Chapter 16 Sixteen

As expected, Chancellor Higgins questioned why Lámia would want to take up Lethal Potions as a food technology graduate now specializing in Essence Extraction, and the wraith said that her thesis – as stipulated in her personal statement during admissions – would be mainly about the extraction process from poisonous plants – lethal plants. And since Professor Theodore teaches Lethal Potions, she felt there could be some relevance that she'd be able to translate into her work. She'd happily take the exam and participate in quizzes if it was required.

Lámia was smart enough to leave out two things: the fact that Professor Theodore may just be one of the few teachers she'd look up to after everything he said about Eleni the other day; and wanting to watch Eleni get crushed by Reida or anyone else in class.

As commendable as her strategy was, Chancellor Higgins wasn't convinced, pointing out that the term had already begun, and materials and equipment had been set. She wasn't willing to make an exception in Lámia's case because the fact that lethal potions "could be" relevant to her work didn't possess the level of certainty the chancellor was ready to place her bets on. But she encouraged Lámia to read up and create a convincing hypothesis, and apply next term.

Lámia was disappointed but understood the logic in the decision. She was surprised Chancellor Higgins allowed her to babble the made-up excuse in its entirety in the first place.

Reida said she could lend her the notes and texts, which Lámia appreciated but admitted she wanted to get into the class mainly to witness Eleni embarrass herself.

Chancellor Higgins personally taught Defense: Fundamentals. She strode into the tableless and chairless hall in a way that silenced chatters and wiped out whispers. Labigail Higgins had long mastered the art of walking into the room and making her presence felt. Her moss green eyes took their time landing on one student to the next as she spoke, "As you can already tell, the numbers in this room far surpass those of your other subjects. This is because the art of defense is a required skill for everyone. Your safety is the institution's priority, but there may be times when you may be required to protect yourself once you're beyond the protected walls of Thavma. Incantas would no doubt have established skills in harnessing their power or wielding a wand and

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would be at a great advantage," She took a moment to convey some arrogantly-smirking students to memory before adding, "for now." Some smirks fell, but some only tilted higher, as if not believing a non-incanta could ever beat an incanta in wielding magic.

"Thavma has always believed that it doesn't matter where you're born or what you've learned. Your ability to wield magic with or without a wand is more of a convenience than it is of power and potential. Your effort and discipline in sustaining the progress you've made and will continue to make will determine the outcome at the end of the term. To facilitate the learning process, one other professor will be assisting me in each cl-"

The chancellor didn't even finish her sentence before the chatters and squeals erupted once more, and her glare that swept across the space rivaled a cold gust of wind that silenced them all. With a glower on the excited faces that were now more controlled, she continued, "Another professor will be assist me in each class. Today, it would be Professor Váskas Dérma."

Groans and dread fill the space when a rhythmic pitter patter of Professor Dérma's footsteps entered the room. "Well, that's not the welcome I was expecting. Who did you think it was? The newly-minted Professor Ischyrós?"

Shy smiles, sighs, and swooning were as subtle as blinding light in the night sky.

"Tee-hah-hu!" Professor Dérma cackled in a way that sent a skin-dotting shiver down everyone's skin. His own skin was a deep shade of teal after an accidental experiment mutated his skin cells. The doctors said he was lucky to be alive. He, on the other hand, told his closest friend, Hexena Ischyrós, that he was lucky that the "tiny" explosion ruined their rival's own experiments and labs as well. At least their progress was stalled together.

Eyes that no longer had the white sclera and were simply two whirlpools of hazel brown pivoted to the chancellor. "Our little Theodore has grown up to be quite the catch eh, Labigail?"

Professor Higgins resisted a smile, prouder of that boy more than he would ever know, though it had nothing to do with his looks. "Shall we begin, Professor Dérma?"

"Awh, you're no fun, Chancellor." Casting a glance around the room, slowing down at the ones who were probably dreaming about Theo before his unusual eyes made them flinch – a response from students that he was used to by now – Professor Dérma said, "Look at it this way,

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you lot – if you make mistakes in your first class with Chancellor Higgins and me, you'll made less of a fool of yourself when it's Professor Ischyrós's turn to assist. But if playing the fair damsel and tripping over your cat is your aim, I have to warn you, Theodore Ischyrós has ignored more feigned damsels than the number of dots there are on – my – skin. Hexena and I counted. Tee-hah-hu!"

"Let's not turn this into a lecture about our colleague, Váskas," said the chancellor.

"I'm simply offering bonus content of our lecture, Labigail. But if we must continue, come on, wands up. Let's see if the non-incantas know how to hold a wand to start with. Keep your feet planted to the ground. Tee-hah-hu! Remember last term, Labigail?" He cast her a mischievous grin.

The chancellor gave him a look, daring him to bring it up. But since Váskas Dérma's aim was simply to get the class's attention and sensing that he'd successfully planted the seed of intrigue in them, his theatrical flair took over and he bowed and gestured her to take the floor.

"Right," she began. "Wands at chest-level for today. Hold it parallel to the floor. Your grip should be two inches from the bottom of your wand to avoid having the force of a spell flipping the wand over. Non-incantas, hold it with both hands on your first try to get an idea of the force you'd need to hold it with one hand. Remember not to hold it too tightly or flow of magic will be blocked, and the magic would saturate at your hand, which would end up snapping the wand. And remember," Her eyes scanned the non-incantas. "Magic, when expelled, is a reflection of your emotions. Erratic emotions produce erratic spells; unconfident emotions produce meek spells; calmness and confidence produce the best spells."

Professor Higgins turned to the side wall and gave a wave of her hand. The wall retracted by several inches, prompting the shocked students to stand back as ten target boards rolled out from left, filling the row. "Incantas, let's see if the holidays have kept the cobwebs out of your head."

Lámia and every other incanta picked a random target board and queued behind one another. On the chancellor's signal, the first ones in line raised either their wands or hands. And where some shouted, "Ekirts!", others uttered the spell the way they'd usually speak. All spells hit the target board. Most were powerful enough to create a hole.

After the incantas completed their practice round and began muttering to each other about how easy it was, they sat back and watched the non-incantas get into positions, some snickering that they had to hold it with both hands like a seven-year-old.

16:54

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"Calm your mind," Professor Higgins said. "Feel the tingling of your senses. Acknowledge it. Now, direct it to your hands. Make sure your wand is aimed at the target board. To strike, say Ekirts. On my mark. Now."

The word Ekirts was shouted, uttered, and murmured. The spell from the murmured students didn't even reach the target board; those who uttered the spell either made a perfect strike with a perfect stance, or – like Reida and Ianne – made a perfect strike but was pushed back by the force of their power. As for those who shouted... One blew the target board into pieces while another two's power snapped their wands in two as blood ran down their hands.

Professor Dėrma, who had an arm over his waist and opposite elbow resting on it while his fingers tapped his chin, pivoted to the bleeding students like he was simply observing a scientific reaction unfold. He took two seconds before making his way to the huntress and fortis vampire burningin embarrassment. "Let's see how bad it is," he said.

The fortis's brief cry didn't make Professor Dėrma any gentler with the way he grabbed his wrist and lifted it up to assess the depth of the wound. "You've got a little something in here." His fingers reached for two splinters and pulled both out without so much as a blink. "You need medical attention. Second floor. Someone should go with you so you won't slip and fall on your own blood."

He winked like the accident was just something minor while some incantas held back chuckles, despite their peers' glares. The injured student's roommate came up and ushered him out the door as Professor Dėrma assessed the second victim.

"Not too bad. Now, here's a little trick you might want to remember. Listen carefully through those tears." He pulled out his own wand, brought it so near the wound that the huntress's instinct was to pull away when the professor uttered, "Laeh."

The stingingpain subsided in strides and the blood that was left was only stains. The huntress heaved a relieved sigh and thanked the professor, who patted her shoulder like a parent would his child, showing a small smirk that made him look... normal, for once.

The next session was for incantas and non-incantas to partner-up. For non-incantas, the first day was merely about grip and striking. But for incantas, the test was to recite every spell they could remember that would do something to a target board except blow it up.

"Cobwebs have clearly found their way into your brains if you need this long to think of something for your partner, Indigo," Professor Higgins

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chided an irascible who chuckled at the non-incantas' amateurish performance earlier.

Although incantas outnumbered non-incantas, Lámia had taken upon herself to stand between Reida and Ianne so she could guide them both. "How about we try Kaerb?"

"Kaerb," they repeated, and their respective target boards split in two, making Ianne flinch.

Reida's panicky eyes darted to a smiling Lámia when she hissed in a whisper, "Was that supposed to happen?"

"Of course. The parameters were no explosions. We're still playing within the rules. Now say Wener."

The cousins exchanged an uncertain glance before repeating the spell, and they couldn't believe their eyes when the both sides of the target board inched toward one another and put themselves back into one piece.

"Well done! Tee-hah-hu!" echoed Professor Dérma from behind them, making the cousins jump but Lámia remained stoic, slowly turning around with her housemates.

He scrutinized the trio the same way he did to anyone new. "What a formidable trinity." After sensing their energies as a whole, he began with Lámia, "Your father should find a successor and retire. He's done more for Incanta in his forty years than some of his colleagues have managed in their lifetimes. He deserves a stress-free retirement. Good thing you decided against a career in politics. We always need more food options. And I, for one, can't wait to test poisonous plants on politickies. Not your father. Other politickies."

Even in her book, Lámia could feel a ghostly crawl along her skin by the professor's demeanor and speech, and she couldn't muster a response in time before the professor's eyes traveled to Ianne. "The lady." His head did a left and right tilt like he was balancing imaginary scales on his ears, and he continued, "Botany is nice and dandy but perhaps consider pursuing something darker to balance out the light, hm? Oh, better yet – develop a darkness within botany. I'd love to see Professor Chlorida's face when that happens. Tee-hah-hu!"

He didn't wait for Ianne's response before trailing to the lycan princess next. His lips may be tugged into an upward curl, but new students would come to learn this was his resting face more than it was his smile. "Your personal statement is reflecting splendidly in your energy, princess. You

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are powerful. But will you know what to do with all that power?"

He released another cackle and skipped away – yes, he skipped not walked.

The three friends were left watching his retreating figure, resisting a shudder to shake off the feeling the professor left with them. Although crept out, the trio were undeniably left mystified.

Several students away, Eleni picked a discretus to work with, though her focus wasn't a hundred percent on the vampire, who she deemed to be her mentee despite the professors labelling them as partners. Eleni's eyes darted to Reida and Ianne every few seconds, intensely displeased that they weren't as terrible as she'd hoped.

She muffled a snort when they both couldn't even properly grip their wand on their first try, but her amusement died off when incantas and non-incantas were told to partner-up. The cousins were even better than the discretus she was stuck guiding What was it with this girl that couldn't expel magic at a basic target board? Ugh!

Eleni got even more infuriated when Professor Dérma walked up to her housemates and prattle on about who knew what when he didn't offer similar attention to the rest of them.

This was despite the fact that the teal-skinned professor popped from pair to pair to correct them on their techniques and compatibility. But Eleni felt he spent the most time with her housemates, and the disparity in the duration in itself proved there was unjust treatment.

It wasn't fair! Their parents' reputations shouldn't be giving them such a huge boost! This was biasness and favoritism in plain sight, and Eleni was determined to report it.

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