

HUNTER ACADEMY: REVENGE OF THE WEAKEST

Chapter 1040 246.4 - Sister

The next morning.

The sun broke clean over Arcadia, casting long gold beams between the spires like divine threads pulling the academy awake. Fog still clung to the edges of the lower hills, but above the campus, the sky was sharp and blue—watchful.

Leonard stood once more within the observation gallery, his coat draped over one arm, the crescent pendant beneath his collar already warmed with passive charge.

Today felt heavier.

Not because of the pressure.

But because of the promise.

I'll watch her today.

He'd contacted Sylvie the night before—briefly. Just long enough to ask, calmly, which rotation block she was scheduled for.

Her response had been plain.

"Mid-day. Team Fourteen. Mist-Ruin variant."

Simple.

Efficient.

No questions. No lingering emotions. She hadn't asked why.

But something in the timing of her reply—precise, as if she'd anticipated the question—had made him pause.

She knew he hadn't come before.

She just wasn't going to say it.

Leonard exhaled through his nose, then flicked a hand across the observation interface, reactivating his slate.

He had time before her rotation.

Roughly two hours.

And in that time—

He would work.

The Kin still hadn't surfaced. No sign. No stir. If Sylvie wasn't the one—and he had to be sure—then the field still needed trimming.

Badly.

He moved down the arc of the gallery, nodding to a passing scout he didn't bother naming, and took up a new vantage near the east-tier viewing runes. His heliowatch was already deployed, masked by low-resonance threads.

Today's trial arenas were condensed combat puzzles: terrain-dynamic, timed objectives, restricted spell-bands. Designed to reveal control, not just raw power.

Perfect.

He scanned the cadet list.

Eight new names flagged from yesterday's analysis. Minor anomalies. Statistical quirks. Tether pulses from the heliowatch that almost flickered.

Almost.

He murmured under his breath:

"Caeli signa. Minima intentio. Solis oculus."

Trace lightly. Mark with breath. Let the sun watch.

Tiny golden threads dispersed—none visible to the human eye, even under magnification. But to Leonard, they curled out like spider-silk filaments, reaching toward their respective targets as the cadets entered their assigned dungeons.

One. Two. Three.

Marked.

Four. Five.

Delayed. A little too much mana. He drew back before the wards picked it up.

Six. Seven. Eight.

All marked within thirty-seven minutes.

Leonard observed from three different angles, watching as they navigated puzzles and pressure.

He listened to the pulse of their breath through monitoring glyphs. Watched the shake in their stances. The cast-flutter of their hands.

Nothing.

No echo from the artifact.

No ripple from the divine thread.

Nothing that even resembled lunar symmetry.

He clicked his jaw shut and leaned slightly forward on the rail, expression unreadable.

He was narrowing the field.

But it wasn't enough.

Still no Kin.

Still nothing to offer.

At this rate...

His gaze darkened a fraction.

I may have to go deeper.

There was one option.

A long-term assignment.

A presence in the Academy itself—not just as a scout.

He could petition for a teaching role, a research position, even an external liaison from Solstice Dawn. The credentials could be forged well enough. His Holiness could cover the rest.

It would take time. Politics. Risk.

But it would give him what he needed.

Time. Access. Proximity.

And if the Kin remained hidden—

If they were still bleeding moonlight through silence—

Then he would find them from inside.

Still, for now—

He turned back to the slate.

A quiet chime pulsed along the crystal surface.

Team Fourteen – Zone Entry Confirmed.

Mist-Ruin Variant. Initiation Time: 12:03 PM.

Leonard's breath stilled.

He reached forward with a single motion and expanded the feed.

Four screens blossomed in overlapping view—each offering different angles of the entry point, environmental overlays, mana-spectrum filters. He tuned them quickly, narrowing his attention to movement pacing and ambient signature dampening.

The fog was already shifting across the dungeon floor.

Cold mist, bleached stone, the outlines of collapsed sanctuaries.

And then—

Figures emerged.

One by one.

Jasmine Reed, blade drawn, already crouched low and moving with predator's rhythm.

Layla Vance, steady as ever, shield already pulsing with controlled runes.

Astron Natusalune, walking like breath through fabric—present and yet somehow never the center.

And finally—

Sylvie.

Leonard's gaze sharpened, just slightly.

His hands didn't move.

But his eyes caught everything.

The light shift as her boots touched the floor.

The soft glow from her gloves—not bright, not overbearing, but anchored.

The quiet way she took her place at the rear, then glanced across the group to recalibrate spacing by habit, not instruction.

He didn't need to see the resonance field yet.

He could already tell.

She was in control.

Before he could refocus the filters, murmurs began echoing across the observation arc.

"—Is that Irina Emberheart's team?"

"Yeah. Looks like Team Fourteen's finally going in."

"Emberheart's daughter on a Mist-Ruin rotation? Bold placement."

Leonard didn't flinch.

But his jaw did tighten—just a little.

Because even now...

Even now, when everyone knew who had stabilized that compression spell...

Even after scouts had begun referring to "the healer with golden-thread control"...

They were still calling it Irina Emberheart's team.

As if Sylvie wasn't allowed to be the center.

As if recognizing her would cost them something.

Leonard didn't need to guess why.

The Emberheart name was heavy. Ubiquitous. Powerful.

And in a world where noble affiliations shaped futures more than talent ever did—

No one wanted to be the first to say it out loud.

That someone else might be shining brighter.

That Sylvie Gracewind might be something more than a background melody.

Because if they did?

If they acknowledged it?

They'd risk being seen as disloyal.

And someone would whisper.

And the Emberhearts would hear.

And the academy would bend.

So they kept saying her name, but only as context.

Only as support.

To Leonard, this was fine.

Not good.

Not fair.

But fine.

This was how the world worked.

He had seen it too many times before—potential reshaped to fit narratives, brilliance masked beneath family names, credit redirected like tributaries toward older, deeper rivers of power.

Legacy always drank first.

Talent?

Talent came second.

And if it came from someone quiet, someone unaligned, someone unclaimed?

It came last.

So no, Leonard wasn't surprised.

Nor was he offended.

He understood.

This was not injustice.

Not betrayal.

It was simply structure.

Predictable. Measured. Inevitable.

And entirely breakable.

But before he could lean further into the interface, before he could even expand Sylvie's solo channel for closer analysis—

A familiar scent—sandalwood and cool iris—curled around the edge of his awareness.

He didn't look up.

Not yet.

But he already knew.

"Watching Sylvie Gracewind today?" Velvetin's voice purred from his side, smooth and conversational. "Finally?"

Leonard said nothing at first.

Not until the interface stabilized, until Sylvie's feed split into four elegant partitions—mana signature, body telemetry, team orientation, and raw visual stream.

Then, calmly, without turning to her, he said:

"Finally? Why assume I didn't watch her?"

A pause.

"I had watched her before, of course."

Velvetin's lips twitched into something between a smirk and a smile.

Amused.

Unmoved.

"Heh... No need for lip service, Leonard." Her voice dipped into that velvety cadence again, rich and coaxing. "I know what you did."

He didn't blink.

Didn't rise to the bait.

"Feel free to think whatever you want."

She gave a soft breath, like a laugh she didn't need to make audible.

Then, without further ceremony, Velvetin lowered herself gracefully into the adjacent observer's chair—legs crossing, fingers steepling as she adjusted the angle of her projection.

The lights above dimmed slightly as the dungeon feed intensified.

The stone mist was settling.

Ruins spreading outward like a spiral maze.

Team Fourteen had entered.

Leonard's gaze never left the screen.

But he felt Velvetin shift beside him—closer than necessary, just enough to rest her chin briefly in her hand as she leaned toward the visual channel.

Then, quietly—just loud enough for him to hear:

"You guys look quite similar, though."