

Learn To Use What You Have

The chatter in the room cuts short when the door swings open. A woman strides in, tall and commanding, her hair a blaze of copper coils that catch the light like fire. Her golden eyes scan the class, sharp and unyielding, the kind of gaze that says she's already catalogued every one of us and found us lacking. "Seats down, mouths shut," she says, her voice like a spark striking tinder. "We don't waste time in Elemental Studies. If you're here, you're here to work." The room stills. Even Cage straightens a little, though his smirk doesn't falter. "I am Professor Talwyn," she goes on, planting herself at the front. "Some of you carry the gift of fire, wind, water, or stone. Some of you do not. That does not excuse you from learning. If you do not command an element, then you will learn to shield, resist, and cooperate with your partner's power. If you do command an element, you will learn control. I want precision and discipline." Her golden eyes sweep the room, lingering on me long enough that my stomach twists. "Pairing assignments are posted on the board. Gather with your partner. We begin immediately." The board shimmers, names scrawling themselves in glowing script. I shove my way to the front, my stomach dropping when I find mine. Rivers, Allison — D'Altair, Cage. Of course. When I turn, Cage is already watching me. He slides out of his seat with deliberate ease, eyes glinting like he's just been handed the best toy in the room. "Well, well," he drawls, sauntering closer. "Looks like you're stuck with me, stray." He doesn't sound exactly thrilled. No, the twist in his smirk is sharper, darker. He looks... entertained. Sadistically so. I fold my arms, scowling up at him. "Trust me, I'm not thrilled either."

"Oh, don't worry." He leans down, his breath brushing my ear. "I'll make

it very memorable for you." My stomach tightens, though not entirely from dread. Great. Just great.

The room erupts into chaos the second Talwyn barks her command. Fireballs hiss across the air, wind gusts rattle the windows, streams of water snake between desks, only to hiss into steam when they hit flame. Stone cracks and rises from the floor, forming jagged shields. I stand frozen for a moment, taking it all in. That's when I spot Tessa. Except she isn't Tessa anymore. She's shifted into a tiny rabbit, snow-white fur flashing as she darts under desks, weaving between legs with uncanny precision. Fireballs miss her by inches, gusts of wind topple chairs, but not her. I groan, dragging a hand down my face. Out of every power I could've borrowed, I picked Hill's. I'm stuck pretending to be a mind reader while my new... friend... is showing off her bunny hops. "This is going to be humiliating," I mutter. "Oh, don't worry, Rivers." Cage smirks as he raises a hand. "I'll make sure of it." Before I can brace, a sharp gust of wind slams into my legs, sweeping my feet right out from under me. I hit the floor with a graceless thud, my bag spilling open. Laughter ripples from nearby students. I scramble up, cheeks flaming, only for a stream of cold water to dump over my head. It soaks through my uniform in an instant, plastering my hair to my face and Cage continues to do this, over and over and over again. "Why don't you fight back?" Cage taunts, circling me like a predator. Another gust of wind shoves me sideways, knocking me into a desk. "Shield yourself. Do something. What sort of pathetic magical are you?" I clench my fists. "I bloody can't." The words rip from me before I can stop them. My voice cracks enough to draw a few stares. Professor Talwyn's heels click against the floor as she strides over, her fiery gaze pinning me in place. Her frown is deep, disapproving. "Rivers." I swallow

hard, forcing myself to nod. "I was told you are a mind reader." I give another nod as my heart hammers. "Then you fight back with your own power." Her eyes flick toward Cage, then back to me. "Get inside the boy's head. Make him wish he hadn't underestimated you." Cage's grin spreads, sharp and cocky, like he's daring me to try. Heat simmers under my skin, crawling up my throat, searing hotter with every smug flick of Cage's stupid green eyes. The water dripping from my hair, the laughter from the students, the smug curve of his mouth, it all digs under my skin until something inside me snaps. Fine. If this is the game, then I'll play it. I open the door in my mind, let the siphoned power I've stolen from Hill sharpen into a blade, and shove. Cage has walls, but they're flimsy and brittle compared to the professor's; he tries to hold them. He tries to slam them shut. They shatter under my will like glass, and I slip inside. His thoughts come in flashes, arrogant, sharp, burning bright like wildfire, but underneath is something darker. Something he keeps locked tight. There. A memory surfaces, and I grip it with both hands. It's Cage, as a boy, small and wiry, standing in the centre of a training ring. His knuckles bloodied, his chest heaving. An older man looms over him, eyes cold, voice venomous. "Pathetic. You'll never be anything. You're nothing. A useless failure of a son." The sting of the words lances through me as though they're hurled at me instead of him. I yank it forward, shoving it to the surface of his mind, forcing him to see it, hear it, feel it. Cage's hand snaps up, magic swirling into another gust of wind ready to hurl me across the room... then he falters. His eyes widen, his smirk twists into something ugly. His whole face contorts with anger, his power fizzing out before it can hit me. "You'll regret that, Rivers." His voice is low, dangerous, carrying a promise that settles in my bones like ice.

Cage's fingers spark again, raw magic crackling between them like a live wire. His eyes blaze, fury twisting his face as he raises his hand again. Before he can strike, I shove. More memories spill into me like floodwater. A younger Cage again, shoulders square in defiance. His father's hand clamps down on his arm hard enough to bruise. The sneer curling that older man's lips as he spits words like poison: "Weak. Worthless. You'll never be anything." I drag it all forward and shove it into Cage's awareness until the echoes of his father's voice ring loud enough for me to flinch with him. His entire body jerks. The air around him snaps, fizzes, then sputters out like a dying flame. "Get the fuck out of my head!" he roars, his voice cracking in fury. Gasps ripple across the room as Cage spins on his heel and storms for the door. He wrenches it open so hard it slams against the wall, then he stalks out. The slam when it shuts rattles the windows, I think... I hit a sore spot.



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