

H. Academy 923

Chapter 923 Shifting Pillars

"You seem awfully fine for a group that was 'attacked,'" she said, her voice flat. "Meanwhile, the so-called 'aggressor' is sitting here badly injured."

Melanie's eyes narrowed.

For a fraction of a second, just long enough for Ethan to catch, her mask cracked.

She covered it quickly, but he saw it.

Eleanor had just struck a nerve.

Melanie scoffed, crossing her arms. "He brought that on himself," she said, the act of 'hurt senior' starting to slip into something sharper.

Ethan let out a slow, steady breath.

'She's slipping.'

Just a little.

But it wasn't enough.

Because no matter what, the footage was still in her favor.

And unless Eleanor had something stronger to work with, unless Ethan had something to prove his side—

The door to the office swung open.

Everyone turned.

A new figure stepped inside, their presence immediate.

An instructor.

But not just any instructor.

Professor Grayson.

The office door swung open with a measured force, the subtle creak of the hinges breaking the tense silence. Ethan's gaze flicked to the entrance, his muscles tightening instinctively.

Professor Grayson strode inside, his presence commanding immediate attention. He wasn't an especially large man, but the way he carried himself made up for it—his stride was purposeful, his expression calm but unreadable. A man who knew his influence and wasn't afraid to wield it.

His sharp, slate-gray eyes swept across the room, landing on Eleanor first. His lips curled into something akin to a polite smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. Then, his gaze shifted, flicking between Ethan, Melanie, and the two sophomores standing rigid at her side.

Eleanor's expression barely changed, but Ethan noticed the way her eyes narrowed ever so slightly. A subtle shift in her posture, a faint tension in her shoulders.

That alone told him everything.

She wasn't pleased.

And the reason was obvious.

Professor Grayson wasn't just any instructor. He was well-connected—particularly to the Vargras Family, one of the most politically influential families in the academy's network. The same family that Melanie had ties to.

His arrival wasn't a coincidence.

It was calculated.

"Apologies for the intrusion," Grayson said smoothly, stepping inside fully and closing the door behind him. His voice was calm, but there was a weight behind it—an authority that implied he wasn't just here to observe. "I was informed that there was a... disciplinary issue involving one of my students."

His gaze landed on Melanie, who, for the first time since this whole thing started, dropped her act completely.

Instead, she smiled.

A real, smug smile.

'Of course,' Ethan thought bitterly.

Melanie had been confident because she had been expecting this.

Eleanor leaned back slightly in her chair, her sharp golden eyes flicking toward Grayson. "This is an internal matter. Was there a reason you felt the need to get involved?"

Grayson tilted his head slightly, as if feigning confusion. "A reason? Eleanor, please. One of my students was involved in a violent attack. I believe that is reason enough."

Ethan clenched his jaw.

There it was.

The narrative being cemented before he could even properly fight back.

Melanie sat back in her chair, completely relaxed now, her arms draping over the armrests as if she owned the room. The two sophomore lackeys by her side were less composed, but they no longer looked wary.

They had backup.

Powerful backup.

And Ethan?

He was rapidly losing ground.

Eleanor didn't respond immediately. She merely studied Grayson, her expression unreadable, but Ethan knew she wasn't the type to let something slide without reason.

Finally, after a long moment, she exhaled through her nose, tilting her head slightly. "You seem rather quick to defend Melanie, Professor."

Grayson smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "And you seem rather hesitant to discipline a freshman for attacking his senior."

Ethan felt something sharp coil in his chest.

That wasn't just an argument.

That was a warning.

Grayson wasn't just siding with Melanie—he was making it clear that any decision Eleanor made against her would be seen as favoritism toward a freshman over a well-connected sophomore.

He was trying to box her in.

Ethan saw it.

Eleanor saw it.

And Melanie definitely saw it—because she took that exact moment to sigh, sitting up just slightly as she placed a hand over her chest in faux concern.

"I really don't want to cause trouble," she said, her voice a perfect mixture of patience and grace. "But this kind of behavior should be addressed properly, shouldn't it? It would be irresponsible to let something like this slide."

Ethan wanted to laugh at the sheer hypocrisy of it.

The way she said it with such sincerity, as if she hadn't been the one to orchestrate this entire damn setup from the start.

Eleanor tapped her fingers against the desk in slow, rhythmic beats, watching Melanie with a sharp, unreadable gaze. Then, finally, she turned back to Grayson.

"Do you genuinely believe that all factors have been considered in this case?" she asked, her voice measured.

Grayson's smile didn't waver. "The academy's own security footage confirms what happened."

Ethan clenched his jaw.

That damn video.

Without the missing parts—the crucial moments before the fight—it painted the exact picture Melanie wanted. And Grayson knew that.

But he didn't care.

Because his goal wasn't the truth.

It was to control the narrative.

Eleanor exhaled slowly, her gaze flicking toward Ethan briefly before settling back on Grayson. "So that's your final position on the matter?"

Grayson's smile sharpened. "Yes."

Eleanor exhaled slowly, the weight of the situation settling in her chest like a heavy stone. Her fingers drummed against the desk in slow, deliberate beats, her golden eyes flickering between Grayson, Melanie, and Ethan. She had seen setups like this before, orchestrated with precise intent, designed not for justice but for control. And now, standing before her, was yet another example of that same, tired game.

She knew exactly what Grayson was doing. By forcing the conversation into a corner, he was creating a scenario where any resistance from her would be perceived as a challenge to the academy's authority structure. If she pushed back, if she insisted on reopening this case, it wouldn't just be a matter of Ethan versus Melanie—it would be her against the influence backing Grayson. And that? That was something the academy could ill afford right now.

Things were already unstable.

The divide between freshmen and sophomores had only grown worse over the past weeks. More fights, more tension, more whispers in the hallways about alliances and rivalries. If this case was dragged out further, if the faculty was seen as taking sides rather than controlling the chaos, it could very well be the spark that turned things into outright war.

Eleanor knew it.

And Grayson knew she knew it.

That's why he was so calm. Why he was watching her with that same unreadable smile, waiting for her next move, fully aware of how limited her options were. If she resisted, he would twist this into her negligence—say she was making excuses for Ethan, that she was playing favorites. And the last thing she needed was for her credibility to be questioned, not now.

Finally, she sighed, a sound filled with quiet resignation. She leaned back in her chair, fingers steepling together as her gaze settled on Ethan. His posture was rigid, his hands curled into tight fists at his sides, his hazel eyes burning with the kind of fury that could only come from knowing you were being forced to lose.

But she couldn't save him.

Not without risking everything else.

"...Very well," she finally said, her voice measured. "Ethan will receive disciplinary action for his attack on Melanie."

There was no immediate reaction. No sound.

Then—

Melanie let out a small, pleased sigh, as if she had been waiting to hear those words the entire time. She leaned back into her chair with a knowing smile, her arms folding over her chest. The two sophomores beside her remained still, but Ethan caught the way their shoulders loosened just slightly, as if the tension had been lifted from them completely.

Grayson gave a small, approving nod. "That is a reasonable decision."

Ethan felt something sharp twist in his gut. His fingernails dug into his palms so hard it hurt, but he refused to say anything, refused to let them see just how much this infuriated him. Every instinct screamed at him to fight back, to demand that they review the full footage, to make them see the truth—but the truth didn't matter here.

Not against power.

Not against politics.

Not against people like Melanie, who knew how to play the system so well that it bent for her without effort.

Eleanor's gaze didn't waver as she continued, "Given the circumstances, I'll be issuing a formal reprimand and a temporary suspension from combat-related activities."

