

H. Academy 882

Chapter 882 - Integrating Into

Julia stepped out of the locker room, rolling her shoulders as she stretched, the faint hum of her voice echoing lightly down the hallway.

She was grinning.

Despite the fact that she had just lost in the exercise, despite the fact that Astron had slipped through her fingers, and despite the fact that she had to hear Damian and Rebecca talk her ear off about it—she was still smiling.

Why?

Because, honestly? She didn't care.

Grades had never mattered to her. Never once in her life had she given a damn about test scores, ranking evaluations, or whatever metric the academy used to sort people into neat little categories.

She knew exactly why she wasn't in the top ten, despite probably being stronger than half the people up there. Her theoretical scores were trash. They had always been trash, and they were going to stay trash.

One slip-up in practical rankings? Whatever. It wasn't like she was gunning for valedictorian or anything.

So, she hummed, tapping her fingers lightly against her thigh as she walked.

But then—

Something felt off.

Julia's blue eyes flicked sideways, noticing a distinct pressure in the air.

Right behind her, Irina was walking with a deadly aura radiating from her entire being.

Not literally, but she might as well have been.

Irina's golden eyes burned, frustration rolling off her in waves as she stormed down the hallway.

She wasn't stomping—Irina Emberheart did not stomp.

But her pace was quick, sharp, every step radiating barely-contained fury.

The passing cadets must have sensed it because they all instinctively moved out of her way, avoiding eye contact like their lives depended on it.

Julia, on the other hand?

She grinned.

This was funny.

"Hey," she said, casual as ever.

Irina didn't respond.

Julia's grin widened as she tilted her head, watching the way people actively fled from Irina's path like she was some kind of vengeful storm goddess about to incinerate the entire academy.

"Hey," she tried again, this time stepping into Irina's path and forcing her to acknowledge her.

Irina's eyes snapped toward her.

Julia raised an eyebrow.

Yep. That was definitely murder in her gaze.

And considering Irina normally looked half-murderous on a good day, that meant someone was about to die.

Julia folded her arms. "Alright. Why are you glaring at everyone like they just personally insulted your ancestors?"

Irina exhaled sharply, running a hand through her hair before muttering—

"Ask it to that bastard."

Julia blinked.

Then her smirk widened.

"Ooooh," she drawled, far too entertained. "Who's that bastard? Astron?"

Irina's glare sharpened even further.

"No." She said the word like it was a curse. "It's your twin."

Julia immediately straightened, interest piqued. "Hmm? What happened?"

Irina's fingers twitched, her flames threatening to spark back to life.

And Julia had to bite her lip to keep from laughing.

Oh, this was going to be good.

Irina exhaled sharply, hard, like she was actively restraining herself from setting something on fire.

"That guy," she said, her voice clipped and brimming with heat, "just ran off after getting the artifact."

Julia blinked, then tilted her head. "Huh. That sounds like Lucas."

Irina's eye twitched. "That sounds like Lucas?" she repeated, incredulous. "That's all you have to say?"

Julia shrugged, completely unbothered. "I mean, yeah. You've met him, right?"

Irina stopped walking just to glare at her harder.

Julia whistled. "Oh, wow. You're actually about to explode."

"I'm about to do a lot worse than that," Irina snapped. "I held that damn wing alone. I burned through two teams. I did everything right. And then your damn brother comes out of nowhere, takes the artifact, smirks, and runs off like it's a joke."

Julia tried—really, really tried—not to laugh.

Julia bit her lip, her shoulders trembling as she tried—really, really tried—not to burst into laughter.

Because this? This was hilarious.

The irony was almost too much.

What Astron had just done to her, Lucas had just done to Irina.

Both of them had been played. Both of them.

And while Julia could take the loss in stride, Irina was absolutely fuming.

Julia pressed a hand to her mouth, trying to keep her amusement contained, but it was getting harder by the second.

Irina noticed.

"Why are you laughing?" she snapped, golden eyes blazing.

That did it.

Julia let out a full-blown laugh, throwing her head back. "Oh, man—this is too good!"

Irina's glare somehow got even sharper. "Explain. Now."

Still grinning, Julia wiped a nonexistent tear from her eye. "Oh, Irina. You're mad, huh? Yeah, I get it. I really, really get it."

Irina narrowed her eyes. "That wasn't an explanation."

Julia smirked. "Fine. Lemme tell you what just happened to me."

She crossed her arms, leaning in slightly, her blue eyes gleaming with mischief. "I had Astron cornered."

"Astron? He was your opponent?"

"Yep. And, I had him dead to rights. The guy was on the ropes, and all I had to do was finish it."

Irina's expression shifted slightly—mild interest creeping in past the frustration.

"And?"

Julia sighed dramatically. "And? Oh, well, he distracted me with some daggers, blew me up with a damn sphere, snatched the artifact right in front of my face, and jumped out the window."

Silence.

Irina blinked.

For a second, Irina just stared at her.

Julia, still grinning like she'd just won the lottery, tilted her head. "What? Processing?"

Irina blinked once. Then—a smile. Small, barely there, but unmistakably real.

Julia noticed immediately. "Wait, wait—was that a smile? Holy hell, did Astron actually break through the Emberheart Rage Barrier?"

Irina rolled her eyes, but she didn't bother wiping the smirk off her face. Because, honestly?

It was kind of funny.

Astron was just like that. No matter where, no matter who—it was always the same.

Calculating and partially deceptive.

And the fact that Julia—of all people—had just been completely played the exact same way Irina had been?

It helped.

Julia huffed. "Don't even try to deny it—you like hearing this."

Irina shrugged, but the smirk lingered. "Maybe. You're usually annoying when you're winning. Seeing you get outplayed? Feels nice."

Julia put a hand to her heart, feigning deep betrayal. "Wow. Is that really how you see me? Your dear classmate, your best—"

"Don't push it," Irina interrupted flatly.

Julia snorted. "Alright, alright. But you can't even pretend you didn't enjoy that."

Irina didn't respond immediately. Instead, her fingers curled slightly, just a small, instinctive motion as she thought about it more.

Astron had beaten Julia.

And yeah, Julia was her rival. A rival in the sense that they were both strong, both proud, and both had wanted Astron on their teams.

And even though Irina was fully aware that there had never been anything remotely romantic between them—

She still didn't like it.

She didn't like Julia looking at him like that. Didn't like that Julia had gotten to test recruit him before she had. Didn't like that, for even a moment.

But now?

Now Julia had lost.

And that?

That made everything better.

Irina stretched her arms behind her head, satisfied. "So, Astron bested you, huh?"

Julia groaned. "I just told you he blew me up and jumped out a window. Try to keep up."

"I heard," Irina said, golden eyes glinting. "I just like repeating it."

Julia glared. "I take back every nice thing I ever thought about you."

Irina shrugged. "You had nice thoughts about me?"

Julia sighed, muttering, "Yeah, I must've been sleep-deprived."

They had only walked a few more steps when Julia suddenly turned to her with a smirk.

"Hey, have you gotten out of Silver yet?"

Irina flinched.