

Who and What Are You?

“Shit indeed.”

The words don't come from the room. They come from inside my head. Hill's voice slides through my thoughts like a blade through silk, smooth, sharp and leaving no place to hide. For one terrifying moment, I think my knees might actually buckle. I force my face into stone. If he is in my head, then fine. He isn't going to see me crack. I flick my gaze up at him. His face was unreadable, expression carved into something calm and disinterested, like my private panic isn't even worth raising an eyebrow over. He is good, too good. Before I can think another word, Scorched's voice breaks the silence, low and commanding, dragging my attention back to him. “Hill,” the dragon rumbles, “I want her name, and I want to know what sort of magical she is.” My stomach twists. I stay rooted to the floor, jaw clenched, eyes locked on the desk in front of me. My heart hammers against my ribs, but outwardly, I give them nothing, no fear, no obedience. Nothing. But inside, my thoughts are anything but still. If he can read me, then he will know everything: the name I'd kept hidden, the slip of wild magic that had scorched an enforcer's face, the truth about where I'd come from, the places I have been. Worse, he'd know the things I thought about him the second he walked in the room. Things no sane girl should think about a teacher, let alone one who could rifle through her mind like flipping pages in a book. If Scorched wants answers, Hill is about to hand them to him. Unless... I find a way to stop him.

Hill's presence presses against my mind like a velvet weight, smooth, firm and confident. He isn't tearing his way in with claws; he doesn't need to. His skill has been honed and refined, the kind of touch that promised he could peel back my thoughts layer by layer without breaking a sweat. Except he didn't account for one thing. Me. I felt it the second his power brushed mine again, an opening, an invitation, whether he meant it or not. Instinct surges through me. I reach out and siphon. His power flows into me like lightning through an open wire, sizzling hot and heady, and before I can think better of it, I mirror him. I build walls. Barriers. Not physical ones, but mental fortresses, slamming doors shut in every direction. He tries again, pushing harder this time, but my stolen strength shoves him back. For the first time, his perfect composure cracks. His brow furrows and his jaw tightens. His storm-grey eyes lock with mine. Who the hell are you? His voice booms through my head, sharp with frustration. I let the corner of my mouth curl into a smirk. Your worst nightmare, I say inside his own mind. His eyes widen, and he takes a step back from me. The silence that follows is heavy. Scorched's ember gaze shifts between us, the heat in the room almost unbearable. "Well?" the dragon asks finally, a note of irritation curling under his words. Hill drags his eyes away from mine, straightening his shoulders. His voice is even, but I catch the edge there, like admitting this has actually cost him something. "Her name is Allison Rivers," he says, "and I have no idea what she is... I can only assume she is human and has a gift like mine." Scorched's eyes narrow. "What do you mean, you think? You've never had this issue before, Professor." Hill's frown deepens, the slightest muscle ticking in his jaw. He looks back at me like I am something dangerous he can't decide whether to dissect

or desire. “She’s powerful. That’s all I know. I can’t breach her mind.” Powerful. Not broken. Not feral. Not nothing. The word thrums in my chest, dangerous and new. I am powerful. Scorched leans back in his chair, fingers steeped, eyes glowing faintly brighter. A low hum rumbles in his chest. “Well,” he says at last, “if she does have a gift like yours, then we’ll be in luck. Such a rare gift can be quite useful to the Council.” The way he says it makes my stomach twist again. Useful. Not valuable or important. Useful. Just a tool for them to sharpen and wield. His gaze lingers on me a moment longer, heavy enough to make my skin prickle. Then he flicks his hand dismissively, like I’m not worth any more of his time. “Get her set up with a class schedule,” he tells Hill. “And take her to Dorm Building D. She’ll be in room 304.”

That was it. My life, my freedom, my everything, reduced to a line and an item on his to-do list. I clench my fists, biting back the urge to snarl at him. Room 304. A prison cell with prettier walls. Hill inclines his head, but I catch the flicker in his eyes when he glances at me again. There’s curiosity, confusion, maybe even a little respect there, though he’d rather choke on glass than admit it. Scorched’s voice cuts sharply across the room. “Dismissed.” And just like that, I am being herded out again. My fate sealed with a room number. Only this time, it’s not fear buzzing through me. It’s fire. If they think they could cage me, if they think I’d be their “useful” little rarity, they have no idea what kind of nightmare they just dragged inside their gates. The door to Scorched’s office shuts behind us with a heavy thud, the sound echoing down the polished hallway. Hill walks at my side with long strides that made me hustle just a little to keep up. His hands fold neatly behind his back as we pass rows of

wide windows where the morning light streams in, catching on dust motes that shimmer like flecks of magic. Students turn as we walk by, whispers chasing me like shadows. Their uniforms matching, their hair neat, their faces scrubbed of dirt and smoke. Every one of them stares at me like I am the monster under their bed, suddenly crawling out into daylight. I scowl back. Let them stare. Finally, Hill speaks, his voice low and measured. "You're really a mind reader?" I snort. "Yep." It wasn't a lie, not exactly. Just not the whole truth. His eyes flick down at me, sharp, calculating. "Why were you out there alone?" The scrub lands flash in my mind, dusty sunsets, cracked earth, the bitter taste of smoke and gasoline, the sound of dogs barking in the distance. Home. I lift a shoulder. "Because." He doesn't like that. "Has anyone ever taught you how to use it?" I press my mouth into a thin line. That one, at least, is easy to answer. "No." No one had ever taught me anything about what I was, about what I could do. Every spark of power I have ever used came raw and reckless, clawed from the air and shoved at the world like a weapon. I've been alone, and I've been absolutely fine that way.