

H. Academy 898

Chapter 898 Attack

Emily's breath hitched, her throat tightening as the full weight of what her father had just said sank in. Her fingers twitched slightly, a rare crack in her composure.

"Th-three rank-8 demonic humans...?" she whispered, barely able to get the words out.

That level of force was astonishing. Overkill. A direct declaration of extermination.

What the hell?

Were they really that determined to erase Azure Crest?

She swallowed, her mind racing. If they were a high-ranking guild—if they had the same presence as one of the elite associations—maybe, maybe this level of aggression would make sense. If this was Team 1 or Team 2, the strongest forces of Azure Crest, she could understand them being a prime target.

But Team 3?

Her father?

The enemy had spared nothing.

Either they were desperate to wipe Azure Crest from existence... or they had this much manpower to spare.

She didn't know which possibility was worse.

Her breath came faster now, her grip tightening around the edge of the hospital bed as she turned toward Ethan, seeking something—some kind of grounding reassurance.

But when her eyes landed on him, her stomach clenched.

His expression didn't look good.

There was no sharp-witted remark, no calm words to defuse the situation. Instead, his brows were drawn together, his hazel eyes dark with contemplation, as if something in what Harin had said deeply troubled him.

Thinking.

His silence unnerved her more than anything else.

"Ethan...?" she murmured, barely audible.

Ethan turned his head toward them, his gaze flickering between Emily and her father.

To be frank, even though he had been in this industry for a long time, he still didn't know exactly how things worked. The ranking system, the parameters—he understood them in theory, but they had never truly mattered to him.

Why?

Because he was a Hartley.

His family owned one of the highest-ranking guilds in the entire continent. The sheer scale of their resources, their manpower, their elite hunters—it made rank-8 demonic humans feel... insignificant.

Hartley's enforcers alone had hundreds of rank-8 operatives under them.

If they needed to, they could mobilize twenty, fifty—hell, even a hundred rank-8 hunters without blinking.

So for him, this level of force wasn't impressive. It wasn't unheard of.

And yet—

Something was bugging him.

His fingers tapped against his arm, thoughts whirring.

It wasn't the number of enemies that unsettled him.

It was the context.

Azure Crest wasn't an elite guild. They had strong fighters, sure—but they weren't supposed to warrant this level of hostility. Three rank-8 demonic humans wasn't just a warning. It was a message.

And that was what felt off.

Ethan's hazel eyes sharpened as he studied Harin.

Ethan's instincts twisted in his gut, a slow, gnawing sensation that told him this wasn't just about Azure Crest.

This was bigger.

His mind churned through the details, piecing things together like a puzzle he didn't have all the pieces for yet. The Hartley family had been supporting Azure Crest for years. It was a well-known fact. Even though Azure Crest wasn't an elite guild, their connection to Hartley should have been enough to keep them from being targeted like this.

And yet, the enemy didn't seem to care.

That was what felt wrong.

If they were willing to send three rank-8s despite knowing Azure Crest had Hartley's backing, then...

Yeah.

The scale of the conflict was about to change.

Ethan exhaled, his gaze flickering between Emily and Harin once more. He could feel it now. That subtle, creeping sensation that something much larger was shifting beneath the surface.

This doesn't feel like a guild conflict anymore.

It feels like the start of something.

His fingers twitched, muscles tensing ever so slightly. If the enemy had already committed this much firepower to Azure Crest, then what else had they brought?

Had they already sent more forces into the capital?

The thought sent a sharp pulse of urgency through his chest—

And then his smartwatch vibrated.

BZZT.

His gaze flicked down, and his stomach dropped the moment he saw the name flashing on the screen.

[Marc Hartley]

His father.

Ethan answered immediately. "Yeah?"

His father's voice came through—sharp, not as steady as usual.

"Where are you right now?"

Ethan hesitated, his grip tightening on his watch. "...Azure Crest."

A pause. Then—

"What the hell are you doing there?"

His father's tone wasn't calm. It wasn't the usual composed, unshaken voice he always carried.

No.

There was strain.

And that? That wasn't normal.

Ethan's grip on his smartwatch tightened as he listened to his father's tone. Marc Hartley was not the kind of man to be rattled. He was calculated, always in control, his presence steady like an immovable wall. Yet right now, there was an edge to his voice—something sharp and pressing.

Ethan exhaled, keeping his voice steady as he answered. "Azure Crest was attacked. Emily called me—her father barely made it out alive. Three rank-8 demonic humans ambushed them in a dungeon. It was a complete massacre. Team 3 was wiped out, and Harin Anderson barely survived. I came here after hearing about it."

There was silence on the other end.

Then, Marc's voice came through, sharper now. "They got attacked? Explain briefly."

Ethan didn't waste time. "The dungeon was a setup. Someone bypassed its natural restrictions, allowing enemy forces to infiltrate. When Team 3 tried to retreat, another group was already waiting outside. They had no way out. The moment the fight started, it was clear—the enemy wasn't there to scare them off. They were there to eliminate them. Three rank-8 demonic humans executed the entire team. Harin only survived because of the artifact Butler Ray gave him, but even that was tampered with at first."

Marc was quiet for a moment. Then, a faint sound—a slow exhale.

Ethan could picture it perfectly. His father sitting in his office, fingers steeped, his mind already working through the implications.

Then, Marc spoke again. "I see."

There was something in his tone. A shift.

Ethan frowned slightly. "What?"

A silence stretched between them.

Then, Marc let out a slow sigh. "You're not wrong to check on your friend," he admitted, his tone steadying slightly. "But this is not the time."

Ethan frowned. "What's going on?"

A pause.

Then, Marc spoke with finality. "A driver will come to pick you up soon. You will return to the Academy, and you will not leave for the time being."

Ethan sat up straighter, his posture rigid. That wasn't a request. That was an order.

He narrowed his eyes. "What the hell is going on?"

Marc exhaled through the speaker. Then, his voice dropped lower, quieter—but no less intense.

"They've crossed the line."

Ethan's heart pounded once, hard, before his father continued.

"Twelve of our dungeons were attacked today."

The words landed like a hammer to the chest.

Ethan's fingers twitched slightly against his arm. Twelve dungeons. Not one. Not two. Twelve. That wasn't an isolated incident. That wasn't random.

That was a declaration of war.

And then—his father's next words sent a chill down his spine.

"We lost Marin, Royce, and Valencia."

Ethan's breath caught. His entire body tensed.

Three names.

Three executives of the Hartley Guild.

Not just strong hunters. Not just elite members.

Executives.

Marin Kont. Royce Grant. Valencia Marlowe.

All three of them were high-ranking figures within the Hartley Guild, overseeing massive operations, strategists and warriors alike. They weren't just strong. They were necessary.

And they were gone.

Ethan's fingers curled into a fist.

This wasn't just an attack anymore.

This was an execution.

A purge.

Marc's voice came through again, firm and commanding. "Ethan. Go back to the Academy. Stay there. Do not get involved."

Ethan exhaled sharply, his pulse hammering against his skull. He closed his eyes for a moment, grounding himself.

Twelve dungeons attacked. Three executives dead.

The scale of this wasn't just about Azure Crest.

Something much bigger was moving.

And for the first time in a long while, Ethan wasn't sure what the hell they were dealing with anymore.