

Homework.

The boy beside me hadn't stopped talking. Every time Professor Vey paused, he muttered something under his breath, just loud enough for me to hear. A running commentary of snide remarks and sharp little jabs, all paired with that smirk that looked stitched to his mouth. I clench my jaw hard, refusing to take the bait. Finally, Vey's head snaps up, her crystalline eyes locking on him. "Mr Pierce," she says, her voice sweet as poisoned honey, "since you seem determined to distract your neighbour, do you have something you'd like to share with the class?" Pierce leans back in his chair, folding his arms behind his head like he owns the place. His dark brown and auburn eyes glitter with mischief. "Actually," he drawls, "yeah. I do. Is there any magical that's exempt from the Weave's effects?" My quill freezes mid-motion, and my breath hitches. It was the exact question I'd been choking on since the demonstration. Professor Vey tilts her head slightly, her expression unreadable. "That," she says slowly, "is an excellent question." The room stays hushed, every student leaning forward. "Yes," Vey continues, her voice carrying easily through the hall. "There is one kind among us who stands apart. One breed of magical that does not answer to the Weave's laws. We call them siphons." The word hits me like a punch to the gut. "Siphons," she repeats, pacing slowly before the glowing lattice she had conjured earlier appears again. "Extremely rare and extremely dangerous. They do not take from the Weave itself, but from others. From secondary sources. From people like you." Her eyes sweep the hall, sharp and deliberate. "Say a siphon were to pull a great deal of magic from you. The backlash would not touch them. The Weave would not punish them. You, however..." her mouth curves faintly, "you would bear the consequences. It is your thread that would

snap. Your body would break. Your life that would burn if they took too much." A ripple of unease spread through the students. I feel it, an instinctive shift, shoulders tightening, eyes narrowing. The word 'dangerous' hangs in the air like smoke, threatening to suffocate them all.

A girl in the front row raises her hand next, her voice steady but curious. "Professor... if siphons are real, where are they all now? Why are they so rare?" Professor Vey clasps her hands together, her faint smile returning. "Another excellent question. Siphons are rare not by accident, but by circumstance. Their power is... unique. Being able to replicate another's magic, or strip it entirely, makes them invaluable to the Council. Most of those born with siphoning ability are sent to the front lines at The Wall." Murmurs ripple through the room, while my blood has turned to ice. The Wall. Even in the scrub lands, I'd heard the warnings. Travellers with weary eyes and voices hoarse from too many nights at the fire would whisper about the war brewing there. Whole villages burned to ash. Armies of magicals turned to corpses in a single day. "Stay away from the East, stay away from The Wall," they always said. "Stay far away." "They are some of our most useful soldiers," Vey finishes crisply. Useful. Always useful. My stomach twists further as I let my mind wander over the question I have asked myself a million times before. Was that where my parents were? I'm not even sure if they're alive, or what happened to them. I can't remember them. I can't remember anything, really. No warm hands holding mine, no soft voices whispering lullabies. There are just gaps, silence and the scrub lands... and me...alone. Well, mostly alone. Sometimes I'd stumble across others, magicals like me, hiding in the edges of towns, desperate to avoid the Council's gaze. Most of the people I had a small connection with always got caught, or we lost each other in

mad dashes through the bush, boots pounding dirt, enforcers howling behind us. Now I sit in this classroom, surrounded by polished uniforms and clean faces, listening to a fae professor talk about siphons like we are nothing more than weapons. Like we aren't people at all.

The bell rings, a deep, resonant chime that seems to rattle through the bones of the building and snap me from my thoughts. Chairs scrape back, parchment rustles, voices rise as students spill from their seats like water breaking through a dam. I shove my things into my bag, ready to make a break for the door before anyone can corner me. "Ms Rivers." Professor Vey's voice cuts through the noise, smooth and impossible to ignore. I freeze as a dozen eyes flick toward me, curiosity sparking in their gazes, before they quickly look away again. My heels feel too loud as I make my way down the stairs to the front, every step dragging. Vey stands waiting, a thin stack of parchment in her hand. Up close, her fae aura shimmers stronger, brushing over my skin like frost. Her eyes, glassy and sharp, study me with unnerving precision. "You are behind," she says, her tone flat but not unkind as she extends the stack to me. I hesitate, then take it. My fingers brush hers for the briefest second, and cold seeps into my skin. "These," she continues, "are texts you will study if you wish to catch up. Foundational works on magical law, Weave theory, and recorded histories. You have missed years of structured training, Ms Rivers. I expect you to close that gap." I stare at the list. There are names of books and tomes scrawled in her neat hand: *The Twelve Pillars of the Weave*, *Origins of Arcana*, *Ethics of Power*, *Histories of the Eastern War* and blah, blah, blah. My head hurts already. Catch up on years? She really thinks I am going to swallow all this down and regurgitate it like her little model student? Vey's gaze sharpens, as if she had read the refusal brewing in my mind. "Do not

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mistake this for a suggestion. If you wish to survive here, if you wish to be more than a feral stray, you will learn. Am I clear?" I tighten my grip on the papers until the edges cut into my palm. "Crystal." Her mouth curves faintly, and then she turns away, already dismissing me. I shove the list into my bag, the weight of it pressing heavier than a big old stone. Years behind. No memories. No parents. No freedom. And now, I have fucking homework.



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