

Chapter 3

Theo got out his wand from the wand pocket of his pants and tapped it on his aunt's classroom door twice, watching the usual purple hue glowing around the wooden door before...

"NEPHEW! GET IN HERE!" Her shout echoed even before the doors unlocked themselves and opened to let him in.

Theo only managed two steps before the sight before his eyes brought him to a sudden halt. His aunt's feet were planted on the edge of a chair that was precariously stacked on three more chairs – all four of which had been stacked on a tower pot that was – thankfully – still on the floor. The swaying tower of chairs and towerpot looked like it was on the verge of falling over.

Trying not to panic, he swallowed a lump in his throat and asked sardonically, "Do you need help putting your desk up there, Aunt Hexena?"

Hexena's unruly raven curls with the occasional purple streaks swayed across her fair face as her sights snapped from the crystal ball on the top shelf to her nephew down below, and her plum-purple eyes gained a new, determined shade. "The last time I did that to my desk, I broke it. Chancellor Higgins was not happy. I'd break my back before breaking another desk."

"Can you just... come back down?"

"I'll come back down as soon as you get me that." She pointed at the crystal ball, stubbornly remaining on the creaking chair. "I was going to ask Váskas to help me get it but he's only returning to campus tomorrow. Come on, nephew. Wave that wand."

Knowing she was going to stay there until she got what she wanted, Theo sighed and aimed his wand at the crystal ball, muttering, "Ereh Emoc."

The crystal ball unglued itself from the top shelf and glided seamlessly past Hexena and landed in Theo's hands. "Now, please. Come down."

To his utter incredulity, his aunt didn't climb down. She leaped to the stack of chairs that wobbled and were seconds away from collapsing before Theo instinctively aimed his wand and shouted, "Ezeert!"

The chairs and towerpot froze in mid-air, tilting and half-falling.

His aunt landed on a misty fog next to her desk – the spell she mixed and sprinkled on her floor before she mounted the stacked furniture.

"Thank you," his aunt said cheerily, grabbing the crystal ball from his hand when he was still in shock.

She then placed it in a transparent cube, opening the side panel and grabbed a few bottles from the lower shelf while Theo picked the chairs from the air and put them back on the floor, telling himself that his aunt was safely on the ground now so there was no longer any need for his heart to hammer this quickly.

"You can go back out there now," his aunt said. "I'll send for you again if I find another crystal ball somewhere unreachable. This is definitely not worse than the time someone shrunk my favorite tarot deck and put it into my coffee like a sugar cube."

Theo wasn't leaving until he knew who did it, though he already had a good guess. Watching the billowing smoke of blue and yellow fill the space in the cube now holding the crystal ball he'd just retrieved, he said, "It has to be those two. No one else would do this. This is going to be further proof that they should've been expelled."

"Alas, they weren't. Holding them here for an extra two semesters while they clean my office wasn't that bad of a punishment."

"It wasn't that great of a punishment either," he muttered.

"Contentment breeds peace, nephew."

"The same way it sustains injustice," he said, tone dipping a notch.

Hexena sighed and placed her wrinkled hands on his shoulders. He grew up so fast, she thought. "Given what I did," she reminded, her tone low like she was sharing a secret when it was a well-known truth, "the fact that I'm still here today is an injustice to many."

"It's not! The fact that they aren't burning in a cauldron right now is!"

They had this conversation many times before, and it always ended the same way – Hexena being grateful she was still alive to watch her nephew grow while her nephew fumed at the injustice that befell her, for a crime she didn't instigate, for a crime that got her wand snapped and broken right in front of her eyes, then snapped again in front of the public, who cheered!

Cheered.

And as if that wasn't enough, she was denied welfare despite having to raise him, a child. No one wanted to employ her after the purported crime. Chancellor Labigail Higgins and Professor Váskas Dérra were her saving grace. They took pay-cuts so that the university had enough to pay Hexena to teach, enabling her to raise her nephew, and she shed tears of relief when she realized he wasn't about to be taken away and put into an orphanage.

While she went through the turmoil on her own, having to put on a smile for the clueless little thing that Theo was, the real culprits were having the best time of their lives. Unscathed, sympathized, and revered, despite everything they'd done.

"Since they're not burning in a cauldron yet," his aunt began, having learned the best way to move forward was by agreeing with her nephew (which she did in her bones but never aloud) then change the subject to one that was more productive. "How about we just wait for the day he scalds his mate's skin and then his own?"

He gave her an arched look. "Dragon-shifters can't scald their own skin, Aunt Hexena."

"I didn't say to use fire or heat, did I?" she replied with a smirk.

His frown turned into a smile, easing his aunt's heart. "I'd give my degrees to see that day," he mused, eyes darting to the smoky cube now.

The blue and yellow smoke produced the desired shade of green and, from the center, it revealed a face, then zoomed out and revealed another face, giggling in a taunting way that made Theo consider looking into how to properly strangle someone.

"Like I said," Theo started again. "They should've been expelled."

Lifting the cube and making her way out, Hexena uttered, "I'll do my best to recommend that but you know Chancellor Higgins's hands may be bound."

Theo kept her pace, walking down corridors by her side, casting a stern eye at anyone who may even look like they'd pull his aunt's cloak.

"So, what are they like?" she asked all of a sudden.

"Who?" Theo blinked.

"I understand you met your ex-roomie's family? What are they like?"

Reida's face came to mind. In an instant, the heaviness in his chest lifted, the cloud of rage at his aunt's situation became more bearable. "They're..." his voice trailed off, making Hexena pause and turn. She scrutinized his face the same way she looked into his first wound when he fell on a broomstick. "They're lycans and..."

"Well, you don't say," Hexena chimed in feigned surprise.

Theo's lips cracked into a smile. "They're good people, all of them. The king is probably my favorite."

"Friendly?"

"Deathly. He could scare an entire battalion. I'd love to see him go head-to-head with dragon-shifters. He'd probably grab one by its tail and use his hostage as a whip, swinging it around to kill the rest."

Double-blinking at the visual he'd just painted, Hexena proceeded down the corridor she knew by heart. "You have an odd taste in people, except for Liam. That one's a good boy."

"He's twenty-four, just three years younger than I am."

"Your point being?"

"We're not boys anymore."

"So, what's her name?"

"What?" He stopped, stumped.

"You went speechless and were flushing redder than loulóúdia when I asked what his family was like. Someone caught your fancy. What's her name?"

"I've never fancied anyone but you, Au—"

"Save theattery and cut to the name or I'll concoct a truth potion and inject it into your veins."

"Reida," he answered despite knowing that his aunt – like anyone else – would need legal authorization before injecting any potions into anyone. He then took a quick look around to make sure no one had heard him.

"The princess?" his aunt chimed, a little louder than necessary, making his eyes take a second sweep around them. Hexena's lips tipped into a teasing smirk. "You have regal taste, nephew."

He gave a shake of his head, feeling the blush she mentioned rising to his cheeks and heating his nape. "It wasn't intentional," he murmured.

"Falling in love normally never is. Doing the necessary to stay in love, though, that would be," she said, her voice carrying a melancholic heaviness that Theo only understood when he got older.

"I doubt I've fallen for her," he clarified. "We just met. I hardly know her."

"And she has this effect on you already. Must be quite the woman."

"She's... curious, bold, beautiful. An open-book."

"You don't say," she teased, and only then did Theo realize he was talking like a wizard in love. "Does Liam know?"

"There's nothing to know."

"Hm. I'm certain it'll show, one way or another."

"That's not very encouraging."

"Am I to understand you plan to keep your feelings to yourself for all eternity? It's a long time, nephew. What if healthcare advances enough to keep you alive past 500 years old?"

"We had one conversation, Aunt Hexena. One. And Liam said she's four months shy of twenty – four months shy of possibly meeting her bonded mate."

"And you hope it would be you?"

Theo had to press his lips shut tight, but his heart screamed for it to be him, a reaction he couldn't wrap his head around. They'd just met. He knew nothing about her... Well, nothing but the little he knew from Liam – that she and their other cousin, Ianne, were unusually fast-learners (much like Theo and Liam themselves) and spent an average of four months to learn what their peers would take a year to absorb.

Ianne was the botanical expert, enrolled here in Thavma to further her knowledge in fertilizers and pest control.

Reida was obsessed with cures, hence her master's degree application to Thavma to study incantations' ingredients, potions, and methods, hoping to develop a cure for oleander, silver, allucin, and zahar poisoning.

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When Theo first learned the princess and lady were applying to Thavma, his prejudice got the better of him, and he thought they'd be accepted even without going through the standard application procedure, given who they were. But after applications were approved by the senior professors, Theo – who had just earned his latest academic title in lethal potions – was granted permission to read the personal statements of those he'd be teaching in the coming term. He made it a point to read them anonymously before putting a name to each piece.

There was one that stood out from the rest, its content well-researched and the writing addicting. He was only halfway through before he tripped to the page for a name, and the burn of shame scalded his skin and scorched every cell in his being.

How could he have entertained the mere thought of the princess being unequalled?

Reading her personal statement was like reading a storybook and textbook at the same time. It was in equal parts riveting and logical – not a balance easily achieved by even the greatest and most experienced researchers.

She was brilliant.

When Liam asked Theo if he had gotten to his cousin's personal statement yet and whether he'd change anything (because Reida asked him to ask), Theo was tongue-tied. He took a moment to refocus and looked at it with a more critical (and judgmental) eye, saying that it was perfect overall, but he would've liked to read more about her progress on synthetically neutralizing allucin because "it's the shortest out of the three."

Liam laughed, then thanked him, dropping Reida a message when he mentioned in passing, "Probably because we have the Forest of Oderem for allucin problems. Too bad the forest doesn't cure much else, though."

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Bringing himself out of his thoughts, Theo now found himself outside Chancellor Higgin's door. His aunt gave him a taunting look with a wry smile. "You've never taken that long to answer a question."

His mouth opened as he first knocked the door in three forceful, successive bangs.

"Screechingseance, Hexend!" Chancellor Higgins cursed from behind the doors, jumping at the sound.

"A moment of your time, Labigail?" Hexena asked in her sweetest voice.

The doors swung open inward and the bob-length, silver-haired chancellor was washing her partially yellow hand at the office sink with a potion-reversal bar soap when she skipped past formalities. "Thanks a lot."

"That's not Bunny's food, is it?" Hexena casually asked, striding in with her smoky cube.

Satisfied with her non-yellow hands, Labigail Higgins wiped off the remaining moisture and said, "I'd kill you before I kill my pet. What is it this time?"

Their speech blurred out as the doors slowly closed in Theo's face, and he was left staring at the door. He stood outside, waited, and hoped – hoped that the punishment would far surpass being kept back a term or two.

"Hey," Liam's voice had Theo putting away his vengeful thoughts. He gratefully accepted a pink-and-yellow sandwich from his friend when Liam leaned against the wall next to him and muttered, "Them again?"

Theo gave a curt nod, and deciding he needed a distraction, he asked, "Your cousins alright?"

"Yeah, they're fine. Saw them on their dorm. The whole entourage is helping them unpack and they'll howl to the sky if they need help."

Theo managed a smile, and all they did next was wait in silence.