

13~ Charlie... I'm Gay

Zane's Point Of View

I must've been wearing the dumbest expression on my face, because Charlie blinked at me like I'd just grown a second head.

"You... you really didn't know?" he asked, flopping back onto my bed like this was somehow his tragedy to suffer. "Bro, it's the Freshman Ball. It's huge. Professors go. Alumni go. Important people. Potential sponsors. Some people even leave with a future fiancé if they play their cards right."

I just stared at him.

He lifted his hands, eyebrows up like come on. "It's like a party, but you get judged the whole time. Kind of like a tournament but with better food. The upperclassmen scope out the new kids. Professors give secret recommendations. Some of the big-name guild recruiters show up pretending to be 'guests.' And... if you're smart..." His grin sharpened. "You can make connections. Or enemies. Or lovers."

His gaze flicked to me deliberately. "Especially someone like you."

I stiffened at that.

I didn't want to be someone like me. I didn't want more attention. I didn't want more sharp smiles like Ronan's. More hidden knives under kind words.

I just wanted to learn. Grow. Survive. Prove myself. Not with pretty clothes and fake smiles under enchanted chandeliers, but with skill.

"Do I have to go?" I asked quietly, curling my fingers into the fabric of my pants.



Charlie blinked. "Technically? Nah. It's optional. But..." he sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees, "... no one skips it."

I barely heard the rest of what he was saying.

Because that's when he spoke.

"Are you afraid?"

The voice didn't come from the room. It came from deep inside me, curling around my ribs like smoke, familiar now in a way that made me flinch and breathe easier at the same time.

My wolf... Fenric.

I closed my eyes.

"Not afraid, I thought. I just don't see the point."

"Everyone else does." Fenric's tone was soft, but there was a rumble of challenge beneath it. "Don't you want to show them what you are?"

A bitter laugh clawed up my throat. "They already know. Half-blood. Mixed mistake. Outcast."

Silence for a beat.

"They don't know you yet." That hit harder than I expected. My throat felt thick. I opened my mouth to respond, but only air escaped.

Charlie's voice drifted back in, distant, like I was underwater. "I mean, look... you're already the academy's new celebrity. People are going to expect you there. Not going is basically handing all the rumors to the people who hate you. You don't wanna do that, right?"



I should have wanted to prove them wrong.

But all I could remember was Ronan's voice cutting through me like a blade, that single cold glance like I was something embarrassing under his shoe.

The laughter. The whispers. Lily's voice like venom dripping sweetly down my spine.

"Do you want to run away again?" my wolf asked quietly, not judging, just there.

I gritted my teeth. No. I want to win the tournament next month. That's what matters. Not silk clothes or pretending I fit here.

For the first time all day, I felt steady again.

But steady didn't mean whole. Not yet.

Charlie was still watching me carefully, chewing the inside of his cheek. "I'm gonna be honest with you, Zane. You don't go... people are gonna talk."

"They already talk," I murmured. "Let them." His eyes softened slightly. "You're not gonna make it easy for anyone to like you, huh?"

I met his gaze. "I'm not here to be liked."

Charlie's grin broke back through like the sun refusing to stay hidden behind clouds. "Gods, you're gonna be so popular."

I groaned and flopped backward on the bed, covering my face with my forearm. "You're impossible."

"You'll learn to love me," he teased, standing. "Or tolerate me."



Whichever's funnier."

I raked a hand through my hair. "Charlie... I don't even have a suit."

Charlie tilted his head, frowning like I'd just said something incomprehensible. "You... what?"

I sighed. "No suit. No dance partner. And honestly, I don't plan on going."

The energy in the room shifted instantly, like I'd stepped on the tail of some invisible beast. Charlie looked like I'd insulted his entire bloodline. "What?! Why not?!"

I gestured helplessly. "I've got more important things to worry about. I'm broke, I don't know anyone, and newflash, being a hybrid around here? Not exactly popular."

Charlie crossed his arms, expression flat. "That's the worst excuse I've ever heard."

"It's not an excuse..."

"It's weak," he shot back, eyes narrowing like he was gearing up for a lecture. "And you don't strike me as the weak type, Zane."

I stiffened.

Weak. Weak like the whispers in my old pack. Weak like Ash's cold betrayal. Weak like the hands pinning me down while Lily laughed in my face.

Something twisted behind my ribs.

Before I could say anything, Charlie's expression softened. "I know a



guy," he said. "Best tailor in the Human Academy dorms. He's practically family to me. Probably has a spare robe that'll fit you."

I wanted to argue, but, that sincerity in his green eyes. After everything I'd survived, sincerity was rarer than magic itself.

My lips pressed together. "Charlie... I'm gay."

Silence.

Then, "Yeah? So?"

I blinked. "So... I'm not exactly gonna be swimming in dance invitations."

Charlie rolled his eyes like I was missing the obvious. "Zane. A third of this academy is openly gay, and that's just the ones who talk about it. This place is crawling with guys who want someone mysterious, powerful, forbidden, you basically walked out of someone's dark academia fantasy."

I glared at him. "You're ridiculous."

Charlie just grinned wider. "I know. It's my best trait."

Before I could argue more, knock knock knock, a sharp rap on the door. Firm. Confident. The kind of knock that didn't ask for permission so much as announce, I'm here. Open up.

Charlie's head snapped toward the door. "The hell...?"

He crossed the room and swung it open, and standing there was a girl.

Not just any girl. Fierce.

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Dark braid over one shoulder. Eyes sharp as shattered glass. Glossed lips curved in something dangerously close to amusement. Behind her stood a handful of other students... tall, intimidating, dressed in deep blue trimmed with gold thread.

She tilted her head at Charlie, ignoring him like he wasn't even there, eyes locked on me behind him.

"Does Zane live here?"

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