+120 Points at most

Chapter 18 Eighteen

"What are you doing?" Iridia asked, suspicionlaced in her voice, eyes fixed on Eleni's opened notebook sprawled with large, confident scribbles.

"Nothing." Eleni said, shutting the notebook, but Iridia snatched it up and only managed to read one line from the page before her friend seized it back.

Iridia began turning flaming red, the kind of red that didn't show up very often because she wasn't the kind to lean into this shade. "Let it be, El. The more you poke the cat, the worse its screechingwill be."

"I'm not pokinganything. I'm just reporting an observation." She decided that reporting a senior professor like Professor Dérma was risky, but her Lethal Potions professor may be a softer target since he was new to the faculty.

"You're reacting based on your anger," Iridia stated. "That has never ended well."

"My anger drove me to prove a lot of people wrong when I accomplished things that they couldn't even dream about. Give it more credit."

"I didn't say it isn't a good fuel. But an excess of it will tip you off balance and your point of focus would blur and direct you to somewhere you don't want to end up in. We worked hard. We got in. Let's just study and enjoy the experience."

"How can you enjoy the experience when beings like them..."

"Who cares?" Iridia exclaimed, shocking her friend. "Who cares that they're here? Who cares that the professors are talking to them? One of them is their cousin. Do you expect them to just ignore each other?"

"I expect them to not qualify for Thavma at all since their cousin is part of the faculty."

Iridia was so baffled that the intensity of red halted, a few subtle streaks of turquoise appeared amidst the red, which wasn't the most flattering color combination. "Eleni Sfálma, I'm telling you this as your friend who wants nothingworse to happen to you. Focus on yourself. And. Let. It. Go."

16:59

+120 Points at most

"Fine," Eleni huffed, dissatisfaction weaving knots in her chest and making her feel caged in a way that she didn't like.

How was it that Iridia was able to just "let it go"? But Iridia would never fully understand what Eleni lived through. How could she when she grew up with two parents and a sibling while Eleni grew up an orphan? And despite her intelligence, she was never adopted. She later learned it was due to the educational expense interested parents were warned about needing to incur if they decided to take her in. She may be smart enough to get scholarships, but if she couldn't be fully-funded, would her potential adoptive parents be willing to make up the difference?

Eleni hated her caretakers for almost a year after learning the truth, but she later learned to appreciate they didn't simply allow any aspiring parent to choose the kids, they themselves chose the parents for the kids equally, if not more, cautiously.

The administrator of the orphanage, Mrs. Karas, once sat her down and told her that nothing could be worse for a child than having guardians who didn't allow her to reach her highest potential, whether it was an unintentional discouragement through a lack of financial means and a difference in priorities and values; or an intentional prohibition such as by using the child for their own benefit and never for the child's own.

It took sixteen-year-old Eleni some time to understand the depth of the decision, but she eventually became grateful that even though it cost the orphanage more to feed and clothe an extra being, they'd rather incur that cost than give her off to any random parent.

Eleni wasn't sure if she would've gotten this far if she'd been adopted. Her village was in some of the most rural – and some would say forgotten – locations in Incanta. Couples who visited the orphanage were either financially unstable or financially sound without a child, though being financially sound was never good enough for Mrs. Karas. There was always an added question of why a couple wanted to adopt.

There were couples who were unable to conceive and said they wanted successors to their family's farms or similar kinds of estates, intending to teach the child the ins and outs as soon as he or she could hold a bucket. Mrs. Karas would only allow teenagers who'd shown an affinity for these ventures to be considered, not a child who'd just learn how to walk and hold a bucket. Most of the time, compatibility would be the cause of the rejection, either by the couple or the administrator herself.

Eleni, though had been considered for three families before she turned twelve, eventually faced disappointment when none of those made it to the end of the orphanage's careful assessment. She wasn't anyone's

+120 Points at most

ideal being and the only place she didn't feel like an unwanted outcast was in her studies. In books and school, she didn't just feel belonged, she felt desired, and that feeling only fueled her drive to be better than anyone else.

How would Iridia or anyone else ever know – truly know – how much Eleni had to look past and put up with for all those years?

She'd only given in to appease her friend, but she wouldn't let this go. Justice wasn't served from thin air. If Eleni wanted to be treated fairly, she'd have to fight for it, just as she'd had to fight for everything else in her life.

She'd just have to be smart about things when making the report. Perhaps she should wait a few weeks before putting her plan into action, so if word did circulate about the consequences of displaying favoritism, Iridia wouldn't suspect that it came from Eleni herself.