

H. Academy 869

Chapter 869 - New group

As I made my way to the designated meeting area, my mind was already running through possible strategies.

The composition of my team would dictate my approach to the exercise, and though I had already memorized every cadet's habits, strengths, and weaknesses, I still had to account for the unpredictability of the battlefield itself.

'Though tryharding may not be that necessary.'

The crowd was thick with murmurs and speculation as cadets gathered, scanning the displayed team assignments on their academy portals. My eyes flicked over the holographic list.

Team 6

Astron Natusalune

Asher Veldrin

Caden Holt

A pause.

So he was on my team.

Asher Veldrin—the same person who had stood with Taylor, who had made the choice to seal me inside the mana stone cave during our first mission. He wasn't the ringleader, no. But he was complicit, and that mattered.

The second name, Caden Holt, wasn't someone I had direct experience with. I knew of him, of course—I knew everyone in our class.

A hard worker. Not particularly remarkable in combat, but diligent enough to refine his fundamentals. A swordsman, though his technique lacked the refined precision of someone like Julia or others. He compensated for it with persistence, if nothing else.

But what stood out more than his combat style was his personality.

Caden was the type who always wore a smile, a natural social lubricant. Similar to Ethan in that regard, but without the same strength of character. He was... impressionable. Often drawn into the pull of his more dominant friends, sometimes without even realizing he was being used.

I had also noted a recent shift in his behavior—subtle changes in his body language, in the way he interacted with female cadets. His need for validation had become more pronounced. A byproduct of personal circumstances, no doubt.

The breakup.

It had been a quiet thing, not a dramatic falling out. But those paying attention—people like me—could see the effects. The way he lingered a little longer in conversations with girls, the extra effort he put into appearing composed, as if unaffected.

A boy desperately trying to convince himself he was fine.

Not an ideal mindset for a battlefield.

I spotted them both near the edge of the training ground. Asher was leaning against a railing, arms crossed, watching me approach with a neutral expression. Beside him, Caden had that easy-going smile on his face, though his posture was just a bit too casual, as if trying to appear effortless.

Asher spoke first.

"We meet again."

His voice was steady, but there was an underlying edge to it. His body betrayed him more than his words—subtle stiffness in his stance, fingers tapping against his arm, the way his shoulders tensed slightly as I closed the distance.

"You've changed a lot," he added, eyeing me carefully.

I didn't respond immediately. Instead, I let the silence stretch just long enough to unsettle him.

Then, calmly, I said, "People change. It's inevitable."

Caden, sensing the weight between us, stepped in with a wide grin.

"Well, aren't we off to a fun start?" He clapped Asher on the back before turning to me. "Astron, right? We haven't really worked together before, but I've seen you in action. Solid stuff, man."

His tone was friendly, casual, but his eyes flicked to me with a hint of curiosity.

I studied him. His posture was loose, open. His gaze flickered—not in fear, but in the way of someone looking for a response, for acknowledgment.

A small nod was enough to satisfy him.

"Caden Holt," I said, as if I needed confirmation.

"The one and only," he replied with a chuckle, rubbing the back of his neck. "So, uh... yeah. I'm guessing we're supposed to figure out how we're gonna work together."

He exhaled, then added, "Not that I doubt either of you, but if we're being real, I don't think I'm carrying this team. I'm more of a 'reliable support' kind of guy, y'know? So... I'll follow whatever plan you guys come up with."

I noted the way his smile widened slightly as he finished speaking, his eyes drifting just past me for half a second.

A small shift in focus.

A quick scan of my surroundings told me what I already suspected—his gaze had moved toward a cluster of female cadets nearby.

Ah.

So even now, his mind wasn't entirely on the mission.

Caden wasn't a bad person. But he had his distractions. His weaknesses.

'Well....it is not my responsibility to fix them.'

Asher exhaled through his nose, shaking his head slightly. "Well, at least you're honest."

Asher ran a hand through his hair, exhaling sharply. Then, with a measured look, he spoke.

"Look..."

His tone was restrained, but the tension was there, woven beneath the surface. His posture shifted slightly, weight pressing onto one leg—a subtle sign of unease, like he was bracing himself for whatever came next.

I remained silent, watching, waiting.

"You and I both know there's been... unfinished business between us," Asher continued, his gaze locking onto mine. "I'm not gonna pretend like nothing happened back at the Mana Stone Mine. I did what I did, and you haven't forgotten that. And honestly?" His lips pressed together, frustration flickering behind his eyes. "I wouldn't either."

There it was.

Recognition. Guilt, even. But also something else—wariness.

He saw me as a threat.

It wasn't just about what had happened at the mine. It was about what I had become since then. It is often like this.

He had expected me to be buried in that cave, to suffer a failure that would set me back. Instead, I had climbed higher. My name was no longer just another among the cadets—it was one that carried weight. More eyes turned toward me now, watching, measuring.

And, of course, there was Irina.

I had noticed the way he looked at me during classes, the way his eyes flickered toward Irina when she stood near me, the barely-there tensing of his shoulders whenever she spoke to me.

Whether he had feelings for her or simply thought that with Irina beside me he would be done for, the result was the same.

To him, I was competition.

"You're right," I said at last, my voice even. "I haven't forgotten."

His expression tightened slightly, as if he expected me to push further.

Instead, I continued, "But this isn't the time for it."

Asher blinked, the tension in his jaw shifting.

I took a step forward, meeting his gaze without flinching. "Focus on what's in front of us. I will do the same."

The words hung between us, simple but heavy.

Asher studied me for a long moment, his muscles still carrying that faint stiffness of guarded emotion. Then, slowly, he let out a sigh, running a hand over the back of his neck.

"...Fine."

His body language softened, if only slightly. His stance was still wary, but something in his posture suggested he was at least partially convinced.

He wasn't letting go of whatever tension existed between us.

But for now, he was willing to set it aside.

Caden, who had been watching the exchange in silence, let out an exaggerated exhale. "Damn, that was getting intense. You two done measuring each other yet?"

I didn't answer, and neither did Asher.

As the tension settled, I remained silent, letting my thoughts drift.

If Asher ever showed signs of being a threat to me, I wouldn't hesitate to eliminate him.

Back at the Mana Stone Mine, I had chosen to let things play out. Not because I was powerless, but because I knew the situation wouldn't escalate beyond control. I had calculated the risks, gauged their intent, and understood that they wouldn't go far enough to truly endanger me.

But that didn't mean I would let that happen again.

I had already allowed it once.

And I wasn't the type to make the same mistake twice.

From the corner of my vision, I noticed Asher side-eyeing me, something unreadable flashing across his face before he exhaled.

"So, what do we do?"

I turned to him, arching a brow slightly. He's asking me?

"You're asking me?" My voice was flat, but the implication was clear.

Asher huffed, shifting his weight. "I may be higher ranked than you, but I know even Irina Emberheart trusts you when it comes to things like this." His expression remained

firm, but I caught the way his fingers twitched slightly, a subconscious tick of someone forcing himself to acknowledge an uncomfortable truth.

So, even he had noticed.

I nodded once, approvingly. "Good observation. Keep this up, and you'll stay alive in the industry."