

H. Academy 918

Chapter 918 Shifting Pillars

Ethan exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck before glancing back at Jane. His voice was calm, steady—not demanding, not pushing.

"I know there's something in your past," he said, watching her reaction carefully. "Something you don't talk about."

Jane's fingers tensed slightly in her lap, but she didn't interrupt.

"But I'm not going to investigate it," Ethan continued. "You don't have to tell me anything until you want to." He leaned back slightly, letting his words settle. "No need to hurry. I trust you."

Jane's eyes widened just a little, her lips parting as if she wanted to say something. But no words came out. Instead, her gaze grew softer, almost fragile. A shimmer of moisture gathered at the edges of her eyes, her hands clenching slightly before she quickly looked away, blinking rapidly.

Ethan didn't comment on it.

Instead, he moved on instinct, reaching forward and pulling her into a hug.

It wasn't dramatic, wasn't anything grand. It was casual, natural. Like it was the most normal thing in the world.

Jane stiffened at first, caught off guard, but after a few seconds, she slowly let herself relax into the warmth. Her head rested lightly against his shoulder, her body no longer holding that tense edge.

Neither of them spoke.

They just stayed like that for a little while.

A quiet moment, a rare kind of comfort.

Eventually, Ethan pulled back slightly, just enough to look at her properly.

Jane sniffed softly, giving him a small, almost embarrassed smile. "Sorry. I probably look ridiculous right now."

Ethan raised an eyebrow. "Nah. You always look like that."

Jane let out a short laugh, swatting him weakly on the arm. "You're terrible."

Ethan smirked but didn't say anything else. Instead, his expression grew a little more thoughtful as he studied her, debating whether or not to bring up what was on his mind.

He wanted to talk to her about everything—Azure Crest, his family, the pressure building in the city. But at the same time...

Did he really want to drag her into all of that?

She had her own problems. Problems that were clearly weighing on her.

Would it be selfish to put more on her plate?

Ethan sighed, rubbing his temple. "Hey, Jane?"

She tilted her head slightly. "Yeah?"

He hesitated, then shook his head with a small smirk. "Nothing. Just... glad you're alright."

Jane blinked before smiling softly. "Thanks, Ethan."

He nodded.

For now, that was enough.

The cold evening air did little to settle the storm in Lilia's mind. Her boots struck the stone pavement with steady, measured steps, her posture upright, composed—but internally, her thoughts churned relentlessly.

She had resumed her guild work over the past few days, reestablishing her influence, reinforcing the alliances she had built, and ensuring that everything within her control remained intact. She had no time to dwell on failures, no room for hesitation. The Thornheart family succession was heating up, and so was the looming battle for Olympus Vanguard.

Yet despite all the strategic maneuvering, the negotiations, and the steady execution of her plans, there was one thing that refused to leave her thoughts.

Astron's words.

"You hesitate."

"That's why you lost."

Lilia's crimson eyes flickered as she entered the archery grounds, the familiar scent of wooden targets, waxed bowstrings, and mana-imbued arrows filling the air. The place was quieter than usual, the evening light casting long shadows over the training dummies lined up in neat rows.

She welcomed the solitude.

Still, her grip on her bow was tighter than necessary as she approached the shooting range. She was here to train—to push past the distractions. But her mind had never been so restless.

Astron's words had been circling her thoughts for days now, lingering like an echo that refused to fade.

She had initially dismissed them. She had wanted to dismiss them.

But she hadn't.

Instead, she had spent too much time dissecting them, replaying that damn conversation in her head, considering every angle, every implication.

"You hesitate when it comes to doing things the way Adrian or Selene would."

"You don't have the necessary drive."

Her fingers twitched slightly against the smooth curve of her bow, irritation creeping in at the mere memory. Astron was wrong. He didn't understand. He observed, analyzed, picked people apart with cold precision—but he didn't know what it meant to be Lilia Thornheart.

He didn't know what it meant to carve out power under the weight of expectations.

He didn't know what it meant to bear the legacy of the Olympus Vanguard, to carry the burden of a name that dictated an entire future before she had even been given a choice.

...Did he?

Her lips pressed into a thin line, her thoughts a whirlwind as she notched an arrow onto her bowstring. The tension in the string felt familiar, grounding. She exhaled slowly, focusing on the target before her.

Everything else could wait. Right now, she would train.

Her gaze locked onto the target, her mind calculating the distance, wind resistance, the subtle shifts in mana around her. Archery had always been something of a sanctuary—an art of precision, control, and adaptability.

Yet, even as she loosed the arrow—a perfect shot, hitting dead center—the words continued to gnaw at her.

"Do you even know if this is what you really want?"

Lilia exhaled sharply, gripping the bowstring tighter. Why the hell was that question still in her head?

It wasn't as if she had never asked herself that before. Of course she had.

She had dedicated years of her life to preparing for this. She had built her own following, established her own strength, fought tooth and nail for every ounce of recognition. She wasn't like Selene, manipulating the game from the shadows. She wasn't like Adrian, relying on brute force and privilege.

She was better.

And yet—

Why does it feel like I have to keep proving that?

Her next shot was off by a fraction—just a fraction. But it was enough to irritate her.

She lowered her bow, inhaling slowly.

No. No distractions.

There was no time to second-guess herself, not now. The succession battle within the Thornheart family was escalating, and the various factions within Olympus Vanguard were growing restless, each vying for dominance. The situation was reaching a boiling point.

Some supported Selene, drawn in by her intellect and calculated leadership. Others stood behind Lilia, seeing her as the rightful successor—not just because of her talent, but because she was a leader who earned her strength.

But that wasn't enough.

Selene played the game like a grandmaster, always several moves ahead, ensuring the board was arranged to her favor before anyone even realized they were playing.

Adrian, meanwhile, had shifted tactics. After their fight, he had stopped underestimating her. Now, instead of arrogance, he was carefully moving against her, consolidating alliances, making plays that couldn't be ignored.

And then there were the outside forces—those who wanted Olympus Vanguard under their own influence.

Lilia wasn't naive. The internal power struggle wasn't just about her and Selene. There were hidden hands in the shadows, powerful figures who had their own plans for the future of the guild. Some of them saw her as an obstacle. Others saw her as a tool.

Lilia exhaled, drawing her bowstring back once more. The cool evening air sharpened her focus, the rhythmic tension of her shots grounding her, allowing her to push aside the thoughts that had been circling in her mind for too long.

Her next arrow flew true, striking the target with pinpoint precision. It should have been satisfying. It should have been enough to silence the storm in her head.

It wasn't.

A flicker of mana in the distance pulled at her senses.

She barely reacted at first. The archery grounds weren't private—it was only natural for others to be here. There were many cadets and club members who used the facility at this hour. Some came to train, some to spectate, others simply because they had nothing better to do.

Lilia ignored it.

She lowered her bow, drawing another arrow, resetting her stance, preparing to fire again.

Then—

The door to her section creaked open.

Her instincts tensed—not because of the sound itself, but because of the shift in mana.

It was subtle, almost concealed, but she sensed it immediately. A spell being cast. Not just any spell—an attack. Aimed at her.

"Heh?"

