

Chapter 4

Reida and Ianne were sharing a room, something they'd been very excited about ever since they received their acceptance letters to pursue their master's degree in Thavma University. It would be like a sleepover that never had to end!

After helping them get settled in, their families bid them goodbye, but not before their fathers reminded them to use their claws whenever necessary, and to refrain from going anywhere outside campus alone, and preferably take Liam with them, despite already having a bodyguard each. Uncle Greg wanted to put together a team of eight for the girls but the cousins – through Enora and Aunt Sush – talked him out of it.

Seeing o their families, the inseparable duo returned to their dorm. The entrance door still fascinated them. Ianne unlocked it when they got here, so now it was Reida's turn to place her palm on the wooden structure, watch the faint hue of silver glow at the edges before the door unlocked itself.

For safety reasons, doors of student dorms had been enchanted to only allow those residing in them to unlock the door. Anyone else would have to placed their hand on the door, and – from the inside – the opaque wooden structure would turn transparent like a one-way mirror for those inside to see who it was and decide whether or not to allow their visitor in.

The moment the cousins stepped in, they heard an unfamiliar voice.

"OH, MY LITTLE GHOUL IS ALL GROWN UP," a woman's voice echoed from the room next to Reida's and Ianne's.

"I am no more than a retem (around three feet) from you, mother," a quieter voice responded. "I'd prefer not to go deaf before the start of the term."

The tone was flat and monotonous. The airiness of both voices made them sound like...

"Wraiths," Ianne murmured just as they strode past the open door, bags and belongings still scattered across the floor of their housemate's room.

The young woman standing in the middle of all the luggage was petite. Her sickly-pale skin was a stark contrast to her pitch-black ponytail that matched her pitch-black eyes and pitch-black clothes along with those pitch-black lips. She sensed a presence – souls – and her head turned without any other part of her body moving. Without blinking, her lips lifted, taking away none of the coldness wraiths exhibited despite the smile. "Well, so they weren't pulling my cloak. I'm sharing a dorm with lycan royalty."

There was a chill in the air when she spoke, a shudder that would trickle down the spines of any warm-blooded creature – a common feeling when a wraith was close by.

"Hi, I'm..." Reida was about to step through the doorway but recalled she hadn't been invited in, and indecision planted her feet at the entrance of the wraith's room.

"You can come in, Your Highness. I'm not in the mood to s*ck anyone's souls today. The journey and people were tiring. Furthermore," She lifted her wrist, showing the bracelet every wraith was mandated to wear at all times unless authorized to do otherwise. "My parents and I are already on a leash."

"They're called precautionary bracelets, my little ghoul," her mother reminded, more affectionate than stern.

Reida took a cautious step through the doorway and gained bits of confidence as she went. Ianne was a bit less sure, but kept at Reida's heels, trying to control her darting eyes, mentally counting the number of black things this creature owned and wondering whether the pop of color she and Reida brought disturbed the monochromatic palette in a way that their housemate would change her mind about not sucking souls.

"Reida," the princess said, a hand to her left shoulder.

The corner of those black lips lifted higher when the wraith stretched out a hand, forgoing an incanta's way of greeting, eyes unblinking as she assessed what Reida would do next.

Ianne looked like she was about to squirm, but Reida accepted the hand, resisting a shiver at the icy temperature and pushing a smile when the wraith said, "Pleasure to meet you, Reida. I'm Lámia Mávros."

Recognition entered Reida's eyes and straightened Ianne's spine. Their gazes pivoted to the man in the room wearing a tattered black coat – the timeless and most desired fashion piece among wraiths. His eyes were gray and hollow, black lips pulled into a line.

"Minister Mávros," Reida and Ianne echoed in unison, the instinct to greet political figures honed from years of practice enabled their voices to emerge respectful and confident but not too eager, despite the silver of fear running through their veins.

The man didn't say a word, and merely offered a nod in return.

"Oh look, Dad is smiling," Lámia said in what they gathered was supposed to be a tease. It was difficult to tell, considering her tone was flatter than a pancake.

The old man was indeed smiling because his lips were flat. If he wasn't, his resting face would hold a downward frown.

Reida's attention pivoted to the beaming woman now. "That means you're Chef Trofi Mávros."

"OH, SUCH A CLEVER LITTLE THING YOU ARE," she said, loud and enthusiastic, coming forward and wrapping Ianne and Reida in a big, cold hug, as her daughter exhaled an embarrassed sigh.

"Mother, they have heightened auditory senses. You don't need to scream."

The stout woman with cloudy curls of silvery, black hair dropped her voice to what she deemed as a whisper, "Sorry about that, you two. Habit from giving orders in the kitchen."

"Which opens once a month," her daughter added, refuting her excuse.

Though the full version of that was her restaurant opened once a month on a reservation-only basis that accommodated no more than twenty people, who were selected by the chef herself from the thousands of names she received each month. Her customers were ones who were more than willing to pay a premium rate for a premium experience. Chef Trofi may be one of the few wraiths who could cook (which in itself was a feat since wraiths neither ate nor drank "actual food and drinks"), but her ever-changing menu was deemed one of the best in Incanta.

Title, money, and recognition had never been Trofi's aim. For some reason, food intrigued her. It was a mystery to her why the other species enjoyed these colorful ingredients mixed and matched in innumerable ways. She, like any wraith, could smell these things, but the scents were more informative than they were appetizing, like smelling different perfumes rather than something that one would want to ingest.

She enrolled in cooking classes and began her culinary journey, dropped out and began experimenting on her own, offering charities to sample the taste until a food critique became her neighbor and constant food-tester. The food critique submitted Trofi's cuisines for sampling by the most prestigious critiques when her hard-to-please taste buds thought the flavors and textures far surpassed some of the best chefs in the realm. That was when Trofi became known as the primary example that one needed nothing more than a curious mind and lively passion to achieve anything, though the chef herself reiterated that luck played a crucial role as well, recognizing that her neighbor was the embodiment of her good fortune.

Trofi didn't operate a full-time restaurant because she didn't believe in turning her passion into a profession. The money she collected went back to buying ingredients and more cookbooks if it wasn't used for her daughter's education first. And when there was any excess, it'd go to purchasing more tattered fashion pieces for herself and her husband.

"So skinny," Trofi gently pinched Reida's arms, surprising the princess because her sister was the skinny one in the family. "I'd have to fatten you up," Trofi declared.

"For the love of death, Mother, she's normal for her kind."

"Hm. Their kind could be a bit malnourished in that case."

"You do realize I'm the skinniest one in this room."

"I meant warm-blooded creatures, my little ghoul."

Lámia dragged an exhale, eyes finding her father, that flat line of his lips tipped just a little higher, only perceptible to the trained eye, filled with nothing but pride for his wife's talent and daughter's academic stride. He deemed himself many times luckier and happier than creatures with a soul.

Who needed a soul when they had a job they liked, a passionate and loving partner, and a stone-cold daughter who had his wife's perseverance and his own mannerism? The minister wouldn't ask for anything more even if he could. Wraiths may be still be shunned from most of the public, but his family wasn't shunned from blessings, that much he knew.

"How would you like me to call you?" Lámia asked, looking past Reida, straight at the other lycan royalty. "Is it Lucianne, Lucy..."

"Ianne. Everyone calls me Ianne," she said, braving herself through the handshake. "Do you normally offer handshakes?"

The gesture felt natural, properly-trained. "No, I don't. Dad taught me. Politicians have to learn all kinds of tricks for all kinds of circuses."

"Lámia!" her mother chided.

But Ianne and Reida burst out laughing, filling the cold, black room with laughter and life. Both girls understood politics involved the occasional superfluous meetings, chats, and events. And gestures too, as it appeared.

Just then, another voice drifted in from the entrance that got louder as it approached them. "...decent. I don't need them to be perfect, just decent. You know, preferably not those who mess up the place and don't see the need to clean and..."

The ranting came to a halt when the witch of lime green eyes spotted the room of black filled with only two colored creatures, recognizing them instantly. Her face contorted into a state of indecisiveness, not knowing whether to hide how she truly felt or let her true thoughts amplify on her face.

"And you are?" Lámia prompted the witch gawking at her and her new housemates.

Her coldness was not well-received, despite knowing that this was a wraith's usual manner of speaking. For some reason, non-wraiths expected more animation. Lámia didn't see the point in offering more animation when the rest of the creatures weren't the least interested in toning down their own animation.

"Eleni," the witch replied, unsmiling. Glancing at Reida about to approach her with a smile that was going to make her gag, her attention returned to Lámia, and this halted the princess's footsteps when Eleni asked, almost accusatorily, "You know them?"

Unruffled, though admittedly confused, Lámia responded, "If you count the ten minutes they were in my room as knowledge, then yes, I know them."

"Oh, so you just met them as well."

"Evidently."

"And you are?"

"Lámia Mávros."

"The minister's daughter?" Eleni's eyes bulged.

"Shocking, isn't it?"

Under her breath, Eleni muttered to herself, "Why would they put me in this dorm?"

Disregarding the fact that the witch wasn't talking to anyone in particular, Lámia replied, "Integration. Diplomacy. Equality. A show. Whatever you want to call it."

Eleni muttered something else that no one could hear and went to her room, ushered in the man and woman around her age helping her with her things and closing the door behind them.

"See?" Lámia echoed, drawing Ianne's and Reida's attention back to her when her eyes remained on the closed door. "Learning a handshake is more practical than learning the incantas' way of greeting. I don't even use the latter."

Sensing the temperature dropping too low despite her nature, the chef mother cheerfully changed the subject, saying she'd send some food over after perfecting her latest recipe, and the cousins said goodbye to the wraiths to let Lámia get settled in.

Returning to their room and taking o a tablet-like device hanging on the wall next to their door, the cousins decided to play around with it in their room. The at-screen devices were called padlets. This was where one had access to the Internet. Incanta didn't believe in merging search engines into communication devices, seeing it as more of a distraction than a convenience. There was a padlet outside every room, and they had seen a whole row of these along Thavma's corridors during registration and when they made their way to the dorm. The cousins got the hang of the mechanics quickly, then found a free game and began playing, chuckling when the shish they were trying to grow was gobbled up by a bigger shish.

Several moments later, their hearing caught Eleni's door open, then footsteps pattered quickly toward the entrance, and the entrance door closed in a soft thud.

"Was it Lámia or us?" Ianne asked as they laid on Reida's bed.

"I think it was all three of us," Reida said, recalling the way the Eleni's face fell the moment her gaze landed on them.

Ianne shrugged. "Mom said the other species might take time to get used to us. But Liam and the other lycans and wolves probably did the heavy lifting already, being the first ones from the kingdom to enrol here and all of that."

"Liam has the brains, charm, and looks from Uncle Juan that anyone would look to."

"Theo has a different vibe, doesn't he? More... reserved."

"Yeah, he does." Reida's thoughts went to the professor who held the book upside down, the conversation they had with such ease, the way he smiled and put on a brave face even when her father had his threatening mode turned on. Not many knew, but she noticed the way his demeanor changed the moment the other professor sent for him. There was a sudden shift in energy: it was no longer carefree, only vigilant and maybe even a little dark. "I wonder what was that thing about cleaning crystal balls and tarot cards."

"We could ask Liam."

"The question is probably why he'd never told us or Mom. He normally shares these things... But now that I think of it, maybe he doesn't share everything about Theo. I mean, we never even got a photo."

"Isn't that because he's camera-shy? That's what Liam said."

Not having a counter-argument, Reida simply said, "Yeah, probably."

Ianne chuckled and got up. "C'mon, let's go grab dinner. I, for one, can't wait for the wand ceremony tomorrow."