

H. Academy 991

Chapter 991 A silent confrontation

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.

"Let's begin," he said without preamble, taking his seat at the head of the table.
"Professor Varrin, the status of grading?"

A wiry professor with wire-frame spectacles cleared his throat and adjusted the stack of papers beside him. "Ninety-two percent of all theoretical midterms are complete. The mechanics staff expect the rest to be finalized by tonight. Most of the statistical analyses are already available on the internal system."

He tapped a rune-inscribed glyph on the table, projecting a translucent interface mid-air. Columns of scores, deviation graphs, and performance indicators materialized for the rest of the staff to view.

"Section three skewed heavily toward failure," Professor Varrin added dryly. "Mana displacement theory seemed to crush most of their hopes."

A few quiet chuckles rippled through the room.

Eleanor didn't laugh.

"It was a necessary section," she said, tone clinical. "Anyone entering active service or mentorship placements needs to understand it. Theories aren't optional anymore."

"Which brings us to the next topic." Jonathan's voice cut through the murmurs. "The academy's funding from central Federation channels has been cut again. Twelve percent this quarter alone. And that number will likely continue to increase if we don't provide the... necessary cooperation."

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-blond 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.

Jonathan stood.

"Surveillance protocols are to be finalized by tomorrow," he said. "Scouts will be permitted to attend the practicals, but their movement will be restricted to designated zones. Any attempt to breach that will be met with expulsion from the grounds."

He glanced briefly at his daughter. "And while some of us may still disagree, this is the direction we've taken. I expect unity going forward. The students will already feel the pressure—we do not need to fracture here."

A heavy pause.

Then slowly, the professors nodded—some with reluctant acceptance, others with quiet resolve.

The Headmaster looked over the hall once more. His next words were quieter, but they carried through the room like thunder.

"Let the scouts come. Let them see what we've built here. But make no mistake—this academy belongs to us. Not to the guilds. Not to the families. Not to the Federation."

He turned toward the window, where the training grounds shimmered under the morning sun.

"We will hold the line. Even if the world shifts beneath our feet."

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.

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...

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.

But now?

Now, those lines were being tested.

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.

"Amelia," Eleanor greeted curtly, inclining her head by the smallest fraction. "I assume you wanted something more than a post-meeting pleasantry?"

Amelia smiled.

Soft. Warm. Harmless on the surface.

But Eleanor had known her long enough to hear the note beneath it. The way Amelia's words always came with more polish than purpose. Smooth, practiced speech. A gentle tone. And beneath it, something else.

Slippery.

"No," Amelia said, shaking her head lightly. "I just wanted to speak with you briefly. You've been handling the first-year mentorships personally this cycle, haven't you?"

And it came once again.

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Eleanor's gaze held steady, her posture not shifting a fraction. She had been waiting for this moment—or rather, for this angle. It was only a matter of time.

So it begins.

She didn't show it on her face, but she knew the question beneath Amelia's civility. The way her voice softened when mentioning the mentorships. The way her tone lingered just a second longer on personally.

It wasn't curiosity.

It was positioning.

"Yes," Eleanor replied, her voice cool and unbothered. "I have."

Amelia tilted her head ever so slightly, as if in admiration, but Eleanor knew better. "They must be... interesting students," she said lightly. "To merit your personal oversight."

There it is.

Eleanor didn't flinch. "They are."

Amelia's expression didn't waver, but her eyes sharpened ever so slightly, the warmth in her voice now edged with something colder—curiosity dipped in subtle challenge.

"Why?" she asked, tone still polite. "Why them, Eleanor? You could've chosen any number of promising second-years for mentorship. Instead, you picked two first-years—raw, unpolished, unstable by most standards—and took them under your wing personally."

Eleanor met her gaze without blinking. "I have my reasons."

The silence that followed wasn't long. But it was heavy.

Amelia's smile thinned.

"I see."

She held Eleanor's gaze for a breath longer—just long enough to signal that she didn't buy the vague answer—but not long enough to confront it outright.

Then she smiled again. Soft. Perfect.

As if she hadn't asked the question at all.

"Well," Amelia said lightly, "on the subject of oversight, I've been meaning to ask..."

Eleanor's shoulders didn't shift, but she felt the tone change immediately. This was no longer about Astron and Ethan.

This was about the infrastructure.

"The facility," Amelia continued. "The one you've been using for private instruction."

Her words were carefully chosen. Not accusatory—just factual.

Eleanor didn't answer right away.

Amelia continued.

"The advanced training center you've been managing access to—quietly, but not secretly. I was curious. It doesn't appear in the official facilities budget. So I looked into it."

A small tilt of her head. Still smiling.

"Some of the regulators you installed are flagged as pre-market prototypes."

Eleanor's voice was even. "That's correct. Most of the equipment is still in the development stage. I worked with two of the Federation's adaptive tech providers under discretionary approval."

Amelia nodded slowly. "I see. And the rest?"

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."

No hesitation. No softening.

Just steel.

The corridor stilled.

And for a moment, Amelia's smile was the only thing still moving.

Amelia's smile remained intact, but her eyes sharpened—finally cutting through the surface as Eleanor had commanded.

"Very well," she said with a breath that carried the faintest hum of satisfaction. "Since you asked so directly..."

She took a single step closer, voice lowering just enough to keep it between them.

"After the mid-terms, the Hunter Association is planning to host an Inter-Academy Tournament."

The words dropped like a stone in still water.

Eleanor didn't react immediately.

Not physically.

But her gaze narrowed—sharp, focused, dangerous.

"...What?"

It wasn't a whisper.

It wasn't loud either.

Just ice. Cold and edged.

Because she hadn't heard a single word about this—not through the official channels, not from the liaison officers she kept tabs on, not even from her most reliable contact in the upper echelons of the Federation's Combat Affairs Board.

And for someone like Eleanor White—that was unacceptable.

Amelia's tone stayed light. "It's normal you haven't heard of it yet. They haven't made it official."

She smiled again—mock innocence on her face, but something sharper beneath.

"If not for my boyfriend, I wouldn't have heard of it either."

Eleanor's eyebrows lifted. That caught her off guard.

"You have a boyfriend?"

Amelia blinked. Then let out a soft laugh, as if amused by the shift in tone. "Is that really the part you're latching onto?"

"That's not the main topic, is it?"

Amelia's smile didn't waver. If anything, it brightened—as though they were discussing weather, not maneuvering over political landmines.

And then, just as Eleanor opened her mouth to press further, Amelia raised a single hand, palm soft and casual, but unmistakably final.

"No more questions," she said, almost teasing. "I've told you all I intend to."

Eleanor's mouth closed, jaw taut.

Amelia leaned in slightly, lowering her voice just enough that the next words slid through the air like silk-covered steel.

"You've reaped benefits, Eleanor. You've used resources most professors wouldn't dare touch. Funds. Equipment. Prototype tech. You've built a facility, shielded it from scrutiny, and poured Federation-grade tools into two students."

Her head tilted—still smiling.

"So... it's only fair, isn't it?"

Her eyes glittered with something unspoken.

"That your mentees are the ones who repay it."

There was no need to spell it out further.

The implication was clear. She wasn't asking Eleanor's permission.

She was placing them.

Astron.

Ethan.

They were going into the tournament.

Amelia gave one final, pristine smile.

"I'll put both of them on the team. Don't worry," she added as she turned gracefully, already walking away. "I know what to do."

And just like that—

She was gone.

Leaving Eleanor in the corridor, the early morning light now feeling a little colder.

Eleanor remained still long after Amelia's footsteps faded down the corridor.

The light through the arched windows no longer felt clean. It felt like glass under scrutiny—thin, exposed, too clear to be safe. Her arms stayed folded, but her fingers had curled tighter against her coat.

Something's wrong.

Amelia was slippery—always had been—but this wasn't her usual level of mischief. This wasn't her trading gossip for influence or poking at policies to feel clever.

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.

But the most frustrating piece wasn't the secrecy.

It was the placement.

Why Ethan? Why Astron?

Eleanor could understand interest in Ethan. He was visible, rising fast, tied to a powerful name. A crowd-drawer. A headline. Someone the guilds would latch onto with a little polish and a few clean victories.

But Astron?

He wasn't loud. He wasn't marketable. He didn't play politics or show off in duels.

He was a shadow with a sharp edge.

Which meant Amelia had looked closer.

Which meant this wasn't just coincidence.

So what is she playing at?

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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.

She stared down the hall, expression unreadable, but her thoughts were dark.

Amelia's words replayed in her mind:

"They'll be the ones repaying it."

Not just performing.

Repaying.

If that's the case...

If Amelia was using the tournament to get back at her—to make some pointed statement about Eleanor's independence, her "unauthorized" resource use, her unorthodox mentorships—then fine.

Let her play that game.

Let her push cadets onto the stage like pieces in a power struggle.

Eleanor could deal with that. Politics were part of the job.

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.

The one that whispered: You're not seeing the full picture.

And that whisper was growing louder.

Still... she had nothing to act on.

No name. No movement. No policy breach.

Only the sense that Amelia's words had been too deliberate. That her detachment wasn't natural. That even her warning—the one veiled as helpful—was framed too neatly.

Eleanor exhaled slowly through her nose.

She had nothing left to say.

Not yet.

No warning to issue.

No accusations to make.

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 or thudded, as if the equipment itself resented being 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."

The oldest of the team—Gellard, by rank and temperament—lowered his own case and slid the lid open. Inside, a set of rune-tagged stakes pulsed faintly. "Don't care what it is. Protocol says we tag it, mark the coordinates, and send it back up to Central. If it blooms, we get the scouts out here in twelve hours. If not, they'll forget about us like usual."

"Warm beds," Ryn sighed.

"Warm pay cuts," someone else added under their breath.

The sound of glyphs activating filled the silence—a low harmonic chime as the stakes pulsed and sunk themselves into the frozen earth. From above, the wind howled again, rattling the antenna packs like bones in a dry field.

Then, faintly—just faintly—something responded.

A pulse.

A hum that didn't come from their equipment.

The team went still.

Jules turned toward the slope, his eyes narrowing.

"...Gellard."

"I heard it," the older man said flatly, already raising his tablet. "Mark it. Whatever's waking up down there—it just crossed into active resonance range."

"Damn it," Ryn muttered, kneeling to double-check the stabilizer feed. "It's forming."

"Rank?"

"Too early to tell. But if it hums like that again, we might be looking at a Class-6 or higher."

Jules blinked. "Class-6?"

His brows furrowed, the edge of skepticism creeping into his voice. "You sure about that?"

Even Gellard paused.

The wind had picked up again—cold, sharp, too coincidental. Static danced faintly along the rim of the nearest detection stake, a soft fizz of energy crackling in the night air.

Ryn squinted toward the slope, one hand shading the scanner screen from the flurry. "Feels weird for a Class-6..." he muttered. "I mean, yeah, the pulse hit hard—but that resonance? That didn't feel like your average brute-force gate. It felt... off. Tuned wrong."

"I know."

Ryn's voice wasn't defensive now—just quiet. "That's what's bothering me. Something is strange."

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"That's what's bothering me. Something is strange."

Elena, the fifth in their squad and the quietest so far, finally spoke, her voice muffled behind the scarf around her mouth. "Are we sure it's not a misread from the terrain? That slope might be amplifying echoes or mana spread. We've had false positives before."

"No," Jules said, shaking his head slowly. "That pulse wasn't natural. It didn't scatter like windborne mana. It locked on for a second."

Gellard checked the readings again. The glyphs on the tablet screen pulsed once more—no longer in irregular bursts, but in a rhythm. A slow, deliberate beat. Almost... breathing.

He frowned.

"It's not fluctuating wildly," he muttered. "It's stabilizing. Like something on the other side is syncing its frequency. Like it's aware of the tag markers."

That made everyone pause.

Elena's hand hovered near her waist, close to the sidearm she usually kept holstered for emergencies. Ryn's fingers twitched against the side of his rig, scanning spikes still active.

"That's not Class-6 behavior," Jules said finally. "That's... something else."

"Maybe," Gellard replied, still staring at the screen. "But until we get full calibration and final resonance depth, we don't label it anything more than what it shows. If it reads Class-6, we treat it like Class-6."

"And if it's not?" Ryn asked, his voice dry but quieter now.

Gellard didn't look up.

"Then we'll all wish we were overestimating."

No one spoke after that.

The stakes finished syncing to the ambient mana stream, their outer rings flashing once with final confirmation. Data packets were logged, resonance signatures stored, coordinates uploaded. All that was left was the final spectral imaging.

They waited in silence, the frost clinging to their gear as if trying to pull them downward.

Jules exhaled slowly, watching his breath drift into the dark. "Readings will finish in ten."

Elena's eyes scanned the slope again, then the clouds above. "Let's just hope it doesn't open in five."

A low hum whispered again—fainter this time, like something testing its voice behind the veil.

Gellard didn't look away from the screen.

He just said, "Brace in case it does."

Far from the frostbitten slope, buried beneath layers of earth and sacrificial secrecy, a circular chamber pulsed faintly with red luminescence. The walls, obsidian-like but veined with writhing streaks of coppery glyphs, seemed to breathe—slow and steady, like the heart of something not quite asleep.

At the chamber's center, an elaborate construct stood. It resembled a grotesque altar fused with machinery: gearwork etched with runes, crystal conduits humming with subdued energy, and a basin in the middle—shallow, rimmed with teeth, filling slowly

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.

"ᄇᄆᄇᄇ...ᄇᄇᄇ..."

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.

Then—

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.

Torn from no book, but pressed with a seal that shimmered with ouroboric ink. It floated down in an agonizing slowness, then rested gently on the stone, pristine and utterly silent.

Written in crisp, black characters:

It worked.

A long moment passed.

Then, one of the five figures leaned forward slightly, the creak of old leather the only sign of motion.

"...Is that the best course of action?" The voice was androgynous. Careful. Distant.

Another responded, deeper and rasped as if their lungs remembered dust more than breath. "Do we even know its effects?"

"We can't," the third said—a whisper like silk being cut. "And that is the trade-off. Remember."

They were silent after that. Not in agreement, but in acknowledgment.

The blood in the machine's basin had stopped rising. The crimson threads held their spiral above it, suspended mid-air like marionette strings awaiting command. At their

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.

Lines glowed faintly across the floor in a massive, incomprehensible array. Not a sigil. Not a summoning circle. A computation. One that mapped not place, but potential. A living equation written across stone and blood, threading the past, the future, and the unknowable now into a singular axis.

The figures didn't speak again. They knew better.

Because what they had done was no invocation.

It was not summoning, nor sacrifice.

It was the activation of a correction.

And corrections, by nature, do not explain themselves.

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The hum faded.

The last of the spectral readings blinked into place across Jules's tablet, the sigils aligning in sequence like puzzle pieces locking into place. He let out a breath, his shoulders dropping.

"Alright," he said. "Confirmed. It's stabilizing at Class-6. Deep-rank variance, minor oscillation—but nothing above tolerance."

Ryn rubbed the back of his neck, still tense. "Still doesn't feel right."

Gellard finally lowered his scanner and exhaled through his nose. "Then maybe trust the gear instead of your gut, for once."

But the moment felt too clean. Too resolved.

And the sky agreed.

It began not with sound—but with absence. The wind dropped. The frostbitten air, which had gnawed at them relentlessly all night, suddenly fell still. A silence too complete. Too sudden.

Then—

KRACK.

A jagged bolt of lightning tore through the clouds above them. Not white. Not blue. Black.

It lanced across the sky with a sound like stone tearing through glass—and for a single instant, the slope, the gear, the faces of the team were all etched in silver.

"What—" Jules said, halfway to shielding his eyes.

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.

"No," Jules muttered, eyes glued to the impossible readout. "It's not fading. The structure is still there. It's not vanishing—it's—"

"Bracing," Gellard finished, his voice low. Grim. "It's changing its signature."

"But that doesn't make sense!" Ryn barked. "Gates don't just decrease in rank! That's not how—"

WHUUMMM.

The gate's perimeter stakes shuddered. Not visibly, not in the metal—but in their shadows. The dark cast beneath them wavered, flickering erratically, as if trying to pull inward toward some new center.

A hollow groan rolled up from the frozen soil.

Elena staggered back, her eyes locked on the center of the slope. "The ground—look at the ground."

A spiral was forming beneath the snow. Not drawn. Not carved. Melted. Steam hissed upward in thin, sinuous streams as heat and cold twisted around each other in silent war. At the center of it, the faintest shimmer hung in the air—like a ripple in water caught beneath glass.

The gate.

Except now, it twitched.

Ryn took an instinctive step back, nearly slipping on the slick snow. "Did it just twitch?"

"No," Jules muttered. "It reacted."

Gellard was already raising the comm unit to his shoulder, fingers working the mana dial embedded in its frame. "This is Field Recon Alpha-Seven—pinging HQ. We've got a gate fluctuation—repeat, a Class-6 gate is exhibiting anomalous behavior. Requesting protocol override and emergency extraction standby."

No reply.

He adjusted the crystal frequency, sharp now. "HQ, respond. Priority flag—unknown resonance event, possible breach instability."

Static.

A slow hiss crackled through the line, then broke entirely into silence.

Jules looked up from his tablet. "What the hell?"

Gellard's hand clenched around the comm. He tapped the emergency beacon embedded in the main case, triggering the failsafe pulse. The flare of mana was supposed to launch a direct signal toward the closest Association repeater tower.

Instead, the beacon glowed once—then died.

"Dead," Gellard said, voice like stone. "The gate's severed the connection."

"Is that even possible?" Elena asked.

"Not under normal protocols," Jules muttered. "But this? Nothing about this is normal."

The air had changed. It wasn't just cold anymore—it was heavy. Intentional. The kind of stillness you only got when something was watching.

Watching and waiting.

"We shelter," Gellard said abruptly. "We wait for line restoration. No approaching the gate. No diagnostics. Pack gear, perimeter circle, twenty meters out. If this thing spikes again, I want buffers between it and us."

The team moved.

Jules and Elena scrambled to pack the scanners. Ryn activated his kinetic ward, a shimmer of violet glinting faintly around him as he backed away from the slope. Gellard remained planted near the edge, eyes locked on the ripple in the snow.

It no longer twitched.

It rested.

Minutes passed in the crawl of the windless dark.

Then, without fanfare, the sky cleared.

No lightning. No sound. Just a slow release of the tension in the air, like a breath being let out.

Jules's scanner blinked back to life.

Mana feed reconnected.

The comm line flickered, buzzed—and then restored, the dull crackle of the headquarters' standby tone returning with a mechanical sigh.

"HQ line open," Jules breathed. "We're back online."

And the gate?

Its readings recompiled.

Class-6.

Stabilized.

Again.

"Back to normal," Elena said, frowning. "That... should be good news."

But Jules didn't answer immediately. His eyes were locked on the diagnostics, flicking through lines of mana flow algorithms and trace signatures.

"...Something changed."

Ryn froze mid-step. "What do you mean?"

Jules turned the screen toward them.

"The core frequency is the same. Same energy output. Same resonance level. It's Class-6 by all external readings. But the structure's alignment..."

He tapped the screen.

"This isn't the same gate we scanned fifteen minutes ago."

"What changed?" Gellard asked.

"The substrate vector. The calibration sigil." Jules hesitated. "And the timestamp. It no longer registers as a new formation."

Elena's eyes narrowed. "Then what is it?"

Jules swallowed, his voice dropping just above a whisper. "It's listed... as reactivated."

The word hung in the air like a curse.

Ryn took a slow step forward. "You mean it's been opened before?"

"No," Jules said, tapping the tablet again. "Worse. It means it was closed. Something sealed it. And now... it just came back."

Before Gellard could reply, the comm unit flared to life with a sharp chime, cutting through the silence.

BZZT—Alpha-Seven, this is Central. Alpha-Seven, respond. Status confirmation required. Repeat—status confirmation.

Gellard grabbed the unit immediately. "Alpha-Seven reporting. All operatives accounted for. We experienced a full blackout—communications, scanners, even auxiliary mana feeds. Everything's restored now, but the gate—"

We know.

The voice from HQ—sharp, clipped—barely masked its tension.

There was a pause. Then:

Your region's blackout coincided with multiple zones across the globe.

The team froze.

Mana spikes. Phantom readings. Communication failures. All simultaneous. North Thalas, Northern Caldur, parts of the Dusk Reach... even zones where no active gates exist. Everything—went dark.

Jules exchanged a look with Elena. She looked pale beneath her scarf.

Gellard kept his voice steady. "Any signs of breach?"

None confirmed. Yet. But readings are inconsistent.

Another pause, longer this time.

You're not the only team to report a gate shifting its classification.

Ryn let out a low breath. "So this wasn't just us."

No. And we don't know what caused it. We're rerouting mana-thread surveillance to priority zones, but as of now, we're blind to the initiating event. There's no pattern. No warning.

A beat.

...It was as if the entire system hiccuped.

Jules frowned. "That's not a system error. That's coordination."

The comm stayed silent.

Then:

Copy your diagnostics. Archive the pre-event and post-event readings. We're pulling all flagged gates into containment protocols. You'll remain on site for full atmospheric trace scans. Priority.

Gellard nodded, though they all knew HQ couldn't see him. "Understood."

The line clicked off with a dull finality.

For a moment, no one moved.

Elena looked up at the gate. Its shimmer was faint again—tranquil, almost gentle.

"Reactivated," she whispered. "But by who?"

Jules didn't answer. His screen was still displaying the timestamp discrepancy.

Ryn exhaled, muttering, "Whatever this is... it didn't start here."

And deep beneath them, where the melted spiral still faintly steamed, the gate pulsed once more.

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.

Serrina's gaze drifted to the northern edge of the map, where several gates pulsed faintly in red and gold. "The dungeon activity's rising across all fronts. Every major gate's showing increased instability. The Blackscale Rift? Fluctuated again this morning. Class-7 distortion with multi-elemental feedback."

"Not just here," Jonnen said. "Rumors say Kaliset's guilds went silent for twenty minutes last night. No scouts. No communication. Just void. Came back like nothing happened."

Varent turned slowly toward him. "That matches what we heard from the Association."

He reached out and tapped the corner of the map, where three districts lit up with archived anomalies.

"All the guild conflicts. The sudden aggression. The mercenary shifts. Even this Philps–Hartley war. I don't think it's just about pride anymore."

Serrina's eyes narrowed. "You think they're being nudged."

"I think the timing's too clean," Varent replied. "And the mana signature beneath it all is wrong. Something's stirring underneath the noise."

He looked back up at the others. His voice was calm. Measured.

"We don't take sides yet. Not until we know who lit the first match—or what's waiting in the ashes."

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—

"We're escalating this," said the Association voice, more composed now, but not without strain. "Cross-departmental investigation is underway. This case is not isolated."

Varent's eyes narrowed. "Define that."

A few seconds passed before a new voice entered the feed—deeper, older, this one carrying the tone of someone higher up the ladder.

"Blackridge Dominion, this is Overseer Ryhal of the Central Guild Authority. You are authorized to receive classified Tier-3 tactical brief."

A glyph-lock flashed across the screen, briefly confirming Varent's clearance.

"What we're about to say does not leave this transmission."

Varent gave a curt nod.

"As of the last twelve hours," Ryhal continued, "a dozen guilds across four continents have filed similar reports. Gates forming—stabilizing—and then refusing all entry."

Serrina's brow furrowed. "How many of those are confirmed?"

"Nine so far. The rest are still under review. But the pattern is repeating. Dungeon constructs that exhibit all standard formation behaviors—mana surge, resonance alignment, structural layering—but once formed, they reject entry. No repulsion. No volatility. They simply... remain closed."

"The same behavior," Jonnen muttered. "Exactly the same."

"Yes," Ryhal said. "Some guilds tried forceful entry. Nothing worked. No defensive countermeasures were triggered. Just... no response. As if the gate knows they're unqualified."

Serrina's eyes sharpened. "You're implying selectivity."

"We're implying nothing," Ryhal said. "We're just acknowledging that every operational assumption about dungeon mechanics may be compromised."

Varent exhaled slowly. "How long until this becomes public?"

"We're containing the narrative." Another pause. "But if it spreads—if more guilds start experiencing this—it won't stay buried for long."

Arlan's voice returned over the shared channel, calm but more cautious now. "We've rechecked our diagnostics. The entry layer hasn't degraded. It's intact—just inert. Nothing's changed in the past thirty minutes."

At the end they couldn't find an answer at all.

[One day later]

Frost clung to the banners of Blackridge Dominion as they flapped listlessly in the courtyard wind—sharp, dry gusts that carried the scent of old steel and crackling glyphdust. The sky above was a colorless canvas, pale as ash, and the mood matched it.

Inside the command pavilion, Guildmaster Varent Illowen stood beside the reassignment board, fingers steepled against his mouth as he reviewed the new orders projected in front of him.

Association Directive – Cross Compatibility Testing

Order: Begin Gate Access Rotation Trials

Purpose: Determine Entry Conditions through Variable Composition

Status: Mandatory.

The room was unusually full—officers, schedulers, handlers, all murmuring in subdued confusion. No guild liked to admit they were following protocol in the dark.

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 inter-guild agreements. Fresh talent, largely untested.

He stopped on one name.

Name: Cael Adverin

Age: 17

Rank: Unverified

Background: Nomadic Registration – Independent Zone 53

Evaluation: High potential / irregular mana signature / unique runic sensitivity

Serrina noticed the hesitation. "One of the new ones?"

Varent nodded slightly. "Quiet. Doesn't talk much. Didn't attend formal Hunter academies. Pulled from a scouting program two weeks ago."

Jonnen raised an eyebrow. "You want to send an unranked rookie to a gate none of our veterans can even touch?"

Varent didn't look away from the name. "No."

He tapped the command sigil beside the name. A rune flared, assigning the hunter to the Frostbound gate.

"I want to see if it touches him."

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?"

A pause. "That's all I've ever needed."

Arlan frowned but stepped back. "Alright then. Gate's inert. Won't bite."

Cael approached.

One step.

Two.

Then—

The shimmer changed.

Barely at first—like a breath taken beneath the surface of water. The haze lifted slightly. The distortion smoothed.

The pylons lit up. Not red. Not warning.

Blue. Recognition.

Cael paused, standing just three feet from the gate. His expression didn't change. The others stared.

The gate pulsed once.

And opened.

Not violently. Not with a roar of mana or the howl of space tearing. It unfolded. Like a veil being drawn aside by unseen hands. Behind it, shadowed stone glowed faintly with threads of gold. An interior. A passage.

Serrina's voice broke over comms, sharp with disbelief. "It opened?"

Arlan could only nod. "It... accepted him."

They all watched.

Cael turned his head slightly, glancing back over his shoulder.

"Should I go in?"

Varent's voice came through—calm. Cold.

"Not yet."

He stepped closer to the edge of the war-table back at headquarters, eyes narrowed.

"First," he said, almost to himself, "we find out why him."

Chapter 998 Changes across the world

[Sunday- 10:42 AM]

<Hunter Association Headquarters – Central Arcane Analysis Division, 17th Floor>

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.

"Age distribution of accepted hunters ranges between 14 and 20. Most clustered between 16 and 18. The gates responded instantly—active resonance, immediate opening."

"And older hunters?" someone asked.

"Complete passivity," Liora replied. "The gates acknowledged their presence—confirmed ambient mana signatures—but refused interaction. Like it was watching them. Measuring."

A silence settled in the room again. This time heavier.

Liora gestured again, and a new dataset unfolded across the holographic panels—names of known elite hunters flashing beside diagnostic glyphs and brief mana resonance logs.

"These aren't just average guild operatives," she said. "We've tested Global-ranked hunters, and aside from them, some Stage-10, Stage-11, even a few classified projections at Stage-12. None of them got through."

"Impossible," someone muttered. "Those hunters have enough mana pressure to flatten small cities. There's no gate built to ignore that."

"They weren't ignored," Liora corrected, her tone quieter now. "They were acknowledged—and passed over. The gates identified them, but they didn't react. Like trying to insert the wrong key into a lock that doesn't even turn."

One of the analysts leaned forward, voice sharp with disbelief. "And brute force?"

"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.

"There are fewer than seven hundred licensed hunters under the age of 21 capable of surviving in a Rank-6 or higher gate."

His tone was mathematical. Merciless.

"Of those, maybe eighty are estimated to survive a Rank-7."

"Eighty?" a guild liaison repeated, stunned. "For the entire Human Domain?"

"Correct."

"That's not even enough to cover three concurrent major gates!"

"And we already have twelve," Liora added.

A heavier silence.

"Talented youths are already valuable," said an older strategist. "But now, they're essential. If these gates become common, then....the world will no longer care about the amount of veterans..."

"—but how many prodigies it produces," Ryhal finished.

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."

Ryhal turned slightly. "Protected zones don't matter if the gates stop opening for anyone else."

A few seats shifted uneasily.

Liora chimed in, gesturing toward the flickering outlines of the major academies—Iveris Prime, Cauldross Spire, Eastreach Verdance, Wyrnvale Sanctum. Names that carried weight. Legacy. Investment.

"Thousands of cadets. Hundreds of promising A-ranks and high-B talents. Most of them in the right age range," she said. "And all of them already under institutional watch."

"That would put them directly within Association purview," the strategist said, slowly.

"It gives us precedent," Ryhal confirmed. "Legal pathways already exist. Emergency conscription clauses. Talent mobilization ordinances. Academy cadets are still considered provisional members of the Hunter Corps. We have jurisdiction if survival is at stake."

"But these students weren't trained to deploy," one of the analysts countered. "They're not ready."

"No one's ready," Ryhal said. "Not when the rules change mid-game."

He took a slow breath.

"And we're not discussing full-scale deployment. Not yet. But what we are discussing... is access. Oversight. The authority to pull who we need when these gates demand it."

A long pause stretched.

Finally, Liora broke it.

"If the gates keep selecting based on youth," she said, "then every academy becomes a vault of keys. And we'll be forced to start unlocking."

Someone near the back spoke—an older man from the Eastern Border Guilds.

"And if they refuse?"

Ryhal's eyes were cold.

"They won't."

He stepped back from the projection and let the silence speak for him. Because beneath all the logic and protocol, one truth had now sunk into every mind in the room:

The next war wouldn't be fought by armies.

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 mana stream flowed backward across the horizon.

"...It finally happened."

She wiped the blood from her lip, still kneeling in the frost-burned grass.

Reina's eyes rose again to the sky—though "sky" was no longer the right word for it.

Above her, the atmosphere convulsed with patterns too vast for the eye to track. It wasn't just clouds that moved—it was the heavens themselves, folding, contracting, recalibrating. Great spirals of glyphs, invisible to the untrained, began to stabilize into alignments—coordinates not of place, but of possibility. The kind she'd only seen on pre-collapse dimensional diagrams or the Watchers' oldest core theories.

Then—she saw it.

The mana pulse. Thin, surgical, unlike any explosive fluctuation she'd observed in the past.

It rose from far beneath the earth like a needle threading through layers of space-time, slipping between boundaries without friction. Reina's eyes tracked its path instinctively—not just the motion, but the intent behind it. A system's hand adjusting its axis. A correction.

And she felt the echo.

Like a whisper brushing across the back of her mind:

The final core has been activated.

Her gaze dropped toward the crater below, where the warping glasslike terrain rippled gently with residual mana. And though the distortion was quiet now, her perception—still resonating with the afterimage of that catastrophic alignment—allowed her to see what others would miss.

The fundamental logic of the world had changed.

Gate classifications, stability thresholds, the logic of entry—all rewritten.

She saw flashes of the sequence from her own perspective—Chapter 233.2's anomaly, now fully registered. The pulsing orb of rewritten mana. The gates flickering out of sync with their own timelines. The spiral beneath the snow, melted not by heat but by intentional design. Not a dungeon.

A device.

"So that's what they meant by reactivation..." she thought grimly, her jaw tightening.

She exhaled slowly, her breath fogging in the reverse-flowing wind.

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."

He resumed walking, blending into the slow stream of other arriving scouts—some older, some sharp-eyed, all visibly eager to weigh the Academy's rising stars.

A courier approached him near the observation tower's outer corridor.

"Name?"

"Leonard Gracewind."

Scroll unrolled. Name found. Papers rechecked.

"Solstice Dawn," the courier confirmed. "You're cleared for all general mentorship observance, Zone B. Interviews and recommendations to be forwarded to Administrative Oversight. Room key and campus permissions are encoded here." They handed him a slim badge, mana-sealed and bound to his temporary identity. "Try not to interfere."

Leonard accepted it with a respectful nod.

The courier left. And with that, Leonard headed forward.

Chapter 1000 234.2 - After

The heavy doors sealed with a resonant hum, layering a half-dozen suppression wards over the chamber.

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

all projections suggest they will—we have no choice but to begin integrating younger operatives immediately."

Jonathan's gaze darkened. His voice was a slow, lethal current.

"The academy exists to prepare them. Not to sacrifice them before they're ready. Not to serve as a conscription pipeline for those too cowardly to hold the line themselves."

One of the Defense Ministry representatives, a woman with silver-streaked hair, interjected smoothly.

"We are not proposing reckless deployment. These cadets will be monitored. Evaluated. They will be sent into appropriate environments for their capabilities."

Jonathan's lips curled into something that wasn't a smile.

"Appropriate. And when the next Rank-6 gate appears in a civilian sector? When the 'appropriate environment' becomes an inferno? Will you still call it exposure?"

The room cooled palpably. Even through holographic projection, the force of Jonathan's will pressed against them all.

Ryhal leaned slightly forward, his expression unchanged.

"We understand your concerns. But the numbers don't lie, Headmaster. We have no reserves. We have no second option."

A new projection rotated into view—manifolds of cadet rosters, talent scores, compatibility indexes. A staggering array of red-coded alerts flashed over the maps of the Federation.

"The world is shifting, Jonathan. You know this better than most. If the old pillars no longer support us, then we must forge new ones."

Jonathan's jaw flexed once, tightly.

He could feel it—like the slow tightening of a noose.

The government, the Association, the guilds—each thread pulling taut, drawing the academy closer to the breaking point.

He could refuse, of course.

He could call it what it was: political exploitation hidden under the veneer of necessity.

Jonathan's gaze remained locked onto the swirling projections, the red-coded alerts flashing across the Federation map like warning beacons.

He knew what was happening.

He saw the trap laid before him.

If he refused now—if he resisted too openly—the Association would not confront him directly.

No.

They would leak the situation to the public.

Frame it as a dereliction of duty.

An elite academy refusing to rise to the call while the world teetered.

Parents would demand answers.

Families would panic.

The Federation would tighten its grip.

And the academy—his academy—would fracture from within.

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.

He leaned forward slightly, his voice composed but cutting through the room like the cold snap of a blade.

"There is no need for hasty judgment," Jonathan said, his words measured, deliberate. "Panic does not forge strong foundations. It crumbles them."

A few holographic figures shifted slightly, sensing the weight of his stance.

Jonathan continued, tone cool, almost conversational.

"You say the gates are spreading. That the youth are now our frontline."

He tapped one finger lightly against the table, the sound unnaturally loud in the layered silence.

"But despite your urgency, the Association has been... selective with its information."

The projections shifted at his subtle command, highlighting only a dozen active youth-locked gates across the Federation's territory.

"Twelve gates. Across an entire continental domain." Jonathan's voice sharpened slightly. "Concerning? Yes. Catastrophic? Not yet."

He let that hang in the air for a long moment.

Calculating.

Pressing the initiative back into his hands.

"This academy will continue its preparation protocols. It will continue to raise hunters who can answer the Federation's call." His gaze turned flinty. "But I will not treat rumors and early symptoms as justification to throw untempered blades into a meat grinder."

A few of the minor representatives shifted uncomfortably. Even Ryhal, still outwardly composed, tilted his head slightly—acknowledging, if only in the subtlest way, that the Headmaster had seen through the bluff.

Jonathan pressed further, turning the knife.

"And surely," he said, voice now carrying the faintest hint of mockery, "the generous budget reallocations from the Academy's funding cuts were not simply to line ledgers."

The words struck harder than a shout.

Jonathan's lips curled into something that wasn't quite a smile.

"You've stripped resources from our training, from our defenses, and poured them—presumably—into Association coffers. Surely then, those resources can be used to better equip the current youth hunters already on duty."

His eyes narrowed slightly.

"Better weapons. Better armor. Portable mana dampeners. Life-saving artifacts. Tools that can actually make a difference in field survivability, rather than panicking to drag more unready cadets into your failing frontline."

The silence was suffocating.

One of the Defense Ministry envoys opened their mouth, as if to object, but Ryhal simply raised a hand, silencing the room with a flick of his fingers.

Jonathan did not move from his seat.

Did not raise his voice.

He didn't have to.

He had seized the tempo of the conversation and forced them to play defense.

Finally, Ryhal inclined his head ever so slightly, his tone carefully neutral.

"Your position is understood, Headmaster."

Jonathan gave a curt nod.

"I will maintain readiness."

Another pause.

"But the cadets are not soldiers. Not yet."

His eyes gleamed cold beneath the holographic lights.

"And I will not offer them up like lambs because others failed to plan for the future."

One by one, the projections began to blink out, leaving only dim afterimages swirling in the darkened chamber.

Jonathan sat alone for a long moment after the connection severed, the weight of command settling once more onto his shoulders.

He closed his eyes briefly, gathering his thoughts.

Delay them. Stall them. Protect the academy for as long as possible.

Because when the time finally came—

When the gates grew too numerous, and the Federation demanded more than just volunteers—

He knew it wouldn't be politics or negotiation that decided the academy's fate.

It would be war.

And the academy would either stand as a bastion—

Or it would burn as the first casualty.

Jonathan rose from his chair, his long coat brushing the floor as he moved to the window.

Outside, cadets were already training—dueling, studying, laughing.

Still innocent. Still unaware of the tides gathering beyond the horizon.

His fists clenched behind his back.

Not yet.