

H. Academy 868

Chapter 868 - No title

"You say that, but I get the feeling she hasn't even started being truly evil."

Lucas leaned back, shaking his head. "Okay, so how'd you even survive that?"

Ethan exhaled, leaning back slightly as he rolled his shoulders. "Honestly? She mostly kept it under control. I mean, it was hell, but she didn't completely crush us. She was testing, not outright breaking us. Still, we had to put in a lot of effort just to stay standing."

Carl, ever the observant one, nodded. "Astron was with you, right? How'd he do?"

At that, Ethan's smirk shifted into something more genuine. He rubbed his chin, recalling the session. "Astron..." He let the name hang in the air for a moment before shaking his head with a small laugh. "He handled it damn well. Better than I expected. And honestly? It was probably even harder for him than it was for me."

Julia, who had been watching Ethan carefully, narrowed her eyes. "Really?"

Ethan met her gaze, still smiling slightly. "Yeah. I mean, he looked like he was really built differently. He adapted to Eleanor's pressure almost too fast, which is kind of insane considering it was our first time under it. Most people would've collapsed in the first few minutes, but he kept up."

Julia leaned back, crossing her arms. "Huh. You sound like you respect him."

Ethan shrugged. "Well, yeah. You have to give credit where it's due."

But then, a sharp grin formed at the edge of his lips. "That being said—" he tapped his fingers against the desk, "—it's only a matter of time before I surpass him."

That made Julia perk up, her smirk returning. "Heeeeh... Competitive, aren't we?"

Ethan chuckled. "Always."

Lilia, who had been quietly listening up until now, rested her chin on her hand. "Alright, but I want details. You said Astron adapted quickly—what do you mean by that?"

Ethan thought back to the session, the way Astron had reacted to Eleanor's increasing mana pressure. "It's hard to explain. Most people resist when they're under pressure like that. It's instinct—you brace against it, fight to endure. But Astron? He flowed with it. Like he wasn't just resisting, he was adjusting before it fully hit."

Lilia's brows furrowed slightly. "That's... unusual."

Ethan nodded. "Yeah. It wasn't just strength—it was efficiency. And it makes me think that whatever training he's had before coming here wasn't normal."

Lucas let out a low whistle. "Damn. Now I really want to see you two go all out against each other."

Julia smirked. "Yeah, yeah, that'd be fun, but what I really want to see is who breaks first under Eleanor."

The conversation lulled for a moment before Julia, ever the one to stir things up, glanced toward Irina. "Hey, wait a second."

The rest of the group turned their eyes on her as well.

"You've been awfully quiet through all of this," Julia said, narrowing her eyes. "Not interested in the Ethan vs. Astron saga?"

Irina, still leaning back in her chair with her arms crossed, barely reacted. "Of course not," she said, her voice calm. "I just didn't have anything to add."

Lucas, sitting next to her, frowned slightly, studying her expression. "Hmm."

Ethan raised an eyebrow but didn't push. Lilia, however, tapped a finger against the table, tilting her head. "Really? I figured you'd at least have some thoughts on it."

Irina shrugged. "You all seem entertained enough without my input."

Lucas, still watching her closely, let it go—at least for now. But just as he turned his attention back to Ethan, he caught something.

A shift.

Irina's posture, while still relaxed, suddenly held an extra tension. Her golden eyes flickered toward the classroom entrance for the briefest moment, and Lucas followed her gaze instinctively.

Just as the door creaked open.

Lucas barely had time to register the small change in Irina's expression before he saw the reason.

Astron entered.

As always, his expression was unreadable, his sharp purple eyes scanning the room briefly before settling on an empty seat toward the back. He walked with that same measured, effortless stride, his presence quiet but somehow noticeable all the same.

Lucas, still watching Irina out of the corner of his eye, noticed the way she didn't immediately look away.

Interesting.

Julia, on the other hand, had no subtlety. She grinned and immediately sat up. "Speak of the devil."

Ethan smirked, shaking his head. "Right on cue."

Astron didn't react, simply making his way toward his seat.

But Lucas? He was still thinking about what he'd just seen.

Irina had noticed him first.

And something about that fact felt... curious.

The sharp sound of boots tapping against the polished floor filled the room, steady and deliberate. The cadets, still engaged in their casual banter, instinctively straightened as the presence of their instructor loomed at the doorway.

A moment later, Instructor Reynold Graves stepped inside.

Tall and broad-shouldered, Reynold carried himself with the practiced ease of a veteran soldier. His sharp blue eyes scanned the room with quiet authority, taking in the cadets' postures, their expressions, and the lingering remnants of conversation that had yet to

fully settle. His uniform, crisp and well-maintained, reflected the discipline he expected from those under his tutelage.

As he reached the front of the room, he clasped his hands behind his back. Though his presence was not as suffocating as Eleanor's, the weight of his experience demanded respect.

"Good," he said, his voice deep but composed. "At least you all know when to stop talking."

A hushed silence followed, only broken by the sound of a chair shifting slightly as students adjusted their posture.

Reynold's gaze swept across the room once more before he nodded slightly. "Cadets, as per the academy's training curriculum, we will begin the Building Simulation Exercise this afternoon. This will be your first large-scale evaluation in a controlled combat scenario, and it will determine where each of you currently stands."

He tapped on his wrist device, and within seconds, the classroom's holo-display flickered to life. The cadets turned their eyes toward the projected image—a large, multi-leveled urban environment reconstructed entirely through mana-linked simulations. Collapsed structures, hidden corridors, and debris-laden streets formed a labyrinth of unpredictable battlegrounds.

"The objective," Reynold continued, his voice measured and firm, "is to retrieve and secure a mystical artifact hidden within this structure. However, you won't be alone." He allowed a brief pause before adding, "Your opponents will be your fellow cadets."

The room buzzed with renewed interest. Several cadets exchanged glances, already calculating potential strategies, while others—like Julia—grinned at the thought of facing off against familiar faces.

"You will be divided into teams of three, assigned at random. These teams will have to navigate the environment, eliminate or evade enemy teams, and secure the artifact until the round's conclusion."

Reynold took a step forward, his expression sharp. "The rules are simple but strict:"

Teams will be randomly selected—you will not be able to choose your allies.

Points are awarded for teamwork, strategy, and effective defense of the artifact—not just combat skill.

The Mana-Linked Arenas will provide realistic urban combat conditions: collapsing walls, hidden traps, multiple floors, and unpredictable obstacles. You must adapt accordingly.

He glanced at the class, gauging their reactions. "You will be expected to coordinate, think critically, and adapt on the fly. Individual strength will not be enough to secure victory—cohesion and quick decision-making will matter more."

For a moment, he allowed the weight of his words to settle over the cadets.

Then, in his usual no-nonsense tone, he added, "Your assigned teams will be displayed on your academy portals in exactly one hour. Report to the Mana-Linked Arena at 1400

hours sharp. Any cadet who fails to arrive on time will not participate and will have to make up for the session in a far less pleasant manner."

At that, a few students instinctively straightened further, knowing that "less pleasant" in Reynold's vocabulary likely meant hours of grueling remedial training.

"I expect full effort from each of you," Reynold concluded. "Dismissed."

As he turned, the tension in the air broke. Almost immediately, the class erupted into murmurs, speculation running wild. Who would be teamed up with whom? Who would get the artifact first? And, more importantly—who would come out on top?

One thing was certain.

This afternoon was going to be chaotic.