

H. Academy 879

Chapter 879 - Artifact Training

TAP! TAP! TAP!

Ethan moved. Fast. His body cut through the battlefield like a blade, Lilia's form drawing closer with every second.

She was already adjusting, repositioning atop the ruined structure, bowstring pulled back—but something was off.

Her aim wasn't on him.

It was on Sylvie.

Ethan's eyes narrowed.

'So she realized it too.'

Lilia wasn't just a sniper—she was an intelligent one. She had figured it out. Sylvie was the problem.

She was the reason Ethan was still in the fight.

And now Lilia was about to take her out.

Ethan gritted his teeth.

'Not happening.'

His feet pushed harder against the ground, the distance between him and Lilia closing in an instant—

Then—

A figure appeared between them.

CLANG!

Sparks flew as a sword blocked his spear mid-thrust.

Ethan's momentum stopped abruptly, his eyes flicking toward the new obstacle in his path.

A girl stood before him, blade raised, feet planted firmly. She had been waiting for him.

And she was smiling.

"Oh... Who would have thought I'd be against Ethan Hartley?" she mused, tilting her head slightly. "But I guess I can't complain with this team."

Her voice was casual, almost amused—like she wasn't standing in front of one of the highest-ranked combatants in their year.

Ethan's mind worked fast.

Jasmine.

That was her name.

He had seen her before. She was always near Sylvie. A swordsman, quick-footed, capable—but not someone he had considered a major threat.

Not until now.

She shifted her stance, blade gleaming with a faint trace of mana.

Ethan didn't hesitate.

No mercy.

TAP!

He exploded forward.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

Eight moves.

That was all it took.

Ethan outpaced her instantly, weaving through her defenses like they barely existed.

She parried once. Twice.

But by the third strike—she was too slow.

By the fourth—her footwork was broken.

By the fifth—her guard was open.

By the sixth—her sword was forced wide.

By the seventh—his spear was already in position.

By the eighth—she was down.

THUD!

Jasmine collapsed onto the ground, her blade knocked from her grasp, her breath heavy as she stared up at him.

Ethan didn't give her a second glance.

His eyes were already locked back onto Lilia.

And he moved again.

THUD!

Jasmine hit the ground, her sword slipping from her grasp as she exhaled sharply.

She wasn't hurt—Ethan hadn't needed to go that far. But she was defeated.

Still, she smiled.

"Lasting eight moves against Ethan Hartley..." she muttered between breaths, eyes flickering with something like amusement. "Not bad..."

Ethan barely registered her words.

His gaze had already snapped back to Lilia.

And the moment he did—

His stomach dropped.

She had recovered.

The eight moves he had spent on Jasmine... had given her time.

Lilia's bow was already raised, another arrow nocked, her mana rippling around it. The last one was strong—but this one?

It was worse.

SWOOSH!

Ethan moved. Fast.

His entire body reacted before his mind could even process it—his instincts screaming at him to dodge. He barely twisted his torso, feeling the arrow brush past his ribs, the sheer force of the mana surrounding it cutting through the air like a blade.

He narrowly avoided it.

Or so he thought.

—Wait.

Something was wrong.

His eyes barely caught the shift—the arrow bent.

It changed trajectory mid-flight.

'That's not possible.'

But it didn't matter if it was possible or not—it was happening.

Before he could fully grasp the reality of what was unfolding, the arrow struck.

THUD!

A sharp pressure slammed into his side, a force that shouldn't have been there. His breath left him instantly, body recoiling from the impact. It wasn't pain—it was pure displacement.

His surroundings blurred.

The battlefield—the sound of distant clashes—everything faded.

The next thing he knew—

Darkness.

The simulation had ended.

He was out.

His mind reeled, but his body remained frozen. The system had declared his loss, cutting him off from the battlefield. It was over.

His team had been eliminated.

They had lost.

Ethan stared blankly at the darkened screen in front of him, his heart hammering against his chest.

'I... messed up.'

He could feel it—the weight of failure settling over him like an unwelcome burden.

Sylvie had already been taken out. The moment he lost track of her aura, he should have known—should have realized.

Jasmine had slowed him down. He had wasted just enough time for Lilia to recover, and that had sealed their fate.

He had been outplayed.

Ethan let out a slow breath, forcing himself to push past the frustration clawing at his chest.

No excuses.

He just wasn't good enough.

Not this time.

Sylvie's heart pounded in her chest, her breath steady but quick as the simulated battlefield flickered into existence around them. The digital skyline loomed over them, and the weight of mana woven into the very fabric of the simulation hummed beneath her feet.

'Stay calm. Focus. You trained for this.'

Ethan and Layla were already in motion, their stances firm, their presence commanding. But Sylvie wasn't a frontliner. She was their enchanter—the one who ensured they could push past their limits.

And she had trained for this.

With the Headmaster.

Weeks Ago...

"Your enchantments are too linear, Sylvie."

Headmaster Arcwright's sharp voice echoed in the training hall as he observed her from behind his desk, fingers steepled in thought. The room's faint mana glow shimmered around them, amplifying the weight of his presence.

Sylvie clenched her fists. She had spent hours perfecting her technique, yet it still wasn't enough. "But my enhancements work—"

"They do," Arcwright interrupted, his gaze unyielding. "But predictably. Anyone experienced will adjust once they realize what you're doing. You need layered reinforcement. Adaptive enchantments."

Sylvie exhaled sharply, absorbing his words. He wasn't wrong. A fixed boost was effective, but a smart opponent—one like Lilia—would dismantle it with precision.

"Think of your enchantments like a shifting tide," Arcwright continued. "They must respond to the battlefield, not just empower. Use your surroundings. Use yourself. Do you understand?"

'I do now,' Sylvie thought, snapping back to the present as the battle began.

BOOM!

Carl's war hammer slammed into the ground, shaking the battlefield with a force that sent shockwaves through Sylvie's legs. The sheer weight of his presence was suffocating, and from above, Lilia rained down suppression fire, her arrows weaving through the air with deadly precision.

Ethan and Layla were already reacting, their movements fluid, calculated. But Sylvie wasn't idle.

Her mana flared to life, golden energy crackling around her fingertips as she activated her first enchantment.

[Adaptive Fortification: Resonance]

A golden glow spread from her hands, wrapping around Layla like a protective veil. But unlike before, this time it didn't settle into a single effect. Instead, it pulsed, shifting with each impact—hardening when Carl struck, absorbing shock when the tremors threatened to break Layla's footing.

'A shifting tide,' Sylvie reminded herself, adjusting the flow.

Layla gritted her teeth, pushing forward against Carl's overwhelming strength. "Not bad," she muttered under her breath. "I barely felt that hit."

Ethan darted forward, spear in hand, dodging the initial volley of arrows. But Sylvie knew Lilia wouldn't miss for long.

'Ethan's next. He needs speed.'

Golden light flared again as she redirected her mana, sending another enchantment cascading over Ethan.

[Kinetic Acceleration: Phantom Step]

A rush of air followed as Ethan's entire form flickered, his movements growing sharper, faster. His spear became an extension of his body, weaving through Lilia's arrows with movements almost too quick for the eye to follow.

Sylvie exhaled. 'This is working.'

But then—

BOOM!

A deep vibration rattled the battlefield. The ground trembled beneath them as Carl activated his [Seismic Crash], throwing the balance of the fight into chaos.

Sylvie staggered slightly but adjusted, mana flowing into her legs.

[Equilibrium: Counterbalance]

Her footing stabilized just in time to see Ethan falter.

'No—he's stuck!'

Carl's [Iron Order: Gravity Command] had taken effect, pulling Ethan toward him like a magnetic force. The moment Ethan's momentum shifted, Sylvie knew what was coming.

Lilia had already adjusted.

She wasn't aiming at Ethan anymore.

She was aiming at her.

Sylvie's breath hitched. The arrow was already mid-flight, shimmering with condensed mana.

'She knows. She knows I'm the real problem.'

For a split second, fear gripped her. Lilia was a top-ranked sniper for a reason—if this hit, it wouldn't just knock her out. It would erase her from the fight entirely.

But then—

'No. Think. Adapt.'

Her hands moved before her thoughts could catch up, golden light surging from her fingertips.

[State Purge: Absolute Release]

A wave of pure mana radiated outward, severing Carl's Iron Order effect from Ethan in an instant. The pull on him vanished. His body was his own again.

Sylvie barely registered the sharp flicker of shock in Carl's aura. She had no time to relish the small victory—Lilia's arrow was still flying toward her.

Too fast. Too precise.

'No time to dodge.'

Her breath steadied. Then—

[Refracted Ward: Deflect]

Golden energy condensed in front of her, forming a barely visible barrier. The arrow struck—

THUNK!

The impact sent a pulse through her bones, but the projectile ricocheted, veering off its original trajectory. Not completely harmless, but enough to keep her in the fight.

Sylvie exhaled sharply, sweat trailing down her temple.

That had been too close.

She barely had time to process her relief before her [Authority] flared—Lilia was already adjusting again.

'She's insane. She's countering me while she fights Ethan?'

Ethan was moving again, his form a blur of speed as he used the opening Sylvie had created to lunge toward Lilia's perch.

For the first time, Sylvie saw a flicker of something in Lilia's aura.

Surprise.

Ethan wasn't supposed to recover this fast.

'Good,' Sylvie thought, her chest tightening with renewed determination. 'We're not out yet.'

But just as Ethan closed in—

Jasmine.

Sylvie's eyes widened as another fighter intercepted Ethan, her sword clashing against his spear.

'No—!'

Her grip tightened.

Jasmine wasn't just there to slow him down.

She was there to stall.

And in the time Ethan spent fighting her—

Lilia had recovered.

Sylvie's heart pounded. Her mana reserves were already stretched thin, and if Ethan didn't break through now—

Then she felt it.

Lilia's aura shifted.

Her bow was drawn. Her mana condensed.

And this time, Sylvie could sense it with absolute certainty.

She wasn't aiming at Ethan anymore.

She was aiming at her again.

Sylvie's breath caught.

Too fast. Too strong.

She had seconds.

No—less.

Lilia released.

SWOOSH!

Sylvie's body braced for impact—

Then—

Nothing.

Darkness.

Her surroundings vanished in an instant.

The battlefield faded, replaced by the quiet void of the simulation's end.

She was out.

Just like that.

Sylvie's fists clenched as she sat in the exit chamber, the cold hum of the mana-link system buzzing faintly around her.

'I lost.'