

Potions and Alchemy

By the time the bell rings and Kade dismisses us, I'm wound tight enough to snap. Pierce keeps grinning at me like a wolf who's caught the scent of blood, but I shove past him the second I can, clutching my map and heading for the one class I'm interested in. Potions & Alchemy, and no, it's not because I care about mixing roots and powders into little bottles of sludge. No, it's because Hill will be there, and if I'm going to keep up this mind-reader act, I'll need a steady stream of his magic to back me up. When I arrive, the lab smells like herbs and smoke, with rows of long wooden benches polished by years of restless hands. Sunlight pours in from tall, narrow windows, catching on racks of glass vials and jars stacked along the walls. The air practically buzzes with energy, alchemy has a rhythm all its own, an undercurrent of bubbling and snapping that prickles across my skin. For once, I don't head for the back. I slip down the aisle and slide into the front row, close enough that I'll be in the direct line of Hill's storm-grey eyes when he comes in. Close enough to siphon, if I play it right. A girl with strawberry-blonde hair already sits at the bench, her bag taking up the second seat. She glances up as I stop, then beams, shoving her bag down to the floor to make space. "Hi!" she chirps, all bright eyes and freckles. "I'm Tessa." I blink, caught off guard. No smirk, no leer, no whisper of stray. Just... a smile. "Uh," I say, sliding onto the bench. "Allison." "Rivers, right? The new girl?" Her voice lowers to a conspiratorial whisper, though her grin never fades. "Word spreads fast. I'm glad you sat here. I was starting to think no one wanted to." Her friendliness is almost disarming. My walls shoot up on instinct, but something about the way she twirls a lock of hair and grins makes it hard not to soften, just a little. Before I can respond, the door opens. Hill steps

in, black jacket fitting him too perfectly, eyes scanning the room like a predator. The buzz of voices dies instantly, silence snapping into place as he moves to the front. I sit a little straighter, my pulse quickening. This is my chance.

Hill sets a stack of papers on the desk at the front, his movements precise and controlled. When he speaks, his voice carries efficiently, low and smooth but edged with authority. "Today will be a practical," he says, sweeping the room with a look that dares anyone to groan. "Get out your textbooks and turn to page one-hundred and twelve. You will find the recipe there. Then, gather the ingredients from the supply cabinets along the wall. Work in pairs. This is not a competition. It is a test of whether you can follow simple instructions without blowing yourselves up." The scrape of chairs fills the room as students dig through bags and flip open books. I pull mine out slowly, more focused on the steady hum of power I can feel rolling off him. It brushes against my skin like static, coiling in the air between us. I reach for it, carefully and subtly, like sipping from a stream rather than diving in. The siphoned magic slides into me smoothly, sparking behind my eyes. I lock it down tight, weaving it into my mental walls before he can push against them again. His eyes sweep past me once, storm-grey and unreadable, and I hold his gaze for half a heartbeat before bending over my book. My pulse races, but he doesn't linger. "Looks simple enough," Tessa says beside me, leaning over her copy. She traces her finger down the neat list of ingredients. "Standard healing draught. Water, comfrey root, willow bark, crushed moonflower petals. Easy." I follow her to the cabinets, where jars and bundles line the shelves in neat rows. She gathers what we need with cheerful efficiency, humming under her breath, then returns to the bench. "You don't talk much, do

you?" she asks, not unkindly, as she measures out a pinch of dried bark. Her voice is light, breezy, like it doesn't bother her in the slightest. "That's okay. I can talk enough for both of us." She smiles at her own words and tips the ingredients into our cauldron. I arch a brow, but say nothing, rolling a sprig of comfrey between my fingers before dropping it in. Tessa leans over the cauldron, her nose twitching as she sniffs. "Rabbit shifter," she adds suddenly, as if answering a question I haven't asked. "Before you wonder, I'm not exactly the most powerful." Her nose wrinkles, though she still smiles. "According to most people here, I'm useless." I blink at her, startled by her bluntness. She laughs, a light, airy sound. "But hey, at least I make one hell of a cute bunny." That drags a short huff of amusement out of me before I can stop it. I shake my head, focusing on stirring the cauldron, but Tessa just beams like she's won something.

Hill's footsteps echo across the lab as he moves from pair to pair, his presence dragging my awareness to him. Students straighten as he passes, some grinning nervously, others shoving their botched concoctions behind stacks of books. When he reaches our bench, he stops. His eyes flick from the potion to me, then back again. He leans in slightly, inhales once, then straightens. "Okay," he says finally, his voice cool. "Acceptable, but it needs work." My jaw tightens. "Of course it does." He slides a folded parchment onto the bench in front of me. "You will purchase these supplies for your own use. Practice during your free time. In addition, you'll find a list of basic brews you will master before the term ends. If you are going to catch up with the rest of the class, you will work twice as hard." He turns and strides off, already moving toward the next table. I glare at the parchment like it's personally insulted me, then unfold it. There are two lists, written in his clipped, tidy hand. Supplies: cauldron, glass vials, brass

stirring rod, mortar and pestle, a dozen herbs and minerals I can't even pronounce. Assignments: Soothing Draft, Firemoss Antidote, Moonlight Serum, Ironfort Tonic. Tessa leans over my shoulder, her strawberry-blonde braid brushing my arm. "Ooooh, that's a long list," she says, cheerful as ever. "Don't worry, though. You can get all of that at The Hopping Hare, down in town. It's basically the only place we go for potion stuff. Students are allowed there after classes end, as long as they're back before curfew." I roll my eyes, but a corner of my mouth twitches despite myself. "We should go together," she says brightly. "After classes end today. I'll show you around, help you get everything you need and hey, lunch is next, right after this. You should sit with me." I blink at her, thrown by how easily she's just... invited me in. This girl is crazy.

7
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