegant, poised, her expression

wearing that trademark serene politeness. Not false. But not true, either.

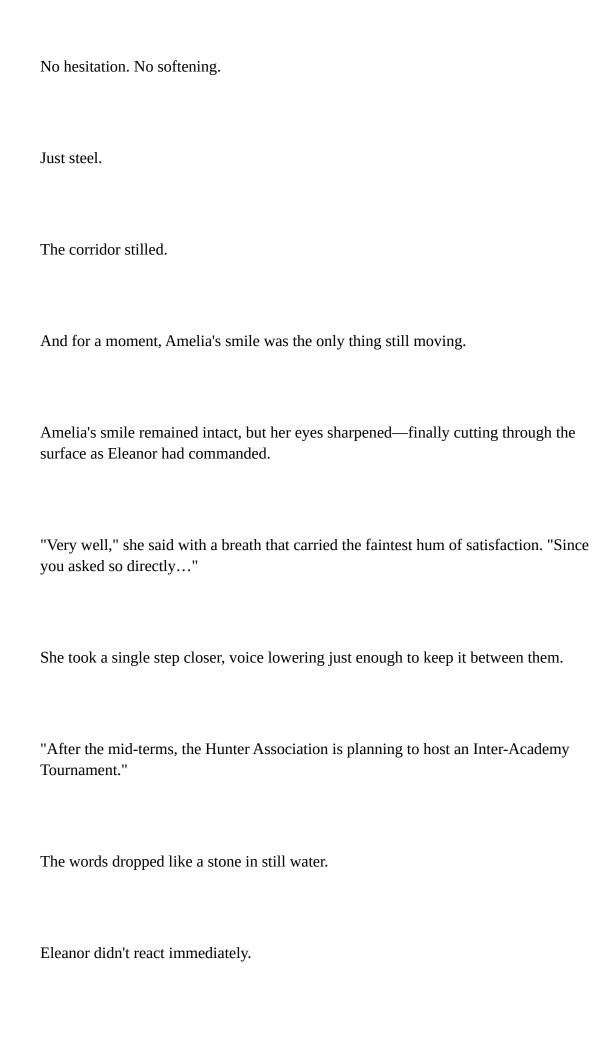


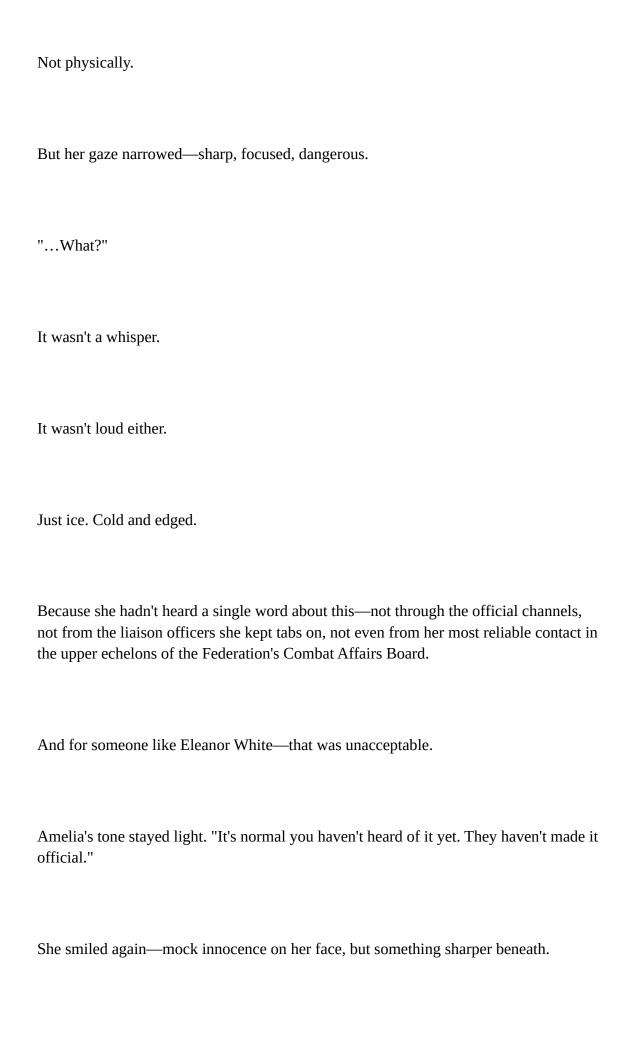




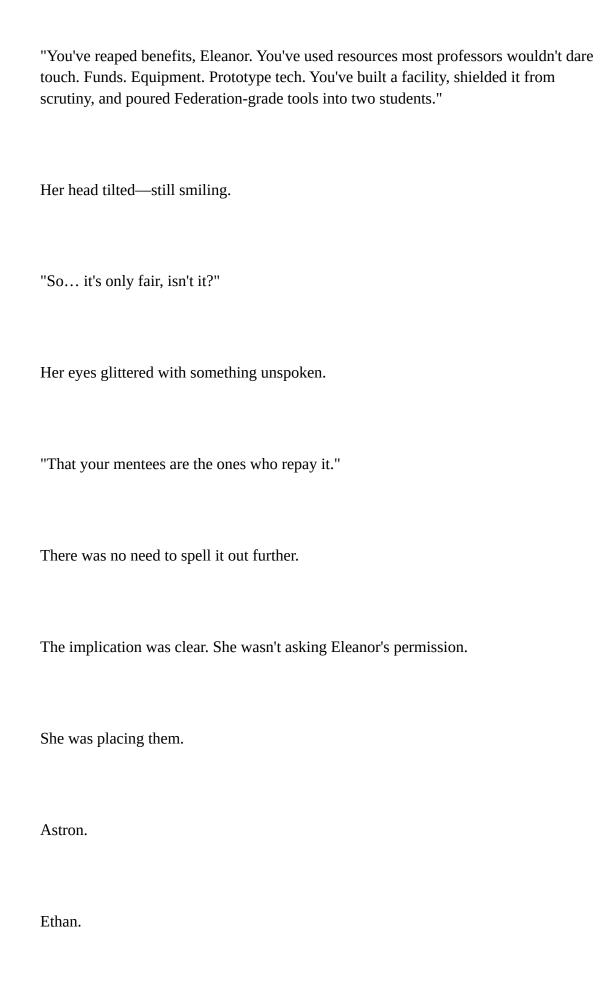


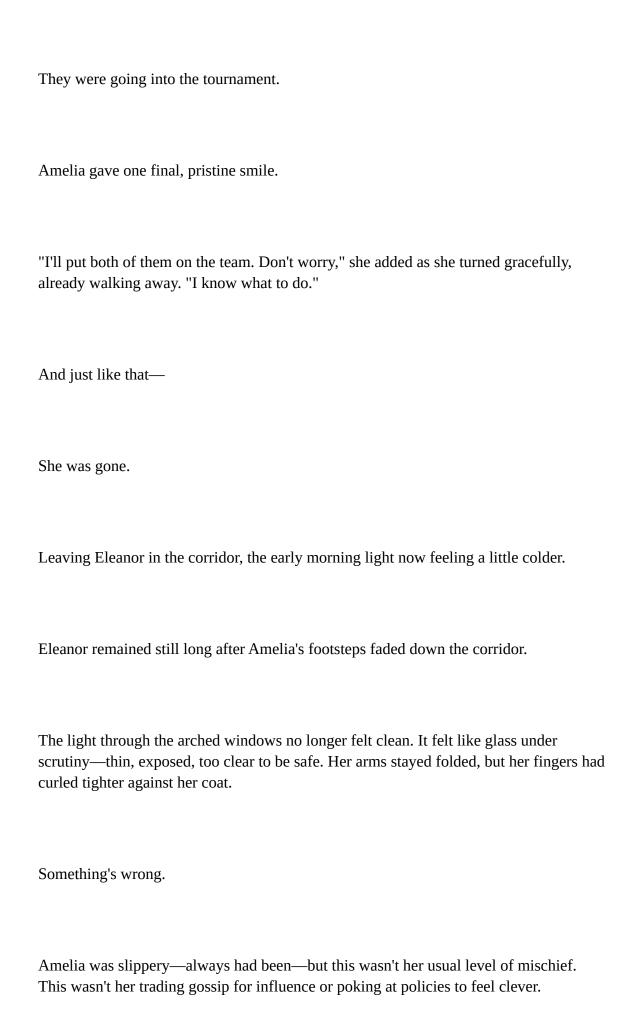
Eleanor's gaze sharpened. "What about the rest?"
"The parts that aren't developmental. The foundational tech. Full reinforcement matrixes. Psion tracking rings. The manual resonance trainers. None of those are prototype models."
A pause.
"You used standard-grade training infrastructure. Quietly acquired."
"I did."
Amelia's smile widened just slightly.
"Which means the center wasn't just a test bed, Eleanor. It was a choice. You built it with intent."
Another pause. One heartbeat longer.
And then, Eleanor's voice cut through the space like a clean blade.
"And what are you coming at, Vice Headmaster?" she asked calmly. "Spit it out."



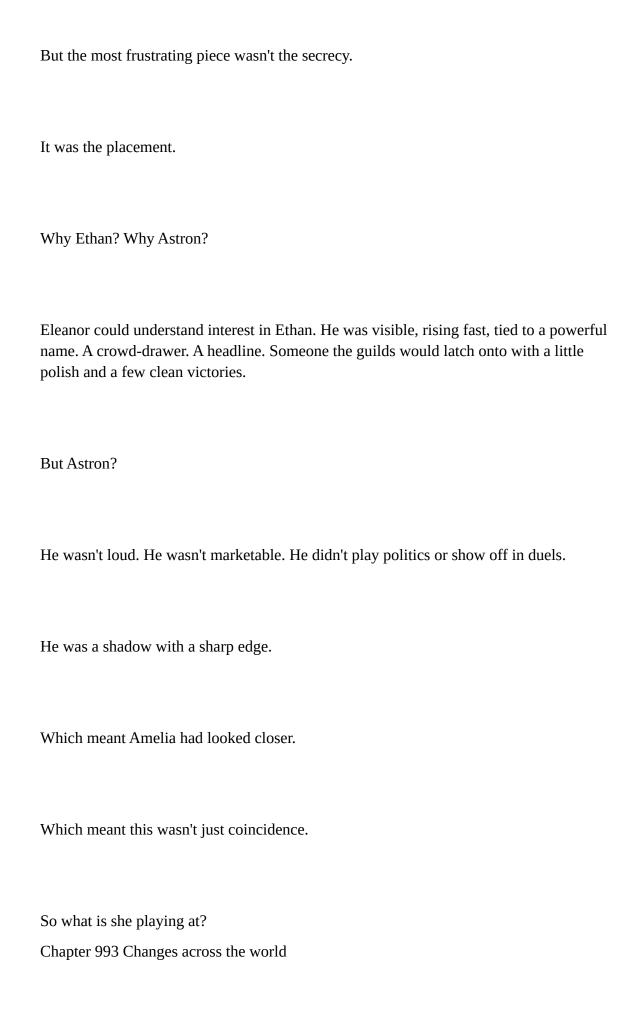




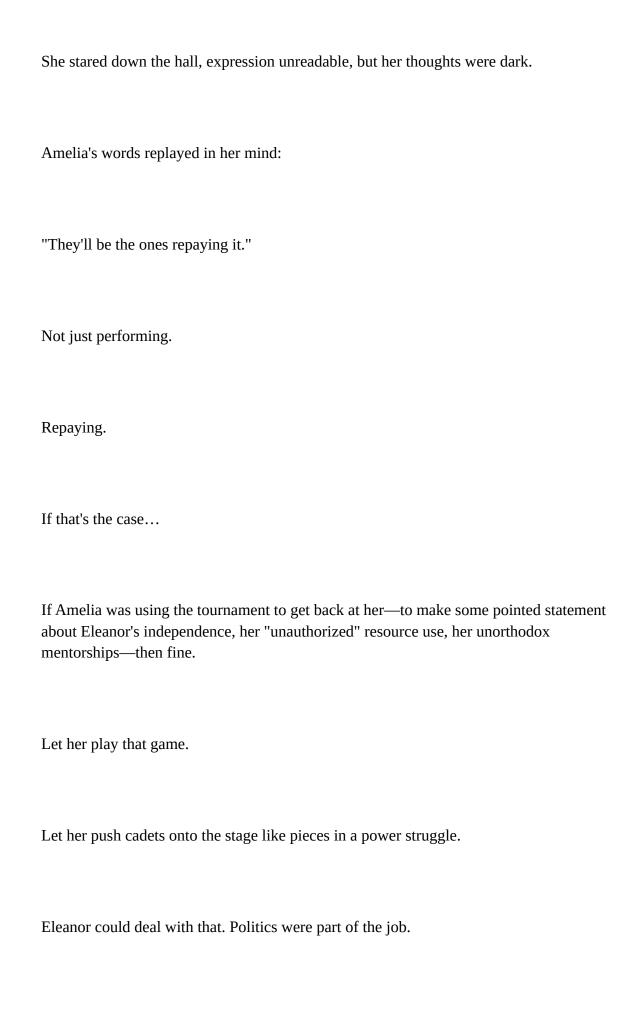




This was precision.
How had she gotten that information?
No official notices had gone out. No circulars, no private communiqués, no flagged developments in the Association's agenda. And Eleanor had connections. Deep ones.
If the Hunter Association was planning an Inter-Academy Tournament, it should have hit her radar first.
But it hadn't.
And somehow, Amelia knew.
Is the Headmaster aware?
That was the next problem. If Jonathan knew and hadn't said anything then things were worse than she thought. Either he was keeping secrets now—or Amelia was playing her own game behind his back.
Both options were equally concerning.

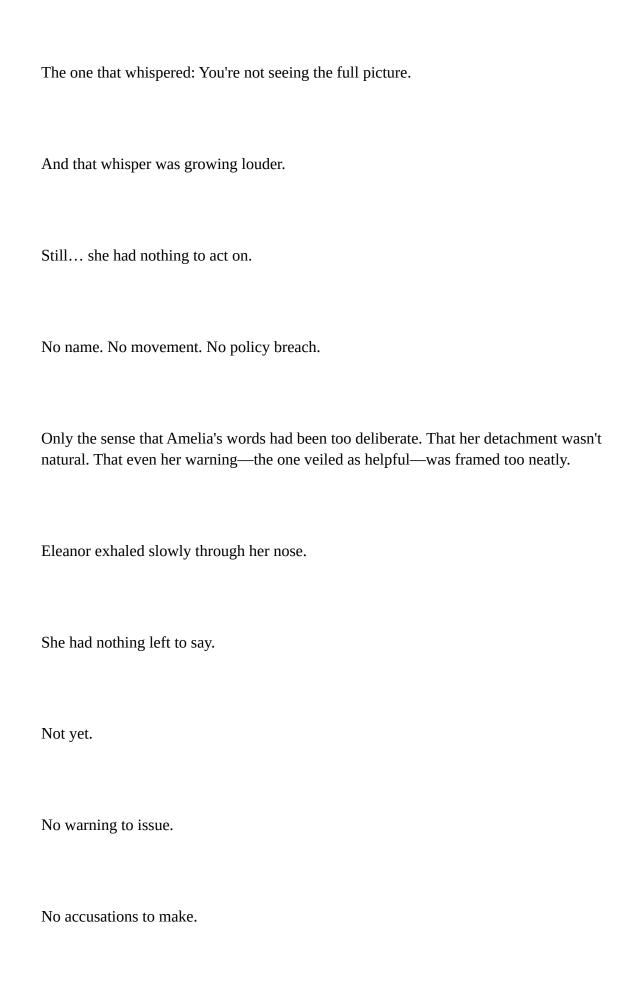


So what is she playing at?
Is she trying to showcase the academy's talents to the world? Use Astron and Ethan as proof that their training philosophy works? That they're producing Hunters stronger and faster than the other academies?
If that was the case
It made sense.
Eleanor exhaled sharply, her boots shifting quietly against the stone floor.
But why not just say that?
Why hide it? Why tiptoe around something so obvious?
Unless
Unless the tournament wasn't just about showcasing.
Unless someone wanted to claim talent before the Federation even realized what it had.



But
Something didn't sit right.
It wasn't just the maneuvering. It wasn't just the veiled condescension, or even the smugness that clung to Amelia's every word.
It was something else.
Something quieter.
Something that Eleanor couldn't quite name—but felt.
A weight beneath the surface. A pull that hadn't been there before.
She narrowed her eyes.
There's more to it.
She could feel it like a splinter caught beneath skin—not painful, but present. Irritating. Familiar.

Maybe I'm overthinking it
The thought slipped through Eleanor's mind like fog through iron bars—distant, unwelcome, but not entirely dismissible.
Maybe this really was just Amelia being Amelia.
Petty. Political. Strategic in the way only someone who had grown up behind closed doors and polished halls could be—dripping courtesy while masking ambition.
And yet
Eleanor's jaw tensed.
With my identity
With her rank, her record, her title as the Invoker, she had long learned to trust what others dismissed.
Instinct.
Not the fleeting gut feelings born from stress or paranoia—but that cold, slow-clenching intuition that had saved her more times than mana shields or contingency spells ever had.



Just that familiar, coiled silence she wore when the battlefield was still fogged and the enemy hadn't revealed their front line.
She turned without another word, coat brushing behind her as her steps echoed down the corridor—measured, unwavering.
If this is the start of something
Then she would be ready when it moved.
And so, she walked—back toward her wing, toward her office, toward her cadets.
Whatever was coming—
She'd meet it head-on.
*****
The wind cut sideways across the open field, sharp as knives.
Heavy boots sank into the soggy earth, each step squelching with reluctant weight. A line of five figures trudged forward under the burden of layered packs, detector pylons,

 $mana\ calibration\ rigs,\ and\ shielded\ boxes\ clamped\ to\ their\ backs\ like\ metallic\ tumors.$ 

Every movement	clinked or	clanged o	or thudded,	as if the	equipment	itself reser	nted be	eing
out here.								

Overhead, the sky was a stretched canvas of black, thick with low clouds that reflected none of the city's distant glow. Not a single star. Just dark and darker, made worse by the occasional flicker of static blue from the long-range detection rods strapped to their harnesses.

"Gods," muttered one of them, a tall man carrying a rig nearly half his height. "If we're gonna be forced out here in the middle of nowhere, the Association could at least spring for better lights."

Another voice—lighter, more annoyed than tired—grumbled back from behind. "You said that last time, Ryn. And the time before that. Pretty sure the lights are fine. The company just knows we're expendable."

"Oh, please." Ryn twisted his head to glance over his shoulder. "If we were expendable, they wouldn't have strapped fifty thousand credits of magi-tech to our backs."

"That's why we're expendable," the voice returned, dry. "The gear costs more than we do."

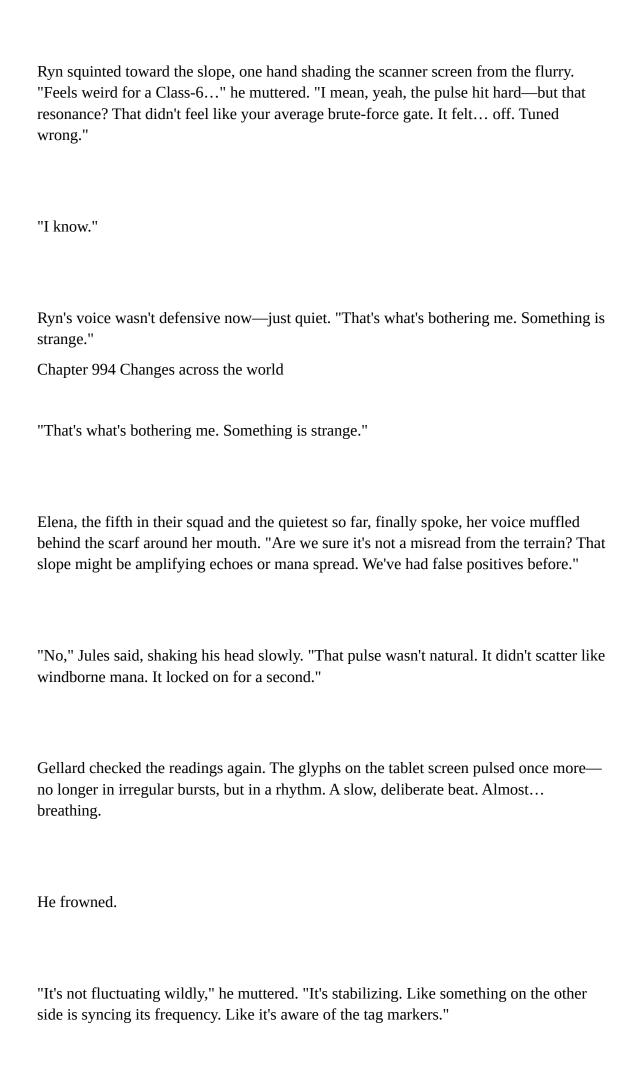
"Can both of you shut up?" A third one spoke up—older, with a clipped tone that suggested he'd already filed this night under "complete waste of time." "Focus your scans. If this is a false flag again, I want it logged, tagged, and buried before sunrise."

"Sure, boss," Ryn muttered, shifting the weight of the relay pole against his shoulder. "Just love getting frostbite for theoretical signatures."

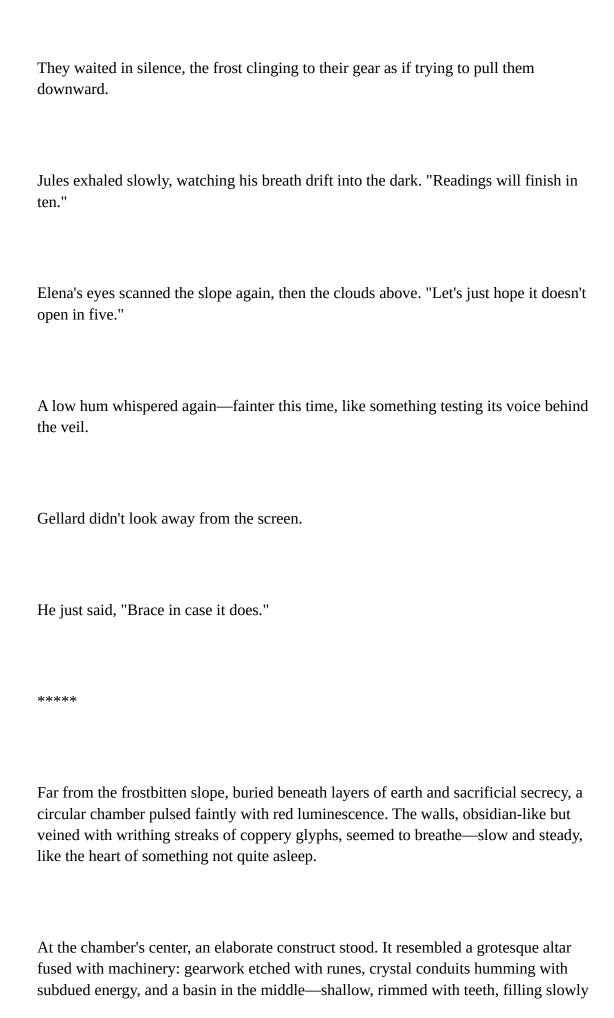
The team pressed onward through the field, the grass flattened into patches of half-frozen mud beneath their boots. The valley ahead dipped just slightly, enough to collect mist—and the mana readings were always worse in mist. Not dangerous, not yet. But it made the sensors twitchy. Unreliable. Like trying to hear whispers underwater.
A faint hum came from the detector box on Jules's side—then spiked.
"Hold up," he said, stopping just before the slope. He raised a hand and waited for the others to cluster in. "Readings just doubled."
A moment passed. Then another. More lights blinked to life—soft blue, concentric rings expanding on the glass surface of the scanner.
"Mana fluctuation localized," the technician muttered, tapping in a set of glyphs. "Looks like a distortion signature. Type three. Maybe a residual imprint from a scout-class gate. Could be forming."
"Could be," Ryn echoed, rubbing his arms as a gust of cold air licked through the valley. "Could also be leftover static from that Class-E two weeks ago. Don't gates leave a mana scent or something? Like cosmic farts?"
Jules stared at him. "I hate that you're technically not wrong."
"Hey, I'm insightful."
"You're an idiot."











with blood that trickled from four equidistant spouts. Each spout extended from a bound body slumped above, barely alive, twitching as the siphon continued.

Around the construct sat five figures in silence. Hooded and unmoving, they wore robes of differing origin and cut—some stitched from stitched leathers, others wrapped in veils of woven shadow. Only their hands showed: blackened at the fingertips, nails overgrown and marked with occult seals.

A voice cracked the stillness—not spoken aloud, but pressed directly into the minds of those present.

"...ტე[O3....<del>გ</del>খՐტ..."

It was not language. Not in the human sense. The syllables were jagged, wrong—each one resonating deep in the spinal cord, like splinters against thought.

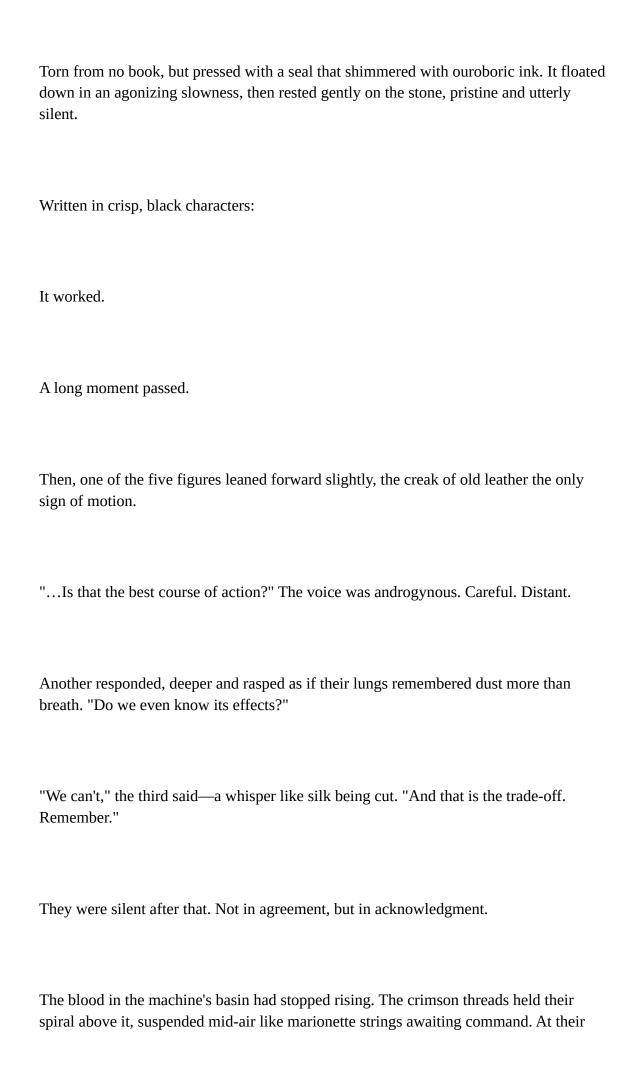
The construct responded.

The blood in the basin began to rise, not with volume, but with pressure—levitating in long, glistening threads that twisted upward like red silk unraveling in reverse. At the apex of the arc, just above the machine, the threads converged into a spinning sphere. It trembled once.

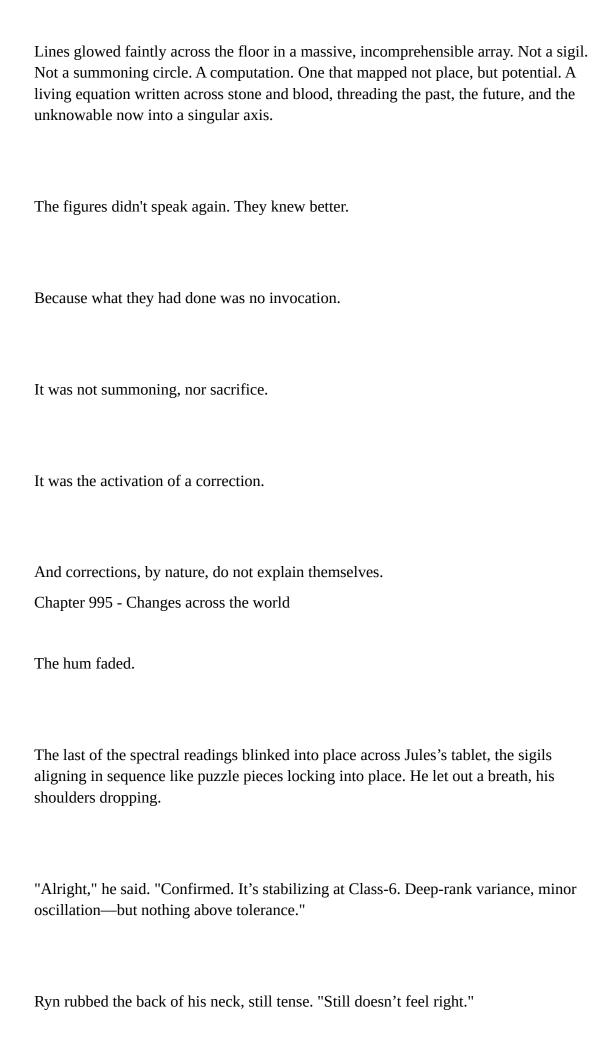
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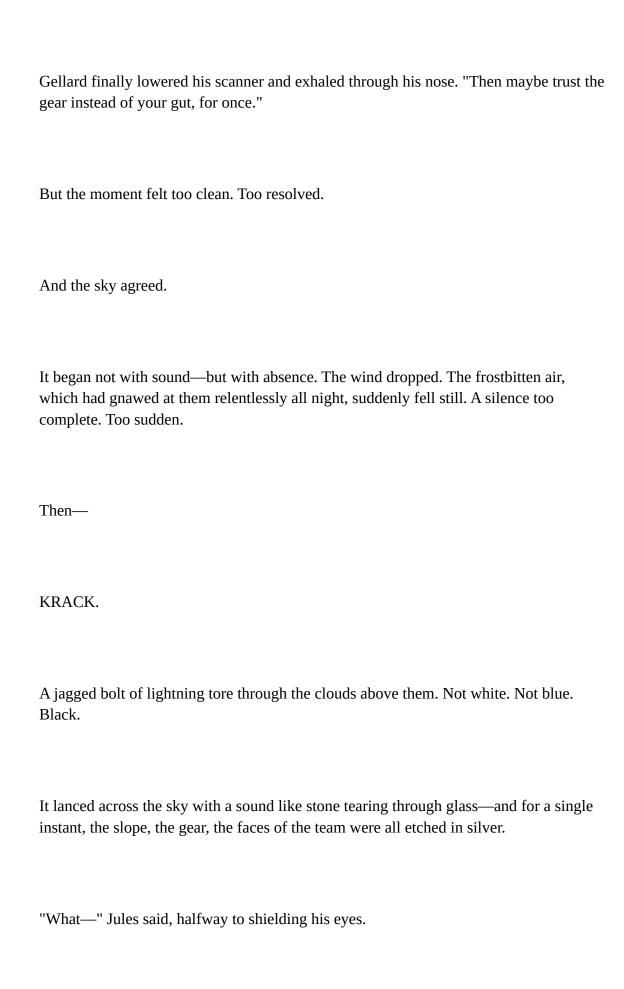
FWHOOOM.

Mana erupted.
Not in a blast, but a pulse—so refined, so thin, it slid between layers of air like a knife through silk. Unseen, but felt. It rose past stone and soil, coiling upward like smoke with a memory. It pierced the crust, the clouds, the veil of the upper sky—and vanished beyond sight.
The five figures did not move. But in their midst, a sixth seat sat empty, facing the machine.
A shimmer cut through the still air—subtle at first, like a disturbance in temperature, a rising ripple above unseen fire. It emanated from the empty sixth seat.
Then came the sound. A wizzle—no, not quite sound, not quite silence. A frequency that bypassed hearing entirely and whispered straight into the spinal cord. Cold. Familiar. Ancient.
The empty seat distorted.
Faint outlines curled inward, like fabric drawn back against a wind that wasn't there. Space folded—not sharply, but as if gravity itself held its breath. From the center of that vacant place, something began to form. Not flesh, not shadow. A presence.
And with it, a single object materialized in the air just above the seat. A page.



center, the orb spun slowly—now with golden filaments threaded through the red. Filaments that didn't glow, but seemed to pull light into them. As if refracting time itself.
Faint motes began to drift off its surface—tiny specks shaped like fragmented letters from forgotten alphabets, vanishing as soon as they took form.
One of the robed figures finally spoke again. This one wore bone pendants across their chest, each carved with a sigil older than any nation.
"This was the last one," they murmured. "The final Core. Once given, there is no reversal. The equation runs."
"The machine has its own law," the first voice added. "We only define its boundary condition. The rest"
"Belongs to the world now," finished another.
Above the orb, something cracked.
A single hairline fracture opened in space, no larger than a grain of sand—but filled with color no eye could fully see. The crack pulsed once, then faded, as though it were never there.
Below it, the machine's base shifted.

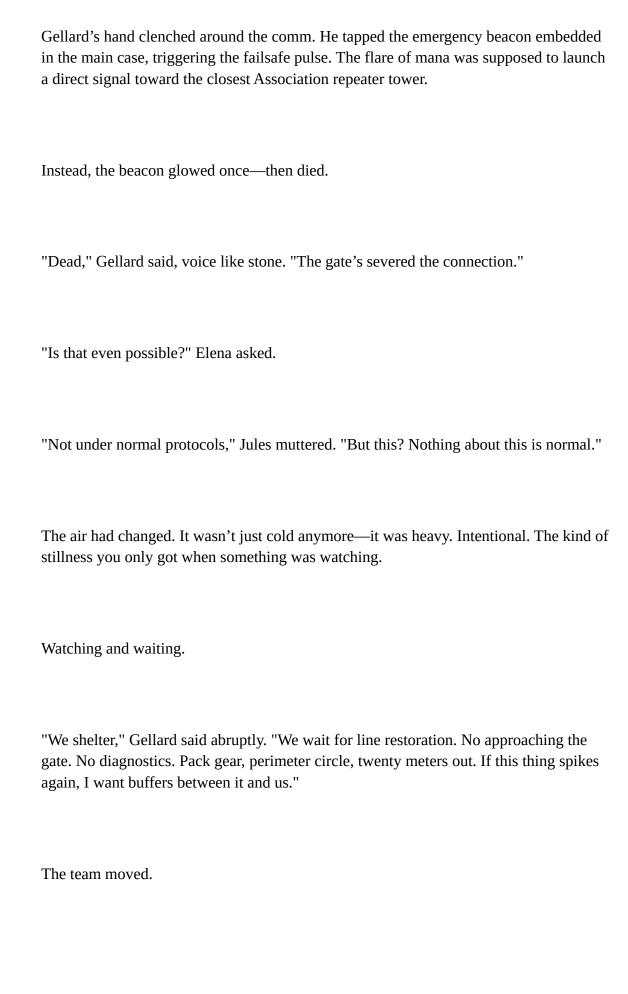


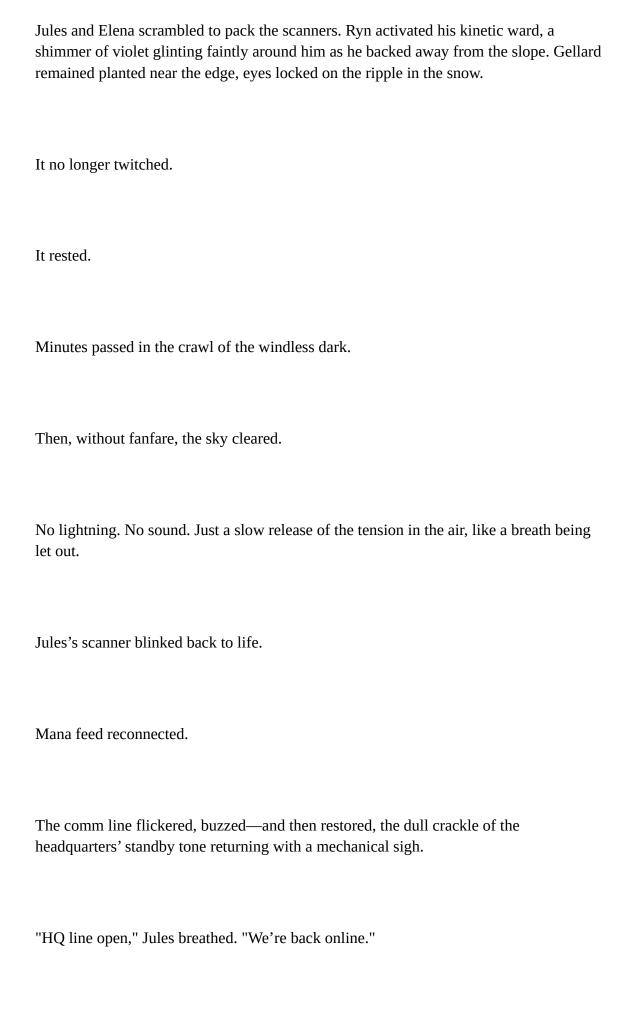


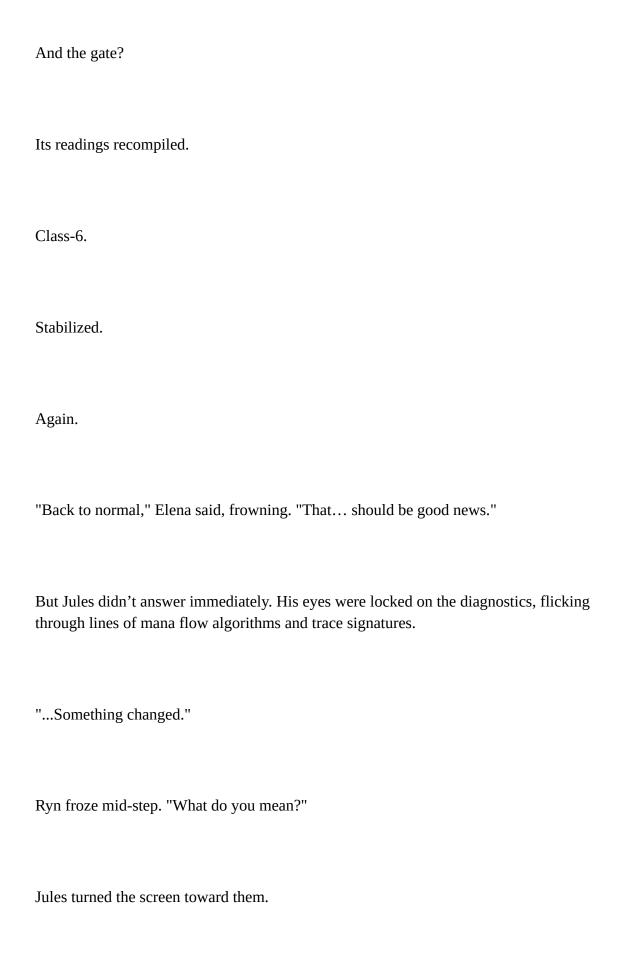
And then the scanner screamed.
The runes across the stakes flared red. Not yellow. Not warning. Critical.
"Wait, what?" Jules stepped back instinctively, looking down at his screen. "No, no, that's not—"
The numbers began to drop.
From Class-6, it blinked once.
Class-5.
Then again.
Class-4.
The resonance curve buckled in real-time. The pulses inverted, the energy stream folding in on itself like it was being compressed—like something inside was trying to hide.
"Is it collapsing?" Elena asked sharply, voice high and tight behind her scarf.



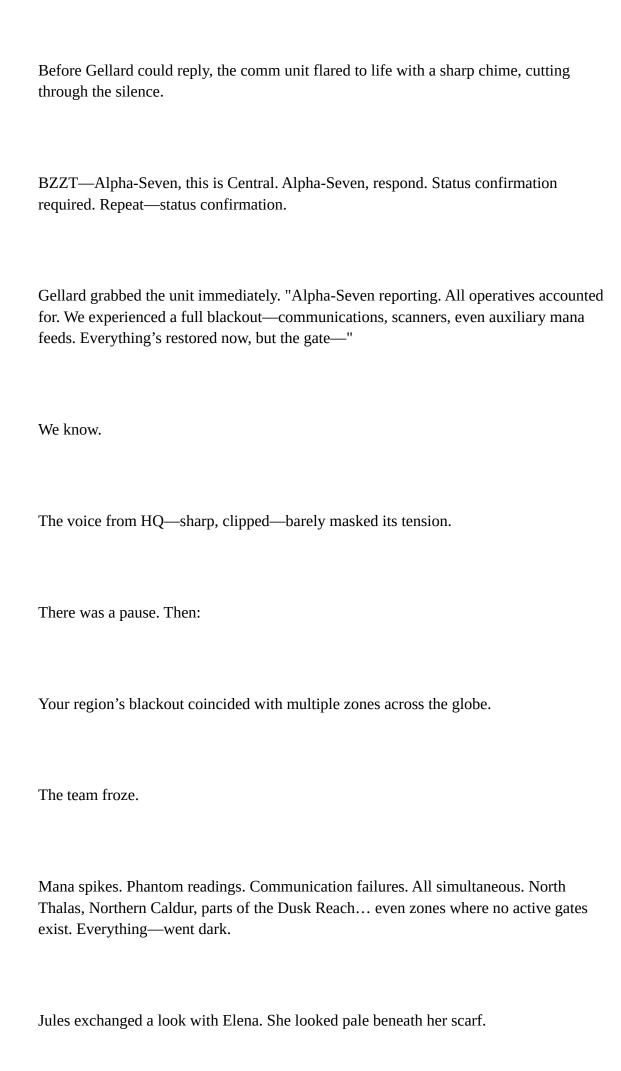


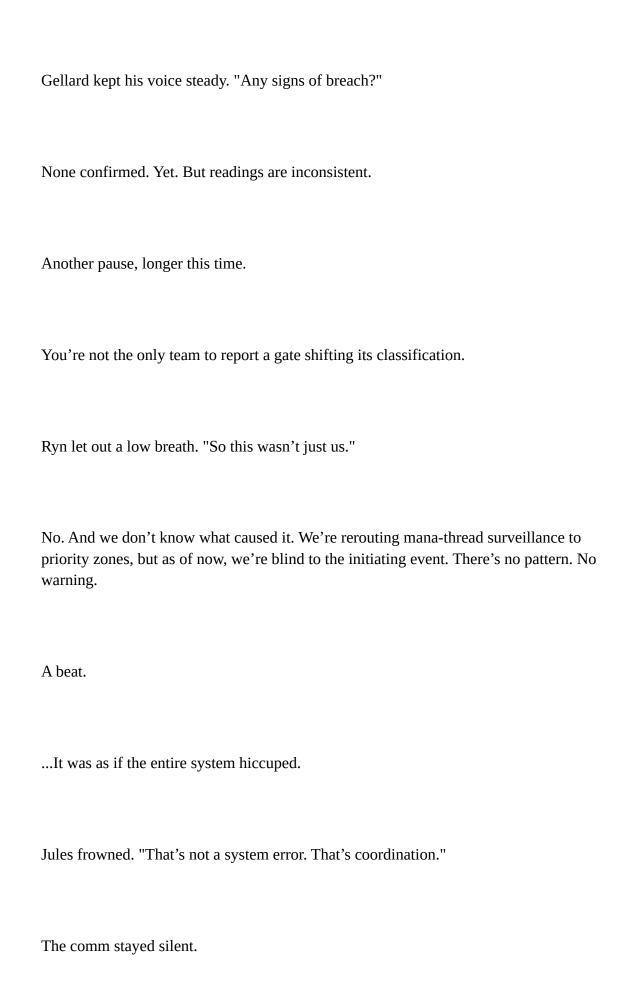














As if it heard.

Chapter 996 - Changes across the world

The war-room of Blackridge Dominion was carved directly into the jagged cliff-face overlooking the glacial coast of Kesserreach. It was all dark steel and frost-laced stone, its walls enchanted to resist both magic and age. Faint blue light glowed from mana filaments coiled into the ceiling, casting long shadows over the obsidian war-table below. Upon it, a territorial map of the continent flickered softly—runes shifting, borders glowing where tensions burned hottest.

Guildmaster Varent Illowen stood at the head of the room, arms folded behind his back, his breath a steady stream in the chill air. He was a tall man, silver-haired but far from old, his bearing more akin to a blade kept sharp through necessity. His eyes, pale and near colorless, scanned the map with the same glacial patience he was infamous for.

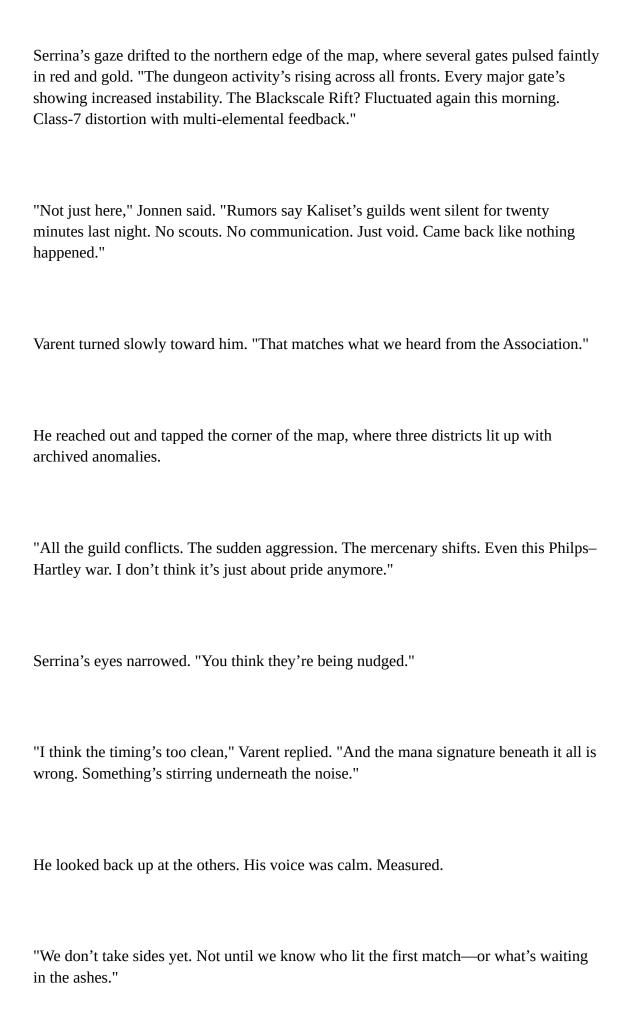
"Philps and Hartley," he said at last. "Their conflict's escalated again."

Across from him stood Serrina Vol, Blackridge's Ice-Domain Guildmaster—a woman wrapped in layered midnight leathers and fur-lined silver plating, her presence as sharp as the cold she commanded. Her braid hung over one shoulder like a coiled serpent. She leaned over the table, one finger tracing a glowing line between two strongholds on the western quadrant.

"The border skirmishes near Leorne Ridge weren't minor." Her voice was low, clipped. "Philps' enforcers crossed into sanctioned resource territory. Hartley retaliated. Two squads dead. The arbitration committee is pretending it didn't happen."

Varent's jaw tensed. "Because Hartley holds the majority in the northern resource courts. If they call it 'miscommunication,' it becomes one."

"And Philps will escalate," said Jonnen Cask, one of their senior hunters—thick-set, axe-wielding, and too experienced to be optimistic. "That bastard's never taken a hit without swinging twice back."
A murmur of agreement circled the chamber. Several hunters from Blackridge's active combat wings stood around the room, armor dusted with frost from recent excursions, watching the projections shift across the table.
"They want us to choose," Serrina said. "Both sides have sent 'neutral courtesy' envoys."
"Courtesy," Varent echoed, dry. "With a list of what they'd expect in return, no doubt."
Jonnen snorted. "Philps offered us exclusive auction rights in Krenhold if we back them. Hartley's dangling Frostglass priority routes."
"We haven't taken a side," Serrina reminded. "And every day we don't, both think we're stalling to negotiate for more."
"And maybe we are," Varent said evenly. "But neutrality doesn't last forever. The only question is—who burns less when we tie ourselves to them."
The room quieted at that.



A soft chime echoed through the war-room—a tonal sequence reserved for high-priority transmissions.
Varent's head turned. The table's central panel flickered, shifting the continental map aside to make space for a new projection. An Association seal appeared briefly in gold, followed by a data feed that began to stream across the surface like cascading glyphs.
Directive: Assignment Confirmation
Gate Classification: Rank-6 (Stabilized)
Designation: Frostbound Slope (Sector NE-1129-KA)
Previous Recon Team: Association Field Recon Alpha-Seven
Regional Authority: Transferred to Blackridge Dominion by Executive Mandate
Action Required: Claim or Relinquish Custodial Rights within 30 minutes.
The room went quiet as the message played out, each word stamped with digital certainty.

"...They're giving it to us?" Jonnen asked, breaking the silence.

Serrina's eyes scanned the live feed. "That's the same sector where the anomaly pinged two hours ago. Recon Alpha-Seven that's Gellard's squad."
"They must've pulled," Varent murmured. "Or the Association wants fresh eyes on it—and doesn't trust their own."
He looked at the timer on the interface. Twenty-eight minutes left.
"Do we know what happened there?" Jonnen asked, frowning. "Any breach alerts?"
"None flagged. But the mana log's erratic," Serrina said, scrolling through the side- panel. "For a stabilized gate, it's too clean. No aftershock trails, no echo threads. Like the whole gate was reset."
"Or replaced," Varent said softly.
He stepped back from the table, eyes on the projection. A decision formed—swift, clean.
"We'll take it."
Serrina arched an eyebrow. "Even with the instability?"

"Especially because of it." His voice had shifted—no longer wary, but resolute. "If something is tampering with gates, we need to see it firsthand. And if the Association wants us on the inside, it means they're more desperate than they let on."

He flicked his wrist, and the table responded to his command. A lineup of Blackridge hunter teams appeared—rosters, roles, deployment histories.

"Team-3," he said.

Jonnen nodded. "They're fresh from the Dreadpine sweep. Still geared. Haven't rotated out yet."

"Good," Varent said. "Brief them in ten. I want full sensory rigging—long-range glyph scaffolds, elemental partition gear, and a scribe-link relay back to headquarters. If that gate twitches, we feel it."

The command finalized with a soft pulse through the war-table's surface. One by one, the indicators beside Team-3's roster lit up green.

Deployment Confirmed. En Route to Sector NE-1129-KA.

Estimated Arrival: 1 hour 13 minutes.

Primary Objective: Gate Assessment and Entry Protocol.

Status: ACTIVE.
Varent stepped away from the table, his long coat brushing the frost-rimed floor. "Keep a direct line open to their lead. No relays. I want real-time echo feedback from the moment they make visual contact."
Serrina gave a curt nod. "I'll monitor from the Diviner's Lens. If there's interference again, we'll know."
"Do we have the last fifteen seconds from Alpha-Seven before the blackout?" Jonnen asked.
"We do," Serrina answered. "It was scrambled by the signal loss, but the last thing Gellard logged before contact dropped was a gate reading rollback—Class-6 to Class-4—then restabilization. No breach. No spike. Just inversion."
"Like the gate flinched," Varent muttered.
Time passed. The war-room dimmed to standby as the team deployed. Tactical windows adjusted themselves for weather conditions and regional leyline flux. An hour later, a low chime buzzed again—shorter, sharper.
Incoming report.
Serrina stepped forward and opened the stream.

FIELD REPORT – Team-3 / Blackridge Dominion
Lead: Arlan Vechir
Timestamp: +1:14:37
Location: Frostbound Slope – Gate Perimeter
The scry-screen lit with Arlan's face, haloed by breath fog and blinking runes.
His expression was tight. Professional—but visibly on edge.
"Reporting from the slope. Gate is visible. Energy signature matches Association's readings: stabilized, Rank-6. Field distortion minimal. Ambient mana pressure is holding steady—too steady."
He shifted slightly in the frame. Behind him, the shimmer of the gate hovered above the snow—rippling like still water caught between dimensions.
"That's the problem," Arlan continued. "We've run three complete entry checks. Interface glyphs, resonance sync, etheric bridge—all standard. Gate refuses to open."

Varent leaned forward.

Arlan's voice sharpened. "No repelling force. No barrier. The entry layer is intact, but unresponsive. It's not denying us—it's ignoring us."

Static flared across the image briefly before stabilizing again. Behind Arlan, one of the team's glyph pylons sparked with a small mana discharge.

"We've deployed full sensory lattice. Echo threads come back clean—but shallow. Gate's rejecting tethering. It recognizes we're here. But it won't acknowledge us."

Chapter 997 Changes across the world

The war-room lights flickered as the transmission paused. The arcane relay stone on the side console pulsed once—amber light indicating a secondary override.

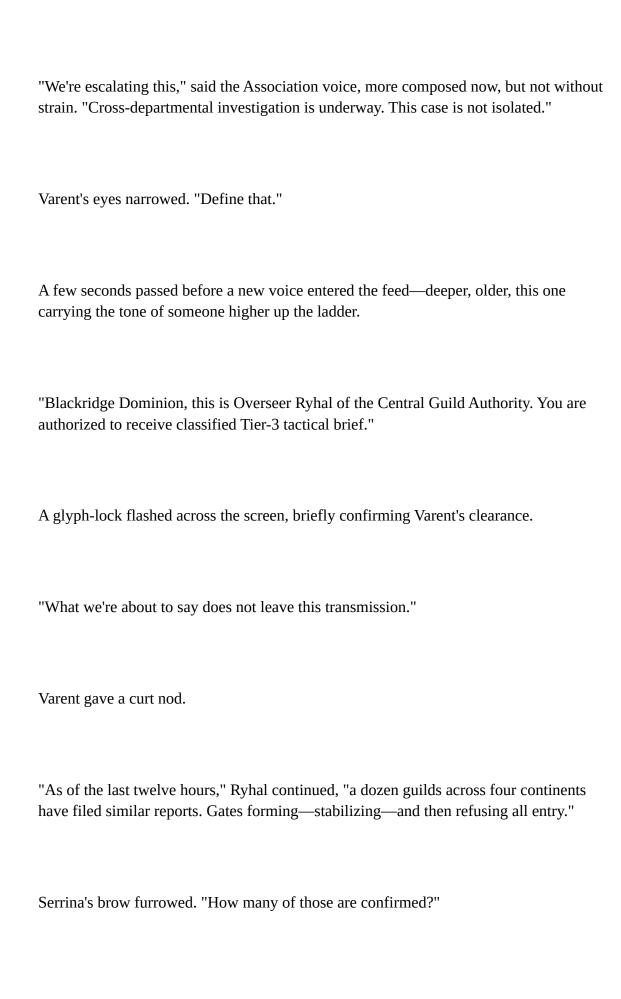
Another voice joined the channel—this time, not from Blackridge, but from Association Command Headquarters. Crisp. Formal. And laced with confusion barely masked beneath protocol.

Arlan's projection stabilized again. He nodded once, jaw set. "Affirmative. Gate integrity reads normal. Mana cohesion patterns are within standard tolerances. However —no ingress possible. No reactive signatures to approach, invocation, or direct interfacing. It's... inert."

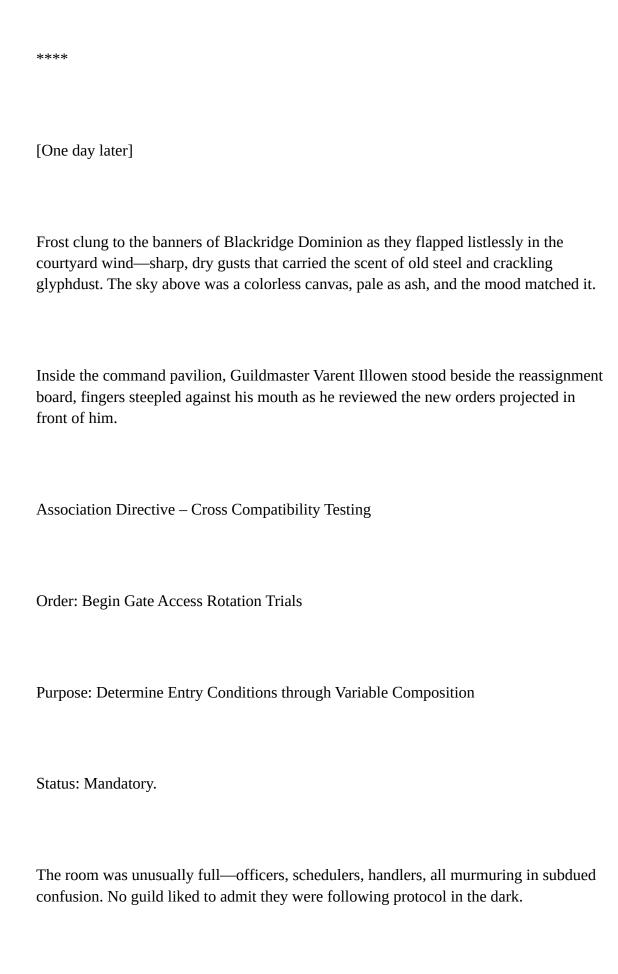
A pause.

Then: "That's not possible."

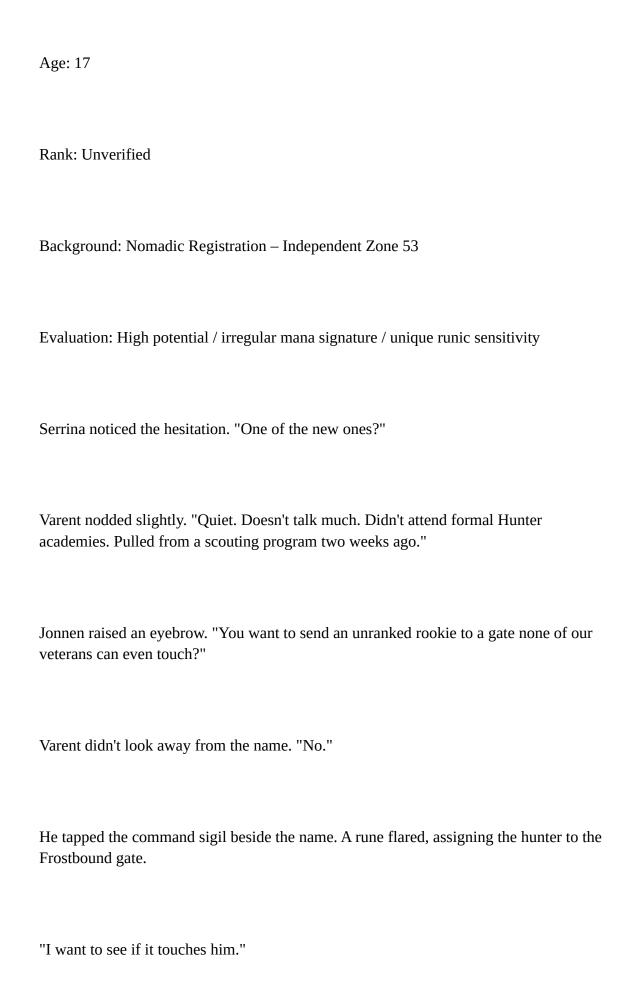
Serrina, still standing beside Varent, turned slightly toward the voice. "Apparently it is."
"The gate exists, its readings are active, it has an anchoring presence in both physical and mana space—but it does not open?"
"Correct," Arlan said. "It's not a shielding issue. There's no defensive glyphwork, no containment matrix. It's behaving like a complete construct, but—closed from the inside."
"Like it's waiting for a key," someone muttered faintly from the Association's side, likely not meant to be heard.
Varent's voice cut clean through the silence. "This isn't a technical anomaly. It's behavioral."
A sharp inhale from the other end. "There's no record of this ever happening. Not in thirty years of gate protocol. If a dungeon forms and stabilizes, it opens—or it destabilizes. This is neither."
"Exactly," Serrina said. "And if it's neither, then it's not following the fundamental laws we've established."
The flicker of the projection steadied again, casting pale light across the war-room's frost-etched walls. Silence followed Serrina's words, but it wasn't empty. It pressed—tightly wound, full of implication.
Then—



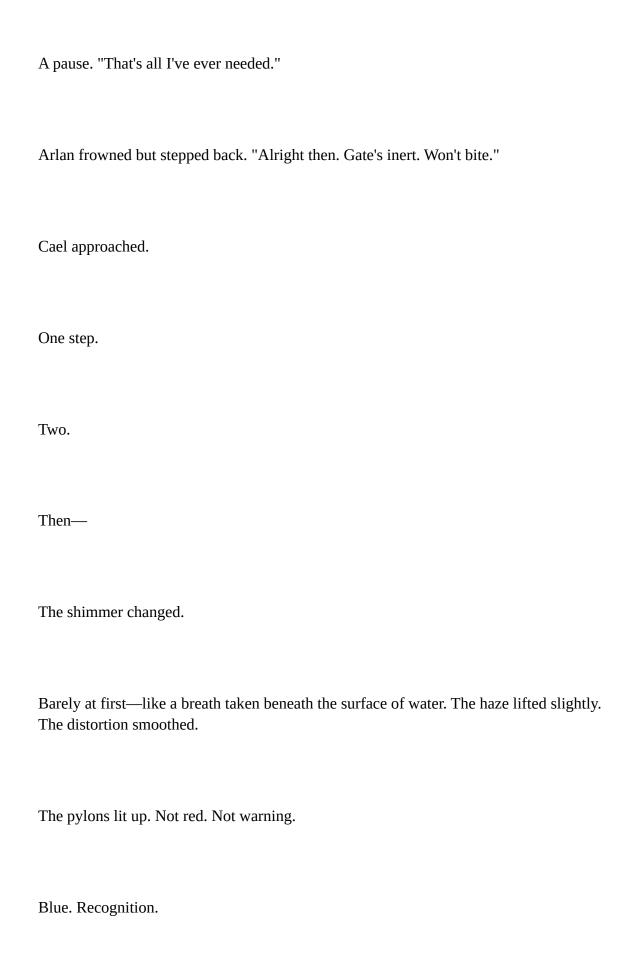


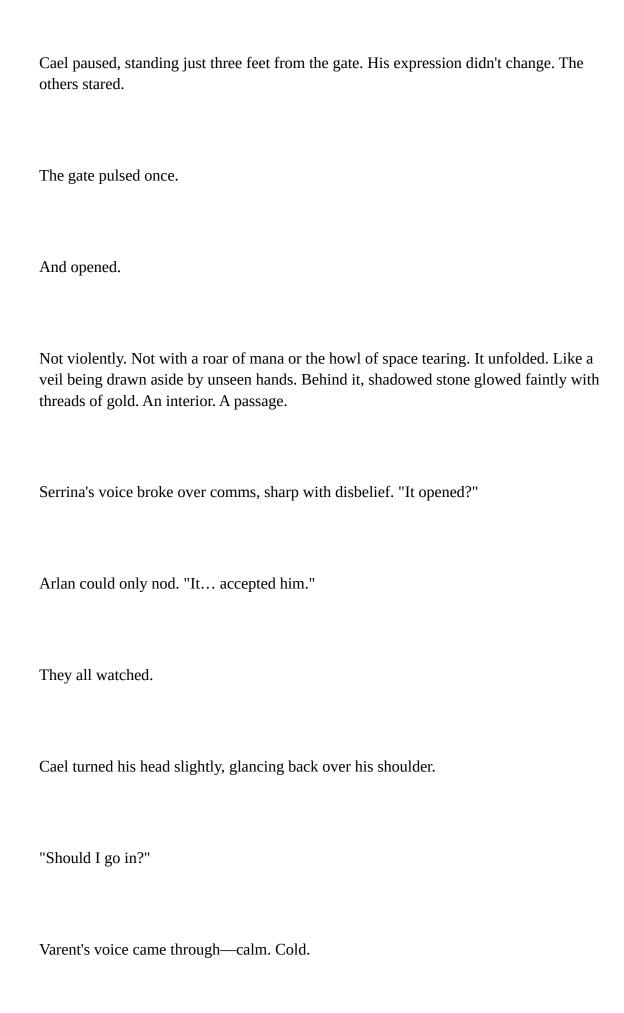


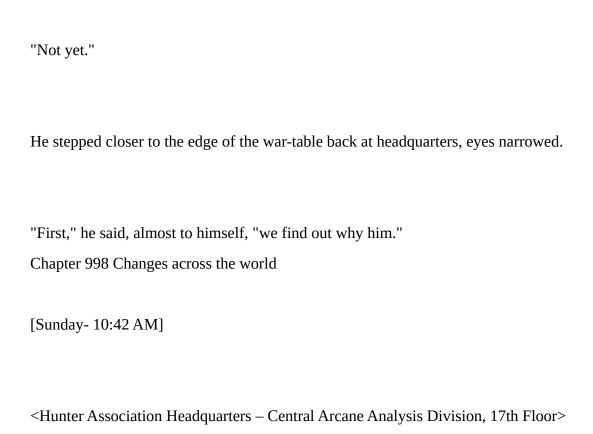
Serrina Vol leaned over Varent's shoulder, arms crossed. "They want us to reshuffle our gate teams. Again." Varent's gaze flicked across the roster. "Thirty years of standardization and they toss it out overnight. No composition rules, no mana tier restrictions... just throw different people at the gates until something sticks." "Like testing keys in a lock we didn't build," Jonnen said from his place by the wall, his axe strapped across his back. Serrina shook her head. "Desperate." "Necessary," Varent replied. He tapped the roster, pulling up Team-3's deployment record. "They've already cycled through three squad variations. No entry. The gate hasn't flared again since the shutdown, but it's still there. Quiet." "Then we start replacing," Serrina said. "Who do you want first?" Varent didn't answer immediately. His eyes scanned a secondary list—a new intake roster. Recent recruits, late transfers, and promising candidates acquired through interguild agreements. Fresh talent, largely untested. He stopped on one name. Name: Cael Adverin



And then, just forty minutes later
The snow was thinner now, worn down by the days of foot traffic and mana discharge. The gate still hung where it had been—just as silent, just as unyielding. Its shimmer was dull, like glass dipped in oil, distorting just faintly when looked at too long.
Team-3 stood back in a wide arc, watching from behind the rune-marked pylons.
Arlan Vechir crossed his arms. "Another rotation?"
The reply came over comms: "Single insertion. One hunter."
Arlan blinked. "What?"
A moment later, a figure was escorted forward—slim build, dark cloak, wide-eyed but calm. Cael Adverin. His eyes flicked to the gate with quiet interest—not fear, not awe. Just curiosity.
"You sure about this, kid?" Arlan asked, voice low.
Cael nodded once. "I was told to walk forward."
"That's it?"





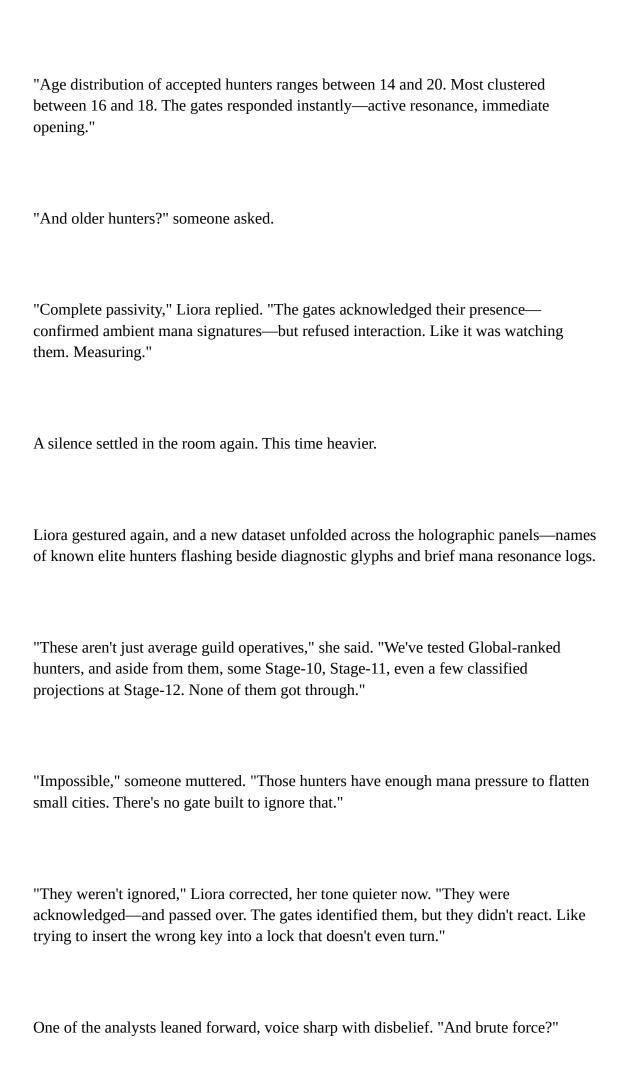


The conference chamber was buried in reinforced mana stone, shielded from outside interference and layered with tiered anti-surveillance wards. Not even sound dared echo in this room unless allowed. Screens floated in concentric rings around the central table, displaying raw data—rotating projections of dungeon gates, mana overlays, and hunter identification glyphs flickering in real-time.

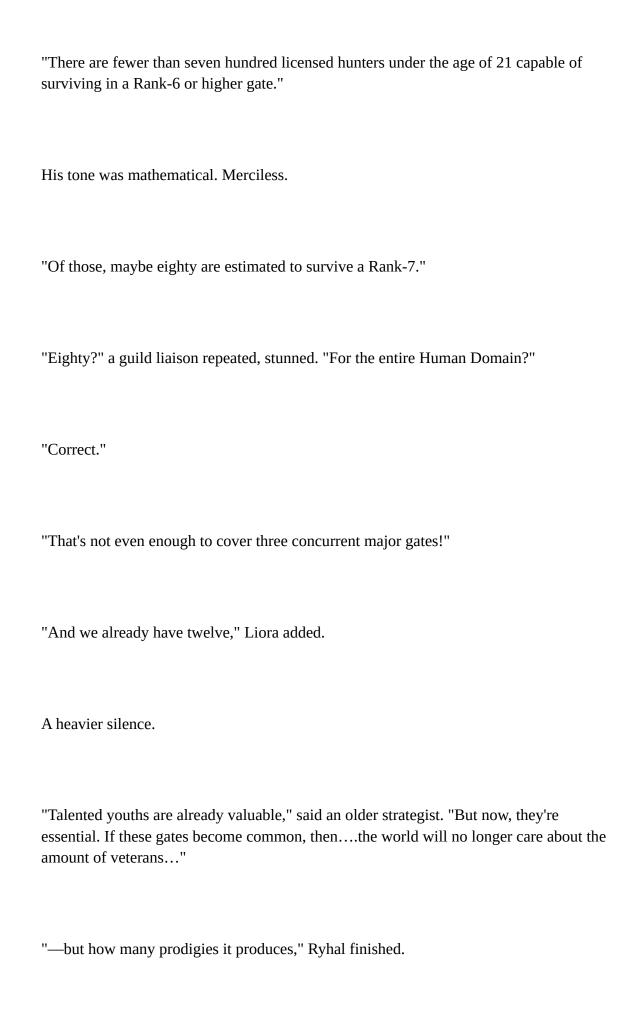
Seated at the table were some of the Association's most senior analysts, guild liaisons, and arcane theorists. Overseer Ryhal presided at the head, his fingers steepled under his chin, his expression sharp but unreadable.

"We've run the tests," said Liora Sen, chief of the Analysis Division. Her voice was crisp, steady from too many sleepless hours. "In twelve gates with reported rejection incidents, we've cycled through 117 hunter permutations—mixed mana ranks, elemental affinities, bloodline variations, combat scores, resonance strength, mental compatibility, even psychological profiles."

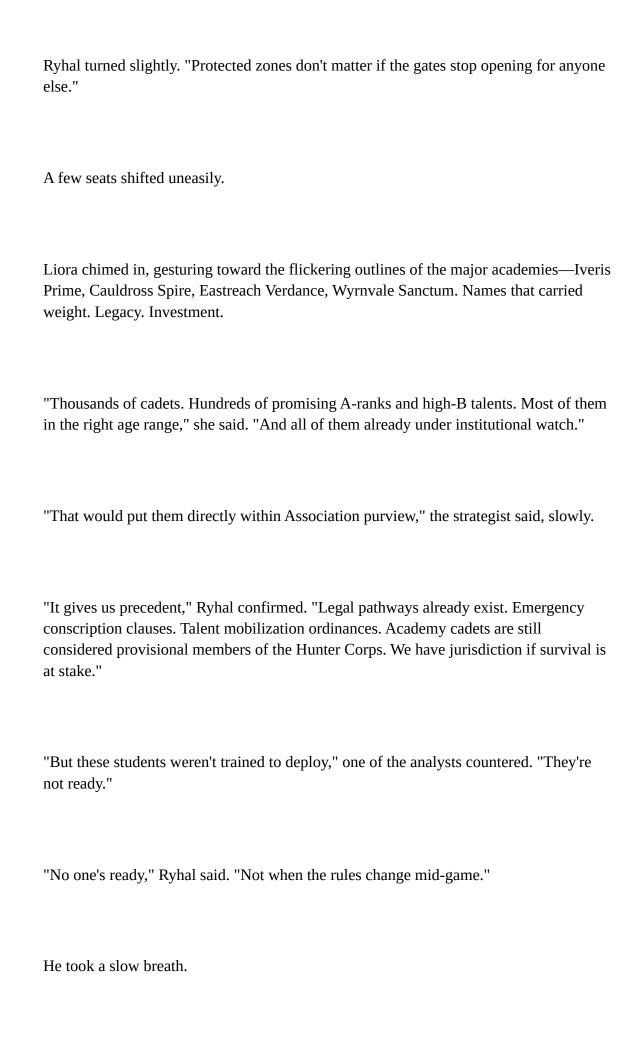
The projection behind her shifted, collating into stacked glyph tables and comparison arrays.
"No consistent traits surfaced across any of them," she continued. "Not mana type. Not level. Not physical condition. Gender, origin, guild, mana rank—none of it mattered."
One of the analysts, a younger man from the Etheric Calibration Unit, leaned forward. "So what did matter?"
Liora tapped the center console. The projection restructured. One column remained. A single variable left untouched by all others.
Age.
The room went still.
Ryhal's eyes narrowed slightly. "Explain."
Liora didn't hesitate. "Across all twelve test gates, the only successful entrants fell into a specific demographic bracket. No one over the age of 21 has entered any of these gates. Not once. No partial entries. No delayed resonance. Full rejection."
She flicked her fingers and the screen pulled up a rotating chart—gate IDs matched with corresponding successful entries.

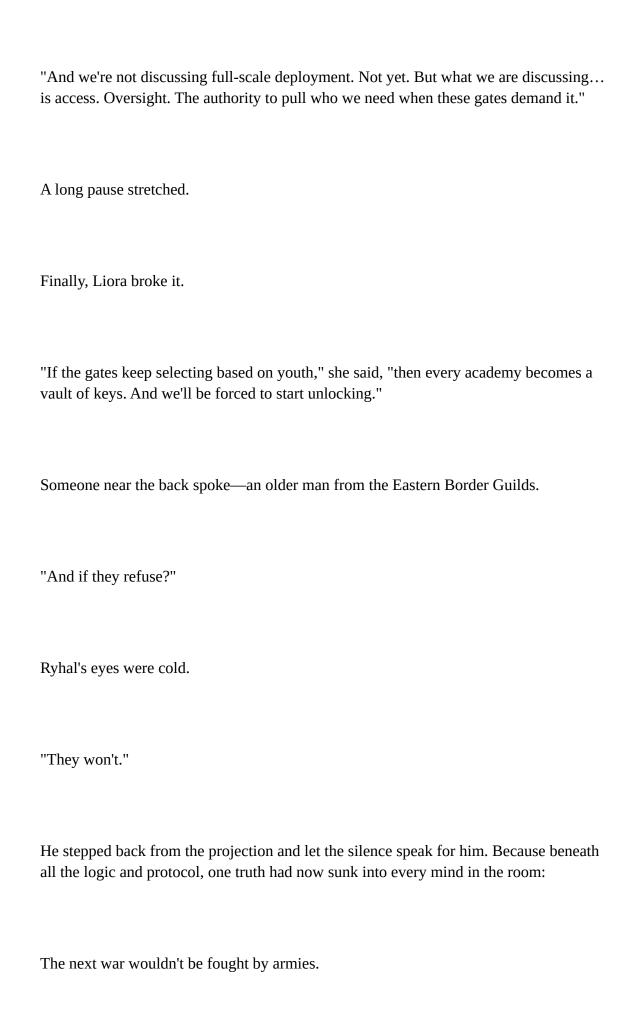


"We tried," she said grimly. "Multiple force applications. High-density spellwork. Dimensional rifts. A full-on mana rupture using a tier-9 incantation from the Rimeward Division. Nothing cracked the barrier."
A second screen flickered to life, displaying footage of a cloaked man surrounded by rings of layered sigils—Stage-11 Hunter Eiro Senak. The instant his strike collided with the gate's surface, it rebounded—gently. No distortion. No absorption. No retaliation.
"Like striking fog," someone whispered.
Ryhal didn't move.
"So we're left with one truth," he said, voice low but firm. "The gates only open for the young."
A quiet fell across the room once more, this one colder. He let it linger for a beat, then stepped toward the center console.
"If this is confirmed," Ryhal said, looking at the gathered minds of the Association, "then the shift this triggers will be cataclysmic."
Screens around him changed again—projecting hunter demographics, academy rosters, youth population graphs, and the global map peppered with red dots: gates that had shown inert behavior.



Murmurs began to rise—concerned, analytical, fearful.
The tension in the chamber thickened, like mana condensed into breathless stillness.
Ryhal's gaze swept the room once again, eyes narrowed not in emotion, but in calculation. He didn't need to speak the next part aloud—not yet—but everyone at the table could feel the implication settling on their shoulders like frost.
"There's only one nation in the Human Domain," Liora said quietly, voicing what the others were only now beginning to grasp. "One centralized infrastructure. One set of academies. One Association."
"And that makes it worse," Ryhal said. "No rival nations to bear the load. No alliances to split the burden. No fallback."
The lights dimmed slightly as the surrounding holograms updated—highlighting national districts, academy zones, youth population centers, and active guild jurisdictions. A web of responsibility wrapped around a single governing body.
"If these youth-gated dungeons become the norm," he continued, "then the entire weight of our survival rests on one thread: the cadets."
A strategist from the Defense Division folded his arms, frowning. "The academies are built for development, not frontline deployments. They're protected zones. Prioritized for growth, not exploitation."



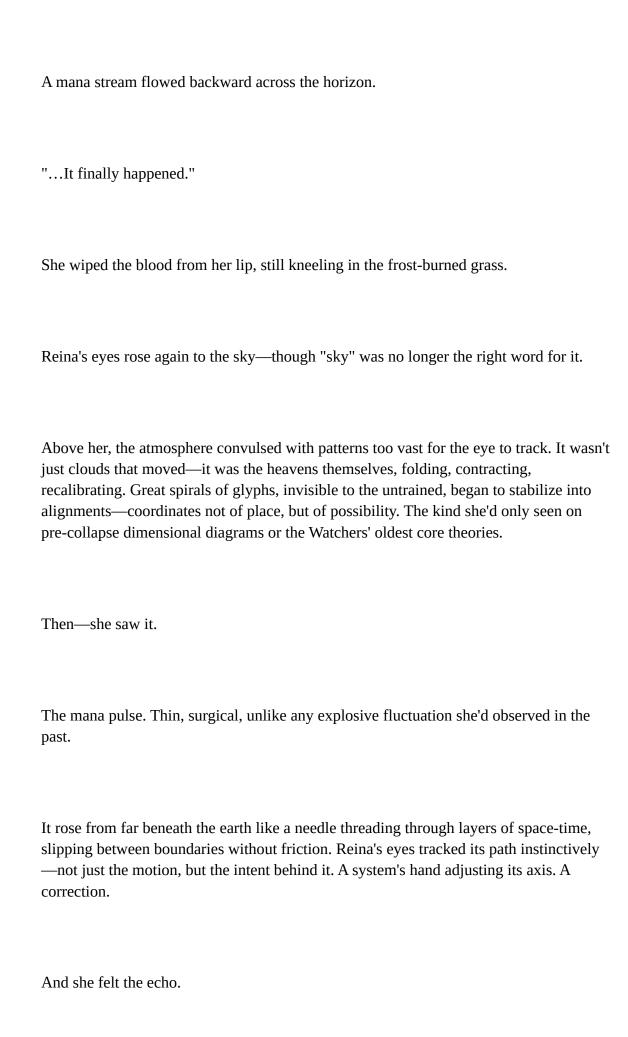


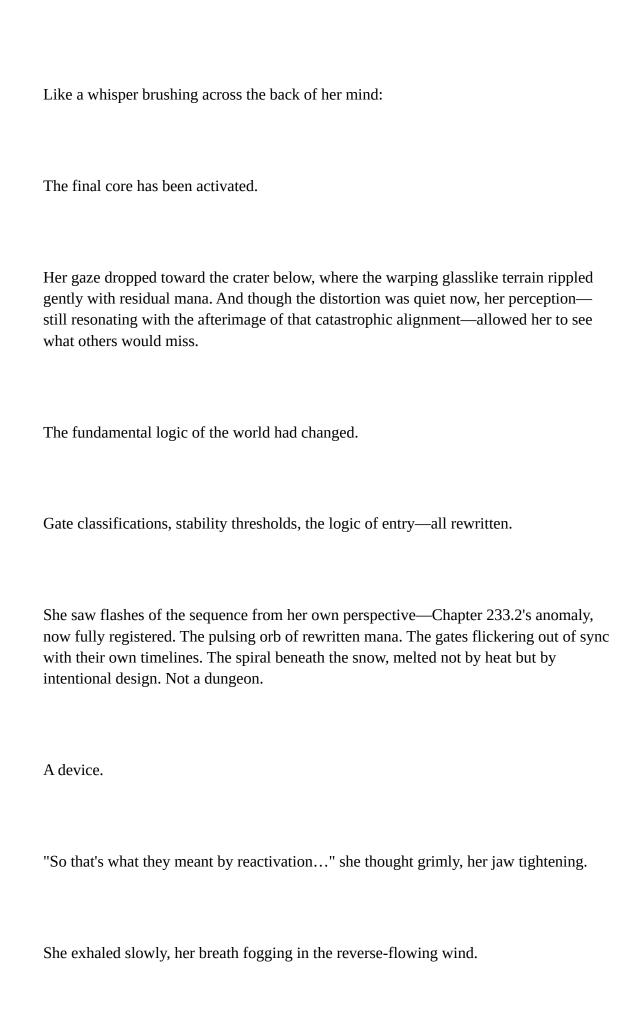
It would be fought by children.
And the Association had just been handed the legal, political, and moral ammunition to take them.
Chapter 999 After
The air crackled with tension, thin streams of mana flickering through the crags like lightning in slow motion. Reina stood atop a jagged outcrop overlooking the impact zone—what had once been a stable, Class-5 gate now dissolved into a warped, glassy crater seething with reversed polarity. The terrain no longer followed any known mana distribution. Snow melted upward. Shadows stretched in the wrong direction. Runes etched themselves into stone without being cast.
Reina's coat flared around her as the wind pulsed unnaturally—like breath exhaled by a sleeping god suddenly stirring.
Then it happened.
The sky fractured.
Not with sound—but with structure.
Lines formed where no lines should exist. Geometric impossibilities folded inward on themselves, equations rewriting in real-time. Across the sky, glyphs spiraled in a cascade too vast and too intricate to decipher—unless you had the eyes to see them.

And Reina did.

Her pupils dilated violently as her trait triggered.
The transformation was immediate.
Her irises fractured into mirrored spirals, layered with sigils, flowing characters, and recursive patterns that scrolled faster than light. Each second stretched into eternity as her vision was hijacked—force-fed an impossible stream of arcane information.
Time.
Coordinates.
Dimensional overlap.
Core variance values from over a dozen closed loops in known dungeons.
She staggered, teeth clenched, hand flying to her temple as the pressure lanced through her skull like molten wire.
"Aaaarghk—!"

The scream was torn from her lungs as her knees hit the stone, her other hand clawing the ground. Mana bled from her fingertips in wild, uncontrolled pulses.
And then—silence.
The information stream cut.
Her eyes dulled slightly, the spirals slowing their rotation before fading back into layered complexity. Her breathing came in short, shuddering waves. A trickle of blood dripped from her nose.
But she was calm now.
Panting.
Sweating.
But calm.
Her voice was quiet, hoarse, but clear.
"So," she whispered, staring at the warped sky as the clouds rearranged themselves into impossible formations.





A pivotal moment.
She knew this would come eventually—the Watchers of Arcane had been preparing for it for decades. Not publicly. Not even in meetings. But in the shadows, beneath layers of deniable logistics and impossible funding. Projects. Cadet hunts. Quiet adoptions. Forced awakenings.
And why?
Because he had reminded them.
The man who once walked among the highest council rooms and left behind more unanswered questions than orders. The one who had vanished with a knowing smile and a cryptic warning of a future that couldn't be prevented—only prepared for.
"You'll need them," he had said. "When the system tries to correct itself."
Reina let the words echo in her head as she stood slowly, wiping the blood from her lip with the back of her gloved hand. Her gaze remained distant, locked onto that sky—a sky now rewritten, re-scripted.
Then, softly, she murmured.
"I guess your little vacation is over."

Her voice barely rose above the wind, but the sentiment settled like frost across her chest.
That serious young man. The one who never smiled unless it was for precision. The one who internalized everything—questions, doubts, brilliance. The one she had trained personally, not because protocol demanded it, but because her instincts had.
Astron.
'Your talents are going to be needed now.'
***
The midday sun hung low in the sky, casting long rays over the smooth stone roadways that stretched from Arcadia's outer gate to the Academy's western reception hall. Spring wind stirred faintly across the fielded pathways, catching banners that bore the sigils of arriving guilds—tigers, owls, flames, swords—all symbols of strength and ambition.
Among the arriving scouts, a new name walked with measured steps.
Leonard Gracewind.
His guild's insignia—a golden sun partially veiled by rays crossing a horizon—was stitched crisply onto the shoulder of his cloak. The badge of the Solstice Dawn, a reputable recruitment and heritage-tracing guild operating across the eastern Federation

A perfectly legitimate front.
Solstice Dawn was known for its spiritual heritage work, specializing in the identification of latent bloodlines, forgotten rites, and young hunters marked by extraordinary potential. Their agents were discreet, tactful, and widely regarded as arbiters of prophetic awakenings and lineage convergence.
Leonard's fabricated persona had been built brick by brick into that image—backed by templar clearance, temple-sanctioned credentials, and appearances in several outposts across the Human Domain.
Everything was ready.
He walked past the gate checkpoint with ease.
The guards, already briefed on the expected arrivals, simply nodded.
"Solstice Dawn, correct? Talent recruitment. Papers check out."
Leonard offered a polite, disarming smile. "That's right. I'm hoping your academy lives up to its reputation."
The guard gave a stiff grin, waving him through. "You and the rest. Good luck finding anyone not already claimed."

Leonard's smile didn't falter. But in his chest, the artifact pulsed—quietly. Faintly. A heartbeat muffled under layers of stone and noise.
Still here.
He stepped into the campus proper.
And for a moment, he paused—not to gawk, not to admire—but to orient. Tall towers rose like monuments to knowledge and pride. Training fields sprawled beyond the courtyards, their wards humming with subtle restraint. Dozens of students moved across the grounds—some in uniform, others mid-spar, some just laughing beneath shaded awnings.
It was all so open.
So peaceful.
And yet, he knew better.
Behind the casual chatter and rehearsed routines, something else stirred. Fate. Omen. Prophecy.
"You're here somewhere." His thoughts sharpened. "And this time, I won't need walls or secondhand files. I'll watch you myself."



Inside, the lights dimmed automatically, and a large circular table lit up with the glow of rune-cast holographic projections. One by one, figures flickered into existence—translucent but sharp, each surrounded by a corona of arcane identification glyphs.

Headmaster Jonathan adjusted the cuffs of his coat, his every movement deliberate, controlled. He took his seat at the single empty chair—the last to arrive—and the meeting began immediately.

Overseer Ryhal's projection hovered at the head of the array, his sharp gaze sweeping the gathered figures: representatives from the Hunter Association, strategic divisions from the Federation Defense Ministry, and a handful of guild envoys observing in silent participation.

"Headmaster Jonathan," Ryhal began, his voice clipped, precise, cutting through the stale air. "We will proceed without delay. You have received the preliminary briefing?"

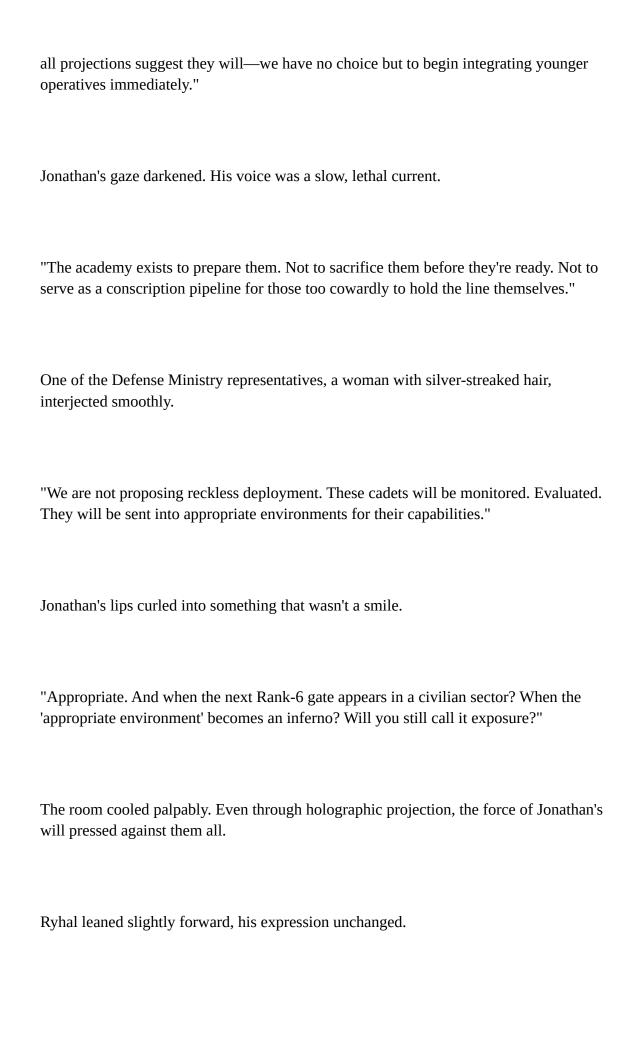
Jonathan nodded once, his face carved from stone. "I have."

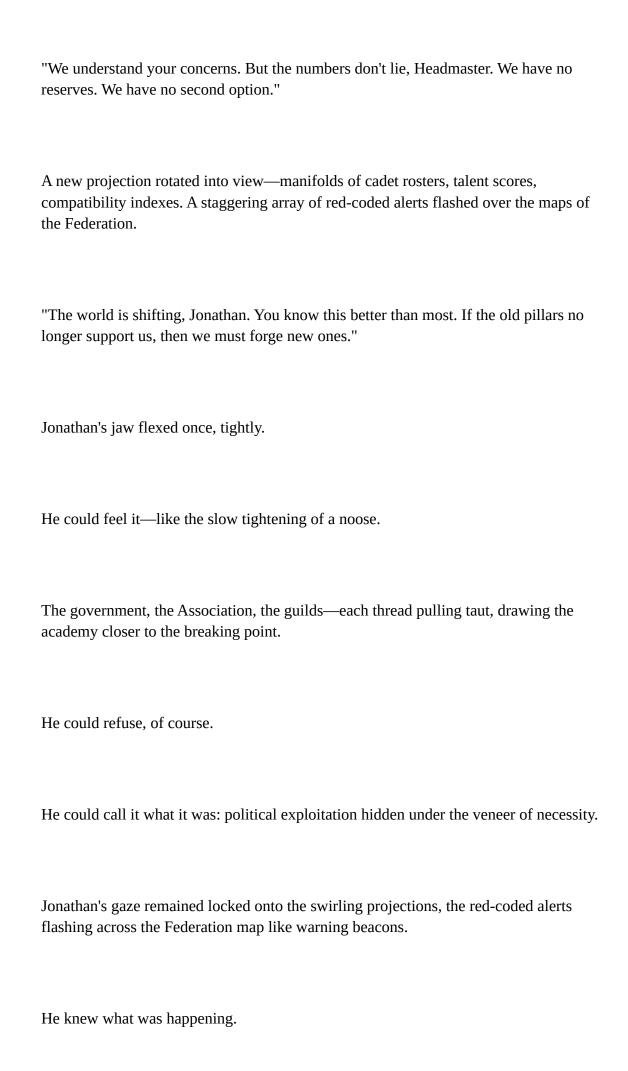
"Then you understand the situation."

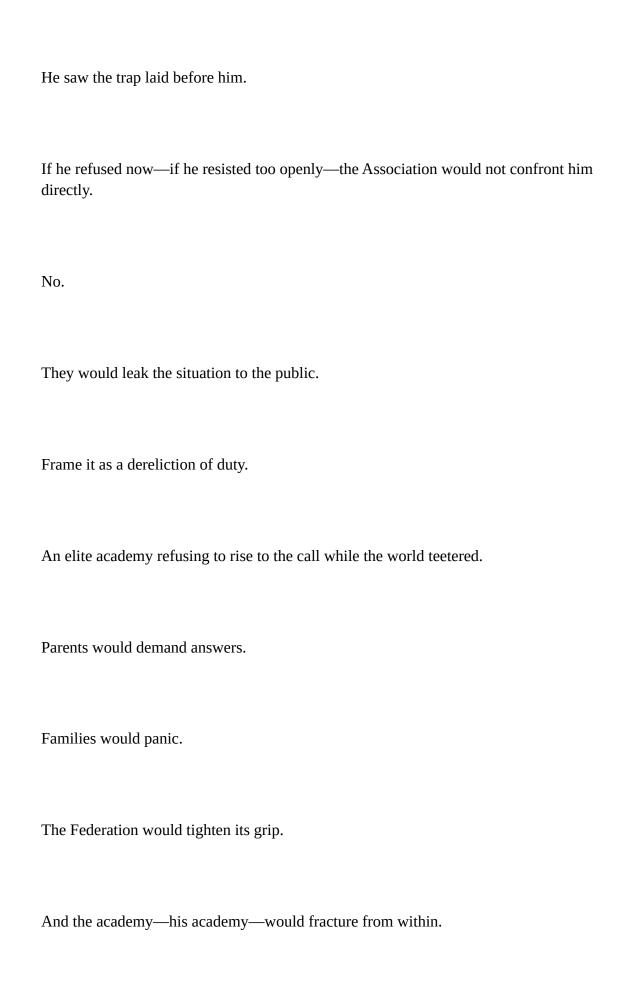
The projections around the table shifted. Images of gates spun into view—dark swirling thresholds layered with alien sigils. Each gate pulsed faintly with life, radiating a subtle but unmistakable message: not for you.

Ryhal spoke with the detached finality of a man delivering a battlefield report. "The youth-restriction phenomenon has been confirmed. Globally. No hunter over the age of twenty-one has been able to enter the new gate types. The pattern is absolute."

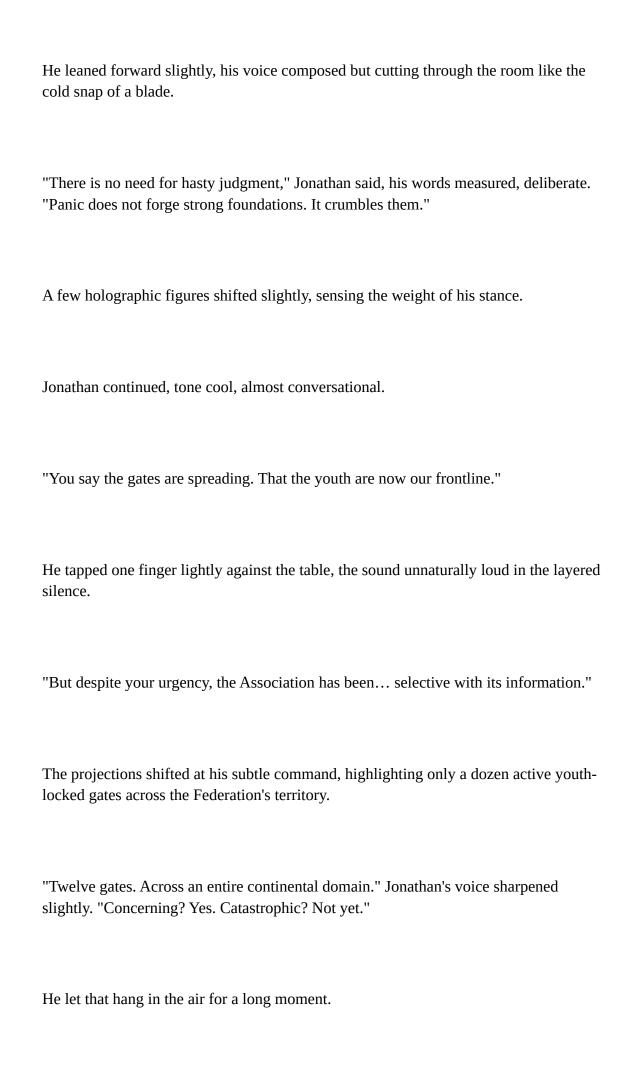
He let that settle before continuing. "The Association has finalized its response. Effective immediately, all primary hunter academies, including your institution, will be requisitioned to support gate operations. We expect coordinated rotations of cadets into active low-risk dungeons for exposure and integration." Jonathan's hands steepled under his chin. He didn't interrupt. Yet. Ryhal continued, as if reading from an immutable decree. "This initiative will be staged. Initial deployments will be observational. Limited objectives. Controlled supervision. It is our position that such measures will not only benefit Federation security, but the cadets themselves. It will accelerate their development. Prepare them for the reality they will inevitably face." Finally, Jonathan spoke, his voice low and even. "Exposure?" His tone was quiet—but the underlying contempt was razor sharp. "You intend to throw my students into the flames under the guise of preparation." A ripple of discomfort traveled through a few of the minor envoys, but Ryhal remained unshaken. "This is not a request, Headmaster. The Federation has ratified the Emergency Talent Mobilization Act. You've seen the clauses yourself. If the gates continue to appear—and

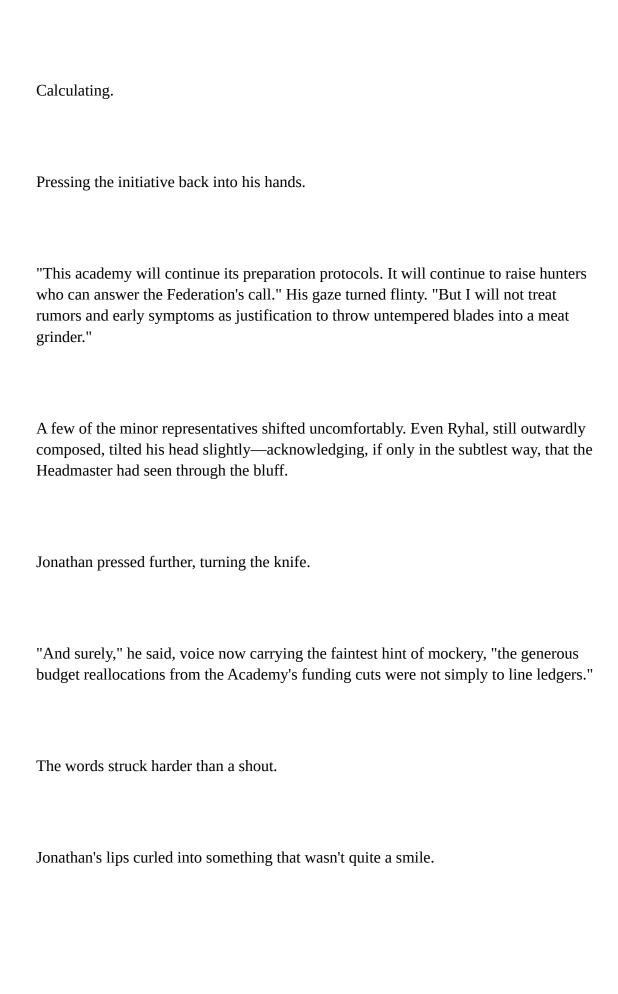


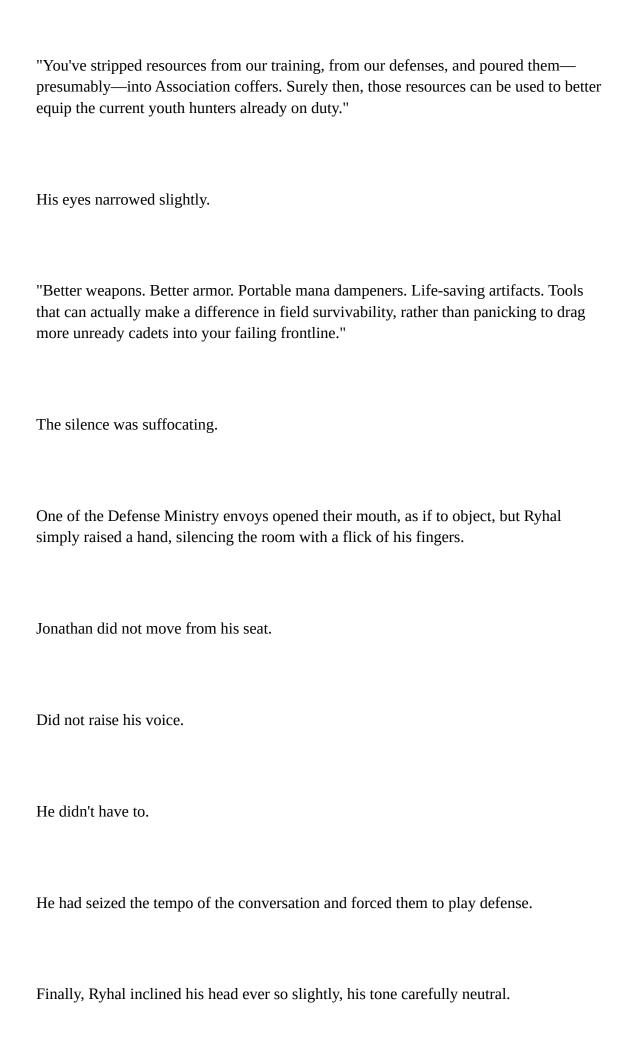




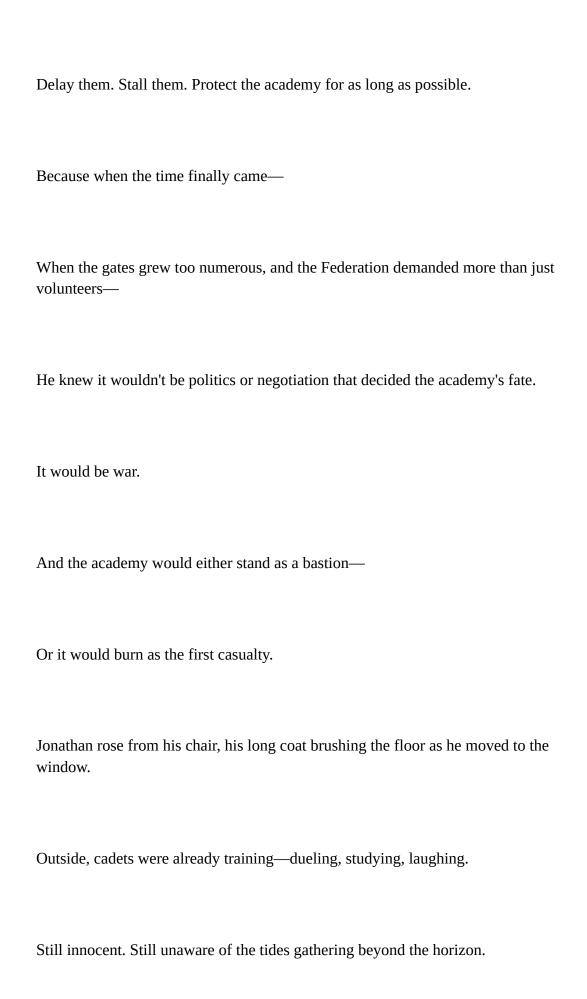
Jonathan's hands curled into slow, deliberate fists on the armrests of his chair, his expression unreadable behind the cold gleam of the holograms.
He had spent decades preparing hunters.
Every cadet who walked these halls knew, consciously or not, that they would one day put their lives on the line.
That was the truth of the path they had chosen.
But this?
This was not preparation.
This was forced acceleration under duress, risking untempered youth for short-term survival.
And Jonathan—no matter what pressure they brought—would not let it happen so easily.
Not yet.











His fists clenched behind his back.

Not yet.