

## Chapter 10 Ten

"Bristling broomsticks, it was just a question!" Eleni groaned as she marched out the class with her roommate. The witch spoke as quietly as she could now that she'd pissed off the professor and more than half her classmates.

"It was an offensive question, but I get your point," said Iridia, an irascible – a magical being that wore her emotions on her skin, literally. Skins of irascibles were beige-colored canvases until an emotion colors them, and their natural hair color would be in any shade of blonde. Iridia was a champagne blonde.

Since colors changed according to an irascible's emotions, many were pressured from a young age to be mindful of their emotional states. And although irascibles required a wand to attack from a further range, they were very capable of fighting close-range attacks without one. This is because magic – any magic – was harnessed from one's emotions, and irascibles' emotions were directly exposed to their external environment through the largest organ of any being's body – their skin. Therefore, irascibles could fend for themselves without a wand in a way no other wandless creature could. It didn't necessarily save them, but it bought them time.

Seeing Eleni seething as she stomped their way to the library, Iridia added, "I'm not saying you're the only one to be blamed, but perhaps it was a little... careless, considering the type of classmates we have in there."

Her friend fumed and came to a sudden halt, nostrils flaring. "Why should we always be the ones to consider them? Why should we be the ones to be careful? Beings like us got here by defying the odds. Creatures like them got here because they could! No other reason! They got here because the opportunity was served to them in a silver cauldron when we had to make do with non-updated grimoires from public libraries and work two jobs through undergrad!"

"Shh!" Iridia was turning pastel purplish-pink, a statement of her embarrassment. And the colors only got more prominent when she spotted the princess, lady, and politician's daughter being greeted by two men who happened to be walking along the corridor outside their lecture hall. They were all smiles until they weren't. And the one in a dark purple buttoned-up suit had his equally dark purple eyes darting to her and Eleni.

Iridia took her friend by the arm and dragged her away, taking the first turn out of the corridor even though it would be the slightly longer way to the library.

"Ugh, don't tell me you're afraid of them too?" Eleni grimace.

"I turn a different shade of purple when I'm afraid, you know that."

Having gone through their whole education journey through the same schools while working at the same places during their undergraduate years together, there were a lot of things they knew about one another. They were each other's support systems, study partners, and the vaults to each other's deepest, darkest secrets.

Eleni and Iridia were twenty-three, objectively young to be master's students, but not the youngest in Thavma's history (a then thirteen-year-old witch still held that record) or in their own class (a seventeen-year-old irascible was the youngest). And this was a fact Iridia was indifferent to but Eleni wasn't particularly happy about.

Eleni had worked so hard all her life. She worked so hard throughout her village school, then became the first villager to enrol in secondary school, then became the first to apply to university, then became the first to get into the twenty-third best university for her undergrad, then became the first to get into Thavma – the best university – for postgrad.

It was a long, arduous journey.

She worked so hard to get into Thavma – the institution of her dreams, the same institution that turned down her application as an undergraduate applicant. She was disappointed then, but Iridia and her fellow villagers encouraged her to keep going, and she did. When her master's application was approved, Eleni burst into tears of joy. Congratulations and gifts were sent from everyone who'd watched her grow and witnessed her achieve success after success. And when Iridia got her offer, they knew all those years of hard work were finally paying off.

Eleni relished her moment whenever the villagers and their children asked for advice, to which she would reply, "Work very hard and never give up. Put yourself first. And always aim to win."

Because, in truth, that was what she did. She'd put herself first and always aimed to win. Nothing less would cut it.

It wasn't all or nothing; it was her or no one.

Her competitiveness served her success but her inability to be happy – genuinely happy – for the success of others hurt many friendships. She knew the right things to say – "Congratulations, I'm so happy for you!" or "You deserve it!"

She knew the right words to use – "Everyone is in their own time, on their own path. I'm sure you'll get it next time." But there would be times when the way she truly felt about someone else's success would show, and never in a good way – "They liked your idea? Oh, that's... great." or "Well, honestly, now that I've got in, I'm not sure if I'd do it all again. But if you're really set on this path, then congratulations, you're one step closer to hell!"

She'd laugh off the last one as a good-natured joke, but the listener would always feel the jab in her words.

The truth was that Eleni would be happy for someone's success with one very important caveat – that they'd never outperform her. She wanted people to be good, but never better than her. She loved being the best, and anyone better was a threat. And one by one, the "threats" removed themselves from her circle, steering away from her energy.

Iridia was the only one who stayed, because – although arguably of equal intelligence – the irascible's scores were almost never higher than Eleni's, a fact that the witch found solace in – a secret that she never shared with anyone.

Even when Iridia got her offer from Thavma, Eleni was happier about the fact that she'd have company more than the fact that her long-time friend got into her dream institution as well, though this wasn't something Eleni would be careless enough to admit aloud. She was content for Iridia's accomplishment, but she was happy she'd have a friend and wouldn't be alone.

The weeks leading up to their first day were supposed to be exciting ones. They did their research on the best routes to use, best spots to eat, and locations they absolutely must visit whenever they didn't have any classes. They kept abreast with the news and updates in preparation of making conversation with their new coursemates. And if their coursemates didn't happen to know everything they did, Eleni was more than happy to share.

They say there is a danger in knowing too much, in digging too deep. Only after one glorious week of basking in the spotlight in her community, an article that spread across six pages became the cloud that took all of Eleni's happiness away.

It was uploaded on Thavma's website as well, and the article circulated across the news in all mediums – PRINCESS REIDA AND LADY LUCIANNE TO COMMENCE MASTER'S STUDIES AT INCANTA'S TOP INSTITUTION IN TWO MOON'S TIME.

The picture in the article was taken from social media, uploaded years ago by a family member, and it showed the cousins embracing during the lady's seventeenth birthday celebration. The media sought permission to use this particular photograph because it best exhibited the royal cousins' friendship and happiness.

To Eleni, however, the picture of two beaming girls surrounded by a horrendous number of balloons, clapping people, and a three-tier cake best exhibited how little some creatures had to work to get to where she got. The witch cemented her own assumptions by tracking the cousins' education history, which didn't require much effort since it was covered in the six-page article.

Was there really so much to say that it required six pages in such small print? Who'd read something this long? Were there really beings who'd want to read about how the "precociousness of the young royals" began in elementary school, especially in science? And was it really necessary to elaborate on their education journeys through the best schools with classes taught by the best teachers and how they won so many prestigious competitions? Competitions with entry fees and supplies that would've cost Eleni her kidneys!

Finally, at the end of the excessively long news piece, Eleni rolled her eyes and swore to never look at the cousins again since they were everything she knew them to be – privileged and loved for being privileged. Essentially, they were creatures who had an unrestricted access to the best of things, including education and opportunities. Thavma probably accepted them as a diplomatic gesture and publicity stunt. And even if the princess and lady truly had the brains, Eleni doubted it was because they worked harder than her. No one worked harder than her.

So how was it fair that they got to be some of the youngest postgraduate students to walk through the sacred halls of Thavma, but Eleni would never have the privilege of doing so? How was it fair that their acceptance into Incanta's top institution became a headlined, six-page news when Eleni's own achievement didn't even get a footnote?

She'd wanted to study here so badly. She'd wanted to win. When she'd finally made it and thought she'd won, she wasn't as revered as some of her peers were just because she didn't have the opportunities or fame that they did in getting into the program earlier.

The cruellest joke had been to place her in the same dormitory as the two she swore to give as little attention to as possible. The wraith was just another privileged one, albeit a politically privileged one as opposed to being royalty.

What in Spirit's name had Eleni done to be bound to live in such close proximity with beings who didn't deserve to be here as much as she did?

She requested for a room change the day she moved in, right after scribbling to Iridia about it, before her friend had the chance to respond. But her request was denied. There were no rooms left. Eleni then requested for a swap, but no one knew her enough to want to switch places with her. Some even thought there was something wrong with her room and wisely said no.

Needless to say, Eleni wasn't having the greatest start to the week. Worse still when the villagers she kept in touch with asked how she was settling in only to then ask whether she'd met the princess and lady yet, and whether she'd be able to get a photo with them.

Eleni chose not to reply until she'd simmer down, failing to understand how popular some utter strangers could be just because they were born to reputable families. Her anger reached its breaking point today in history class, where Reida's and Ianne's discreet chuckling at whatever that politician's daughter said made Eleni's control snap like a twig.

In hindsight, speaking up may not have been the best move to make. Her targets were solely the royal cousins, but things got a bit out of hand when Professor Dnaw's questioning made her give answers that could have been insinuating that several other peers weren't qualified as well, considering their parents were famous, highly successful, and had diplomatic ties to maintain themselves.

Ugh, why did the professor have to prod her like that?

It was alright. She learned from her mistakes, just as she always did. In the meantime, she must find and borrow every book she needed for the next class so she'd be able to shine like the star she was meant to be. Because if there was one thing Eleni had trained herself to do, it was to win.