

## H. Academy 880

### Chapter 880 Artifact Training

The moment the signal was given, Asher and Caden moved.

Their footsteps pounded against the training ground as they charged forward—not recklessly, but with deliberate aggression. The two of them had been assigned to the left flank, where Astron's strategy would be put to the test.

The plan was simple.

Overload one side, make it look like brute force, and bait the enemy into shifting more bodies to counter.

A crude plan. One that relied on the enemy underestimating them.

If their opponents were sharp enough to see through the bait, then things would get dangerous.

And yet...

'He looked pretty confident there.'

Asher glanced briefly in Astron's direction.

Asher's eyes flicked toward Astron's position.

Or rather—where Astron was supposed to be.

But he was gone.

'When did he—?'

There was no sign of movement, no trace of his departure. One second he had been there, calmly standing in place. The next—vanished.

Asher didn't like that.

Not because he needed Astron to hold his hand, but because it meant that Astron had seen something before anyone else had. And Asher hated being a step behind.

But there was no time to dwell on it. Their first opponent had already stepped forward.

Rebecca.

The moment she came into view, Asher clicked his tongue. Of course, it was her.

She was loose-limbed, her stance deceptively relaxed, but Asher wasn't fooled. Rebecca wasn't the kind of fighter who relied on raw strength or overwhelming mana. No—her speed, unpredictability, and footwork were her real weapons.

Caden, standing beside him, let out a low whistle. "Looks like we got company."

Rebecca tilted her head slightly, cracking her neck. "Didn't take you long. That's nice." Her tone was light, almost amused. "So, you guys here to break through or just stretching your legs?"

Asher didn't answer. Instead, he shifted his stance, already moving.

He wasn't going to waste time trading words.

Rebecca smirked. "Guess that's my answer."

She dodged before his attack even fully came through—her reflexes were sharp, her instincts tuned to avoidance rather than direct clashes. Asher's fist swiped past her shoulder by a hair's breadth as she twisted her body mid-step, her counterstrike already primed.

Caden moved to intercept, bringing his leg up for a high kick.

Rebecca saw it coming. She adjusted at the last second, ducking low as Caden's attack whipped just over her head.

'Fast.\*\*

Rebecca wasn't just dodging—she was baiting.

She let them think they were about to land a hit, then slipped through at the very last second, forcing them to commit while she lined up her next move.

Annoying.

And dangerous.

Because Asher could already tell—if they let her dictate the pace, this fight would become a slow bleed.

Rebecca pivoted on her back foot, her leg snapping out in a lightning-fast roundhouse aimed at Asher's side. He barely had time to block, raising his forearm to absorb the impact.

THUD.

The force of it sent a vibration up his bones.

Rebecca grinned, using the momentum to spin into another kick—this time toward Caden.

Caden, however, was ready.

He didn't block—he stepped into the kick, closing the distance faster than Rebecca expected. The sudden shift ruined her angle, and Caden's elbow slammed into her stomach.

Rebecca let out a sharp exhale, but instead of retreating, she grabbed onto his arm.

She yanked him forward, trying to use his own weight against him. But before she could throw him, Asher moved.

His foot came up in a snap kick, slamming into Rebecca's ribs and forcing her to release Caden.

Rebecca stumbled back slightly, but she was still standing.

And she was still smirking.

"You two hit pretty hard," she admitted, rolling her shoulder. "Guess I should take this seriously."

She planted her feet, her mana flaring slightly—not flashy, but controlled, precise.

Asher exhaled sharply. 'Tch. This is taking too long.'

He hadn't expected her to go down easily. But they needed to move.

And then—

A sudden presence.

Asher barely had time to react before a second figure rushed in.

Adrian Langley.

'Here we go.'

The moment he arrived, the fight shifted.

Adrian was a defensive fighter—his specialty wasn't overwhelming offense, but rather controlling engagements. Minimizing damage, buying time, forcing enemies to waste energy.

And just like that, their momentum stalled.

Rebecca and Adrian positioned themselves together, closing off any easy angles of attack.

Caden cursed under his breath. "They're forming a wall."

Asher grit his teeth. This was the worst outcome—if they got bogged down in a drawn-out fight, the rest of the enemy team would have time to adapt, to counter.

But then something hit him.

Something was missing.

'Wait. Where's the third defender?'

They were supposed to pull three of them in.

Where is the third defender?

Asher's fingers curled into fists, his instincts flaring with unease.

Their plan had been to force three of them to this side, leaving the artifact weaker on the other end. But now, standing in front of them were only two—Rebecca and Adrian.

The third was missing.

His mind raced.

Had their opponents seen through their strategy? Had they figured out that Astron wasn't just a background piece in this game?

If so—this whole exercise was already lost.

Tch.

Asher clenched his jaw, eyes flicking to the side, toward the ruined cityscape beyond the fight. If the enemy had left their strongest fighter back at the artifact's location...

'This is bad.'

No, not just bad—disastrous.

At best, all they could do now was salvage this situation. Make it costly for the enemy even if they lost the objective.

And Astron—wherever the hell he was—better have been fast enough to secure the artifact before a real monster showed up on the other end.

'Let's hope that guy can get the artifact...'

His breath was tight, measured, his body tense and ready for whatever happened next.

'And let's hope there isn't a stronger cadet guarding it.'

But before he could dwell on it—

"Where is your mind, when I am here!"

Rebecca's voice snapped through the air like a whip, her mana flaring as she lunged.

Asher barely had time to react before she was already on him.

Her foot lashed out, forcing him to block just in time. The impact rattled up his arm, but the attack wasn't over—she pivoted, seamlessly transitioning into a follow-up strike aimed straight for Caden.

Caden deflected, but even he wasn't fast enough to avoid the full brunt of it. Rebecca's palm strike connected against his ribs, sending him skidding back a step.

Adrian followed up immediately, forcing the engagement to turn against them.

Asher and Caden found themselves pushed back, losing control of the momentum.

'Shit.'

They weren't losing yet—but they weren't winning either.

And the longer this fight dragged on, the more the balance tipped against them.

"Oh... so one of your guys went behind us, huh?"

Rebecca's voice came from the side, deceptively casual.

But Asher knew better.

She wasn't just commenting—she was revealing.

Astron had been discovered.

His stomach tightened. If she was mentioning it so openly, it meant she wasn't worried. No, more than that—she was confident.

Caden, still catching his breath from Rebecca's last attack, gave her a sharp look. "Tch. And? That doesn't mean we've lost."

Rebecca just sighed, shaking her head like they were children who didn't understand the situation. "You guys really are unlucky..."

"What?" Asher snapped, feeling the irritation bleed into his tone.

Rebecca grinned. "Just give up."

Something in her voice made the back of Asher's neck prickle. Why was she so confident?

And then—he got his answer.

"Julia is there."

Silence.

A moment of pure stillness.

The weight of that name dropped like a stone in Asher's gut.

His fingers twitched. Caden's expression shifted.

Rebecca's smirk widened. "See? You get it now."

Julia Middleton.

One of the strongest cadets in their year. Ruthless, sharp, and dangerous. If she was guarding the artifact—

Then Astron was in serious trouble.

Asher barely dodged a sharp kick from Rebecca, twisting his body at the last second. His breathing was steady, but his mind was a mess.

Because this was over.

'Julia is there.'

The moment those words left Rebecca's mouth, the fight had lost all meaning.

He wanted to curse. At himself, at his luck, at whatever damn force in the universe decided to screw him over today.

Because of course.

Of course, it had to be Julia Middleton.

Among their year's cadets, there were some names that recently started making everyone hesitate.

Viktor was outright exempt from these training exercises. Too strong, too unfair, too unbalanced. The instructors had stopped putting him in mock battles unless it was against upper years.

Irina Emberheart, terrifying in her own right. Everyone had seen what she could do.

Ethan, rising quickly, a threat in the making, though he still wasn't on their level yet.

And then—Julia.

Asher clenched his jaw as he parried another strike from Rebecca.

Julia Middleton was a nightmare.

Everyone still remembered her duel.

He had watched it.

That absolute dismantling of her opponent, the ruthless precision of her attacks, the overwhelming control she had on the battlefield. Her mana, her instincts, her sheer presence.

And Astron had just walked into that.

'We lost.'

There was no salvaging this.

And now, all Asher wanted to do was drop his weapons and sigh.

Because this wasn't just a loss.

This was bad luck of the highest level.

Rebecca and Adrian were already annoying enough. But Julia? She was different.

She was someone you did not want to fight.

And Astron, as unreadable as he was, wasn't on her level. No one was.

Asher hated this feeling. The feeling of being completely screwed over before the fight even started.

Tch.

'Might as well just—'

BEEP.

His thoughts froze.

A sharp, electronic ping came through his earbuds. A message. A notification.

A voice, crackling slightly through the comms—

"Artifact acquired. Offense team wins."