

H. Academy 874

Chapter 874 Artifact Training

Julia's eyes widened—just for a fraction of a second.

Behind?

Her instincts screamed at her. Something was there.

And yet—when she turned her head, she saw nothing.

Her mana senses weren't picking up anything, no flicker of energy, no shifting presence. The hallway behind her was exactly the same as before. Silent. Empty.

But she knew that was a lie.

Her tiger senses weren't wrong. Something— someone— was there.

Damn. That fast?

Her muscles reacted before her thoughts could catch up.

Without hesitation, she dashed backward, twisting mid-movement, her hand already drawing her sword.

She didn't wait for confirmation. Didn't need to.

Her blade slashed forward, cutting through the air—

CLANK!

Metal met metal. A clean, precise block.

Julia's golden eyes locked onto the person standing in front of her, their weapon held up in a perfect defensive angle.

A young man.

Black hair. Sharp purple eyes.

For a moment, there was only silence between them.

Then Julia's lips parted slightly.

".....Oh....."

Her grip tightened. Her grin sharpened.

"Astron."

The young man barely reacted, his gaze unreadable as always.

Astron stood there, calm as ever, his sword still pressed against hers. But then—

Tch.

A soft sound. Barely audible.

Julia's sharp ears caught it instantly—the faint click of his tongue.

Her gaze flickered downward for the briefest second, just enough to notice—

He was holding the artifact.

A dull silver orb, pulsing faintly with embedded runes, clutched in his other hand.

Julia blinked. Then she let out a short, amused exhale. "You really..."

She didn't finish the sentence. She didn't have to.

She understood now.

Her plan—the entire defensive formation she had set up? He had already read it.

And of course he did.

'Damn, he's good.'

She had coveted this guy for her team. Irina did too. There was a reason for that.

And now? Seeing him move like this, outmaneuvering her expectations?

It made her grin widen.

Slipping past her mana senses? Not many people could do that.

Not many could avoid her completely and still get this close.

But—her tiger senses still caught him.

And thank the gods for that, or else?

This training session would've been over already.

'That would've sucked.'

But now? Now she had him.

Julia's grip tightened. Her golden eyes gleamed with excitement.

"I wanted to fight you for a long time..." she admitted, a slow smirk curling across her lips.

Then, she tilted her head. "But I really didn't expect it would be here."

Without another word, she launched forward.

CLANG!

Her sword slashed down in a vicious arc—fast, sharp.

But—

Astron moved like water.

His daggers snapped up, deflecting her blade at just the right angle, redirecting the force without wasting a single movement.

That wasn't luck. That was skill.

Julia's smirk widened. "Oh, you're fun."

Astron, of course, didn't react. He simply adjusted his stance, shifting the artifact slightly in his grip.

Julia didn't give him a second.

The moment her sword was deflected, she channeled her mana into the blade. A surge of energy crackled through the steel, a faint golden glow lining the edges.

And then she struck again.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

Blow after blow, her blade lashed out—faster, heavier, more relentless.

Astron moved like a shadow, twisting and weaving between strikes, his daggers working overtime to redirect and deflect. But even for him—this was getting harder.

Because Julia was not just some swordsman.

She was one of the best.

Maybe the best in the entire academy.

And right now?

She was going to remind him of that.

Astron sidestepped, narrowly avoiding a deep cut to his ribs.

Julia twisted mid-swing, using the momentum to slam another strike from the opposite direction.

CLANK!

Astron blocked again—but this time, his foot slid back.

Julia's smirk widened.

'Got you.'

She capitalized.

Her sword was longer, stronger, heavier.

Astron could deflect all he wanted—but she had reach.

Step by step, she cornered him, her blade forcing him back, cutting off angles, shutting down his movement.

Astron clicked his tongue, shifting his stance—but he knew it too.

He was running out of space.

And then—

A single miscalculation.

One deflection, just slightly off.

And that was all she needed.

CLANG!

Her blade slammed against his dagger, and the force rippled through his grip.

Astron's fingers twitched.

And in that single instant—

The artifact slipped from his grasp.

It hit the ground with a soft thud, rolling slightly between them.

Julia's golden eyes gleamed.

"Ohhh... you dropped something."

She grinned.

This was getting really fun.

Then she tilted her head, her blue eyes glinting.

"Well, now that your hands are free..." she smirked, adjusting her grip on her sword.

"You can focus on fighting me fully, right?"

No hesitation. She dashed forward.

Her mana surged, rippling through her sword as she moved with pure, honed instinct.

"「Sword of Middleton: Three Stripes.」"

The technique was a foundation of Middleton's swordplay, but when perfected? It became a storm.

Three strikes—three precise, lightning-fast slashes, one after another.

The First Stripe—A downward diagonal slash, cleaving the air with brutal efficiency.

The Second Stripe—A horizontal cut, swift as a whisper, meant to cut down retreating enemies.

The Third Stripe—A finishing upward arc, executed with pure force to break an opponent's stance entirely.

And Julia? She had perfected this technique.

Her form was flawless. Her speed? Blinding.

Most people would already be on the ground by the Second Stripe.

But—

CLANG!

Astron reacted.

The instant Julia moved, he reached into his spatial storage—and in a blink, another dagger appeared in his free hand.

He moved to meet her head-on.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

The First Stripe? Blocked.

The Second Stripe? Matched.

The Third Stripe? Parried.

Astron's daggers flickered like silver streaks, intercepting each strike at just the right angles.

Julia's smirk widened. Damn, he's fast.

But—

Even with his speed, his precision, his adaptability—

He was getting pushed back.

Step by step, her power forced him backward.

Each impact sent a shockwave through the air, his stance tightening as he absorbed the force.

For the first time, Astron wasn't just dodging or redirecting.

He was blocking.

Holding ground.

But not winning.

Julia's eyes gleamed.

Julia's strikes didn't slow—if anything, they only grew sharper. But somewhere in the back of her mind, she was... impressed.

She hadn't expected this much resistance.

Sure, she wasn't going all out. She had been treating this as a warm-up, holding back just enough so she wouldn't end the fight too soon.

And yet—he was still standing.

'Huh...'

Her golden eyes flickered with something new—curiosity.

Even though her current level of combat should have flattened someone ranked in the 1000s, he was still keeping up.

'He's not that strong... but yeah. I can see why Ethan and the others speak so highly of him.'

That wasn't something just anyone could do.

Her lips curled into a grin. "You're good."

Astron didn't respond, his expression unreadable, but his stance shifted slightly, adjusting to the next exchange.

Julia let out a low chuckle. "But, I also have my pride, you know."

And with that—

She stopped holding back.

A sudden surge of mana crackled along her blade, intensifying, sharpening. The glow surrounding it pulsed, growing brighter, denser.

And then—

She moved.

Her body blurred as she dashed forward, faster than before.

Astron's purple eyes flickered just slightly.

CLANG!

The first strike—he blocked.

The second—he parried.

The third—he barely deflected.

But the fourth?

It cut through.

A shallow slice along his sleeve—barely a wound, but enough.

Julia's grin widened. "Tch—finally."

She was about to win.