

Food Hall

The food hall is a beast in itself. Vaulted ceilings hang with floating lanterns, banners dripping with colour, the air thick with chatter, clatter, and the mouthwatering scent of roasted meat and sweetbread. It isn't the size that stops me. It's the sheer number of them. I've never seen so many magicals in one place. Tessa tugs me inside, weaving through the stream of bodies, and my eyes can't keep still. A long table to the right practically vibrates with rowdy, loud wolves, half-shifted claws and ears on display as they tear into steaks that are bloody enough to drip onto the floor. Laughter shakes the rafters as one shoves another clear off the bench. Across from them, sleek, cat-shifters lounge with feline grace, their golden eyes narrowing at the wolves' noise. A snow leopard boy licks sauce from his fingers, his tail flicking behind him. A group of fae glimmer near the centre, their hair catching every shard of sunlight like living gemstones. They eat slowly, perfectly, their voices soft and lilting. At the far end, the vampires have claimed their corner, pale and aloof, sipping thick crimson from glass goblets. A boy with silver eyes glances at me, lips curving around fangs, before turning back to his brood. On the left, witches and warlocks sprawl across two tables, parchment and quills scattered between bowls of stew. Sparks fizz from fingers, ink bottles levitate lazily, and cauldrons steam even though this is lunch. Cage sits among them, green eyes flashing when he catches sight of me. His smirk is sharp enough to slice bread. Elementals cluster near the windows, the air shimmering faintly around them. One girl absentmindedly twirls water into tiny spirals above her cup, while a boy sparks flames across his knuckles like he doesn't even notice. Beyond them, smaller tables buzz with more kinds than I can count. I swear I even see a troll hunched over a mountain of food that

could've fed three people.

I stop dead, heart thudding. This isn't just a school. It's a bloody zoo. Tessa nudges me toward a quieter table in the middle, where the "in-between" types gather. The place for outcasts, strays and people who don't fit neatly anywhere else. I slide onto the bench, trying to look like I belong here. The truth is obvious, though, I don't belong anywhere. The hairs on my neck prickle with stares. Some curious, some hostile, some... hungry. I duck my head, letting my hair fall forward, eyes glued to my lap. "Don't let them bother you," Tessa whispers, her freckles dancing as she smiles. "Everyone stares at the new kid. You're just the freshest meat in the hall." Great. Exactly what I want to be. I glance down at the long table in front of me. The polished wood gleams, set perfectly with a plate, bowl, and cup at each spot. Silver cutlery gleams beside them, so spotless I can see my reflection in the spoon. There is only one problem. There is no food, no line, no trays, not even a server. Just rows of kids eating like kings and queens while my stomach gnaws at itself. I nudge my plate with a fingertip, scowling. "So... how does this work? Or am I supposed to steal a steak off a wolf shifter's plate and hope I don't lose my arm?" Tessa giggles, leaning closer. "No, no. It's enchanted. All you have to do is run your finger around the edge of the plate, bowl, or cup you want to use, and it fills with whatever your heart desires." I blink at her, then at my empty plate. "Of course," I mutter, rolling my eyes. "How useful." "Go on," she urges, her grin wide. "Try it." With a sigh, I drag my fingertip slowly around the rim of the plate. A soft shimmer ripples across the surface, and then suddenly, it's heaping with precisely what I've been craving: roast chicken, golden potatoes dripping with butter, and a slice of fresh bread so soft it still steams. My stomach growls loudly enough that Tessa laughs

again. "See? Told you." I shake my head, tearing a piece of bread in half. "Magic plates. What's next, beds that tuck me in at night?" "Actually..." Tessa starts, eyes sparkling. I cut her off with a groan. "Don't answer that."

I've just torn off another piece of bread, the butter melting across my fingers, when a sudden whizz cuts through the noise of the hall. I jerk my head to the side just in time to see an apple whistling past my ear and smacking into the wall behind me with a dull thunk. The hall goes quiet. Then laughter bubbles up from the warlock tables, sharp and mocking. I don't need to look to know who's responsible. Cage sits slouched in the middle of them, green eyes glinting with satisfaction as he lazily twirls his fingers. A pear hovers above his hand, glowing faintly with magic. "Not impressed, Rivers?" he calls across the room, his voice carrying easily. "Thought you liked useful tricks." More snickers break out around him, a few students turning to watch me, waiting for a reaction. I stare at him, the warlock's smug grin widening, his pear spinning slow circles in the air like he has all the time in the world. I slowly raise my bread, tear off another bite, and chew deliberately, never breaking eye contact. "Wow," I say dryly, my voice loud enough to carry. "Food-throwing. Truly groundbreaking magic." A few students at the nearby tables snort, trying to hide their laughter. Cage's smirk tightens, his eyes narrowing. Tessa leans toward me, whispering under her breath, "Careful, Allison. You don't want to make an enemy of him." I keep my eyes on Cage as I swallow the last of the bread. "Too late." Before I can decide if I want to lob my cup at Cage's smug head, the bench beside me creaks under sudden weight. Pierce plops down casually, filling the plate in front of him high with food. He leans one elbow on the table, grinning like a devil as he tears into a roll. "Don't mind the arrogant warlock," he says, jerking his chin toward

Cage. "They all think they're better than everyone. Comes with the territory." I scowl at him, shifting an inch away. "Don't you have a group of shifters to sit with?" "Of course I do," he says around a mouthful of bread, completely unbothered. His auburn-glinting eyes sparkle with mischief as he tilts his head toward me. "But they're not nearly as pretty to look at." My face heats instantly, though I roll my eyes so hard it almost hurts. "You're unbelievable." "Yeah," he says cheerfully, flashing that grin. "That's why you like me already." Cage's smirk across the hall falters into something darker, his eyes narrowing on the scene. I duck my head, stabbing my fork into my chicken just to have an excuse not to meet either of their stares.



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