

## H. Academy 873

### Chapter 873 Artifact Training

A sharp, mechanical chime rang through the training facility, followed by a crisp, authoritative voice over the speakers.

"Building Simulation Exercise commencing in T-minus thirty seconds."

The room hummed with quiet anticipation as cadets adjusted their stances, some stretching, others rolling their shoulders to shake off the tension.

Astron, Asher, and Caden stepped forward toward the designated teleportation gate, a large, circular construct embedded into the ground, glowing with intricate mana runes. The air around it shimmered, charged with energy, waiting to transport them into the simulation.

"All assigned teams, prepare for deployment."

Astron didn't hesitate as he stepped onto the teleport pad, the others following close behind. The moment all three were inside the boundary, a low-frequency hum vibrated through their bones.

The world flickered.

Mana surged around them, folding space itself.

Then, in an instant—they were somewhere else.

As the light faded, the trio found themselves standing before a ghostly building.

The atmosphere was thick with an unnatural stillness, the air heavy with the scent of dust and damp stone. Around them, the entire cityscape felt abandoned—crumbling structures stretched into the misty skyline, broken windows gaping like hollow eyes. Some buildings still had half-standing walls, their interiors exposed to the elements. It was a ruin, a forgotten battlefield.

The architecture was old, twisted by time, with eerie remnants of past conflicts—scorched ground, shattered barriers, lingering mana distortions in the air.

This wasn't just a simple mock battlefield.

It felt like a place where something had happened.

Something real.

Caden whistled low. "Damn... They really went all out on the immersion, huh?"

Astron's gaze swept across their surroundings. He had seen places like this before.

Demon Contractor bases. Dungeons.

Most Artifact Wars weren't conducted in clean, sterile environments. They happened in places like this—old strongholds, underground facilities, ruined cities swallowed by time.

The reason?

Because less populated zones meant fewer civilians caught in the crossfire.

Not that it was always the case—there had been plenty of instances where artifacts surfaced in crowded areas, forcing highly trained Hunters to engage in urban warfare. But those situations required a level of coordination far beyond what cadets were capable of.

This exercise was more grounded. More realistic.

They weren't in a densely populated metropolis.

They were in a dead city.

And in a dead city, only the strongest walked out victorious.

Asher exhaled sharply, shifting his stance. "I see no other cadets."

Caden shrugged, stretching his arms behind his head as he scanned the empty streets. "Well, there's a reason why the teams are divided. They must've started on the other side."

Asher exhaled through his nose, his stance shifting slightly. "Yeah. Figures." He didn't seem too concerned. If anything, he was just waiting for the real action to start.

Astron remained silent, his sharp purple eyes locked onto the ghostly structure before them. Its worn-down exterior, the fractured windows, the barely-standing support beams.

This was where it would begin.

Caden, ever the casual one, tilted his head. "So... we're moving as planned?"

Astron didn't answer immediately, his gaze traced the building's frame. Then, he nodded once. "Yes."

That was all they needed.

Without another word, the trio stepped forward, crossing the ruined threshold of the abandoned structure.

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The air was still. Too still.

Julia shifted slightly on her perch, perched above the hallway like a cat watching its prey. The simulated environment around them flickered with occasional distortions—a reminder that, despite how real it felt, this was all just an advanced combat exercise.

Still, the tension of waiting was the same.

She could hear Adrian adjusting his grip on his weapon near the stairwell. Too tense. Guy really needed to relax.

And then—

"Ugh. I'm bored."

Rebecca's voice crackled over the comms, making Julia smirk.

"Already?" Julia drawled.

"Yes, already." Rebecca groaned. "We're just sitting here like statues. If someone doesn't show up soon, I might just take a nap."

Julia snorted. "That'd be impressive, considering the incoming fight."

"Eh. It's fine. I'm a light sleeper."

Adrian, ever the nervous one, clicked his mic. "Can we not joke about this? We don't know when they'll—"

"Relax, Langley," Julia interrupted, rolling her shoulders. "You'll live."

Rebecca hummed. "Though, now that I think about it... isn't it kinda weird?"

"What is?" Julia asked, tilting her head slightly.

"This whole thing." Rebecca paused for a second. "This combat sim just popped up out of nowhere. Usually, we don't do full-on scenario-based exercises like this until later in the semester."

Julia blinked. She... hadn't actually thought about that.

"Huh. You've got a point."

Now that she considered it—this was advanced.

The academy did have practical exercises, sure. But this? This was structured almost like a real-world mission. Not just some "capture-the-flag" or basic sparring match—they were defending an objective, strategizing, managing resources.

Adrian hesitated before chiming in. "So... you're saying the academy is pushing things faster than usual?"

"Duh," Rebecca said dryly. "I mean, look at us. This isn't 'normal first-year training.' We're doing tactical planning, structural positioning, even accounting for team dynamics."

Julia shrugged, stretching her arms out as she shifted slightly on her perch. "Yeah, yeah, maybe the academy's pushing things faster," she admitted, "but honestly? Who cares?"

Rebecca made a sound somewhere between a sigh and a chuckle. "Of course you don't care."

"Why would I?" Julia grinned, tapping her fingers against the metal beam she was sitting on. "I'm here to fight, have fun, and maybe learn a thing or two along the way. That's what this place is for, right?"

Adrian huffed. "This isn't just some playground, Julia. Some of us actually—"

"Actually what, Langley?" Julia cut in, smirking. "This is still a training exercise. We're supposed to be learning, right? Well, I learn best when I get to kick some ass while I'm at it. And guess what? So far, this new curriculum? It's giving me plenty of opportunities."

Rebecca let out a slow exhale. "I mean... you're not wrong."

Julia swung her legs idly, gaze flickering back to the dimly lit hallways ahead. "Besides, I already know what's coming after I graduate. No point stressing about all this when the path's already set."

She didn't say it like it was some heavy burden—just a fact.

After all, she knew what was waiting for her.

A Hunter for her family's guild. A future spent tracking, fighting, and handling things most people wouldn't dare to touch. And maybe even the head of something bigger.

Did she think too hard about it? No.

Did she care? Again—no.

That was the future. Right now? She still had time. Time to fight, to enjoy the chaos, to sharpen herself while she could.

So if the academy wanted to throw harder training at her? Good. Let them.

Still, she couldn't ignore the fact that Rebecca had a point.

Things were changing. The academy was adjusting their curriculum, pushing cadets harder than expected.

It wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

But it did make Julia wonder—why?

Whatever. She'd figure it out later.

Rebecca was still talking, her voice lazy as ever. "Still, if they keep pushing the curriculum like this, I bet—"

CLANK!

The sound echoed through the hallway. A sharp, metallic impact—something striking against the debris they'd placed earlier.

Then—

"Heh..."

A voice. Amused. Confident. Too confident.

Julia's smirk stretched wide. "Oh, finally."

The wait was over.

Her fingers twitched in anticipation as her golden eyes flickered toward the sound. Right where she expected.

'They really took the bait, huh?'

She knew it. She knew they would try to push Rebecca's side. It was the weakest-looking position—the most obvious to break through.

And now?

They were about to regret it.

Her mind clicked into place, predicting their next moves before they even made them.

'Typical.'

Rebecca had already moved, falling back just slightly—not retreating, but repositioning, letting them think they had the advantage.

Julia grinned. "Langley, hold your position. I got this."

Before Adrian could respond, she kicked off her perch, moving fast.

'!'

But then something warned her.

'Behind?'

There was something behind.