

H. Academy 875

Chapter 875 Artifact Training

"Tch—finally."

Astron exhaled, his stance shifting lower, more defensive.

But Julia wasn't slowing down.

With every step forward, her attacks came harder, sharper, heavier.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

He was still matching her pace.

But no longer blocking everything.

Her blade was cutting through.

And at this rate?

She was going to bring him down.

Julia's strikes didn't stop.

Her blade carved through the air, relentless, forcing Astron further back. Step by step, her blue eyes tracked his every movement, reading his reactions, adjusting—tightening the noose.

And then—

She sensed it.

The wall.

Her smirk widened.

"That's it, huh?" she exhaled, slowing her swings just slightly, enough to speak. "End of the line, Astron. You've got nowhere left to go."

Astron didn't answer.

Didn't even blink.

Julia tilted her head. "You might as well surrender. Your plan failed."

Still, he remained silent.

And then—

His hand twitched.

Something flashed.

Julia's instincts flared. Danger.

Daggers.

Her body moved before her mind even fully registered it.

She twisted, her sword snapping up in a clean arc—

CLANG! The first dagger—deflected.

CLANG! The second—knocked aside.

CLANG! The third—sent spinning into the air.

Julia let out a sharp exhale, blue eyes narrowing. "That won't stop me."

And then—

Her instincts screamed.

Something was behind the last dagger.

Her eyes widened—

BOOM!

A shockwave ripped through the corridor as a compact explosive sphere detonated midair.

Julia barely had a split second to react.

Her combat instincts—**her sheer, absurdly fast reflexes—**kicked in.

A barrier.

A thin, golden shield of condensed mana flashed into existence around her, just in time to absorb the worst of the explosion.

The force still slammed against her, pushing her back a few steps. Smoke and debris kicked up in the air, obscuring her vision.

But she saw it.

Through the haze—

Astron.

Already beside the window.

His purple eyes locked onto something.

And then—he clenched his fist.

Julia's gaze snapped down.

The artifact—the one still lying on the floor where he had dropped it—

It moved.

It flew straight to his hand.

Her eyes widened. "Telekinesis? No..."

Mana threads.

A barely visible, ultra-thin connection of mana had been wrapped around the artifact from the moment he dropped it.

And now?

He just reeled it back in.

Julia lunged—

But—

Too late.

Astron kicked off the window ledge, leaping into the open air.

Julia rushed forward, skidding to the edge—

Only to see him vanish below, dropping out of sight.

Gone.

She clicked her tongue, gripping the windowsill tightly.

"Damn it."

Her blue eyes flashed with something between irritation and excitement.

She had cornered him. She had been seconds away from winning.

And still—he got away.

Julia exhaled, a sharp laugh escaping her lips.

"Tch... sneaky bastard."

She pushed herself back from the window, rolling her shoulders.

That was fun.

And next time?

She wasn't going to let him slip away.

Julia took a deep breath, shaking off the lingering sting of the explosion. The heat had already faded, leaving only the lingering scent of smoke and the faint static hum of dissipating mana in the air. She clenched her jaw, then let out a sharp exhale before stepping away from the window.

Astron had gotten away.

She didn't like it.

She had him—had him. Cornered, outmaneuvered, pushed back to the wall. But he had slipped through the cracks like damn mist, smooth, calculated, and with zero wasted movement. Even now, she replayed it in her head. The daggers were bait. The real trap had been the moment she thought she won.

Her fingers twitched slightly, but she let the irritation bleed out of her in a slow, controlled breath. She wasn't going to stew over it—not in frustration, at least. No, if anything, it was exciting.

Not many people could make her lose a fight.

Not many could outplay her at her own game.

So Astron? Yeah, she'd remember this. And next time, he wasn't getting away.

Just then, her earpiece crackled to life. A familiar voice cut through the silence.

"Yo, Julia," Rebecca's voice came through, casual but with a sharper edge than usual. "What's the situation on your side?"

Julia snorted. "You're asking me? Shouldn't I be the one asking that?"

Another voice chimed in, this time Damian's, low and steady. "The moment I got to Rebecca's side, the two that were pressuring her retreated. Didn't even try to fight back. They just vanished."

Julia frowned slightly. That meant...

Rebecca sighed, her voice tinged with something bordering on annoyance. "And there's no sign of the last one. The third guy. Couldn't track him at all. He could be on your side."

Julia's blue eyes flicked around the room, scanning the remnants of the battlefield, checking for any lingering shadows in the corners, any hint of movement. But there was nothing. Just the aftershock of her fight with Astron and the faint static of disturbed mana.

Then she laughed. It was a light, almost amused sound.

"Well," she exhaled, dragging a hand through her hair. "Doesn't really matter, does it?"

Rebecca clicked her tongue. "What do you mean?"

"The artifact's already gone." Julia let out another short laugh, shaking her head. "Astron snatched it and jumped out the damn window."

Silence followed.

Then—

"Wait. What?!" Rebecca's voice spiked, completely dropping her usual composed tone.

Damian let out a low hum, processing the information before speaking. "So. We lost."

Julia's smirk twitched, but she didn't deny it.

"Yeah." The admission came out smooth, easy, but there was a sting underneath it. She hated losing. Absolutely loathed it. But she wasn't about to lie about it either. That wasn't her style. She was a fighter, and fighters owned their losses. Nothing scratched her pride worse than making up excuses.

"I had him cornered," she continued, rolling her shoulders. "I was this close. But the bastard had another trick up his sleeve."

Damian let out a slow breath. "Astron, huh?"

Rebecca muttered something under her breath, then sighed. "Well. I guess there's no point in sticking around, then. We're done here."

Damian's voice came through again, his usual composed tone laced with amusement. "That was the guy you wanted on your team, right?"

Julia scoffed, brushing some dust off her sleeves as she turned away from the window. "Yeah, what about it?"

She never hid it. Hell, she had proposed it in front of the whole damn class, causing an uproar that had people talking for days. If anything, she made it pretty damn clear that she wanted Astron in her squad.

Rebecca let out a small chuckle. "Guess he really is talented if he can even outsmart Julia Middleton."

Julia clicked her tongue, not because Rebecca was wrong, but because she hated admitting it. Astron had gotten the best of her this time. That was just a fact.

Damian, of course, had to keep running his mouth. "You should've thought this through more," he mused, his tone that perfect mix of casual and smug. "A guy like that? He's got layers. If you really thought you could just power through him without thinking about what he had up his sleeve—"

Julia let out a short laugh, cutting him off. "Oh, shut up, Damian."

She could already hear the satisfaction in his voice.

But, annoyingly enough, he had a point.

Astron wasn't just strong. He was smart. He had read the battlefield, read her, and set her up without making a single unnecessary move. He had baited her into pushing him to the wall and then flipped the whole damn situation in a split second.

That wasn't just skill. That was foresight.

And that?

That was rare.

She exhaled, tilting her head slightly as she walked. "You think too much. I wasn't looking to scheme. I wanted a fight. And I got one."

Rebecca snorted. "Yeah. And you lost it."

Julia scoffed, running a hand through her hair. "I didn't lose the fight."

Rebecca let out a short laugh. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah." Julia shrugged. "He didn't beat me up, didn't knock me out, didn't even land a real hit."

Rebecca hummed, unimpressed. "Mmm. Sure. But to me, it looks like a loss."

Julia's blue eyes narrowed slightly, but she let Rebecca continue.

"He might not have beaten you, but he accomplished his objective. That's what this fight was actually about, wasn't it?"

Julia rolled her shoulders, not answering just yet.

Rebecca, sensing an opportunity, pressed further. "From his side? That's a win. And from your side?" A smirk tugged at the corner of her lips. "It just sounds like—"

Julia immediately cut her off.

"Do you want a beating, Vale? I still haven't had my fill."

Rebecca's smirk froze for half a second before she immediately backpedaled.

"Whoa, whoa, I was joking!" She raised her hands in surrender. "Just messing with you! Of course the mighty Julia Middleton never loses!"

Julia clicked her tongue, but a grin tugged at her lips despite herself.

"Damn right," she muttered, stretching her arms.

She knew she lost. She didn't need Rebecca rubbing it in. But letting her have the last word?

Yeah. Not happening.