

## H. Academy 864

### Chapter 864 - Between

The gym at Arcadia Hunter Academy was a sprawling space, filled with various equipment designed for the physical training of the Awakened students. The air was thick with the scent of sweat and the hum of machinery as students went through their exercises, pushing their bodies beyond the limits of ordinary humans. It was a far cry from the quiet comfort of the library, but Jane had long since accepted that this was a necessary part of her training.

She stood in front of one of the high-tech machines that tracked speed and strength, her breath steady as she prepared for her next challenge. Her body had grown accustomed to the rigorous demands of being an Awakened—superhuman strength, enhanced agility, and heightened reflexes that could make even the most skilled athletes seem slow in comparison. But Jane knew that being an Awakened wasn't just about raw power; it was about control.

Her wavy brown hair was tied back in a tight ponytail to keep it out of her face as she adjusted her stance. She was wearing the academy's standard training attire—a form-fitting black suit designed for flexibility and durability. The fabric clung to her toned frame, highlighting the strength she'd built over the past months, even though she rarely allowed herself to acknowledge it.

Today, she had chosen to focus on her speed. The sleek machine before her measured her agility and the precision of her movements, something she'd been practicing over the past few days. She wasn't as fast as the most advanced students, but she was improving.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward. She activated the machine with a single swipe of her wrist, and the countdown began.

"Three... two... one..." The machine beeped, and Jane shot forward, her body moving in a blur of motion. Her legs powered her forward with the strength of an Awakened, her reflexes reacting faster than most could see. As she maneuvered through the obstacles—dodging, weaving, and sprinting—her mind focused purely on the movements, on keeping control. Her heart rate was steady, her body responding with fluid precision. Each step felt like a graceful dance, her body defying the limits of normal human movement.

She reached the end of the course, her chest rising and falling as she slowed to a stop, a small bead of sweat trickling down her neck. Her breath was even, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips as she glanced at the digital screen.

"Not bad," she muttered to herself, eyes scanning the results. She had improved since her last test, her speed slightly faster and her accuracy sharper. It was far from perfect, but it was progress.

She wiped the sweat from her brow, feeling a sense of accomplishment, but there was no time to bask in it. She knew she had to keep pushing herself if she ever hoped to truly master her abilities. The world outside the academy was filled with dangers that even Awakened students like her needed to be prepared for.

Turning, Jane saw a group of other students training in the distance—some practicing their strength, others refining their combat techniques. It was a reminder of how much further she had to go, but it also gave her a sense of camaraderie. Everyone here had their struggles, their weaknesses, but they also had the potential to be stronger.

As she stepped off the training area and grabbed a towel to wipe her face, she couldn't help but think about Ethan. She had told him she'd be in the gym today, and

Jane exhaled, stretching her arms as she felt the lingering burn of exertion in her muscles. Training was exhausting, but it was necessary. She had promised herself that she would keep pushing, keep getting stronger—because in this academy, strength was

everything. However, as much as physical prowess mattered, knowledge was just as important, which was why she was now heading to the library.

She glanced at the time on her smartwatch. Ethan's schedule was different from hers, given that he was a freshman and she was a sophomore. They had fewer opportunities to meet during the day, which made the moments they spent together all the more meaningful.

Ethan...

The thought of him sent a warmth through her chest. He had already started making a name for himself in the academy, his talent undeniable. People had begun talking about him—his rapid improvement, his strength, his adaptability. Even among the Awakened, he was standing out.

And yet, despite all the attention he was receiving, he still made time for her.

Jane couldn't help but feel a sense of pride and, if she was being honest, a little disbelief. How had she ended up having someone like him by her side? It almost felt unreal. With how everyone was beginning to recognize Ethan's abilities, she sometimes wondered if she was just holding him back.

She shook her head, brushing those thoughts away. No. He chooses to be here. And... I want to keep up, too.

Tightening the towel around her neck, she left the training grounds, weaving through the corridors of the academy with ease. Though she preferred the silence of the library, she had spent enough time moving between the training areas, classrooms, and lecture halls to know her way around even the busiest sections.

As she neared the library, the familiar sight of towering bookshelves in the distance filled her with a quiet sense of relief. The library was her sanctuary, her escape from everything—the noise, the expectations, the pressure. But just as she was about to step forward, a voice called out behind her.

"Jane."

Jane stiffened the moment she heard the voice.

A small, almost imperceptible flinch ran through her body, her grip tightening around the towel draped over her shoulders. She hadn't expected to hear that voice—not now, not here.

Slowly, she turned her head, her brown eyes meeting the familiar yet unsettling gaze of Melanie.

"Where are you going?"

Melanie's tone was casual, almost nonchalant, but Jane knew better. That voice—it was laced with something she couldn't quite place. Not hostility, not warmth either. Just... something off.

Jane swallowed, pushing back the unease that had begun to coil in her stomach. "The library," she replied, her voice even, controlled.

Melanie took a step closer, her hands tucked into the pockets of her academy uniform. The bruises were still faintly visible beneath the soft glow of the hallway lights, barely concealed by the collar of her jacket. Jane noticed them immediately, her gaze flickering over them for a fraction of a second before returning to Melanie's eyes.

It wasn't her place to ask.

Melanie noticed her glance, but she didn't acknowledge it. Instead, she tilted her head slightly, her lips quirking in an unreadable expression.

"You spend too much time there," she commented.

Jane forced a small smile. "It's quiet."

A brief silence stretched between them. The sound of distant footsteps echoed down the hallway, other students going about their routines, but in this moment, it felt like they were the only two people standing there.

Melanie shifted her weight, watching Jane closely. "You've been training a lot, haven't you?"

Jane hesitated. She wasn't sure why, but this conversation felt... strange. Not in an outright threatening way, but in a way that made her feel like she was stepping into something she hadn't prepared for.

"Yeah," she admitted after a pause. "Everyone is."

Melanie hummed in response, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Then, she sighed, her breath visible in the cold air of the hallway.

Melanie took another step forward, closing the distance between them. Jane's muscles tensed instinctively, her body reacting before her mind could catch up. She could feel the cold radiating off Melanie, a stark contrast to the simmering heat beneath her own skin from training.

Then, Melanie spoke, her voice smooth yet laced with venom.

"It seems you've seduced another boy with your face."

Jane's eyes narrowed slightly, but before she could respond, Melanie leaned in. Close enough that Jane could feel her breath against her ear.

And then—

"Mia."

The name slithered into Jane's ear like a curse, sending an immediate, visceral reaction through her body. Her breath hitched. Her hands trembled before she could stop them, her fingers tightening around the towel draped over her shoulders.

She tried to suppress it. Tried to will herself not to react.

But she had already flinched.

Melanie's lips curled into a cruel smile as she leaned back, her eyes gleaming with satisfaction. "Oh? That got a reaction," she murmured mockingly. "How nostalgic."

Jane forced herself to stay still, to push down the memories clawing their way up her throat.

Melanie, of course, wasn't done. She took her time, circling Jane like a predator toying with its prey. "You should give up on him."