

Chapter 8 Eight

"A pretty fungus with the ability to look into the future and not see if any turn of events would come after a misfortune. The professor's right. Who in their sanity would let something like that dominate their minds?" Lámia uttered, though she spoke so monotonously that Reida and Ianne took a moment to catch on that she was being sarcastic.

The wraith had no classes. She'd seen the campus and library. She was bored, so she wandered and found herself wandering into the crowded cafeteria. Like all wraiths, she was not overlooked, but avoided like she was bringing death with her. Her chill was a natural repellent, and although it made her lonely as a child in places where wraiths were scarce, it only brought relief when she got older and decided that most people were more trouble than they were worth.

Even so, she found herself pacing toward the only two familiar faces despite there being two empty square tables at the far corner where she could have sat in solitude. "May I join you?" she asked, interrupting the cousins, who – unlike everyone else – didn't feel her chill or presence until she spoke.

"Of course," the princess said, pulling out the empty chair next to her and gestured for her to sit.

Lámia's two-second look at the pulled-out chair was her way of showing surprise. No widened eyes, no gaping mouth, no blinking. Just a stare. She wasn't sure if anyone had pulled out a chair for her before. "Thank you," she said, and robotically drop into the seat. Without her having to ask, Reida and Ianne brought her up to speed about their conversation.

Lámia listened with laced fingers on the table and crossed legs, and she noticed the way neither of them excluded her from the space, making eye contact with her like they would each other. Lámia wasn't just "allowed" into their space, but welcomed in their conversation, despite saying nothing. The experience felt new.

They were talking about the Prolégo Prophecy and the way the professors reacted. Although Lámia's brow scrunched slightly when Ianne swooned at the tale of Serafina Layson, the wraith would admit this had been the best company she had in years. She wondered if she ever liked any company. Silence had always been preferable, for both her and the rest of society.

With these two, it felt different. The cousins were getting looks and not in a good way, Lámia noticed. From socializing with a wraith or from the cursed ingredient in the princess's wand? Lámia could only speculate. What pique her curiosity, though, was that neither cousin seemed to notice or care.

Lámia liked that. She liked beings who didn't give a curse what the public thought of them, though they seemed to be giving a curse about the curse.

And that professor.

Lámia almost sighed aloud – a rare occurrence.

Wraiths didn't exhibit a wide range of emotions. Anger, irritation, and boredom were usual, but other emotions were dependent on each individual. Her mother exhibited a more unusual range of emotions, a polar opposite of her father. Only souls knew how they fell in love. And since wraiths couldn't conceive, they adopted (or extracted) her from the Cave of Psychés. But that was a story for another day.

Now, back to Professor Dnaw. What bristling broomstick of an advice. Lámia began dreading having to see him once a week for history.

"Have you told your parents?" Lámia asked. It seemed like the courteous thing to ask. Not too intrusive; not too indifferent.

Reida shifted in her seat. "Not yet."

"You fear they may disown you?"

"What? No! My parents aren't like that."

"Precisely. So why haven't you told them? It's been four hours since the ceremony."

When silence ensued, Lámia wondered if the cousins were regretting their decision in letting her join them, until Ianne said, "It's... a lot to take in."

"I don't know the king or queen, but I'm confident their experience on the battlefields with mind-manipulating vampires more than prove they're capable of learning about a prophecy."

"It's not about capabilities," Reida sighed, frustrated, though not at Lámia. "It's just..."

Lámia watched her might-be friend – the way her shoulders slouched when she wasn't paying attention to her posture; the way her eyes darted

to her fingers fiddling with the wrapper of a straw; the way fear ebb from her soul. The king and queen weren't the kind of creatures who'd disown or disinherit their pups, especially not Reidia when she was a miracle pup, so if there was no fear of being cut off, there could only mean one thing. "You're worried they'll be disappointed," Lámia uttered, hoping her volume was low enough. And it was. Ianne and Reidia only caught it with their lycan hearing.

"Yes," Reidia whispered, almost ashamed.

Lámia blinked once, both brows furrowing, showing more emotions in that single reaction than she would normally do in a week. "Reidia, I'm the last person to understand souls but I am acquainted with something called life. Everyone is cursed to some extent. The difference is you have a pretty fungus to tell you about one curse that may change the course of your living days. But all of us have a pessimistic side that knows not all days would be stormy, and we can only enjoy and make the most out of the gloomy days before the sunshine and rainbows arrive to give us a hard time."

The last portion required some mental gymnastics, but Reidia and Ianne eventually got Lámia's point. And they also learned their new friend preferred stormy days to sunny ones, which should have been obvious but wasn't something they'd given thought to until now.

"You're right," Reidia muttered.

"I usually am as I age but I appreciate the acknowledgment."

The cousins released a chuckle, and Lámia's brow rose, confused, wondering if lycans had a type of humor that she wasn't familiar with yet. In any case, she liked it. She liked how she felt around them – seen, heard, respected, and appreciated.

"Hey, you ladies seem to be having a good time," Liam's voice echoed as he came up to the empty side of the square table. His gaze fell to Lámia. If he was surprised, he didn't show it, and offered her an incanta's greeting.

Lámia held out a hand, and Liam took a moment before accepting it, not hiding the shiver as well as his cousins did the previous day. The one next to him was definitely an incanta, so Lámia merely said, "Hello."

"Hi," Theo nodded with a small, polite lift of his lips and brought his hand to his left shoulder, a gesture Lámia returned only after a two-second stare.

Maybe her mother was right about her university life for once. Maybe

Lámia was going to "make great friends".

"Any classes?" Liam asked, looking between them.

If Lámia's eyes weren't deceiving her, and if her mental catalogue on a being's body language was still up-to-date, she'd say Ianne was blushing, though Liam's perplexed gaze was set on Reida when the princess replied with a conspiratorial smirk, "History."

An inside joke, Lámia guessed, one that even the wizard seemed to know about, judging by the way his polite smile turned into a mischievous one when he patted the lord's shoulder.

Liam nodded with a smirk that mirrored his cousin's, and said, "That's going to be one interesting lesson."

Lámia felt a sudden warmth wrap around her wrist and the next thing she knew, the princess's conspiratorial smile was transferred to her when she speedily whispered, "We'll tell you about it in class. C'mon."