

H. Academy 899

Chapter 899 Attack

Ethan stared at the screen of his smartwatch for a moment, the call ending with a cold finality. His father's words still rang in his head—twelve dungeons attacked, three executives dead.

A purge.

That was the only way to describe it.

He exhaled slowly before looking up at Emily. She was already watching him, her expression tense, waiting. He could see the worry in her eyes, the unspoken question lingering on her lips.

"What happened?" she asked, her voice steady despite the tension in her shoulders.

Ethan ran a hand through his hair, his jaw tightening. "It's worse than I thought." His voice was lower now, restrained. "Azure Crest wasn't the only one attacked today. My family's dungeons—twelve of them were hit."

Emily's eyes widened. She sucked in a sharp breath. "Twelve?"

He gave a slow nod. "And we lost Marin Kont, Royce Grant, and Valencia Marlowe. They were executives of our guild."

The room fell into silence.

Emily's fingers clenched at her sides. "Three executives...?" Her voice barely registered above a whisper.

Ethan nodded, his expression unreadable. "Yeah. That's why my father is calling me back to the Academy. He doesn't want me getting involved."

For the first time, Emily couldn't even argue. If the enemy was bold enough to take out high-ranking members of the Hartley Guild, then the scale of this conflict wasn't something she could fully grasp yet.

After a moment, Ethan turned his attention toward Harin, who had been listening quietly, his sharp gaze focused on Ethan.

"Mister Harin," Ethan said, his voice firm but not unkind. "From now on, things will only get more dangerous. If you wish to step back, you don't have to stay in this fight. I'll make sure that every member of Azure Crest is paid properly. If they choose to leave, they'll have the means to do so."

Emily stiffened. "Ethan, you don't have to—"

"I do." Ethan cut her off, his hazel eyes unwavering. "I pulled your guild into this war, Emily. My family backed you when you were struggling, and that means I have a responsibility. But that doesn't mean you have to stay in this mess. If your father, or anyone else in the guild, wants out, I'll make sure they have a way to walk away."

Silence stretched across the room.

Then, Harin let out a low chuckle.

It wasn't amused.

It was the kind of laugh a veteran gave when hearing something naïve.

He leaned forward slightly, despite the pain in his ribs, his tired eyes locking onto Ethan's with an intensity that hadn't dulled despite his injuries.

"Boy," Harin said, his voice rough but unwavering, "do you think I've stayed in this fight because I had to?"

Ethan's brows furrowed slightly, but he let Harin continue.

"This guild was on the brink of collapse long before your family got involved." Harin's voice was steady now, carrying the weight of years of struggle. "If you hadn't joined that expedition team back then—while I was injured—Azure Crest would've been erased."

Harin exhaled, his gaze distant for a moment, as if recalling the past. "It was when you joined that expedition team that things started changing," he said. "I was still recovering, but I heard the reports. The way you handled the situation, the way you fought alongside our people—it wasn't just some noble's son playing hero. You saw their worth. You saw their struggle."

Ethan remained quiet, his expression unreadable, but he remembered it clearly.

At the time, he had joined on a whim—or at least that's what he told himself. He wanted to prove something. Wanted to step out from under his family's influence and do something with his own hands. He had no title, no bodyguards, no weight of the Hartley name hanging over him.

Just him.

And it had been real.

The expedition had been rough, brutal even, but he had seen the guild's hunters pushing forward, refusing to let go of their dignity despite their lack of resources. He had watched the way they fought—not just for themselves, but for the people next to them. And that was when it clicked.

Azure Crest wasn't just surviving.

They were fighting to stay alive.

And Ethan had made a decision that day.

He wasn't just going to watch.

So he invested.

Not through his family's resources, not through the guild's typical channels—he did it from his own private funds. He didn't want this to be another Hartley Guild extension. He wanted it to be his decision, his responsibility.

Emily crossed her arms, nodding slightly. "From the moment that [that guy] betrayed us, the guild started declining," she admitted. Her expression darkened at the mention of him, but she pushed past it. "We barely held on. People left, resources were cut, and no one wanted to take the risk of associating with us anymore."

She looked at Ethan.

"But then you stepped in."

Harin chuckled, shaking his head slightly. "You gave us the lifeline we needed, Ethan. Even if we were just another part of some bigger plan for you back then, you still gave us a chance."

Ethan's gaze flickered for a moment. "It wasn't some bigger plan," he muttered, leaning back in his chair. "I just... wanted to see if I could do something without my family."

Emily gave a small smile at that. "Well, you did. And look at where we are now."

But even as she said it, a thought lingered in her mind.

Ethan wasn't the only one who had invested in them.

Somewhere along the way, another mysterious investor had bought into Azure Crest's stocks, quietly supporting them from the shadows. It wasn't Ethan, and it wasn't any of their known allies.

Even now, she still didn't know who they were.

But whoever they were, they had placed their bets on Azure Crest just like Ethan had.

And if this war was truly beginning, Emily had a feeling she would find out soon enough.

Harin let out a slow breath, his decision unwavering. "In any case, I'm not stepping out of this," he said firmly. "This is my guild. These are my people. And Emily—" His gaze softened as he looked at his daughter. "She's all I have left."

Emily's lips parted slightly, but she said nothing, her fingers curling at her sides.

Harin shifted against the bed, his body still aching, but his voice remained strong. "Of course, I'll ask the others. If anyone wants to leave, I won't stop them. I'll make sure they have enough to get away and start over." He exhaled, his expression darkening slightly. "But honestly? I doubt they'll be safe outside."

Ethan's fingers tapped against his arm, his brows furrowing. He didn't want to admit it, but Harin had a point.

If the capital—the most heavily guarded city—was already being infiltrated like this, then what about places without the same level of protection?

What about the smaller settlements, the scattered guilds in less fortified regions?

The thought made his stomach coil.

Ethan exhaled, shaking his head slightly. "I can't argue with that," he admitted. "Nowhere is really safe anymore."

Harin nodded. "Then I'm staying here. This is my guild, and we're not running." His voice lowered. "Besides, if I left, then what was the point of surviving in the first place?"

Emily closed her eyes briefly, inhaling before looking back at her father. She wasn't going anywhere either. This was her home.

Ethan studied them both before finally smiling—a small, genuine curve of his lips. "Then I'll do my best," he said. "For all of you."

A quiet understanding settled between them.

Then—

A faint honk outside.

Ethan glanced toward the window before pulling himself up. "That is the ride."

Ethan turned back to Emily, his expression shifting to something more serious. "Come with me to the Academy," he said. It wasn't a suggestion—it was a genuine request.

Emily blinked, caught off guard by his sudden words. "What?"

"You heard me." Ethan's gaze was steady. "You should come back with me. It's safer there."

Emily's brows furrowed as she squared her shoulders. "No. I'm staying here."

Ethan expected that response, but he still let out a frustrated sigh. "Emily, listen—"

"I am listening," she cut in, her voice firm. "And my answer is the same. My father is here. The guild is here. I won't leave them behind."

Before Ethan could argue further, another voice interjected.

"You should go back."

Emily turned sharply to look at her father, disbelief flashing across her face. "What?"

Harin met her gaze with unwavering resolve. "Ethan's right," he said. "It's not safe here, Emily. Not anymore."

Emily's hands clenched into fists. "And you expect me to just run?"

"This isn't running. This is surviving," Harin countered. "Azure Crest still has a future—but only if someone lives to carry it forward. I need you safe, Emily. And that means being somewhere the enemy can't reach you so easily."

Emily shook her head. "No. I can't just leave you here—"

"You think I don't want you here?" Harin's voice lowered, but there was a deep, unshakable weight to it. "You're my daughter, Emily. You're all I have left. But that's exactly why you need to go. The Academy is protected."

Ethan, seeing the moment of hesitation in Emily's expression, pressed forward. "Harin's right. If you stay, you'll be a target. And if something happens to both of you—" He exhaled sharply. "I don't even want to think about it."

Emily's jaw tightened, her emotions warring inside her. She didn't want to leave. She hated the idea of running while others stayed behind to fight. But she also knew her father wasn't speaking out of fear. He was speaking as a leader.

And a father.

Her fingers trembled slightly before she finally spoke. "...And what about you?"

"I'll survive," Harin said, offering her a small, reassuring smile. "I always have."

Ethan crossed his arms. "So? Are you coming or not?"

Emily took a deep breath. Then another.

And finally, she nodded.

"...Fine."

But the moment she did, an uneasy feeling settled in her chest.

Because despite what they were saying—she had a sinking feeling that nowhere was truly safe anymore.