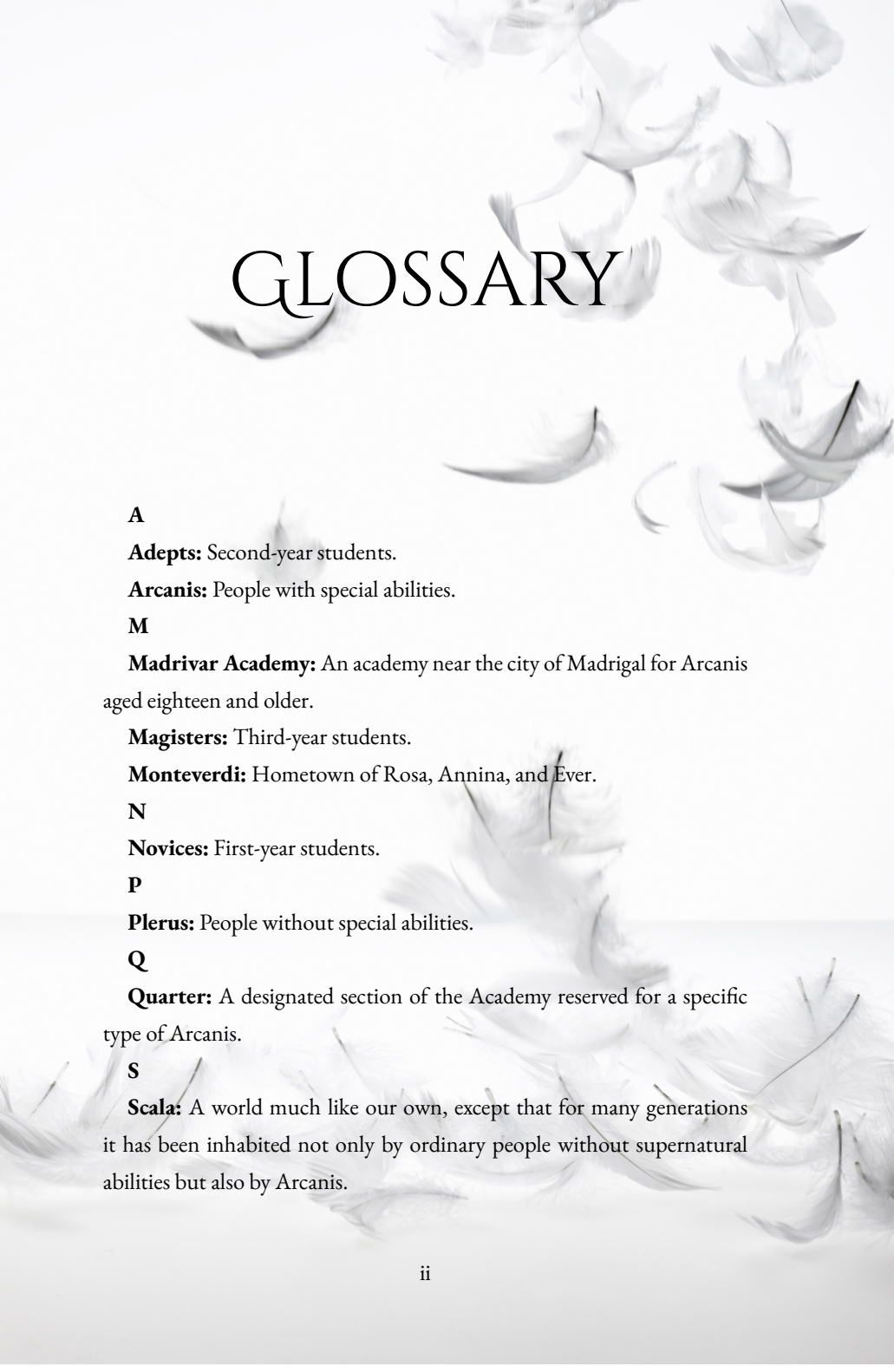


SHIFTER ACADEMY I:
STUDIES IN ARCANA -
CHAPTERS 1 AND 2
ANNIE WAYE



GLOSSARY

A

Adepts: Second-year students.

Arcanis: People with special abilities.

M

Madriver Academy: An academy near the city of Madrigal for Arcanis aged eighteen and older.

Magisters: Third-year students.

Monteverdi: Hometown of Rosa, Annina, and Ever.

N

Novices: First-year students.

P

Plerus: People without special abilities.

Q

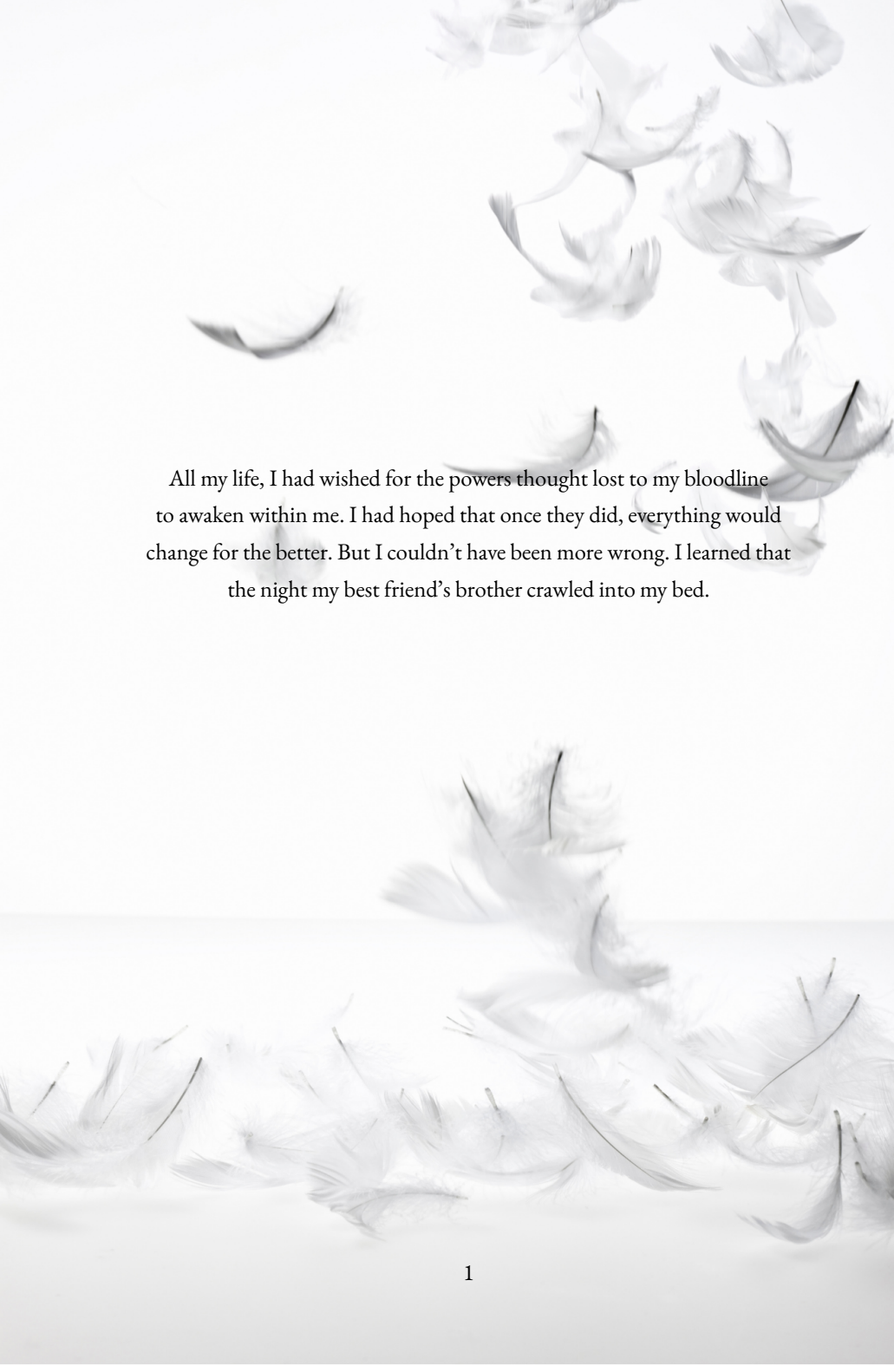
Quarter: A designated section of the Academy reserved for a specific type of Arcanis.

S

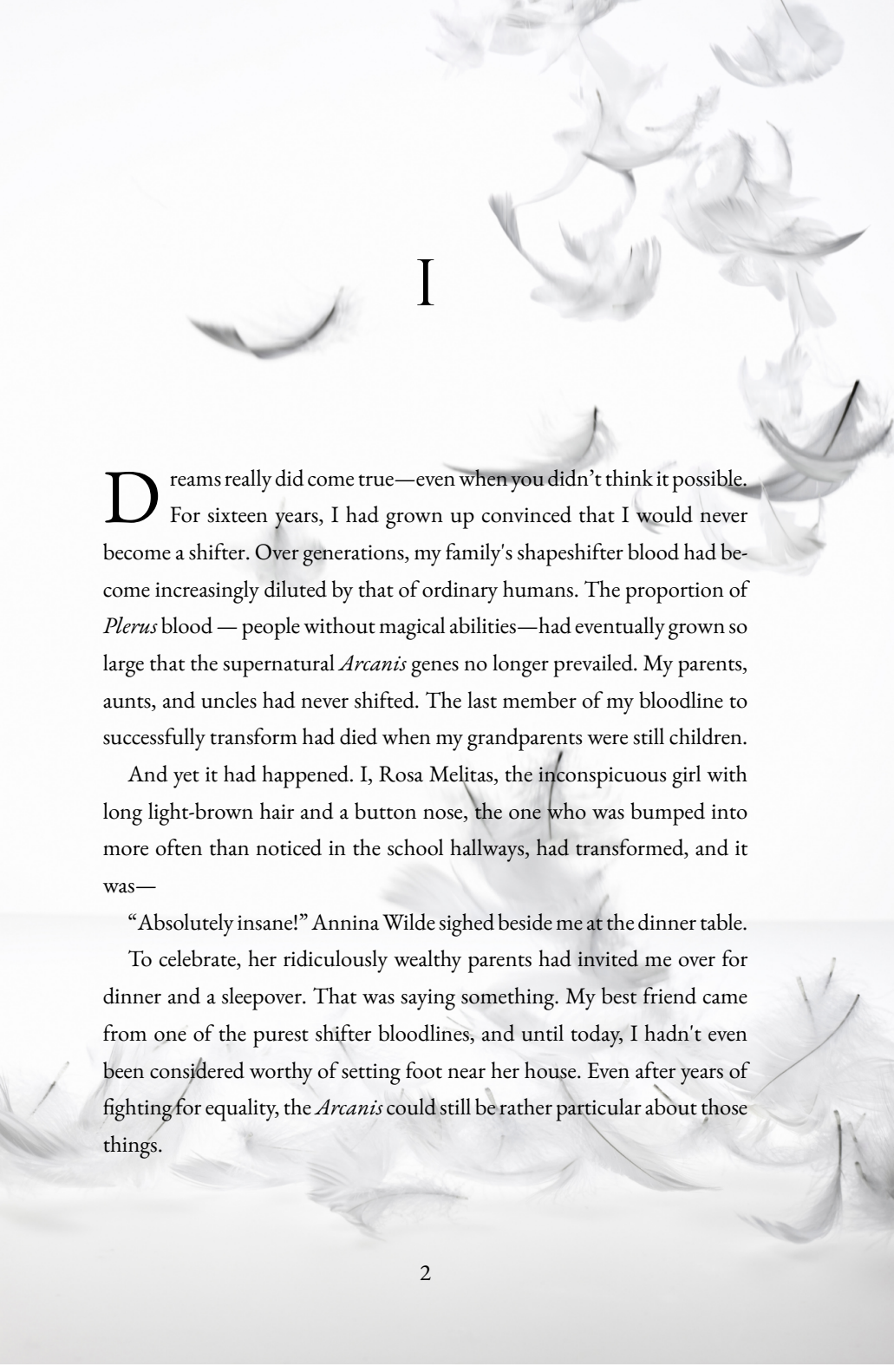
Scala: A world much like our own, except that for many generations it has been inhabited not only by ordinary people without supernatural abilities but also by Arcanis.

Shifter: A shapeshifter; a type of Arcanis.

Shift: The transformation of a Shifter (usually into an animal).



All my life, I had wished for the powers thought lost to my bloodline to awaken within me. I had hoped that once they did, everything would change for the better. But I couldn't have been more wrong. I learned that the night my best friend's brother crawled into my bed.



I

Dreams really did come true—even when you didn’t think it possible. For sixteen years, I had grown up convinced that I would never become a shifter. Over generations, my family’s shapeshifter blood had become increasingly diluted by that of ordinary humans. The proportion of *Plerus* blood — people without magical abilities—had eventually grown so large that the supernatural *Arcanis* genes no longer prevailed. My parents, aunts, and uncles had never shifted. The last member of my bloodline to successfully transform had died when my grandparents were still children.

And yet it had happened. I, Rosa Melitas, the inconspicuous girl with long light-brown hair and a button nose, the one who was bumped into more often than noticed in the school hallways, had transformed, and it was—

“Absolutely insane!” Annina Wilde sighed beside me at the dinner table.

To celebrate, her ridiculously wealthy parents had invited me over for dinner and a sleepover. That was saying something. My best friend came from one of the purest shifter bloodlines, and until today, I hadn’t even been considered worthy of setting foot near her house. Even after years of fighting for equality, the *Arcanis* could still be rather particular about those things.

“You should have seen her!” The pasta on Annina’s plate had probably gone cold by now because she kept twirling some around her fork only to set it down again and gesture wildly as she spoke. “We were standing in the hallway before sixth period, just grabbing a book real quick, when Rosa tripped. I thought she was about to face-plant, but—*poof!*” She flung her arms wide, nearly smacking me across the face with the back of her hand. “Suddenly there was a cat! And the cutest one ever!”

Mr. and Mrs. Wilde nodded thoughtfully. Sitting at their mahogany dining table, surrounded by gold-framed portraits of long-dead ancestors, certificates, medals, and awards, that simple gesture felt like being knighted.

“And then?” came a rough, dismissive voice from my right.

Oh, right. Annina’s brother Ever was here too. Though not for much longer, from what I’d heard. Thank goodness.

Like the rest of the family, he had raven-black hair that fell in loose strands across his forehead. He had already shoveled down at least two servings of spaghetti and now leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed, his dark eyes narrowed with a challenging glint. “Let me guess,” he said. “She freaked out, shifted back, and ended up standing naked in the middle of the school hallway.”

My eyes flew open in alarm, and my heart clenched in my chest.

Mrs. Wilde shot him a reproachful look. “Ever,” she warned. Heat crept into my cheeks. He had hit the nail squarely on the head. I hadn’t had the slightest idea what was happening to me. Looking back, I couldn’t even remember exactly how I’d transformed. And before I knew it, the whole process had reversed itself. Thankfully, Annina had immediately realized what was going on. At the last second, she’d snatched my jacket off the floor and thrown it over me so that at least a tiny part of me was covered. I didn’t even want to think about the minute that followed—when I’d fled to the

girls' bathroom while she hurried after me carrying my clothes. It had felt like an eternity.

"Don't think about it, Rosa." Annina squeezed the hand I had resting on the table. "Luckily today was the last day of school. By the time we see everyone again, they'll probably have forgotten all about it."

My throat went dry. When my gaze met Ever's, I wasn't convinced in the slightest. Quite the opposite. He hadn't even been there, yet I had the distinct feeling *he* would never forget it.

"Don't worry about him," Annina told me later, after we'd settled into her room. She sat cross-legged on her bed, absently playing with her phone while I tried to find a comfortable position on the air mattress. "He's always like that. Being declared a shifter prodigy at the age of five did absolutely nothing for his ego." She rolled her eyes. "And thankfully," she added with obvious delight, "he'll be on his way to the Academy in two weeks."

"Right," I murmured, unable to keep a note of awe from my voice. "The Madrivar Academy." One of the elite academies that accepted only shifters who could actually transform.

It felt impossibly far away—at least as far away as the idea of me ever becoming a shifter had always seemed.

"Isn't it incredible?" Annina lowered her phone and flashed me a huge grin. "If they accepted him, they'll accept me in two years too." She leaned toward me. "And if they take me, they'll take you. Then we can go there together."

I blinked at her in disbelief and shook my head. "Why on earth would they take me? My bloodline—"

"To hell with your bloodline!" she interrupted easily. "You transformed. That's more than anyone else in your family has ever managed." Her grin widened. "You're a shifter, Rosa. That alone makes you more than qualified

for Madrivar.” Then her expression softened. “I promise you. Once you’ve shifted for the first time, the rest comes naturally. That’s how it was for me, too.”

Back when she’d been four years old, I thought. And yet she seemed utterly convinced that I was simply a late bloomer—not a blind hen that had stumbled across a single grain of corn by pure chance.

“We’ll make sure they accept us—both of us. Then we’ll spend three years turning the Academy upside down, and after that...” She grinned. “...the rest of the world.”

I tilted my head skeptically. “Were you always this megalomaniacal, or was there something in the pasta?”

She giggled. “I’m just in a really good mood.” She let out an almost wistful sigh. “Just imagine it. You and me at the most prestigious academy around. Nothing but Arcanis everywhere. People just like us. We’ll make so many connections, learn so much, become even better shifters... and then we’ll build real careers. Big ones.” She smiled at me encouragingly, her expression softening. “Your parents must be so incredibly proud of you,” she said quietly. “You could lead your entire bloodline into a new era.”

Warmth spread through my chest. At the same time, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I didn’t deserve a friend like Annina.

The elegant, expensive furnishings and the five cars parked in the underground garage had made that painfully clear. We came from different worlds. But she genuinely believed I could bridge the gap. That I could shatter the glass ceiling between us and meet her halfway.

Later, after we’d turned off the lights, I closed my eyes and slowly drifted toward sleep. For the first time in my life, my defenses fell away. My doubts and insecurities vanished without a trace, leaving behind nothing but hope—so light that I felt as though I could float.

That feeling lasted until a faint hiss reached my ears. Instantly, I was wide awake. For a moment, I dismissed it as part of the dream I'd only just begun to slip into. Then my pulse quickened. I held my breath and listened to the silence filling the room. The only sound was Annina's steady breathing.

Restlessly, I scanned my surroundings. Annina couldn't sleep in complete darkness, so a dark red lava lamp on her desk cast a dim glow across the room. The shifting light left countless shadows tucked into corners and along the walls, though none large enough to conceal an intruder. And even if someone could... This family was wealthy beyond imagination, with influence to match. No one could break into this house without someone noticing.

And yet the uneasy feeling refused to leave me. I hardly dared close my eyes again. The instant I finally forced my eyelids shut, the sound came again. Softer this time. So muffled that I wasn't even sure I'd really heard it. But hearing it twice... *That* couldn't be my imagination.

No more than the fact that something was moving beneath my blanket. Something long and slender, its shape outlined beside my right leg as it shifted the fabric.

I sucked in a startled breath. Adrenaline exploded through my body, making me grab the blanket and tear it off. I saw my leg, my gray pajamas—and a thick, venom-green snake, its head shooting straight toward me.



My own scream still echoed in my head two years later, leaving me wrapped in silence for most of the train ride. Annina and I were wearing our dark-blue Madrivar uniforms, and she'd talked nonstop the entire journey. At least that way, she didn't notice how withdrawn I was.

"I can't wait to see who else is starting with us," she mused aloud. "Ever said they accept shifters from all over the country. So it won't just be the ones from our school. If any at all. It feels like everyone from our class scattered to the four winds."

I simply sat there, trying to focus on the sound of her voice, even though the memory of my first—and only—sleepover at her house two years ago felt more vivid than reality itself.

It hadn't been fair. I'd only just gotten used to the idea that, against all odds, I could actually shift. I'd finally dared to feel hopeful about my future. And then? Then that snake had appeared and turned what should have been the happiest day of my life into a nightmare.

Annina crossed one leg over the other. She was tall with an athletic build and would probably have no trouble making one of the Academy's many sports teams. Unlike me, she'd chosen the uniform pants. Both the pants and the jacket were dark-blue, paired with a black shirt that made her dark hair almost blend into the fabric.

"Anyway, this is finally my chance to carve out my own path, you know?" Even though she was sitting right beside me on the train, she spoke loudly enough for the entire carriage to hear. "Ever's always been the overachiever in the family. He's going to take over leadership of our clan and the real estate company, so his future is completely set. I'll probably have to find something else—a good career or an influential husband to marry." She flashed me a grin. "I figure the Academy is a pretty good place to find either one, don't you think?"

I shrugged. She was asking exactly the wrong person. No one in my family had ever attended the Academy—it was reserved for people with powers, after all. It had felt surreal that the entire admissions process consisted of an online application, my school transcripts, and my Arcanis family tree. Even though I'd been one of the top students in my year, I still felt like an unwelcome intruder. “I-I...” I stammered awkwardly. “I think so too.”

Annina's gaze sharpened, suddenly reminding me of her brother staring at me across the dinner table. A slight crease formed between her brows. “Oh God,” she said, lowering her voice. “You're not thinking about what happened back then again, are you?”

I almost snorted. *What happened* made it sound as though it had simply... happened. As though no one had been to blame.

But that wasn't true. There had been a very clear victim. And a very clear culprit.

Annina sighed. “Yeah, I know. What he did was awful. But he's also just an asshole.” She gently rested a hand on my thigh, covered to the knee by my dark-blue skirt. “I honestly don't know what Ever was thinking. He's usually managed to behave himself around my friends. He probably just had a really bad day. But that was two years ago, Rosa. He probably doesn't even remember it anymore.”

I clenched my teeth. Didn't remember? The absolute terror he'd put me through by shifting into a snake in the middle of the night and crawling under my blanket? I still had nightmares about it.

“And even if he does,” Annina finished firmly, “he's in his third year, and we're starting our first. We won't have anything to do with him.”

I wrapped my arms around myself, unable to meet her eyes. “He's your brother,” I said flatly. “Surely you'll want to spend time with him.”

“Yeah, but you don’t have to be there if you don’t want to.” She looked dissatisfied as she leaned back in her seat. “Besides... things aren’t the way they used to be between us,” she murmured. “Ever’s changed since he started at the Academy. He’s become... quiet. He rarely called, hardly ever came home. We barely saw each other.” She shrugged. “And I don’t think that’ll change much just because I’m here. He’s probably found a bunch of insanely talented shifter friends who are way cooler than his little sister and doesn’t want to be seen with me.”

Just then, the train began to slow. Annina’s face lit up.

“We’re here!” she squealed, jumping to her feet. “We’re finally here!”

The Madrivar Academy was one of the most prestigious institutions in the Northern Hemisphere of Scala. After graduating from secondary school, every kind of Arcanis imaginable—shifters, witches, fae, werewolves, and countless others—could continue their education here, taking advanced courses designed to prepare them for life at the heart of society. While many academies specialized in particular groups and their unique abilities, Madrivar welcomed every form of the supernatural. That was why the campus was so unbelievably enormous. Even the photographs I’d pored over again and again during the past two years had filled me with such awe that my heart was in turmoil as we made our way there.

The first thing we saw of Madrivar was the towering wall surrounding the entire campus, allowing only the rooftops of a few buildings to peek above it. A fairly steep hill led up from the small train station. Most of us hauled our luggage up on foot, but every few moments cars sped past at far too high a speed, dropping off individual students directly in front of the main gate. The gates stood wide open, guarded by a handful of staff members in dark suits. They held tablets and methodically worked their way through the list of new arrivals expected that day.

As we approached them, I grew nervous. An irrational fear crept over me that they wouldn't let me in—even though my student ID was safely tucked away and I was already wearing my Madriver uniform. But I didn't feel worthy. I felt anything but worthy. Because even though Annina had predicted two years ago that my first shift into a cat was only the beginning of something extraordinary... not much had happened since.

"Forget about it," she'd told me on the train. "That's exactly why we're here. To learn."

Even so, surrounded by all the other students filing into the four queues around us, I felt small. Insignificant. If they turned me away right at the gate, I couldn't even blame them.

"Name?" asked the tall man with a tiny pair of glasses perched on the very tip of his nose.

I swallowed. "Rosa Melitas," I said, my voice coming out embarrassingly high.

He frowned. "Was that a question or an answer?" he said, clearly reacting to my tone.

I silently cursed myself and straightened my back. "A-an answer," I replied in an exaggeratedly deep voice. "Rosa Melitas."

He was already swiping through his tablet. After a moment, he nodded. "Building B, Room Four," he informed me, telling me something I already knew. "The welcome ceremony begins at three."

"Building B, Room Four, right?" Annina asked hurriedly when we found each other again on the other side of the entrance. "Nothing's changed, has it? Right?"

"Annina, breathe." I raised a calming hand. "Yes, of course. We're still in the same room." And we would be for the next two years, until we'd be given single rooms in our final year.

She let out a throaty groan of relief. “Thank goodness.” She had also made sure we’d chosen identical schedules from the course catalog. Most of our classes were subjects we’d never been allowed to take at our mixed secondary school: *History of the Shifters*, *Shifter Civics*, and *Advanced Shifting* were just a few of them. These courses were meant to prepare us for life as shifters and as members of the shifter community, where things sometimes worked very differently from the way they did among the Plerus.

“Well, that settles the most important thing,” Annina declared, visibly relieved. “I don’t think I could’ve handled it if, on the very first day—” Her gaze snagged on something in the distance, and she fell silent. Her eyes widened, her mouth dropping open at the same time, and she leaned closer to me. “Oh my God,” she whispered. “Do you see those ridiculously cute guys over there?”

She was probably talking about the three blond young men whose uniforms were trimmed with light blue stripes—a sign that they were two years ahead of us.

I inwardly winced. They were *Ever’s* age.

“Do you think they’re brothers? I mean, they all have ridiculously good genes.” Annina had to tear her gaze away from them before shooting me a meaningful look. “I didn’t expect to find candidates this quickly. Let alone have options!”

I snorted with amusement. “Why do I get the feeling that getting married has become your number-one priority?”

She waved the thought away. “Not my number-one priority! But what’s wrong with checking out the options first?” She ran her tongue over her lower lip. “And check them out I will.”

I groaned. “Annina...”

I could barely spare the men on campus a second glance. The buildings surrounding us were far too captivating. Some looked ancient, almost like miniature castles with towers and pointed blue roofs. Others were unmistakably modern, with entire walls of glass reflecting the sunlight. Broad, meticulously paved roads led to the grander buildings, while the smaller annexes were connected only by narrow, winding footpaths that cut through the campus lawns. Even though I'd practically memorized the Academy's website, the sheer size of the campus was overwhelming. I was certain it wouldn't take more than a day before I got hopelessly lost trying to find a lecture hall—or my own dorm.

It was early afternoon, and Madrivar was alive with activity. Everywhere we looked, students filled the campus, their uniforms revealing how long they'd been at the Academy. Most of those around us wore the deep blue of first-years, dragging suitcases behind them just as we were. We were Novices. Second-year Adepts could be recognized by their lighter blue uniforms, while third-year Magisters wore uniforms distinguished by striped trim.

While I kept one eye on the campus map on my phone—and Annina kept one on every attractive guy who walked past—we crossed a circular plaza dominated by a large fountain, the central hub of the Academy's entrance grounds. From there, every residential quarter was within easy reach, each forming a different section of the sprawling campus. Naturally, we belonged to the Shifter Quarter, where our classes would also take place. During our free time, however, we were allowed to explore the rest of the campus.

It wasn't until the Shifter Quarter came into view, separated from the rest of the Academy by another towering wall, that I truly believed we were here. That *I* was here. Me—the girl whose parents had always imagined a

future behind a bank desk—had actually been accepted to the Madrivar Academy. I'd met both requirements: excellent grades and Shifter abilities. It was real.

I was about to live a life I'd never thought possible. A life that began today...

...to the sound of a vaguely familiar voice behind me. "Well, well. Look who we have here."

We stopped dead in our tracks. Dread crawled up my spine, draining the color from the vibrant world around me.

2

I went rigid, every muscle in my body tensing as I prayed I was mistaken. After all, it had been two years since I'd last heard his voice. Maybe it was someone else entirely who'd felt the need to strike up a conversation with two new students on their very first day at the Academy, and—Annina spun around beside me with a startled squeal.

“Ever!” she cried, throwing herself into his arms.

I swallowed a sigh and forced myself to compose my features before slowly turning to face him.

Annina had her arms wrapped around his neck while he returned the hug with considerably less enthusiasm, draping one arm around her shoulders.

“What are you doing here?”

“What do you think?” He took the first chance to ease her away and gave her a faint smile. “Who would I be if I missed my favorite sister’s first day at the Academy?”

Annina planted her hands on her hips. “I’m your only sister, Ever.”

“Do you always have to put such a negative spin on everything?”

Now that I saw them standing side by side, the resemblance between them was unmistakable. As a child, Annina had often been teased because her broad nose, strong jaw, and imposing height supposedly made her look

too masculine. Ever, on the other hand, looked like an ancient marble statue, every feature sculpted into perfect proportion. Dark brows arched above his eyes, his straight nose leading down to full lips and a clean-shaven, sharply defined jaw.

Ever's gaze landed on me. My entire body tensed as I braced myself, waiting for him to speak. To remind me of what had *happened* two years ago. To make fun of me. Instead, his gaze slid right past me and settled on Annina's light-blue suitcase. "I'll take that," he said casually, crossing the distance between us. Without so much as a glance in my direction, he grabbed the handle. "Where are you headed?"

Quietly, I let out the breath I'd been holding. He hadn't done anything cruel. And yet somehow, his cool indifference felt even more humiliating.

"Building B!" I was relieved when Annina naturally slipped between us as we started walking again. I, of course, kept pulling my own suitcase. "Do you know where that is?"

"It's one of the women's dorms," Ever replied dryly. Then he added, drawing out the words with unmistakable amusement, "I know it inside and out."

Annina groaned. "Ever!"

Disgusted, I looked away. I would've been surprised if, over the past two years, this man had done anything besides sleeping his way through his female classmates. Someone like him—born into a life of luxury where he never had to lift a finger—hardly seemed likely to spend his time doing anything else.

Even though Ever didn't spare me a single glance, I became increasingly certain he intended to escort us all the way to our room. Then he'd know where I lived. Where I slept. Before I knew it, I was picturing him sneaking

into our dorm in the middle of the night, shifting into a snake, and slithering toward me...

My throat tightened, and the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. A rushing sound filled my ears. I felt like a soldier marching into a war zone: I knew the battle was coming—I just didn't know when, where, or under what circumstances. Only that it was a matter of time.

I'd stopped noticing our surroundings altogether. Instead, I stole glances at Ever out of the corner of my eye. He was twenty now. His hair was a little longer. He was taller, broader, and his voice had deepened slightly, though it still carried the same rough edge I remembered. I'd expected to run into him here more often than I'd like. But within the first five minutes on campus? That surpassed even my worst nightmares.

I supposed that was the price of being friends with Annina.

I barely registered us making our way through the Shifter Quarter, a district of flat-roofed buildings of every size, almost like a city within a city. Each residence had its own front garden enclosed by an iron gate, with the bars in the center forming the building's identifying letter—in our case, a *B*.

Room Four was on the ground floor, just a few yards from the entrance. Inside, everything came in pairs: two single beds, two wardrobes, and two desks. A door led to a cramped bathroom. It would be Annina's and my home for the next two years whenever we weren't visiting our families. Since Monteverdi was about four hours away, that probably wouldn't be every weekend.

To make matters worse, Ever followed his sister inside and set her suitcase down in the middle of the room.

Part of me had hoped he'd have the decency to stay in the doorway. Instead, I had no choice but to share the cramped space with him. To put

a little distance between us, I headed straight for the bed on the right and heaved my suitcase onto the mattress.

“Yep,” Annina said, slowly turning in a circle. “This is about as bare and boring as I expected.”

“You’re not allowed to make any changes to the room,” Ever said, wandering over to the wall beside the door and leaning against it. “No nails, no glue—nothing like that. Just in case you were planning to cover the place with posters.”

Annina turned to him, looking offended. “Posters?” she repeated in visible disgust. “I’m not twelve anymore.”

For a brief second, he looked caught off guard. “Right.” He shook his head. “Anyway... don’t get too carried away. They do regular room inspections and all that.”

Annina rolled her eyes. “Yeah, heaven forbid anyone show a bit of personality.” She smoothed down the front of her uniform jacket. “Why don’t we all just shift into the same person while we’re at it? Then we can make sure we all look exactly alike.”

One of Ever’s eyebrows twitched. “If all of us could shift into other people, there wouldn’t be much left for them to teach us here.”

“Fair point. But who knows? Maybe one day.” She waved a dismissive hand, as though she wasn’t expecting an answer. “Thanks for showing us the room. I think we need some time to settle in now.”

A weight lifted from my chest. Was she... dismissing him? Because she knew how uncomfortable I was with him standing there against the wall, watching us? Even though I was doing everything I could not to show it. I’d already opened my suitcase and started unpacking on autopilot. Well... if you could call it unpacking. I was mechanically taking out neatly folded clothes one by one and laying them on the mattress beside me.

“You’ve probably got a ridiculous amount to do as a Magister anyway,” Annina went on as she flopped onto her bed. “So we won’t steal any more of your time.”

“But Ever didn’t move. Actually, I don’t have anything else on my schedule.”

Annina raised a skeptical eyebrow. “You’ve topped the Academy-wide Shifter rankings for the past two years,” she said pointedly. “You shouldn’t have any free time left to help out the common folk.”

“Oh, but I do,” he replied dryly. “Turns out I was still a few extracurricular credits short. So this year I volunteered to be a mentor.”

Annina snorted. “A mentor? *You?*”

I was glad she’d said it instead of me. According to our orientation booklet, mentors were upper-year students assigned to help first-year Novices through their first trimester whenever they needed guidance. But Ever? In a role that required *people skills*? Please. That was almost enough to make me laugh.

I only meant to steal a quick glance at him—but my eyes immediately lingered. Now that I was seeing him from the front, I noticed the black shirt beneath his uniform jacket. The way it stretched across his chest...

“Rosa, right?”

The words hit me like a blow, and I hastily snapped my gaze to his eyes. My heart clenched. He’d scared the life out of me, and now he wasn’t even sure what my name was? “Yes,” I replied curtly.

His expression didn’t change. “You’re staring.”

The realization hit me like a bolt of lightning, robbing me of the ability to think for a moment. He’d noticed? But I’d only looked at him for two seconds—

One of his brows arched. “...and you’re still doing it. Not exactly polite.”

Something inside me snapped. There it was. Exactly the kind of effortless provocation I'd been expecting. Waiting for. Because it had been simmering inside me for two years. Ever since the moment I'd hurled myself off the air mattress and hit the floor hard. The moment I'd screamed and jolted Annina awake. Annina, who had taken one look at the snake before groaning, "*Ever! What the hell?*"

Slowly, I straightened. I'd waited two years to see him again. And then I'd waited for him to give me the slightest reason to bring up that night. Part of me had hoped, right up until this moment, that he'd show even a hint of remorse—but of course I'd been wrong.

This was my first day at the Academy, where Ever would be staying for another year. And in that moment, I realized I couldn't afford to let him ruin this new chapter of my life.

Not today. Not over the months to come.

I had to end to this. Here. Now.

I narrowed my eyes and marched straight toward him. "Want me to tell you what wasn't very polite?" I growled, startling myself with the low, dangerous edge in my own voice.

Ever, on the other hand, remained completely unfazed. "By all means." He pushed himself away from the wall, took a single long stride toward me, and suddenly stood so close that barely an inch separated us. Without the slightest hesitation, he leaned in until his breath brushed against my skin. His eyes held mine as he murmured, "I'm all ears."

My thoughts came to an abrupt halt. Ever was only a few inches taller than Annina, but he stood more than a head taller than me. Combined with his broad shoulders, he had the kind of commanding presence that instinctively made people think twice before getting in his way. The hard set of his features only reinforced it.

A faint citrus scent reached me. It was the last thing I registered before I forgot how to breathe. Heat and cold surged through me at the same time, battling for control as my mind slowly recovered from the shock. This man had never been this close to me before. At least not in this form.

“Oh my God!” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Annina jump off the bed and march toward us. “Would you two please stop?”

Without hesitation, she grabbed Ever by the upper arm and pulled him away from me with all her strength. He, meanwhile, yielded so slowly it seemed he wanted to make absolutely sure everyone understood that his sister succeeded only because he was letting her.

Crossing her arms, she planted herself between us and, for some reason, looked from one of us to the other as though he wasn’t objectively the villain in this situation.

“We’re all adults now, aren’t we?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Ever replied without missing a beat, his gaze still fixed on me. “I never really had the chance to get to know your friend properly before, Annina.” Something calculating flickered in his eyes. “I’m looking forward to changing that.”

Annina visibly relaxed. “Now *that’s* what I wanted to hear.”

I whipped my head around to stare at her. Hadn’t she heard that tone? That unmistakably devious tone? Or maybe she simply didn’t want to. Because this was her beloved brother—the kind of person who could never do anything truly awful. Anything he did would always be dismissed as nothing more than a harmless prank. That was what happened when you were the golden child. No one ever saw the slightest fault in Ever. He could get away with anything.

Annina’s gaze landed on my open suitcase, and she gasped. “Oh, right! The welcome ceremony.” She snapped her fingers. “Don’t forget to bring

your cloak!" She was already hurrying toward her suitcase as though she were convinced she'd forget it herself if she didn't deal with it immediately.

"Right," Ever drawled, never taking his eyes off me. "Wouldn't want you embarrassing yourself on your very first day."

Heat rushed to my face as I remembered my very first transformation. He hadn't even been there. Yet he spoke as though he knew exactly what he was talking about.

I glared at him. "Why are you still here?" I hissed. "Don't you have somewhere else to be?"

"At the welcome ceremony," he replied. "With you."

Oh, hell. He actually meant it. He really was a mentor.

"Well, thank goodness!" Annina fished her dark-blue cloak out of the depths of her suitcase, only to toss it carelessly onto the bed. "At least we won't be late." She checked the time on her phone. "But we should get going soon." With determination, she headed for the bathroom. "If you'll excuse me for a second, I need one last bathroom break before we're all put on display." She was always complaining that shifting put pressure on her bladder, so I didn't stop her as she disappeared into the bathroom...

...leaving me alone with her brother.

The moment the door clicked shut behind her, I felt his eyes on me. Every muscle in my body tightened. I forced myself to keep unpacking, my movements stiff, taking great care not to expose anything in my suitcase that was absolutely none of Ever's business.

The silence stretched on, and with every passing second my heartbeat pounded louder in my ears. My palms grew damp, and I prayed Annina would hurry up and put an end to this ordeal.

My breathing had turned shallow. Even in the corner of my eye, I became more and more aware of Ever's gaze. Then it hit me. I wasn't the one

who should feel uncomfortable in my own skin—especially not in my own room.

I pulled myself together and met his eyes without flinching.

“You’re staring.”

Ever didn’t look the least bit caught off guard, nor did he seem to feel the faintest trace of guilt. He probably didn’t even know what guilt felt like. “So?”

I let out a derisive hiss. “Oh, so it’s a problem when I do it, but perfectly fine when *you* do?”

Ever didn’t so much as blink. “I never said I didn’t like it.”

My heart gave a tiny leap, and I hated it with every fiber of my being. I nearly snorted. What was this game? He knew perfectly well what he’d done. He knew exactly what I thought of him. Was this just another twisted way of getting under my skin?

I ground my teeth and continued rummaging through my suitcase. But the weight of his gaze only seemed to intensify. Sharper. More invasive. And one thing became painfully clear. I couldn’t let this go. In fact, Annina disappearing into the bathroom might have been the best thing that could’ve happened. Now Ever and I were alone. There was no one around for him to put on a show for. This was my chance to finally speak my mind.

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