

Chapter 21: E.Z.

Elizabeth Zott walks back into the Chemistry Department at Hastings Institute with cautious optimism, hoping for some semblance of respect and camaraderie among her colleagues. Her return is met with a mix of indifference and superficial gestures, exemplified by the presentation of a new lab coat emblazoned with the initials "E.Z." What might have been intended as a welcome-back gift feels more like a veiled dismissal of her identity and accomplishments, reducing her years of hard work and dedication to a couple of letters. While she thanks them politely, Elizabeth cannot help but feel the undercurrent of condescension that permeates the room, foreshadowing the resistance she will face.

The day takes a sharp turn when Dr. Donatti, her supervisor, summons her to discuss her ongoing research into abiogenesis—a project Elizabeth had poured her heart into, believing it to be confidential. Instead of engaging with her findings or encouraging her efforts, Donatti's tone is dismissive, laced with skepticism and subtle mockery. He quickly shifts the conversation, stripping Elizabeth of her title as a chemist and relegating her to the role of a mere lab technician. To add insult to injury, Donatti suggests that she consider abandoning her aspirations in science altogether in favor of pursuing stenography—a thinly veiled attempt to push her into a traditionally female-dominated role. The suggestion reeks of paternalism, further reinforcing the systemic sexism that Elizabeth has fought against throughout her career.

Elizabeth's day becomes even more challenging when she encounters Miss Frask in the ladies' room. Frask, the Personnel secretary, represents the institutional culture that devalues women's contributions, often siding with the patriarchal system to maintain her own precarious position. Their conversation, fraught with tension, delves into Frask's insinuations that Elizabeth's success at Hastings is not a result of her talent or hard work but rather her relationships with influential men. Frask's thinly veiled accusations echo the widespread societal belief that women cannot achieve greatness on their own merit. The interaction reveals the internalized misogyny that often pits women against each other, even when they share common struggles.

Elizabeth counters Frask's accusations with sharp wit and pointed logic, refusing to let her hard-earned achievements be reduced to baseless gossip. The confrontation escalates, exposing the frustrations of both women—Frask, resigned to the system's limitations, and Elizabeth, determined to challenge them. Their clash culminates in a physical altercation, leaving Elizabeth drenched but unbowed, a symbolic moment that underscores her resilience and defiance in the face of relentless adversity.

The challenges Elizabeth faces at Hastings highlight the stark realities of being a woman in a male-dominated field during an era rife with sexism. Her commitment to her work and her unwavering belief in her own abilities stand in sharp contrast to the pervasive culture of doubt and dismissal she encounters. Despite the systemic barriers and personal attacks, Elizabeth's resolve remains unshaken. She is not fighting solely for her own recognition but also for a future where women like her daughter, Madeline, can pursue their dreams without facing the same oppressive roadblocks.

As Elizabeth dries herself off and returns to her work, she reflects on the deeper significance of her struggles. The lab coat, the meeting with Donatti, and the clash with Frask all serve as reminders of the uphill battle she must continue to fight—not just for herself but for the countless women who will come after her. Her determination to challenge the status quo and redefine what it means to be a woman in science is a testament to her strength, intelligence, and unyielding spirit.

This chapter encapsulates the complexities of Elizabeth's journey, balancing her personal convictions with the professional expectations imposed upon her. It paints a vivid picture of the sacrifices and resilience required to challenge deeply ingrained societal norms, offering a poignant exploration of ambition, identity, and the fight for equality. Elizabeth's story serves as a powerful reminder that progress is not achieved without struggle and that every act of defiance against injustice brings the world one step closer to a more

equitable future.