

Chapter 9 Nine

Mandatory history classes at a postgraduate level only came about when Incanta opened up to the other worlds. It was an initiative aimed at showing the lycan and werewolf kingdom, the vampire empire, and hunter territories that Incanta was ensuring that its youth were well aware of "the deep-seated respect political figures of every species developed for one another, evident through the impeccable diplomacy exhibited in the merging of our realms," Professor Dnaw recited from the textbook he co-authored with Chancellor Higgins and another two academics from other institutions.

Reida and Ianne took Liam's advice and chose to sit near the back for this class, in case they accidentally sniggered like Liam did the first time he heard the template line. His mistake was sitting in the front row. Things only got worse when Liam leaned toward a perplexed Theo and shared the real way Incanta managed the "impeccable diplomacy".

Theo snorted at the end of Liam's tale, and they both began chuckling. Unfortunately for them, Chancellor Higgins was substituting the lecture since Professor Dnaw was away, and Theo and Liam found themselves having to give the realm's most pampered bunyip a bath later that evening.

They didn't enjoy it. The bunyip did, though.

Reida and Ianne shared their family's version of history with Lámia, and after a single blink, the wraith cracked opened her textbook she didn't bother to read beforehand. She genuinely believed that all history texts were brainwashing materials designed to cement segregation and discrimination in Incanta. This was the first time Lámia willingly opened a history text, just to see how far off Incanta's brainwashing was on this particular occasion. Professor Dnaw's voice blurred into the background as Lámia read the text while keeping the real history at the back of her mind, and the real history was this:

Incanta opened itself around a decade ago, after magical beings sporadically snuck into the kingdom, unannounced. Portals began opening in random places: mall changing rooms, wardrobes on display at a furniture fair, public restrooms, and sewers.

Sixteen foreign scents that were entirely unfamiliar drove Greg, Sush, and the mavericks mad. Toby, Ella, Phelton, along with every other creature

involved in defense in both lycan and werewolf territories weren't doing any better. Not only were the random intruders difficult to catch, they were impossible to trace to the source. They'd follow the scent trail before it cut off mid-air.

It only got worse when the vampire empire and hunters headquarters began reporting similar findings and frustrations.

The only consolation was that there were no new scents beyond the sixteen, so sixteen was all they needed to hunt down.

Easier said than done.

Things got so dire that the king and queen themselves joined the expeditions, popping from one part of the kingdom to the next. They weren't any closer to figuring things out either until – at the dinner table one night after the pups were put into bed – nine-year-old Reida, who snuck out of her room to eavesdrop on the adults conversation, came out of the shadows and asked, 'Could it be witches, Mommy? Or maybe a wizard? Oh, oh, what if they're faeries?'

Christian jerked, then cursed under his breath at his niece's sudden appearance. Greg and Sush didn't look pleased at her being out of bed but also a little apologetic that she overheard their conversation.

"Come, cupcake." Her father beckoned, and she was on his lap within seconds, taking it as an encouragement to continue blabbering, "Witches and wizards move about differently. They open a portal, step inside, and poof! They're gone. It says so in Udessa's Quick Adventures."

She hopped out of her father's loose grip in a way that almost gave him a heart attack even though she landed safely on the ground. Reida dashed to the living room, took a children's book from under the coffee table filled with her books, Ken's puzzles, and Enora's range of toy weapons.

Meeting the adults back in the dining room where murmurs ceased as soon as she entered, her father held her with both arms this time as she flipped through the glossy colored pages with an eagerness to share.

She pointed at how a round-faced girl with turquoise hair was bored one day and decided to visit her grandmother, but thought she should bring along a gift before dropping by. On the next page, Udessa was drawn with a hand raised in front of her, with her eyes closed where she said, "Nepo." A portal opened and Udessa popped from a fruit market to a florist, then ended up at the bakery, deciding to get a few pastries in the end. Udessa detected a familiar perfume scent when she was at the bakery, lingering at the section of stacked strawberry-flavored croissants. She thought

hard about who the perfume and croissants reminded her of. When the fictional character's pondering came with the lightbulb moment that led Udessa to her older sister, she opened another portal to her sister's workplace, who admitted she was there mere minutes ago and ended up joining her sister on the visit to their grandmother's.

"See?" Reida ended the tale with a grin that was received with more frustrated shock than awe.

In the adults' defense, they'd been at this for weeks with no progress, and fatigue and irritation were never a good concoction.

Toby turned to Lucy with knitted brows, and his eyes glazed over. Reida hated it when that happened. It meant the adults wanted to speak among themselves.

'If that's true, then it's possible they're surfacing. Maybe they're looking to establish some kind of diplomatic relationship?' Toby chimed in forced optimism.

'By invading our territories. How quaint,' Greg remarked in the deep, sardonic rumble.

Sush agreed. 'We didn't receive any requests or messages from another world. Assuming this is the doing of the creatures from the realm of incantation, their methods are wrong on a diplomatic scale. I am this close to getting my hunters to pin scent-specific explosives on every public site we traced the invading scents to if they don't balls-up and meet us face-to-face.'

As Reida got comfortably warm and a little drowsy in her father's embrace, Xandar linked, 'The last time they opened up their realm, things didn't end well for them. It wasn't just that lives were taken. Their dragon shifters had their horns harvested and wings clipped, then put into labor; faeries were ground in choppers because of the healing qualities of the dust they turn into from the butcher; witches and wizards were taken hostage and blackmailed into creating spells for their captors in exchange for their lives and those of their families; and wraiths and irascibles were used as weapons – being coerced to decimate anyone who didn't fall in line.'

A passing silence followed before Greg questioned, 'You expect me to believe we did all of that? We, with our claws, noses and healing abilities, beat those hocus-pocus creatures with the ability to conjure anything from mid-air.'

Xandar made a face. 'One, we had help – the vampires' and humans' help. Two, you really have to stay away from children's books, Greg.'

'Why should I? It's the princess's children's book that opened up this possibility.'

Glancing at the droopy-eyed Reida, it was Christian who replied, 'I think he meant you have to stay away from the wrong kind of children's books, Greg. You know, those that are prone to hyperboles and unfounded villainizing.'

Greg shot his distant cousin a glare. He was about to deliver a retort when the queen cut in, as she always did. 'Not all spells can be created out of mid-air, Greg. Some take time to concoct and marinate and... whatever else they do. How about we leave the books to Yarrington and Benedict? Now, since none of the foreign scents so far carry the scents of wolves, lycans, vampires, and hunters, and humans aren't exactly equipped to appear out of nowhere, maybe Reida is right. And we'd have to send a message – pining it to the end of scent trails is a good idea.'

'You're actually saying yes?' Sush's tired eyes enlarged and brightened. 'I thought you'd have a lot to say against it, seeing that...'

'By non-explosive means, Sush,' Lucy stipulated firmly.

Sush's initial surprise and delirium deflated as she murmured, 'Of course.'

Phelton suggested, 'The message should be accompanied with a deadline. Say a week?'

'Three days. Nothing more. I'm exhausted.' Toby pressed the corners of his eyes for the umpteenth time that evening from the weeks of restless nights. The stakes were higher now that he and Ella had a five-year-old Wayne Tristan to protect.

Empress Pellethia nodded in agreement and affirmed, 'Three days.'

'Along with a threat,' Xandar added, in a tone that was heavier and deeper as he gazed at his little cupcake who was now fast asleep in his arms. 'To protect our own.'

'Threat of what?' Greg mocked, knowing they were the ones who'd been chasing their tails since the first trespasser they still couldn't put a face or name to entered their radar. 'Wing-clipping, horn- and wing-stealing, faery-crushing, witch- and wizard-hoarding, wraith- and irascible-weaponizing?'

There was no humor on Xandar's darkened face when he calmly said, "Yes."

This became one of the rare times Greg secretly respected his cousin more than he'd like to admit.

When the queen said nothing in opposition and simply stared at the princess with worry creasing her brows, everyone knew that not only was the king serious, the threat may materialize if the trespassers didn't show themselves soon.

Lucy and Xandar worked through the night with the message, each one balancing out the other in terms of threat and diplomacy, scratching through lines and arguing in low whispers for two hours before their finished product was left on Lucy's desk and they went to bed.

The next morning, Lucy rewrote the finished draft on a fresh sheet of paper after Greg and Sush picked up the pups for school. "It's perfect, baby," Xandar reassured her. "We can't be any more diplomatic than that."

Lips curling into a tired smile, his wife sent out the drafted lines to those at the dining table the previous night and said, "I was actually thinking of adding back your idea of putting boiling cauldrons of poisons in certain public locations, but if you insist the message is perfect without it, I'll gladly drop th-"

Her words were cut off by her husband pulling her into him as he nuzzled her neck to elicit her laughter.

A string of messages came in response to the draft with thumbs-up and okays. All that was left to do was wait.

And they didn't have to wait long.

A dragon-shifter from the Occupational Safety Department entered the kingdom the same day the messages were put up. This was his third visit, and he came with the sole aim to confirm his colleagues' reports on the conducive environment and improved civilization that may be good for business and diplomatic relations. The moment he stepped out of a restroom in a crowded shopping complex, black ink fluttered on the beige door before his eyes. His curiosity got the better of him. He adjusted his glasses to read the invisible message that had been chemically engineered to surface upon the detection of particular scents – one of them being his.

"Whoever you are, we expect a proper request for an audience with the kingdom's rulers and ministers. The appalling indecency and blatant disrespect by trespassing on numerous occasions in various locations warrants us to take extreme measures against your kind to ensure the safety of our own. We haven't forgotten history, have you?"

Succinct. Demanding. Bone-chilling. Tail-shrinking.

No incanta needed reminding of why their world was sealed off from the rest for all that time.

With a wave of his wand, the dragon-shifter took the words off the wall and into his palm, then wisely aborted his assignment and retreated, going straight back to his superiors, who called for an emergency meeting, where he waved the words off his hand and into the space above the meeting table. After shocked gasps and horrific faces went around, a negligible minority proposed they got ready for an attack or a full-fledged war. The majority preferred to lean toward maintaining peace, and decided that word be sent to the kingdom.

From there, an audience was requested and granted, albeit with less-than-pleased faces on the incantas' first arrival, despite the presence of Incanta's own royalty.

While the meeting was supposed to go down as a positive pivoting point in history, it was – back in the kingdom – the historical time that the lycan queen did not return a bow. Her omission only spoke for her rage, despite her impeccable composure. And thanks to her status in the kingdom and in her husband's heart, not one single creature on her side reciprocate the greeting offered by Incanta's rulers, something that the high lord and high lady were not happy about.

Incanta's rulers brought this up with the Prime Minister as soon as they reached Incanta after concluding preliminary diplomatic discussions, and the leader of the governing party received an earful behind the walls of the Royal Court with the high lady being particularly enraged that she wasn't given the respect and adoration she was accustomed to receiving, and thus was expecting.

Over the years, meetings were held in terms of entry and exit. As time went on and diplomatic ties strengthened, along with business deals, the initial months of worry and frustration were forgiven, though never forgotten.

"I prefer the unadulterated version," Lámia declared, shutting the book at the end of the chapter. "It's darker – more realistic."

"Professor?" someone echoed, raising her hand, and everyone turned to Eleni, the first student with a question when several others were beginning to doze off.

"Yes, Ms. Sfálma?" Professor Dnaw nodded from his stool.

"Do you think diplomatic efforts are still ongoing today – ten years after Incanta has established it with the other realms?"

"Why, of course! Maintenance of peace will always take effort and..."

"Well, I meant more of a..." Eleni glimpsed at Reida and Ianne, and continued, "...staged effort, one that political figures have agreed to send in place of themselves."

No one was blind to the insinuation. Those who were falling asleep snapped wide awake. Several, though not many, were beginning to wonder whether Princess Reida and Lady Ianne were truly qualified to be amongst them.

The air was so still that the wolves and lycans could hear everyone's breaths.

"Ms. Sfálma," Professor Dnaw's voice finally echoed, "you may either clarify your assertion or rethink the way you'd like to rephrase your words. Everyone undergoes the same assessment to be accepted into Thavma."

"But how do we know that, Professor?" Eleni prodded, querying innocently but, in a university that only accepts the best of the best, everyone had the necessary intelligence to know it was all an act, especially when the acting itself was subpar.

"Are you saying you got in by different means, Ms. Sfálma?"

"I'm too insignificant in the larger scales of politics to have such an option, Professor."

"Are you saying you have heard of such an option, then?"

"No, but I am curious as to whether... it's fair if the difference in accessibility to privilege and information – that we all know isn't evenly distributed across populations and species – results in some of us having opportunities that others may not."

Professor Dnaw only got more annoyed, despite his even tone. "And your view of our entry assessment is that those with less privilege and opportunities should have a separate, easier manner of..."

"Oh, no! Of course not, Professor. But I do think history should acknowledge the... ease certain species now have over others, thanks to their parents who have a duty in maintaining diplomacy between our realms."

Reida and Ianne couldn't hide the way their brows knitted to the center as they stared at their housemate, whom they hadn't even had a proper conversation with yet.

"What is her problem?" Lámia murmured, saying something that the cousins were thinking as well.

Professor Dnaw wasn't prone to lean toward anger. Now, he didn't know whether to feel anger or sympathy for this girl he saw so much promise in when he read her personal statement and interviewed her.

"Ms. Sfálma," he began, deferring to the more humane part of himself, suddenly wishing she brought this up in private since this has to now be responded in front of her peers in order to set the record straight with the rest of the class. "History acknowledges facts. Cold, hard facts proven by treaties, contracts, interviews with anyone who was involved or had witnessed to a historical event. Your concern isn't just speculative, it is inaccurate. I am not equipped in legal matters so I cannot tell you precisely whether it's defamatory. I'd be very careful in making insinuations like that, not because there are powers above you, but because it is wrong. This has nothing to do with power, and everything to do with speaking without proper basis. Conflicts of the past have arisen due to unfounded statements made by some very powerful figures. Be on the right side of history by not being those figures."