

Professor Chance's Academy For The Gifted

Chapter One

Chapter I – “Just Another Day”

Once, having powers meant something.

You could light city blocks with your fingertips. Heal a dying lung with a single breath. Carry freight across oceans in a single bound. Powered people — the Gifted — had a place in society, woven into the machinery of the world.

Then came the bots.

Polished, tireless, and obedient, machines replaced gifted workers in just a few short years. No sleep. No ego. No danger of rebellion. The world celebrated progress. And the powered? They were discarded — feared for what they *could* do, hated for what they no longer *needed* to do.

Now, being powered meant being less than human.

It meant neighborhoods like *The Verge* — broken concrete, rusted scaffolding, flickering lights, and checkpoints that scanned too long and asked too much. If you had powers, you got used to living under a microscope. Or worse, invisible.

That’s where they lived. Six kids who shared a power-block and a little patch of dead grass they called a park.

Kevin was first to arrive that evening, collapsing onto the cracked stone bench, bag of pistachios in hand. A streetlamp buzzed above, struggling to stay lit. He popped a shell into his mouth, not even bothering to spit out the husk.

Sirius strolled in next, his fingertips sparking like flint on stone.

“Any bots chase you today?” Kevin asked.

“Only the sad one outside the corner store. Think he’s trying to be friends.”

“I respect the hustle.”

They shared a laugh, not because anything was funny — but because you had to.

Soon the others trickled in.

Ameari kept to herself, sitting cross-legged under the slide, her eyes watching shadows. Her jacket was frayed, its sleeves marked by thread where she’d patched it using her silk. TK arrived next, carrying a worn backpack full of scrap and metal bits. A small mechanical bird poked its head out of the zipper.

Selena made her entrance last, as always — hair tied up, earrings mismatched, attitude sharpened. She didn't speak at first. Just leaned against the rusted fence, chewing gum slowly like it had something to prove.

They called this their "meeting place," but really, it was where they tried to feel normal.

"This block's getting worse," TK muttered, eyes on a distant patrol drone hovering too low. "Two more curfews announced today. One powered kid got dragged out of school. No warning."

"They'll come here eventually," Ameari said quietly. "They always do."

Kevin shifted. "You guys ever think... maybe we're next? Not 'cause we did anything wrong. Just 'cause we *exist*?"

No one answered. The silence said enough.

Selena rolled her eyes. "Y'all are such downers."

"You just scared they'll arrest you for loitering?" Sirius grinned.

"Please," she said. "I'd *persuade* them into carrying my bags home."

TK chuckled. "That's *if* you don't tell them to give you their patrol drone."

Selena smirked. "Don't tempt me."

That was their balance. Light sarcasm masking heavy truths. They all knew what they were — anomalies, outcasts, walking caution signs. Even in the parts of the city where people turned a blind eye, someone was always watching.

Then, as if summoned by the weight in the air, Ameari reached into her backpack and pulled out a white envelope. "This came to my door this morning," she said, holding it up. "No name. Just this."

Kevin blinked. "Wait — you too?"

They all had one. Same sleek envelope. No return address. Inside: a note printed on metallic cardstock.

You have been selected for a unique opportunity. A safe facility has been prepared for gifted youth like yourself — a chance to train, live, and be seen for your potential, not your burden. Transportation arrives tomorrow at 0900. Pack light. Trust few.

Selena read hers again for the fifth time. "Sketchy as hell."

"But tempting," TK said.

Kevin looked around. “What if it’s real?”

“What if it’s a trap?” Sirius countered. “You don’t think it’s weird? No official logo. No org name. Just... ‘trust few’? Sounds like someone watched too many spy movies.”

“But it *knows* about us,” Ameari whispered. “My silk. Your sparks. TK’s machines. That doesn’t happen by accident.”

Selena folded her arms. “So what? We show up, and what? Get ‘rehabilitated’? Turned into weapons?”

Kevin leaned forward. “Or maybe... maybe it’s what our parents always wanted. A way out. Not just to survive — but to matter.”

That silenced them.

He wasn’t wrong.

Their parents had lived through the shift — the time when Gifted meant opportunity. They’d seen the slow collapse. Watched the headlines change from “*Miracle Workers*” to “*Liability in the System*.” They had tried to protect their kids from that same fate. And now, this invitation might be the only shot left.

“My mom told me to go,” Ameari finally said. “Said... maybe I won’t have to hide anymore.”

“My dad just said, ‘Don’t screw it up,’” Sirius muttered.

TK’s voice softened. “Mine just said, ‘Be better than us.’”

Kevin looked down at his bag of pistachios, fingers tightening around it.

“I think I’m going,” he said. “If it’s fake, I’ll adapt. If it’s real... then maybe I’ll finally be more than the block’s punching bag.”

Selena sighed. “I swear, if this turns into some cult, I am *not* drinking the punch.”

Ameari smiled faintly. “I’ll make sure the punch bowl has a silk lid.”

They laughed. It was nervous. Fractured. But real.

The night deepened, wrapping the city in soft static as distant sirens howled through the steel jungle. They sat there a little longer, sharing fears, stories, snacks. Just six misfits huddled on the edge of something they couldn’t name.

When the streetlight finally died above them, no one moved.

Morning would come fast. And with it — the program.

Whatever it really was.

Chapter Two

Chapter II – Welcome Home

The morning air was sharp and still, the streets quieter than usual. Even the ever-humming drones overhead seemed to keep their distance, as if aware something unusual was about to happen.

One by one, the kids gathered at the cracked bus stop sign on the edge of their worn-down neighborhood. Selena arrived first, earbuds in, arms crossed like she wasn't waiting for anyone. Sirius and Kevin came next — the former with static still flickering around his fingertips from the shortcut he took through a broken junction box, the latter munching loudly on a bag of pistachios like it was a breakfast substitute.

Ameari kept a bit of distance from the group, shoulders slightly hunched, eyes scanning the sky. Her long silk ribbon trailed behind her like a silent companion, folding and unfolding in quiet fidgets. TK rolled up last, a set of mechanical goggles hanging from their neck, gears ticking from a half-built device sticking out of their satchel.

"Is this even real?" Sirius mumbled, scratching the back of his neck.

"If it's a prank, it's a well-funded one," TK muttered, eyes scanning the horizon.

Then, exactly at 0900, a sleek, silver bus turned the corner without making a sound. No rumble, no screech — just a whisper of motion as it pulled to a stop in front of them. The doors hissed open.

Out stepped a man in a long emerald coat with gold trim, shoes polished like mirrors, and a wide grin stretching beneath a pair of purple-tinted sunglasses.

"Rise and shine, beautiful disasters!" he announced with flair, voice echoing off the crumbling brick walls. "The Academy awaits!"

There was a pause. Kevin blinked. "Uh... who—?"

"Jay Chance. Instructor. Legend. Dream-crusher. Depends on the day," he said with a dramatic bow. "You may call me *Hard Copy*, but *Jay* will do just fine. Now get on the bus before I decide to sing show tunes."

Selena sighed but boarded first, curiosity winning over suspicion. TK followed, adjusting their goggles, then Sirius, Kevin, and finally Ameari, who glanced back at the street one last time before stepping inside.

The interior was unlike anything they expected. Smooth leather seats, glowing interior lights, even digital nameplates flickering softly as they approached each row. It felt... official.

Each kid found their seat, quiet now, the hum of possibility settling over them like fog.

A few minutes passed in silence as the city slowly rolled away outside their windows.

Then, gently, a soft rustling. Ameari raised one of her silk tendrils like a hand.

Jay, who had been theatrically scrolling through a holographic tablet at the front, looked up with a grin. "Yes?"

She blinked. "...What exactly are we here for?"

Jay tapped his chin. "Excellent question, Ameari. Very polite. I was wondering who would crack first."

He stood, hands clasped behind his back as he began pacing slowly down the aisle like a flamboyant drill sergeant.

"You're here because someone thinks you have potential. Raw, unfiltered, untrained *potential*. Dangerous, beautiful, misunderstood potential." He paused beside Kevin's seat, raised an eyebrow. "Some of you adapt to everything but still avoid doing your chores." Kevin coughed into his pistachios. "That's not legally proven."

Jay kept moving. "The Academy exists to help people like you hone your powers. Not just *use* them — *master* them. Refine them into weapons, tools, shields... statements."

Sirius tilted his head. "So... we're here to become heroes?"

Jay chuckled, and it was... odd. Not mocking, but tired. Like he'd been asked that too many times and still didn't know how to answer.

"Heroes," he repeated. "Yes. That's the word they like me to use."

TK narrowed their eyes. "You don't like it?"

"I think it's... limiting," Jay said, more softly now. "But that's a conversation for later. When you've earned it."

The bus continued to glide through the city, slowly leaving the rusted edges of society behind. Buildings grew taller, cleaner, glass and steel replacing chipped concrete and rusted siding.

When they finally passed through two large security gates, the road curved into a long driveway lined with trees — *real* ones, not synthetic. At the end stood the Academy.

It was more fortress than school — wide white marble walls, massive open courtyards, and towers with gleaming panels that caught the sun and scattered it like prisms. A flag fluttered at the highest point: a stylized symbol of interlocking hands, glowing faintly.

Kevin sat forward, pistachios forgotten. "We live here now?"

Jay turned, his sunglasses slipping down just enough to reveal tired, honest eyes behind the bravado.

“Welcome home,” he said.

And with that, the bus doors hissed open again, and the chapter ended not with answers... but with the sense that everything was about to change.

Chapter Three

Chapter III – Orientation

The inside of the academy felt more like a luxury institute than a place for misfits. Marble floors glistened under pristine lighting, and digital panels softly blinked with the academy's crest — a minimalist phoenix in silver and blue. Jay led the kids through the main atrium with a flamboyant flair in every step, arms swinging dramatically as if presenting a stage.

"Now, I hope you all packed more than just bad attitudes and teenage angst," Jay grinned, spinning once on his heel. "Because this place? This is where we turn potential into purpose."

The group followed him down the first hallway. The classroom was spacious, all glass walls and smartboards. Holographic displays hovered at every desk.

"This'll be where your brains get the bulk of the work," Jay said, knocking on one of the desks. "Lesson one: just because you have powers doesn't mean you're done learning."

Kevin flopped into a seat and whispered, "Man, do the desks adapt too?"

Jay smirked. "Only if you get good grades."

Next was the training grounds — an open-air arena behind the building, reinforced with energy shielding and steel barricades. There were mock cityscapes, weighted drones, obstacle towers. Sirius' eyes practically sparked with excitement, and even Ameari looked quietly impressed.

"You'll each get your time here," Jay said. "Some of you will love it. Some of you will cry. That's the process."

Kevin grinned. "So, crying is part of training? Good to know."

The lunchroom was massive, with chrome counters, colorful lighting, and more food options than any of them had ever seen. Kevin locked on to a wall dispenser labeled Snacks: Nuts & Seeds, bolted over, and triumphantly returned with a bag of pistachios.

"Found my sanctuary," he declared.

Jay led the kids through one final hallway and stopped at a set of sliding doors. "Your dorms," he said. "Common lounge, boys' hallway to the left, girls' hallway to the right. You'll be sleeping here, relaxing here, and probably arguing here, too."

The lounge had soft seating, dim lighting, and a wall of books and game consoles. The group scattered into the space, some sinking into chairs, others wandering silently.

Jay clapped his hands. "Get settled, explore, and try not to blow anything up. Orientation week starts tomorrow."

And with that, he strode out, cape flowing behind him as the door hissed shut.

Later That Day

The group eventually settled in, each reacting to their new surroundings in their own way.

In the lounge, Ameari draped herself across a corner of the couch, fingers idly threading her silk into braided patterns as she mulled over the day. Selena was already lounging, scrolling through a newsfeed on a sleek academy tablet she “borrowed.”

“So what do you think about Jay?” Ameari asked, soft but clear.

Selena smirked. “Flamboyant. Definitely trying too hard to make a first impression. But the guy knows how to make an entrance.”

“He seems... kind, though,” Ameari said. “I think he really wants to help us.”

Across campus, the boys had migrated back to the lunchroom. Kevin, of course, was on his second bag of pistachios, cracking shells with the speed of someone who’d clearly practiced.

“Okay, but seriously,” Sirius said between bites of a protein bar, “how is he so dramatic? Like... does he *practice* that in a mirror?”

“He’s the instructor version of a musical number,” TK added, voice dry. “But he’s got skill. I looked him up. They used to call him the Power Architect.”

Kevin leaned back in his chair. “I like him. He didn’t flinch when I pulled a crab claw out of my wrist at the entrance.”

Sirius coughed. “That... is the worst possible sentence I’ve ever heard.”

The rest of the day passed in a haze of curiosity and quiet awe. The kids explored the winding halls, discovered hidden rooms with sensor-locked doors, and even stumbled across a rooftop garden filled with strange flora.

When night came, they returned to the dorm. Lights dimmed gradually as the academy shifted into a nighttime routine. One by one, they filtered into their respective hallways, the hum of conversation giving way to silence.

In the common lounge, a strand of Ameari’s silk lingered draped across the back of a chair like a quiet bookmark.

Chapter Four

Chapter IV: Shadows in the Back Row

Morning light poured through the hallway windows as the group made their way toward their first official class at the Academy. The halls were quiet, almost eerily so, with polished floors and walls too clean for comfort. None of them quite knew what to expect, but they moved as a loose pack—Kevin cracking pistachios, Sirius zapping his fingers out of boredom, Ameari occasionally trailing her silk behind her like a curious ribbon.

The classroom itself was more like a small auditorium, sleek and softly lit, with a long curved board at the front and an assortment of desks set in tiers. At the very back corner, someone was already sitting.

A boy. Headphones on. Leaning against the window, arms crossed. His eyes weren't on them but somewhere outside, lost in whatever was playing in his ears. Behind him stood a shadowy figure — identical to Jay in posture and stance but made entirely of flickering, inky smoke.

"Uh..." Kevin leaned toward Sirius. "Do we... know him?"

Sirius shook his head. "That's creepy, right? Just me?"

Ameari tilted her head, narrowing her eyes. "That's Jay's stance. The shadow."

TK frowned. "Then why is Jay's shadow just... chilling with him?"

As they filed in and sat down, the boy finally turned his head and gave them a slow, lazy wave with one hand. Then he looked back out the window, uninterested. The shadow beside him slowly melted into the floor, vanishing without a trace.

"...What the hell," Selena muttered, raising an eyebrow.

Before anyone could say more, the door burst open and in waltzed Jay in full flamboyant flair — bright coat flowing like a cape, hair perfectly tousled, smile full of caffeine and chaotic energy.

"Good morning, my little anomalies!" he called, throwing his arms wide. "Today's the day we begin turning raw potential into legend!"

Then he saw Azrael in the back.

"Oh for the love of—Azrael, introduce yourself." Jay sighed, placing his hands on his hips.

Azrael didn't move.

Jay took a deep breath, rubbed his temples, then snapped his fingers. Silk burst from his palm in clean, sharp threads that wrapped themselves into a heavy, fabric mallet — distinctly *Ameari's* weaving style.

Before anyone could react, he lobbed it across the room.

THWUMP.

It smacked Azrael square in the back of the head, causing his headphones to jolt slightly off. He groaned and slowly sat up straighter, turning to glare at Jay like an annoyed cat being nudged off a warm laptop.

“Fine,” Azrael muttered. He stood and looked at the rest of the class, utterly unbothered by the silk attack.

“Name’s Azrael. Codename’s Ash. I summon shadow creatures based on stuff I’ve seen before while also stealing the power of whoever’s shadow it is. I can teleport between shadows too. That’s it. Now you know. Can I sit down?”

Jay gave a flourishing bow. “Thank you *ever* so much.”

Azrael plopped back into his seat and replaced his headphones without another word.

“Now that the drama is out of the way...” Jay clapped his hands and smiled. “Time to put your talents to the test. Everyone, gather your gear—today, we’re heading to the sparring grounds.”

“Wait, already?” Kevin asked, perking up.

Jay winked. “There’s no better way to learn than a little friendly combat. Besides, some of you have been itching to show off since breakfast.”

The group exchanged a few glances — some nervous, others excited. Sirius cracked his knuckles. Ameari tightened the silk threads curled around her wrists. Selena sighed dramatically but stood anyway.

As they began to rise from their seats, Jay turned back once more.

“Oh, and try not to blow anything up,” he added cheerfully. “The Academy insurance paperwork is *nightmarish*.”

With that, the group filed out, the door shutting behind them as their footsteps echoed down the hall.

Back in the classroom, Azrael lingered one second longer, the sunlight catching on a subtle grin.

Chapter Five

Chapter V: First Sparks

The sparring grounds were massive — a circular arena surrounded by a dome of reinforced glass, sunlight filtering through above. It looked more like something from a tournament than a school. Jay stood near the center on a raised platform, clapping his hands like a game show host.

“Alright, lovebirds and loose cannons — it’s time for our first real test!”

The group stood in a wide semicircle, nerves buzzing. Some bounced on their feet. Others stayed motionless. Azrael leaned against a wall in the shadows, as usual, half there and half not.

Jay raised a hand. “Match one — Selena versus TK. Let’s get spicy.”

Selena sauntered into the arena with her usual dramatic flair. TK followed reluctantly, shoulders hunched, muttering something about how this felt unnecessary. Jay stepped back with a grin.

Selena didn’t even raise a hand.

“TK,” she said, voice calm, “You know I’m going to win. Do you really want to waste the energy?”

TK looked at her. Blinked.

Then sighed.

“I forfeit.”

The arena was dead silent.

Jay blinked. “...Huh. Well. I suppose that *is* a win.”

Selena gave a smug little curtsy. “One doesn’t need to sweat to win a war.”

TK walked off, shaking his head. “Unbelievable...”

Jay clapped his hands again. “Round two! Kevin versus Sirius! Let’s turn up the voltage.”

Kevin cracked his knuckles and popped a pistachio in his mouth as he strolled into the ring. Sirius followed, fists already sparking with small arcs of lightning.

“Go easy on me, Thunderboy,” Kevin grinned.

“Not a chance.”

The match was fast — Sirius darted around, zapping Kevin from multiple angles. For a moment, it looked like he might win. He even got a direct hit that sent Kevin stumbling.

But then Kevin chuckled, and his skin shimmered — rubber.

The next shock did nothing.

“Cute,” Kevin said. Then he slammed forward, not hard — just enough to knock Sirius flat.

“Winner: Kevin!”

As they exited, Kevin tossed him a protein bar. “You’ve got speed. You just gotta commit. Stop playing keepaway — fight like you mean it.”

Sirius grunted, accepting the snack.

“Final match!” Jay beamed. “Azrael versus Ameari. This should be... poetic.”

Ameari stepped forward, glancing once at Azrael. Her hands danced and wove quickly — delicate strands forming a tight weave around her fists. Silk gloves. Reinforced strikes.

Azrael stepped in slowly, not summoning anything yet. He simply watched her, then smiled.

The fight began with Ameari launching a flurry of precise punches. Azrael ducked and weaved, vanishing between her shadows, teleporting just enough to frustrate her aim.

“You’re strong,” he said casually. “But you’re boxing with art supplies.”

Ameari’s eyes narrowed.

Azrael raised a hand. “Let me try something.”

He touched a nearby shadow — his own — and it surged outward. From it rose a shadowy version of Ameari, perfectly mimicking her stance.

The crowd gasped.

The shadow wove a wall — intricate, hard silk layered in a geometric shield.

Azrael moved behind it, then allowed the shadow to dissolve into him.

His own hands lit with threads — clumsy, at first, but then deliberate. He mirrored her glove weave... almost perfectly.

They clashed — fists meeting fists, silk versus silk. It was close.

Azrael landed the final blow, knocking her off balance just enough for Jay to call it.

“Winner: Azrael.”

Ameari sat up, not angry — thoughtful.

Azrael walked over and offered her a hand. “Your technique’s solid. But you’re thinking like it’s just fabric. Think origami. Think possibilities.”

She blinked, took his hand, and nodded. “Show me later?”

“Sure,” he said. “If I’m in the mood.”

Jay clapped from the sidelines. “Excellent! You all survived — mostly emotionally. That’s good enough for day one.”

As they left the arena, the sun dipped low. The day had only just begun, but something had shifted. There was fire now — in their focus, in their footsteps.

Chapter Six

Chapter VI: Origami Lessons

The training dome had barely cooled down when Azrael disappeared from the arena in a flicker of shadow, but his exit hadn't gone unnoticed. As the others filed out, Kevin tossed his last pistachio shell onto the floor and jabbed a thumb toward the hall.

"Alright, screw this. I'm finding that emo magician and getting some answers. You guys with me?"

TK cracked his knuckles. "He copied Ameari. That was Jay's thing, wasn't it? The hell was that?"

Selena nodded, arms crossed. "Whatever it was, I want to know how he did it. And why."

The three of them tracked Azrael down by his usual trail of cryptic indifference. They found him leaning under a shadow-drenched overhang outside the dorms, earbuds in, hood up, staring at the sky like it had personally offended him.

Kevin stepped forward. "Alright, shadow boy. Start talking. What in the fresh hell was that stunt? Since when can you steal powers? That's Jay's deal, right?"

Azrael slowly pulled one earbud out, raising a brow. "Wow, direct. And here I thought you guys were gonna butter me up first."

TK wasn't in the mood. "Answer the damn question."

Azrael rolled his eyes. "Alright, alright. It's a long story and I'm not in the mood to be a storyteller, but here's the sparknotes: I'm a nice little military screw-up. Got tossed into a program, came out with a few... fun powers. One of them? Shadow summon. I copy what I see, use what I summon. That's how I met Jay."

Selena blinked. "You *met* Jay in the military?"

Azrael smirked. "Let's just say he wasn't always a fashion disaster in charge of teenagers."

Kevin opened his mouth to ask another question, but Azrael vanished into the nearest shadow, his voice trailing behind him.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I've got plans with the short one. Gotta teach her origami."

The three stood there stunned for a moment.

"He just... dipped," TK said flatly.

"Without even a sarcastic goodbye," Selena muttered.

Just then, Jay rounded the corner, hands in his pockets, humming to himself. When he spotted the trio, he stopped.

Kevin narrowed his eyes. "Jay."

TK crossed his arms. "Jay."

Selena tilted her head. "Jay."

Jay blinked at them, their intense glares locking on him like lasers. He took one step back.

"I don't get paid enough for this!!" he yelled, turning on his heel and sprinting down the hallway like a man fleeing the apocalypse.

In one of the empty side halls of the training facility, Ameari sat cross-legged on the floor, silk trailing from her sleeves as she replayed the earlier fight in her head. Her weaves were strong. Precise. But not enough.

Azrael emerged from her shadow without a sound. "You're early. Or maybe I'm late."

She looked up, not surprised. "You said you'd teach me."

He shrugged and sat opposite her. "Fair enough. Lesson one: you're boring."

She narrowed her eyes.

"No offense," he added, holding up a hand. "But you treat your ability like it's just gloves and punches. It's art. You're painting with silk and only using beige."

Ameari exhaled. "Then teach me color."

Azrael grinned. He lifted a thread from his shadow and shaped it into her weave. Not a glove this time, but a folded fan.

"Think of your obi as an extension of yourself. Flexible. Expressive. Not just a blunt tool."

He shifted the weave again. A shield. A whip. A kite.

"Combat potential," he said, gesturing. "Fan: quick parries and deceptive strikes. Shield: obvious. Whip: control and disarm. Kite? Distraction. Wind drag. Who knows."

Ameari watched, eyes widening.

"You care about this," she said quietly.

Azrael looked away. "Sometimes."

They spent the next hour folding and unfolding weaves, reshaping silks into new forms. Her motions grew looser. More fluid. She hesitated less. Thought more. She tried a spear, then shifted it into a net. A net into a harness. A harness into a trip wire system.

Finally, Azrael leaned back, satisfied.

“Alright,” he said. “Final lesson: don’t use your hands for a week. Just the obi. You need to learn how to speak through it without leaning on your fists.”

Ameari stared at him, mouth opening to protest, then closed it.

She nodded.

Azrael vanished before she could say thank you, his laughter echoing behind him.

She smiled despite herself, silks weaving slowly around her shoulders like wings.

Chapter Seven

Chapter VII: A Test of Character

The classroom was abuzz with idle chatter as the students filtered in, most of them still sore from yesterday's sparring matches. Ameari sat cross-legged on her chair, absently folding a strip of her obi cloth in her fingers. TK was slumped at his desk, nursing a bruised ego. Kevin was already munching on something loud and crunchy—probably pistachios—and Selena sat upright with military posture, scanning the room with quiet interest.

Azrael, as always, had claimed his back corner, headphones on, eyes turned toward the sky beyond the window.

Jay burst into the room, dramatically twirling a clipboard like it was part of a Broadway number.

"Class!" he sang. "Today is the day we test your hearts!"

Everyone groaned.

"Is it a power test?" TK asked hopefully.

"Are we sparring again?" Kevin added with an eager grin.

Jay clutched his chest as if wounded. "You wound me, children. No, no—today is a far more intimate challenge. Today... you'll be tested on each other."

A wave of confusion passed over the class like a slow-moving storm. Eyebrows raised. Heads turned. Even Azrael removed one earbud to pay attention.

"What?" Selena finally said, voice as sharp as ever.

Jay twirled again and pointed at her like she'd nailed the punchline. "Exactly! You'll be graded on your knowledge of each other. Names. Powers. Habits. Strengths. Weaknesses. You all want to be heroes? Well, heroes work in teams, and teams know each other. Intimately."

Silence.

Then Kevin broke it. "So we're taking... a get-to-know-you quiz?"

Jay beamed. "Bingo, my crunchy friend!"

A few more groans followed.

"So... we're being punished for not talking to each other?" Sirius asked.

Jay tapped the clipboard. "Not punishment. Opportunity."

Azrael let out an exaggerated sigh and put his earbud back in. “Great. A pop quiz on people I have no interest in.”

Jay shot him a look, but said nothing.

“Start today,” he announced instead. “You have three days to talk. Learn. Bond. Or don’t. But your grade depends on it.”

With that, he dramatically flicked his scarf and strolled out.

The next few days brought a shift in the academy’s atmosphere.

Instead of split-offs and silences, conversations bloomed like weeds in the cracks. TK asked Selena about her strange command-based power—though she only smirked and responded with, “Don’t ask stupid questions.” Kevin pestered Sirius with questions about heat absorption while demonstrating how his rubbery skin kept his snacks warm.

Even the lounge, once an echo chamber of quiet breathing and separate screens, was now filled with group banter. Selena sat with the others for the first time. TK cracked jokes and didn’t get punched. Sirius and Kevin had somehow ended up comparing protein bars.

Ameari stayed mostly quiet, but observant. Her eyes flitted to Azrael more than once.

Azrael, for his part, remained immovable. He kept his distance. Never joined any group chats. When asked a question, he shrugged or grunted. Any inquiry about his power or background earned a sigh and a cold glance.

Eventually, Kevin had enough.

“Look, I get it,” he said one evening, voice loud enough for everyone to hear. “He’s a loner. He’s cool. He doesn’t care. Fine. But if this test is about knowing your teammates, then he’s failing us.”

Azrael didn’t respond.

“You don’t know anything about us either,” Sirius added. “And you don’t even try.”

Azrael remained still, leaning against the wall, a shadow curling idly beneath his feet like smoke.

Ameari shifted slightly but didn’t speak. She remembered the training session—the way he had shaped her silk with ease, the patience in his instructions. That warmth. That care. It had been real. But now?

It was like it never happened.

Jay never addressed the tension directly. He floated in and out of rooms, humming songs, watching, waiting.

Test day came with no fanfare.

Each student was handed a sheet of paper. Ten questions. All about each other.

What's TK's power?

What is Sirius's combat weakness?

What does Ameari's cloth resemble culturally?

What animal does Kevin turn into when threatened?

Who prefers solitude during lunch?

What is Selena's command power limit?

What does Azrael always wear on his wrist?

They weren't textbook questions. They were observant ones. Human ones.

Most of the class flew through the quiz, confident in their new bonds and fresh insights.

Azrael didn't pick up his pencil for ten minutes. Then, without lifting his head, he filled it out in under three.

Jay returned ten minutes later, dramatically flipping a golden envelope.

"I would grade these by hand," he said, "but alas, I have a life."

He snapped his fingers. A small shadow unfolded from the corner of the room and handed out the tests—already graded.

Gasps spread as quickly as the papers did.

"Sixty?!" Kevin barked.

"Fifty?" TK frowned. "But I knew all your names!"

Selena flipped her page, expression neutral. "Seventy. Not bad."

Ameari stared at her paper. A bold red 100% marked the top.

She blinked. Then looked up, eyes scanning the room.

Only one other test matched hers.

Azrael, slouched back in his seat, hadn't even bothered looking at the score.

Jay clapped once.

"Interesting results! Seems most of you are learning well—except when it comes to two individuals." He glanced at Ameari and Azrael. "The only two to receive perfect scores."

Murmurs.

“What?” Kevin said. “No way—he didn’t even talk to anyone.”

“Yeah, how the hell did he get a hundred?” TK added.

Ameari looked over at Azrael. He didn’t return the glance, but there was a slight smirk on his face.

Kevin’s jaw tightened. “You really are a jerk, huh? Watching everyone and saying nothing.”

Azrael shrugged, eyes still on the window. “I pay attention. Doesn’t mean I want to talk.”

Jay chimed in, “You’d be surprised how much you can learn when you’re not talking.”

The class sat in stunned silence.

Ameari looked down at her paper again.

It didn’t feel like victory.

But it did feel like understanding.

Chapter Eight

Chapter VIII: The Silent Treatment

Azrael stepped into the classroom, earphones in, gaze distant. As always, he moved like a ghost — there, but never quite part of anything. He headed straight for the back, slouched into his usual seat, and looked out the window like the world outside was the only one worth paying attention to.

No one greeted him.

The moment he entered, conversations died. Laughs were swallowed, sentences cut off. Chairs creaked awkwardly as everyone shifted in their seats to avoid looking at him.

Azrael didn't react.

He just stared out the window, as if none of it mattered.

Ameari walked in shortly after, the only one unaffected by the strange tension. She paused for a beat, her gaze drifting to Azrael's corner. Then she walked over casually.

"Morning."

Azrael gave her a small nod, barely turning his head.

Selena stood up, eyes sharp. "Why are you still talking to him?"

Ameari frowned. "Excuse me?"

Kevin crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, looking annoyed. "You're wasting your time."

"Seriously," TK added. "He clearly doesn't want anything to do with us."

"He helped me train," Ameari said defensively.

Kevin scoffed. "And you think that makes him a team player? He didn't say a *word* during the test. Didn't even try to connect."

"He got a perfect score," Selena muttered. "Just like you. But no one else could answer a thing about either of you."

Ameari narrowed her eyes. "That's not my fault."

"No," TK said. "But it is his. And you're the only one still treating him like a human being."

Before the argument could escalate, a shadow flickered across the floor.

Azrael was suddenly behind them.

Kevin jumped, spinning around.

Azrael smirked. "Hey. It's not her fault she has better taste than you."

Kevin glared, fists balling up. "You want to go, shadow boy?"

"Not particularly," Azrael replied coolly. "But I do find it funny you're mad she treats me better than the rest of you."

"You shut everyone out," TK snapped. "You didn't give us a chance."

"You didn't *want* a chance," Azrael said, stepping past them. "You wanted to pass a test. There's a difference."

Selena's voice sharpened. "You're acting like we're the bad guys here."

Azrael glanced back. "Not the bad guys. Just predictable."

He kept walking, hands in his pockets.

Kevin growled. "We *did* try to know you."

Azrael shrugged. "Then try harder."

Jay walked by at that exact moment, clearly sensing the rising tension. "What's going on—?"

Kevin turned his attention on him like a missile. "Jay. Seriously. You knew about all this? His power? His past?"

Jay held his hands up. "Hey, I don't get paid enough to be his therapist."

And with that, he backed away—then spun on his heel and ran out of the room.

The room was dead silent for a beat.

Then TK muttered, "Coward."

Ameari exhaled through her nose and turned to go, but Kevin blocked her path.

"You really shouldn't hang out with him."

Ameari glared. "Why? Because you don't understand him?"

"Because he *doesn't* want to be understood."

"I think you're wrong," she said quietly. "He just doesn't trust easily."

Kevin's jaw tensed. "You're making a mistake."

A shadow rippled across the floor again.

Azrael reappeared in front of them, arms folded.

"Enough," he said.

They stared.

"If you really want to understand me so badly," he said calmly, "we can do it the only way that works."

His eyes narrowed.

"Fight me."

Selena blinked. "What?"

"Combat's the only language some of you speak, right?" he asked. "Then let's talk."

TK tilted his head. "You serious?"

"All of you," Azrael said. "Against me."

Kevin's lips curled into a grin. "Fine by me."

Selena cracked her knuckles. "Let's see what you're really hiding behind all that edge."

Ameari stepped forward, shaking her head. "I'm not fighting."

Everyone looked at her.

"I already understand him," she said.

Azrael met her gaze with a rare flicker of something almost... grateful.

Then he turned, shadows curling around his feet, and walked toward the training field.

The others followed, tense and determined.

The air itself seemed to shift.

The fight was coming.

Chapter Nine

Chapter IX: Language of War

The wind whispered across the training field as they took their places. The afternoon sun stretched shadows long across the cracked stone.

Azrael stood calmly at the center of the circle they'd formed, earbuds in, hands in his pockets.

Selena stepped forward first, a smirk curling across her lips. "Azrael," she said, voice clear and commanding. "Stand down."

Nothing.

"I said, surrender."

Still nothing.

Then he slowly raised one hand... and pointed to his ears.

Earbuds.

Selena's smirk vanished.

Azrael pulled one out halfway and spoke, bored: "You're going to need more than a bossy voice and a pretty face."

Selena clenched her jaw.

"You're too basic," he continued, eyes narrowing. "Get some real combat capabilities. Until then—" he waved her off, "sit this one out."

Humiliated, Selena took a reluctant step back, fists clenched but offering no argument.

TK hurled a palm-sized sphere at him — one of his signature concussive bombs. It flew fast, hissing with kinetic energy.

Azrael didn't flinch.

A shadow flicked outward from beneath his feet, forming a snaking tendril that slapped the bomb mid-air and flung it straight back.

It burst just in front of TK — blinding him with sound and smoke.

TK stumbled, coughing, ears ringing.

Azrael's voice cut through: "Bombs are a crutch. Get creative."

Sirius darted in, electricity crackling between his fingertips. "Let's see how you like this!" he shouted, lightning lashing forward.

But Azrael moved like smoke — slipping just past the arcs of power with inhuman grace. Before Sirius could try again, a shadow shot up from his feet and coiled around his limbs, locking him in place.

"You've got the spark," Azrael said, walking calmly past him. "But you're too stiff. Predictable."

Sirius struggled but couldn't break free.

Then came the rumble of footsteps — heavier, faster.

Kevin charged.

Azrael turned and cracked a rare, crooked grin.

"Oh, it's *you* next, isn't it?" he said, stepping lightly to the side as Kevin barreled forward.

In one motion, Azrael stuck a foot out.

Kevin tripped.

Hard.

He hit the ground with a heavy *thud* and a grunt, dust blooming around him.

Azrael leaned over him, voice low. "You're strong, sure. You can't die — impressive."

He kicked the dirt near Kevin's hand. "But that just means I can break every bone in your body without worry."

Kevin glared up at him, jaw tight.

"You're too rooted in the basics," Azrael said. "Strength without creativity is just a blunt instrument."

Then — a glint of silver behind him.

Too late.

A sharp jab pierced the back of Azrael's neck.

His eyes widened.

Jay stood behind him, syringe in hand.

"Sorry, kid," Jay muttered. "Protocol."

Azrael's knees buckled.

He fell forward, shadows flickering wildly before fizzling into nothing as his body hit the ground.

Jay looked up at the stunned circle of students. His tone was casual, but his face was pale.
“We’ll, uh... try not to let him do this again.”

Everyone just stared — frozen, half stunned, half scared.

Jay looked at Kevin specifically. “And Kevin? He was serious. If I hadn’t stopped him, he would’ve made you *feel* every nerve in your body scream until you forgot your name.”

Jay tapped the empty syringe against his palm. “Just remember... he’s not even trying most of the time.”

And with that, he vanished in a blink — teleporting away, leaving silence behind.

The group stood still, hearts pounding, dust still hanging in the air.

No one said a word.

Azrael lay motionless on the ground.

And the shadows around him began to stir.

Chapter Ten

Chapter X: Echoes in His Absence

The classroom felt quieter without him.

Not peaceful — just... lacking. The space he usually occupied near the window remained empty for days, a hollow seat surrounded by sidelong glances and unfinished thoughts.

Jay stood at the front, the same as always, flipping through reports with one hand while sipping bad coffee with the other. But his posture was sharper. His patience, thinner.

"Where is he?" Selena asked on the third day.

Jay didn't look up. "On a mission."

"What kind of mission?" TK pressed, leaning forward. "Is it dangerous? Secret? Does it even exist?"

Jay finally raised his eyes. "That's classified."

Kevin crossed his arms. "Not fair. We've been training too. Why does *he* get to go?"

Jay set his mug down and folded his arms.

"He got to go," Jay said evenly, "because he was *ready*."

A heavy pause settled.

Jay let the silence stew before continuing, "Azrael gave you all solid critiques. The only one who took it seriously — who *listened* — was Ameari."

Eyes drifted to her, but she didn't react. Just kept staring down at the desk, face unreadable.

Jay scanned the room again. "The rest of you? You're improving, sure. But improvement without change is just repetition."

Then he went back to reading, clearly done with the discussion.

No one argued again.

In the days that followed, things began to shift.

Selena showed up early to class, practicing jabs and stances with bruised knuckles and fierce eyes. She'd found a combat instructor — someone blunt who didn't care about style, just survival.

TK scrapped all his old devices. Every free hour, he huddled over a workbench, fingers blackened from wires and burns, building something new. Smaller. Smarter.

Sirius spent long nights behind the gym, sweat dripping down his brow as he whipped lightning into shapes — coils, arcs, serpents — trying to make it dance instead of just lash.

Only Kevin stood still.

He trained, yes. But always the same way — hard punches, sharp blocks, brutal takedowns. Efficient. Strong. But still rooted. Still predictable.

And he *knew* it.

A week passed.

Monday morning.

Jay entered the room like usual — plain, calm, unbothered.

But today, behind him...

Azrael walked in.

His footsteps were as quiet as ever, his expression unreadable. But there was something different — a weight in his shoulders, a drag in his steps.

The earbuds were still in, though they weren't playing.

Dark circles ringed his eyes. The usually sharp fire behind them was dimmer. Quieter.

He glanced at the class.

"Yo," he said simply, then wandered over to the window seat and sank into it without another word.

Everyone watched in stunned silence.

Jay didn't explain. Didn't introduce. Didn't acknowledge his return at all.

Azrael just stared out the window.

And class resumed.

Chapter Eleven

Chapter XI: Threads and Footwork

Azrael had been back for two days. Two quiet, exhausted, tension-drenched days. No outbursts. No fights. Just quiet. But Kevin wasn't letting that sit.

He stared across the room at the worn figure staring out the window. The circles under Azrael's eyes weren't just exhaustion; they were distance. But Kevin didn't care.

He marched up to the desk, stopping only a foot from him.

"Teach me," Kevin said flatly.

Azrael didn't even glance his way. "No."

Jay, seated nearby, didn't look up from his tablet. "He's not in the mood, Kevin. Drop it."

Kevin narrowed his eyes. "He told me I was rooted. Fine. Show me how not to be."

Azrael exhaled slowly, still looking out the window.

Jay turned a page. "You can beat a training dummy senseless, but the kid hasn't slept in a week. Pick your battles."

Kevin folded his arms. "Then maybe he'll sleep better after some exercise."

Azrael finally turned. His expression was unreadable, but there was a flicker of annoyance.

"Fine," Azrael muttered. "Training grounds. Now."

The field was wide and empty, a breeze teasing the grass. Kevin rolled his shoulders, eager.

Azrael stood across from him, eyes sunken but sharp. He didn't take a stance. Just stood there.

"Alright," Kevin said, settling into his usual position.

Azrael sighed. "There. That."

Kevin blinked. "What?"

"That stance," Azrael said. "You give away your lead side instantly. You telegraph your power hand, your weight distribution, your direction. It's a billboard saying, 'Hit me here.'"

Kevin frowned, adjusting. "This is standard form. Military approved."

"Exactly. That's your problem."

He walked a slow circle around Kevin. "You're too rooted. Too basic. You fight by the book, not by the moment. You're readable. Predictable."

Kevin squared his shoulders. "So what? You want me to be flashy?"

Azrael snorted. "No. I want you to be fluid. Learn to fight discreetly. Make your movement a question, not an answer. You need to stop thinking you can only adapt through your power. Adapt your *approach*. React. Flow. *Feel* what they're going to do, and move with it, not against it."

He stopped pacing and looked Kevin dead in the eye.

"The next time someone fights you, they shouldn't know what hit them until they're already on the ground."

Kevin was silent. He didn't argue.

Azrael stepped away, leaving the advice in the air.

Ameari sat beneath a tree near the edge of the courtyard, practicing wrapping techniques with her obi. The fabric fluttered slightly with each flick of her hand, forming shapes, then unraveling.

Azrael approached from behind, hands in his pockets.

"Hey, kid."

Ameari looked up. "Hm?"

He crouched down, eyes narrowing. "Your obi's fraying."

She blinked. "It's fine. I'll fix it later."

Azrael didn't respond. He simply snapped his fingers, and a thin shadow coiled outward, solidifying into a small sewing kit. Needles of polished black, thread like silk.

"Sit down."

She sat, startled by his tone.

He slid closer, gently taking the obi. His fingers were methodical as he threaded a needle and began stitching.

"You need to take care of this," he muttered. "It's not just cloth. It's part of you."

Ameari watched his hands, precise and practiced.

"It's just a tool," she said softly.

Azrael didn't look up. "Wrong. A weapon is just a tool. This is a channel. An extension of your will. If it fails, you fail."

He tied the last stitch off with a flick, then looked her dead in the eyes.

"I won't always be here to fix your problems, Ameari. Maintain your gear. It reflects how seriously you take yourself."

She nodded slowly.

He stood, the sewing kit dissolving into wisps of black.

Without another word, he turned and walked off, leaving her clutching the obi in her lap, stitches fresh and solid.

For a long while, she didn't move.

Chapter Twelve

Chapter XII: Lines in the Sand

Jay's voice echoed off the training room walls, dull but steady, as he explained the intricacies of adaptive combat maneuvers. Most of the class was half-listening, still sore or bruised from the last sparring round. Ameari, seated near the front, tapped her pencil against her notebook in steady rhythm. The seat beside her was empty.

The classroom door opened with an exaggerated creak.

Azrael strolled in, earbuds hanging around his neck, hands stuffed into his jacket pockets. He wore a lopsided grin that could've passed for actual happiness if it hadn't looked so plastered on.

"Good morning, class," he announced, not even remotely sorry for being late. "Miss me?"

Jay looked up from his notes, unimpressed. "Azrael. You're forty minutes late."

"Better than fifty," Azrael quipped, tossing himself into his seat in the back corner.

Jay sighed. "Your cheery mood is noted and appreciated. Unfortunately, it's also incredibly fake."

The fake grin vanished from Azrael's face like a light switch being flipped. He stared forward, his expression unreadable.

Jay paused, as if considering whether to push further. Then something odd happened.

An obi—long, intricately woven, unmistakable—appeared in Jay's hand with a flick of his wrist.

It wasn't just any obi.

It was Ameari's.

She stood up so fast her chair scraped the floor. "Why do you have that?"

Jay spun it loosely around one hand. "It was just laying around. Picked it up on my way in."

Ameari's jaw clenched. That obi never left her side.

Azrael stood from his chair slowly, his eyes narrowing. "You're lying," he said flatly. "That wasn't just laying around. You took it from her before class started."

Jay raised an eyebrow, still casual. "What are you implying?"

"I'm not implying anything," Azrael said, voice lower now, colder. "I'm telling you. You stole it."

The class had gone deathly quiet.

Jay tilted his head slightly, his gaze unreadable. “You seem awfully protective, Azrael. That new sibling instinct kicking in, or is this something else?”

Azrael didn’t flinch. “You can pester me all you want, Jay. I’ll take the bait every time. But the new kids?” He stepped forward. “They’re off-limits.”

Jay’s eyes lingered on him for a long moment before the obi vanished from his hand, shadows swallowing it up. “Fine,” he said simply, turning back to the board. “She can have it back.”

Ameari slowly sat back down, still shaken.

Azrael didn’t move for a second. His eyes remained on Jay like a warning. Then, just as suddenly, he dropped into his seat and pulled his hood up.

Class resumed, but no one really focused. The message had been sent—Azrael had drawn his line.

And Jay had seen it.

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter XIII: The Wager

The morning light filtering into the classroom was hazy, caught in the half-drawn blinds that clung loosely to the windows. Dust floated in the air, visible in the shafts of golden light. Jay stood at the front of the room, scribbling something on the board with his usual flourish, the marker squeaking faintly against the surface. Most of the class sat in their seats with a blend of exhaustion and boredom that had become normal over the past week. No one spoke.

Azrael's seat was conspicuously empty.

Jay continued writing as if nothing was out of the ordinary, but those who had been paying attention knew better. He had paused after every line, glancing to the door. Waiting. Watching. Judging.

The door creaked open. Every head turned.

Azrael stepped into the room with all the subtlety of a ghost. His eyes had regained some color since last week, the dark circles under them still present but faded. He walked in, earbuds dangling around his neck, and dropped into his seat without a word.

Jay turned slowly from the board, arms crossed, one brow raised. His tone was neutral but firm.

"Azrael."

The boy didn't look up.

"You've had quite the attitude lately."

Still silence.

Jay tapped the edge of the whiteboard, watching him closely. "I'm starting to get bored of it."

That drew a glance, though only briefly. Azrael's gaze was unreadable.

Jay walked slowly to the middle of the room, hands in his coat pockets. He paced a bit, like a professor building up to a lecture—or something more theatrical. "So, let's change it up a bit. Let's make this... interesting."

He stopped near Azrael's desk. "A wager."

Azrael tilted his head slightly. "A wager?"

Jay grinned. "Yes. You and me. A match. Tomorrow. If you win, I'll stop messing with the others. No more pranks. No more 'tests.' Just me, quietly doing my job. Sounds peaceful, doesn't it?"

A few students exchanged surprised glances. Kevin leaned forward, suddenly far more invested.

Azrael's eyes narrowed. "And if you win?"

Jay shrugged, still grinning. "Then I get to prank as much as I want, no complaints from you. And—you'll return what you took from me."

The air in the room shifted. Selena sat up straighter.

Azrael's voice was low. "There's very little point to this."

Jay's tone lost some of its playfulness. "You're right. But then again, the kids don't exactly know everything about you, do they, Azrael?"

That silenced the room. Every eye turned toward the quiet, brooding boy by the window.

Jay's grin returned, but it was sharper now. "How will they react when they find out what exactly your past holds?"

Azrael's jaw tightened. The fake disinterest drained from his expression, replaced by a cold calculation. Then he stood up.

"Fine," he said. "Tomorrow."

He grabbed his bag and walked out of the room without another word. The door didn't slam—it clicked softly shut.

The class sat frozen in the aftermath.

Kevin finally spoke, voice low. "What the hell was that?"

Selena leaned back in her chair. "Something tells me this wasn't just about pranks."

Ameari stared at the door, unsure of what to feel.

Jay turned back to the board, entirely unfazed. He picked up his marker and resumed teaching like nothing had happened.

"Alright, moving on. Page seventy-four in your manuals. Let's talk about power synergy in small squads. And someone bring me coffee next time, this class is full of tension."

The students hesitated, but eventually turned to their books. Whispers traveled between desks like wind through leaves.

Azrael's challenge hung in the air, unanswered but unavoidable.

That afternoon, word of the wager had spread like wildfire. The dorm halls buzzed with speculation, theories, and bets. Jay had long been a figure of mischief and mystery—powerful, but unpredictable. Azrael, meanwhile, had always been something darker, something colder. No one had ever seen him truly fight. Not like this.

Kevin paced in the hall. “So, like, what do you think he meant? About Azrael’s past?”

Sirius leaned against the wall, arms folded. “Nothing good.”

Selena sat cross-legged on a bench, brows furrowed. “Jay only gets serious when he’s teaching a lesson. But what’s he trying to prove?”

Ameari hadn’t spoken all day. When someone asked her if she knew anything, she simply shook her head. But in truth, she remembered the night Azrael stitched her obi. The way his hands trembled when he thought she wasn’t looking. There was something cracked behind the calm—something hurt.

The next morning arrived too fast. Students filled the training arena, sitting in the bleachers that lined the walls. Jay stood at one end of the ring, still dressed in his usual instructor’s coat, sleeves rolled up. A light breeze tousled his hair, and he smiled like it was just another Tuesday.

Azrael walked in with slow, deliberate steps. He wore a plain black shirt and loose training pants. No earbuds. No smirk. Just focus.

Jay clapped his hands. “Alright, alright, eyes forward, mouths shut. Let’s get this started.”

He looked at Azrael. “You remember the terms?”

Azrael nodded. “Yes.”

Jay’s grin faded. “Good.”

They stood across from each other in silence. Then Jay moved.

It was fast—too fast for most to follow. A flicker, a blur of movement—and Azrael dodged.

Their battle began not with an explosion, but with a ripple. Jay darted left, summoned a ring of energy from his wrist, and flung it like a discus. Azrael ducked, shadow spilling from his heels to trip Jay up. Jay flipped mid-air, landing with a handstand, then launched upward again.

The crowd was silent, breathless.

Jay grinned mid-air. “Come on, Azrael. Where’s the fire?”

Azrael didn’t reply. His shadows swirled and solidified, coiling like smoke into spears that struck from all directions. Jay flicked his wrist and dispersed them with an invisible wave of force, his eyes bright with delight.

He countered with a barrage of kinetic pulses. Azrael slid under the first, spun to dodge the second, and threw a punch of pure shadow into the air to meet the third.

Sparks flew. The ring glowed.

Then Jay spoke—not to taunt, but to cut deep.

“Still fighting like you're running from something.”

Azrael flinched.

Jay moved in. A real strike—fist to jaw. Azrael blocked it barely, shadow stiffening around his arm like armor.

“You think hiding behind power makes you strong?” Jay said, pushing forward.

Azrael's eyes burned. His shadows surged upward, forming wings, blades, tendrils. The arena dimmed for a moment.

“I think you should stop talking,” Azrael growled.

Jay laughed. “Now there's the real you.”

They clashed again, this time harder. The floor cracked beneath them. Energy hissed in the air.

Watching from the crowd, Ameari gripped her seat. She could see the pain behind Azrael's movements. The fury. The fear.

Kevin muttered, “He's not holding back anymore.”

Neither was Jay.

Their final exchange was wordless. Just movement, instinct, raw emotion.

Jay feinted left, then blinked behind Azrael. Azrael spun fast, shadows lashing out and forcing Jay back. Jay smirked and lunged again, meeting Azrael's strike head-on.

The impact cracked the floor and knocked both of them back. Jay hit the ground hard, rolled, and came up grinning.

He raised both hands in surrender. “Alright, alright. You win.”

The room was dead silent.

Jay wiped blood from the corner of his mouth, still smiling. “You've still got it. And I suppose a deal's a deal. I'll stop pranking the others.”

He turned to leave, then paused and glanced back.

“Oh—and you can keep what you took. I didn’t really care about that.” He chuckled. “Truth is, I never planned to hold you to the deal. I just wanted a fight. Been a long time since I had one worth my energy.”

Jay stretched, winced slightly, and walked toward the exit. “Good match, Azrael.”

Azrael stood in the middle of the ring, chest heaving, watching him go. No one said a word.

And just like that, it was over.

Back in their dorms, the whispers began again. But now they weren’t about speculation—they were about fear, awe, and the quiet realization that none of them knew who Azrael really was.

And worse: now they wanted to know.

The next chapter of their education had truly begun.

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter XIV: The Mission Brief

Jay was back to his usual self the next morning—grinning like a hyena, tossing sarcastic remarks, and leaning against the planning table with that smug gleam in his eye that meant trouble was brewing.

“Alright, nerds and ninjas,” he announced, clapping his hands, “time to earn your keep. We’ve got ourselves a mission. Everyone’s coming—except Azrael and Selena. You two stay here.”

Selena frowned, but Jay didn’t pause. He reached into his jacket and tossed down a small tablet that flickered to life, displaying a map of a fortified building.

“Our target is Raul Bennez. Ex-mercenary. Leader of the Black Scar Syndicate. Real scumbag. Trafficking, extortion, murder-for-hire—you name it. This guy’s the nucleus of a nasty little infection, and it’s time we cauterize it.”

He tapped the screen. A 3D render rotated slowly.

“His headquarters is here. Old military facility, repurposed with steel walls, motion sensors, and automated turrets. But we’ve got two advantages: one, I bribed his guard chief. Two, the guy’s got a routine. Every afternoon, 1400 sharp, he walks the perimeter garden with a glass of overpriced brandy. That’s when you’ll strike.”

He swiped again, pulling up a blueprint.

“The inner building is a three-floor compound. Top floor: Raul’s quarters. Middle floor: security center and private guards. Bottom floor: prisoners, loot, probably more bodies than you’d like to count.”

He looked up, serious now. “This isn’t a smash-and-grab. We go silent. Precise. Raul’s head—and his files—are the goal. In and out before they know what hit them.”

Everyone listened in silence. Even Kevin looked serious.

Jay continued, pointing to each person.

“Sirius, you’re breach. Kevin, cover fire. TK, sabotage. Ameari, extraction.”

TK gave a sharp nod, adjusting their gloves. “On it.”

When Jay finished, the others began reviewing the schematics, forming plans, checking gear. But Selena stayed frozen.

As the group dispersed, she grabbed Jay’s arm and pulled him aside.

“Why am I not going?” she asked flatly.

Jay didn't smirk this time. He just looked at her, unreadable. "Because I need you here."

Selena's brow furrowed. "That's not an answer."

Jay sighed. "You're needed for something else. Something important. I'll explain later, I promise. But not now. Just... trust me."

Selena stared at him for a long second. Then, reluctantly, she stepped back.

The rest of the day passed in preparations. Packs were filled. Weapons cleaned. Jokes were made, but no one laughed too hard.

By the time dawn crept over the horizon, the group stood at the gates—Ameari, TK, Kevin, and Sirius all dressed for war.

Jay gave a nod. "Bring me his head."

The gate creaked open. The group vanished into the rising mist.

Behind them, Selena watched, fists clenched at her sides, while Azrael silently leaned against the doorway, watching her instead.

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter XV: Command and Memory

The gates had barely closed behind the departing team when Selena found herself standing in the quiet hallway, arms crossed, eyes narrowed. Jay was already slipping back into his usual behavior, pretending everything was just another Tuesday.

“Alright, Selena,” Jay said, tossing a small file onto the table beside her. “Change of plans. You’re on a solo op.”

Selena raised a brow and picked up the folder. “A solo op?”

Jay leaned on the backrest of a nearby chair, hands clasped behind his head. “Yeah. There’s a guy in town—runs a food truck downtown. Real charmer. Also happens to be knee-deep in some shady dealings. He’s got info on an underground fight ring that’s been trafficking enhanced individuals for bloodsport. We want that information.”

She opened the file. A grainy photo of a middle-aged man with slicked-back hair and a cheesy smile greeted her. “You want me to use my power on him?”

Jay nodded. “Just ask him to write down everything he knows about the ring. He won’t be able to resist. Get the intel and come back. Quick and clean.”

Selena’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Is Azrael coming?”

Jay’s expression didn’t change. “No. He’s not allowed to.”

Selena waited, expecting more, but Jay turned and walked off with a lazy wave.

The walk into town was quiet. The breeze was light, and the clouds overhead kept the sunlight from becoming too harsh. Selena kept her hood up, letting her thoughts wander as she neared the bustling downtown area. She stuck out—everyone else looked relaxed, like they belonged. She didn’t.

But she knew how to find her target.

The food truck was a silver clunker parked at the edge of the plaza. A colorful awning extended over the window, where a line of customers were chattering and waiting for their overpriced tacos. The man behind the counter looked exactly like the photo—sleazy and far too cheerful for someone supposedly involved in underground violence.

Selena waited until the line thinned out, then stepped up.

He grinned. “Hey there! You want the spicy special or something a little sweeter—”

“Write down everything you know about the underground fight rings. Now.” Her voice was calm, firm, and laced with her power.

His expression went slack. Without another word, he reached below the counter, pulled out a notepad, and began scribbling furiously. Within a minute, he tore off the sheet and handed it to her with shaking hands.

Selena didn’t thank him. She simply turned and walked away.

Back at the academy, she dropped the paper in front of Jay, who raised his eyebrows and gave a low whistle.

“Fast work. Efficient. You ever think about a career in espionage?”

Selena didn’t laugh. “This is what you do with my power? Shake down food truck owners?”

Jay shrugged, but he didn’t respond. His expression softened slightly. “It’s not all glamour and glory, kid. But you did good. Go relax, take the day off. The others will be back soon.”

Selena left the room without another word.

She wandered the academy for a while. The halls were quieter than usual, the absence of the others making everything feel oddly empty. Eventually, she found herself near the south wing, where the dorms stretched into a quiet lounge.

And, of course, there was Azrael. He sat on the windowsill, earbuds in, staring out into the distance like some brooding painting. But today, he looked... less tired. Less burdened. Almost at peace.

She walked up to him, arms crossed. “You only ever use Ameari’s power.”

Azrael blinked and turned his head, smirking faintly. “Hello to you too, Selena.”

“I’m serious.”

He sighed, slipping out one earbud. “Because her power isn’t just easy to use—it’s familiar. My sister had it. Almost exactly. I’ve had more time with it than any of the others I’ve absorbed.”

Selena hesitated. “Your sister?”

Azrael’s smile faltered. He looked down, fingers tightening on the edge of the windowsill. “She didn’t make it out of the program. We were part of a military blacksite. They experimented on us—cut, sliced, rewired. She died on one of their tables.”

Selena stood still, caught off guard by the calm way he said it.

"I was twelve," Azrael continued. "She was fourteen. They told me she wasn't strong enough. But I knew what they meant. She was just unlucky."

He hopped down from the sill, brushing his pants off. "Anyway. Coffee?"

She blinked. "What?"

"I know a good shop a few blocks from here. Not school-sanctioned, but hey, rules are meant to be bent."

Selena hesitated, then nodded. "Sure."

They left the academy in silence, walking side by side into the twilight.

And for once, neither of them felt the need to say anything at all.

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter XVI: Operation Silence

The air was thick with tension as the strike team gathered at the edge of the forest that bordered the Black Scar Syndicate's compound. Morning mist clung low to the ground, shrouding them in a thin veil as the compound came into view. The structure was cold and angular—an old industrial facility now turned fortress.

Ameari and Kevin sat a few yards back from the main squad, crouched in thick underbrush. They weren't going in unless things went south. Jay's orders had been clear: this was a stealth mission, and their role was support.

Sirius took the lead, silently moving toward the perimeter fence. His movement was crisp, trained. He found a lone guard stationed at the northeast entrance—a man too bored to take his job seriously. One swift strike to the neck dropped the man without a sound. Sirius motioned for TK.

TK dashed in like a shadow, stripping the guard of his outfit with efficiency that betrayed experience. With a slight grin, they adjusted the ill-fitting jacket and cap, then slipped into the facility through a side door, armed with a vial of fast-acting poison.

Inside, the compound hummed with low electronic sounds. Cameras panned slowly. Guards chatted lazily, unaware of the breach.

Raul Bennez strolled through his indoor courtyard, sipping brandy from a crystal glass. TK moved through the corridors with the practiced calm of someone who'd done this before. No one questioned the uniform. They made their way to the bar cart near the balcony where Raul would stop to refill his drink. It was a simple matter of timing.

With a deft hand, TK poured a small dose of the poison into the decanter, wiped their prints from the glass, and walked away as silently as they'd arrived. No commotion. No alarm.

A few minutes later, from her lookout, Ameari saw Raul stop at the cart. He poured a drink. Took a sip.

Then collapsed.

A quiet buzz of static came through the team's comms.

"Target down. Exfil in two minutes," TK's voice whispered.

Kevin exhaled. "That's it?"

"I guess we did our job," Ameari said, watching as Sirius and TK re-emerged from the building and jogged back into the woods. "No alarms. No injuries."

"It almost feels too clean," Kevin muttered.

"That's a good thing."

The group reassembled and quietly made their way back to the rendezvous point where a sleek black vehicle waited. Jay wasn't there to pick them up—just a coded message on the screen that read, "Well done. Return to base."

Back at the facility, the sun had begun to dip. A warm orange hue bathed the walls as the group returned, dirty but unharmed. Jay was waiting for them at the entrance, holding two cups of coffee and leaning against the doorframe.

"Look at you, all accomplished and still breathing," he said with a grin. "I'm proud."

Ameari stepped forward, her face serious. "Where are Azrael and Selena?"

Jay shrugged. "Haven't seen them since this morning. Pretty sure they're off-campus, though. Don't worry. If Azrael wanted to vanish, not even I could find him."

Kevin frowned. "That's comforting."

"Go get cleaned up. You've earned it," Jay added, stepping aside.

The team split off to wash the sweat and grime of their silent kill away. Steam rolled from the showers, echoing with relaxed sighs. By the time they regrouped in the lounge, the sun had disappeared completely, replaced by the soft electric glow of the rec room lights. Kevin lounged in an oversized chair. Ameari curled up with a book. TK and Sirius argued over who got to pick the next movie.

It was nearly 8 p.m. when the door creaked open.

Azrael stepped in first, followed closely by Selena. She looked tired, but calm. He looked like himself again—disinterested, hands in pockets, hoodie draped over his head. But his eyes searched the room with more focus than usual.

"Yo," Azrael said casually. "Mission go well?"

Kevin nodded. "Yeah. TK poisoned the guy. No one even saw it coming."

"Good," Azrael said with a small smile. He stepped over to Ameari and gave her a gentle pat on the head. "You did a good job."

Ameari blinked in surprise but didn't move away.

Then Azrael straightened and looked at both her and Kevin. "By the way, starting tomorrow, I'm taking over your combat training. You've got potential, but potential doesn't mean much without sharpening it. I'll make sure you're not just good. I'll make you dangerous."

Kevin scoffed. "You? Training us? You don't even show up on time."

Azrael gave him a pointed look. "Exactly. Imagine how strong you'll be if someone like me takes the time to teach you."

That shut Kevin up.

Selena chuckled quietly, leaning against the wall. "He's got a point."

As the group settled in for the night—tired, sore, and still running off the high of a completed mission—the tension that had haunted them for weeks seemed to lift just a bit.

They were starting to feel like a real team.

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter XVII: Shadows of the Self

The morning after the team's return, Azrael was uncharacteristically alert, dressed, and waiting by the entrance gates of the academy. Kevin and Ameari approached, both still wiping sleep from their eyes and looking at him with curiosity.

"Where are we going?" Kevin asked, stretching his arms.

"You're under my jurisdiction now," Azrael said plainly. "We're going to train. The way I did."

Ameari tilted her head. "That sounds... ominous."

"It is," Azrael replied with a small grin.

They boarded a regional transport bus just outside the academy, the kind used for long-distance travel through the rural sectors. The ride was quiet. Kevin looked out the window while Ameari skimmed through a worn-out manual on hand-to-hand combat Jay had given her. Azrael, meanwhile, leaned back, eyes closed, but never quite asleep.

After nearly two hours, the scenery began to shift. Skyscrapers gave way to rolling hills, then to thick pine forests, and finally, to the towering silhouettes of the Akito Mountain Range. The road narrowed, winding precariously between cliff faces and steep drops. The air thinned and cooled. Eventually, the bus came to a stop at a dirt path leading upward.

"End of the line," the driver said.

They stepped off, the view immediately stealing their breath. The range was vast and wild, with snow-kissed peaks and vibrant greenery stretching as far as the eye could see. A single dirt path wound higher up the mountain, barely visible through the brush.

"Come on," Azrael said, already walking.

The hike was grueling, steep, and demanding, but both Kevin and Ameari pushed through without complaint. After another hour, a small cabin came into view nestled between trees and boulders. Smoke drifted lazily from the chimney, and a well-worn path led to its wooden porch.

Before they reached the door, it opened. A short, stern-looking woman stood there with arms crossed and a knowing smile. Her hair was silver, her posture unyielding.

"You brought company this time," she said.

Azrael's face softened. "Hey, Mom."

Kevin blinked. "That's your mom?"

"Come in," she said without waiting for a response.

The inside of the cabin was modest but cozy—wooden walls lined with bookshelves, a stone fireplace, and a kitchen that smelled of freshly baked bread and stew. The table was already set.

Dinner was warm and quiet. Azrael's mother, whose name turned out to be Elira, asked Ameari and Kevin polite questions about the academy, their powers, and what they hoped to accomplish. Azrael mostly stayed quiet, a nostalgic look in his eyes.

After the meal, they each settled into their small guest rooms. The mountain air was crisp, and the beds were surprisingly comfortable. For once, there was no background hum of electricity or intercom announcements—just the wind through trees and distant hoots of owls.

Morning came early.

Azrael stood outside before sunrise, dressed in black training gear, his breath visible in the cold air.

Kevin and Ameari joined him, yawning.

"Out here," Azrael said, gesturing toward the open stone clearing just behind the cabin.

He raised a hand. Shadows pooled around his feet, extending outward like ink. Two humanoid figures rose from the darkness—one shaped like Kevin, the other like Ameari.

Both Kevin and Ameari stepped back slightly.

"You'll be fighting yourselves," Azrael said. "Shadow versions. They're enhanced. They know your moves. Your patterns. They'll exploit your weaknesses."

Kevin scoffed. "That seems... unfair."

"It's the only way you'll learn," Azrael replied. "Beat yourselves. Then, when you're ready, you'll fight me. If you can knock me off my footing even once, training ends."

Ameari eyed her shadow cautiously. "What's the point of fighting you if we can't even beat ourselves?"

Azrael looked at her. "That's the point. You can't fight others if you don't understand yourself. Not truly. This mountain doesn't care who you pretend to be. It will expose you. So will I."

Kevin rolled his shoulders. "Fine. Let's get this over with."

He lunged at his shadow—and immediately regretted it. The mirror image dodged fluidly, countering with a sweep that sent Kevin sprawling into the dirt. Ameari tried a more cautious approach, circling her doppelgänger, testing reactions. But the shadow moved in tandem, anticipating each step.

Azrael sat on a boulder nearby, arms crossed, eyes sharp.

They fought for hours.

By midday, both Kevin and Ameari were bruised, winded, and frustrated. They took a break by the stream near the cabin. Azrael handed them water but said nothing.

"I can't land a hit on mine," Kevin said, rubbing his shoulder.

"Because you fight expecting them to react like you would," Azrael said. "They don't. They know you better than you do. So change."

Ameari drank quietly, eyes narrowed.

They went again.

This time, Kevin tried a feint—a move he rarely used—and caught the shadow slightly off-guard. It wasn't much, but he managed a grazing hit.

Ameari shifted her stance entirely, fighting more like Azrael had once shown her—fluid, unpredictable. She too managed to knock her shadow back, if only briefly.

Azrael nodded approvingly.

"You're adapting. Keep pushing. You're getting closer to who you really are."

They collapsed in exhaustion as the sun dipped behind the mountain peaks.

Azrael stood over them, his voice softer now.

"You'll face yourselves again tomorrow. Once you learn to beat your shadows without brute force—when you truly outsmart and overcome yourselves—then we'll begin the final phase."

Ameari looked up, sweat and dust clinging to her brow.

"And then what?"

Azrael's eyes gleamed.

"Then you'll face me."

The fire crackled inside the cabin that night as the three of them ate in tired silence. Elira served hot stew and bread again, patting Kevin's back when he groaned from soreness.

"You'll survive," she said. "He trained the same way when he was your age. It made him the soldier he is now."

Kevin gave Azrael a sideways glance. "You used to fight your own shadow too?"

Azrael didn't look up from his bowl. "Still do."

That night, as the stars blanketed the sky above the mountains, Kevin and Ameari lay awake in their bunks, thinking not about Azrael—but about themselves.

And what it meant to overcome the person in the mirror.

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter XVIII: Midnight Reckoning

The night air in the mountains was thin and crisp, carrying with it the scent of pine, damp moss, and earth. The cabin was silent save for the occasional creak of wood contracting in the cold. Kevin tossed in his bed, eyes open and alert. Something outside had woken him—something loud.

A sharp crack rang out, followed by a low, thunderous thud that reverberated through the walls.

He sat up instantly, alert.

A few seconds later, Ameari crept out from her room across the narrow hallway, her eyes wide with concern.

"You hear that too?" she whispered.

Kevin nodded. "It sounded like a tree snapped in half."

Another crash followed—this time closer. Like something massive being slammed into the ground.

They crept quietly through the hall and into the living room, only to find a surprising sight: Elira, Azrael's mother, calmly sipping tea by the fireplace, completely unfazed.

"You're awake," she said without looking up.

Ameari glanced at her, puzzled. "Is something attacking us?"

Elira gave a small chuckle and set her cup down. "No. That's just Azrael."

Kevin blinked. "That's Azrael? What the hell is he doing?"

"Training," Elira said. "He does it every few nights. Sometimes more if he's frustrated. He's just getting it out of his system tonight."

Without waiting for permission, Kevin and Ameari slipped on their boots and coats and opened the front door, stepping into the biting cold. They followed the sounds of destruction until they reached a clearing where the moonlight poured through the trees.

What they saw stopped them dead in their tracks.

Three figures moved like shadows through the clearing, so fast and fluid they were almost blurs. One was unmistakably Azrael. The other two were mirror images of him, cloaked in darker shades, moving with the same deadly grace.

They clashed, fists striking with shockwaves that cracked the air. Each blow that connected caused tremors in the ground. Trees around the clearing were shattered—some splintered at the base, others cleaved in half from the force of near-misses.

Azrael pivoted, dodged, countered. One shadow lunged, but he ducked low, sweeping a leg and flipping the figure through the air. Before it landed, he was already turning to intercept the second, blocking its blow with his forearm before retaliating with a brutal elbow to the face.

Ameari grabbed Kevin's arm, stunned. "He's fighting himself... again. But this is on a whole different level."

Kevin swallowed hard, his breath visible in the cold air. "This is what his training looks like? No wonder he's built like that."

Azrael didn't notice them. He was fully immersed—focused, calm, and deadly. Not a single move was wasted.

Minutes passed. Then more. The fight escalated.

One of the shadow versions roared, driving Azrael into a fallen log, but he backflipped off it, landing on the shadow's shoulders and twisting to drive it into the dirt. The second closed in, but Azrael threw a spinning back kick that sent it hurtling into a boulder, cracking the stone with the impact.

Kevin exhaled slowly. "I don't think I've ever seen someone move like that."

Ameari's eyes didn't leave the scene. "I don't think anyone else *can* move like that."

Eventually, Azrael stopped. Both shadow versions stood across from him, breathing hard—if they could breathe at all. Slowly, he raised his hand and snapped his fingers. The shadows dissipated into mist, swirling and dissolving into the forest floor.

Azrael stood in the clearing alone, his chest rising and falling slowly.

He turned toward the trees, his expression unreadable. "You two can come out now."

Kevin and Ameari froze. They hadn't made a sound.

"How the hell—?" Kevin whispered.

They stepped out, sheepishly approaching him.

Azrael gave a half-smile. "Couldn't sleep?"

"Not with that going on," Ameari said, gesturing to the ruined clearing.

Azrael chuckled. "Yeah. I get carried away sometimes."

Kevin looked around. "You really do this often?"

"Every few nights. Helps me stay sharp."

Ameari glanced at him. "They fight like you. Are they... shadows like the ones you made of us?"

Azrael nodded. "Yeah. But stronger. I've been refining them for years. They push me like no one else can. It's how I keep from going soft."

Kevin looked at the shattered trees, the cracked stones, the broken earth. "You call this not going soft?"

Azrael gave him a serious look. "If you don't keep growing, you die. Out there—beyond the academy—there are people who can do worse than this without trying. If I'm not ready, people I care about pay the price."

The silence between them thickened.

Then Ameari spoke softly. "Is that why you train us so hard? So we don't die out there?"

Azrael looked up at the moon. "It's part of it. The other part is that I believe you two can be more than you think. You just have to break yourselves open to see it."

The wind blew gently through the trees, carrying the scent of snow and smoke.

Kevin and Ameari stood quietly beside him for a while, each watching the moonlight stretch across the battlefield of broken trees.

Eventually, Azrael turned toward the cabin. "Come on. You've got a big day tomorrow."

They followed him back in silence, their minds buzzing—not just from what they'd seen, but from the realization of what it meant.

Azrael wasn't just their teacher.

He was a storm they were learning to survive.

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter XIX: Foundations of Trust

The days following Azrael's midnight exhibition unfolded with a noticeable shift. Kevin and Ameari no longer viewed him with the detached wariness they once had. There was a new air of respect—not just for his strength, but for the depth of dedication he poured into refining it. Training under him had been intense before, but now it took on a more personal edge.

Azrael, in turn, began opening up in subtle ways. He wasn't the stoic, impenetrable force they'd first encountered. Instead, he cracked jokes, offered feedback with a little more patience, and even shared the occasional story from his past, always couched in dry humor.

"You know," Azrael said one afternoon, after Ameari managed to land a strike on her shadow twin, "I used to break three ribs a week when I first started. My mom would patch me up and then make me spar again the same night."

"She sounds terrifying," Kevin muttered.

"She is. But she makes great soup," Azrael said with a smirk.

Each day began at sunrise with rigorous physical drills—running through forest trails, climbing rock faces, and lifting weights fashioned from tree trunks and boulders. After breakfast, they would spar with their shadow selves. By the fourth day, both Kevin and Ameari had begun to land consistent hits. Ameari was adapting faster, her style more fluid and reactive. Kevin, meanwhile, grew more strategic, using his environment to compensate for his raw strength.

Yet the final test—fighting Azrael himself—remained untouched.

He never pushed them to take it on. Instead, he simply waited, giving them the space to decide when they were ready.

"Why haven't you tried yet?" Elira asked Kevin and Ameari one night over dinner.

Kevin looked up from his stew. "Because he fights like a machine. Even if we both went at him, I doubt we could land a hit."

"You're not meant to win," she replied. "You're meant to try. That's where the lesson is."

Ameari nodded slowly, filing the words away.

On the fifth day, the snowline began to creep down the mountain peaks. The chill in the air sharpened. Training had gone as usual—warm-ups, shadow sparring, technique drills. Kevin and Ameari were exhausted but proud of their progress. Even Azrael seemed satisfied.

Then, after lunch, Ameari stepped forward as Azrael was stretching. Her hands were at her sides, her eyes focused.

"I want to fight you."

Azrael looked at her, blinked once, then stood up. "You sure?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

Kevin watched from a few feet away, mouth slightly open. "You serious?"

"Very."

Azrael rolled his shoulders, walking to the middle of the training field. "Alright then. Nothing fancy. Try to knock me off my footing."

Ameari moved to the center opposite him. She took a breath, tightening her stance. Azrael stood as if this were another warm-up, relaxed and almost disinterested.

Then Ameari struck.

She lunged low, sweeping at his legs, only for him to sidestep with effortless grace. She followed up with a rising elbow toward his ribs, but he caught her wrist and turned, using her momentum to fling her backward. She tucked midair, landing on her feet and charging again.

"Good recovery," Azrael commented.

Ameari gritted her teeth. She darted in, faking a left hook before spinning into a kick aimed at his head. Azrael ducked, swept under her arc, and pivoted with a light jab to her shoulder that sent her stumbling.

But she was learning.

She adjusted instantly, spinning low to try and trap his ankle. He stepped over the maneuver and smiled.

"Better. Keep it up."

Kevin found himself edging forward unconsciously, watching every movement. He'd never seen Ameari push so hard, her expression locked in grim focus.

She feinted again, this time charging high before dropping into a leg sweep. Azrael jumped—but just as he did, she surged up and drove a punch toward his center.

It grazed his side.

Azrael paused mid-motion, blinking. He took a single half-step backward to absorb the impact.

Kevin let out a low whistle. "That was... something."

Azrael adjusted his stance, cracking his knuckles. "You're improving. Keep going."

Ameari grinned. She surged forward again.

They traded blows for nearly ten more minutes. Nothing landed cleanly. Azrael never once went on the offensive. It was entirely defensive—a dance of dodges, redirects, and the occasional parry. Ameari's limbs grew heavier with each passing moment. Sweat glistened on her brow.

Finally, she overextended.

Azrael pivoted and gently pushed her to the ground, kneeling beside her.

"That's enough. You did well."

Ameari lay there, panting, arms sprawled in the dirt. "You didn't even try."

"Didn't have to," he said. "The lesson wasn't about beating me. It was about showing yourself you're not afraid to try."

He stood and offered her a hand.

She took it.

Back near the cabin, Kevin met them with a towel and a grin. "Well, that was brave."

Ameari took the towel. "You're next."

Kevin laughed nervously. "We'll see."

Azrael clapped them both on the shoulders. "You two are getting stronger. Not just in body, but where it counts. Tomorrow, we raise the bar again."

And with that, they walked back toward the cabin, not as teacher and students, but as something closer to a small, weathered family.

Chapter Twenty

Chapter XX: Shadows and Fury

The morning sun crept slowly across the mountains, bathing the snow-capped peaks in golden light. The air was crisp, and the sky above the cabin was cloudless. Birds chirped faintly in the distance, though their songs were overpowered by the rhythmic thuds and sharp shouts coming from the nearby training field.

Azrael stood at the center of the clearing, his shadow falling long and thin across the frosted ground. He watched as Kevin and Ameari stood shoulder-to-shoulder, both focused, both ready.

"Today," Azrael said, his voice cutting through the cold air like a blade, "you won't be fighting shadows. You'll be fighting me. Together."

Kevin shifted, flexing his fingers. "Both of us?"

Azrael nodded. "You want to see how far you've come? Let's find out."

Ameari tightened her stance, her expression serious. The tension in the air was electric.

Without warning, Azrael launched forward.

He moved like a blur, fast enough to make Ameari and Kevin instinctively leap in opposite directions. His foot slammed into the ground where they'd just been, sending a shockwave through the dirt and scattering leaves in all directions.

Kevin retaliated first, charging in with his fists glowing faintly from the surge of internal energy. He swung with practiced power, but Azrael ducked under it effortlessly, countering with a sharp strike to Kevin's ribs that sent him stumbling back.

Ameari came in next, low and fast, slicing the air with her obi as if it were a whip. Azrael caught it mid-swing, holding it with one hand as he met her gaze. "Better. But still predictable."

He twisted and flung her across the clearing. She landed with a roll, coming up to her feet as Kevin rejoined the fray. The two of them attacked together, Kevin with brute force, Ameari with precision. Azrael allowed himself to be pushed back, letting their coordination build. Their attacks were synchronized, their movements sharper than ever before.

But he was still Azrael.

Dodging a swipe from Kevin, he spun and caught Ameari by the arm, using her momentum to fling her upward. She tumbled through the air but used her obi to grab a tree limb, flipping herself back to the ground with control.

Kevin, however, wasn't as lucky.

Azrael turned and delivered a sweeping kick to Kevin's midsection. Kevin flew back, slamming into a jagged boulder with a sickening crack.

"Kevin!" Ameari shouted.

Kevin slumped down, his head low.

Then, something shifted.

The ground around him trembled slightly. The air became heavier.

Kevin slowly lifted his head, his eyes glowing with an unnatural light. His muscles pulsed and expanded, his breath coming out in steam. His body doubled in size within seconds, veins bulging across his arms and chest.

"Enough," he growled. "I'm tired of losing."

Azrael's eyes narrowed. "That power..."

Kevin charged, and the earth shook under his steps.

This time, Azrael didn't dodge in time. Kevin crashed into him like a freight train, fists flying in a furious storm of rage and raw strength. Azrael blocked the first few blows, but each hit forced him back further and further.

Ameari took a step forward, unsure.

"Ameari," Azrael said between blows, catching Kevin's fist just inches from his face. "Go back to the house."

"What?"

"Now!"

Ameari hesitated, but the seriousness in Azrael's voice cut through her doubt. She turned and ran back toward the cabin.

Azrael let go of Kevin's fist and braced himself.

Kevin roared and swung again, connecting with Azrael's jaw and sending him sprawling into the dirt. Azrael rolled back to his feet, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth.

"You're stronger than before," he admitted. "But you're still just angry."

Kevin let out another roar and charged again.

They clashed like titans. Azrael met Kevin's power head-on, moving with more intensity than before. The forest around them suffered the consequences. Trees cracked and split from the

sheer force of their collisions. Boulders shattered under stray punches. The ground tore itself apart beneath their feet.

Kevin grappled Azrael and threw him through the air. Azrael landed hard, skidding through dirt and snow. Kevin was on him in seconds, throwing punches that dented the earth.

Azrael caught one punch, then another. He used Kevin's momentum to flip him over, slamming him into the ground. Kevin responded by wrapping his legs around Azrael and hurling him backward.

Back and forth, they went.

Azrael ducked low, swept Kevin's legs, and landed a solid strike to his temple. Kevin staggered, but only for a moment. He lunged again.

Blow after blow, they matched. But Kevin's rage was slowly burning out. His movements became more sluggish, his breathing more erratic.

Azrael ducked a wild swing and finally moved in. With a burst of speed, he struck Kevin in the gut, then the chest, and finally the neck. A combination too fast to react to. Kevin gasped and fell to one knee.

Azrael placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Sleep."

Kevin collapsed.

Azrael stood over him, his chest heaving. Blood dripped from his lip, his knuckles bruised.

"You did well," he murmured.

He bent down, lifting Kevin onto his back with a grunt. The walk back to the cabin was slow, heavy.

Inside, Ameari waited, eyes wide with concern. She stood as Azrael entered, Kevin unconscious in his arms.

"He's fine," Azrael assured her. "Just needed to be put down for a bit."

He walked past her and dropped Kevin onto the bed with a soft thud, pulling a blanket over him. Then he slumped into the nearby chair, exhaling deeply.

Ameari approached slowly. "He went berserk. I've never seen him like that."

Azrael nodded. "It happens. Rage unlocks potential, but it blinds you. He has power, but no control. Yet."

She sat down beside him. "Will he be okay?"

"He will be. Stronger, even. But he'll need to learn that strength isn't everything."

The room was quiet for a while, save for the crackling fireplace and Kevin's soft breathing.

Azrael glanced at Ameari. "He surprised me."

"You looked like you were having fun."

A small smile crept onto Azrael's lips. "Maybe. Just a little."

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter XXI: Homecoming

The sun rose gently over the mountains, casting soft rays of gold across the cabin nestled at their base. Inside, Azrael stood near the front door, arms crossed as he watched Kevin and Ameari gather their things.

“You’re both ready to return,” he said, voice firm but calm. “You’ve done well here. But remember—training doesn’t stop just because we’re back at the Academy.”

Kevin zipped up his duffel bag and gave a small nod. “Got it.”

Ameari looked around the small cabin one last time. “It’s weird leaving after everything. Feels like we’ve been here for months.”

Azrael’s expression softened slightly. “You’ve changed in ways that months at the Academy couldn’t have accomplished.”

Elira appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, a small smile on her face. “Don’t go forgetting to eat, and don’t let Azrael throw you into too many boulders.”

Kevin gave a sheepish chuckle. “No promises.”

They said their goodbyes, Elira hugging Ameari and Kevin before giving Azrael a nod that only a mother could make meaningful. Then, they boarded the same bus that had brought them there, now carrying three very different individuals from when they arrived.

Two hours later, the familiar walls of the Academy loomed into view.

The bus hissed as it came to a stop, and as they stepped off, the front doors swung open.

Jay stood there, grinning like a proud parent. “Well look at you three. You look like you’ve seen war.”

Azrael gave a curt nod. “They’ve come a long way.”

Jay’s eyes scanned Kevin and Ameari. “Stronger. Definitely stronger. The others will be glad to see you back.”

As they walked through the main hallway, familiar faces began to appear. Students peeked out from classrooms, others loitered in the lounge until suddenly a wave of voices rose all at once.

“Kevin!”

“Ameari!”

A group of classmates surged toward them, laughing, cheering, calling their names. Kevin and Ameari barely had time to react before they were engulfed in a wave of bodies and voices.

Azrael, caught at the edge of the crowd, raised an eyebrow as he was subtly nudged to the side. Someone stepped in front of him. Another cut across his path.

“Oh,” he muttered. “Right. Not the popular one.”

He gave a slight smirk and turned, walking off toward the dorms.

Inside his room, Azrael lay down on his bed and stared at the ceiling. It was peaceful, at least. No shadows, no screaming, no cracked trees.

Just a mattress. Blankets. Silence.

He closed his eyes.

Meanwhile, back in the lounge, the group swarmed around Kevin and Ameari, throwing question after question at them with wild excitement.

“Did you really fight Azrael?”

“Are the mountains as intense as they say?”

“Is it true Ameari trained while balancing on pinecones blindfolded?”

“Did Kevin actually destroy a tree with his face?!”

Kevin blinked, overwhelmed. “Uh. I mean... some of that is—kind of true? Maybe?”

“I KNEW IT,” someone shouted.

Ameari, growing overwhelmed, activated her obi and lifted herself a full foot into the air. “Gotta go!” she shouted cheerfully as she floated above the crowd and zoomed toward the dorm hallway.

Kevin watched her disappear with silent betrayal. “You traitor...”

More questions poured in.

“What was Azrael like up close?”

“Is it true he doesn’t sleep?”

Kevin rubbed his temples. “Okay. One at a time. And yes, probably.”

Eventually, the crowd let up enough for Kevin to slip toward the common room’s snack shelf. He grabbed a large pouch of pistachios and flopped onto the couch with a long sigh.

He cracked open the shell of one. "Finally."

As he sat there, a buzz rang through both his and Ameari's phones.

AZRAEL (Group Msg):

"You're both still under my jurisdiction. Don't slack. -A"

Kevin stared at the message.

A moment later, Ameari replied from her room.

AMEARI:

"Already putting on my training socks 😬"

Kevin snorted and typed:

KEVIN:

"Can't wait to be powerbombed through the library next."

Azrael's reply came seconds later.

AZRAEL:

"Wouldn't be the first time. Stay ready."

Kevin leaned his head back and stared up at the ceiling, a small smile playing on his face.

He may have just been tossed across half a mountain the day before... but somehow, it felt good to be back.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter XXII: The Orchard of Pain

The morning light streamed through the windows of the Academy classroom, falling in golden rays across the desks. Students slowly trickled in, some still yawning, others chatting about their breakfast or the sparring matches they'd witnessed the evening before. Kevin and Ameari entered together, both looking far more grounded and composed than they had weeks prior.

Kevin stretched, tossing his bag onto a seat. "Feels weird being back in class."

Ameari nodded, adjusting the pins in her hair. "Almost too quiet."

The murmurs of the classroom were interrupted as someone finally noticed the teacher's desk.

"Hey... where's Jay?"

A simple sheet of paper lay on the desk, folded neatly. Kevin stepped forward and picked it up, reading it aloud.

"Taking a vacation day. Be back soon. Bye. – Jay."

The class looked around at each other, puzzled.

"He took a vacation?"

"Jay?"

Before anyone could further speculate, the lights flickered. A strange ripple of energy moved through the room like a pulse. And then—

He appeared.

A man in a sleek, black coat, white gloves, and jet-black boots stood at the front of the classroom. His hair was dark silver, almost metallic, and his face was sharp, almost ageless. His eyes scanned the room with cold precision.

Before anyone could react, he vanished.

In the next instant, he was standing directly behind Azrael.

The class gasped.

Azrael didn't even turn around. He simply said, calmly, "The last time you tried this, you lost. Swiftly. Today will be no different."

The man tilted his head with a small smirk, then blinked across the room again, reappearing at the front.

"Greetings," he said, his voice clear and crisp. "You may refer to me as Professor Orchard. I will be your instructor until Jay returns."

No one spoke.

"Unlike your usual teacher," Orchard continued, "I will not be giving you written work or lectures. You are here to be trained. To fight. To become more than soft, pampered children playing at strength."

He clapped his hands once. The lights flickered again.

"To the training grounds. Now."

The class followed him out, uneasy murmurs passing between them as they crossed the stone pathways toward the Academy's outdoor training field. Even Kevin felt a knot in his stomach. Something about Orchard was wrong—not in the overt villainous way, but in the quiet, unnerving confidence he exuded. The kind of confidence that said, *I will break you, and I'll enjoy doing it.*

Orchard walked to the center of the field and turned to face the class.

"All of you will face me. One at a time. I will not hold back, like your precious Jay does. Consider this your evaluation."

Murmurs of protest began.

"You can't be serious."

"We're students!"

"He's insane!"

Orchard held up one hand, and the voices died down.

"Selena. Step forward."

Selena hesitated. Her long hair flowed over her shoulders as she slowly walked forward, every step careful. She looked back at Kevin and Ameari—both watching tensely.

She turned to face Orchard and opened her mouth, preparing to use her voice—a powerful sonic weapon when wielded properly.

But she never got the chance.

Orchard vanished in a flicker of black.

The next moment, he was inches from her face.

Her eyes widened.

He reached forward, grabbing her by the throat and lifting her off the ground with disturbing ease.

"Weak," he said. "Unworthy."

And with a casual motion, he flung her like a rag doll across the field.

She hit the wall with a sharp cry, her body crumpling before she slid down to the grass.

The class was silent.

"Next. TK."

TK stepped up, fury already burning in his eyes. He threw a barrage of small devices—miniature explosives, traps, shock tools—all of which had given him the upper hand in past fights.

Orchard didn't even move.

Each device shattered before reaching him, as though an invisible wall existed around him. Orchard raised a hand and flicked a finger.

TK's entire belt exploded off his waist.

"Toys," Orchard said, voice dripping with disdain. "Walk away."

TK's fists trembled, but he stepped back, jaw clenched.

"Sirius."

The electric-eyed boy stepped forward, already charging his lightning. He raised both hands and unleashed a torrent of blue-white voltage directly at Orchard.

Crackling, booming power filled the field.

When the smoke cleared, Orchard stood there. Unburned. Unmoved.

He stepped forward, grabbing Sirius by the hair, and flung him backward. Sirius hit the ground hard, rolling to a stop beside TK.

"Disappointing."

Orchard narrowed his eyes and turned toward Kevin and Ameari. "You two," he said, voice loud and commanding. "Come forward. Since you train together, let's see what you've learned together."

Kevin took a half-step forward, but Azrael raised his arm, halting him. The air shifted as tension snapped into the room like a drawn wire.

"They're not under your jurisdiction," Azrael said, his voice low and flat, but carrying a weight that made even the birds outside go silent. "They won't fight you."

Professor Orchard blinked, then chuckled dryly. He glanced back at Kevin and Ameari, then back to Azrael. "I see. Protecting your pets now, are we? If you believe they can't win, Azrael, just say so. No shame in that."

The room collectively inhaled. Orchard had prodded at the wrong nerve. Azrael's jaw tensed, his arms folding slowly across his chest.

He turned to Kevin and Ameari. "You may fight him," he said flatly. "But do not kill him. Just win the match. That's all."

Kevin cracked his knuckles. Ameari gave a subtle nod, tightening the wrap of her obi around her waist.

"Let's go," Kevin muttered.

They stepped forward together as the rest of the class fell silent, all eyes glued to the training ground. The air was thick with anticipation.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter XXIII: The Challenge Escalates

Kevin and Ameari stepped onto the training field, tension heavy in the air. The rest of the class stood back, their expressions a mixture of concern and curiosity. Professor Orchard stood at the center of the grounds, his hands clasped behind his back, wearing the same calm, almost smug smile he had when throwing their classmates around.

Kevin glanced at Ameari. She nodded back. They had trained for this kind of pressure. Still, something about Orchard made their skin crawl.

"Together now," Orchard said, gesturing for them to begin. "Let's see if Azrael's little projects have some worth."

They charged forward in sync. Kevin moved low, going for the legs, while Ameari used her obi to strike from above. Orchard sidestepped Kevin's sweep with ease but had to block Ameari's strike, her weapon whistling through the air. She pressed her attack, keeping him occupied just long enough for Kevin to come back around with a hard uppercut.

It landed. Orchard stumbled slightly, eyes flashing with surprise.

"Not bad," he said, wiping a bit of blood from his lip. "Let's see how long that lasts."

In a flash, he retaliated. Kevin ducked one blow but got clipped in the side. Ameari parried another, only for Orchard to twist mid-motion and catch her leg. With terrifying speed, he lifted her and slammed her hard into the ground.

She groaned, trying to recover, but Orchard didn't give her the chance. He struck again and again, his blows brutal and excessive. Ameari struggled, trying to pull herself free, but he grabbed her by the obi and flung her across the field like a ragdoll. She hit the dirt hard and didn't move.

Azrael's fists clenched at his sides. His jaw tightened. His eyes, always calm, now blazed with restrained fury.

"Azrael..." Selena whispered nearby. "Aren't you going to stop him?"

"I can't," Azrael said, voice low and sharp. "Not until the match ends. That's the rule."

Orchard turned toward Kevin, who was already moving, rage written across his face. He tackled the older man, fists flying in a blur of fury. Orchard blocked with one arm and countered with the other, forcing Kevin back step by step. Kevin's strikes were heavy, trained, and powerful—but Orchard was faster.

Then Kevin slipped. A single misstep.

Orchard seized the moment. He grabbed Kevin by the neck, lifted him into the air, and drove a knee into his ribs. Kevin gasped, his breath knocked clean out of him. Orchard threw him down and drove his foot into Kevin's side again and again, each stomp more vicious than the last.

"Stop it!" Sirius shouted from the sidelines. "You're going too far!"

Others joined in, shouting for Azrael to call it off.

Azrael didn't move. He stared straight ahead, his fury barely held in check.

Orchard walked over to Kevin's crumpled body, grabbed him by the arm, and hurled him into the wall of the nearby building. The wall cracked, and Kevin flew straight through into the next room.

Silence fell over the training ground.

Azrael took a step forward.

"You didn't have to go that far," he said, his voice quiet, but heavy with threat. "And you know it."

Orchard looked back at him with that same irritating smile. "If you've got a problem, Azrael, come fix it."

Azrael exhaled, slow and deep.

"Fine," he said. "If it's a fight you want so badly..."

He stepped onto the field, the rest of the class watching with wide eyes as the air grew colder, heavier.

"...then it's a fight you'll get."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter XXIV: A Silent Guardian

Azrael didn't say a word as he stood over Kevin and Ameari, both unconscious, bloodied, and bruised. His expression was unreadable, but his clenched fists and tense shoulders said everything.

He raised a hand. The shadows around him surged to life, flowing across the training ground like ink poured over glass. From beneath Kevin and Ameari, they gently lifted the two, cradling them in weightless wisps that moved with eerie grace. The students stepped back instinctively, uncertain whether to speak or stay silent.

Azrael said nothing.

With quiet precision, he turned and began walking toward the far side of the academy. The shadows followed, their burden carried effortlessly as though weight didn't exist. Few knew that the dorms extended that far back into the mountainside. Fewer still had ever seen the door Azrael now approached—a dark steel archway etched with faded runes, the mark of a space that was once meant for something else entirely.

Azrael opened the door with a press of his hand, the lock recognizing only him. Inside, it was quiet. Warm. Clean. A stark contrast to the frigid halls outside. His space was small but purposeful—two spare beds, minimal decoration, and shelves stacked with supplies both medical and arcane.

The shadows lowered Kevin and Ameari onto the beds without a sound.

Azrael moved instantly, grabbing a metal case from a nearby shelf. Inside were rows of bandages, antiseptic sprays, vials of glowing liquid, and surgical tools. He knelt between the two of them, starting with Ameari. Her injuries were deep, bruises across her ribs, a small cut above her brow, and her arm held at an odd angle.

Carefully, he realigned the arm with clinical precision, then wrapped it tightly, fingers gentler than any of them would've expected. He cleaned the cut, dabbed it with a salve that hissed softly against her skin, then stitched it closed with a tiny needle and steady hands.

He repeated the process with Kevin—more internal damage there. The bruising was heavy. A cracked rib at least. Azrael took out a different vial, glowing green, and administered a few drops beneath Kevin's tongue. The boy stirred slightly, groaning.

"Easy," Azrael said quietly, his voice softer than usual. "You're safe now."

Kevin didn't respond, already slipping back into sleep.

Azrael sat back on his heels and let out a slow breath. Then he stood. Checked the room. Adjusted the blankets over both of them. Dimmed the lights slightly.

Fifteen minutes passed.

He returned, checked Ameari's breathing, then Kevin's. Adjusted a bandage.

Another fifteen. Same again.

An hour passed, then two.

Someone knocked on the door.

It was Selena, her voice muffled through the reinforced steel. "Azrael? Can we see them?"

"No," he said firmly, standing at the center of the room. "They need to rest. Come back tomorrow."

"But—"

"I said no."

His tone was final. Unmovable. There was no anger in it, but there was no room for argument either.

He turned back to the beds.

The usual coldness in his eyes had softened. Something had shifted. Watching Kevin and Ameari fight together—take the hits, stand up, fall down, and still rise again—it reminded him of things he'd buried. Family. Bonds. Loyalty. He wasn't their friend. He wasn't their teacher. But he was *something*. And whatever that was, it demanded he protect them now.

He sat in the chair between them, one leg crossed over the other, arms folded. His eyes never left them.

A guardian.

A brother.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter XXV: A Line in the Sand

Chapter Title: A Line in the Sand

The early morning light poured softly through the trees that lined the Academy's eastern ridge, casting long golden shafts across the walkways. Dew still clung to the grass, and the air had that rare peaceful stillness that only came after days of chaos. The Academy itself—its stone towers, dorms, and training halls—felt hushed, as though it, too, was holding its breath after what had occurred.

Inside Azrael's secluded dorm wing, Kevin and Ameari stirred awake, the scent of strong coffee and faint lavender rising in the room. Azrael sat by the window, not in his usual coat of dominance but relaxed, even thoughtful. He hadn't slept.

Ameari blinked the sleep from her eyes. "You didn't rest, did you?"

Azrael turned from the window slowly, his usually sharp expression softened. "Didn't need to. You're both stable now."

Kevin sat up too, stretching his sore limbs. "You were watching us all night?"

Azrael nodded, crossing the room to check the bandages he'd placed on Kevin's shoulder. "After what happened with Orchard, I wasn't going to take chances."

The two exchanged a glance, unsure of how to respond to the rare show of protectiveness from someone like Azrael.

"You don't have to attend class today," Azrael continued. "I'll be teaching in Orchard's place. He... left last night."

Kevin smirked faintly. "Wonder why."

Ameari looked toward the window. "I think we're good to go. We're not fragile."

Azrael studied her, then relented. "Fine. But from now on, you sleep here. You're under my jurisdiction, not the school's. That includes safety."

Ameari raised a brow. "So we're your personal soldiers now?"

Azrael gave the faintest smirk. "Something like that."

The three left the dorm together, walking the long gravel path toward the main building. The rest of the Academy was beginning to stir—students heading to breakfast, others whispering about the recent shakeups. Word of Orchard's defeat had spread, though the truth had already twisted into myth. Some said Azrael broke his spine. Others said Orchard had fled the continent.

But as they neared the main courtyard, a sharp black car rolled to a stop at the base of the grand staircase. Its polished surface gleamed in the morning light. Kevin and Azrael slowed their pace when they noticed Ameari's posture stiffen.

A tall man stepped out first—broad-shouldered, suited in charcoal-gray, with perfectly combed silver-streaked hair and eyes like polished glass. Behind him, a slender woman emerged with practiced grace, her posture regal and her expression unreadable.

"They're here," Ameari muttered. "My parents."

Azrael's eyes narrowed slightly as he scanned them. "Did they warn you?"

"No. But I should've expected it."

The three stood quietly as the couple approached, every step they took radiating control and disapproval.

"Ameari," her father said, stopping just feet away. "We're taking you home."

The words dropped like cold iron between them.

Ameari took a step forward, trying to keep her voice steady. "I'm not leaving. I've made progress here—real progress."

Her mother cut in sharply. "Progress? You've been injured. Mentally stressed. Engaged in unauthorized combat. This isn't a place for someone of your background or potential. We didn't send you here to be thrown around like a street brawler."

Azrael's voice broke the tension. "She's not just being thrown around. She's learning. Growing faster than anyone I've seen in years."

Her father's gaze flicked to him with the barest hint of disdain. "Azrael, is it? The rogue student made instructor overnight. We've heard of you."

"I'd hope so," Azrael said coolly. "But I'm not here for reputation. I'm here for results. Ameari is under my training now, and I won't allow you to undo everything she's fought for because of fear."

"We're her parents," her mother snapped. "Her safety is our responsibility."

Azrael's tone sharpened. "Then you'll want to hear my proposal."

Both parents hesitated, clearly unaccustomed to being spoken to with such boldness.

"There is a selection coming up for the Trial of Realms," Azrael said. "A rite reserved for only the most advanced students across every academy. Ameari will be nominated. If she succeeds, you allow her to remain, no questions. If she fails, she leaves under your terms."

Ameari's eyes widened slightly. She'd heard of the Trial before—its name was whispered among students like a legend. A gauntlet designed to expose every weakness, and test every strength.

Her father scoffed. "And what makes you think she's capable of such a feat?"

"Because I've trained her," Azrael replied without missing a beat. "And because she's shown more determination than half the candidates who've ever survived the trial. She won't be alone. Kevin will be there as well. They're stronger together."

Ameari's mother spoke carefully. "And if we agree to this... you take full responsibility?"

"I already have."

There was a long silence. Then, her father gave a slow, reluctant nod. "Very well. She may stay—but only until the outcome of the trial. If she loses..."

"I'll leave," Ameari finished for him. "On my own terms."

Without another word, the couple turned and returned to their car. As it drove away, silence fell over the courtyard.

Kevin gave a low whistle. "Trial of Realms, huh? That sounds... ominous."

"It's brutal," Azrael said, eyes still fixed on where the car disappeared. "But if you both want to stand at the top, this is the path."

Ameari let out a shaky breath. "Then I'm not backing down."

Azrael glanced between them, then nodded. "Good. Because now, things get serious." The early morning light poured softly through the trees that lined the Academy's eastern ridge, casting long golden shafts across the walkways. Dew still clung to the grass, and the air had that rare peaceful stillness that only came after days of chaos. The Academy itself—its stone towers, dorms, and training halls—felt hushed, as though it, too, was holding its breath after what had occurred.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter XXVI: Training For Trials

The academy grounds were humming with renewed intensity. Whispers of the Trial of Realms had become more than just gossip—they were now facts, confirmed by Azrael himself. Ever since Kevin and Ameari returned from their mountain training, everything felt heavier, more serious. The students could feel it in the air—the silence that filled the halls when Azrael passed by, the newfound tension in the training field. Something big was coming, and no one wanted to be the one unprepared.

At the break of dawn, the training field was cloaked in a low-hanging mist. The chill in the air wasn't just from the cold—it was anticipation. Azrael stood at the center of the field, arms folded, watching the group assemble in silence. Kevin and Ameari stood on either side of him, alert and ready. Behind him, the rest of the class filed in, bleary-eyed but attentive.

"You've all heard the rumors," Azrael began, his voice cutting through the morning fog like a blade. "Let me confirm it. The Trial of Realms is coming. That means your lives, and the pride of this academy, are on the line. This is not training. This is preparation for war."

Murmurs ran through the class, but Azrael raised a hand. A shadowy figure stepped from behind him, identical in every way—down to the posture, the glare, the tone of presence. The class tensed.

"This is me," Azrael said simply. "A shadow of me. He will be your instructor. He knows everything I do. For now, he will teach you. Kevin and Ameari are under my personal instruction from here on out."

Without a word, the shadow version of Azrael turned and gestured for the class to follow. One by one, they hesitated and then obeyed, following the duplicate to a separate field.

Azrael turned back to Kevin and Ameari. "You two, with me."

He led them to the main training ring. "From now on, we train like we did in the mountains—but here, on this field. You will fight, you will fall, and you will get back up. I won't stop until I know you're ready."

At his signal, five shadowy figures began to form from the ground around them. Each one had a distinct form, stance, and aura. Azrael's voice was low and calm. "These are modeled after real combatants from other academies—ones you may be fighting. I've studied their moves. Now you will learn them, and learn to overcome them."

The first shadow, tall and lithe, cracked dual whips in the air that seemed to sing with precision and speed. Ameari stepped forward without hesitation. Her obi fluttered as she sprang into motion, using her cloth to redirect herself through the air and dodge the whipping strikes.

Azrael watched carefully. "She's keeping above the arc. Good."

Kevin's opponent was completely different—a hulking brute who looked like his fists could shatter stone. Kevin hesitated for only a second before charging in, attempting to close the distance.

Azrael's sharp voice rang out. "Don't meet force with force until you understand his tempo!"

Kevin adjusted mid-move, ducked a punch, and struck low at the shadow's knee, causing it to falter. Not perfect, but better.

One by one, Azrael summoned more shadows—each with different powers: one controlled soundwaves, another had super speed. There was a frost manipulator, a telekinetic, even a mimic that copied Ameari's every move.

Time and again, Azrael forced them to adapt.

"Focus on your breathing," he called. "Predict the first move, the second will kill you."

Kevin dodged a lightning-fast strike and countered with a shoulder tackle. Ameari wrapped her obi around a clone's neck, using its momentum to slam it into the ground.

When they struggled, Azrael didn't coddle them. But he never abandoned them either. He corrected their stances, adjusted their angles, made them repeat failed techniques until they got it right.

"You can't afford to guess," he told Kevin after a failed feint. "You have to *know* what comes next."

After hours of non-stop drills, bruises, and exhaustion, Kevin and Ameari sat near the edge of the field, sweat dripping from their brows, breathing heavy.

Azrael stood over them. "This isn't about power. It's about control, awareness, pressure. You're both strong. But this trial will break anyone who thinks brute force alone will win."

Kevin looked up. "So we go again?"

Azrael nodded. "Again. Every day. Until you don't have to ask."

As more shadow opponents formed behind him, the sky above slowly began to shift from misty gray to a deep orange—the sun climbing higher. The training was far from over.

But for the first time, Kevin and Ameari didn't flinch.

They stood.

And they prepared to face the next fight.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter XXVII: The Calm Before the Clash

The days passed with a heavy anticipation in the air. Word of Solstice Vale Academy's imminent arrival spread through the halls like wildfire, and students at the academy buzzed with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. Though there was no official event to welcome them, the atmosphere made it feel like something big was coming — and it was.

On a crisp morning, just a week later, the students from Solstice Vale arrived.

They entered the academy gates with a quiet confidence, each dressed in matching, sleek navy uniforms embroidered with silver threads that shimmered in the light. There were ten of them, all varied in size and build, but they moved as a unit, calm and composed. Their leader, a tall girl with white hair and icy blue eyes named Lysandra Vale, stood at the front. She carried herself like royalty — not haughty, but sure of her place.

Azrael stood by the academy doors, watching them arrive with his arms crossed. Kevin, Ameari, TK, Sirius, and the rest of the class lingered behind him, sizing up the new arrivals.

Despite being from a rival school, the students from Solstice Vale weren't openly hostile. They exchanged greetings and respectful nods but kept their distance — polite, but not overly friendly. It was clear they had come for one thing: the Trial of Realms.

Later that day, Azrael gathered his group in the training field.

"They'll be training on the east side of the academy," he explained. "We'll stay on the west. That's by design. No distractions."

The group nodded.

"The Trial of Realms is a 1v1 format," Azrael continued. "That means five matches. That means five fighters."

He looked across the group.

"I've made the selection."

A brief silence.

"Sirius. TK. Ameari. Kevin. And myself. We're going in."

A mixture of reactions rippled through the group — excitement, nerves, and silent nods of acceptance. It made sense. These were the strongest among them.

Azrael's voice grew more serious.

“Starting tomorrow, we’re going to prepare like never before. You’re not just fighting for yourself — you’re fighting for this academy. They may look kind, but don’t let that fool you. Solstice Vale doesn’t send anyone who isn’t dangerous.”

The following morning, the real work began.

While a shadow version of Azrael led the rest of the class through fundamentals and defense tactics, the real Azrael took Kevin and Ameari to the far end of the field.

He stood in the center of the grass with his arms raised slightly.

“I taught you in the mountains,” he said. “Now we use that here.”

He tapped the ground, and two shadowy figures rose from the earth. They had form — solid, sleek, and deadly. The first was a tall figure wielding two curved blades that shimmered like liquid glass. The second had silver gauntlets, his arms crackling with kinetic energy.

“These are replicas,” Azrael said. “Based on what I’ve seen of Solstice Vale’s students. You’ll be fighting people like this.”

Kevin stared at the shadow with the gauntlets. “He’s fast, huh?”

“Faster than anything you’ve fought before,” Azrael confirmed.

Ameari tilted her head at the twin-blade wielder. “She feels like a trap. That stance is all misdirection.”

Azrael smiled slightly. “Good eye.”

The training was brutal. From sunup to sundown, Kevin and Ameari were forced to adapt to new enemies, new fighting styles, and impossible odds. Each shadow combatant mimicked someone from Solstice Vale, and with every round, Azrael pushed them harder. One replica could throw exploding discs. Another fought with mirrors, creating illusions mid-battle. One even reversed gravity in a five-foot radius, forcing Ameari to use her obi in completely new ways just to stay grounded.

“You won’t win if you fight how you used to,” Azrael warned. “You have to evolve. Every second.”

Kevin, battered and breathing heavily, forced a grin. “So, we’re basically dying every day just to lose less?”

Azrael gave him a sharp look. “You’re not here to lose.”

Day by day, the two began to change. Their footwork sharpened. Their timing improved. Their teamwork became flawless — a wordless rhythm born from shared pain and survival.

Every evening, Azrael would sit with them in the grass, watching the sun sink beyond the mountains.

“You’re getting close,” he’d say.

And they were.

The Trial of Realms was coming. And with it, the moment they had been forged for.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter XXVIII: Necessary Greetings

The morning was unusually quiet.

Birdsong had vanished, and a low fog clung to the ground like the breath of some slumbering beast. Most of the students had gathered outside the academy's central courtyard, murmuring and squinting toward the east gates. Something in the air made the hair on the back of their necks stand on end.

Then, they appeared.

Ten students, dressed in pristine navy-and-silver uniforms, stepped through the gates in perfect formation. They didn't speak, didn't smile. Their presence was cold, calculated — a wave of pressure that washed over the courtyard like a tide of quiet challenge. At the center of the group was Lysandra Vale, tall, regal, and pale as snow. Her white hair was braided down her back, her eyes a cool, glacial blue that swept over the gathered crowd with calm indifference.

The rest of the Solstice Vale students fanned out behind her — each one distinct. A short boy with a fox-like grin and a spiked bat slung over his shoulder. A dark-skinned girl whose hands sparked faintly with crimson lightning. A silent, sharp-faced boy with silver eyes and two scarred knuckles that flexed constantly, as if remembering old fights.

The air was stiff with curiosity and nerves.

Azrael stood near the front of the academy students, arms crossed, watching without emotion. Behind him stood Sirius, TK, Ameari, Kevin, and the rest of their class.

Lysandra stepped forward, stopping a few paces from Azrael.

"We appreciate the invitation," she said, voice smooth and practiced. "And the hospitality."

Azrael didn't flinch. "Let's hope it stays mutual."

Behind him, TK whispered to Kevin, "Is it just me, or do they all look like they were printed from the same intimidating mold?"

Kevin kept his eyes on the group. "No, it's not just you."

The Solstice Vale students moved in small groups, beginning to mingle — if "mingle" could describe the silent glances and wary nods exchanged between schools. Sirius approached the spiky-haired boy with the bat.

"Nice weapon. You plan to swing that thing at us or just pose with it?"

The boy grinned. "Depends. You flammable?"

TK, trying to be friendly, offered a handshake to the girl with crackling hands. “I’m TK. I make things. You... fry things?”

She gave a tiny smile and shook his hand, giving him a faint zap. “Call me Zira. You build ‘em, I break ‘em.”

Meanwhile, Ameari and Kevin found themselves facing two Solstice Vale students — a thin, hooded figure with strange golden rings floating around their arms, and a tall girl with violet hair and faint scars on her cheekbones.

The hooded one spoke first, voice muffled but amused. “You two are the ones training with Azrael?”

“We are,” Ameari said evenly.

“You’ll be worth watching, then.”

The tension didn’t explode — it simmered, a barely concealed undercurrent of challenge. Words were exchanged politely, but behind every smile was a calculation. Behind every nod, a question: *Who’s stronger?*

Later that day, Azrael gathered his students behind the training fields.

“They’ll be on the east side. We stay on the west. No unsupervised sparring. No friendly duels. No slipping off for conversations. They are not your friends.”

Selena raised a brow. “Even the cute ones?”

“Especially the cute ones.”

There was a collective groan.

Azrael’s expression remained flat. “We start focused training tomorrow. No distractions. You’ve met them now. That’s enough.”

As the students filed back to their dorms, glancing back at the now-settling Solstice Vale camp, Kevin muttered, “This is going to be intense.”

Ameari adjusted her obi with a quiet nod. “Good. We didn’t train this hard to have it easy.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter XXIX: Sharpened Edges

The morning came brisk and sharp, wind slicing across the academy fields with the same edge Azrael carried in his voice that day. The faint glow of dawn still clung to the sky as the students gathered at the training grounds. The grass was slick with dew, boots leaving temporary impressions in the wet earth.

Azrael stood in the center of the clearing, arms crossed, his dark coat unmoving despite the wind. Behind him, shadows shifted — silent copies of himself flickering between the students, ready to demonstrate or correct any mistake.

Kevin and Ameari stood a few paces apart from one another, already tense. Their hands flexed and settled at their sides. They'd trained together for weeks now, survived Azrael's mountain methods, and fought beside each other. But today, they were opponents.

"I want you to go at each other with full effort," Azrael said, gaze hard. "You've fought shadows, fought under pressure. Now fight someone who knows your rhythms."

Kevin smirked slightly. "Don't hold back, Ameari."

She adjusted her stance, obi twitching like a waiting serpent. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Azrael gave a nod. "Begin."

The two clashed immediately — Kevin rushing in with sheer physical power while Ameari danced around him, her obi slashing through the air to redirect or deflect. Dust kicked up around them as their strikes echoed across the field, a fluid rhythm of force and finesse. Kevin's fists landed heavy, but Ameari's precision made up the difference, exploiting every small opening he gave.

Nearby, the rest of the class watched with wary eyes.

TK muttered, "They've gotten way better..."

Azrael turned to the others. "Your turn."

TK, Sirius, and the rest blinked at him. "Wait," TK said, "we're not sparring with each other?"

"No." Azrael stepped forward, and two of his shadows moved to stand behind the group. "You're sparring with me. Or at least versions of me. One at a time."

Sirius sighed. "Oh good. That's not terrifying at all."

Azrael didn't crack a smile. "I'm going to teach you the same way I taught them. Painfully."

Shadow Azrael lunged forward, and Sirius barely ducked in time, a lightning spark escaping his hand. The others tensed. Azrael's training wasn't gentle, and now they understood what Kevin and Ameari had endured in the mountains.

Selena, standing at the edge of the field, crossed her arms. "Why am I here? I'm not part of the Trial team."

Azrael didn't even look at her. "Because you're part of this class."

"I'm not fighting if I don't have to," she said, standing her ground. "There's no point."

Azrael turned his eyes on her then — not angry, but heavy with meaning.

"If you think not being selected means you're unimportant, then leave. But you're here because you're still capable. And if you ever want to be ready for something bigger than school rankings, get back in line."

Selena's jaw tightened. She didn't move for a few seconds. Then, reluctantly, she stepped forward — not to fight, but to stand with the rest.

Back in the center, Kevin launched into a powerful spin-kick, one that Ameari barely ducked under, retaliating with a lash of her obi that whipped around his arm and nearly yanked him off his feet. He managed to twist free just in time, the two of them breathing heavily, sweat beginning to glisten.

Azrael gave a single clap. "Good. Again."

They went back in. Faster. Rougher.

As the main group took turns sparring with Azrael's shadows — TK throwing down his gadgets only to have them dismantled midair, Sirius firing blasts that barely made the shadows blink — the intensity rose.

But it wasn't about beating Azrael. It was about adapting, reacting, improving.

And through it all, Azrael watched. Measured. Corrected. Pushed.

By the time the sun was overhead, Kevin and Ameari were both on one knee, panting. Their final exchange had ended in a deadlock — Kevin's punch halted an inch from her jaw, Ameari's obi coiled around his waist, both frozen with mutual respect.

Azrael finally nodded. "That's enough."

As Kevin helped Ameari to her feet, and the rest of the group dropped to the ground, exhausted, Selena walked over to Sirius, brushing dirt off her sleeve.

"This sucks," she muttered.

Sirius gave a breathless laugh. “Yep. But... it’s working.”

Azrael stood with arms still folded, his eyes scanning the group.

“You’ll thank me later,” he said, dead serious.

And somehow, they believed him.

Chapter Thirty

Chapter XXX: Lines Crossed

The week rolled on, and Solstice Vale's presence settled like fog across the academy. Their students moved with an almost eerie grace — calm, polite, and always watching. There were no taunts, no overt hostility. But even their kindness felt deliberate, careful, like a trap laid in silk.

Each school trained on opposite ends of the campus, their routines strictly separated. The academy's staff had made it clear: interactions between groups were to be minimal outside of supervised activities.

But rules, Selena had always thought, were more like guidelines anyway.

That's how she found herself leaning against the far corner of the courtyard wall one late afternoon, where the two territories of the schools nearly brushed. She wasn't trying to hide — not really. She told herself it was coincidence that her steps always drifted toward the edge, that she just happened to wander when no one else was looking.

And today, she wasn't alone.

He stood a few feet away, golden-haired and dressed in the deep green uniform of Solstice Vale. His name was Kieran. She'd overheard it during a lunch briefing. He was one of their chosen fighters. Quiet, observant, unnervingly precise. But not cruel.

"You know we're not supposed to be doing this," Kieran said, glancing around with a small smirk.

Selena shrugged, toying with the edge of her sleeve. "Then don't stand here. I won't chase you."

He chuckled. "You might, though."

They fell into easy conversation, the kind that danced just far enough from danger to be exciting. Kieran was sharp, but not aggressive. Thoughtful. He didn't talk about strategy, power, or victory. He talked about music. About books. About the mountains back home.

And Selena found herself laughing more than she expected.

But the moment stretched too long. Voices echoed from the opposite corridor. Footsteps.

Selena turned fast. "Go," she whispered.

Kieran gave her a quick wink before vanishing behind a stone column, melting into his side of the school like a shadow. She smoothed her hair, turned the corner—and walked right into TK.

He stared at her, squinting slightly. "What were you doing over here?"

"Nothing," she said too quickly. "Just walking."

TK frowned, not buying it, but let it slide. “Azrael’s looking for everyone. Said we’re doing ‘team formation drills.’ His words, not mine.”

She nodded, heart still racing, and followed him back.

Later that evening, during cooldown exercises, Azrael walked slowly among the students. His eyes were sharp, even more so than usual.

“Some of you are still treating this like school,” he said, his voice low but firm. “You think this is about grades. Rankings. Impressing your friends.”

He paused, gaze settling briefly on Selena — just long enough for her to freeze.

“This is about survival,” Azrael continued. “About walking into a fight where the other person might not stop when you fall. Where they *want* to humiliate you. Break you.”

The air grew heavier with every word.

“I don’t care how kind they seem. If you’re naive enough to think kindness equals safety, then you don’t belong in this fight.”

Selena swallowed hard. Her chest felt tight.

She didn’t say anything.

That night, as the others returned to their dorms, Selena lingered near the training grounds. A piece of paper sat folded in her pocket — hastily scribbled during dinner.

It just read: *Same spot tomorrow?*

And beneath it, a single word in familiar handwriting:

Always.

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Title: Ties That Fray

Training had ended with bruises and breathless silence. The sun had already dipped beneath the horizon, casting long shadows over the academy grounds as students dispersed in clumps, wiping sweat from their brows and muttering complaints under their breath.

But not Selena.

She slipped away from the group with quiet steps, her path deliberate, familiar. Past the dorms. Through the overgrown garden. Around the back of the old storage hall.

And there he was — Kieran, leaning against the stone wall, arms folded like he'd been waiting forever but didn't mind.

"You're late," he said with a small grin.

"I had to dodge TK," Selena replied. "He's gotten suspicious."

Kieran raised an eyebrow. "And Azrael?"

She rolled her eyes. "He watches everyone, but... I don't think he knows."

She was wrong.

From a distance, Azrael stood still behind the tree line, arms crossed. His sharp eyes locked on the two figures just barely visible in the dim light. He didn't say a word. Didn't move.

He simply turned, his coat sweeping behind him, and disappeared into the dark.

The next morning, training began earlier than usual. The group filed into the field, groggy and half-stretching, but Azrael was already there — standing perfectly still with his arms behind his back.

"Selena," he said flatly, voice cutting through the morning air.

She blinked, surprised. "Yeah?"

"You're not allowed to train with the class anymore."

The field went silent.

"What?" she stepped forward, confusion quickly turning to protest. "Why?"

Azrael's gaze didn't waver. "Your emotional attachment to a member of Solstice Vale makes you a risk. You could compromise information. Strategy. Weaknesses."

Her mouth fell open in disbelief. “You think I’d—? You think I’d betray the school?”

“I think your judgment is compromised,” Azrael said. “Until the tournament is over, you’re off the roster.”

Selena clenched her fists. “That’s not fair. I’m not even in the damn tournament!”

Ameari took a step forward. “Azrael, come on. This is too harsh.”

He glanced at her but said nothing. Selena’s eyes narrowed.

“Fine,” she said. “Then let me *prove* I’m not weak.”

She threw off her jacket and stepped into the training circle.

“Fight me. No powers. Just fists. If I win, I stay.”

There was a long pause. Azrael stared at her, unreadable.

Then, slowly, he stepped into the circle.

The fight started fast. Selena charged first, ducking low and trying to sweep his legs. Azrael moved like liquid shadow, sidestepping and forcing her to overextend. She recovered and came in again, fists tight, each punch more desperate than the last.

He blocked her easily.

“Why does it matter so much?” she grunted, circling him.

Azrael didn’t answer.

She feinted left, lunged right. He caught her wrist and flipped her to the ground with practiced ease, then stepped back.

Selena rolled to her feet, panting.

“Why?” she shouted again. “Why does it matter if we win or lose?!”

Azrael’s jaw tightened.

She came in again, this time not attacking — just staring at him, waiting.

“Why?” she whispered.

He stood there, still as stone.

Then he finally spoke. “Because the winner gets to take one student from the losing school.”

The field went deathly quiet.

Selena froze. “What?”

Azrael's voice was low, sharp. “It’s not just for pride. Not just a game. They get to choose one of us to take to their academy — permanently.”

Selena’s lips parted. “And... who did they choose?”

Azrael looked away for the first time.

“I heard whispers,” he said. “That they want Ameari. Her control. Her bloodline. Her voice. And I won’t let that happen.”

Selena took a shaky step back. “So this whole time... that’s why you’ve been training us like this.”

“I won’t lose any of you,” he said, his voice flat. “Especially not her. So we have to win because if we don’t then her parents will take her and she will go to the rival school.”

Selena's chest tightened, guilt washing over her.

She looked down, then quietly stepped out of the ring.

“I understand,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

Azrael didn’t say another word.

But something had shifted between them.

The group watched, silent and stunned, as Selena turned and walked off the field — this time not toward the Solstice Vale border, but back to the dorms.

She didn’t look back.

The sun had risen higher now, casting a warm glow over the academy's stone paths. Training had ended early that morning, the tension from the field still hanging like a storm cloud over everyone. Most of the students had retreated indoors, whispering to each other about what Azrael had revealed.

Ameari, however, wasn’t ready to walk away.

She found Azrael where she expected him to be—behind the training field, sitting on a worn bench in the shade of a tall tree, arms crossed, eyes closed, as if in meditation.

She approached slowly, quietly.

“You know,” she said, breaking the silence, “you could’ve told us earlier.”

Azrael's eyes opened, but he didn't look at her. "It wasn't something you needed to carry on your shoulders. Not yet."

Ameari sat down beside him, leaving a few inches of space between them. "You're not just our instructor anymore. Not really."

Azrael tilted his head slightly. "No?"

She shook her head. "You care. I've seen it. What you did for Kevin and me... what you said out there about me—"

"That wasn't meant to be said," he cut in. "It just slipped."

Ameari smiled faintly. "You're terrible at hiding when you care."

A pause. The breeze rustled the tree above them.

"You were right, though," she said quietly. "If they'd taken me before, I wouldn't have had the strength to stop it. Not then."

"You do now," Azrael replied. "You've earned it."

Ameari turned to him. "So... what happens if we lose?"

Azrael was silent for a moment, then answered with a calm, sharp certainty. "We won't."

She didn't press him further. She didn't need to.

"You think Selena's mad at you?" she asked.

"She should be," Azrael said. "But she'll understand. Eventually."

"You could've told her too."

"I could've," he admitted. "But when emotion clouds loyalty, that's when the most damage is done."

Ameari nodded, thoughtful.

"Do you ever worry?" she asked, softer now. "That no matter how strong we get... it still won't be enough?"

Azrael finally looked at her then, meeting her eyes.

"I worry every day," he said. "But I'd rather stand with people I trust than alone at the top. That's why I push you. Why I push all of you. Because I can't do it alone."

The honesty in his voice caught her off guard.

She smiled again. "Well. You've got us. For whatever comes."

Azrael nodded. "Then we're already halfway to winning."

They sat in silence after that. Just the sound of wind, the distant laughter of students who didn't yet know how close they were to losing someone.

And the quiet understanding between two people who had chosen to fight for something bigger than themselves.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter XXXII: The Sound In The Silence

The quiet peace of the past week came to an end the moment the students of Solstice Vale stepped through the academy gates, bags in hand and farewells offered with lingering smiles and half-hearted jokes. The two schools had spent the last several days bridging the gap between competition and camaraderie, but now the inevitable was here.

The Trial of Realms was over, and with it, the temporary unity.

The Solstice Vale instructors exchanged respectful nods with the academy's staff and gave Azrael a brief glance, unreadable in expression, before leading their students away. Some of the departing students waved. A few even offered hopeful calls of "See you next time!" And then they were gone.

The academy was quieter without them—strangely so. For the first time in days, the grounds weren't filled with laughter, friendly banter, or makeshift sparring matches. The spell had broken, and the students slowly began returning to their routines.

By the next morning, classes resumed.

Jay returned just as suddenly as he had disappeared. He walked into the classroom without ceremony, without explanation, his demeanor unreadable. The students blinked at him as he stood behind his desk like he hadn't vanished for days.

"Where did you go?" TK asked, half curious, half casual.

Jay didn't respond. Instead, he turned toward the board and began writing the lesson in silence. The students exchanged glances. Selena frowned. Kevin looked puzzled. But no one pressed further.

It became clear over the following days that Jay had changed—subtly, but undeniably. He no longer joked with the class, no longer smiled or made offhand remarks. He didn't ask how anyone was doing or check in on their moods or injuries. He taught efficiently when he bothered to teach at all—but more often than not, he'd hand the class off to Azrael with a vague nod and disappear into his office or out of sight entirely.

The distance wasn't physical so much as emotional. Jay was *there*, but not *present*.

It confused them—especially the ones who once looked up to him.

Azrael, however, didn't seem surprised. When asked about it, he merely shrugged and told them to focus on their technique. Whatever Jay was dealing with, Azrael had clearly decided it wasn't the students' burden to carry.

And so the days moved on, with Azrael filling in the growing gaps.

One afternoon, after yet another class handed off to him last-minute, Azrael dismissed the lesson early. The group began gathering their things, expecting him to vanish under his favorite tree again, when he surprised them by staying at the front of the room.

“Before you go,” he said, folding his arms behind his back, “I need to talk to you all.”

The room quieted. Even Selena paused at the door, brows raised.

Azrael looked at them all, his tone calm, but sincere.

“I never really took the time to get to know each of you. Not properly. I know your strengths. I’ve trained you hard. But I don’t know *you*. Not in the way I should if I’m supposed to lead you.”

There was a brief silence.

“So,” he continued, “starting tomorrow, after class, I’ll be taking each of you out. One at a time. Different days. No training. Just time to talk. Learn. Connect. I’ve already picked the place—it’s somewhere specialized for me, but you’ll enjoy it. Don’t worry about the cost. I’m covering everything.”

He looked at each of them in turn, pausing just a little longer on Ameari, then Kevin.

“We’ve come far,” he added. “And we’ll go farther. But it’s time I know who I’m going there *with*.”

The students exchanged surprised glances, and for a moment, even Selena looked like she didn’t know what to say.

Azrael gave a small nod and turned toward the door. “That’s all. You’re dismissed.”

As the students filed out—some murmuring in curiosity, others whispering guesses about the “special place”—the air felt different again. Not heavy with pressure, but lighter, expectant.

Something new was beginning.

And this time, it wasn’t about war.

It was about *them*.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter XXXIII: The Tinkerer's Time

The sun had just begun to dip behind the school buildings, casting long shadows across the courtyard, when Azrael appeared beside TK without a word. He simply gave the boy a look, nodded once toward the gate, and started walking. TK didn't ask where they were going—he didn't need to. This was his day.

They walked in silence for a while, the academy disappearing behind them as Azrael led TK through narrow paths and winding backroads. Eventually, the gravel crunched beneath their feet as they stepped through a rusted chain-link fence that had long since stopped swinging.

Before them lay a scrapyard.

A sprawling mess of twisted metal, broken electronics, shattered panels, and forgotten machines. Old cars stacked on one side. Disassembled drones and weapon components half-buried in dirt on another. The place was chaotic—but to TK, it was a kind of paradise.

His eyes lit up like it was his birthday.

"I used to come here as a student," Azrael said, leading him deeper. "It was quieter back then. Less clutter. But it always had potential. Now it's a little overgrown—but that's good for you. More to work with."

TK turned in a circle, nearly overwhelmed. "Are you serious? I can just... take stuff?"

"Scrap's useless until someone like you gives it purpose," Azrael said simply. "Take what you want. Build whatever comes to mind. You've got an hour before sunset."

TK didn't need more than that. He was off in an instant, digging through a pile of battered casings and loose wires, eyes sharp, hands quick. Azrael watched him for a while from a distance, leaning against an old rusted frame, saying nothing. Letting the boy's excitement run its course.

Eventually, he walked over, crouched beside TK, and held up a small black box no larger than a coin purse.

"You see this?" Azrael said, tapping it. "Most students use bulky containers for their gadgets. You don't have to. Compact designs make it easier to hide tools on your person. Less risk, more mobility."

TK took it and turned it over in his hands. "How'd you even make something this small?"

"Redundant layering," Azrael explained, grabbing a few bits of scrap and beginning to demonstrate. "You compact the charge source here. Build the shell around the densest part, not the frame. Think inside-out. Makes it more durable too."

The next hour was filled with quiet conversation, invention, and slow but steady trust.

Azrael wasn't as cold in this setting. He was precise, calm, but not distant. He gave pointers when TK needed them and praised them when it was earned. He asked TK what kind of tools he liked working with most. What he'd build if he had unlimited materials. He asked him about projects he'd scrapped and why he scrapped them.

And then, softly—like he wasn't even sure if he should—he asked, "What about before this school? What did you have then?"

TK paused. His hands slowed, then stopped completely. He looked down at the half-finished device in his hands. "...Not much," he said after a long silence. "Just me. Bounced around a lot. I don't remember my parents. Or... I guess I do. A little. But not enough."

Azrael didn't interrupt.

"I remember my mom had this little red box where she kept tools," TK said. "Not high-tech or anything. Just basic stuff. I think that's where I got the bug for tinkering."

He gave a small, nostalgic smile. "They left me with someone who wasn't really... interested in keeping me. So I ran. Spent a lot of time on the street before I got picked up by the academy."

Azrael was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "That kind of background creates two kinds of people. The kind who break apart, and the kind who build. I see which one you are."

TK blinked, startled by the compliment.

"You're rough around the edges," Azrael continued, "but smart. You see potential where most people see junk. That's a strength, TK. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise."

TK looked down again at the small gadget in his hand. "Thanks, Azrael. I mean it. No one really... says that kind of stuff."

Azrael just stood, brushing the dust from his pants. "Get used to hearing it. You're under my instruction now. And I don't train people I don't believe in."

They left the scrapyard with a small bundle of parts between them—TK carrying his device with care, Azrael moving with his usual grace. The walk back was slower. Calmer. The silence now felt like shared space, not awkward distance.

When they returned to the academy, TK hesitated at the dorm door before looking up at Azrael.

"Hey," he said, "thanks for today. Really. It meant a lot."

Azrael gave the faintest smile. "Good. Then make it mean something."

TK nodded and went inside.

Azrael stood there a while longer, looking out across the quiet campus as night fully settled in. One student down. A few more to go.

But this—this was a good start.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter XXXIV: Current of Control

The following evening, just as the academy's bells marked the end of the day, Sirius found Azrael waiting by the gates. Unlike TK's trip, there was no explanation, no instructions—just Azrael's signature nod and a simple, "Come with me."

Sirius followed without protest. There was something about the way Azrael moved—always purposeful, like each step knew exactly where it was going—that told Sirius not to ask questions yet.

They didn't talk much on the way, which was fine with Sirius. He liked silence. The quiet between them felt steady, not strained. After a short walk through the edge of town, they stopped in front of a sleek building made entirely of dark glass and curved metal. Soft light glowed from beneath the entrance like a heartbeat.

"What is this place?" Sirius asked, arching a brow.

Azrael stepped forward and the doors slid open with a hiss of pressurized air. "It's called *Current*. A café run entirely by machines. No humans inside. Not one."

Sirius blinked. "No staff?"

"None. Everything's powered and managed by a closed electric grid. AI-driven baristas. Automated chefs. Even the ambient music is modulated based on energy flow patterns." He gestured for Sirius to enter. "It's run by electricity. Same force you control. I thought you should see what that looks like when it's not being used to fight."

The interior was unlike anything Sirius had ever seen. Elegant robotic arms moved with balletic precision behind the bar, brewing drinks and plating desserts like art pieces. Screens flickered gently with calming visuals—rivers of light, thunderclouds, galaxies rotating in perfect symmetry. The walls themselves pulsed with an ambient hum, like a low note of a song only the machines could hear.

Sirius stood in awe for a moment before Azrael led him to a booth near the back.

As they sat down, a mechanical hostess extended an interface. Azrael let Sirius pick for both of them, not saying a word as the boy scrolled through options. Eventually, Sirius settled on a coffee infused with low-level static energy and a plate of something that looked like glowing berry tarts.

"I didn't know anything like this existed," Sirius muttered, his eyes still darting around the room.

Azrael leaned back. "That's the thing about power. Most people only see one side of it. Fire burns. Water drowns. Lightning destroys. But all of those things can also create. Light. Movement. Life."

Sirius looked down at his own hands, flexing them slowly.

“You’ve been taught to control your electricity like a weapon,” Azrael said. “And you’re good at it. But I want you to know that what you have isn’t just destructive. It’s potential.”

Sirius was quiet, digesting that—both the thought and the bite of tart he just took. “I used to get told I was dangerous,” he said eventually. “Back home, my foster parents... they didn’t know what to do with me. Lights would flicker when I was mad. Devices would short-circuit if I touched them. I once made a phone melt in my hand.”

He gave a quiet laugh, more bitter than amused. “They were afraid I’d burn the house down. I almost did once.”

Azrael didn’t flinch. He simply nodded. “You were a conduit without a stabilizer. People feared the symptoms because they didn’t understand the source.”

Sirius looked up, intrigued. “You talk like you’ve seen it before.”

“I have,” Azrael said. “In others. In myself.”

That made Sirius pause. “You?”

Azrael didn’t answer right away. Instead, he sipped his drink, letting the silence carry the weight of his response before offering a quiet, “Power left unchecked has broken a lot of people. That’s why I’m strict. That’s why I push you.”

He set his drink down.

“Because if you don’t learn to master what’s inside you, someone else will either try to control it... or destroy it.”

Sirius nodded slowly. There was more truth in Azrael’s words than he cared to admit. But there was comfort too—knowing someone understood the danger not just of power, but of being feared for having it.

As they talked, the café subtly responded to them. The lights softened. The hum adjusted to a new rhythm. It was as if the building itself had begun to understand Sirius, responding to his presence.

He noticed. “It’s reacting.”

Azrael smiled faintly. “You’re not hurting it. You’re feeding it. Harmonizing.”

Sirius breathed in slowly, letting himself relax, shoulders easing.

“I never thought of my electricity like this before,” he said quietly. “Like it could belong somewhere.”

Azrael leaned forward, resting his arms on the table. “It does. You just have to choose where to put it.”

They stayed a while longer, talking about control, balance, and the unspoken weight of being powerful while still young. Before they left, Azrael let Sirius step behind the bar, where the machines didn’t seem to register him as a threat—but instead, adapted to his proximity. It was a moment of rare peace.

As they exited the café into the cool night air, Sirius looked over at his mentor.

“Thanks,” he said, “for showing me this.”

Azrael nodded. “You’re not just a weapon, Sirius. You’re a current. You can destroy—or you can power a city.”

Sirius looked up at the stars, his reflection flickering faintly in the glass door behind them. For once, he didn’t feel like a storm waiting to happen.

He felt like lightning in still air—controlled, sharp, and alive.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter Thirty-Six

Chapter XXXVI: "Echoes of Kindness"

The quiet hum of the city buzzed faintly beneath the afternoon sky as Azrael and Selena approached the familiar little café tucked between two tall brick buildings. It looked just as it had months ago—modest, warm, and with the faint smell of sweet pastries and roasted coffee drifting from the open windows.

Selena glanced up at Azrael, a small smile tugging at her lips. "You remembered."

Azrael nodded, pushing the door open. "Of course I did. This was the first time I saw you handle yourself after a real mission. It made an impression."

The warm air inside greeted them instantly. The place was nearly empty, with only a few patrons scattered across the small tables. A soft jazz tune trickled through the speakers, setting a relaxed mood.

They sat at the same table they had that day—by the window, looking out toward the street.

Before Selena could say anything, a voice piped up beside them. "Hey! You're that guy from the academy, right?"

Azrael looked down to see a young boy, maybe seven or eight, staring up at him with wide eyes and a smile missing two teeth. For a moment, Azrael's face remained unreadable, his usual cold demeanor settling in place.

But then—he softened.

He crouched slightly, meeting the boy's eyes with a calm expression. "You should be with your parents, little one."

The kid smiled wider. "They're paying over there. I just wanted to say your last fight was *awesome!* You punched that guy so hard the ground cracked!"

Selena watched with raised eyebrows as Azrael chuckled—not the dry, sarcastic kind she was used to, but an actual quiet laugh.

"Thank you," he said gently. "But don't try that at home. Go on now. They'll worry."

The kid nodded excitedly and ran off.

Selena blinked. "What... was that?"

Azrael leaned back in his chair, unfazed. "Children haven't learned to hate yet. There's no reason to be harsh with them unless they give you one."

Selena stared at him for a moment longer, then let out a breath and smiled faintly. “You’re full of surprises.”

Azrael looked at her. “Only when necessary.”

The waiter came by, and they ordered light snacks—tea for Azrael, something sweet for Selena. The silence that followed was comfortable, but Azrael broke it with a simple, pointed question.

“So, Selena. Who are you outside of your power?”

She tilted her head. “You’re asking about... me?”

He nodded. “You’ve fought, trained, and risked your life for this academy. I’ve pushed you. Hard. But I never asked who you are beyond all that. I’d like to know.”

Selena tapped her cup for a moment before answering. “I used to think I was just my voice. The weapon no one wanted to hear until it was time to break something. I always liked to sing, but that stopped feeling safe when people started getting hurt by it.”

Azrael’s expression didn’t change, but his silence urged her to keep going.

“My mom always said it was a gift, but she also told me to be careful not to use it. That’s kind of... mixed messaging, right?” She laughed bitterly. “So I learned to be quiet. Until I couldn’t be anymore.”

Azrael nodded slowly. “Power comes with conflict. Not just battles with others—but within yourself.”

She looked at him. “What about you? Who are you when you’re not the guy throwing people through walls?”

He smirked faintly, but there was something tired in his eyes. “Someone who’s trying not to fail the people that still trust him. Someone who’s lost too many.”

Selena’s tone softened. “That’s why the Trial meant so much to you.”

He nodded. “Ameari was going to be taken. I couldn’t let that happen.”

They sat in silence for a while longer, the weight of that truth hanging between them. Then Selena reached across the table and tapped her knuckles against his lightly.

“You’re not as cold as you pretend to be.”

“I’m colder,” he said dryly, but the edges of his lips curled upward for a second.

Selena laughed. “Sure you are.”

They stayed a while longer, talking about music, childhood, and everything in between. And for the first time, Selena saw a side of Azrael that wasn't made of armor or shadow—a side that listened, remembered, and cared more deeply than he let on.

And Azrael? He saw a young woman who wasn't just a voice of destruction, but someone trying to define herself through the noise.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter XXXVII: “Steel Without Sparks”

The sun had just begun to dip, casting long golden streaks over the academy rooftops. Kevin stood by the front gate, arms crossed, trying not to look too curious. When Azrael arrived, he said nothing at first, simply nodding for Kevin to follow. The two walked side-by-side through the quiet paths that curved beyond the edge of the academy grounds.

Kevin shot him a sideways glance. “So... where are we going? Please don’t say the mountains.”

Azrael gave a rare smirk. “Not this time. I figured we’d keep our lungs intact.”

Eventually, they arrived at a simple, open-air sparring ground. It was quiet, with nothing but the creak of nearby trees and the wind sweeping over the worn mats. No crowd, no weapons, no flashy abilities. Just open space, a cool breeze, and two fighters.

Azrael removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves. “No powers today. Just you and me. Let’s see how well you move without lightning at your fingertips.”

Kevin raised a brow. “You just wanted an excuse to punch me, huh?”

Azrael shrugged. “Possibly.”

They stepped into the ring. Kevin took a light stance, loose and bouncy, while Azrael planted his feet in a more grounded posture. For a moment, they just circled each other.

“You ever think about how weird this all is?” Kevin asked, faint grin on his lips. “A year ago I was still getting in trouble for skipping school. Now I’m sparring my team leader after helping win a magical tournament.”

Azrael ducked a jab and countered with a light sweep to Kevin’s leg, which Kevin narrowly avoided.

“You’ve come a long way,” Azrael said simply. “Not everyone can survive what you’ve survived.”

Kevin grunted, throwing a combo of strikes. Azrael blocked each one with ease, though his expression said he was holding back—for now.

“Remember that time during training when you had me fight a shadow version of myself?” Kevin laughed, dodging a strike. “That thing talked more crap than I do!”

Azrael allowed a chuckle to escape. “I programmed it based on your actual dialogue.”

Kevin gasped dramatically. “You mean I was annoying on purpose? I’m wounded.”

Azrael finally landed a clean hit—just a light tap to the ribs, but enough to make Kevin backpedal. “Your words. Not mine.”

They continued the sparring match, trading light blows and footwork, but it was more play than pressure. More learning than dominance. And for Kevin, it was the first time in a long time that he didn't feel like he had to prove anything. He was just... himself. And Azrael was letting him be that.

Eventually, they both stepped back, panting slightly. Azrael gave a nod. "You've improved."

Kevin wiped sweat from his brow. "Yeah? Think I could take you if we both sneezed at the same time?"

Azrael's eyes narrowed with amusement. "That's an oddly specific strategy. Might just work."

As the sun finally disappeared, Azrael motioned for them to move on. They walked back into town, this time to a small corner shop with a faded awning and a humming freezer. The sign above the door read: The Creamery.

Inside, Kevin blinked. "Ice cream? This is the big, mysterious post-training surprise?"

Azrael stepped forward and pointed to a flavor without hesitation. "Pistachio."

Kevin squinted. "You don't strike me as a pistachio guy."

Azrael handed him a cone. "Try it."

Kevin took a cautious bite. His eyes widened. "Okay. That's ... amazing."

They took their cones outside and leaned against the low stone fence that edged the sidewalk. Lights flickered on in the distance, soft and golden, while the town slowly settled into its evening rhythm.

For a while, they just stood there in the peace of it all.

"I always wondered," Kevin said after a minute, "why you care so much. Not just about winning. About all of us."

Azrael looked out at the street, quiet. "Because people like us don't often get a second chance. And when we do, we don't always recognize it."

Kevin nodded. "So... this academy is your second chance?"

Azrael's gaze drifted to him. "Something like that. It's not about redemption. It's about not letting anyone else get broken the way I did."

They were quiet again, but it wasn't heavy. It was thoughtful. Shared.

Kevin held up his cone. "To broken people who still somehow work."

Azrael clinked his pistachio cone against Kevin's like a toast. "And to lightning without a storm."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Chapter XXXVIII: "Cherry Blossoms and Old Scars"

The afternoon light cast soft golden rays through the clouds as Azrael waited just outside the school gates, hands tucked into his coat pockets. Ameari arrived shortly after, dressed with a subtle hint of excitement. As they walked, the world seemed quieter than usual—like the wind itself had slowed to listen.

"Where are we going?" Ameari asked, stealing a curious glance at him.

"You'll see," Azrael replied, a faint edge of something softer—something gentler—touching his usual composed tone.

They arrived in town, weaving through a quiet street lined with cherry blossom trees just beginning to bloom, until they reached a modest little building tucked between two taller ones. A wooden sign above the door read *Shiori's Blossom Café* in flowing Japanese calligraphy. Red lanterns gently swung in the breeze, and the scent of sweet matcha and grilled mochi filled the air.

Ameari's eyes lit up. "You brought me to a Japanese café?"

Azrael nodded. "You always seem most at peace when you talk about the culture. Thought it might be... fitting."

Ameari smiled warmly, touched by the gesture. "That's really thoughtful."

They entered and took a seat near a paper-paneled window. A soft melody played in the background—a shakuhachi flute tune, calming and nostalgic. The waitress brought over tea and small plates of dango, and the two began to chat, slowly relaxing into a rhythm. Ameari laughed as she recalled the early days of training, and Azrael even cracked a rare, small smile.

Just as Ameari was about to ask him something more personal, a voice called out from the entrance.

"Well, well, if it isn't the great Azrael."

Both of them turned. A tall young man approached, wearing a loose traditional yukata stylized in modern colors. His light hair was tousled, and his cheerful smile contrasted sharply with Azrael's ever-present stillness. Tied around his waist was an obi with a glowing seal pattern strikingly similar to Ameari's—but more chaotic, like a storm compared to her calm tide.

"Leon," Azrael muttered, his voice flat, cold.

Leon's grin didn't falter. "I saw you walk in and thought, *No way, it's been forever!*" He turned to Ameari and offered a polite bow. "And who might you be? I'm guessing one of Azrael's students. Poor you."

Ameari blinked. "I'm Ameari. And... we were kind of in the middle of something."

Leon chuckled, undeterred. "Figures. Always so focused. Azrael, c'mon, it's been years. Are you *seriously* still mad about the past?"

Azrael's expression didn't change. "I have no reason to speak to a traitor."

The word hung in the air like a blade drawn across glass.

Leon didn't flinch. "Still as dramatic as ever. Look, I didn't come to start anything—I just thought I'd say hi."

Azrael stood slowly, stepping between Leon and Ameari. "You've said it. Now leave. She's my focus today."

Leon held his hands up in mock surrender. "Alright, alright. But hey, Ameari—if you ever want to learn a *less rigid* version of your power, you know where to find me."

Azrael's eyes flashed—not with power, but with a rare and unmistakable fury. Leon only smiled and walked away, whistling as if nothing had happened.

Once he was gone, Ameari looked at Azrael, her brows drawn in concern. "Who was that?"

Azrael didn't meet her gaze at first. He stared out the window for a moment, the petals drifting gently outside like memories.

"That," he said slowly, "is a story for another day."

He turned to her again, his expression softening. "Today's about you. Let's go."

The two left the café behind and wandered toward the beach nearby. The air carried the scent of salt and warmth, and the sound of waves gently rolling against the shore brought a peaceful rhythm to their walk.

As they strolled along the waterline, the tension from earlier faded. Ameari skipped a stone across the waves while Azrael kept pace beside her, occasionally nudging her shoulder when she joked too boldly. The conversation turned to childhood memories—hers of reading manga under her covers at night, his of quietly climbing to the highest points in the mountains to escape the noise of people.

"It's weird seeing you like this," Ameari admitted as they paused by a cluster of driftwood.

"Like what?" Azrael asked.

"Human."

He gave her a look—half amused, half exasperated—but she only laughed. “I mean it. You always seem so far away from everything. But... here, like this, you feel closer.”

Azrael looked out to the sea, the horizon tinted orange and gold.

“I don’t do this often,” he said. “But I wanted to understand you better. The way I trained you... it’s not just about fighting. It’s about knowing who I’m fighting for.”

Ameari didn’t say anything for a long time. She just stood beside him, letting the sound of the ocean speak for a while.

When the sun began to dip fully beneath the water, they turned back toward the academy—no longer just teacher and student, but something stronger. Something forged in quiet understanding, not just battles.

Something like trust.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Chapter XXXIX: A New Disruption

The next morning began like any other. The classroom was still filled with a soft haze from the early sunrise, and the gentle hum of students filing into their seats buzzed through the air. But the moment they stepped inside, something was immediately off.

Azrael's seat—always empty until he arrived—was occupied.

The figure lounging casually in the chair leaned back with a smug grin on his face, arms crossed behind his head. His uniform was crisp, but worn in an unbothered way, with a custom flare that clearly skirted school regulation. His presence was magnetic, unsettlingly so, and yet so relaxed it made everyone pause. A bright sash decorated with strange, ornate markings hung around his waist—the same style that marked Ameari's power—but with a wilder, more chaotic design.

"Morning, everyone!" he chirped, voice full of easy charm. "Name's Leon. I'm new here. I figured I'd get comfy."

Some students exchanged glances in confusion, others just muttered or nodded awkwardly. But all heads turned when the door opened again and Azrael stepped into the room, black coat trailing behind him like a shadow.

He paused.

His gaze settled on Leon in his seat.

Then, without a word, he walked past him, placed his materials on the desk, and started writing the day's topic on the board.

No acknowledgement. No reaction. Just... silence.

Leon leaned in toward Ameari, who was seated just beside the front.

"Guess he's still sore," Leon whispered with a laugh. "He's always been the brooding type."

Ameari kept her eyes forward, silent, calm. She didn't turn to look at him, but her hands clenched slightly on her notebook. Leon's voice lowered a bit, but not by much.

"You know, you've got a great presence," he said lightly. "I can see why Azrael is so protective of you. Must be weird, right? Having him of all people play bodyguard."

Still, no response. She wrote a few words into her notes, brushing her hair behind her ear.

Leon didn't stop. All throughout the class, he'd lean over, whisper jokes, ask questions, or just make random observations like, *"Do you think Azrael ever smiles? Like ever?"* or *"You and I have similar powers, but mine's way more fun, you'll see."*

Each time, Ameari would calmly ignore him.

Azrael, for the most part, kept teaching. But now and then, he'd pause midsentence, look directly at Leon, and say flatly, "Focus on your work."

Leon always nodded with mock sincerity. "Of course, Professor Azrael."

The class began to feel the tension grow daily.

For the next several days, Leon was relentless.

He sat in Azrael's seat each morning before class began.

He tried to buddy up with the rest of the students, offering compliments, wild stories, and tidbits about how Solstice Vale had "way better food." He always had something to say, some comment, some backhanded jab meant more for Azrael than anyone else.

When they trained, he'd lean on the railing of the observation deck, commenting on their form or praising them loudly when they landed hits.

"Nice swing, TK! Almost looked like you knew what you were doing!"

"Kev, that dodge was clean. You sure you're not copying me?"

He continued to pepper Ameari with conversation whenever they were close. She never cracked. Calm, silent, focused.

And every time Leon spoke out in class, Azrael would cut in with a tired: "Focus."

But even Azrael's patience was beginning to stretch thin.

One afternoon, when Leon arrived at his usual time, he found Azrael already in the seat.

Leon stopped in the doorway, a little surprised, then smirked and took a desk a few rows back. As the students filed in, they noticed Azrael's darker mood, the faintest edge in his voice as he started the lesson.

During a lull in the lecture, Leon leaned forward again.

"So, teach," he said. "You ever gonna tell them about us? Or is that still a sore spot?"

The air in the classroom dropped ten degrees.

Azrael didn't look at him. Didn't say a word. He simply picked up the chalk, and with a sharp *click*, continued writing on the board.

The students all felt it. There was something unspoken between them—something old and painful.

Leon kept smiling.

Ameari, for the first time, glanced back at Leon. Her eyes held no warmth, only calm curiosity.

Leon winked.

“Just trying to lighten the mood,” he said.

For the rest of the week, the pattern remained. Leon continued to prod. Azrael continued to teach. Ameari continued to ignore.

But a storm was clearly building, and everyone in the classroom could feel it in the quiet, tense space between Azrael and the cheerful boy with a familiar power.

And whether they liked it or not, the class was caught in the middle.

Chapter Forty

Chapter XXXX: “Power That Wasn't Yours”

It had been days since Leon had embedded himself into their class, a grating presence that never faded. He kept his tone light, always playful, but there was something underneath it—something off. He smiled too wide. His questions toward Ameari weren't just friendly, and the way he lingered near her in the halls, stood a bit too close during drills, always happened to be nearby when she was alone—it was enough to raise suspicion.

To anyone else, it might've seemed like harmless flirting.

But Azrael wasn't fooled.

Every time Leon leaned against Ameari's desk, making some new attempt at charming her, Azrael's fists would tighten. His voice during lectures grew sharper. Training drills became more intense. And yet, Leon acted like nothing was wrong—no, he reveled in it. He made a game of poking at Azrael's restraint.

One afternoon, in the middle of practice on the sparring field, Leon stood along the fence, arms folded, watching Ameari spar against one of the class shadows Azrael had conjured.

“Nice footwork!” Leon called out with an exaggerated clap. “Bet I could teach you a few things to make that style really shine.”

Azrael, who was pacing quietly at the field's edge, stopped cold.

“Leon,” he said without turning, “stop showing off a power that isn't rightfully yours.”

The silence after that was suffocating. Ameari stopped moving. Even the ambient rustling of the wind seemed to hesitate.

Leon's smirk faltered for the first time, just slightly.

“Oh?” he said, pushing off the fence with a casual shrug. “That's what this is about again?”

He stepped onto the field, walking straight up to Azrael without hesitation.

“You don't get to say what's rightfully mine,” Leon said, his tone still laced with forced calm. “Your sister would've died. Her power would've gone with her. If I hadn't taken it, it would've been lost.”

“You had no right,” Azrael said, voice low, burning.

“I saved her legacy,” Leon said simply. “And it cost me my place on the team. But you—what did you do, Azrael? You watched her die.”

Azrael's entire frame stiffened.

For a moment, it seemed like he might act—might throw the first blow without warning. But instead, he turned away.

“Leave,” Azrael said, his voice even.

Leon raised a hand in mock surrender. “As you wish.”

He strolled away from the training field, hands in his pockets, humming a quiet tune. As if nothing had happened.

Ameari stood in the middle of the field, her expression unreadable. The others didn’t speak. No one moved.

Later that evening, after the rest of the class had been dismissed, Ameari found Azrael still standing on the field, his back turned to the fading sun.

She approached quietly, then spoke softly. “What was he talking about?”

Azrael didn’t answer at first.

“He was talking about my sister,” he said finally. “Her name was Kaela.”

He took a breath, deep and bitter.

“Two years ago, she, Leon, and I were on a mission team. She was our leader. Strong, careful, smarter than either of us. We got ambushed by something we weren’t prepared for. She got caught... badly. We couldn’t save her.”

He looked down at his hands.

“She was dying. I stayed with her. Leon—he didn’t even ask. He just... took her power. Pulled it from her like it belonged to him.”

Ameari’s eyes widened. “He... took it?”

Azrael nodded slowly. “Not inherited. Not passed down. Stolen. With no permission. Not from her. Not from me. Not from our family. He used a forbidden method. It got him banned from any official teams. But he was allowed to live. Free.”

He turned to look at her, the usual coldness in his eyes replaced with something deeper—grief, regret, fury.

“She should be alive. Not him.”

And with that, he walked away from her, vanishing into the long shadows cast by the academy walls, his coat flaring behind him like a dark flame.

Chapter Forty-One

Chapter XXXI: “Taken”

It was late. The sky had dipped into a soft gradient of orange and deep blue as the sun slipped behind the horizon. Ameari stood at the edge of the courtyard, arms crossed, waiting for Leon.

She wasn't sure why she'd agreed to meet him. Maybe it was curiosity. Maybe it was a concern. Or maybe it was the way Azrael had looked—wounded in a way she hadn't seen before.

Leon arrived right on time, hands tucked in his jacket pockets, that same smile stretched across his face.

“You came,” he said brightly. “Wasn't sure you would.”

“I need to ask you something,” Ameari said, skipping the pleasantries. “Why did you take Kaela's power?”

Leon blinked once, then sighed, tilting his head. “Straight to the point, huh?”

“You stole something sacred. And now you're flaunting it in front of her brother like it means nothing.”

“Flaunting?” Leon echoed with a soft chuckle. “No, no. That's not it at all. I'm reminding him.”

“Reminding him?” Ameari's eyes narrowed. “Of what?”

Leon took a few slow steps toward her, gaze dropping slightly. “That he failed.”

“That's sick.”

Leon shrugged. “Maybe. But it's the truth.”

“And pushing his buttons? You think this is how you make things right?” she demanded. “He already lost someone he cared about. Why make it worse?”

Her voice trembled now, more with frustration than fear.

Leon's smile stretched wider—but something in it shifted. It wasn't friendly anymore.

“You're absolutely right,” he said softly. “Just getting under his skin isn't enough.”

Ameari took a step back. “What do you mean—?”

Before she could react, an obi twisted around her ankles, freezing her in place. Her breath hitched. She felt the power surge through her body—her own kind of power—but it was being overwhelmed by a similar force. Familiar, but wrong. Distorted.

Leon raised a single hand. "Don't take this personally. I just need him to come see me."

In one blink, the world shifted.

And Ameari vanished.

The next morning, the dorm was still. Azrael stirred awake, senses sharp despite the restless night. Something was off.

He sat up in the room he now shared with Kevin and Ameari, eyes scanning. Her bed—empty. Sheets still warm, but she was gone. His heart dropped into his stomach. Then he noticed the envelope resting on the edge of the bed. Neat. Precise.

He opened it with steady hands.

"Come get her. You know where. Let's see if you've changed."
—Leon

Azrael's expression hardened.

From the other room, Kevin emerged, rubbing his eyes. "Azrael? What's going on?"

Azrael didn't answer immediately. He folded the note and tucked it into his coat.

"I have to go," he said firmly.

Kevin's eyes widened. "What do you mean go? What's going on? Where's Ameari?"

Azrael turned toward the door, his voice cold and calm.

"Leon took her."

He didn't wait for Kevin's reaction. He was already moving, his shadow unfurling beneath him like wings in the wind.

Chapter Forty-Two

Chapter XXXII: Into the Shadows

Morning came with a strange tension in the air. The students of the academy filtered into the classroom with their usual chatter, but even the sunlight streaming through the windows felt dimmer—muted, as if the walls themselves sensed the shift.

Azrael stood at the front, arms crossed, his expression unreadable. Kevin stood silently at his side, eyes sharp and focused. The usual air of control Azrael carried now seemed wrapped in urgency.

Once everyone settled, Azrael spoke, his voice as calm as ever but laced with something colder beneath the surface.

“Kevin and I will be gone for the next two days. Possibly longer,” he said simply.

A murmur spread through the room instantly. Jay, who’d just arrived moments before, raised a brow but said nothing.

“Where are you going?” TK asked, frowning.

“Is everything okay?” Selena added, glancing between the two.

Azrael’s gaze swept the class, firm and final. “That’s not your concern. Continue your studies while we’re gone. I’ve left a shadow to instruct the class.”

“Wait—” Sirius started, but Azrael had already turned away.

Kevin followed without hesitation, his eyes scanning the room one last time—lingering for a brief second on Ameari’s empty seat. His jaw clenched.

Once they were in the hallway, the two walked side by side in silence until they exited the building. Only then did Azrael finally speak.

“We’re going to the ruins north of the old capital. Leon’s note didn’t say it directly, but I know that’s where he is. It’s where he trained. It’s where he took her power.” His voice darkened at the last part.

Kevin nodded, his tone serious. “Tell me what I’m walking into.”

Azrael didn’t hesitate. “Leon uses the same power as Ameari. Energy weaving. But his version is chaotic—less refined, more volatile. He took it from Kaela... my sister. He didn’t inherit it. He stole it.”

Kevin blinked, but stayed quiet. He’d never heard Azrael talk like this—so personal, so raw.

Azrael continued. “He’s fast. Likes to play with his opponents. And he's not above using manipulation or psychological tactics to get into your head. He’s dangerous—but cocky. That’s our opening.”

“And Ameari?” Kevin asked. “What’s the plan?”

“We get her out. Alive. Nothing else matters.”

They made it back to the dorms where Kevin quickly grabbed his gear, while Azrael methodically assembled his supplies: healing kits, restraints, cloaking charms, and a small knife that seemed far too personal to be standard equipment.

Within twenty minutes, the two stood at the school gates. Azrael cast one last glance back toward the academy before opening a portal beneath them—a ripple of shadow and mist. He didn’t say goodbye.

As they stepped through, the gateway closed behind them like a curtain falling on a stage.

And the hunt began.