

Chapter 14 Fourteen

"We are so proud of you, cupcake. Very well done!" Xandar said through the webcam and continued laughing, holding his queen on his lap who resisted joining him for their daughter's sake.

"It wasn't supposed to happen like that, Dad."

"Sometimes things go better than planned," he said with another chuckle.
"Way better."

"I wasn't even joking."

Ken piped, "I'm not going to lie, Ri. It was funny."

"Mom?" Reida pleaded, needing someone on her side.

Lucy sighed. "Cupcake, I understand you were trying your hand at diplomacy, but in the context of your class and the unusual reaction you had compared to the way a normal creature would react to Elen's excessive competitiveness, it did come off as sardonic amusement."

Her father chuckled some more before adding, "Amazing. Impeccable." Then, in a more affectionate tone, his gaze fell on his mate when he added, "Just like your mother."

"I didn't know you had a funny bone to begin with," Enora said from the upper right corner of the split screen, genuinely impressed as her fingers pulled and pressed the face mask back in place when it moved during her laughter with her brother and father at Reida's unintended joke. "Maybe Thavma is giving you an advanced degree and a personality upgrade."

"Enora," Lucy warned.

"What? It's a good thing, Mom. She's getting funny! It adds to her character."

"Your sister, like you and your brother, aren't lacking in character just because you can or cannot be funny." To her eldest, she continued, "Reida, cupcake, I know the last thing you want is for us to intervene, so your father and I won't. But please, don't refrain from participating in class just because she's there. You're not being fair to yourself."

"Yeah, since when do you not raise your hand?" Enora questioned, finding

◀ Chapter 14 Fourteen

✿ +120 Points at most

it odd herself. Not raising hands during class was her thing, never her sister's.

"I'm practically living with her, so I guess I wanted to... preserve the peace?"

"Whose peace, Reida?" her mother asked. "Hers or yours? Because the preservation of communal peace is a group effort. And if it isn't, it shouldn't come at the expense of your own peace."

Reida was tongue-tied. She didn't think of it that way.

It was her sister's voice that brought her back when Enora offered an unhelpful suggestion, "I could ask Uncle Greg to get your bodyguard to plant some kind of insects or explosives in..."

"No!" thundered Reida and Lucy while Ken and Xandar broke into a second round of laughter.

"Mom, I'm not here to make enemies," Reida expressed her concern.

"You're not there to dim your own light just because others don't want to see you shine either, Reida. Theo is right – having a pained past doesn't grant anyone a perpetual license to hurt others, either through words or actions. I don't know this girl, but I can tell she seems quite bitter, but none of that is yours or anyone's fault. She's an adult now. The responsibility to heal lies in her hands. She can't expect creatures to understand her when she's not even bothered to be respectful. None of you owe her anything, so none of you should carry the burden that she hasn't realized is hers to offload and release – healthily and gradually."

"So what do I do? Just pretend she didn't say what she did in history?"

"You don't have to pretend. You just treat her as she is – another classmate. If you would've attempted at answering a question if she was anyone else, then answer it. You're in Thavma for you, Reida. Not her. Be the creature you'd be despite that kind of toxicity – bold, ambitious, and passionate in everything she pursues."

Reida could do that. "Okay, thanks Mom."

Enora spoke again just for the hell of it, "So, you really don't want Uncle Greg's hel—"

"Cookie," Lucy interjected. "Let's keep Uncle Greg within the matters of national security only."

"But it is national security, Mom. Reida's a princess – the heir to the throne. We should be using some of Aunt Sush's targeted arrows on that

Something in that line made Reida and her animal shrink. It wasn't the first time it was brought up but she still couldn't get used to it. It felt like a blister, a thorn on the side – that thing you didn't want to do but know you had to because... you just had to.

She really was the heir to the throne, wasn't she? She was used to being the princess but it was hard to translate that to a role as the future queen. By convention, Reida – as the first-born pup – should have been crowned next-in-line in a grand coronation on her eighteenth birthday, but she requested for it to be delayed, a request her parents granted, telling her it was okay to only hold the ceremony when she felt ready.

But would she ever be ready?

The delay would hit a two-year mark in a few months and it still felt too soon, too fast. There was still so much she hadn't seen, so many things she hadn't done, so many elements around her that she hadn't explored yet.

She loved her parents but she'd seen them work, and although they'd always made time for her and her siblings by color-coding their calendars, the piles on their desks never seemed to clear completely nor were their schedules ever empty. They loved what they did, everyone could tell. But would Reida want to do what they were doing for the rest of her life?

"REIDA!" Enora shouted, making her sister jerk. "Who were you daydreaming about?"

That was one of the worst questions to ask. A low growl came from their father while their mother whispered something to him, and his nose found its way to her hair when Lucy asked, "Are you alright, cupcake?"

Reida narrowed her eyes at her sister. "Can you stop pushing everyone's buttons for once?"

"Mom asked if you were alright – twice. You didn't answer. You look like you were two packs away. What was I supposed to do?"

"You could've just shouted my name and stopped there."

"I could. But why should I?" Enora questioned with an innocent smile but a devious glint in her eye that Ken swore matched Uncle Greg's.

Ken spoke, sounding like he was speaking to their parents, "Uncle Greg did say their bodyguards reported nothing out of the ordinary, even with Incanta's weirdness, so..."

"I'm fine," Reida declared before the speculations and worry went on. "I was just digesting Mom's advice."

"Hm," their father began, his anger seemed to have mellowed out as his fingers ran through his mate's hair, gazing at her like they'd just met when they'd been married for two decades. "She does give great advice." His tone was low, soft, affectionate, and absolutely disgusting.

"Goddess, Dad? Seriously?" Enora groaned and made a show of covering her eyes.

Ken used this time to reply to a few texts.

This reaction was despite the fact that they had seen their father gushed about their mother and dropped random kisses on her face, neck, and shoulder countless times when they were growing up. And they'd definitely seen their mother blushing like a new bride every time she got that kind of attention from him, which would send their father into a trance where he'd just stare at her like he was seeing for the first time.

It wasn't something Reida thought much of as a pup since she saw the same dynamic between her uncles and aunts. But as she grew older, she and her siblings learned that their family's love was one that was sacred and rare, but that didn't mean Enora enjoyed watching the exchange, even when it was between her favorite uncle and aunt.

"Mom? Dad?"

"Yes, cupcake?" they said in unison.

Reida took a breath to herself, then said, "Something happen during the wand ceremony, and it might not be something good."

She told her family about the prolégo mushroom and the Prolégo Prophecy, appreciating that no one made a sound throughout the tale. Her brother's face was stone-cold. Her sister's elbow was anchored on the table while her hand covered her mouth, which was a strategic move because Enora hadn't mastered the level of composure Reida already acquired and was still prone to gasp or shriek by accident.

By the end of it, her parents didn't look disappointed, nor did her siblings. They just looked... serious.

After a moment, Enora's quiet murmur channeled through the speaker even though she was speaking to herself, "Wonder if there's another mushroom that can detect the number of mate-bond rejections a creature has to go through before meeting their destined mate."

"We're talking about Ri, Enora," Ken chided.

"Yeah, but doesn't it make you wonder..."

"Later. It'll make me wonder later. Not now."

"Prophecy or not," their mother's voice echoed, quieting her pups' bickering, "as long as you do what you love and stay true to yourself, no curse will ever overpower your legacy and character."

"You're not... upset?" Reida asked, the fear she held back until now was threatening to emerge in the form of tears.

"We couldn't be prouder of the person you're growing into, cupcake," her father uttered firmly, though the furrow of his brows signified his confusion. How could their pup not know they were beyond grateful to be given the honor of raising such an impeccable young woman? "Why would we be upset about something like this?"

Her mother, in turn, asked, "Are you upset, cupcake?"

Upset? No. But... "I'm scared," Reida admitted in a whisper. "Betrayal, heartbreak... Which would it be? When will it happen?"

"Why are you leaving out the one about greatness?" Enora chimed.

"Reida," her mother spoke in the same hushed tone she used when she was consoling her pups who'd normally be curled up her side when they were little. "Betrayal and heartbreak are... not desirable experiences, and it's okay to be scared. I am worried that you may have to go through it, but I'm confident you'll come out okay. You have everything it takes, and although it's unfair that you'd be subjected to these things even when you don't seem to be doing anything wrong, there are forces that none of us can control. But we can control how we choose to move forward – choose to weather the storms and come out the other side. And we'll be right here with you if and when that happens. You're never alone, Reida. We're right here with you."

Relief washed over Reida like a tidal wave. She'd been so focused on when the prophecy would be fulfilled and who it would involve that she didn't consider the fact that she'd find a way to be okay even if it happened. She didn't need to give the stupid mushroom this much room in her head. She was in Incanta to study and – hopefully – develop cures, not sit and wait for a prophecy to happen. "Thanks, Mom," she said, shedding tears of relief, and she noticed her father's stiff shoulders loosened.

"Okay, Ri. Serious question," Enora began, leaning so close to the camera lens that everyone could only see one of her lilac eyes and the magnified corner of her nose. "Did you really buy those lemon tarts and throw it at your professor?"

Commented [Ma1]:

Commented [Ma2R1]: