

**The Sage of Time: The Midnight Heir**

By John Dupree III

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﻿Prologue

The audio crackled to life.

"If you're hearing this… congratulations. You’ve officially been thrown into a war you didn’t sign up for."

A male voice, laced with exhaustion yet sharp with urgency, spoke through the grainy recording.

"My name is John Timely, and my brother Joseph and I are time-traveling wizards from the year 2036. We possess an artifact—a necklace forged by the Egyptian gods, a relic of unimaginable power. But it has fallen into the wrong hands."

A crash cut through the static, followed by hurried breathing. A second voice, deeper and more agitated, spoke.

"John, less monologuing, more escaping, remember?"

"Fine. Here’s the short version: Evil time wizards have corrupted the necklace. They’re using it to alter history, rewrite fate, and erase anyone who stands in their way. We traveled to the year 2120 to retrieve it before they could—"

Another boom. Glass shattered. A chorus of eerie, echoing voices murmured something unintelligible in the background.

"Oh, great. They found us."

A long pause. Then, Joseph spoke again, his voice lower, resigned.

"If you’re the one who finds this message, it means we failed."

John inhaled sharply.

"If you’ve been chosen by the gods, you must protect the necklace. Never let it fall into the hands of the Midnight King. If you need to use it, follow these steps: First, you—"

The voices in the background grew louder. The crackling static peaked—then silence.

And then, a final whisper.

"Oh no. We’re too late—"

The recording cut off.

**Chapter 1 – (Jordan's POV)**

“So that’s what this is,” I muttered, staring at the ancient-looking necklace nestled inside a dusty old Nike Air Jordan shoebox. The contrast was absurd—this relic, tangled in delicate gold chains with an emerald-green gemstone at its center, lying in the same box people used to stash dirty gym shoes.

Shelly leaned over my shoulder, chewing on a piece of gum like this was the least interesting thing to happen today. “Yeah, or it could just be some elaborate prank. You ever think of that, Einstein?”

I ignored her, my fingers tracing the intricate patterns carved into the metal. Symbols I didn’t recognize—hieroglyphs, maybe? Though they seemed to shimmer faintly, like the necklace itself was breathing.

Beside it was an ancient-looking tape recorder, the kind you’d expect to find in a dusty attic next to a pile of old cassette mixtapes labeled “Summer Vibes ‘89.” It looked straight out of the 1980s—a relic in its own right, with chipped edges and a faded "REC" button that had seen better days.

"Who even uses these anymore?" Shelly muttered, blowing a bubble until it popped dramatically.

I rewound the tape until it clicked, then pressed play, the gears inside groaning like they were waking from a long nap.

The static crackled first, then the same distorted voice filtered through again— low, urgent, like someone whispering secrets across time itself.

A sharp burst of static cut the voice off.

Silence followed.

Shelly and I exchanged glances, the kind we usually reserved for spotting something weird on late-night conspiracy videos.

The silence stretched, filled only by the faint hum of the school’s flickering fluorescent lights.

Shelly was the first to break it. “Okay. That was dramatic. I’ll give them points for effort.”

I turned to her, my brain already racing—calculating probabilities, analyzing historical patterns, piecing together every fact I’d ever absorbed from documentaries, textbooks, and random late-night Wikipedia rabbit holes. "Shelly, this is real. You heard what they said! A magical time-traveling necklace created by Egyptian gods? And it’s just… sitting in my locker?"

Shelly snorted, crossing her arms. "Right, because obviously a god-chosen, world-saving relic would be delivered to your nerdy hands. The universe is hilarious."

I scowled. "Statistically speaking, if something of great importance were to randomly end up in someone’s possession, it would be someone of higher intelligence and logical thinking who would actually—"

She cut me off by grabbing the necklace, dangling it like it was a cheap keychain. “Blah, blah, blah. Look, smartypants, what exactly are we supposed to do with this? Just waltz into battle against ‘evil time wizards’ with our straight Cs in gym class?”

“You mean your straight Cs, Shelly. Not my fault you don’t study.”

Shelly rolled her eyes. “Yeah, well, congrats on being the human version of a textbook. Doesn’t help us now, does it?”

I opened my mouth to argue—but then everything changed.

The hallway went dead silent. The background hum of teenage chaos—lockers slamming, sneakers squeaking, gossip bouncing off the walls—all gone. It was like someone had hit mute on reality.

I glanced up at the antique clock mounted above the hallway doors. The second hand was frozen, stuck at exactly 7:09 AM.

A chill crawled down my spine.

Then—they appeared.

Two massive men strode down the hall, not from thin air but from around the corner like they'd been there all along—except I knew they hadn’t. Their uniforms were sleek, black, futuristic—stitched with faint crimson embroidery resembling jagged cracks, like veins of corruption spreading through fabric. Their chest plates bore an emblem: a black circle with a red slash through it, the symbol subtly pulsing with an ominous glow.

One of them had a scar running from his temple to his jaw, like he’d lost an argument with a sword and barely lived to tell the tale. The other was even bigger, his arms crossed over his chest with an expression that screamed “I’ve punched people for less.” Their eyes glinted faintly red—cybernetic enhancements, maybe, or something worse.

Scarface smirked. "Kid, hand over the box. And nobody gets hurt."

Shelly took an instinctive step back, her usual bravado dimming for the first time. I, being the much more intelligent and rational sibling, did the opposite.

I tightened my grip on the shoebox. “You’ll have to pry it from my cold, genius-level IQ hands.”

The larger one cracked his knuckles, the sound sharp and deliberate. "We were hoping you'd say that."

They didn’t vanish. No fancy tricks. Just raw, brutal speed.

The bigger one charged, his heavy boots pounding against the tile like distant thunder. He moved with terrifying precision, not supernatural, but definitely more than human.

Shelly shouted something—I couldn’t process the words—because, in the next instant, he was in front of me.

His fist connected with my face before my brain could even process what was happening.

Pain exploded behind my eyes, and for a split second, everything blurred into streaks of light as I flew backward, the shoebox slipping from my grasp mid-air.

I crashed into the row of lockers with a metallic clang that echoed down the empty hall.

Shelly’s scream snapped me back to reality.

Dazed, I blinked through the stars dancing in my vision, trying to focus on the scene unfolding. Scarface lunged toward the fallen shoebox, but Shelly—my reckless, annoying, absolutely fearless sister—got there first.

She kicked the box toward me like she was scoring the winning goal in the World Cup.

"Get up, Jordan!" she shouted, her voice cutting through the fog in my head.

I scrambled, ignoring the throbbing pain in my jaw, and grabbed the box.

The men advanced, and that’s when Shelly did the most Shelly thing possible.

She punched Scarface square in the nose.

It made a satisfying crunch, but the guy barely flinched. His head snapped back slightly, and when he looked at her again, his nose was already resetting itself with a sickening crack.

“Okay, cool, that’s new,” Shelly muttered, backing up.

I didn’t think. I just ran, dragging her with me, the shoebox clutched against my chest like it was my last brain cell during finals week.

We rounded the corner, racing past the frozen world around us. Students mid-step, conversations trapped like ghosts in the air. It was terrifying and surreal, like running through a paused movie.

But we weren’t fast enough.

The larger man was already ahead of us somehow—not teleporting, just fast, his long strides eating up distance like it was nothing. He blocked the hallway like a human bulldozer.

Shelly skidded to a stop, cursing under her breath. "Great. This just keeps getting better."

I tried to think—an escape plan, anything—but logic wasn’t exactly helping when time itself seemed broken.

The man didn’t say a word this time.

He just swung.

And then he punched me so hard, I nearly discovered time travel myself.

**Chapter 2 – (Shelly’s POV)**

My brother is an idiot.

I say this with full conviction because who in their right mind tries to pick a fight with two literal time-traveling assassins?

Answer: Jordan Spyro.

One second, he was clutching the shoebox like it contained the meaning of life. The next, he was airborne—launched across the hallway like an overenthusiastic bowling ball, limbs flailing in the most undignified way possible. He crashed into a row of lockers with a metallic clang that echoed down the hall.

I didn’t even get a chance to scream.

The guy who hit him snatched the shoebox off the ground, inspecting it with a satisfied grin. "See? That was easier than you thought, kid."

The other guy—the one who hadn’t treated my brother like a human projectile—pulled out a small silver device from his belt. It looked like a remote control crossed with alien tech, pulsing faintly with red light. He pressed a button, and with a sound like reality itself tearing apart, a swirling, galaxy-like portal ripped open behind them.

It wasn’t just light and color. It was like staring into infinity—stars, dark matter, shifting like liquid space. My brain felt like it was trying to comprehend something it wasn’t designed to see.

“No! Wait—”

Too late. They stepped backward into the portal, vanishing as it collapsed behind them like it had never been there.

And just like that—everything snapped back to normal.

The hall roared back to life. The sounds of lockers slamming, kids laughing, sneakers squeaking against the floor—all returned like someone had pressed play after hitting pause on reality. The antique clock ticked forward, 7:10 AM, as if the universe was pretending none of it had happened.

But it had.

Because my idiot brother was still lying on the ground, groaning like a kid who just realized he failed a pop quiz he didn’t study for.

I sprinted over, adrenaline still buzzing through me, and yanked him up by the arm. “You absolute moron! You got punched into next week over a box!”

Jordan winced, his face already blooming with the early stages of a black eye, but somehow—somehow—he still had the audacity to glare at me like I was the problem. “It wasn’t just a box! It was a world-changing artifact entrusted to me by destiny—”

I dropped him.

Like, literally let go.

Thud.

He hit the floor with an undignified oof, glaring up at me from the cold tile.

“You deserved that,” I said, crossing my arms.

Jordan groaned, rolling onto his side like a defeated turtle. “This is why I have trust issues.”

I fought the urge to kick him—lightly, of course—but settled for an exaggerated sigh, rubbing my temples. The adrenaline was fading, replaced by the cold realization of what had just happened. We’d been attacked. By people who weren’t from around here. And they’d taken… whatever that necklace was.

I glanced around. The hall looked normal again. No sign of the portal, no mysterious goons lurking, no magical aura. Just students obliviously shuffling to their next class, completely unaware that reality had been briefly hijacked.

My brain felt like it was glitching.

“Okay,” I muttered, dragging Jordan up again, this time with less aggression. “We need a plan. And a really, really good excuse for why you look like you got hit by a bus.”

Jordan staggered to his feet, wincing as he rubbed his jaw. There was already a faint bruise forming, his cheek slightly swollen. He looked like he’d lost a bar fight, except the bar was our high school, and his opponent was a time-traveling linebacker.

His eyes, though—sharp, focused, burning with determination—were the only part of him not battered. “We’re getting that necklace back.”

I groaned. “Oh, great. Here we go.”

He didn’t even acknowledge my sarcasm. Instead, he started pacing like some mad scientist plotting world domination—muttering calculations under his breath, theorizing probabilities, probably reciting historical references I’d never heard of.

“This isn’t just about the necklace,” he finally said, stopping to look at me with that intense ‘I’ve connected the dots’ expression he always got when solving a math problem. “They didn’t just find it. They were looking for it. Which means—”

“They’ll come back?”

Jordan shook his head. “No. It means they’re not done yet.”

I blinked. “Cool. Love that for us.”

I glanced down the hall, suddenly hyper-aware of every shadow, every corner. The world felt different now, like the edges of reality had been peeled back just enough to show the cracks beneath.

Jordan straightened his hoodie, wincing again. “First, we need to find out what that necklace actually is. Who made it. Why it’s important.”

I gave him a deadpan stare. “So, what? We’re gonna Google ‘ancient magical time-travel necklace stolen by interdimensional weirdos’?”

Jordan didn’t even flinch. “Already ahead of you.”

And just like that, he limped off toward the library like nothing had happened, as if getting punched into a locker by time-traveling goons was just another Tuesday.

I sighed, following after him.

My brother was an idiot.

But, unfortunately… he was my idiot.

**Chapter 3 – (Jordan’s POV)**

I’d like to take a moment to point out that getting launched across the hallway by a time-traveling super-soldier is not how I imagined starting my morning.

And yet, here we are.

By the time Shelly finished lecturing me about my “reckless stupidity” (which, for the record, was actually heroic bravery), we were already halfway home, walking in silence. Which is weird because normally, this is prime sibling-bickering time. Our walk home is like an unwritten battleground where every passing tree is another witness to our endless verbal warfare.

But not today.

Today felt… different.

The world seemed quieter somehow, like the universe itself was holding its breath. Even the usual sounds of our neighborhood—the distant hum of lawnmowers, cars rumbling by, kids laughing—felt muted, like background noise on low volume.

I should’ve known something was off when Shelly wasn’t actively insulting me.

“Alright, spill it,” I finally said, breaking the silence.

She kept walking, hands stuffed deep in her hoodie pockets, looking annoyingly unbothered. Her individual braids swung with each step like it had more energy than she did. Classic Shelly.

"Spill what?" she replied, not even glancing at me.

I narrowed my eyes. "You're thinking about something. You never think about things. It’s unnatural."

She gave me a side-eye so sharp it could’ve cut glass. "Excuse you. I think about plenty of things. Like pizza. And how annoying you are. And whether or not I should start calling you 'The Human Ping-Pong Ball' since you got smacked across the hallway like one."

I sighed, ignoring the jab. "Can you take this seriously?"

"I could… but that would go against everything I stand for," she replied smoothly, her smirk practically tattooed on her face.

I stopped walking.

She took a few more steps before realizing I wasn’t beside her anymore. She turned around with an exaggerated sigh, like I was the inconvenience in this scenario.

"Shelly."

She rolled her eyes. "What? Did you sprain your brain along with your face?"

I ignored the insult. "Something’s wrong. You’re too calm. No jokes about ancient Egyptian curses. No conspiracy theories about government lizard people. Spill."

She stared at me for a second, her playful expression fading ever so slightly. Just enough to notice if you knew her like I did.

Then she sighed, stuffing her hands even deeper into her hoodie pockets like she was trying to disappear into them.

"Okay, fine. You want my big, world-changing opinion?" She turned to face me fully, arms crossed like she was bracing for impact. "I think this whole magic destiny thing is a load of crap. There. I said it."

I blinked. "That’s… it?"

"Yup."

I threw my hands up. "How are you not freaking out right now?! We were attacked—by literal time-traveling assassins! And one of them punched me so hard I swear I saw next Tuesday!"

She shrugged. "Because freaking out doesn’t change the fact that two bald dudes from the future sucker-punched you into next week and stole the only lead we had."

Her logic was infuriating. Not because it was wrong, but because it made an annoying amount of sense.

"Which is exactly why we need to do something about it!" I argued, my voice louder than I intended. A pigeon nearby flapped away like it didn’t want to be part of this conversation.

"And what, oh mighty genius, do you suggest we do? Track them down using your superior intellect and the power of stubbornness?"

"Actually—"

She facepalmed. Like, full-hand-to-the-forehead kind of facepalm.

"Jordan. No. No. Do not say what I think you're about to say."

I crossed my arms. "What am I about to say?"

"That you have some ridiculous plan to chase down two clearly overpowered time-travelers with nothing but your big brain and an unhealthy amount of optimism."

I opened my mouth.

She groaned. "Oh my God, you do have a plan. I hate that I know you this well."

"Look, Shelly," I said, switching to my best ‘trust me, I’m a genius’ voice, "we don’t have to fight them directly. We just have to figure out how to track them. If they can manipulate time, there has to be a way to detect their presence."

She stared at me. Then blinked.

"You have no idea what you’re talking about, do you?"

"Not yet," I admitted, "but that’s why we need to start researching."

"Researching what? 'How to Defeat Time-Traveling Bald Guys for Dummies?'"

I ignored her sarcasm.

"The point is, we need answers," I said. "And if no one else is going to give them to us, we’ll find them ourselves."

She exhaled sharply, tilting her head toward the sky like she was praying for patience from the universe. "Fine," she muttered, defeated. "But if we die, I am 100% blaming you in the afterlife."

"Deal."

We started walking again, the tension slightly eased now that we’d returned to our regularly scheduled sibling nonsense.

Just as we turned the corner to our street, it happened.

A man appeared out of nowhere.

Literally.

One second, the sidewalk was empty. The next? There was a frail-looking old guy in a white robe standing directly in our path.

Shelly yelped, nearly tripping over her own feet. "DUDE, WHAT—"

I instinctively pulled her back, my heart slamming against my ribs like it was trying to escape. The man stood there, unmoving, his piercing dark eyes locked on us like we were the answers to a question he’d been asking for centuries.

His skin was dark and weathered by time, and his long, unkempt black and grey hair spilled over his shoulders in tangled waves. But it was his presence—off, like the air around him didn’t quite know how to exist—that made my brain scream wrong, wrong, wrong.

He studied us in silence, his gaze sharp enough to cut through steel.

"You two," he finally rasped, his voice like gravel grinding underfoot, "are not ready for what’s coming."

There was a long silence.

Shelly broke it with her signature brand of grace.

"Awesome. Another cryptic old man. This day just keeps getting better."

**Chapter 4 – (Shelly’s POV)**

Let me be clear—I did not sign up for this.

My morning plan involved eating two slices of leftover pizza, ignoring Jordan’s nerd talk, and maybe surviving another school day.

What I did not plan for?

Getting ambushed by time-traveling assassins.

Watching my brother get launched into another dimension (okay, slight exaggeration).

A mystical old man appearing out of thin air and telling us we're “not ready for what’s coming.”

So, yeah. My day was already ten levels of ridiculous, and now I had to deal with him.

The old guy stood in front of us, arms crossed, wearing a long white robe that screamed "I'm important and mysterious." His face looked like it belonged on an ancient statue—deep lines, piercing gaze, serious ‘I-know-everything’ energy.

Jordan, of course, was eating it up.

"You know who we are," he said, his voice a mix of curiosity and suspicion. "And you clearly knew we’d be here. Who are you?"

The old man stared at us for a long moment before sighing heavily, as if this was some huge inconvenience for him.

"I am Professor Timely," he said flatly. "And unfortunately for me, I seem to be your only hope of survival."

My BS meter instantly went off.

"Right, because clearly, we should just trust a guy who looks like he fell out of a history book," I muttered.

Thinking though, that name sounds familiar, ‘Timely’. I just couldn't remember where at the moment because of all this nonsense my brother dragged me into. Go figure.

Timely turned to me, his sharp gaze making me regret speaking. "You are Shelly, correct?"

I frowned. "Uh... yeah?"

He nodded, as if confirming some secret theory in his head. "That explains the recklessness."

Jordan smirked at me. "See? Even time-traveling professors think you’re a mess."

I elbowed him hard in the ribs.

Jordan wheezed.

Timely ignored us both. "You two are in grave danger. If the Midnight King has set his sights on you, then it is only a matter of time before he finds you again."

Jordan stiffened at the name. "The Midnight King... he was the one the recording warned us about."

Timely nodded. "Yes. And if the necklace is now in his possession, you have less than a year before his power becomes unstoppable."

I stared at him.

"Wait, hold up," I said. "Less than a year before what? The world explodes? Time collapses? Jordan gets even nerdier?"

Timely just frowned at me. "It means that by the next celestial alignment, he will have enough power to rewrite history itself. Nothing you know will exist. Not your family, not this world... not you."

A chill ran down my spine.

Okay. That was way worse than I expected.

Jordan, of course, had already switched to problem-solving mode.

"Then we need to stop him," he said. "But how do we fight someone who can control time and magic?"

Timely studied him for a moment, then let out a humorless chuckle.

"You're bold," he said. "Naive, but bold."

Jordan squared his shoulders. "Look, we didn’t choose this. But we’re not going to sit around and wait to sit around and wait to be erased from existence, either. So if you know something, tell us."

Timely’s face remained unreadable. He was like one of those stone statues that stare at you no matter where you move.

I wasn’t buying it.

“Hold up,” I snapped. “How do we even know you’re not with those guys? For all we know, you’re just another time-traveling weirdo trying to get your hands on that necklace. How do we know you’re not the bad guy here?”

Timely’s gaze finally shifted to me, sharp and unblinking. Then he spoke with that dry, unimpressed tone that somehow made me feel like I was the annoying one.

"If I were here to harm you," he said slowly, "you’d already be dead."

…Well, damn.

Jordan blinked. "Comforting."

Timely continued, completely unfazed. "Unlike the men who attacked you, I don’t need to throw punches to end someone’s life. But, as you can see, you’re both still standing. Despite your… impressive lack of caution."

I opened my mouth to argue but then realized—fair point.

Jordan cleared his throat. "Okay, assuming you’re not here to kill us, what now?"

Timely let out another one of those tired, world-weary sighs like babysitting us was the worst part of his job.

"Follow me."

I blinked. "Wait—what?"

But before I could protest, the air around us shimmered—like the fabric of reality itself was being pulled apart.

Colors twisted. Light bent. The sidewalk beneath our feet dissolved into blinding white.

And just like that, the entire street disappeared.

**Chapter 5 – (Shelly’s POV)**

I had exactly two seconds to process what was happening before my entire reality shifted.

One moment, we were standing on the street, and the next—

We weren’t.

The world around me melted into pure light, stretching and swirling like someone had just thrown reality into a blender. There was no ground, no sky—just endless, glowing energy that felt like it was alive.

I hated it immediately.

"Jordan," I hissed, trying to grab onto him, but my hand passed through his arm like mist.

"Uh," he replied intelligently, watching his own fingers phase in and out of existence. "I think we're dying?"

Before I could properly panic, everything snapped back into place.

The light disappeared. The ground reappeared under my feet—solid, warm, and smooth like polished stone—and suddenly, I was standing somewhere completely different.

And holy crap.

I turned in a slow circle, my brain breaking as I tried to comprehend where the hell we were.

Golden pyramids floated in the sky above us, their surfaces glowing with ancient hieroglyphics that moved and shifted like living text. Pathways of pure energy connected them, forming intricate bridges that seemed to pulse with magic.

Below us, an endless expanse of land stretched in every direction, but it wasn’t just land—massive floating islands hovered above a shimmering, star-filled abyss, like we were standing in the middle of a cosmic ocean. Waterfalls of liquid light cascaded from floating structures, vanishing into the abyss below without a single drop ever hitting the ground.

Even the air felt different—thicker, heavier, but not in a bad way. It was like every breath I took was charged with raw energy, making my skin tingle.

"Okay," Jordan finally said, adjusting his glasses like that would somehow help him process this. "That was... unexpected."

I just stared at him. "Unexpected? You call waking up in an ancient Egyptian fever dream unexpected? Jordan, we are standing in literal magic."

Jordan was already in full nerd-mode, eyes darting everywhere, taking in every detail. "This must be Dimension X," he muttered, mostly to himself. "The place Timely transported us to... a dimension of pure magic. I have read about this before in what I thought to be crackpot theories… but it's real…"

"No kidding," I said dryly, nudging a floating ball of glowing energy with my finger. It bobbed away like a soap bubble before disappearing into thin air. "Gee, what gave it away?"

Before he could answer, Professor Timely materialized behind us—which, by the way, was very rude because I almost screamed.

"Welcome to Kemet Academy. Try to keep up," he said, walking past us like we weren’t having an existential crisis.

Jordan and I exchanged a look before hurrying after him.

"So," I said as we walked across a golden bridge made of solid light, "where exactly are we? Is this Dimension X? "

"You are in Dimension X," Timely replied, not even looking back. "A realm that exists outside of time and space—created by the ancient gods as a sanctuary for the most powerful magic users."

Jordan practically vibrated with excitement at the explanation. "So, wait—you’re saying this place was built by the Egyptian gods?"

"Among others," Timely said vaguely.

"Others?" I echoed. "What, like Zeus? Odin? Santa Claus?"

Timely sighed, clearly already tired of me.

"The gods of old were not what you think. Many of them were—" He paused, then chose his next words carefully. "—not human."

Jordan and I froze mid-step.

Jordan blinked. "Wait. Are you saying that—"

"—the Egyptian gods were aliens?!" I finished, grinning at the absurdity, and knowing Jordan would love this nerd revelation.

Timely didn’t deny it. He simply kept walking.

"Oh my God." Jordan actually looked offended. "You're saying the ancient alien conspiracy theorists were right this whole time?!"

Timely shrugged. "It is not a conspiracy if it is true."

Jordan made a strangled geek-noise of frustration. "Do you realize how much this changes everything?!"

I elbowed him. "Relax, nerd, you're gonna combust."

Timely led us toward one of the floating pyramid structures, where a massive arched entrance opened before us on its own.

Inside, the walls were lined with glowing runes, and strange holographic symbols floated in midair, rearranging themselves as we passed.

And then I saw them.

The students.

The moment we stepped inside, I noticed something immediately off about the student body.

Sure, there were humans. Some of them looked relatively normal, wearing robes or uniforms, their hands glowing with controlled magic.

But then there were... the others.

Tall figures with elongated heads and glowing eyes hovered effortlessly above the ground, their robes shimmering like starlight. Others had multi-jointed limbs, their fingers moving with impossible precision as they manipulated glowing screens of light.

One student—who looked like an actual grey alien straight out of a sci-fi movie—was casually levitating multiple books in midair while conducting a full-on quantum physics equation in front of him.

Jordan noticed.

And immediately had an existential crisis.

"Oh no," he whispered, visibly horrified.

I smirked. "What? Something wrong?"

Jordan swallowed hard. "Shelly. I just realized something." He turned to look at me, dead serious.

"I’m not the smartest person here."

I lost it.

"Wow, really?" I gasped dramatically. "You mean there are actual geniuses beyond your earth-based book smarts?! Say it ain’t so!"

Jordan ignored me, still in full mental breakdown mode. "No. No, you don’t understand. This is a crisis. I have been out-nerded. I have spent my entire life being the smartest person in every room and now—now I am a fool among titans."

One of the alien students turned with their six eyes, giving Jordan an amused glance. "Yes," the alien said, voice smooth and melodic. "You are."

Jordan looked like he was going to combust on the spot.

I wheezed. "Oh my god, this is my favorite place ever."

Timely sighed. "Enough gawking. You both have a lot to learn."

Jordan was still processing his intellectual downfall, but I grabbed his arm, dragging him forward.

"Come on, genius. We’ve got magic school to attend.”

**Chapter 6 – (Jordan’s POV)**

I was still recovering from my intellectual beatdown by a bunch of floating alien nerds when Professor Timely led us into a grand chamber deep within one of the golden pyramids.

The walls were lined with glowing hieroglyphics, shifting like living text, and massive floating runes hovered above a circular stone platform at the room’s center. The air crackled with energy, like the whole place was alive with ancient magic.

Shelly nudged me. “Okay, I’ll admit it. This place is kinda sick.”

“I know,” I muttered, adjusting my glasses. “It’s… unreal.”

Timely turned to us. “Before you begin training, you must first understand who you are.”

I frowned. “We already know we can use magic.”

Timely narrowed his eyes. “Being able to channel magic and knowing what kind of wizard you are are two very different things.”

Shelly crossed her arms. “So what, there’s like a sorting hat or something?”

Timely stared at her blankly. “A what?”

I groaned. “Ignore her. Please, continue.”

Timely raised a hand, and suddenly, the floating runes pulsed, sending a ripple of golden energy through the room.

“Magic manifests differently in every individual,” he explained. “Some are born into a classification; others are shaped by experience. Your classification determines your abilities, limitations, and potential.”

With a wave of his hand, four massive symbols appeared above the platform, each glowing with its own mystical aura.

Timely stepped forward, his voice lowering into something ancient and rhythmic.

“These classifications have been known since time untold, Whose magic you wield, whose fate you hold. Listen well, for the path ahead, Shall shape your soul before it’s shed.”

His hand lifted toward the first glowing symbol, depicting a small, winged figure with outstretched hands.

“Wings of light and laughter bright, Small in form, but fierce in fight. Bound to the air, their spells take flight, Dancing flames and storm’s delight.”

Shelly tilted her head. “Okay, but like… how small are we talking?”

Timely arched an eyebrow. “If you were a Faerie Wizard, you would be approximately one foot tall.”

Shelly blinked. “A foot?! Like an actual fairy?!”

Timely nodded.

I snorted. “Shelly as a tiny flying gremlin? That would be hilarious.”

She elbowed me in the ribs. “Laugh again, and I will end you.”

Timely ignored our sibling violence and gestured to the next symbol, a golden gauntlet resting on an outstretched hand.

“Through ancient craft and relic’s might, Power sleeps in steel and light. Bound to tool, their magic grows, But should it break, their power slows.”

I felt my heartbeat quicken at this one.

"Artifact Wizards are the most common type," Timely explained. "They are powerful, but their strength depends entirely on their artifact. Without it, they are significantly weaker."

I swallowed. "That… that’s me, isn’t it?"

Timely gave me a knowing look but didn’t answer yet.

Instead, he turned toward the third symbol—a full moon with claw marks slashed across it.

“When night calls and shadows roam, A beast awakens, flesh and bone. No spells, no runes, no magic bright, Yet fear their claws in darkest night.”

I glanced at Shelly. “Wait… does that mean there are people who can’t use magic at all?”

Timely nodded. “Not all magical beings wield spells. Some, like the Werewolves, are creatures of instinct and transformation.”

Shelly squinted. “So you’re telling me there are full-on werewolves running around?”

Timely smirked slightly. “You will meet one soon. When your training begins.”

I shivered. I had a feeling that wasn’t going to be a friendly introduction.

Finally, Timely pointed to the last and final symbol—a faint, glowing blue flame.

“Beyond the veil, their souls ignite, A fleeting spark, both dark and bright. From death returned, their fates entwine, But time runs thin—a thinning line.”

A chill ran down my spine.

"Spirit Wizards," Timely said gravely, "are the rarest of all. Their power is immense, but their existence is fleeting. The more they use their spirit form, the closer they get to corruption."

Shelly frowned. “Corruption?”

Timely nodded. "They start as a pure spirit—blue in color. But as they push their abilities, letting in dark matter energy, they slowly turn red… then gray. If they reach the final stage—they implode. Completely erased from existence."

Silence filled the room.

"Well," Shelly finally said. "That’s horrifying."

Timely simply nodded.

Then, he raised his hand—

And golden light engulfed us both.

The air crackled with magic as golden light surrounded both me and Shelly. The symbols of the four classifications hovered above us, shifting and pulsing as if searching for something.

Then—

A blinding silver light engulfed my body.

And a soft blue glow surrounded Shelly.

Timely nodded. "It is confirmed."

He turned to me first. "Jordan, you are an Artifact Wizard."

I felt my breath hitch. I knew it.

Then, he turned to Shelly.

"And you, Shelly," he said slowly, watching her carefully, "are… something else entirely."

The blue glow flickered, as if unstable.

Shelly frowned. "Wait, what does that mean?"

Timely hesitated. Then shook his head. "For now, we focus on Jordan."

I barely heard them. I was still reeling from my own confirmation.

I was an Artifact Wizard.

And that meant—

Timely gestured toward the far end of the chamber.

"Jordan," he said, "it is time for you to choose your artifact."

A surge of energy flooded the chamber, and suddenly, multiple artifacts appeared around me, each glowing with power.

Swords. Staffs. Rings. A floating orb pulsing with energy.

And then—

One of them spoke to me.

Not with words, but with a presence, a pull—something deep in my soul calling out to it.

I turned toward a silver wristband, simple yet engraved with markings I couldn’t read. As I stepped closer, it began to glow brighter.

"That one," Timely murmured. "It has chosen you."

I hesitated, then reached out—

The moment my fingers brushed the cool silver, a jolt of power shot up my arm. My vision flashed white, and suddenly—

I wasn’t in the chamber anymore.

I saw memories that weren’t mine.

A warrior standing in a battlefield, raising his wristband against an unseen enemy. A voice—deep, commanding, filled with wisdom—whispered in my mind:

"You are not ready."

And then—silence.

I gasped, stumbling back, the artifact now firmly wrapped around my wrist.

Timely nodded. "It is done."

After the ceremony, Timely led us down a dimly lit corridor toward a large dormitory area carved from polished stone. Each doorway was lined with glowing symbols, casting an otherworldly glow over the hall.

“These will be your quarters,” Timely announced. "Rest. Training begins tomorrow."

Shelly raised an eyebrow. "We actually get beds? I was half-expecting a stone floor."

Timely shot her an unimpressed look. "Contrary to whatever you believe, this is a school, not a medieval prison."

Then, he handed us school-issued robes.

I, wide-eyed, stared at them in awe. "These are cool, I'll mix them in with my regular clothes.”

Shelly took one look at hers. "Yeah, I’m not wearing this."

Timely arched an eyebrow. "You are free to find alternative clothing… as soon as you locate a Footlocker or JCPenney on campus."

Shelly scowled. "So nowhere, then?"

"Precisely."

“Yeah, I'm still not wearing this.”

I snorted. For once, Timely and I were on the same page.

**Chapter 7 – (Jordan’s POV)**

The first thing I noticed about Xenon was that she looked like she could kill me in my sleep and not feel bad about it.

The second thing I noticed was that I might be into that.

She stood at the edge of the training hall, arms crossed, leaning casually against the stone wall like she owned the place—and honestly, with the way she carried herself, she might have. Her black hair was cut short, military-style, with streaks of pink highlights woven through like she didn’t care if it clashed with anything. It didn’t. It worked. Too well. The kind of “I woke up like this” perfection that was rude to the rest of us average people.

Her skin was a warm, light brown, a contrast to the cool, piercing gold of her eyes. They weren’t normal human eyes, though—not just gold, but sharp, almost predatory, like the eyes of some wild animal. They locked onto me like she was sizing me up, evaluating my worth, and spoiler alert—I was already failing.

Her arms were toned, muscle defined and effortless, with faint traces of dark hair that shimmered slightly under the training hall lights. She wore a black sleeveless top, the fabric clinging to her athletic frame, and combat pants tucked into worn boots that had clearly seen more action than I ever had. When she shifted her jaw slightly, I caught a glimpse of her teeth—razor-sharp, the kind that weren’t just for show.

I swallowed. Hard.

Shelly, standing beside me, noticed immediately. Because of course she did.

“Don’t embarrass yourself,” she whispered out of the side of her mouth.

“Too late,” I whispered back, my voice cracking slightly.

Flawless execution, Jordan.

Professor Timely cleared his throat, snapping me out of whatever weird internal crisis I was spiraling into. He stood at the center of the hall, looking as done with us as ever.

“This is Xenon,” he announced. “She’s one of our more… experienced students and will be helping me make sure neither of you die horribly in training.”

Great. Inspirational.

I frowned. “That feels like a low bar for success.”

Xenon smirked, a lazy, toothy grin that showed just enough of those sharp canines to make my spine tingle.

“You’d be surprised how many don’t clear it.”

She said that way too casually for my comfort.

Timely either didn’t notice or didn’t care about the growing sense of doom settling over me. He glanced at both of us, arms crossed with that usual “I have no time for your nonsense” expression firmly in place.

“Since this is your first formal training session, it’ll just be the two of you… and Xenon. Consider this a crash course before regular classes start soon.”

I blinked. “Wait, regular classes?”

“Yes,” Timely replied dryly, like I was slow for not realizing this. “This is a magic academy, not a daycare. You’ll both be placed in classes with other students soon enough, but for now, you need to survive basic training.”

I glanced at Shelly. She didn’t look nearly as horrified by the idea of school as I was.

Timely continued, “We’ll start simple. Artifact control for Jordan. Basic spellcasting for Shelly. Xenon will be your sparring partner.”

I blinked again. “You think he realizes that’s not simple at all?”

“Doubt it,” Shelly replied, popping a piece of gum into her mouth like this was just another Tuesday.

Timely must’ve heard us because he shot us both a look that said, “Keep talking, and I’ll let Xenon train with live weapons.”

“The sooner you learn, the less likely you’ll end up as corpses,” he added dryly.

Shelly clapped her hands together like we were at summer camp. “Okay! Morbid threats aside, let’s get this over with.”

I took a deep breath. Time to not suck at this.

Thirty Minutes Later

I was absolutely sucking at this.

The training hall was designed for failure. Thick stone walls reinforced with magic (probably to keep idiots like me from blowing a hole in them), high ceilings, and scorch marks everywhere that suggested we weren’t the first students to nearly die here.

I stood in the center of the room, drenched in sweat, holding my artifact—a silver wristband etched with faint glowing runes. Timely claimed it contained immense latent power. All I had to do was unlock it.

No big deal, right?

Wrong.

Apparently, unlocking it meant not letting it control me, which was proving difficult because every time I tried to focus, something exploded. First a practice dummy. Then another. Then… a wall.

The smell of burnt stone filled the air.

Timely pinched the bridge of his nose like he was debating the pros and cons of just giving up on me entirely.

“Alright, stop,” he groaned. “Jordan, what part of ‘focus your intent’ are you struggling with?”

I wiped the sweat from my forehead, breathing hard. “The part where my intent is to not die, but the artifact clearly has other ideas.”

From across the room, Xenon chuckled. A low, amused sound like she genuinely found me entertaining—which was worse than her thinking I was pathetic. Somehow.

“You panic way too easily,” she said, her voice smooth but with an edge like a blade hidden in velvet.

“I do not panic,” I shot back.

“You literally flinched when I walked up earlier.”

I paused. “…That was out of respect.”

Shelly, sitting on the sidelines and pretending to be supportive, muttered under her breath, “Yeah, respectfully scared.”

Xenon pushed off the wall and sauntered closer, her movements fluid, controlled—like a predator casually stalking its prey just for fun. She stopped a few feet away, tilting her head slightly, eyes glinting with amusement.

“You’ve got some power, I’ll give you that,” she said, sizing me up again. “But you have no control. Which means in a real fight… you’re dead.”

The way she said it wasn’t a threat.

It was a fact.

Timely clapped his hands together, cutting through the tension. “Enough standing around. Sparring time.”

I blinked. “Wait, what?”

Timely gestured between me and Xenon like this was the most obvious next step in the world. “You. Her. First duel. If you can last more than thirty seconds, I’ll consider this session a success.”

I turned to Shelly for backup.

She grinned at me. That traitor.

Xenon cracked her knuckles, stepping into the center of the hall with all the casual menace of someone who’d done this a thousand times before.

Confident. Too confident.

I suddenly regretted every life decision I’d ever made.

**Chapter 8 – (Shelly’s POV)**

“Wow,” I muttered, arms crossed, as Jordan sailed through the air and collided with the stone wall like a malfunctioning ragdoll in a video game. His body hit with a satisfying thud, sliding down in an awkward heap.

“He didn’t even last fifteen seconds.”

Xenon dusted her hands off with all the enthusiasm of someone who’d just finished folding laundry. She didn’t even look remotely winded. In fact, she looked bored. Like Jordan’s efforts were an unfortunate inconvenience she had to tolerate.

“Yeah,” she said, stretching her arms overhead lazily. “I went easy on him too.”

From the floor, Jordan groaned. “Define ‘easy’…”

Timely sighed so dramatically you’d think he was the one getting his organs rearranged. “Pathetic. Absolutely pathetic.”

Jordan peeled himself off the floor with the grace of a wet noodle, clutching his ribs. “Glad we’re all boosting my confidence here.”

“Confidence won’t help you when you’re dead,” Timely replied dryly, his arms crossed like he’d already mentally planned Jordan’s funeral.

Jordan staggered to his feet, face flushed with a bit more color than it already had—not from exertion, but pure stubborn pride. “Okay, fine. I get it. I need to learn how to use my artifact properly.”

Timely arched an eyebrow. “That’s the first intelligent thing you’ve said today.”

I snorted. “It’s rare, but he gets there eventually.”

Jordan shot me a glare that screamed “I hope your cereal gets soggy.”

Timely ignored our sibling banter entirely. “Your artifact isn’t just a tool—it’s a part of you. You can’t just command it to work. You have to understand it.”

Jordan frowned, rubbing his wrist where the artifact gleamed faintly under the hall’s magical lights. “So, what? You want me to take it on a dinner date? Maybe get to know its hopes and dreams?”

Timely’s eye twitched like he was seriously considering spontaneous retirement. “Gods help me.”

But to his credit, Jordan wasn’t ready to give up. He rolled his shoulders, shaking off the ache, and turned back to face Xenon, determination written all over his face.

“I want to go again.”

Xenon raised an eyebrow, clearly amused. “You sure about that, champ? I’d hate to rearrange your face twice in one day.”

Jordan didn’t flinch. “Yeah. I’ll figure it out.”

She sighed dramatically, as if she were the one being inconvenienced. “Alright. Your funeral.”

The hall grew quieter as they squared off again. Timely stepped back, arms crossed like a judge at a talent show, while I perched on a nearby bench, pretending not to be entirely entertained by this.

Jordan activated his artifact, the sleek silver band on his wrist pulsing with faint light. His expression tightened with focus, brows furrowed like he was doing complex calculus in his head.

Xenon didn’t even bother shifting her stance. She just stood there, loose and relaxed, like a predator waiting for its prey to trip over its own feet.

Jordan made the first move, lunging forward with surprising speed. A burst of energy shot from his wrist, crackling like condensed lightning.

Xenon casually sidestepped it.

Not dodged. Sidestepped. Like she was avoiding a puddle on the sidewalk.

Jordan stumbled forward, momentum carrying him too far. Xenon reached out, grabbed his arm mid-swing, twisted—and slammed him into the floor with a dull thud.

He groaned.

Again.

Timely sighed so loudly it echoed.

“Jordan,” Timely said, his voice dangerously calm, “what did we just talk about?”

Jordan rolled onto his back, gasping for air. “Teamwork?”

“You’re not on a team.”

“Optimism?”

“No.”

“Ah… yes. Understanding my artifact.” He wheezed. “Right. Got it.”

Xenon walked over, offering him a hand. Jordan hesitated but took it, letting her haul him to his feet like he weighed nothing.

She didn’t let go immediately. Instead, she leaned in slightly, her sharp gold eyes locking onto his.

“You’ve got power,” she said quietly, almost like she was talking to herself. “But you think too much. Magic’s not just logic—it’s instinct. Feel it. Don’t analyze it.”

Then she released his hand, stepping back without another word.

Jordan stood there for a second, looking slightly dazed—whether from the impact or her words, I wasn’t sure.

Probably both.

While Jordan was busy being Xenon’s personal crash test dummy, I had my own problems.

Namely: trying to make anything magical happen.

I flicked my wrist, attempting a basic fire spell Timely claimed was “as simple as breathing.” Spoiler alert: it was not.

Instead of a blazing, impressive flame, my magic fizzled out with a sad pfft, like a cheap lighter on its last drop of fluid.

Timely groaned, rubbing his temples like he was developing a migraine. “Shelly, I don’t know how it’s possible, but you are the worst spellcaster I’ve ever seen.”

I grinned. “Awesome. I love breaking records.”

Timely stared at me like he was rethinking all his life choices.

“Try again,” he muttered, exasperated.

I sighed dramatically, flicking my wrist again.

Pfft.

Timely’s eye twitched.

Xenon, now leaning against the wall again, snorted. She looked like she was genuinely holding back laughter, which was somehow more insulting than outright mockery.

“You two are gonna die so fast,” she said with a lazy grin.

Jordan and I both turned to glare at her.

“Wow,” Jordan said flatly, brushing dust off his shirt. “So much faith in us.”

Xenon shrugged. “I call it realism.”

Timely pinched the bridge of his nose again, his patience hanging by a thread. “This is going to be a long year.”

**Chapter 9 – (Jordan’s POV)**

The first thing I learned about magic school is that mornings here suck just as much as they did back home.

Shelly and I dragged ourselves out of bed at what I’m pretty sure was an ungodly hour, both groaning like we’d aged seventy years overnight. The golden glow of Dimension X’s eternal magic sky was somehow both beautiful and way too bright for my barely functioning brain.

“You think Timely could’ve at least warned us about the lack of coffee here?” I muttered, rubbing my eyes.

Shelly, who had flopped face-first onto her bed after pulling her robe halfway on, made a sound that could only be described as existential despair.

"Shut up, nerd. I’m dying.”

“Same,” I said, but pulled my robe on anyway. “If we don’t show up on time, I’m pretty sure Timely will actually kill us.”

“That’s fine,” she said into her pillow. “Death sounds like a vacation.”

With great effort—and a shared understanding that this might be the end of us—we eventually made it to the first hall listed on the schedule Timely had provided.

The moment Shelly and I stepped into the Magical History 101, I knew we weren’t in for a normal lesson.

The room was colossal, more like a grand lecture hall than a classroom. The ceiling stretched impossibly high, adorned with swirling golden constellations that rearranged themselves into different patterns every few seconds. Floating orbs of light hovered near the walls, shifting in color depending on who was speaking.

The desks were arranged in a circular formation, each row stacked slightly higher than the one before it, giving every student a perfect view of the massive central platform where the professor stood. In the air above him, holographic images flickered—shifting from ancient battlefields to towering temples, scenes from history unfolding like a living textbook.

And in the center of it all stood Professor Althar.

Althar was tall and wiry, with piercing silver eyes that looked like they could read minds. His robe shifted between deep purple and green, as if woven from constantly shifting magic. Despite his thin frame, he radiated a commanding presence, one that demanded attention.

When he spoke, his voice boomed without needing to shout.

"I am Professor Althar, and if any of you expect this to be a class where you sit back and take notes, you are already failing."

The entire room went silent.

Shelly leaned toward me and muttered, "Well, damn."

Althar raised a hand, and the holographic images above him shifted, forming a massive glowing battlefield. Figures clashed in an all-out war, their movements playing out in slow motion like a reenactment frozen in time.

"This," he said, gesturing toward the image, "is the Battle of Karnak—a pivotal moment in magical history. Can anyone tell me why?"

The room remained quiet.

And then—before I even realized what I was doing—I raised my hand.

Althar’s sharp gaze flicked toward me. "Yes. You. The new student."

Shelly’s head snapped toward me so fast she nearly gave herself whiplash.

"That’s the first recorded use of an artifact to counteract a Spirit Wizard in full form," I said.

Althar arched an eyebrow. "Correct. Explain further."

I swallowed, but the words came instantly, effortlessly.

"The opposing side had no way of countering a Spirit Wizard’s raw power until they developed an artifact capable of disrupting their spiritual flow. The Karnak Amulet—a prototype version of modern artifact-based magic—was used to trap the Spirit Wizard mid-transformation, neutralizing their abilities."

Althar studied me for a moment. Then he nodded. "Very good."

The floating orbs of light around the room pulsed bright blue, a signal that the class had just witnessed a correct answer.

I barely noticed.

Because my brain was going into full meltdown.

I hadn’t studied.

Like, at all.

Sure, I had skimmed the reading materials before bed, but not enough to memorize battle names, strategies, or historical significance. And yet, I had just rattled off an answer like I had been studying this for years.

Shelly, still staring at me like I had just grown a second head, whispered, "Okay, what the hell was that?"

I kept my eyes forward, lowering my voice. "What was what?"

She scoffed. "You answered that way too fast. Like, confidently. Since when do you know the history of ancient magical warfare?"

I hesitated. She had a point. Normally, I wouldn’t have been able to recite information like that unless I had studied for hours.

"I—I don’t know," I admitted. "I mean, I glanced at the readings before I went to sleep last night, but not enough to actually memorize this stuff."

Shelly raised an eyebrow. "Okay, so you skimmed some pages and now you’re an expert?"

I frowned. That did sound weird.

And then I realized something else.

Ever since I had put on my artifact, I had felt… different.

My mind had been clearer, like information was organizing itself faster. Even the way I processed what I was reading last night—things that would have taken me a while to piece together—had just clicked instantly.

I glanced down at my wristband, my fingers brushing over the engraved markings.

"I think it’s the artifact," I murmured.

Shelly blinked. "What?"

I leaned closer. "Think about it—artifacts enhance a wizard’s abilities, right? Maybe they don’t just enhance physical abilities. Maybe they enhance whatever a person is already naturally good at."

She squinted at me. "You’re telling me your special magic boost is being an even bigger nerd?"

I sighed. "It’s not just that. It’s memory, analysis—retaining knowledge faster. I think this thing is… helping me think."

Shelly stared at me for a beat, then shook her head. "Wow. You really hit the wizard lottery."

I wasn’t so sure.

If my artifact was already enhancing my intelligence, then how much further could it go?

More importantly—was there a limit to what it could do?

Before I could think too much about it, Althar clapped his hands, and the glowing battlefield above him shifted again, transitioning into a new lesson.

But I wasn’t fully paying attention anymore.

Because for the first time since arriving at this school, I was beginning to understand something.

This artifact wasn’t just an object.

It was changing me.

By the time we finished Magical History and made our way to the training hall for Magical Combat 101, it was already alive with activity. Other students were already engaged in their own sparring matches, spells crackling through the air like streaks of lightning, while instructors observed from the edges. The energy in the room was intense, almost like an arena before a big fight.

Timely stood in the center, waiting for us with his usual no-nonsense expression.

"Today, we refine your control." His gaze flickered to me. "Jordan, you will focus on artifact synchronization. Shelly, we’ll continue developing your spellcasting."

Shelly stretched her arms. “Ah, yes. The thing I suck at. Can’t wait.”

Timely gave her a flat look before clapping his hands. The training floor beneath us shimmered, shifting as targets began rising from the ground—floating metal orbs, darting unpredictably in the air.

"For artifact users," Timely continued, nodding toward me, "the first step is control. You will hit these moving targets with a controlled burst of energy."

I flexed my fingers, feeling the familiar pulse of my artifact against my wrist. "Alright. Shouldn’t be too hard."

Timely’s eyes gleamed. "We’ll see."

I lifted my arm, focusing on the nearest target. I pictured the energy flowing through my body, channeling into my wristband, and then—

I fired.

The blast shot straight past the target and exploded against the ceiling, sending sparks raining down.

Timely sighed. “Again.”

I tried again. This time, I overcorrected, and the blast barely fizzled out before it even reached the target.

Timely rubbed his temples. "Would you like me to call one of our healers now, or will you be improving before you manage to blow yourself up?"

"I’m working on it!" I snapped, adjusting my stance.

I fired a third time—closer, but still off-target.

Shelly, meanwhile, had successfully summoned a small flame in her palm and was grinning like she’d just won a championship.

"Look, Jordan! I can finally do basic magic. You still suck."

Timely pinched the bridge of his nose. “Shelly, you’re not supposed to be celebrating the bare minimum.”

"Let me have my moment," she said.

Meanwhile, I took a deep breath and focused again. This time, I didn’t rush it.

I felt the energy in my wristband shift, almost like a heartbeat. Instead of forcing it, I let it flow naturally.

I lifted my arm—

And fired.

The energy shot forward—clean, controlled—and struck the target dead center, shattering it into glowing particles.

Timely nodded approvingly. "Better."

Shelly clapped mockingly. “Wow, look at you. Finally managing basic competence.”

"Shut up," I muttered, but I couldn’t help smirking.

For the first time since we’d arrived, it felt like I was actually getting somewhere.

**Chapter 10 – (Shelly’s POV)**

Magic was a scam.

I had come to this conclusion after spending the last forty minutes trying—and failing—to cast even the simplest of spells while the rest of my class made it look effortless.

Across the room, students were summoning flames, manipulating water orbs, and bending wind currents like it was nothing. Meanwhile, I had just barely managed to produce a spark—and even that fizzled out before I could celebrate.

Timely stood at the front of the room, arms crossed, watching us like he was mentally categorizing who would survive a real battle and who would die immediately.

I already knew which category I was in.

"Alright," Timely announced, pacing between the students. "Precision over power. Your goal is to control the element, not just summon it. Anyone can create a spark. A true caster directs it, shapes it, bends it to their will."

I flicked my wrist again, muttering the incantation under my breath.

Nothing.

I bit my lip and tried again, this time focusing harder, channeling whatever energy I had left into my hands.

Still nothing.

“I don't understand…,” I said to myself, "I made a flame before… why does it seem like I'm getting worse?”

And then—

"You look like you’re about to explode."

A voice beside me made me flinch. I turned to see a short girl leaning casually against the training post beside me, arms crossed, watching me with a lazy smirk.

She had dark green hair with streaks of silver, pale skin, and a floating notebook hovering beside her, flipping its pages on its own, and an expression that somehow managed to be both smug and amused.

I already hated her.

"And you are?" I asked flatly.

"Raya," she said smoothly, tilting her head slightly. "And you’re Shelly, the new girl who apparently has the magical abilities of a damp sponge."

I narrowed my eyes. "Wow. We just met, and I already want to punch you. New record."

Raya grinned. "Trust me, that’s normal. I have that effect on people."

"Yeah, I bet." I crossed my arms. "You here to give me more unwanted feedback, or are you just enjoying the show?"

"A little of both." She shrugged. "It’s kind of fascinating, actually. You’re clearly not stupid, so what’s the problem? Bad form? Weak energy control? Or do you just have an invisible force field of failure wrapped around you?"

I scowled. "Oh, you’re hilarious. Really. You should be a comedian instead of a wizard."

"Eh, comedy’s a backup plan," she said. "Magic pays better."

I huffed, trying one more time to summon even a hint of magic.

Nothing.

Raya sighed, shaking her head. "Okay, I can’t watch this anymore. You’re making me sad."

"Oh, I’m sorry, is my struggle inconveniencing you?"

"A little, yeah. It’s painful to witness."

"Then walk away," I shot back.

"Nah. This is entertaining."

I glared at her. "Do you actually have anything helpful to say, or are you just here to be annoying?"

Raya tapped her chin. "Both, actually. But let’s start with helpful."

She stepped closer, watching my stance. "You’re trying way too hard. Spellcasting is about flow, not brute force. Magic isn’t some muscle you flex—it’s a current. You guide it, not yank it out of nowhere."

I frowned. "That sounds like something someone who’s naturally good at this would say."

Raya snorted. "Hey, just because I make it look easy doesn’t mean it is. But I did learn one thing early on—the more frustrated you get, the harder it is to channel magic. You’re overthinking it."

I exhaled sharply. "Yeah, well, maybe you should try being awful at something for once and see how fun it is."

"Can’t relate," Raya said easily. "But I imagine it sucks."

I rolled my eyes. "You know, you’re really bad at pep talks."

"I never said I was giving one," she replied. "I’m just observing your struggle in real-time. It’s like watching a baby deer try to walk for the first time. Tragic, but also kinda funny."

I threw my hands up. "Great! Love this chat. Real motivational."

"Look," Raya said, "I can’t make you good at magic, but I can at least stop you from embarrassing yourself."

I raised an eyebrow. "Oh, yeah? And what’s the catch?"

"No catch," she said, then smirked. "Unless you count having to admit that I’m better than you."

I snorted. "Not happening."

"Then keep failing. Your choice."

I scowled, but I knew she was right. My stubbornness was doing me no favors.

"Fine," I muttered. "What do I do?"

Raya’s smirk widened. "That’s more like it."

She clapped her hands together. "Alright, let’s fix your incompetence."

I scowled. "You are really bad at being supportive."

"It’s a skill," she said. "Now, try again. But this time, don’t force it. Think of magic like… a river. If you try to push against the current, you’ll just get swept away. But if you move with it, it flows naturally."

I frowned. "That’s so annoyingly vague."

"Yeah, well, welcome to spellcasting," Raya said. "Now shut up and focus."

I exhaled slowly, flicking my wrist again.

For a second, I felt it—a flicker of energy, a tingle at my fingertips, like the spell was finally responding.

And then—

A tiny burst of sparks shot from my palm and immediately died out.

I groaned. "I hate this."

"Okay, progress," Raya said, nodding approvingly. "That was slightly less pathetic than before."

"Gee, thanks," I muttered.

Timely’s voice boomed across the hall. "New students, switch partners. Five-minute break."

I glanced at Raya. "Guess I’m off to disappoint someone else."

She snorted. "Don’t worry. You’re my project now."

"Project?" I repeated, narrowing my eyes.

"Oh yeah," she said smugly. "Fixing you is my new hobby."

I groaned. "I don’t like that at all."

Raya smirked. "Too late, you’re stuck with me."

And just like that, I had an unwanted mentor.

I sighed, rubbing my temples as I made my way toward the benches near the training area, where students were gathering to take a break before our next round of spellcasting drills.

That’s when I noticed someone else watching me.

A boy—leaning against the far wall, arms crossed, a small smirk tugging at his lips.

Oh great. What now?

I leaned back against the bench, staring at the ceiling. "So, why are you actually here? You don’t seem like someone who randomly gives pep talks."

Eli was quiet for a moment before casually saying, "Ever hear of The Hollow?"

I frowned. "The what?"

Eli smirked. "Figured you wouldn’t know yet. It’s not exactly advertised in the welcome manual… or to underclassmen."

"Sounds like something sketchy," I said. "What is it? Some kind of underground fight club? Secret rebellion?"

Eli let out a short laugh. "You’re thinking too small. The Hollow is… whatever you need it to be."

"That’s vague and not at all suspicious," I said dryly.

He leaned back, stretching. "Officially? It doesn’t exist. But unofficially? It’s where students go when they want privacy—real privacy."

I narrowed my eyes. "Privacy for what, exactly?"

Eli gave me a knowing look. "Take a wild guess."

I blinked. And then—oh.

Oh.

I sat up straighter. "Wait. You’re saying this is… a hookup thing?"

"Among other things," Eli said, smirking. "But yeah. That’s the main draw. Students who want to ‘let off steam’ without the professors breathing down their necks? They go to The Hollow."

I gave him a look. "This school has an entire hidden sex club?"

He shrugged. "Calling it a ‘sex club’ makes it sound tacky. Think of it as an exclusive underground hangout with… flexible social norms."

I stared at him. "You realize that makes it sound way worse, right?"

Eli chuckled. "Depends on who you ask."

I exhaled, shaking my head. "I don’t get it. Why go through all this effort? If people want to hook up, can’t they just… I don’t know, go to each other’s rooms like normal people?"

Eli scoffed. "You’re assuming things work that easily here. Dormitory restrictions, curfews, nosy professors. Not to mention, some people don’t exactly want the rest of the student body knowing their business."

I folded my arms. "So basically, The Hollow is one giant excuse for people to sneak around and sleep with each other."

Eli grinned. "Bingo."

"Gross."

He laughed. "You’d be surprised. Some of the most uptight students on campus? Yeah, they’ve been there. You’d never know just looking at them."

I made a face. "That’s… mildly horrifying."

"Relax, it’s not all debauchery. Some people go just to escape the school’s rules for a night."

"Uh-huh," I said skeptically. "And you’ve been there, I’m guessing?"

Eli smirked. "I’ve seen it. Let’s leave it at that."

I narrowed my eyes. "You are way too smug about this."

He just shrugged. "What can I say? Some people study magic, some people study… other things."

I groaned. "Okay, we are absolutely done with this conversation now."

Eli chuckled. "Not curious?"

"Not even a little," I said flatly.

He grinned. "You say that now. But give it time—people always get curious eventually."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, well, not me. If I ever mysteriously disappear, assume I’ve been kidnapped, not sneaking off to some underground orgy."

Eli snorted. "Noted."

Before I could say anything else, Timely’s voice boomed across the hall.

"Break is over. Back to training."

I sighed, pushing myself off the bench. "Great. Time to go embarrass myself some more."

Eli gave me a lazy salute. "Well, if you ever change your mind—"

"I won’t," I interrupted.

He laughed. "We’ll see."

I shot him one last disgusted look before walking back toward the training area.

The Hollow, huh?

Whatever. Not my problem.

**Chapter 11 – (Jordan’s POV)**

The human body is remarkably inefficient at recovering from physical stress.

I had spent the past few weeks recording and analyzing my own muscle fatigue levels after training, and so far, my results showed an annoying trend—the more I trained, the more my body complained about it the next morning.

Which explained why Shelly was still face-planted into her pillow, groaning like she had been hit by a truck.

"This is abuse," she mumbled, muffled by fabric.

I flipped through my spellbook, barely looking at her. "You say that every morning."

"Because it's true."

I sighed, setting the book down. "If it were abuse, you’d be dead by now. Since you’re still breathing, I think you’ll live."

Shelly groaned louder, dragging herself further under the blankets.

This had become routine over the last few weeks. Our training had escalated, pushing us harder and demanding more endurance. I had already adjusted to the physical toll somewhat atleast—my artifact enhanced my mental processing speed, which meant I could predict movements, memorize techniques, and execute them with minimal effort.

Shelly, however, had no such advantage.

Which meant I got to witness this lovely meltdown every morning.

"You're going to get stiff if you don’t stretch," I told her, standing up to roll my shoulders. "Professor Timely is only going to push us harder today."

A muffled noise came from beneath her blanket.

I frowned. "What?"

She peeked out just enough to glare at me. "I said, combat class is dumb."

I sighed. "No, it’s not."

"Yes, it is," she insisted. "We’re wizards. We use magic. Why are we learning to punch things?"

I shook my head. "Because not all fights involve magic. What happens if your spells get disrupted? Or if someone blocks your incantation? You need to be able to—"

"Run away?" she tried.

I stared at her. "Shelly."

She groaned. "Fine. Hand-to-hand combat is important. Blah, blah, magic disruption, blah."

I smirked. "Glad we’re on the same page."

She sat up with great effort, rubbing her face. "You know, sometimes I wish you weren’t so good at things. You ruin my ability to complain."

"That’s a you problem."

She squinted at me. "I bet if you could fast-forward time to the part where you're all-powerful, you would."

"Obviously," I said. "But unfortunately, I’m stuck dealing with linear time like everyone else."

Shelly groaned dramatically and stood up, rolling her neck. "Ugh. Fine. Breakfast?"

I grabbed my bag. "I was waiting on you, slowpoke."

She chucked her pillow at me.

I caught it effortlessly. "See? Your reflexes are improving."

Shelly scowled. "I’m going to hex you one day."

"Unlikely," I said. "Now let’s go. I have an advanced lecture to dominate."

She muttered something about my overinflated ego, but I ignored her.

The day was just beginning—and I intended to make the most of it.

As we stepped out of our dorm and into the bright corridors of the academy, the familiar hum of magic pulsed through the air. The floating lanterns overhead flickered in a synchronized pattern, guiding students toward the central halls, where the dining chamber awaited.

The Grand Dining Hall was a massive space, easily large enough to hold several hundred students at once. Towering golden pillars lined the perimeter, each carved with glowing arcane symbols that flickered as students passed by. The ceiling was an enchanted sky, shifting between warm morning hues and the faint shimmer of stars still lingering from the night.

Rows of long, floating tables stretched across the hall, each enchanted to provide a perfect seat-to-food ratio. Students didn’t carry trays—the second you sat down, food materialized in front of you, customized to whatever you craved most.

Shelly and I took our seats at an open table near the middle, and, true to the enchantment’s design, our meals appeared instantly.

A plate of buttered toast, eggs, and seasoned potatoes materialized before me—exactly what I had been thinking of. Shelly, on the other hand, had a stack of pancakes so absurdly high it looked like a structural hazard.

She grinned, already drenching them in syrup. "Magic is amazing."

I smirked, shaking my head. "You literally just said magic was a scam the other day."

"Yeah," she said, stuffing a bite into her mouth. "But free food makes everything better."

Before I could respond, I noticed two familiar faces moving toward us.

II recognized Eli the moment he walked up to us—hard to miss with his smug grin and the kind of energy that screamed I’m about to say something ridiculous. I’d seen him around in Magical Combat 101 sometimes, mostly just standing around like he was allergic to effort. While the rest of us were getting knocked around by spells and trying not to die, he’d be leaning against a wall, casually watching like he was a bored spectator at some mediocre show. Sometimes he’d sit cross-legged on the floor, doodling in a notebook or bothering people with random conversations.

I always figured he was just some upperclassman slacker, the kind who thought he was too cool to participate—or maybe he was just terrible at magic and trying to hide it. Either way, he was definitely that guy.

And now that guy was here, sliding into our conversation like he belonged.

Now that I was seeing him again though…

He didn’t look like an idiot.

He looked calculated. Observant. The type who watches people before making his move.

The girl walking beside him, however, was even more familiar.

I had never met her personally, but I knew who she was.

Raya had a reputation.

She was one of the top-performing students at the academy, well-known for excelling in nearly every practical spellcasting test. I had read about her in student ranking reports, had heard passing mentions of her in lectures, but we had never actually interacted with each other.

Until now.

They stopped at our table.

Eli smirked. "So, Jordan… have you ever heard of The Hollow?"

I set down my fork. "I’ve heard of it."

Eli’s smirk widened. "Then let me guess—she told you it’s a waste of time."

Shelly waved her fork. "Because it is."

Eli leaned toward me. "Look, Jordan. You’re smart. Smarter than most people here. You’re not the type to just blindly follow rules, are you?"

I glanced at him, expression unreadable.

He was testing me.

And the worst part?

He wasn’t wrong.

I had questions this school wasn’t answering. Things I wanted to know. Things I wanted to experience.

And the more he talked, the more I started to wonder—

Maybe The Hollow was exactly what I was looking for.

I leaned back in my chair, keeping my expression neutral. "I’ll think about it."

Eli’s smirk widened. "That’s all I needed to hear."

By the time we got up to leave, my mind was still turning over what I had just learned.

I wasn’t committing to anything. Not yet.

But I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t interested.

If there was one professor who never wasted time, it was Professor Althar.

The second Shelly and I entered the lecture hall, the atmosphere shifted.

Althar stood at the center, his silver eyes sharp and unyielding, his robe shifting between deep green and purple as if woven from liquid magic. Around him, the classroom was silent, students already at their seats, locked in a tense anticipation.

Because when Professor Althar spoke, you listened.

He swept his gaze across the room, then spoke—a single, commanding sentence that sent a ripple through the class.

"Magic does not care for the lazy. If you are waiting to be spoon-fed knowledge, you will starve."

There was a pause, long enough for the weight of his words to settle.

Then, without another moment wasted, he raised a hand, and with a flick of his fingers, a series of floating artifacts appeared before us—rings, pendants, staffs, and weapons of various sizes, all pulsing with faint magical energy.

"Artifacts," Althar continued, pacing between the glowing objects. "The backbone of many great wizards. They are more than tools—they are extensions of the wielder’s will."

He gestured toward a floating dagger, its silver blade glowing with an eerie light. "An artifact is not simply chosen. It is bonded. Connected. And in some cases…" His gaze swept the room. "It remembers."

That last word sent a strange chill down my spine.

Because I knew exactly what he meant.

I glanced down at my wrist, where my own artifact—a silver bracelet engraved with unreadable markings—rested against my skin.

I remembered the visions I had seen when I first touched it. The whispered voice, the flashes of battle, the overwhelming sense that this artifact had belonged to someone before me.

I clenched my fist. Was it possible that my artifact… remembered something?

Before I could dwell on it further, a voice cut through my thoughts.

"That’s an oversimplification."

I looked up just as one of the alien students—a tall, six-eyed humanoid with dark blue skin and a slightly condescending smirk, the same alien I met before—spoke up.

"Artifacts aren’t mystical beings with memories," he continued. "They’re merely vessels for stored magical energy. The ‘bond’ is just a synchronization of aura frequencies."

Althar’s silver gaze flicked toward him. "You assume too much, Kriv’Nak."

The alien—Kriv’Nak, apparently—looked unfazed. "I assume based on logic."

Althar stepped closer, unblinking. "Then tell me, logician, explain the case of Iphos the Blind, who wielded a staff that whispered prophecies to him in his sleep? Or the Flamebrand of Zahara, which ignites only for those it deems worthy?"

Kriv’Nak’s expression tightened. "Coincidence. Unusual magical properties, but nothing beyond that."

Althar gave a small, knowing smirk. "And yet, here sits a student in this very room who has already experienced an artifact speaking to them."

My breath caught.

Althar’s eyes locked onto mine.

The entire class turned to stare.

Shelly blinked at me. "Wait. What?"

I swallowed, feeling heat rise to my face.

I hadn’t told anyone about the visions I had seen. Not even Shelly.

Kriv’Nak’s gaze sharpened. "You’re saying he has an artifact that speaks?"

Althar didn’t answer. He simply turned away and continued pacing. "Artifacts choose their wielders for reasons even we do not fully understand. To dismiss their nature as mere objects is to display a lack of imagination… and a lack of wisdom."

Kriv’Nak frowned but didn’t argue further.

The other alien students—his little entourage of equally smug, hyper-intelligent friends—whispered among themselves, sending occasional glances my way.

And that’s when I realized—they were irritated.

Not because they didn’t understand something.

But because I had something they couldn’t explain.

For once, they were dealing with something beyond their understanding.

And they hated it.

I should have felt vindicated.

But I didn’t.

Because as I watched Kriv’Nak and the others stew in their frustration, I realized something else—

They weren’t mad because I had suddenly become smarter.

They were mad because they couldn’t explain how I was smarter.

And it hit me.

This was exactly how I used to treat Shelly.

I glanced at my sister, who was currently doodling in the margins of her notebook, completely checked out of the lesson.

I sighed.

"Alright," I muttered, nudging her notebook with my elbow. "You’re not listening at all, are you?"

Shelly didn’t even look up. "Oh, I’m listening," she said. "I’m just not caring."

I exhaled sharply. "Come on, I’ll explain it in a way you’ll actually understand."

She raised an eyebrow, finally looking at me. "Okay, now I’m concerned. Since when are you helpful?"

I hesitated. "I… I’ve been thinking about how I act sometimes."

Shelly stared. "Are you dying?"

"Would you just listen?" I muttered.

She smirked, but I could tell she was genuinely curious now.

So, for the next few minutes, I explained—without condescension—how artifacts weren’t just tools, but extensions of power, a bridge between a wizard’s magic and something older.

I didn’t talk like I was reciting from a book. I just… talked.

And for once?

Shelly actually listened.

When I finished, she leaned back in her chair, studying me with an expression I couldn’t quite place.

"You know," she said slowly, "normally, you’d just enjoy being smarter than me and let me suffer."

I let out a breath. "Yeah… I think I’m trying to be better than that."

Shelly tilted her head. "Weird. But not bad-weird."

I smirked. "Don’t get all sentimental on me."

She grinned. "Oh, trust me, I won’t."

I rolled my eyes. "Good."

As class wrapped up, Althar dismissed us with a final, cryptic statement:

"Artifacts do not simply follow orders. They listen. They learn. And sometimes… they remember."

His gaze flickered toward me one last time.

I swallowed hard.

Even as Shelly nudged me and we left the room, I couldn’t shake what Althar had said.

Did my artifact remember something?

And if it did…

What exactly was it trying to tell me?

As we left the lecture hall, Shelly stretched her arms over her head. "Welp, that was fun. Nothing like a little existential crisis about magic tools to start the day."

I barely heard her.

Because my mind was still turning over everything that had just happened.

Althar’s words.

My artifact.

The way the aliens looked at me—not with superiority this time, but with frustration. Jealousy.

I should’ve felt smug about it.

Instead, I just felt restless.

There were too many questions I didn’t have answers to.

And I hated not having answers.

Shelly nudged my side. "You’re making your ‘I’m thinking too hard’ face again."

I blinked, pulling myself back to reality. "I do not have a face for that."

"Yeah, you do," she said, grinning. "It’s that one where you look like a robot trying to process emotions but failing miserably."

I rolled my eyes, but I didn’t argue.

Because… she wasn’t wrong.

I had a lot to process.

And unfortunately for me, my brain wasn’t done yet.

Because my thoughts had already started shifting—to something else.

To The Hollow.

Eli’s words from breakfast still lingered in my mind.

You’re not the type to just blindly follow rules, are you?

And honestly? I wasn’t sure anymore.

Back in high school, everything had been simple. My only focus had been getting into a good university, maintaining my grades, staying out of distractions.

But now?

Now, I was in an entirely different world.

A world where rules weren’t set in stone.

A world where… I actually had time to think about things I had always pushed away.

Like relationships.

Like attraction.

Like… the fact that I wasn’t entirely sure I only liked girls.

I never thought much about it before. I had been too busy. I had pushed those thoughts aside whenever they surfaced, writing them off as distractions.

But I still remembered.

Back in high school, there had been one moment—a guy in my AP physics class, leaning over his desk, laughing at something his friend said.

For some reason, I had looked at him for too long.

Noticing the way his smile curved, the shape of his jaw, the way his eyes crinkled when he laughed.

And then I had immediately forced myself to stop thinking about it.

Because it hadn’t mattered.

I had told myself that I had more important things to worry about.

And for a while, that had been true.

But now?

Now, I was in a place where nothing was holding me back.

And maybe—just maybe—The Hollow was exactly what I needed to figure things out.

Not just about the artifact mystery.

Not just about this world and its secrets.

But about myself.

Shelly side-eyed me as we walked. "You’re being weirdly quiet. You’re not planning anything dumb, are you?"

I smirked. "Define dumb."

She groaned. "Oh, great. That’s never a good answer."

I didn’t respond.

Because the truth was—

I didn’t know what I was planning yet.

I just knew I wanted more.

More answers.

More experiences.

More than the straightforward path I had always followed.

And whether it was a mistake, a risk, or exactly what I needed—

I was going to find out.

**Chapter 12 – (Shelly’s POV)**

The first rule of surviving magic school? Never walk slow enough for someone to think you’re open to conversation.

Unfortunately, Jordan had not mastered this concept.

Which is why, after we’d wrapped up Althar’s lesson and wandered into the courtyard, he immediately got ambushed.

I spotted them before he did—Kriv’Nak and his merry band of extraterrestrial know-it-alls, waiting like a pack of nerdy vultures. Their sleek uniforms were immaculate, their postures stiff with irritated superiority.

Oh, this was gonna be good.

Jordan, oblivious as ever, was still in deep thought about whatever nerd thing he was fixating on today. Probably that artifact junk. Or maybe his existential crisis about how he wasn’t the smartest person in the room for once.

Kriv’Nak stepped forward, his elongated fingers tapping impatiently against his arm. "Jordan Spyro."

Jordan stopped walking. His eyes flicked up—finally noticing the lineup of challengers in front of him.

I smirked, leaning against a nearby pillar. "Ooooh, full name. That means you’re in trouble."

Jordan shot me a look, but Kriv’Nak didn’t even acknowledge my existence. Which, honestly? Rude.

"You seem to enjoy proving yourself in class," Kriv’Nak said, voice clipped. "Yet your knowledge seems… unearned."

Ah. There it was.

These guys weren’t just frustrated. They were pissed that Jordan, a mere Earth-born human, had suddenly outclassed them in Althar’s lesson—something that had never happened before.

Jordan sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I take it this is leading somewhere."

Kriv’Nak’s four dark eyes narrowed. "A challenge."

Jordan’s brow lifted. "A challenge?"

"An intellectual and magical theory match," Kriv’Nak confirmed. "You and I—one-on-one. A battle of wits, problem-solving, and advanced spell application theory."

I let out a low whistle. "Damn, Jordan, you pissed them off so bad they wanna duel you with homework."

Jordan ignored me. "And if I say no?"

Kriv’Nak scoffed. "Then you confirm what we already suspect—that your knowledge is artificially enhanced." His gaze flickered to Jordan’s artifact-wrapped wrist.

Oof. That was a low blow.

Jordan’s jaw tightened.

For a second, I actually thought he was going to brush it off. Old Jordan—the arrogant, always-gotta-be-right version of him—would’ve thrown himself into the challenge without hesitation, eager to prove his superiority.

But this Jordan?

This one paused. Thought it through.

And that’s what made it interesting.

Finally, after a long moment, he sighed. "Fine. I accept."

I grinned. "Hell yeah, I’m getting a front-row seat to the nerdiest showdown in history."

Jordan shot me a glare. "You're not helping."

"Wasn’t trying to."

Kriv’Nak nodded, satisfied. "We meet in the theory chambers tomorrow evening. Do not be late."

And just like that, they swept away in perfect formation, like a bunch of synchronized swimmers.

Jordan ran a hand through his hair, exhaling sharply. "This is stupid."

"Yeah," I agreed, "but it’s also kinda hilarious, so I support it."

He groaned. "Of course you do."

I clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Hey, you’ve got this, Brainiac. Worst case? You crash and burn spectacularly, and I get to mock you for eternity."

Jordan muttered something about my priorities being deeply concerning, but I was already mentally preparing my best insults for when this inevitably became a disaster.

This was gonna be fun.

I had barely made it halfway down the hall after Jordan’s nerd battle declaration when a sharp tug of magic pulled at my chest.

For a brief second, I thought I was about to get yanked into another weird magic incident—because let’s be honest, that was becoming a daily occurrence—but then a voice echoed in my head.

"Michelle Spyro. My office. Now."

I froze.

It took my brain a second to register who had just mentally summoned me like some obedient puppy.

Professor Timely.

Ugh.

I groaned. "Really? Telepathic summons? He couldn't just send a note like a normal person?"

Jordan barely glanced at me. "Have fun with that," he muttered, still lost in whatever battle strategy he was brewing.

"Wow, thanks for the support."

He waved me off as I turned on my heel, grumbling the entire way to Timely’s office.

I didn’t know what I expected when I entered Timely’s office, but somehow, this was worse.

The room felt… ancient. The air hummed with magic so thick I could almost taste it. Stacks of old, leather-bound books lined the walls, most of them covered in dust but still radiating power. Strange artifacts floated in protective glass cases, some glowing faintly, others whispering when I got too close.

At the center of it all sat Professor Timely, hunched over a cluttered desk, scribbling something with an old quill.

The moment I stepped inside, the door shut behind me on its own.

Great. Totally not ominous.

Timely didn’t look up. "You took longer than I expected."

"Yeah, well, I like to enjoy my last few moments of freedom before getting lectured," I muttered, crossing my arms. "So, what’s this about? Another pep talk on how I need to take things seriously? Because trust me, Jordan’s got that covered."

Timely set his quill down and finally met my gaze. His silver eyes were calculating, unreadable.

"No, Michelle," he said smoothly. "This is about you."

Ugh. Full name again. I hated that.

I scowled. "Shelly. Seriously. No one calls me Michelle."

Timely gave me a long look, then leaned back in his chair. "No one calls you Michelle… because you refuse to let them."

I blinked, caught off guard. "Uh. Yeah. Because it sucks?"

His gaze didn’t waver. "Or because the name reminds you of expectations you never wanted."

My jaw tightened. I didn’t like how easily he could read me.

"Whatever," I muttered, shifting in place. "Is this leading somewhere, or are we just having a deep therapy session?"

Timely exhaled through his nose, the closest thing to amusement I’d ever seen from him. "Very well. Let’s get to the point."

He steepled his fingers. "You are not an ordinary wizard, Shelly."

"Yeah, no kidding. I'm spectacularly below average."

"You are a Spirit Wizard."

I froze.

I had heard the term before, but no one had directly confirmed it.

Timely’s gaze bored into me, giving me no room to brush it off as a joke.

"You are the rarest classification of wizard," he continued. "The strongest… and the most cursed."

…Cursed?

I swallowed. "Okay, you’re making this sound way less cool than it should be."

Timely folded his hands on the desk. "Tell me, Shelly—have you ever wondered why I’ve focused more on Jordan’s training than yours?"

"Because he’s a nerd and I suck at magic?"

"Wrong."

There was no humor in his tone now.

I shifted uncomfortably. "Okay, then enlighten me."

Timely studied me for a long moment. Then, he spoke.

"Spirit Wizards are unique because their power is not fully accessible in life."

Something cold curled in my stomach. "What do you mean?"

Timely’s voice was grim.

"You cannot reach your full potential, Shelly. Not until you die."

The room suddenly felt too small as I remembered Timely explaining this. He had said this before… yet I still didn't want to believe it now that it was my reality.

I let out a short laugh. "Funny. Good one. You had me there for a second—"

"I am not joking."

My mouth went dry.

Timely’s expression was unreadable, but there was a heaviness in his voice that made my chest tighten.

"You are a Spirit Wizard," he repeated. "And Spirit Wizards do not reach their full power unless they die with unfinished business. Only then do they return—reborn as a pure spirit, unshackled from mortal limitations."

I couldn’t breathe.

"That… that’s insane," I choked out.

"That is the truth."

I stared at him, waiting for some kind of reassurance—some kind of ‘but there’s another way’ speech.

None came.

He was serious.

The weight of it settled in my chest, pressing down hard.

"That’s why you didn’t focus on training me," I murmured, realization dawning. "Because you knew I couldn’t actually use my real power yet."

Timely nodded once.

I gripped the edge of the desk, knuckles lightening. "So what, I’m just supposed to live knowing I won’t reach my potential unless I die a certain way?"

He said nothing.

I clenched my jaw, anger bubbling up beneath the fear.

"That’s some messed-up prophecy nonsense," I snapped. "What am I supposed to do with that information? Just sit around waiting for some convenient unfinished business?"

Timely’s eyes softened—not with pity, but with understanding.

"You will have to decide for yourself whether your gift is a blessing… or a curse."

I felt sick.

I needed to think—to process this.

I needed to talk about anything else.

I swallowed hard and forced myself to speak. "Okay. Fine. But I have questions, too."

Timely leaned back slightly. "Go on."

I folded my arms. "Our parents. We just vanished from home and… what? No one noticed? No one's looking for us?"

Timely didn’t hesitate. "Your parents believe you are exactly where you’re supposed to be."

I frowned. "That’s not an answer."

"It is magic. A powerful enchantment exists in this dimension. The moment you arrived, the memories of your daily existence on Earth became… blurred to those who knew you."

My stomach churned. "So they think we’re safe. Just… somewhere else."

"Yes. And when you return, they will remember you as if you never left."

That was… horrifying.

But before I could process that, my eyes landed on something on his desk—a photograph.

It was old, slightly worn at the edges, but still well-preserved. Two young Black men stood side by side, smiling in the way that only brothers do—the kind of smile that carries a thousand shared memories.

One of them had long, neatly braided French braids, cascading down his shoulders—he was lean, confident, eyes sharp and bright with purpose.

The other had a clean-cut, short fade, his features softer, but his posture just as strong. They looked healthy. Happy. Untouched by whatever had aged Timely into the tired, world-worn man standing before me now.

Something about the image nagged at my memory.

And then it clicked.

The shoebox. The tape recording.

"My name is John Timely. My brother, Joseph, and I—"

I inhaled sharply.

"Wait a damn second." I pointed at the picture. "You're one of the Timely brothers from the tape, aren’t you?"

Timely’s expression didn’t change.

I narrowed my eyes. "The last name, the history, the weird secrets. You were on that recording."

A long silence.

Then—

"Yes," Timely said quietly. "I am."

I stared at him, a thousand more questions burning in my head.

But before I could speak, he lifted a hand, cutting me off. "Listen carefully, Shelly. This knowledge must stay between you, your brother, and myself. No one else can know."

I frowned. "Why? What’s the big secret?"

Timely’s gaze darkened. "Because to the world… I am dead. And I would like to keep it that way."

Something cold and sharp settled in my chest.

"You faked your death?" I asked, watching him carefully.

Timely didn’t react. "Let’s just say I prefer to operate outside the expectations of those who once knew me."

That wasn’t cryptic at all.

I folded my arms. "You’re not gonna explain any further, are you?"

He gave me a small, knowing smirk. "Not today."

I exhaled sharply, shaking my head. "Great. Another thing to add to my ever-growing list of What the Hell is Going On."

Timely finally stood. "If you wish to remain alive for as long as possible, I suggest you start getting used to not having all the answers immediately."

Wow. Super reassuring.

I was about to make some smart remark, but my words stuck in my throat.

Because despite the usual dry tone in his voice, despite the cryptic nonsense he always pulled…

There was something else in his expression.

Something that almost looked like regret.

But before I could figure it out, he turned away.

And I was left standing there, mind spinning, stomach churning.

Nothing about this day was okay.

Nothing at all.

**Chapter 13 – (Jordan’s POV)**

The library at Timely Academy was a paradox of chaos and order.

The shelves stretched endlessly, stacked with books that whispered to each other, floating scrolls that rearranged themselves, and a particularly judgmental encyclopedia that had smacked me on the forehead when I questioned its accuracy.

But right now, I wasn’t here to marvel at the library’s impossible design.

I was here to win.

Kriv’Nak’s challenge was no joke, and I wasn’t about to let some six-eyed alien humiliate me in front of an audience. I had spent the last hour memorizing battle strategies, analyzing past theory duels, and sketching out counterarguments. My brain was in overdrive.

Then, of course—Eli showed up to ruin it.

“Let me guess,” his voice drawled from behind me. “You’re preparing for your big nerd duel?”

I sighed. “It’s not a duel. It’s an intellectual and magical theory match.”

“Oh, my bad.” He slid into the seat across from me, smirking. “You’re preparing for your big nerd-off.”

I shot him a glare. “Shouldn’t you be off plotting some illegal Hollow activities or whatever it is you do in your free time?”

Eli grinned. “Actually, I came to check on my newest potential recruit.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I haven’t agreed to anything.”

“Yet,” he corrected smoothly. “But you didn’t shut me down immediately at breakfast. That tells me you’re at least thinking about it.”

I paused. Damn it. He was right.

I sighed, closing my book. “Look, I’m not gonna pretend I’m not curious. I just don’t know if it’s my thing.”

Eli propped his chin on his hand. “And what exactly do you think your thing is?”

I hesitated. This wasn’t a conversation I’d ever actually had out loud before.

But something about Eli made it feel… okay.

“I think…” I exhaled sharply, running a hand through my hair. “I think I might be bi.”

Eli’s expression didn’t change—no surprise, no shock, just… understanding.

“I’ve thought about it before,” I continued, voice lower now. “Back in high school, there was this guy. I noticed him, but I pushed it away. I was too focused on school, on being ‘the smart one.’” I huffed. “Romance was never really a priority for me. But now, being here… I have time to actually figure out what I want.”

Eli leaned forward slightly. “And you think The Hollow might help with that?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. I just… I don’t know where to start.”

A slow, knowing smirk spread across Eli’s lips.

“Well, lucky for you,” he said, his voice dropping just slightly, “I happen to be very good at helping people figure things out.”

Eli drummed his fingers on the table. “Look, you’re not exactly a by-the-book rule-follower.”

I snorted. “Haven’t you said that already?”

He grinned. “You didn't let me finish. You are calculated. You like to have control. You’re not someone who jumps in blindly—you want to know what you’re getting into before you take the leap.”

I shifted in my chair, a little unnerved by how well he was reading me. “And?”

“And The Hollow is whatever you want it to be.”

His voice had shifted—lower, more deliberate.

I suddenly felt very aware of how close he was sitting.

Eli’s gaze flickered over me, and for the first time, I noticed something different in the way he was looking at me.

It wasn’t just casual teasing.

It was something else.

Something intentional.

And that was when I really saw him.

I had noticed before that Eli was attractive, but I had never actually thought about it. Now, with his full attention on me, I couldn’t help but take in the details.

His skin was a warm caramel, smooth and practically glowing under the library’s enchanted lights. His face had that effortless charm—sharp jawline, high cheekbones, a smirk that was equal parts dangerous and inviting.

And then there was his hair—a soft, dark and curly Afro that looked way too touchable.

I swallowed hard, suddenly way too aware of every little movement he made.

Eli caught my expression and smirked. “What’s that look for?”

I cleared my throat. “Nothing.”

“Mmhmm.” He tilted his head. “So, since you’re figuring things out… let me ask you something important.”

I tensed. “What?”

He leaned in, resting his chin on his palm. “Are you a top or a bottom?”

I choked on air. “Excuse me?!”

Eli laughed. “It’s a valid question!”

“I—I don’t know, okay?” I muttered, suddenly flustered. “I mean, I’ve done some… research.”

Eli raised an eyebrow. “Research?”

I hesitated.

Then realization dawned on his face.

“Oh my god.” His grin turned downright wicked. “And by research, you actually mean porn?”

I groaned. “Shut up.”

“I knew you nerds were secretly horny deep down.”

I scowled. “Is this what you came here for? To bully me?”

Eli smirked. “You walked right into it.” He stretched lazily, then added, “For the record, I’m a verse top. So that could work if you want it to.”

I inhaled sharply.

Okay. That was a lot of information.

I needed to think about something else.

Fast.

My brain latched onto the first distraction it could find.

Xenon.

I hadn’t seen her since our first training session. And that was weird, right?

She was supposed to be the one "making sure we didn’t die in training." And yet, she was nowhere to be found.

That was… odd.

And now that I was thinking about her, another thought crept in.

If I did go to The Hollow—if I did explore this side of myself—would that complicate things?

I wasn’t sure how I felt about Xenon yet, but I knew I had been attracted to her when we first met. There had been something there.

But if I went to The Hollow…

Would that make things messy later?

“Jordan.”

I blinked.

Eli was waving a hand in front of my face. “Hey, you good? You zoned out for a second.”

I shook myself back to reality. “Yeah, I—sorry. Just thinking.”

Eli smirked. “You should really stop doing that.”

I huffed. “Yeah, well, it’s a bad habit.”

He pushed his chair back, standing. “Think on my offer. If you want to find out what you’re missing, meet me outside the east hall at midnight.”

He winked.

And then he was gone.

I sat in my dorm, staring at the enchanted clock on the wall.

11:47 PM.

I should have been asleep. I should have been resting for my next day of training. I should have been doing literally anything else besides sitting here, debating whether I was about to sneak out past curfew to explore an underground secret society known for its mysterious exchanges, magical duels, and discreet hookups.

But here I was.

Eli’s words from earlier looped in my head.

"If you want to find out what you’re missing, meet me outside the east hall at midnight."

I exhaled sharply, running a hand through my hair. This was stupid. I didn’t do things like this. I was the responsible one. The logical one. The one who thought things through.

And yet, here I was, already pulling on my shoes.

Maybe it was the intrigue. Maybe it was the fact that for the first time in a long time, I wanted to do something just because I wanted to.

Maybe it was Eli.

Either way, I was already out the door.

The walk to The Hollow wasn’t as simple as slipping through some hidden door or shady alley. No, this place was practically an urban legend tucked into the very bones of Kemet Academy. But Eli had explained the trick over breakfast—you just have to know where to look, he’d said, like it wasn’t the most cryptic thing ever.

The entrance was hidden behind one of the academy’s massive waterfalls, the one cascading from a floating pyramid that orbited above the east wing of the school. The catch? You could only access it when the waterfall aligned perfectly with another pyramid, which happened every thirty minutes as part of the school’s bizarre architectural magic. Most people didn’t even notice the alignment, but Eli mentioned it with the smugness of someone who thought he’d cracked some grand mystery.

I didn’t need guesses. I had math.

By the time I approached the cascading wall of water, I had already calculated the precise moment the alignment would hit. Factoring in the pyramids' rotational speed, trajectory shifts, and gravitational oscillation (yes, I’m that guy), I knew I had exactly forty-seven seconds to get through the waterfall before the alignment broke.

And right on schedule, the waterfall shimmered—like liquid glass peeling apart—and revealed a narrow passage carved into the cliffside behind it.

Eli was already there, leaning against the jagged stone like he’d been waiting his whole life for this dramatic entrance. His arms were crossed, one foot propped against the wall, and an infuriatingly smug grin plastered across his face.

“Took you long enough,” he said, straightening up as I stepped through the mist.

I rolled my eyes. “I arrived exactly when I meant to.”

He chuckled, pushing off the wall to fall into step beside me. “Of course you did, Mr. Human Calculator.”

I didn’t bother correcting him. He wasn’t wrong.

Before we could continue though, a tall, hooded figure blocked the way to the entrance. His robe shimmered with protective wards, his hands crackling with golden energy.

“The Hollow is for adults only,” the gatekeeper said in a deep, rumbling voice. “State your ages.”

“Relax, old man,” Eli smirked. “I’m nineteen.”

The gatekeeper’s eyes flickered, and a pulse of magic swept over Eli’s body, verifying his claim.

The man turned to me. “And you?”

I hesitated for half a second. “Eighteen.”

A similar pulse of magic rolled over me, tingling against my skin before fading.

The gatekeeper nodded. “You may enter.”

“See?” Eli nudged me playfully. “No turning back now.”

I exhaled and stepped forward.

The passage leading down to The Hollow was darker than I expected.

Not just dark—wrong.

Magic buzzed in the air, thick and electric, pressing against my skin like a living thing. The walls pulsed with faintly glowing runes, shifting as we walked, whispering unintelligible words.

Eli chuckled. “First time?”

I scoffed. “What gave it away?”

“The way you keep looking over your shoulder like something’s about to eat you.”

I frowned. “Is something about to eat me?”

Eli just grinned.

We stepped through an arched doorway—and suddenly, the passage opened into something vast.

I stopped breathing.

It was a city hidden right here on the campus.

An underground labyrinth of glowing sigils, floating platforms, and twisting staircases leading to places I couldn’t even begin to comprehend. The ceiling stretched impossibly high, lined with shimmering constellations that shouldn’t exist.

Hundreds of students moved through the streets—some masked, some veiled in shadow, some practically glowing with magic.

Everywhere I looked, forbidden exchanges were happening.

In one corner, a student whispered incantations over a crystal ball, the air around them warping with visions of something unseen.

Further down, a group was engaged in a high-stakes magical duel, the ground beneath them cracking with energy.

And then there were the others.

The ones who leaned in close, whispered in low voices, disappearing behind curtained doorways and hidden corridors.

This place was alive—thrumming with magic, secrecy, and temptation.

Eli stepped beside me.

“Welcome to The Hollow.”

I swallowed hard.

Eli led me through the winding paths, navigating effortlessly while I tried not to look as overwhelmed as I felt.

“So?” he asked, smirking. “What do you think?”

“It’s…” I struggled to find the right word. “A lot.”

Eli chuckled. “Yeah, it can be. But it’s also freeing.”

I shot him a look. “Freeing?”

He gestured around us. “Look at them, Jordan. No one here is pretending to be something they’re not. No professors breathing down your neck, no expectations. Just people doing what they want.”

I hesitated.

Because… wasn’t that kind of what I wanted?

For once, to stop thinking about what I was supposed to do and just—be.

Eli’s gaze flickered over me, and I felt that tension again—the same one from the library.

“You wanted to figure things out,” he said, voice low. “I told you I could help.”

I exhaled. “And how exactly do you plan to do that?”

His smirk deepened.

“Follow me.”

I didn’t hesitate this time.

Eli led me into a hidden alcove, away from the noise of the main hollow. The space was dimly lit, the air thicker, warmer.

He turned to me, leaning casually against the wall, but there was something in his expression –something almost challenging.

“I'll make it easy for you,” he murmured. “One kiss, see how it feels”

My brain short-circuited. “I–”

“No pressure,” he added, but his gaze never wavered.

I had spent my entire life making decisions logically. Calculating every outcome, weighing every possibility.

This time I didn't think.

I just moved.

The second my lips meet his, my chest tightened –not in panic, not in uncertainty. In something else entirely.

Eli let out a small, satisfied hum, his hands gripping my waist lightly, not forcing, just grounding.

Then he pulled me closer.

The heat between us built quickly. His hands roamed over my back, and before I knew it, my own fingers were tangling in his curls.

He exhaled against my skin. “Your tense.”

“I –,” I swallowed, “I don't normally do this.”

“Then let me guide you.”

What followed was a slow unraveling.

Eli’s fingers found the clasp of my robe, tugging it loose. The fabric slid down my arms pooling at my feet. He then found my belt buckle to my pants I wear under my robe and undid the buckle, smoothly helping me remove my pants and underwear in one combo, revealing my naked body. My breath hitched.

His hands were on my bare skin now, warm and deliberate.

I hesitated, my fingers grazing the edges of his robe.

Eli grinned. “Go ahead.”

I took a slow breath and pulled his robe off, revealing the tones definition of his body – lean muscle, smooth caramel skin, and a large item between his legs I couldn't help but eyeball.

He smirked at my lingering stare. “See something you like?”

I swallowed but didn't deny it.

Eli stepped closer, voice dropping lower. “You still overthinking?”

I exhaled sharply. “Maybe.”

He chuckled, pressing his lips against my collar bone, sending a shiver through me. “Let's fix that.”

His hands trailed lower, teasing, and I let myself melt into the sensation.

I wasn't sure how much time had passed before I found myself laying back on the soft alcove cushions, Eli hovering over me, lips brushing over my jaw.

I could feel the anticipation tighten in my chest.

Eli’s thumb traced my hip. “You good?”

I nodded, then hesitated.

“There's um…” I cleared my throat, heat rising in my face, “Do you –do you have lube?”

Eli blinked, then his smirk exploded into a wicked grin.

“What's your favorite flavor?”

My brain short-circuited again.

I gawked at him. “I –what?”

Eli chuckled, reaching into a small enchanted pouch beside him. He pulled out a small glass vital filled with shimmering liquid.

“This one’s strawberry.” He pulled out another. “Vanilla. Oh, and here's honey.”

I stared at him. “Why –why do you have flavored lube?”

Eli winked. “Tastes better when giving head.”

I instantly regretted asking.

The heat in my face spread down to my chest, my brain struggling to process coherent thoughts.

Eli laughed. “Gods, you are adorable when you get flustered.”

I buried my face in my hands. “This is the worst moment of my life.”

“No,” he teased, leaning in close, “this is the moment you realize you're a submissive bottom.”

I choked. “EXCUSE ME!?”

Eli just grinned. “Oh yeah, the way you react? The way you hesitate, all nervous, waiting for me to take the lead?” he dragged his lips over my throat, making me shiver. “You love it.”

I had zero defense for that.

Because he wasn't lying, and he damn for sure wasn't wrong.

Eli pulled back slightly, watching me carefully. His expression softened. “You sure about this?”

I took a slow breath.

Then nodded.

Eli smirked. “Good.”

What followed was slow, deliberate, and undeniably intense.

Eli was attentive, reading my reactions easily, coaxing me through every new sensation.

The warmth of his touch, the heat of his mouth. The slow teasing drag of fingers that left me aching for more.

He took his time, letting me adjust, making sure I was comfortable and wanting.

And then–we moved together.

The rhythm of it, the way my body reacted to him–it was overwhelming in the best way possible.

I gasped, gripping onto his arms, feeling entirely undone.

Eli exhaled sharply, pressing soft kisses along my jaw, my throat, my chest. His voice was a whisper against my skin.

“Relax, I got you.”

And he did.

By the time we reached the peak, I was shattered in the best way possible.

Afterward, we lay tangled together on the alcove cushions, breathless and dazed.

Eli was grinning like he just won a bet.

I was still trying to process the fact that this actually happened.

Eli lazily draped an arm over me. “Sooo…”

I blinked at him, still feeling like my brain had been fried. “What?”

He smirked. “Did I do a good job?”

I gawked at him. “You’re seriously asking that?”

He stretched smugly. “Hey, first impressions matter.”

I buried my face in the pillow.

Eli chuckled, brushing his fingers through my hair. “So?”

I hesitated—then admitted, shyly but happily,

“…Yeah. It was good.”

Eli grinned like a cat with cream.

“Knew it,” he said smugly, then continued, “but a little advice. Next time you decide to sleep with someone, make sure you ask them about their sexual history beforehand, and also if you both want to use condoms,” Eli said, looking at me with that same smirk again.

I lifted my face slightly out of the pillow. “Isn't this something you should have mentioned to me before we just did what we did?” I said, a bit worried now.

“Oh no it's not like that, I'm safe. I don't have anything,” Eli replied, face softening again. “I have been on Prep for a few years now, as well as always having frequent visits to be checked for other sexually transmitted diseases. Only reason I didn’t ask you, is because I knew you were a virgin,” Eli said, giving me an all knowing cocky look.

“Yeah, and you can read minds. You know everything about me don't you,” I said embarrassed that he wasn't wrong, but I continued, “Thank you for the information though. I didn't know all that stuff. I would rather not get with everyone though, I think I would rather only do this with you for now.”

“Ohhh, so you want to go again sometime, is what you're saying?”

“Shut up!” I said again, returning my face back to its pillow grave.

“But hey, I'm serious. I'm here for you as a friend, not just a bed warmer. I can help you set up a medical plan here at the school so you can be safe as well. Even if it's you only doing this with me, I would rather you be safe and take precautions if they are there to offer.”

“I –thank you,” I said, shocked by Eli's genuine concern for my well being.

Before tonight I thought Eli was just some guy who was into illegal activities on campus that he wanted to get others into. But now I see him as a friend I can trust… and a good bed warmer.

“Also, I didn't want you to have your first time ruined by a rubber, I wanted you to truly feel all of me, and judging by the sounds you made, you definitely did,” Eli said, laughing.

“I'm gonna strangle you,” I replied, but I wasn’t mad, I was far from it.

By the time I made it back to my dorm, the thrill of the night still hummed through my veins.

I barely had time to process everything that had just happened before I realized—

Shelly was waiting.

She sat on her bed, arms crossed, looking me up and down.

“Have a good time?”

I jumped.

Shit.