

Phoenix Allium knew she was the kind of girl most other people would describe as “bossy.” It’s how she would describe herself, in fact. Even before she discovered she was a witch, she took pride in taking charge of whatever situations she found herself in. Her old classmates in New York, her mom’s friends at the shelters she so often volunteered at... heck, sometimes she’d even try running the pass at her family’s restaurant when service was slow enough to handle. They always humored her, though with the benefit of hindsight, she suspected the sight of an eight-year-old girl barking orders and waving her finger around while standing on a stepstool to be visible from the other side of the pass made it hard for them to hold their laughter in.

Oh well. She probably wasn’t much of a help at all, but she didn’t mind. It made her feel good, knowing she had some measure of control over the things and people that mattered to her. As long as they listened to her, she knew she could help them through any struggle.

So it was exciting, going to Luna Nova. Mastering magic would make her so much more able to help people. She could take over her family’s restaurant, continue her mother’s charity work, finally grow into the leader she always knew she could be. At long last, she wouldn’t have to rely on anyone or anything to make the world a better place.

And then she met *her*.

Amanda O’Neill. Rambunctious. Disobedient. A slacker. She was the most rebellious girl Phoenix had ever met, someone who didn’t have a problem telling anyone to shove off. The first time Phoenix saw her talk back to a teacher, her jaw just about hit the floor. It was infuriating watching her be such a pain. It was infuriating even just being around her sometimes. Phoenix wanted nothing to do with this mess of a girl, this utter antithesis to common decency. She just had to continue her fire magic research, in her own little corner of the school. and forget Amanda ever existed.

There was just one problem.

Phoenix was maddeningly in love with her.

It drove her insane. How could she feel *anything* for this girl but repulsion? Yet time and again she found her gaze searching the hallways for that shrub of wild orange hair, wondering what classes she took, what she did in her free time, what kind of girls she was into (was she even into girls?), how she always seemed so sure of herself no matter the circumstances. On one occasion, she overheard Amanda debating the best potion-makers in town with her friends, and that weekend she found herself visiting the shop she spoke most passionately about. She could’ve sworn she meant to go shopping for alchemical regents, yet here she was buying the Gluttony Elixir that Amanda had claimed would double your stomach capacity so you could keep eating for hours. And she was *right*, god dammit.

Clearly this couldn't stand. If Phoenix spent any more time obsessing over this girl, she'd become swept up in her wild ways. She'd lose sight of the goals she always had in mind. For her family's sake- for her *own* sake- she needed to forget all about Amanda O'Neill.

Which is why, after months of avoiding Amanda, Phoenix finally worked up the courage to ask her on a date.

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It was infuriating how perfect the weather was that day. Sunny, warm, a pleasant breeze blowing through the town, barely a cloud in the sky. Phoenix stood waiting in the town square, her glossy black hair tied back in a ponytail instead of her usual bun. She was wearing her favorite dress, a red pinafore number with white lace sleeves. It felt bizarre, dressing up for a date with her enemy. But she had to set a proper stage, didn't she?

It was a simple enough plan. All she had to do was spend a day about town with Amanda, and her feelings would be cured. The only reason she'd been silly enough to fall for a girl like her in the first place is because she only ever saw her at a distance. But once they spent enough time together? Once Phoenix got a taste of what a rude slob she was up close? She'd never look at her that way again. Easy, painless, and at least she'd get a nice walk out of it. It was perfect.

She wondered if her collar was too short and tugged on it nervously.

"Hey! Sorry for the wait!"

Phoenix looked up. "It's alright! I wasn't here lo--"

The words died in her throat. *Oh sweet Nine Witches. Amanda was stunning.* Slick blue jeans that perfectly accentuated her long legs, a sporty red polo shirt with a dragon emblazoned on the lapel, and a glittering turquoise hairpin that seemed infused with magic. Phoenix had never seen her out of her Luna Nova uniform before, but she always assumed she was the kind of girl to throw on whatever she grabbed out of her closet first and call it a day. Well, if that were true, then she clearly had the luckiest closet ever.

"Woah, look at you!" Amanda looked cheery as she hurried to Phoenix's side. "You're super-cute!" She glanced down at herself. "I'm, uh, not underdressed am I?"

"Ah- that's- no, you're fine!" Phoenix stammered. *Cute? Did she just call me CUTE?*

"Thank god," Amanda sighed. "This is kinda my first date, so I didn't know how to get ready. But I didn't just want to throw something on, you know?"

“O-Of course not!” Phoenix hurriedly brushed a stray strand of hair behind her ear. Was she out of her mind? Why was she blushing over being called cute? *Get it together, girl!*

“Well, no sense waiting around,” she said, setting her posture straight. “Shall we get going?”

“Sure! What’s the plan?”

“Follow me and you’ll find out.”

A grin spread across Amanda’s face. “Building anticipation, huh? I like the way your head works, Allium.”

Phoenix’s face grew, if possibly, even redder. “W-well, let’s be off!” she said as she set a course deeper into town.

This was going to be harder than she thought.

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Things started off well enough. Phoenix and Amanda strolled through town, peeking in the shop windows, until they made their way to the restaurant Phoenix had made a reservation at. It was a fairly fancy place, somewhere she suspected Amanda would struggle to fit in. But despite some sideways glances from the waitstaff at Amanda’s casual outfit, it was mostly smooth sailing. The only thing that really stymied her was how many forks there were. She spent a solid minute trying to figure out the difference between the salad fork and the dessert fork. Her eyebrows scrunched up so much in concentration she looked like a particularly perplexed owl. Phoenix struggled not to laugh at the sight.

“Seriously, who needs that many forks?” Amanda complained as they left the restaurant. “It’s like it’s designed to confuse you!”

“Don’t tell me the great Amanda O’Neil is backing down from a challenge?” Phoenix teased.

Amanda snorted. “Challenge? I swear, you rich people have too much free time on your- Oh shit, look! Gem sale!”

“Huh?” Phoenix turned to see Amanda sprinting towards the nearest shop. “Wh- slow down!”

But Amanda was not to be stopped. By the time Phoenix followed her inside, she’d already snatched up a small pile of alchemic gemstones. “Jackpot!” she grinned. “Constanze is always bugging me for help with her projects. These’ll come in handy!”

Phoenix pursed her lips. "And I assume you can... pay for all that?"

Amanda blinked. Slowly, as if the thought was only just occurring to her, she looked down at the pricey, glittering baubles. "Um."

Phoenix felt a smile creeping up the corners of her mouth. *What am I going to do with you?*

"Excuse me!" She hurried to the cashier and slapped her card down on the counter. "That should cover everything, shouldn't it?"

Amanda's jaw dropped. "W-Wha?!"

"My treat."

"No way! I can't make you-"

"You are not making me do *anything*, Ms. O'Neil." Phoenix put her hand out. "Come on. Let's get these wrapped up before you cause an explosion."

In truth, she didn't understand it either. Wasn't she supposed to be untangling herself from Amanda? What was the point of splurging on a girl she was trying to forget? But the card was already on the counter; she couldn't very well take it back now, could she? Yes, she just had to commit. No sense worrying over what she couldn't change.

Amanda was still staring at her. Phoenix tried very hard not to blush. She was... less than successful.

Then, Amanda smiled. "Man. You're something else, Allium."

Ulp.

"J-Just get over here!" Phoenix stammered. God, why could the ground not open up and swallow her whole?

"I know, I know." Amanda patted her on the shoulder as she walked to the counter. "Thanks, though. Really."

Phoenix closed her eyes and tried not to leap out of her skin at Amanda's touch. "O-Of course."

This was going to be *way* harder than she thought.

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It was almost infuriating how happy Amanda was.

How dare she, really? How dare she have such a big, guileless smile on her face as she skipped down the street? How dare she hum so adorably to herself as she swung the bagged gemstones back and forth? Didn't she know how infectious her joy was? How much it made Phoenix want to start skipping alongside her without a care in the world? Stupid, inconsiderate Amanda O'Neil.

Phoenix kneaded her hands behind her back as she walked. This was bad. She was supposed to be falling out of love with Amanda. But all this day was doing was making it easier and easier to fall even deeper for her. Where had her plans gone so far astray? Surely she was missing something, something that would bring the whole charade down. But where? And how?

"Hey, check it out!" Amanda's voice broke into her thoughts. "They're playing broom polo!"

Phoenix looked over. Sure enough, there was a game going on in the square. A group of kids were rushing back and forth on their brooms, hitting a big, speckly purple ball around. As she watched, a girl who looked about 10 gave it a smack with the handle of her broomstick, and it crashed down into the other team's scoring area. "Seven!" she hooted.

"Rats!" A sour-looking boy smacked his broom in annoyance. "Come on, don't let them catch up!"

Amanda laughed at the sight. "Man, that takes me back! I used to be such a sore loser."

You still are, Phoenix thought but wisely didn't say.

"And you?" Amanda glanced at her. "Were you any good at broom polo?"

"Oh, um-" Phoenix felt her cheeks redden. Feeling awkward, she turned away.

Unfortunately, even a girl as dense as Amanda could figure that one out. "Don't tell me... you never played?"

"I-I just never saw the appeal!" Phoenix stammered. "Who'd like such a messy sport?"

That was a lie, and not very convincing one. Watching her friends zoom around at recess, struggling for the ball, always looked like so much fun. But there was never time. She was busy at home, or with studies, or with the restaurant, always something keeping her occupied, always something for her to be responsible for. Who had time for some silly distraction like sports? Certainly not her.

"Anyway, I'm not built for roughhousing like that," she muttered, trying to convince herself more than Amanda. "Potion-making is far more- EEP!"

And suddenly Amanda was pulling her along into the middle of the circle, waving her wand high. "Room for two more?" she called.

"Woah!" The kids' eyes lit up. "Luna Nova uniforms!"

"That's right!" Amada grinned as she yanked a bewildered Phoenix to her side. "And you guys look like you could use some team captains!"

"A-Amada!" Phoenix wanted to sink into the ground. "What are you-"

"Relax, relax!" Amada clapped her shoulder. "You'll get the hang of it in no time!"

THAT'S NOT THE PROBLEM HERE!

But it was too late; the kids were already swarming around them. "You're so pretty!" one of the girls said, tugging her cape. "Can you be our captain? Pretty please?"

"No way!" another girl said. "We saw her first!"

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

Phoenix felt her toes curl. How often had she seen her friends butt heads like that? How often had she buried her nose in a book and pretended she didn't mind sitting on the sidelines? Was she just going to hide away again like nothing changed?

Amanda's grin was burning in her eyes.

That's right. We're on a date.

She sucked in a breath.

Why not enjoy it?

"Aaaaaalright!"

She threw her finger in the air, feeling utterly ridiculous as she struck as gallant a pose as she could muster. "If that's the case, we're gonna kick their butts! Who's with me?"

The kids cheered. Phoenix felt a strange electricity running through her. She managed to shoot a defiant look back at Amanda. *How's that?*

And the look vanished from her face right away, because Amanda was *laughing* harder than Phoenix had ever seen her laugh. "Oh my god!" she cackled. "That was incredible!"

If Phoenix were any redder, she might burst into flames like an actual phoenix. "Sh-shut up!"

“Sorry, sorry!” Amanda wiped her eyes. “That’s a hell of a challenge, Allium!”

With a flourish, she mirrored Phoenix’s pose. “It’s on, then! No holding back!”

Her smile was bright. Too bright. Phoenix felt her stomach fizz like root beer. It was the most wonderful feeling in the world.

Forget hard. This was going to be impossible.

* * *

“Ow!”

“Hold still!” Phoenix pouted as she dabbed more cream on Amanda’s swollen ankle. “You’ll just inflame it more!”

“I know, I know!” Amanda sucked in air through her teeth. “Owowowowowowow.” The park bench beneath her creaked in protest as she swayed her upper body back and forth.

It was inevitable, perhaps, that Amanda would hurt herself. She’d gotten more into the game than the kids, rushing around at top speed and making dangerous plays one after the other. It was like she was asking to take a tumble off her broom, and whoever was listening had certainly taken than offer.

Phoenix sighed. If only she was better at healing magic, she could’ve fixed this up in no time. *So much for our date.*

“There.” She closed the ointment up. “You’ll have to stay off it for a couple hours, but it should be good as new.”

“Thanks.” Amanda’s voice was strangely quiet.

Phoenix felt a lump in her throat. Amanda O’Neil was like an explosion, her energy and determination endless. She should always be shining as bright as a supernova. But now, she was looking at the ground, her shoulders slumped, her expression hidden in shadow. It was so unlike her, she almost looked like someone else entirely.

“Amanda?” Phoenix asked.

“Sorry,” Amanda mumbled.

“For what?”

“For messing up our date.”

Huh?

“That’s- what are you talking about?” Phoenix stammered.

“I was too reckless.” Amanda rubbed her hands over her head. “Aaaaaagh, I’m such an idiot!”

“Don’t say that!” Phoenix leapt to her feet. “You’re not an idiot!”

“But I am!”

“No, you- you’re perfect!”

The words caught in her throat. Suddenly, she felt her chest twist in on itself. “*You’re perfect,*” she mumbled.

And I’m just...

She clutched the hem of her dress. This whole time, Amanda had been nothing but nice to her. And here she was, looking for an excuse to... what, exactly? To think less of her? Confirm the stereotype she’d already formed in her head?

“This day... it’s been incredible,” she mumbled. “I’ve had so much fun with you. More... more fun than I deserve.” She forced herself to meet Amanda’s gaze. “So don’t you dare say you ruined it, or I won’t forgive you. Got it?”

Amanda’s eyes were wide and vulnerable. For a moment, Phoenix was worried she was about to start crying. Then, a soft smile crept over her face. “That’s what I’ve always liked about you, Allium.”

“Huh?” And just like that, Phoenix was tomato-red again.

“I mean, like... you care so much. About everyone.” Amanda rubbed the back of her neck awkwardly. “When Constanze caught the flu, you always had medicine on hand for her. When Jasminka got lost in the Screaming Forest, you were gonna rush in and try to save her yourself before Professor Chariot got there. It doesn’t matter if you know them well or not. You just... help people.”

Phoenix stared at her. Suddenly, her chest felt painfully warm. “You... remember all that?”

“Well, yeah?” Amanda stifled a chuckle. “You make an impression, what can I say?”

You make an impression.

It was something Phoenix had heard many times before. Her teachers, her classmates, even her parents, not always in those exact words, but certainly the same meaning. Phoenix

stood out. She made people pay attention to her. She was bossy, she told people what to do, she affected the world around her consciously.

This was the first time it hadn't sounded even a little like an insult.

Suddenly, it took all her self-control not to leap into Amanda's arms and kiss her on the spot.

"Hey." Amanda stretched her leg out cautiously. "What's your dorm like?"

"My... dorm?"

"Yeah, like, who else is in it?"

Phoenix rubbed her sleeve over her eyes. "N-no one," she said.

"Seriously? You're by yourself as a first year?"

"I requested it. I... enjoy my peace and quiet."

"Well..." Amanda put her arms behind her head. She suddenly looked a little sheepish. "If... If you ever wanna change that... I'm just saying, you know."

Phoenix blinked. Slowly, it dawned on her what Amanda had failed to actually say out loud. "You mean..."

"I mean, we're pretty messy! And, like, not really organized." Amanda leaned back and forth awkwardly. "So it would help, you know? Having a number four to keep us in line?"

Phoenix was speechless. She stared at Amanda, at her nervous posture, at the bashful half-smile still refusing to leave her face. Suddenly the whole thing seemed so comical she wanted to laugh.

No, strike that. She didn't want to laugh.

She *did* laugh.

"Wh- hey!" Amanda's jaw dropped. "What's the big idea, Allium?"

"Sorry, sorry!" Phoenix tried to stop giggling, but it was no use. Was this really the girl she'd been scared of? The person she thought would ruin her life? Had she been running scared for someone so wonderful for God knows how long? When all she had to do was turn around and the monster would never have existed. How utterly ridiculous the whole affair was.

Well, maybe being ridiculous every now and then wasn't such a bad thing, was it?

“Alright,” she said, finally calming down. “I’ll... consider it. Certainly I could use the company every now and then.”

“Really?” Amada’s face brightened instantly.

“But on one condition!”

“Hm?”

Phoenix took a deep breath. Finally, she managed to look Amanda in the eyes. Her beautiful, fiery, passionate hazel eyes.

“You can... you can call me by my first name. If you want.”

For a moment, Amanda was quiet. Then, she broke into her biggest smile yet. “Alright... Phoenix.”

And just like that, the warmth in Phoenix’s chest spread throughout her whole body until it felt like she was about to live up to her namesake and burst into flames.

“Y-yeah.” She managed to smile back. “Phoenix.”

She’d never been so happy to lose in all her life.