

Chapter 15 Fifteen

"I'd say it's a great start to the morning," Lámia made herself comfortable at the dining table – not a place she'd thought she'd be sitting at when she first moved in. The seat felt comfortable but the experience was odd in a new kind of way.

Reida sighed, got the leftover baked goods out of the fridge – including Lámia's dragon-mint soul-in-a-bottle – and popped hers and Ianne's pastries into the microwave while setting the wraith's bottle on the dining table, where Lámia was arranging the plates and cutlery Ianne brought over.

Eleni and Iridia had already left the dorm the moment Reida and Ianne appeared in the dining room. They grabbed their bags from the couch and left with a yellow-colored bun in each of their hands.

Lámia was reading on the balcony with the glass partition drawn close. Wraiths didn't sleep, so she spent the hours reading, which she found to be the only activity that made time flew. When she noticed the dining room lights turned on, her head turned in that mechanical way and instantly locked gaze with Iridia, who froze in place and looked like she was going to faint from pure fear.

Lámia offered a curt nod, and Iridia pushed a meek smile, but Eleni chose to avoid her gaze. Lámia went back to reading, jaded to being ignored, flipping through the pages of her Food Technology: Sustainable Living weekly Journal until she heard Reida's and Ianne's voices, at which time she automatically shut the magazine and rose from the seat, placed her hand on the glass partition that dissolved into mist, stepped through the threshold and allowed the solid glass to come back up on its own.

The glass partition, like their windows, had been enchanted to only allow those who belong in a specific dorm to open or close it – a security measure that any institution would take seriously.

Lámia stood in the middle of the small living space and wished the cousins good morning before they heard sounds of dishes being washed at an unnaturally fast pace, crockery being placed into the rack above, and the witch and irascible snatching their wands from the dining table and slipped them into their pockets before leaving through the door – all within twenty seconds.

And that was the very action that made Lámia smile so early in the day and sip on her soul bottle like she was cozying into a space that she never thought she would or could.

"What does it taste like?" Ianne asked while munching on a lemon tart, eyes widening in curiosity.

Lámia's gaze dropped to her bottle. "I'd offer you a sip but only wraiths can suck souls, unfortunately. According to the books, souls for us would taste like fluids for you. As for the flavor, dragon-mint is fragrant due to its charred crisp that's balanced with the cooling soul of a mint plant. I hope that puts things into perspective."

Ianne's head cocked as she pictured it. "Yeah, I think it does. Sounds yummy, actually."

"It's one of the better flavors," Lámia mused. "If you ever find yourself in the position to recommend a wraith's menu to another wraith, lean toward anything with a mixture between a being's soul and one from nature. Never pick one with only the essence of a flora or exclusively a fauna... On second thought, let them pick. Everyone has different taste, even wraiths."

The cousins release a light chuckle, and Lámia managed another almost-imperceptible smile.

Reida was still wrapping her head around the way they made tarts here, all without a pastry base. She had to look up the definition of a "tart" in Incanta and took a few moments to understand that it meant "a dish consisting of a filling held by the main ingredient of the filling itself, with an open top that leaves the filling visible and exposed".

Hence, a mushroom tart meant a gigantic mushroom holding a filling of diced mushrooms with a café's signature gravy; a lemon tart meant a soft, lemony filling in a lemon skin; the various fruit tarts were held by the skin of those fruits.

Not to mention the fact that there had been a momentary lost in translation with things like a chicken puff, which was chicken-flavored cotton candy. Ianne mistook souls-in-bottles for smoothies and almost ordered one because of the vibrant colors until Lámia stopped her and told her to read the tags.

At least a croissant was still an actual pastry... sort of – while it looked closely similar to the ones they'd find back home, the one in Incanta – somehow – could fit a total of three fillings in one normal-sized croissant. Though wary of their combinations at first, Reida's curiosity

got the better of her, and she ordered one. The croissant with fillings of lemongrass paste, chilli pepper chicken, and whipped potatoes immediately made her drool for another. She ended up buying every flavor combination they had, eating one more before leaving the café and sticking the rest in the fridge for breakfast this morning.

"What about food tech made you choose it, Lámia?" Reida asked before taking a bite into the croissant of blueberries, vanilla cream and crushed chocolate cookies.

Lámia sucked the last bit from her bottle and said, "I'm interested in learning about the soul-extraction process on a deeper level, studying to see if the souls of poisonous plants are truly poisonous or there's an extraction method that hasn't been created yet."

"Wow," Ianne whispered. "That's amazing."

"Thank you. What about you, Ianne? I wouldn't have pinned you for a botany woman at first glance."

"Oh?" Ianne's chewing paused.

"When you took out the wrong notebook at the cafeteria last night and it fell off when the lord came over, I saw the drawings on the opened pages. They're very vivid. I would've thought you were an artist if you weren't in an institution with exclusively math and science courses. Do you have a second degree in art?"

"Well, uh..." Ianne flushed. She'd never shown those to anyone but Reida. "They're actually my form of leisure, like an outlet to distress. I feel better when I draw. But no, I don't have a degree in art."

"You prefer botany?"

"I think so." Ianne felt it was such a strange question to ask. And her answer only made the conversation stranger. She'd loved plants for as long as she could remember, having taken after her mother. Every birthday, her parents would bring her to a nursery and an art store. Now that she thought about it, why did she always insist on two places of vastly different character when her brother and cousins were happy with just one type of store?

"Perhaps you like both botany and art equally," Lámia uttered, bringing Ianne out of her thoughts. "Even soulless beings can like more than one thing. Consider my mother, for example – a mother, homemaker, and professional chef. Perhaps you're like her – a polymath."

"I never thought of it that way," Ianne replied with a small smile, liking

that it was something positive to be proud of.

Lámia pivoted to Reida. "Specialization in potions where one of your classes happens to be on lethal ones – do I want to know why you chose this particular program?"

Reida gave her a look, one that signified Lámia was being dramatic. "Lethal Potions is the only lethal subject I have. The goal is to find a cure for oleander, silver, allicin, and zahar poisoning. Our family's blood is susceptible to oleander and silver, so Mom and Dad, even me and my siblings in recent years, have donated blood as regularly as we can manage – for both cure and research, but our scientists hadn't been able to duplicate the component that aids in that kind of healing, worse still when that component oxidizes too quickly for a thorough analysis. I've conducted my own experiments using my own blood multiple times to find the difference between it and another creature's. I found it, but there's nothing in the kingdom, empire, or human territories that has the necessary extraction and duplication materials and process I need to..." She sighed "...honestly, I don't even know what – dissociate and duplicate that healing component we have; or just duplicate; or maybe it's something else entirely. I thought – if I can somehow... learn the way Incanta dissect parts of an organism and merge it with another – like the way they extract the soul of a plant for your soul-in-a-bottle – I'd probably find a way to do the same with blood. But I'm also here to learn about the way Incanta merges different components of different organisms, hence the potion specialization since this program is the closest thing I can find that involves breaking things down and mixing them up to create something new. I'm here more to learn the process of breakdown and integration, to be honest, to see if the same theory would apply to our blood."

A moment of still silence passed before Lámia said, "And here I thought you two couldn't get more spellbinding. I've spoken to Chancellor Higgins about taking Lethal Potions, did I mention?"

Ianne choked and spurted her morning smoothie on Eleni's dishcloth that sat innocently in neatly-folded square at the corner of the dining table, sending the lady into a state of panic and making her cough worse. Reida pressed her cousin's shoulder back down when Ianne tried to reach for the dishcloth, telling her to calm down while getting her some water.

Lámia, unfazed, merely rose, took the dishcloth, went to the sink, and cleaned it in the same stiff manner she did everything. Ianne would've stopped her if she could stop her coughing first, which didn't happen. The wraith folded the cloth back into a square and set it back in place after Reida wiped down the traces of Ianne's spurted smoothie when her cousin's coughing stopped and she was just replenishing her lungs now.

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"You alright?" Reida asked, giving her shoulder a concerned squeeze.

"Yup. Yup. That was... Were you serious, Lámia?" Ianne questioned.

Lámia's eyes was on the tell-timer on her wrist before they flickered back to the cousins. "I was. But we all have Defense: Fundamentals in twenty minutes. Perhaps I should explain on the way."



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