

## H. Academy 881

### Chapter 881 - Integrating into

The air in the locker room was heavy with silence.

The once-tense battlefield had been replaced by the dull hum of flickering lights, the quiet rustling of cadets changing, and the occasional clang of metal lockers being shut. The simulation was over. They had won.

And yet, Asher still couldn't wrap his head around it.

He sat on one of the benches, running a towel through his hair as his gaze flicked toward Astron. The guy was as unreadable as ever, calmly unstrapping his equipment, moving like he hadn't just walked into hell and come back with a trophy.

And that—that was the problem.

Asher hadn't stopped thinking about it since the second the notification hit his ears. How?

He needed answers.

Caden, sitting on the bench across from him, was still processing everything himself, shaking his head as he muttered, "I swear, if I have to fight Rebecca again anytime soon, I might just sit that one out."

Asher ignored him. His focus was on Astron.

And before he even realized it, the words left his mouth.

"How did you get it?"

Astron, mid-motion, glanced at him. "Get what?"

"The artifact." Asher's voice was sharp, clipped. "We learned that Julia was there."

For the first time, Caden looked up. He hadn't asked, hadn't pried—but hearing Asher say it aloud made it real.

That was the question. That was what had been bugging all of them.

They all knew the pecking order. And Julia Middleton was at the top.

Astron wasn't supposed to beat her.

And yet—he did.

Asher exhaled sharply, leaning back against the locker. His muscles were still tense, his heartbeat not quite settled from the fight. But it wasn't from exhaustion. It was from frustration.

Because no matter how many times he replayed it in his head, none of this made sense.

Astron was already an enigma. That much, Asher had begrudgingly accepted. But this? This was different.

'First, he devises a quick plan that's just enough to make things work. Then, in the middle of it, he decides to act on his own and completely bypasses my senses?'

That was what bothered him the most. Asher prided himself on reading people, on being able to anticipate movements, strategies, shifts in behavior. It was how he survived. How he thrived.

And yet, he hadn't sensed Astron moving at all.

By the time he had realized Astron was gone, it was already too late.

Asher stole a glance at Caden, and—judging by his expression—he was thinking the same thing.

Because Astron wasn't just faster than them.

He was operating on a completely different level.

Asher narrowed his eyes, voice flat. "So? What happened?"

Astron finished unstrapping the last of his equipment, then glanced up, seemingly unfazed. "The objective of the exercise was clear from the start."

His voice was even, calm—as if this was obvious.

Asher didn't say anything, waiting for him to continue.

Astron didn't beat around the bush.

"I didn't beat Julia in a fight," he said. "I just took the artifact and ran."

Silence.

Caden blinked, his towel halfway to his face.

Asher stared at him, expression unreadable.

Then, he let out a sharp breath—almost a laugh.

"That's it? That's his answer? He just ran?"

He sat forward, his elbows resting on his knees, studying Astron more carefully now.

"You ran," Asher repeated, his voice laced with skepticism.

Astron nodded once.

"And she just—let you?"

That's what made zero sense.

Julia Middleton wasn't just one of the strongest in their class—she was one of the strongest cadets in the entire academy.

Asher had always thought of Irina Emberheart as the untouchable one. The kind of monster you could only pray to be on the same side as.

But Julia?

Julia was different.

She wasn't just powerful—she was relentless.

She didn't just win—she crushed.

There was a reason why the Middleton family sat at the top. It wasn't just because of their swordsmanship. Their talent as Awakened was borderline unfair.

And yet, Astron sat there, calmly saying he ran.

'How the hell do you run away from someone like Julia?'

Caden finally spoke up, shaking his head. "Nah, see, that's the part that doesn't make sense. You didn't just run. You got away."

Asher's gaze didn't waver. "He's right. If it was that easy, everyone would just run away from her. And yet, no one does."

They had seen her in fights. Julia didn't let people run.

She was fast. Too fast.

Her raw stats were ridiculous, second only to Viktor. Physically, there was no one else close to her.

So how?

How did Astron manage it?

Astron didn't seem the least bit surprised by their reactions. He simply finished adjusting his sleeves, his expression calm, detached.

Then, as if he were explaining something as mundane as weather conditions, he said—

"That's her weakness."

Asher's eyes narrowed. "Weakness?"

Astron nodded. "Those who know they are strong tend to get overconfident."

His tone wasn't mocking, nor was it condescending. It was just fact.

"People like Julia achieve things early that others spend a lifetime chasing. Strength, skill, recognition. They're used to being ahead of everyone else. And once they get there, they have to find things that are fun."

Asher blinked, processing the words.

Fun?

Astron continued, his voice steady. "And for people like that... fun usually means playing around with opponents they think are weaker than them."

Caden let out a short breath, shaking his head. "Tch. That's messed up."

"Not really," Astron replied. "It's just how they are. If every fight feels like a guaranteed win, then why not entertain themselves?"

The way he said it made it sound so... obvious.

And the worst part?

He wasn't wrong.

Asher had seen it before. Fighters who were too strong, too untouchable, too ahead of the curve. They got bored.

It wasn't just Julia. It was Irina, Viktor, some of the prodigies from other academies.

The moment they knew they could win, the moment they felt there was no danger, they would start toying with their prey.

They'd prolong fights just to feel something. They'd hold back, let their opponents struggle, make them believe they had a chance—only to crush them at the last second.

Julia had done the same thing.

It wasn't that Astron had overpowered her.

She had let him run—because she thought she had time.

Because she thought it didn't matter.

But it did.

Astron's gaze flickered toward them, sharp and unwavering.

"In this industry, a single slip can cost one's life."

His voice was calm, but there was something colder beneath the surface.

"And those who are arrogant?" His fingers traced the edge of his wristband. "They're often the first ones to learn that."

He exhaled. "But they don't get a second chance."

Silence.

Neither Asher nor Caden spoke.

Because what could they even say to that?

Astron stood up, stretching slightly before rolling his shoulders back.

But then just as he was already at the door when he paused.

His fingers rested against the metal frame, but instead of stepping out, he turned his head slightly, his sharp purple gaze flickering back toward them.

His expression remained unreadable, but his next words carried a weight that settled heavily in the air.

"And remember. Slips like this also include choosing the wrong side."

Then, he walked out.

The door clicked shut.

Silence.

Asher didn't move. Neither did Caden.

Because they both knew exactly who those words were meant for.

It wasn't for Caden.

It was for him.

A sharp, subtle reminder. A message disguised as an offhand comment.

Asher exhaled through his nose, his jaw clenching slightly.

'Tch.'

It wasn't like he hadn't thought about it before. About where he stood. About the decisions he had made back in the first semester.

But having it thrown back at him like that?

He rubbed his thumb against his knuckles, forcing himself to stay relaxed.

Caden let out a low whistle, running a hand through his hair. "Man... That guy sure knows how to leave a room, huh?"

Asher didn't answer immediately. His mind was still turning, still processing.

Because as much as he hated to admit it—Astron had a point.

Slips could be fatal.

And he had made one before.

Now, the only question was—what to do?

It was something that he needed to figure out, and figuring things like these were often hardest.