

Future Known

Whispers erupt the second the door slams shut. "Cage never loses it like that..." I can feel every pair of eyes digging into me, cataloguing me, deciding whether I'm dangerous or just stupidly reckless. Tessa slides back to my side, her hands fluttering like she isn't sure whether to hug me or check me for burns. "Allison, are you okay? He...he didn't hurt you, did he?" I shake my head, forcing my voice steady. "No. He just... lost his temper." That is an understatement. Cage hadn't just lost it; he snapped, and I'm the one who broke him open. Professor Talwyn clears her throat, sharp as a whip-crack. "Enough gawking. Back to work. Rivers did as instructed. That's the lesson. Now, focus." The students scramble to obey, but the whispers don't stop entirely. I can feel them clinging to me, eyes darting toward me as if I've just grown a second head. I sink into my chair, dripping water still making a damp circle on the floor beneath me. Tessa leans close, her voice a whisper only I can hear. "You're braver than I thought." I almost laugh. Brave? No. I've just been angry. Stupidly, recklessly angry and now I've painted a target on my back with someone who already hates me.

The bell finally rings, mercifully and loudly, releasing us into the hallway. Tessa tugs at my sleeve. "Come on. Divination's next. We can sit together."

I gather my things slowly, trying to shake off the feeling that every whisper and every sideways glance will follow me straight into the next class. By the time Tessa and I slip into Divination, my hair is mostly dry, but my nerves aren't. The classroom is nothing like the others I've seen. It's round, dimly lit, and draped in velvet curtains that muffle the outside world. Candles float in clusters above our heads, dripping wax that vanishes

before it hits the floor. Low tables fill the room instead of desks, each one set with a polished bowl of water and a scattering of strange stones that glimmer faintly in the candlelight. Professor Nyra Vale is already there, standing barefoot in the centre of the room like she hasn't noticed the chill. Her hair falls in silvery waves, her pale eyes clouded like smoke. She wears layered shawls that shimmer when she moves, rings stacked on nearly every finger. "Ahhh," she coos the moment we enter. "More little fish in my pond. Welcome, welcome. Sit, sit." Tessa leans close as we settle cross-legged at a table. "Everyone thinks she's a little... well, you'll see."

"Wonderful," I mutter.

Nyra begins pacing the circle of tables, her shawls whispering against the floor. "The Weave is a river," she says dreamily. "It runs forward, but sometimes it eddies, sometimes it splits. If you're quiet enough, still enough, you can dip your hand into its current and see where it might take you." The students bend over their bowls, whispering incantations and focusing. Some frown, some gasp, and one boy yelps when his bowl hisses steam. I glance into mine, but the water only reflects my face at me, tired, wary and unimpressed. Then something brushes against me. It's faint and delicate. Not a shove like Hill's mind-reading or a blaze like Cage's arrogance, but a gentle ripple, tugging at the edge of my awareness. Nyra. Her mind is... open. Not even slightly guarded or fortified. It's as if a door is cracked just enough to peek through. I don't even mean to, but the siphon in me reaches anyway, sliding over the threshold. Her thoughts aren't words, but visions. Colors. Shapes. Threads of light tangling, twisting, burning bright as they wrap themselves around... me. I stagger

back from the bowl, breath catching. For half a heartbeat, I see myself in her mind, magic exploding from my skin, not borrowed but mine, crackling wild, dangerous, and undeniable. Five shadows stand behind me, their eyes burning with recognition. Nyra's pale, clouded gaze snaps to mine. She freezes, then her lips curve in the faintest smirk. "Well, well," she whispers, so soft I almost think I imagine it. Then she winks, a glimmer of mischief breaking through her haze. Nyra's smirk lingers as she turns away from me, drifting back toward the centre of the circle. She lifts her arms, shawls trailing, and her voice carries across the dim room like smoke. "Ohhh," she croons, her pale eyes flashing, "threads upon threads. A storm stitched from shadows, fire, scales, teeth, five paths braided into one. The river bends, the river breaks, but the girl does not drown." The class goes dead silent for half a beat. Then whispers erupt. "She's rambling again."

"Always off in her own world."

"Does anyone even understand her?"

Laughter titters in the corners of the room, students shaking their heads. One boy mimes stirring his finger in his temple, as if she's lost it years ago, but my stomach twists tight. I do understand. I've just seen it. The shadows. The fire. The storm. Five figures behind me, their eyes burning like stars. She isn't rambling. She isn't crazy. She knows. When her gaze flicks back to mine for the briefest moment, the corner of her mouth quirks again, like a secret we're both in on. I'm so fucking glad everyone else thinks she's insane.

The class goes by relatively well after that. I actually enjoy this class, and I

am more than upset when the bell rings, soft and chiming, and the candle flames gutter out one by one. Students stretch, muttering to each other as they gather their bags, most still laughing about Nyra's "mad ramblings." Tessa slips her bag over her shoulder and gives me a quick smile. "Good luck, Allison. I've got Herbal Applications next...much less dangerous than, you know..." She wrinkles her nose. "Defensive Training."

"Thanks," I mutter, though luck doesn't sound like it will do me much good. She wiggles her fingers in a cheerful wave before disappearing into the stream of students filing out. I take my time packing, stalling, until the room is nearly empty. Nyra hums to herself, scattering stones across a velvet cloth as if she's already forgotten we were there. When I pass her desk, she glances up, those clouded eyes glinting faintly as she smirks again. The message is clear enough: I see. I know. I won't tell. My stomach knots as I push out into the hall. The walk across the Academy feels longer than it should, sunlight slanting low through the windows as I pass. Eventually, the stone walls give way to open air, and the path curves toward the rear of the grounds. The training fields stretch out before me, vast, packed-earth arenas ringed by stone barriers, weapon racks standing along the edges. A handful of students are already there, stretching or sparring with wooden practice blades, their laughter carrying on the breeze. I stop at the edge, my bag hanging heavy on my shoulder, and stare at the place where I am apparently supposed to survive the next hour. "Well," I mutter under my breath. "This is where I die."

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