

A Filthy Mind

I stab another piece of food and pretend I don't feel both Cage's and Pierce's eyes burning holes into me. Tessa, bless her, either doesn't notice or refuses to care. She leans forward on her elbows, her strawberry-blond braid slipping over her shoulder as she beams at me. "So," she chirps, "what classes do you have for the rest of the day?" I blink at her, then dig the folded parchment schedule Hill had given me out of my bag. It's already crumpled at the edges. "Uh..." I smooth it out on the table. "Let's see. Potions this morning, obviously. Next is Elemental Studies, then Divination, and then..." My lips twist. "Defensive Training." Pierce leans back in his seat, still grinning, when he suddenly frowns at my schedule. "Wait, why the hell are you taking Defensive Training?" The words carry across the table, loud enough that a few heads turn. Tessa's jaw drops. "Oh stars. I'm surprised they'd even put you in there. You'll get absolutely pummeled..." She winces, cheeks pink. "No offence." "None taken," I mutter, stabbing at my plate again. Tessa tilts her head, nose wrinkling as her eyes narrow at me. "What sort of magical are you, anyway? I can't place your scent." Pierce's eyes gleam as he leans closer, inhaling deliberately. "She's right. You don't smell like anything I've come across before." My heart stutters, but I force a shrug, keeping my tone casual. "Probably just because I was unregistered for so long. Throws things off, you know? Makes me... different." They exchange a glance but don't push further. I shove a piece of bread into my mouth, chewing slowly before adding, "I'm a mind reader." Tessa's eyes widen, her freckles standing out stark against her pale skin. "Seriously? That's..." She glances around nervously. "That's rare." Pierce's grin falters, suspicion flickering across his face. "Huh. That explains a lot." Before he can say more, I let

the power I've siphoned from Hill unfurl in my head, just a little taste, like opening a window a crack. I reach toward Pierce's mind. The first thought that slams into me is loud, frantic, and ridiculous. Shit. Don't think about her boobs. Don't think about her boobs. Don't think about her boobs. I blink, then choke on my bread, covering it with a cough. My face heats as I fight back the laugh clawing at my throat. Pierce frowns, leaning toward me. "What?" "Nothing," I rasp, taking a quick gulp of water. Tessa looks between us, brows raised, suspicion blooming. I shove my hair forward to hide my face, muttering under my breath. "Mind reading's very useful." Pierce's brows furrow for a beat, his eyes narrowing on me. Then, like a door creaking open, another thought brushes against mine, louder, sharper, directed. Are you in my head, little stray? My cup freezes halfway to my mouth. I stare at my plate, pretending not to hear. When I don't answer, his smirk spreads dangerously. His thoughts sharpen, deliberate this time, no frantic slip, but a pointed shove straight at me. An image bursts behind my eyes: his hand sliding boldly up my skirt, heat and hunger sparking in his gaze. I suck in a breath at the same time water hits the back of my throat. I choke, sputtering, then full-on spray water out of my nose. The table goes dead quiet. Tessa gasps. "Allison! Are you okay?" I snatch a napkin, blotting furiously at my face, my cheeks blazing. Pierce sits beside me, grinning like the devil himself, leaning on his elbow as if nothing has happened. His eyes glint with mischief. I glare at him, fire burning hot enough to set the table aflame. "You..." He just tips his head, smug as ever. "What's the matter, Rivers? Cat got your tongue?" Tessa glances between us, bewildered. "What just happened?" "Nothing," I grind out, stabbing my fork so hard into my chicken that the tines bend. "Absolutely nothing." Pierce just leans closer, his voice low, meant for me

alone. "Stay out of my head, little stray... unless you like what you find there." The bell rings, loud and merciful, cutting through Pierce's smug grin and my murderous glare. Students shove back from their tables, the food vanishing from plates with soft pops of magic.

"Come on," Tessa says brightly, grabbing her bag. "We've got Elemental Studies next. You'll like this one, promise." I don't care if it's broom-riding or basket-weaving, as long as it gets me away from this guy and the filthy images rattling around in his head. I sling my bag over my shoulder and follow Tessa out into the hall. The crowd presses around us, uniforms brushing past, conversations humming. Tessa chatters the whole way, pointing out classrooms, staircases, and shortcuts as if she's been waiting for an excuse to give a grand tour. Then, halfway up a staircase, she shoots me a sideways glance. "Okay, so... how the hell did you get his attention?" I blink. "Whose?" She gives me a look like I've just asked what colour the sky is. "Kael Pierce. Don't play dumb. He sat with you. Talked to you. That never happens." I shrug, feigning indifference. "Not sure. I didn't exactly invite him." "Do you know half the school avoids him?" Tessa presses, eyes wide. "Besides the shifters who are fireproof, everyone else steers clear. He's trouble wrapped up in a pretty body." I snort. "So what is he then? A dragon?" That makes her laugh, a bright, bubbling sound that draws a few stares. "Not quite. He's a hell hound." I stop dead on the stairs, nearly getting run over by a pair of students rushing past. "A hell hound." "Mhm." She nods, still grinning. "Dangerous, moody, explosive temper... the usual." Great. Just great. By the time we step into the Elemental Studies classroom, my stomach has already sunk to my shoes. Expansive, bright windows line the walls, and the air shimmers faintly with residual magic. Rows of desks spread across

the polished floor, each with scorch marks, water stains, or cracks carved into the wood. It looks less like a classroom and more like a battlefield with seating. Sitting right in the middle, with green eyes already locked on me, is Cage. His smirk spreads slowly as he leans back in his chair, propping his boots on the desk in front of him. "Oh, good," he drawls, loud enough for the students around him to hear. "The stray decided to show up." Tessa stiffens beside me, whispering under her breath, "Don't rise to it. That's what he wants." I clench my jaw, fingers tightening on the strap of my bag. The universe really hates me.

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