

Thornhill Academy

c 3

Room 304.

Hill stops at a side office, ducks in, and returns with a single sheet of parchment that looks far too ordinary for how heavily it weighs in my hand when he passes it over. “Your schedule,” he says, voice as flat and formal as ever. I glance down.

Thornhill Academy Class Schedule – Allison Rivers

8:00 AM – Intro to Arcane Theory

9:45 AM – Magical History & Law

11:00 AM – Potions & Alchemy

1:00 PM – Elemental Studies

2:30 PM – Divination & Vision Crafting

4:00 PM – Elective: Defensive Training

I blink at the page, reread it, and then let out a bark of laughter I can’t quite choke back. Defensive training. Me. The sound echoes down the hallway, drawing curious looks from passing students. I clutch the parchment to my chest and shake my head. “Defensive training?” I scoff under my breath. “That’s rich.” Hill’s storm-grey eyes cut to me, calm but sharp. “You have defensive training,” he says smoothly, “which is mostly full of shifters, because all the other electives were full.” My laughter dies in my throat. Mostly full of shifters. Great. Just what I needed, to get tossed into a pit of oversized puppies who probably think ripping things apart with claws counts as education. I drag my gaze back up at him. “And how the hell am I meant to find my way around to all these places?” I wave the schedule as if it were written in a foreign language. Which, for me, it might as well have been.

Hill doesn’t answer. Instead, he lifts a hand and stops a boy passing us in the corridor. The boy turns, green eyes flashing with irritation before settling on me. He has short, spiked blond hair, his uniform blazer slung lazily over one shoulder, and the air around him buzzes faintly with restrained power. He looks at me once, up and down, and his mouth twists as if he’d just stepped in something foul. “Cage,” Hill says, his voice even. “Make Ms Rivers here a map of the school.” Cage’s brows arch. “Her?” His voice is smooth but dripping with disdain. I decide right here that he’s an asshole. Hill’s silence is enough of an answer for him. Cage sighs, rolls his eyes, and snaps his fingers. Magic flares golden

around his hand, threads weaving together midair until a folded parchment appears between his fingers, glowing faintly before dimming to a normal piece of paper. He shoves it toward me, his lip curling. "Try not to get lost anyway." I take it, ignoring the burn of his disgust, and unfold it. The map shimmers slightly in my hands, the hallways on it alive with shifting lines and glowing markers moving across it like fireflies. When I focus, I can feel it tug at me, showing me exactly where I stand and where I need to go. "Useful," Hill says simply. I scowl, tucking the map under my arm. Useful. Everything in this place seems to come back to that word.

Hill walks me through another courtyard, up a path lined with stone archways where groups of students lounge, magic sparking between their fingers like casual toys. I hold the map Cage had given me under my arm, but I didn't need it to tell me something was wrong. The silence was doing that. The moment we stepped into Dorm Building D, it hit me. The stares. The low laughter. The heavy reek of too much cologne and wolf musk in the air. Everywhere I look, boys are leaning against door frames, sprawled across worn couches in the common area and crowding the hall with books under their arms. All boys. Shifters with cocky smirks, warlocks with glowing eyes, a fae or two that looked carved from marble... But not one girl. My boots slow, scuffing against the tile. "You've got to be kidding me." Hill's sigh is quiet but deliberate, like he's been waiting for this. "Yes, Ms Rivers, typically, this building houses the male students of the school. Unfortunately for you, being enrolled late, the rest of the girls' blocks are full." My stomach may as well vacate my body now. I stay rooted where I am. The heat of all those stares prickles at my skin. Hill's voice goes on, calm as ever. "Fortunately for you, however, you get a single room. A privilege many in this school are not privy to." "Yeah," I mutter, "lucky me."

We reach the end of a long, dim hallway lined with heavy wooden doors. Instead of stopping, Hill presses his hand against the last door at the end. The wood groans open, revealing a narrow stairwell spiralling upward into shadows. "Up," he says. The steps creak under my boots as we climb, dust motes dancing in the narrow shaft of light from a single lantern on the wall. The air grows heavier, mustier, with every turn until we reach a door at the very top. Hill unlocks it with a brass key and drops the cool metal into my palm before pushing the door wide. The "room" isn't a room at all. It's the attic. The ceiling stretches higher than I expected, rafters crisscrossing above like dark ribs. The space is massive, swallowing sound as soon as we step inside, but it's empty, just a sea of dust and shadows. On one side, a gigantic stained-glass window blazes with fractured colour, the reds and blues throwing warped patterns across the floor. Beneath it sits a single bed, small and sagging, its mattress peppered with stains I don't want to investigate. The air smells stale, thick with dust and neglect, like no one has set foot up here in years. I wrinkle my nose and glance around the vast emptiness, then back at Hill. "This is a privilege?" I ask, voice dripping with disbelief. "The dirt I used to sleep on is better than this." His mouth twitches, maybe with irritation, maybe amusement, but his storm-grey eyes give nothing away. "You have class in one hour, Ms Rivers. Do not be late." Hill's voice is flat and final, already turning toward the door. "Ah, wait," I call after him, raising a brow. "Do I get one of those preppy uniforms or not?" He doesn't even stop walking. He lifts a hand and waves vaguely toward the far end of the attic. I squint into the shadows and barely make out the hulking outline of an old wardrobe, its doors crooked and half-broken, sitting like a forgotten skeleton in the dust. Hill doesn't bother

with another word. The heavy door creaks shut behind him, the click of the lock leaving me alone in the cavernous silence. The attic swallows me whole. I blow out a breath, dragging my hand through my hair as I eye the wardrobe far across the room. The dust swirls in lazy clouds, where the coloured light from the stained-glass window cuts through, spilling across the floor like blood and bruises. “Preppy uniform,” I mutter under my breath, rolling my eyes. “Yeah, this should be good.”