

Thornhill Academy

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Welcome To Thornhill Academy.

Allison

Thornhill Academy's large iron gates stand tall in front of me, black and sharp, twisting into shapes that look more like barbed wire than decoration. They loom so high I can't see the tops without craning my neck. For a moment, I think the bars might bend and curl around me like a trap closing in. The enforcer on my left tightens his grip on my arm, as if I might make another attempt to run for it. Spoiler: I had. Twice. The first time was a dash through the scrub bush before he tackled me into the dirt. The second ended with me tripping over his damn boot and face-planting. My pride still hurts more than my ribs. The enforcer on my right... Well, he has kept a healthy distance. I don't blame him. Yesterday, when they first found me, I'd blasted him in the face with a spell I didn't even know I could conjure. His eyebrows still haven't grown back properly, which is both satisfying and slightly horrifying every time I look at him. The way he keeps darting side glances at me, like I might set him on fire again, almost makes me want to smile... Almost.

The gates creak open soundlessly, like the whole place has been waiting for me. Perfect green lawns stretch out in neat squares, too flawless to be natural. Marble pathways glisten under the morning sun, not a speck of dust or cracked stone in sight. Stone towers rise in the distance, their windows catching the light and throwing shards of gold across the ground. Magic hums in the air, pressing against my skin like static before a storm. Then there are the students. Dozens, possibly hundreds, spill across the courtyard. They move in tight little groups, uniforms crisp and pressed, dark blazers with silver embroidery, ties knotted perfectly at their throats, shoes polished until they catch the light like mirrors. None of them looks like they have

ever trudged through scrub land with dirt under their nails and smoke in their lungs. They all stop when they see me. It's like watching a ripple spread across a pond, one head turning, then another, then another. Magic falters mid-air, and conversations cut off. Every eye in the pristine courtyard is locked on me. They stare like I am some wild thing that has wandered in from the forest. They aren't exactly wrong. I tug my arm, but the enforcer's grip only tightens. His hand is a cuff, digging into the flesh of my bicep. I straighten my shoulders and meet their stares head-on. If they want a rabid animal, fine. I'll give them one.

I realise now how many magicals there are. Shifters with glints of fur under their skin. Fae with silver-lined eyes. Witches trailing sparks from their fingertips. A siren's laugh gets caught on the breeze. I've never seen so many in one place before. Never even dreamed of it. The scrub lands I came from don't have people like this, just broken magicals and scraps of freedom. Now that freedom is gone, shrinking behind me with every step deeper into this perfect little prison. The enforcers don't slow. We cross the courtyard and climb the wide marble steps that gleam like bone. The doors ahead are massive, carved with sigils that pulse faintly as I approach. They open on their own, and I am shoved through into a hall that makes my chest tighten. The inside of Thornhill is worse than the outside. The air is thick with incense and magic. Chandeliers float overhead, crystal shards dripping starlight down the walls. Banners are hung in deep reds and silvers, embroidered with the crest of Thornhill, a phoenix made of fire and chains. The floors gleam so perfectly I can see my own scowling reflection in them. We march past students lining the hall, whispering behind their hands. Their eyes follow me, their expressions ranging from curiosity to disgust. I catch words like feral, unmarked, and illegal. My jaw clenches so hard my teeth ache. "Move it," the enforcer mutters, steering me toward a wide staircase. The steps seem endless, and we climb higher and higher. The walls are lined with portraits of grim-faced magicals glaring down at me like I am already guilty of something. At the top, heavy doors loom, their brass handles are shaped like coiling serpents. The enforcer knocks once, and the door swings open with a groan. I am again shoved inside.

The office is all dark wood and smoke. Tall shelves line the walls, stacked with books so old their spines look ready to crumble. A fire roars in a stone hearth, heat crawling over my skin. Behind an enormous desk sits a man who looks like he'd been carved from stone and then set on fire for good measure. His hair is the colour of ash, his eyes like molten embers that burn hotter the longer they stare at me. Fredrick Scorched. Principal of Thornhill Academy. "Sit," he says, voice a rumble that seems to vibrate the floorboards. I stay standing. My boots planted firm, my arms crossed. His eyes narrow, but I'm not about to play the tame little stray just because a dragon shifter with a fancy chair tells me to. Scorched flicks his hand toward the enforcers. "Leave us." The one with missing eyebrows looks like he might protest, but the other nudges him out the door before he can open his mouth. The latch clicks shut, and suddenly, the room is too quiet. Just me and the dragon. "What is your name?" he asks. I raise my chin but don't answer. "And what sort of magical are you?" His words are clipped and precise. I stare back, unblinking. The silence stretches until it's cracked. He tutts softly, shaking his head as if I were a misbehaving child. Then, with one deliberate finger, he presses a brass button set into the corner of his desk. "Send in Professor Hill," he says into the intercom. I feel my pulse jump. He leans back again, those ember eyes pinning me in place. "Never mind, we'll get those answers out of you one way or another." A few seconds later, the door opened and in walked trouble.

Professor Hill is the kind of tall that makes you instinctively want to look up and keep looking. His frame is lean but strong, shoulders filling out the dark, tailored jacket he wears. His skin is a warm bronze tone, his jaw sharp enough to cut glass, and his dark hair falls just long enough to brush the collar of his shirt. His eyes are a startling shade of storm-grey, sharp and knowing, as if he can already see straight through me. His mouth... Full lips, curved like he's one smirk away from my ruin. I swallow hard, my throat dry. Scorched gestures lazily toward him, smoke puffing from his nostrils as he speaks. "Professor Hill, although a master of potions and poisons, also has a rare gift. He can read minds." My stomach drops. My mind is

currently replaying about six different filthy scenarios involving storm-grey eyes and what that mouth could do...Shit.