Chapter 19 Nineteen

Premonitions – at its core – was an awareness subject that was mandatory for students of every level in Thavma. The last thing anyone wanted was students being unaware of their mental states and succumbing to their triggers, making some kind of disastrous, irreversible mistake from a momentary loss of control or a temporary lapse in judgment. There was never an ironclad guarantee that there would be no accidents with the increased awareness of their psychological and emotional states, but at least with this class, the likelihood of mishaps was kept to a minimum.

"Now, let's see what we're working with here," Hexena Ischyrós began, her voice boomed loud and strong from the centre of the circular lecture hall. She'd concocted a potion beforehand and kept it in a spray bottle. Things had become a real hassle without a wand. Once the last of the students piled in and took their seats, she sprayed the potion over her deck of cards. When she had her wand, there was no need to concoct anything. She merely needed to recite a spell and the deck would shuffle themselves.

She'd gotten a hang of the "extra labor" over the years, and she was pleased to find no snickers or chuckles in this class when she couldn't wield magic the way any other incanta could. Then again, postgraduates had always possessed more maturity and empathy than those undergraduate flatworms.

As her favorite deck of cards shuffled themselves in mid-air above her desk, Hexena spied the princess's eyes fixated on the metallic black cards flipping and rearranging themselves, watching the whole process in nothing but wide-eyed wonder. The lady seated next to her seemed equally intrigued. The wraith with them, on the other hand, had her fingers laced and set on the table, staring at the deck numbly, almost in boredom.

From Hexena's experience, it was difficult to gauge how a wraith truly felt until they started speaking so she was not going to waste her precious seconds speculating this one and decided to venture guesses for her other students instead. Several were already shrinking into their seats, as if not wanting their minds to be read.

Internally, Hexena smirked. Cards didn't read minds, they read energies. And no one could hide from the cards, especially one who'd already given

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into fear.

When the cards were shuffled and ready, the deck glided over the students once, and – in their second round of flight around the room, cards drifted onto everyone's desk. Certain cards gravitated to more than one being thus duplicated themselves – peeling from the top and bottom – before making their way toward the energy calling for them. Some students only had a single card while others had two or three. And the remaining cards returned to Hexena's desk.

"Cards can tell a lot," Hexena's voice drifted from the back of the room, spooking most of her students who didn't recall seeing her move. As she slowly made her way back to the center, looking over the shoulders of her students who had flipped their cards over, she said, "The number of cards you've gotten doesn't matter. What matters is what lays in the ones that chose you; why the energy you're radiating attracted the cards you did. The number of similar images you see on a card indicates the intensity of the prescribed emotion – the higher the number, the more intense and worrying an emotion would be. You need not show anyone what's in your hand, but to ignore the telling is choosing to ignore the truth, however harsh it may be. The images should be simple enough for you interpret if you've been born and bred in Incanta. Non-incantas, you'll learn them soon enough. They aren't very difficult to grasp. The fundamental principle is to remember that no one is able to read the cards more accurately than you. Different images have different significance to each being. If you're one to find happiness in sunshine, the sun would represent happiness. If you're one to hate it, it signifies hatred. Simple as that. The trick is to ask yourself: what does this image mean to me? Only after you've answered that question would you be able to properly gauge your state of being."

A hand rose from the back. "Professor, what if I've never seen something on my card. Like this." A hunter, Ganesan Subramaniam, flipped over one of his three cards, holding it up high. "What are these things? Spiky cucumbers?"

Low laughter came from his classmates while the professor smirked. "It's an insect called a vdélla. It leeches toxic substances from its environment and produces the purified air we breathe. Show it a little more respect, Mr. Subramaniam."

"What are the spikes for?"

"To protect itself, of course."

Perplexity pulled his brows to the center. "From what?"

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"Us."

"Y'all kill it? Why?"

"Because it contains medicinal properties when squished and boiled for six hours."

"Oh," he murmured, gaze droppingback to the card, suddenly feeling sorry for the spiky cucumbers. "So... What I think of the vdélla reflects my internal state?"

"Well, you had no knowledge of vdélles when the card chose you. And I doubt that's the only thingthat made no sense."

"True," he admitted, unabashed.

"That means everything on the card is new to you. That means you're entering into a new phase in life where everything is new to you. It's common for a non-incanta to attract a card like that, especially in the first month. If you get the same card next time, then however you feel about the vdélla after learning about it will determine your mental state."

"Oh. Is it advisable to read up on... everything here?"

"It doesn't matter if you do or don't, though bear in mind that reading up would alter the significance a card represents should you get it again. If you don't read up and you get it again, it'd simply tell you that you're bored of going through the motions, provided you haven't developed any sort of emotions for the vdélla." When he gave a nod of comprehension she turned to the rest and asked, "Any further questions about how to read what you hold?"

Ianne's hand rose. "If there are characters on the cards and we don't know who they are... What does it mean, Professor?"

"Ah, that's an interesting one," Hexena began. Ears quirked and eyes tried to spy Ianne's two cards she was holding down when the professor continued, "Study the details. The face, eyes, even the color of their clothes, perhaps. The first person that comes to mind represents the characters on the card."

"And we're not necessarily one of the characters if they're more than one?"

"That's correct, Ms. Blackfur."

Ianne nodded, smiling meekly. "Thank you, Professor."

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She got two cards – one with a type of plant she read about before coming to Incanta called the crossroads plant; and another with two characters in it, both happy and – Ianne felt – were in love.

The crossroads plant fascinated her because of the criss-cross way each leaf grew. She'd never seen a leaf branching out from a leaf. Fascination. That was simple enoughto decode.

And if Ianne was being honest with herself, the second card wasn't hard to decode either. Her first thoughts were Liam when she saw the male character of blonde hair holding the hands of the female character that she had hoped was herself, but instinctively knew it wasn't, deep down knowingit was the professor he was seeing – the "incrediblybrilliant" one.

Hexena got a peek at Lámia's only card she didn't bother hiding letting it sit face up as she stared numbly at it with an enchantingpurple-colored liquid in a conical flask and a smoky skull above it.

"An urge to kill someone, dear?" Hexena asked, brows etching in concern. Not another one, she thought.

"Frustration," Lámia said, confusingthe professor. "Your nephew and the chancellor rejected my request to join his Lethal Potions class."

"I see. That does sound upsetting," she said with more relief than empathy.

"I'll apply next term. It's no issue."

"That's an admirable determination, Ms. Mávros. I'm surprisedyou didn't get a card that symbolized that."

"I did," she said. "The potion in this card succeeded, didn't it? Hence, the floating skull. There wouldn't have been such a clear image had the potion failed."

Hexena's lips lifted into a smile at the grit in Lámia's unwaveringeyes, a grit that she saw in someone once long ago – someone she missed dearly. "Well done," she said, and moved on to the next student – the discretus named Aurora – looking like she was about to go mad with six cards on her desk.

Reida stared at her two cards. She had been doing so in the last few minutes. She didn't even know whether to hide something like this. At least Ianne knew to hide and Lámia knew to show. Reida was lost. Should this be a secret? If someone saw the cards, would they be able to guess the way she interpreted them? Why should she be afraid if they

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do?

The first was the image of dark clouds and thunder. She used to get a negative energy on stormy days when she was a pup, and climbed to her father's side of the bed when the thunder woke her up in the middle of the night. Although she was no longer petrified by both these things, dark clouds still make her wary – the kind of feeling that got her looking over her shoulder even when she was safe. Thunder still scared her sometimes, depending on the intensity, vibration, and suddenness. It was the only time she felt cursed with lycan hearing.

She was afraid. Justifiably so ever since the prolégo mushroom decided to float into her box and was now in her wand. The damn prophecy shouldn't have been a tale that survived that many generations to wreak mental havoc to begin with.

As for the second card, it was a field of germinating shoots. She'd seen something like this in one of the many excursions her middle school organized. The guide brought them to a field of germinating shoots of estellas, explaining the way any plant grew, and added that it was how everything in the world began – with a seed, which would sprout and grow into a shoot. Everything, including people and relationships, sprouted, grew, and budded the same way.

Reida didn't know what to do with herself when Theo came to mind. A relationship? She pleaded with herself that it meant a teacher-student relationship, but – deep down – she knew the truth. As did her cards.