

## H. Academy 871

### Chapter 871 - New team

Astron took the small tablet handed to them by an instructor, his sharp purple eyes scanning the screen as the briefing loaded.

A dimly lit, wireframe representation of the urban complex flickered to life—a sprawling multi-leveled structure with broken corridors, collapsed ceilings, and interwoven staircases. The artifact's location pulsed faintly on the map: Third Floor, West Wing.

Everything else? Unmarked. No exact team placements. No routes. No layouts of enemy fortifications.

They were given just enough information to make a decision—nothing more.

'Realistic, indeed.' Astron narrowed his eyes.

The academy wasn't holding their hands. A real mission wouldn't provide enemy blueprints or detailed guard rotations. A Hunter needed to assess, adapt, and execute within minutes.

They had ten.

Two teams infiltrating. Two teams defending.

Which meant there was only one real certainty—resistance was guaranteed.

Asher leaned in slightly, eyes flicking between the map and Astron's face, gauging his reaction. "Well? We going in loud or quiet?"

Astron tapped a finger against the tablet's frame, letting the silence stretch for a moment as he processed the information. His first instinct? He could handle this alone.

A fast, precise approach would get him in and out before anyone had the chance to fully react. But there was no need for that. He didn't have anything to prove—not here, not to them.

Instead, he was more interested in them.

How would Asher and Caden handle this? What insights could they offer?

Astron glanced up, his expression unreadable. "Thoughts?"

Asher's brows lifted slightly, as if caught off guard by the question. His initial instinct had likely been that Astron would just dictate a plan outright.

Caden, however, took it in stride, rubbing his chin as he peered at the wireframe map. "Alright, let's see... Third Floor, West Wing. If we assume the defenders are smart, they

won't just bunker down around the artifact. That'd make them too easy to surround and pick off."

He traced a rough route with his finger. "So, they're probably setting up in layers. First line of defense here—stairwell access points, maybe some barricades. Second line would be closer, something tighter around the artifact itself."

Astron tilted his head slightly, listening. Half-right.

Asher nodded slowly, arms still crossed. "If they know what they're doing, they won't waste their strongest fighters on the outer defenses. Those are meant to stall, buy time. The real threat will be positioned inside the artifact's perimeter."

Astron gave a slow nod, but his eyes remained on the screen. "If they're competent, yes."

Asher's brow furrowed. "And if they're not?"

"Then this is over in five minutes." Astron didn't say it as a boast, just a fact.

Caden chuckled. "Kinda hoping they put up a fight, though. Wouldn't be fun otherwise."

Astron ignored that and refocused on the map.

"They'll have two main priorities: control the bottlenecks and limit sightlines." His voice was calm, measured. "If they're smart, their first defensive point won't be at the stairwells. It'll be just past them, where we'd think we're clear after breaking through."

Asher's head tilted slightly. "Ambush positioning?"

Astron nodded. "If I were setting up defenses, I'd let the attackers push up, make them believe they've secured ground—only to collapse in on them from the flanks once they're committed. Stairwells and main hallways are obvious choke points. But what's more dangerous are the rooms directly adjacent."

Caden's eyebrows raised slightly. "Huh. Didn't think of that."

Asher exhaled through his nose. "Makes sense. If we rush up, we're walking into a death trap."

Astron tapped the map again, this time highlighting the West Wing's upper balcony.

"Their best sniper, or anyone with ranged proficiency, should be stationed here. It's got a clear line of sight toward the primary entry points. If they're competent, they'll have someone watching it—either to pick off infiltrators or call out movements."

Asher crossed his arms, his expression skeptical. "There aren't many rangers in this batch." His gaze flicked to Astron, almost challenging. "Not many archers like you."

Astron didn't react to the statement—he simply nodded. "Indeed." His voice remained calm, even. "I'm just reminding you—if they have any, they would be positioned there."

Asher exhaled through his nose, but he didn't argue further.

Caden, watching the exchange, smirked slightly. "So, worst case scenario, we've got someone with a bow watching that balcony. Best case, it's empty, and we don't have to worry about a surprise arrow to the skull."

Astron's eyes flicked back to the tablet. "That's not the only position they'll use." He traced his finger down to a section just beneath the artifact's location—a wide, but seemingly unremarkable hallway leading into the West Wing's storage area.

"This spot." His voice didn't change, but there was a weight behind it.

Caden raised an eyebrow. "You sure? That's... kind of an awkward place to set up."

Astron's fingers tapped against the screen. "Not if they expect attackers to push aggressively."

Asher leaned in slightly, eyes narrowing. "Go on."

Astron tilted the tablet slightly, his mind already playing out the battle before it even began. He had spent enough time observing these cadets, analyzing their instincts, their habits. Most of them were predictable.

And right now, that worked in his favor.

"If I were leading the defense," he continued, "I'd let the first wave of attackers rush up the main stairwell. Make them think they're advancing—maybe even let them reach the artifact room itself." He tapped the hallway again.

"This is where I'd cut them off."

Caden frowned. "You mean—?"

"They let us in," Astron said simply. "And when we're inside, when we're overcommitted—that's when they seal the exits and collapse in."

Silence.

Asher's fingers twitched against his arm.

"...Interesting." His voice was quieter now, more thoughtful. "Didn't think of that."

Caden let out a short whistle. "Yeah, alright. That's nasty." He looked at Astron with something close to admiration. "You've thought about this a lot."

Astron's gaze remained on the map.

He already knew where the enemy would be.

This wasn't some grand revelation. It was just obvious.

The defenders weren't random. They were other cadets—cadets he had studied, fought alongside, sparred against. Their skill levels varied, but their decision-making?

That was predictable.

He knew their tendencies. How they hesitated. How they bluffed. How they reacted when under pressure.

Given the layout of the structure and the level of their training, predicting their defensive strategy wasn't difficult. They would fall into patterns—patterns he had seen before.

But he wasn't going to say that out loud.

No need to reveal what he knew.

Caden tapped a finger against the map, brows furrowed. "Alright, but what about the other offensive team? Are we working with them, or is this a full-on free-for-all?"

Astron's gaze didn't waver. "If the academy wanted us to work together, they wouldn't have separated us." His voice was calm, matter-of-fact. "It's far more likely they want to compare our effectiveness—see which team performs better."

Caden hummed, considering that for a second. Then he grinned. "Huh. So, we're in a competition. That means if we run into them, we could—"

Before he could finish, Astron glared at him, his sharp purple eyes carrying an almost imperceptible intensity.

"Besides," Astron continued, voice even but firm, "when we already have enough, why should we seek more?" His gaze didn't waver. "The three of us will be enough."

Caden blinked at him, then slowly raised his hand in surrender.

"Okay, man, I get it—you're confident." He smirked slightly. "But no need to be edgy."

Astron just stared.

Asher, standing next to them, exhaled sharply and facepalmed—just a little.

Caden cleared his throat. "Ahem. It was a joke."

"A bad one," Asher muttered, rubbing his temple. "This guy's duller than you think."



Astron simply shook his head, already tuning them out.

The conversation was done.

Now, it was time to execute.