

H. Academy 872

Chapter 872 - Artifact Training

The air inside the simulated building was thick with tension, the artificial mana field humming faintly as it projected a near-perfect replication of an urban combat zone. Dim lighting, flickering wall panels, and the distant sound of shifting debris completed the illusion of a real war-torn structure.

Julia cracked her knuckles as she leaned against a half-crumbling wall, tapping her foot impatiently while her supposed teammates "discussed strategy."

If you could call it that.

Adrian Langley, the boy on her team, was going on and on about some convoluted positioning tactic he'd clearly pulled out of nowhere. He was animated—too animated for someone whose ideas sounded like a mess of jumbled words with no real substance.

The other one, Rebecca Vale, leaned lazily against the wall, arms crossed, eyes half-lidded like she had already checked out of the entire exercise. It wasn't her first time teaming up with Julia, and like last time, she didn't seem all that interested in contributing.

'Great. One guy who won't shut up about nonsense, and one girl who can't be bothered. I swear, do they assign my teams like this on purpose?'

Julia sighed, rolling her shoulders. She wasn't about to let these two drag her down. Unlike the boring theory sessions, this? This was her domain.

"...and if we funnel them into a crossfire position—" Adrian was still talking, waving his hands around dramatically.

Julia cut him off with a sharp clap of her hands. "Okay, yeah, no. We're not doing that."

Adrian blinked. "Wait, but if we just—"

"Not happening." Julia crossed her arms, fixing him with a pointed look. "You're overcomplicating this. They're not a bunch of slow-moving idiots who are just gonna walk into your perfect little trap."

Adrian frowned. "You don't even know what I was about to suggest."

"I know enough," Julia shot back. "I don't do theory, but I do know when something is dumb."

Rebecca let out a small amused hum from the side.

Julia exhaled and turned back to the map on her wrist device. Third Floor, West Wing. That was the goal.

'Two attacking teams. Two defending teams. Meaning at least three different groups of people in this hole, all of them trying to screw each other over.'

A smirk tugged at the corner of her lips.

'Sounds like my kind of game.'

The moment Julia sensed movement, she didn't turn immediately. Instead, she kept her stance relaxed, as if she was still considering Adrian's nonsense plan. But her senses, her instincts—her 'tiger' senses—flared in warning.

A subtle shift in the air. A rhythm in the footsteps that felt too casual, too deliberate.

'They're coming from the left, four of them... No, three. One of them's staying back.'

And just as expected—

"Well, well. What do we have here?"

A smooth, almost mocking voice echoed through the space. Julia tilted her head slightly, her golden eyes flickering toward the newcomers.

Three cadets. All girls.

The one in front, Marissa Lorne, had the air of a leader—short brown hair tied in a neat ponytail, arms crossed, a confident smirk on her lips. She wasn't bulky, wasn't intimidating in size, but her presence? It was sharp.

'This girl is not bad.....I should fight her when I have a chance.'

The other two flanked her, standing at a relaxed but precise distance apart. One had dark green hair, cut just above her shoulders, while the other had a pale blonde bob. They weren't making any sudden moves, but they didn't have to.

Julia already knew.

'They're not here to make friends.'

"Figured we'd find you here," Marissa continued, tilting her head. "I was hoping we'd get a chance to talk before things get... messy."

Julia didn't react immediately. She just lifted a brow. "That so?"

Marissa's smirk widened a fraction. "It is. We were thinking—why not work together? We both have the same goal, after all. No point in wasting energy fighting each other when we could secure the artifact first, then see who's really the strongest."

Adrian perked up slightly. "That actually makes—"

Julia elbowed him.

Hard.

Adrian coughed. "Ow—what the hell?!"

Julia ignored him, eyes never leaving Marissa's. She saw it now—the gleam in those brown irises. The way she phrased her words so carefully. The way her stance remained loose, but not careless.

These girls were not looking for an alliance.

They were looking for an easy way in.

'Leeches,' Julia thought, her smirk stretching. 'Smart leeches, but leeches all the same.'

It wasn't just the way Marissa was talking—it was the way she and her girls didn't look at Adrian or Rebecca. Their focus was entirely on her.

Because they already knew who was worth paying attention to.

And Julia? She had no interest in carrying dead weight.

"Nice offer," she said, casual, like she hadn't already made up her mind. "But I'll pass."

Marissa didn't blink. Didn't even flinch. "That's a shame."

Rebecca, who had been silent the entire time, finally sighed. "Julia."

Julia didn't look at her. "What?"

Rebecca gave her a lazy side-eye. "Are you sure about that?"

Marissa tilted her head slightly, watching.

Julia let out a small laugh. "Oh, I'm real sure."

She stretched her arms out dramatically, before dropping them with a light clap.

"I mean, let's be real. You're not actually here for an equal partnership." She gestured between them. "You're here 'cause you want us to do the hard work, while you slide in at the last minute and pick off whatever's left."

The green-haired girl twitched, ever so slightly.

Marissa's smirk didn't drop.

"That's a rather uncharitable assumption," she said smoothly. "We just thought you'd prefer not wasting your energy on an unnecessary fight."

Julia's smirk widened at Marissa's smooth words, her golden eyes gleaming with amusement.

"If that's what you thought," she said, voice dripping with amusement, "then you must not know me very well."

The air between them tensed for just a fraction of a second. Because everyone knew Julia didn't back down from fights. If anything, she welcomed them.

Her grin sharpened. "A fight is never unnecessary. Doesn't matter who it's against—kicking people's asses is always a good time."

For the first time, Marissa's smirk faltered, just slightly. A subtle twitch of her mouth.

'Ha. Thought so.'

Julia wasn't dumb—she knew Marissa had been feeling her out. Seeing how much she could push, how much leverage she could find. But at the same time, Marissa also knew picking a fight with Julia now would be a bad idea.

So, instead, she exhaled lightly, regaining her composure. "Fine," she said. "Since you're so eager for a fight, why don't we just split the territory? We take the right wing, you take the left. At the very least, we can agree not to get in each other's way—for now."

Julia tilted her head, considering it for all of half a second before shrugging. "Works for me."

Marissa gave a sharp nod before stepping back, gesturing to her teammates. "Then we won't waste any more time."

With that, she and her group turned, heading off down the right corridor without another word.

Julia waited a few seconds, watching them disappear, before letting out a low chuckle.

"Now..."

Pulling up her wrist device, Julia flicked open the digital map of the building. The interface flickered as it projected a rough outline of the structure—corridors, stairwells, floors, and a glowing marker for the artifact room.

Turning toward Adrian and Rebecca, she wasted no time. "Alright, here's how this is going down."

Rebecca let out a slow sigh. "You sound way too excited for this."

Julia just grinned. "Of course, I am. This is the fun part."

She turned the holo-map slightly so they could see, tapping a few key points as she spoke.

"We don't bunker down like idiots. That's how you get swarmed and overwhelmed. We make them think they have a chance—then we shut them down."

Adrian crossed his arms. "And how exactly do we do that?"

Julia pointed at a hallway just before the artifact chamber. "We let them in just enough."

Rebecca raised a brow. "You're suggesting a choke point."

Julia smirked. "Not just any choke point. A death funnel."

Adrian blinked. "A what?"

Julia's grin widened. "A place where they think they can break through—only to realize they've walked straight into their own graves."

She tapped the screen again.

"There are three main ways they'll try to get to us. The central stairwell, the ventilation shaft here—" she flicked to a hidden side passage, "—and this hallway leading from the west wing."

Rebecca hummed. "Most teams will go for the stairwell. It's the easiest route."

Julia nodded. "Exactly. That's why we don't put our focus there. We let them come through. Then, we lock it down and pin them in."

Adrian frowned slightly. "And what if they try the ventilation shaft?"

Julia gave him a look. "Then we make sure they regret it."