

## H. Academy 876

### Chapter 876 - Artifact Training

The air inside the simulation crackled with heat, the scent of scorched stone and seared metal thick in the confined space. Embers drifted lazily through the ruined corridor, a lingering trace of Irina's flames as she stood in the center of her defensive formation, golden eyes sharp and calculating.

The right wing was hers to defend.

And she was doing just that—holding her ground against not one but two attackers who had decided to team up in a desperate attempt to overpower her.

One of them was a tank, a broad-shouldered brute covered in reinforced mana armor. His sheer durability made him a menace, and the way he stomped forward—each step absorbing the force of her heatwaves—was infuriating. The other was a spearman, agile and precise, his long reach making him a constant threat from behind the tank's defense.

They weren't reckless. No, they were methodical. The spearman probed her defenses with quick, precise thrusts, forcing her to react, while the tank absorbed the brunt of her flames, using his sheer presence to slowly, steadily, inch forward.

It was a good plan. A solid strategy.

Too bad it wouldn't work.

Irina twirled her fingers, and the flames coiling around the battlefield suddenly surged, cutting off their angles of approach. The tank grunted as the temperature spiked, the ground beneath him glowing a dull red from residual heat. His armor flickered with defensive enchantments, resisting the worst of the flames, but even he had limits.

The spearman, sensing an opportunity, lunged forward in a blur of motion. His spear shot through the air, aimed straight for her flank—fast, but predictable.

Irina's body moved before thought.

SWIRL!

A fiery vortex erupted from beneath her, a controlled explosion of heat that blasted outward. The sudden pressure sent the spear's trajectory off-course, the tip veering inches away from her ribs. She pivoted sharply, twisting her body with the motion, and with a flick of her wrist—

FWOOSH!

A wave of flame followed her motion, swallowing the spearman's position. He barely had time to retreat, the heat singeing the edge of his uniform as he leapt back, breath sharp.

"Damn it—! She's controlling too much space!" the spearman hissed, glaring at the inferno between them.

"She can't hold it forever," the tank growled, mana reinforcing his body as he pressed forward another step. "We push at the same time. One solid break and she's done."

Irina scoffed under her breath. Push?

She tightened her grip, her flames roaring higher in response to her will. The sheer heat density in the air made it nearly impossible for them to move forward without consequence. Even the tank, despite his defenses, was cooking inside his armor.

They didn't get it.

This wasn't about burning them alive. It wasn't even about defeating them outright.

This was about control.

"Alright then," she muttered, her smirk sharp as she raised her hands. "Come and break it."

SWOOSH!

The flames shifted—not outward, but inward.

Her fire curled toward the walls, the floor, the ceiling—embedding itself into the very structure of the right wing. The temperature didn't just rise; the entire battlefield became part of her domain.

The spearman hesitated. "Wait—"

CRACK!

A wall of flame erupted behind him. The hallway was no longer a battlefield—it was a furnace.

Irina's flames weren't just a barrier anymore. They were cage bars.

"You're locked in," she said, her voice laced with amusement.

For the first time, the tank hesitated. His breath came heavier now, his armor hissing as heat threatened to melt through the reinforced plating. The spearman, eyes flickering between the closing walls of fire, clenched his teeth.

They needed to force a breakthrough.

And they needed to do it now.

BOOM!

The tank made his move, exploding forward with raw force. A burst of mana surged from his body as he slammed his gauntlet-covered fist into the ground—

A shockwave tore through the right wing.

The pressure ripped apart the closest flames, shoving the heat back for a brief moment. The spearman capitalized immediately, his spear gleaming as he lunged—

A perfect, coordinated attack.

...

But Irina was already moving.

The moment the tank punched the ground, she stepped backward, letting the force of the blast push her away while simultaneously preparing her next move.

The spearman, expecting her to be staggered, went for the kill—his spear lunging toward her now-unprotected chest.

Irina's smirk widened. Checkmate.

FLICK!

She snapped her fingers.

BOOM!

The ground beneath the spearman ignited.

A pillar of flame erupted from below, swallowing him in an instant. The impact threw him off balance, his spear missing by mere inches as his body was hurled back by the concussive force of the explosion.

The tank, seeing his teammate getting blasted away, roared and charged forward—

Irina spun, raising both hands—

CRASH!

A fire-forged barrier slammed into place right in front of him, the sudden wall of heat forcing him to halt before he could smash through. The sheer heat distortion caused his armor to shimmer, the intense thermal energy reaching its limit.

For a brief moment, the tank stood frozen—caught between his own momentum and the impenetrable barrier of heat in front of him.

Irina's golden eyes gleamed. "Looks like you're overheating."

And with a final flick of her wrist—

The flames collapsed inward.

The tank's roar turned into a guttural curse as the heat suffocated his movement. His armor's defensive mana flickered one last time—and then failed.

THUD.

He dropped to one knee, breath ragged, his body trembling from heat exhaustion.

The spearman, still recovering from the earlier explosion, gritted his teeth in frustration. "Damn it..."

Irina lowered her hands, her flames slowly retreating, coiling around her like a predator satisfied with its hunt.

"I'd call that a defense," she said, tilting her head slightly, her tone utterly casual.

The tank grunted but didn't get up. He knew it. They'd lost.

The spearman huffed, frustrated but unable to deny the outcome. "We never stood a chance, huh?"

Irina smirked. "Nope."

The tank exhaled heavily, shaking his head. "I guess he was right. We really wouldn't be able to win against her even if we attacked together."

Irina barely paid him any attention, her golden eyes narrowing as she relaxed her stance. Right. Because obviously, that was how this was going to end.

But then—

SLASH!

A sharp, unnatural shift in the air.

Irina's instincts flared.

Danger.

She twisted—fast—her entire body moving on pure reflex as her mind caught up to the impossibly quick blade slicing toward her from behind.



Her golden eyes widened.

'This is...'

It wasn't just speed. It wasn't just precision.

That strike—felt unnatural.

Too clean. Too precise. Too calculated.

Her gaze snapped to the side just as the faint shimmer of an illusion dissipated from the air like mist being blown away.

And standing there, holding a gleaming blade—

Lucas Middleton.

His white hair was slightly disheveled from movement, but his blue eyes remained sharp—calm, yet glinting with amusement. In his other hand, resting easily against his hip—

The artifact.

The very thing this entire exercise revolved around.

Her artifact.

Irina's breath caught, fury already coiling in her chest.

"Lucas?"

Lucas flicked his blade once, a subtle movement, before resting it lazily against his shoulder. His smirk was light, casual, but his posture was anything but relaxed.

"As expected..." he mused. "The illusion didn't hold for too long."

Irina's heart pounded. Illusion?

'No—'

It clicked.

The tank and spearman—they had been distractions. Not just to break her defense but to keep her attention locked here.

While Lucas had been moving silently through the battlefield. Watching. Waiting.

That strike wasn't meant to hit. It was to force her to react. To make her shift her attention—just long enough.

And now—

Lucas lifted the artifact slightly, twirling it between his fingers before tucking it into his belt. "But, I guess you let your guard down a little bit."

His smirk deepened.

"See ya."

And then—

He moved.

No—he vanished.

A streak of silver blurring through the burning air, too fast, too precise. Even for Irina's reaction time—even for her flames—Lucas was already several meters away before she could fully process it.

Her golden eyes burned with rage.

"LUCAS!"

Her flames erupted, spiraling outward in a wave of raw, blistering heat—but he was already gone.

Faster than before.

That realization made her teeth grind, her hands clenching into fists as the searing heat coiled uselessly around her.

He wasn't supposed to be that fast.

He was always quick, Middleton swordsmen were famed for their speed, but that was—something else.

Something that made her insides twist.

And just like that—

Irina stood alone in the right wing. The battlefield still hers.

But the artifact?

Gone.

"...."

Her hands clenched.

Her flames, which had been lashing wildly, still coiled around her like a storm barely restrained. The entire battlefield was hers. She had dominated. She had controlled everything.

And yet—

She still lost.

The fact sat in her stomach like molten iron, searing its way into every nerve. After all of that. Every calculation, every second of precise mana control, the way she had perfectly held the entire right wing on her own—

And it still wasn't enough.

Her breathing was steady, but her anger wasn't.

Her golden eyes flickered dangerously, turning toward the only two remaining idiots in her line of sight.

The tank and the spearman.

The two who had been fighting her. The two who should have been keeping an eye on the rest of the battlefield.

"You."

Just one word. One simple syllable, spoken low, but thick with heat.

The tank, still on his knee, looked up. His expression froze. The spearman, now half-standing, also went rigid.

The heat spiked.

The flames that had been slowly dying flared back to life.

And in that moment, both of them realized something.

She wasn't holding back anymore.

The temperature surged, the air turning suffocating in an instant. A warning—a silent, deadly promise of what was about to happen.

Sweat dripped from the spearman's forehead. The tank, already struggling from heat exhaustion, visibly flinched as the sheer pressure of mana settled over them like a death sentence.

Neither of them thought.

They just moved.

"Ah—WE SURRENDER!"

TAP. TAP.

Both of them slammed their smartwatches, the surrender signal activating instantly.

A second later, a faint blue holographic shield shimmered around their bodies—system-protected from further combat.

Irina's eyes twitched.

Her flames snapped backward, halting a breath away from charring them both.

For a long moment, there was only the crackling of embers.