

Chapter 12 Twelve

"Welcome to your first class in Lethal Potions," Theo began, indifferent to the squeals and shrieks, knowing he owed his aunt two dinners per week for the rest of the month instead of their usual once a week the moment he heard those unnecessary sounds.

His aunt told him that, as much as she recognized his gift in potions and hard work over the years that enabled him to be one of the youngest professors Incanta had ever seen, she also recognized he had grown into one of the most handsome young wizards of the century – a fact that she would love to take credit for but couldn't. And since Professor Hexena Ischyrós herself had a notable number of students who signed up for her class simply because of her beauty in her younger days, she betted her nephew would have some of those students as well.

Theo's mistake was to say there would be no such thing in his class, not being opened to the slightest possibility that there may be a student or two who'd fit into that category. His aunt saw this as an opportunity, and told him that if, on his first day, he caught that kind of look or heard a kind of squeal, he'd have to have to double their weekly dinner/gossip session for an entire month. Theo didn't think much of it when he agreed.

Only when he walked through the doors did he realize he'd just lost one of the worst gambles he could make in his life. The stares weren't subtle. Nor were the squeals. Three or four were blushing red just by watching him roll up his sleeves.

Theo made a mental note to roll up his sleeves before classes next time. He would later learn that it made no difference.

As he leaned against the teacher's desk and seeing the memorized faces in person for the first time, he wondered if he could oust a few students. Did he have the power to do that? Were there conditions to fulfil before he could do it? He'd ask his aunt about it during the extra dinner he'd have to schedule with her later. How was it that she always won these things?

"I'm Professor Theodore Ischyrós, and I'll be conducting all lectures and tutorials. But before we get into the subject matter, it is important to fully appreciate the purpose of studying Lethal Potions." He paused, allowed a short stretch of silence to pass, then continued, "This branch of potions is not merely a study of the most dangerous substances known to Incanta, it also elucidates how these substances are made.

Understanding that would enable us to hypothesize ways to neutralize them in the shortest span of time using the least amount of resources. Lethal Potions is a study of deathly substances to sustain life, not to take more lives."

"First things first, the syllabus that sits on your desk outlines the sequence in which we'd learn the course material. And the manner in which you'd be tested has been laid down in the accompanying document. Regurgitation of course materials during the final exam would only take up twenty percent of the final grade; thirty percent would come from pop quizzes so if you're ever in the mood to fail or get expelled, don't bother finding time to study; the next forty percent would come from conducting an experiment of your choosing, within the limits Thavma is able to accommodate and authorize; and the final ten percent would be granted based on class participation, so be mindful about staying awake when you're in this room. Questions?"

A hand raised, and Theo nodded her way.

Holding the sheet detailing the way they'd be tested and graded, Eleni asked, "Professor, this says Professor Antagonistikós and Professor Katákopos would be assessing us?"

"Yes. Professor Achilles Antagonistikós from the University of Filtra and Professor Daphne Katákopos from the University of Eidikós would be assessing you, not me. Which is why I said I'll merely be conducting the lectures and tutorials. I didn't say anything about grading your class."

Eyes bulged wide and irascibles' skins turned white, announcing their shock and fear.

"B-But..." Even Eleni was struggling to speak. "Isn't Achilles Antagonistikós..."

"Professor Achilles Antagonistikós," Theo corrected, brows furrowing in disapproval.

"Yes – Professor Achilles Antagonistikós. Isn't he..." She trailed off, expecting Theo to take over, but he didn't. He simply waited for her to continue, so the pressure she felt made her add, "Isn't he a Thavma graduate?"

"He is," Theo replied curtly.

"And there was an article. Well, it isn't about the article. It's actually in the comments section that said..." Eleni waved her hand like the article was in front of her when it was actually on Thavma's website.

"Ms. Sfálma, kindly complete your question so everyone would know what you're trying to ask," Theo's mildly irritated voice echoed.

Reida chose to stare at her syllabus sheet, praying Lámia would add Lethal Potions to her schedule so she didn't have to sit through another class like this alone. She knew where Eleni was going with things. Reida didn't skim through reader comments as profusely as Eleni did, but she knew the gist of the unasked question from Liam's stories whenever he visited home. She knew the name Achilles Antagonistikós as well as she knew Theo's name even before she'd met either of them.

Eleni swallowed, considered aborting her question, but seeing most eyes were on her, it felt like she'd be a shrinking coward if she chose to back down now. "I suppose my question is: w-why is Professor Antagonistikós grading us?"

"Are you implying he's unqualified, Ms. Sfálma?"

"No! I meant... he and you weren't exactly... friends?"

Curses travelled in low murmurs throughout the room.

They were dead, undeniably and guaranteed to fail the semester and doomed to repeat the subject or drop it entirely.

A rivaling professor would hurt his rival by failing his students, because a high-enough failing rate would prompt the chancellor to intervene. An assessment would be conducted on the lecturer's manner of teaching and he may be asked to resign for incompetence. It wasn't Theo's career his students were worried about. It was their own grades and future they were concerned with.

Theo gave nothing away, holding onto his hard expression. "We weren't friends. We still aren't. But what are you trying to imply, Ms. Sfálma?"

"Isn't it unwise to ask him to assess us?"

"Enlighten me, Ms. Sfálma, how is it unwise to ask one of the brightest minds of this generation to assess you and your peers to make sure only the qualified qualifies?"

"Surely he can't be the only being..."

"He's not. But he is one of those beings. Failing to recognize that is failing to appreciate the value he'd given to the scientific community, even when he was still a student. Here's something to take note of, everyone – you never have to work with someone you don't like, but choosing not to

respect them should only be done in the most justifiable circumstances – if they'd behaved unprofessionally would be the most common reason. It was never a secret that Achilles and I do not get along, but like all rivals, we still preserve a level of respect for one another in order to serve something that's bigger than the both of us – in this case, it's to filter through the next batch of Lethal Potion students. Questioning his right to assess you is questioning his qualification and professionalism, which is something I'd highly advise against, unless he's truly done something unethical that's worth looking into. And if I were you, I'd look at it this way – being taught by a Thavma professor and assessed by two leading professors in Lethal Potions from top institutions who'll grade you, where there would be no risk of favouritism or conflict of interest, would be a great boost to the credibility of your final grade. If you pass, that is."

That was definitely one way of seeing it, Reida thought. She liked that Theo wouldn't be grading her or preparing her quizzes, but when she read Achilles's name, she went into shock the same way Eleni did. The difference was that Reida chose not to speak because she knew she couldn't yet, knowing she'd only sound incoherent.

"Any more questions?"

Another hand rose – an irascible's. "Given the unconventional nature of assessment, Professor, is the passing mark lower than sixty percent?"

"No." Theo's brows furrowed. "I'm rather concerned if you're asking that on the first day and within the first hour, Ms. Filódoxos." Skimming over his students, he added, "You're no longer an undergrad. This course will be demanding, which should have gone without saying, so if you feel the need to drop this class, do speak to me and Chancellor Higgins soonest possible."

"Are you teaching any other class, Professor?" another witch asked, giving him the kind of look that had some of her classmates making a face or rolling their eyes.

"No," said Theo simply, eyes briefly flickering to Reida, mentally recalling their earlier conversation as he fought back a smile.

"Oh, that's a pity. Looks like I'll have to stick this one out then."

"Oh, poor you," the dragon shifter seated next to Reida murmured sardonically, a sentiment that was commiserated by anyone in the class who didn't see Theo as someone to potentially sleep with.

Theo merely dragged out an exasperated exhale, making his disapproval known through his drawn-in brows and deep frown, but his reaction only



made some of the swooning ladies swoon harder. "If there are no further questions, let's begin with chapter one – plants. Now, who can tell me the three most powerful flora in Incanta?"

Eleni's hand shot to the air. Upon Theo's nod, she answered, "It's not set in stone since there's a possibility of new flora emerging on a daily basis but – at present – they're the three Is – lithuas in pink, limas in blue, and lisophoras in yellow.

"The first portion of the answer is correct, not the second. Anyone else want to give a try?"

Eleni's bright smile dimmed evidently, and she remained stone-shocked until Iridia patted her shoulder and told her it was alright.

But it wasn't alright! That was the answer! She read it!

Indignant, she flipped open not one, but two Lethal Potions textbooks, checking the section that listed the most lethal flora in order. There! The three Is! She was right!

About ten other students had attempted to answer by the time Eleni was telling herself not to make the same mistake she did in history as she pondered on how best to tell the young professor he'd made a mistake in front of the whole class without seeming rude.

"Ms. Paw-Claw, care to participate?" Theo asked, making Reida subtly jerked in her seat.



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