

## H. Academy 920

### Chapter 920 Shifting Pillars

Ethan and Jane spent the next while in quiet company, talking about anything but the obvious problems looming over them.

It was simple. Comfortable.

Jane didn't try to force conversation, and Ethan didn't press her to talk more than she wanted to. Instead, they sat together, occasionally throwing jabs at each other, shifting the mood back into something lighter.

But after a bit, Jane finally sighed, stretching her arms before fixing him with a look.

"Alright, you've wasted enough time on me."

Ethan raised an eyebrow. "Wasted?"

She smirked. "Yeah. Don't you have things to do? I know you don't just sit around all day."

Ethan leaned back slightly, crossing his arms. "I can spare time."

Jane shook her head. "I'm fine now. Really."

He frowned, not entirely convinced.

She must have noticed because she let out a breath before reaching forward, poking his forehead lightly with her finger. "I mean it, Ethan. You don't have to babysit me. Go do whatever big, important things you were supposed to be doing before you called me."

Ethan huffed, swatting her hand away, but there was no real annoyance in his expression.

"...Alright. But if something happens again, call me."

Jane smiled softly. "I will."

Still, Ethan lingered for another second, studying her face, making sure she wasn't just saying that to get him to leave.

Jane just rolled her eyes playfully. "Go already."

With a final shake of his head, Ethan finally stood. He gave her a last glance before heading toward the door, stepping out of her dorm and into the hallway.

The moment he exited the girls' dormitory, the air outside felt cooler against his skin. The shift from the enclosed space to the open corridors of the academy grounds was almost refreshing.

He started toward his own dorm, his pace unhurried.

But then—

His senses flared.

Something was wrong.

The shift was subtle—so subtle that most people wouldn't have noticed it.

But Ethan wasn't most people.

The air changed.

The world around him seemed to bend, just slightly.

Like a shift in perception.

His steps slowed, his hazel eyes narrowing as he scanned the area.

Then, in the corner of his vision—

A flicker.

A distortion.

Ethan's breath steadied as he instinctively braced himself. The mana around him shifted—pulsing, coiling, thickening like unseen tendrils weaving through the air. It wasn't an attack. Not yet. But it was enough to put him on guard.

Then, a voice.

"What were you guys doing in there? You made me wait a lot."

The tone was casual, almost playful, but there was something underlying it—something deliberate.

Ethan turned, his hazel eyes sharpening, and the moment he saw her, his expression turned cold.

Melaine.

A senior. One he remembered well.

The one who had made Jane's life miserable.

She leaned against the nearby wall, arms crossed, her posture relaxed as if she had all the time in the world. A smirk tugged at her lips, but her gaze held a sharp edge, assessing him, waiting for a reaction.

Ethan didn't give her one.

Instead, he stood there, unmoving, his hands slipping into his pockets as he met her gaze without a word. His mana settled around him, no longer shifting wildly but still present—controlled, restrained.

Melaine tilted her head, her blonde hair catching the dim hallway lights. "No greeting? That's rude, you know."

Ethan's jaw tightened. "Didn't realize I owed you one."

She chuckled, pushing off the wall, stepping closer. "Touchy." Her eyes flickered past him, toward the dormitory doors. "Jane seemed fine. I guess she really does bounce back fast."

Ethan's fingers curled inside his pockets, a subtle motion, but enough to ground himself as the quiet rage settled deep in his chest. His breath remained even, his expression blank, but beneath the surface, his patience was fraying.

Melanie was baiting him, and she knew it.

"We warned her, you know," she said, stepping closer, her smirk widening. "But she didn't listen. Stubborn, that one." Her tone was light, almost casual, but the satisfaction in her eyes told a different story. "Surely, you don't hold a grudge, right? You do understand how the rules play out here."

Ethan's eyes darkened.

He had already suspected it. Suspected that people like Melanie—ones who thrived off their status, their influence—were behind Jane's bullying. But Jane hadn't said anything. She hadn't asked for help.

And Ethan...

He had waited.

Because as much as he wanted to act, it wasn't his place to do so unless Jane let him.

But now?

Now, Melanie had chosen to bring this to him directly.

"Rules?" Ethan repeated, his voice dangerously quiet. "You mean the ones that let cowards like you get away with this kind of garbage?"

Melanie's smirk twitched, but she didn't lose her composure. Instead, she let out a small, amused hum.

"Oh, Ethan," she sighed dramatically. "I was hoping you wouldn't be this predictable. But I suppose I should've expected it."

Then, she lifted a hand, snapping her fingers once.

Two figures stepped out from the shadows behind her.

Bigger. Older. Both of them sophomore- second years, by the looks of it. Built like trained fighters, their gazes cold and calculating. One cracked his knuckles, while the other simply rolled his shoulders, as if testing his flexibility.

Ethan barely spared them a glance.

Ethan tilted his head slightly, his hazel eyes locked onto Melanie. He wasn't in a rush to move. Not yet. Instead, he studied her, waiting for her next move.

Calm. Controlled.

Then, in a measured voice, he asked, "Why are you doing this?"

For a second, Melanie didn't respond. Her smirk remained, but something flickered in her eyes. And then—

Her expression twisted.

"Why?" she repeated, her voice laced with venom. "Because I hate that whore."

Ethan's fingers twitched. His expression didn't change, but something inside him snapped.

"And most importantly," Melanie continued, her lips curling into a sneer, "you freshmen think you can just talk after what you've done?"

Ethan's glare sharpened. He didn't need to ask what she meant.

The academy had been a mess for weeks now.

Freshmen and sophomores had been at each other's throats, and nothing the academy did managed to put the fire out. It started as small things—subtle mockery, passive-aggressive taunts, scuffles that broke out during training sessions.

But then, it escalated.



Sophomore students, feeling superior, had begun actively targeting freshmen, believing them to be beneath them. And when the freshmen fought back, things spiraled further out of control.

Fights. Confrontations. Entire sections of the academy being put under surveillance just to prevent another incident from breaking out.

And Ethan?

He was an anomaly in the middle of all of it.

He didn't care about the divide. Didn't care about the pointless conflict that had everyone else tearing each other apart.

And more than that—

He was openly spending time with Jane.

A sophomore.

To the others, that made him a traitor. A freshman who had no respect for the lines that had already been drawn.

Melanie scoffed. "I knew you were going to piss me off the moment I saw you, Ethan. You walk around like you're untouchable. Like this whole damn thing doesn't concern you."

Ethan exhaled slowly, the anger inside him no longer just simmering—it was burning, spreading through his veins like wildfire.

"That's because it doesn't concern me," he stated, his voice calm despite the fury in his eyes. "I don't waste my time with pointless fights over status or year rankings. I have better things to do."

Melanie's glare deepened. "Oh, do you? And what, exactly, would those better things be? Hanging off Jane's arm like some pathetic dog?"

Ethan's jaw clenched.

Melanie smirked, satisfied with the reaction. "Yeah. That's right. That's exactly why I hate you, Ethan." She took a step forward, eyes gleaming with malice. "You don't belong anywhere. You pretend you're above all of this, but guess what? You're not. The moment you step into the academy, you play by our rules. And freshmen?"

Her voice dropped, low and sharp.

"They don't get to talk back."

Ethan didn't respond immediately. He just... stared at her.

His eyes held something dangerous now.

The kind of quiet, simmering fury that didn't explode—but burned, slow and consuming, waiting for the right moment.

Then, finally, he spoke.

"And what happens if I do?"

Ethan's jaw tightened, but he remained still. His hazel eyes darkened, and the air around him felt heavier, as if the very mana surrounding him had started to stir—slowly, dangerously.

Melanie didn't miss the shift. She leaned in slightly, her smirk widening as if she were savoring the moment.

"You act so righteous, Ethan," she mused. "So protective. Like you actually know her."

Ethan said nothing, but his silence only seemed to encourage her.

"Tell me," she continued, her tone laced with mockery. "Do you really know Jane? Do you know what kind of girl she is?"

His fingers twitched.

Melanie's eyes gleamed with something almost excited—like she was waiting for him to react. Waiting for him to break.

"I bet she hasn't told you, has she?" she whispered, stepping closer. "Hasn't told you about her past? About the things she's done?"

Ethan inhaled slowly. His mind was screaming at him to walk away. To not give her what she wanted.

But he couldn't.

Because Jane had never talked about it.

She had always been guarded about her past, and Ethan, despite wanting to know, had never pressed her. He respected her too much to force her to say anything she wasn't ready to.

But now, the way Melanie was speaking—like she knew something, like she was enjoying this—made his blood boil.

Melanie chuckled. "Poor, naive Ethan. Do you think she's some helpless victim? That she's innocent?" She tilted her head, her voice dropping lower. "She's far from it."

Ethan clenched his fists, the movement subtle, but she caught it.

Her smirk sharpened.

"Should I show you?"

Before he could respond, Melanie lifted a hand. Mana flickered at her fingertips, distorting the air as an illusion began to form between them.

And then—

The scene unfolded.

Ethan's breath hitched.

It was Jane.

But not his Jane.

Not the Jane he knew.

The illusion depicted a version of her unlike anything Ethan had ever seen before. She was on a bed—her expression empty, her body exposed in ways Ethan never should have seen. There were hands on her—multiple hands, faceless figures pressing against her, touching her. The sound of breathless whispers filled the space, teasing, mocking.

Ethan's entire body went rigid.

His mind knew it wasn't real.

Knew this was Melanie's illusion.

But it looked real. Sounded real. Felt real.

The sickening, twisted image burned itself into his vision, and Melanie's voice slithered into his ear like poison.

"That's the real Jane," she cooed. "That's who she is. A whore, Ethan. Always was. Always will be."

Ethan's breath came slow, measured.

Rage curled in his gut like a living, breathing thing, clawing at his ribs, begging to be set free.

But Melanie wasn't done.

"You think she's different with you?" she sneered. "You think she's changed?" She let out a mocking laugh. "No, no, Ethan. She jumps on others just like this. It's who she is."

Something inside him snapped.

In a single motion, before he could stop himself—

Ethan moved.