

Chapter 11 Eleven

"What did you say her name is, Reida?" Theo asked, trying to ignore the tingle running under his skin when he said her name. He got out his wand and gave it a quick wave, producing a smoky sheet that looked a lot like a list.

"Eleni. Her last name is... It starts with an S, I think. Uh..."

"Sfálma, was it?" Ianne mused.

"Goddess, yes!" Pivoting back to Theo, Reida mindlessly uttered, "Sfálma. Sorry."

While skimming through the list of names, Theo responded, "You don't have to apologize for something so trivial, Reida. You're a princess."

"Does that mean I'd have to apologize for something trivial if I wasn't a princess?" she challenged, giving him an arched look.

His eyes lifted from the list. Their gaze collided, dark purple meeting light at the exact same moment, and that brief lock connected them in a way that was hard to explain. It wasn't just attraction. There was a kind of knowingness, a degree of faith in where this could go, and a desire to explore.

"Huh," Liam's huff had them averting their eyes. Theo's and Reida's sights snapped to Liam, turning a shade of red like they'd both been caught, but Liam was simply running a finger down the cloudy list that was a little hard to read, hence his personal dislike for this particular spell.

Taking a relieved breath to himself, Theo stole one more glimpse of Reida and resisted smiling to himself at the betraying pink of her cheeks while following his friend's gaze to the last third of the list, and he murmured, "At least we know why her name sounded familiar."

"What?" Reida and Ianne echoed.

Lámia hadn't moved from her cross-armed position, but her unblinking eyes showed that she was ready for the plot twist.

"She's in my class," Theo explained simply, brows pulling to the center as he sighed and waved the list away.

"Which class?" Reida asked, enlarged eyes pleaded with him to say anything but Lethal Potions.

Liam gave her a consoling pat on her shoulder, which should have been a good-enough answer, but Reida was holding onto the illusionary thread of hope that Eleni wouldn't be her classmate yet again.

All hope was drained when Theo replied, "I'm flattered if you think I teach more than one class, Reida. But I must disappoint you and tell you that I don't."

"That would be interesting," Lámia said. "I should've taken that class."

"What do you mean?" Ianne asked.

"You wouldn't want to see your cousin decimating Eleni Sfálma? I would." Gaze pivoting to Theo, Lámia asked, "Are students who don't take the tests and assessments allowed to sit in lectures and tutorials?"

"No." Theo gave a single, conclusive shake of his head, looking at the wraith like she'd just asked if she was allowed to suck every soul on campus.

"Hm. Pity," Lámia muttered. Black eyes travelled to Reida, and she continued, "Our association for the past twenty-four hours has given me the impression that we may be friends. If so, please share whenever Eleni trips over her cat. And when you decide you've learned enough and are ready to douse some poison in her room or on her, count me in."

Reida may need more time to get a hang of incantas' phrases but she knew 'tripping over one's cat' meant making a fool of oneself. Why was Lámia already trying to wage war over someone they practically have to live with for the rest of their four-month program?

Before the princess could protest, disbelief coated Theo's voice when he questioned, "You're actually saying all of that here? Right now? In front of me?"

"Would you prefer I do it behind your cloak?"

"I'd prefer those thoughts never entered your head."

"Telling a student what to think just because he's a teacher. Typical."

Liam and Ianne snorted, but Theo's gaze instinctively went to Reida. "Is she normally like this?"

"I've only known her for a day, so..." Reida shrugged.

Turning back to Lámia, Theo noted, "Don't take this the wrong way, but thank you for not taking Lethal Potions."

"I'm actually considering speaking to Chancellor Higgins about adding it to my sch-"

"No. Absolutely not. I don't need a student learning the course material only to use it on their own coursemates."

Lámia was unfazed: "I admire your persistence and appreciate it isn't based on discriminating the soul-sucking race but I must remind you that your word against the chancellor's is insignificant in the larger scheme of things."

Ianne was practically tearing up from cackling at this point while Reida and Liam were trying their best to hold back their own laughter.

Theo took a long moment to gather his thoughts, then noted, "Using lethal substances and knowledge on something like this is a waste of resources. It's not our only option. I have my own way of dealing with things."

The laughter and urges to laugh stopped.

"I'm listening," Lámia said, waiting, as were the others.

"Good," Theo replied. "Keep it that way. Don't do anything to get yourself expelled. Let the graduates handle this."

"Handle what?" Reida asked, suddenly not finding anything humorous.

There was a glint in his eye when he uttered, "I guess we'll find out in a few hours, Ms. Paw-Claw."

"No," she exclaimed. "No, no, no. Whatever it is you're thinking of doing, don't."

"Last I checked, I'm the professor, Your Highness."

"Then be a professor, Professor – a professional!"

"Oh, I can be very professional. Besides, what's a class without a little fun?"

"She might have her reasons for saying what she did," Reida suggested meekly. "Not that she was right in saying those things, but maybe something in her past made her feel it was... right?"

Theo's expression only exemplified uncompromising adamance. "A difficult past doesn't justify taking it out on those who have more. None of us had the privilege of choosing the circumstances we're born into. Scars and wounds from the past don't justify acting out on those who'd taken the opportunities they had. If we'd really like to place blame, blame those who've been governing Incanta. I don't believe the less privilege should be given an easier route or even a different route, but I do believe the governing body has never done enough to alleviate the lives of these families, never granting them enough access to the same information and opportunities available to others."

A moment of silence followed from the power and depth those words carried. Theo didn't sound like he was speaking from an intellectual standpoint. It felt like he was speaking from experience. It wasn't just an assessment from the mind, but a belief from his soul.

Although Liam mentioned that his best friend's aunt was a Premonitions and General Potions professor here in Thavma, he'd never mentioned Theo had been accused of nepotism before. Then again, there were other things Liam didn't tell the family about Theo, choosing to keep his friend's secrets over sharing with his family – a fact that Theo appreciated.

The voice that broke the silence was a cold, monotonous one. "I deeply regret not signing up for Lethal Potions now."

"Lámia," Reida chided. "Stop encouraging him." Turning to Theo, she persisted. "Doing more would only make things worse. Besides, Eleni didn't mention any names, so she didn't necessarily mean us."

An awkward silence followed before Lámia said, "Do you hear that, Reida? It's the sound of incredulity."

As Ianne began chuckling and held Reida's shoulder for support, the princess's eyes narrowed. "I'm beginning to consider reassessing our friendship, Lámia."

Everyone noticed the way the wraith's eyes brightened with the tiniest spark. It was brief, but noticeable. "Oh, we're friends. Good. Let's go do friendly things, like visit the bakery just outside campus. It serves some of the best souls-in-bottles in Incanta. They have other colorful things like pastries and cakes as well if you feel like ruining your day. The strawberry croissant might suit your taste, Ianne."

Liam raked his fingers through his hair in frustration. "Goddess, my wolf's drooling just thinking about the lemon tart I ate last week."

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 +120 Points at most

"We could get you one," Ianne offered.

"No, it's alright. I'm meeting Felicia later this evening. I'll bring her there before dinner and grab one then. She loves the cakes there."

"Oh," was all Ianne could eeked out, eyes darting to the ground before looking somewhere else.

Lámia asked, "Is that another professor or..."

"She is," Liam said with a bright smile. "Not here, though. She teaches in Mageia. Got a better offer from them than Thavma."

"She had two offers. Impressive," Lámia uttered, then told herself to shut up after this when her peripheral vision caught Ianne shifting instead of standing still, looking anywhere but at Liam, her body showing all kinds of signs that screamed her need to leave.

Liam didn't notice, beaming with happiness and so much pride. "She's incredibly brilliant. Just... perfect in every way. And," His arm went over Theo's shoulder, a lilt of humor lifting his tone when he added, "Felicia also happens to be the only woman my ex-roomie here didn't try to tear me away from, so that's something."

Theo noticed the way Ianne folded herself too, and couldn't help but feel sorry for her. Whenever Liam spoke about his cousins, it was clear there was nothing more than platonic love. His nosy Aunt Hexena once ventured whether the cousins would develop a romantic interest for one another considering Liam and the girls were technically not blood-related since the queen was the adoptive sister of Liam's father. Theo brushed his aunt off after getting to know Liam for a few months, telling her he saw them as nothing more than sisters at best. But it appeared his aunt's intuition had once again beaten one-sided facts.



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