

ACT_III_Draft2

Chapter 1

Eddie stirred awake. Blinking against the soft sunlight that streamed through the stained-glass panels above, he found himself in a spacious, vibrant ward he didn't recognise. The sunlight cast warm red, blue, and green hues across the room. It refracts off the intricate stained-glass windows.

Rows of clean beds stretched out before him. Each of them is separated by shimmering silk curtains. The curtains caught the sunlight, creating a soft glow. The air was thick with an unsettling peace—too muted for comfort. Faint murmurs of incantations and the soft hum of magic filled the air. Healers, clad in flowing robes that ripple like water, moved gracefully from bed to bed. Their hands glowed as they worked. Their whispers of healing spells were gentle, but to Eddie, they stirred an unease deep inside him.

His body felt heavy like he was sinking into the plush mattress beneath him. He glanced down at his chest. Bandages wrapped tightly around his chest. He could smell the faint, herbal scent of salves beneath the cloth. His brown wool jacket was gone, replaced by a loose hospital robe. The memory of the attack at the campus flickered in his mind. He remembered blacking out on the path home, the pain in his chest, the sense of his body giving up after the attack.

He remembered blacking out on the path home, the pain in his chest, the sense of his body giving up after the attack.

Voices filtered through the silk curtain beside him.

"...I'm telling you, there ain't no way it was some drunk with a pitchfork," came Will's voice, low but insistent. "Eddie was, like, a ten-minute walk from the East

Gate. Ain't no drunk walking off that close to campus without being stopped, Maddie, you know more about this don't you? What'd you think?"

"I'm not sure," said Madeleine gently. "The shape of the wounds—it's not consistent with a weapon. They're jagged, uneven... it's like when your cat scratch you, but worse."

"Yeah, no shit." Will chuckled, "That must've been one hell of a cat."

"Wait, Madeleine, You think it was a creature?" Ashley's voice cut in, sharp and focused. "I think that would explain why the police lied. If it was a creature attack, they'd have to report it to the university, and then the Council. Edenfield doesn't like people thinking the city's unsafe."

There was a pause. Eddie kept his breathing steady, not quite ready to let them know he was awake.

"I'm just saying," Will continued, "We've been here long enough. And we know the cops don't spin that hard unless someone told 'em to. Higher up."

"I saw the paper this morning," Claire said simply. Her voice was clipped and factual, like reading from a page. "No mention of magical residue. Which is odd. If it was a Chimaera, it would've left traces."

Another pause.

"But it's not like they'd put *that* in the official report," Ashley snapped. "They've been trying to cover this up for months. First the missing pets, then the rumours about the alleys by Red Oak Lane—"

"—And now Edward." Madeleine's voice softened. "He could've died."

Eddie blinked slowly, then let out a low groan. The talking stopped instantly.

"He's awake," Madeleine said gently, and he heard the shift of feet as someone moved to his bedside.

The curtain drew back, and light spilled across his bed. Madeleine stood closest, her auburn hair catching the light. Will gave him a lopsided grin from beside her, while Ashley crossed her arms and gave him a look that was half-relief, half-scolding.

“Hey man,” Will said, shaking his head. “You gotta stop gettin’ yourself mauled if you want to survive first year.”

“I—I didn’t...” Eddie’s voice cracked. He coughed. His throat felt raw. “What happened?”

“We were hoping *you* could tell *us*,” Ashley said, brow furrowed.

“We were told that you were found outside the Astral Garden, unconscious,” Madeleine explained, voice soothing. “Your wounds were... severe. They said it was a pitchfork, but—”

“—But no drunk guy’s walking around Edenfield with a farm tool like some horror film extra,” Will finished.

Eddie groaned and shifted upright, wincing at the pull in his bandaged side. “It was some drunk bloke, Will,” he muttered, his voice hoarse. “Or... at least, I thought so.”

Ashley stepped closer, her brows knitting together. “Eddie,” she said, voice calm but intent, “you can tell us everything. We’re not gonna spill it to anyone.”

She glanced at the others—Madeleine, Will, even Claire—waiting for their confirmation. One by one, they nodded.

Eddie hesitated. The memory was like a cracked mirror—fragments scattered across his mind, sharp and confusing. But one detail glared, undeniable.

“I could’ve sworn it was a person,” he said slowly. “Not some monster. I saw them, just for a second. A silhouette. Tall. Human. Moving weird, but definitely a person.”

The words had barely left his mouth when Madeleine stiffened.

“A person?” she repeated, her voice a pitch higher than usual. “You’re sure? Not an animal? Not some summoned thing?”

Eddie frowned at her reaction. Madeleine, normally so composed—always the calm in any storm—suddenly looked pale. Her fingers clutched the hem of her sleeve.

“I mean—yeah,” he said, uncertain. “It looked like one. Didn’t see a face or anything, but... they held something. Like a—”

“A weapon?” she cut in, eyes wide. “Did it *use* something to hurt you?”

Will raised his hand like he was in class. “So it’s true—you *were* attacked by a pitchfork!”

Ashley whirled on him. “Will, shut up!”

Eddie let out a breath, then leaned back against the pillows, eyes distant. “I didn’t think much of it at first,” he said, voice low. “It was almost two in the morning. I’d just left the library—I’d stayed late copying a book for Alchemy. The campus was dead quiet.”

Everyone watched him now. Even Claire had paused her quiet page-turning.

“I was walking past the Archway Garden,” Eddie continued, “and I saw someone just... standing there. Under one of the old gaslamps. Alone. Wearing a suit, just—still. Like a statue.”

Ashley frowned. “A suit?”

Eddie nodded. “Dark-colored. Didn’t look like a student. Or a professor. Just this tall guy. I thought maybe he was lost. Or drunk. I kept walking.”

His voice dropped. “Then I heard footsteps. Behind me. Slow. Limping.”

A hush fell over the group.

“I turned onto Fallow Lane—the one behind the Rune Studies hall,” he said. “And that’s when I saw it again. It was following me. Limping like its leg was twisted or broken. That’s when I started running.”

Madeleine’s hand covered her mouth.

“I didn’t look back until I crossed into the courtyard behind Alchemy Hall. I thought I’d lost it. But when I turned...” Eddie swallowed. “It wasn’t standing anymore.”

He looked up at them. “It was *walking on all fours*. Like—like a dog. Except it was still wearing the suit. Its arms were too long. And its face...” He blinked, the memory flickering behind his eyes. “Its face wasn’t right. The eyes were too far apart. The skin looked stretched. Like it was trying to *look* human, but couldn’t quite manage it.”

Silence.

Even Will had nothing.

No joke. No quip.

Just stunned stillness.

Eddie looked between them, the weight of the memory clinging to his chest. “Any idea what that might be?”

For a moment, no one moved.

Then Madeleine spoke. Her voice was barely a whisper. “Chimaera,” she said.
“What you just encountered was a Chimaera.”

Eddie sat up straighter, his breath catching. His mind raced—not with fear, but recognition.

“You’re kidding,” he murmured.

But Madeleine wasn’t smiling.

Will blinked. “Okay—gonna need someone to back up a sec and explain what the hell that even is.”

Madeleine didn’t look at him. Her eyes were still locked on Eddie’s, her usual softness tinged with something sharp. “In Alchemical theory, there was a period—about two centuries ago—when a few researchers attempted to... alter the nature of living tissue. Not transmuting metals or changing matter states, but *life*.”

Will squinted. “You mean, like, magical surgery?”

“No,” Madeleine said. “Not healing. Not enhancement. I mean the forced fusion of multiple living organisms. Stitching animal parts together. Layering magical grafts. Rewiring the essence of a creature until something new emerged. A new species entirely. Something unstable.”

Eddie exhaled slowly. “It was called the Chimerae Program. Officially, it was banned. Unethical, unpredictable, and dangerous.”

“And I thought it was just a myth,” Madeleine said, barely audible. “One of those cautionary tales they use in Magical Ethics.”

Will’s brows rose, visibly unsettled. “So you’re telling me someone *built* that thing? Like—*made* it?”

“More like they broke a bunch of creatures and mashed ‘em together,” Eddie muttered. “Trust me, it’s not elegant magic. It’s Frankenstein crap.”

“Wait, like... lightning bolts and grave robbing?” Will asked.

Eddie gave him a look. “No. Worse. Alchemically engineered. Living tissue restructured through transformation circles, mutagenic tinctures, and gods know what else. It's one of the few things that both the Arcane Council *and* the Healers Guild agreed was a step too far.”

“And now it's here,” Madeleine said quietly, folding her arms. “In Edenfield. Fully formed. Active. Which means someone didn't just try to make one—they *succeeded*.”

A thick silence followed Madeleine's words.

No one spoke.

Then, softly but with a rare note of resolve, Madeleine said, “We have to do something about this.”

She looked around the circle of friends, her brows slightly drawn, eyes steady. For a moment, her usual softness was edged with something almost fierce.

Before anyone could respond, the curtain snapped open with a rustle of silk.

A nurse in pale blue robes stepped in, smiling politely. “Sorry to interrupt. Visiting hours for Mr. Welton are over. The doctor will be in shortly for his examination.”

The group broke from their huddle. Will stood first, patting Eddie lightly on the shoulder. “Alright, man. Heal up. Don't go fighting any more horror movie monsters without calling me first, yeah? ”

Ashley followed, her tone brisk but warm. “Keep your head clear, Eddie. Rest, but don't forget what happened. If someone's covering this up—we'll find out.”

Claire gave a brief nod, the hem of her robes brushing the polished floor. “Stay sharp, Edward. You're lucky to be alive.”

Then came Madeleine. She stood near the foot of his bed, her expression softer now, though something lingered behind her eyes—concern, perhaps, or fear she wasn't voicing.

As the others stepped out, she lingered.

"Hey," she said, her voice quieter now that it was just the two of them. "Do you know when you'll be out?"

Eddie shook his head. "Dunno. They said at least a week. Maybe two, if the burns need more time."

Madeleine nodded slowly. Her fingers fidgeted with the sleeve of her robe.

She stepped closer and offered her hand again. He took it—and this time, she held it for a moment longer.

"Good luck," she said. "And... stay safe, alright?"

Then she flashed him her familiar warm smile. The one that always seemed to smooth the edges of everything else. "When you're out—come find me. There's something I want to show you."

With that, she waved gently and slipped through the curtain after the others.

Eddie leaned back against the pillows, the room quiet again save for the distant hum of magic.

It was only then that he noticed the slip of paper in his hand.

Neat handwriting curled across the page: Madeleine D. 0712 443 229

And beneath it, a simple line:

21st Norwood Street. Past the Campground.

Edenfield Mythical Creature Sanctuary.

Chapter 2

The bus hummed with a tired groan that never quite stopped. It buzzed faintly beneath the floorboards like a nest of bees, accompanied by the rhythmic squeaking of the old suspension every time they hit a bump.

The seats creaked whenever someone shifted their weight. Somewhere near the back, a bolt was loose—it rattled faintly with every turn.

Overhead, the air conditioner wheezed out cool air in pitiful, uneven bursts. It clicked now and then, like it was trying to restart itself but kept giving up. A soft *hiss* followed each breath of air, barely noticeable unless you listened for it.

The whole vehicle smelled faintly of dust and dried grass. The scent of something sunbaked.

Eddie sat near the window, his crutch propped beside him, fingers loosely gripping the handle. The metal of it was warm to the touch from sitting in the sunlight. His leg ached dully from the vibrations in the floor.

Outside, the suburbs of Edenfield slowly gave way to open fields. The noise of city life—the chatter of street vendors, the distant clanging of bells, the squeals of tram brakes—had long since faded, replaced by the subtle hum of wind brushing over fields.

He leaned against the cool windowpane and let his eyes drift to the hills outside.

Yellow wildflowers dotted the landscape, swaying gently like dancers in a slow procession. He recognized them now—Eden Flowers. Rare, beautiful. Rumored to be the city's namesake.

Eddie had read about them recently in a book Will tossed aside in their dorm room. They only grew on the eighth continent, and some believed they were the

reason the city was called Edenfield. A field of paradise. A hopeful name, for a city so full of hidden things.

The note crinkled faintly in his hand as he turned it over again.

21st Norwood Street. Past the Campground. Edenfield Mythical Creature Sanctuary.

Madeleine's handwriting was neat, almost too neat—like every letter had been shaped with care.

He could've ignored it.

Finals were over. Will was back to plucking wild solos on his electric guitar with the campus band. Ashley had thrown herself into her advocacy group again, fighting for student protections and probably brewing some conspiracy after everything that happened to him.

He could've gone back to the Book Pirates, argued about the latest book they'd smuggled in from the restricted section. He'd even drafted a rant about the plot holes in *The Alchemist's Mirror*.

And yet, here he was.

Why?

Because of a hunch? Because of that thing that chased him—crawling on all fours with arms too long and a face that didn't look human?

Or maybe because of *her*.

He let out a slow breath and leaned his head against the window. The glass was warm.

She'd been patient with him. Even when she caught him that one time—slipping a book from the library.

Who was he kidding?

She was kind to everyone. That was just who she was.

Eddie looked outside again. The golden fields had started to thin. In their place, narrow rivers carved winding paths through the land, glinting in the sunlight like veins of silver. Trees—tall, broad, and old—appeared more frequently now, rising from mossy rocks and thick underbrush. Their branches cast flickering shadows that danced across the windows as the bus rattled along the dirt path.

The road dipped and groaned under the weight of the vehicle. Somewhere beneath Eddie's seat, a loose panel clattered like it might fall off. Still, he kept his eyes forward.

The bus finally creaked to a stop before a worn wooden cabin that sat nestled beneath a wide oak tree. A crooked sign swung gently in the breeze above the door.

Norwood Campgrounds.

Eddie looked at the paper again, unfolding it like he hadn't memorized every inch of it.

21st Norwood Street, past the campground.

Right, this must be it.

With a grunt, he pressed a hand to the metal frame of the seat in front of him and hoisted himself up. His leg protested instantly, a deep throb radiating from his thigh down to his ankle. He hissed through his teeth.

The aisle felt narrower than usual. He shuffled past the rows of empty seats, his hand dragging along the backs of them for balance, his body swaying with the uneven ground beneath the bus.

Gravel crunched under his foot. The scent of pine hit him immediately—strong, earthy, and damp. Somewhere nearby, birds were chirping, and the wind whistled gently through the leaves like a whisper.

Eddie took a few slow steps forward, scanning the area. Past the bus stop and Norwood Campgrounds cabin, there wasn't much—just a scattering of wooden buildings, most of them locked up, a picnic table or two, and a lonely clothesline swaying in the breeze. Beyond that, just trees. Trees and shadows. Tall and thick, the kind that swallowed noise and direction.

He turned the note over in his hand again.

"Past the campground," it said.

Past where? Eddie thought. *Left of the mossy rock? Right at the griffin statue?*

He made his way toward one of the cabins where a man in green coveralls and a wide-brimmed hat was fiddling with a hose.

"Excuse me," Eddie said, approaching. "Do you know where Edenfield Mythical Creature Sanctuary is? Should be somewhere near here."

The man scratched his chin. "Creature Sanctuary?" He turned his head and spat thoughtfully. "Think that's north. Up past the creek. Or south, maybe. Can't remember. My cousin swore he saw a griffin there once. Or a deer. Could've been a deer."

Eddie blinked. "Right. Thanks."

He asked two more people—one of them pointed down a trail that led nowhere, the other looked confused and said it didn't exist at all. Ten minutes passed. Maybe fifteen. He was sweating now, leaning heavier on his crutch, irritation mounting.

He came to a slow stop by a large oak tree, breathing hard. His leg was sore, his shirt was sticking to his back, and he was starting to wonder if this had all been a mistake. Maybe Madeleine had been joking. Or testing him. Or maybe—

“Edward!”

The voice cut through the woods like a warm gust of air. He froze, eyes scanning the brush and the winding paths around him.

Again, “Edward!”

He turned just in time to see a figure emerging between two trees—wavy red hair catching the sunlight like a flicker of fire, arms waving above her head.

Madeleine.

She jogged toward him, boots thudding softly against the dirt path, a wide smile on her face.

“You made it!” she called, beaming.

Before he could say anything, Madeleine wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug.

“Agh—bloody—my leg!” Eddie winced, half-laughing, half-wheezing.

Madeleine immediately pulled back, her eyes wide. “Oh no! I’m so sorry—I didn’t know you were still healing!”

He waved it off, trying to catch his breath. “No, no, it’s fine—just... It’s still there y’know?”

Madeleine frowned, looking genuinely guilty. “You should’ve waited a few more days. Seriously. You didn’t have to come limping through the woods for this.”

“What can I say, I couldn’t wait to see the dragons,” Eddie said dryly, expecting an eye-roll or a sarcastic jab in return.

Instead, Madeleine glanced ahead and replied, matter-of-factly, “They’re currently under intensive care. One of them had a wing injury and the hatchling’s still in containment, so I’m afraid you won’t be able to see them today.”

Eddie chuckled. Then paused. “Wait... you’re serious?”

Madeleine looked at him with a raised brow, half-smiling. “You’re in the Edenfield Mythical Creature Sanctuary, Eddie. Come on. You haven’t seen anything yet.”

She turned and started walking again, parting the overgrown trail with her hands. Eddie followed, crutch tapping against root and soil.

-o-

They followed a narrow path through the woods, barely more than a trail beaten down by time and boots. The trees arched overhead like ancient guardians, their branches laced with moss, the sunlight filtering through in golden slants. The silence of the woods was complete—except for the occasional chirping of birds, the rustle of leaves, and now and then, a distant, eerie wail from deeper in the forest.

Eddie glanced toward the sound but didn’t say anything for a while. Then, as they passed a moss-covered log, he finally asked, “So... how long have you been doing this? The Sanctuary thing.”

Madeleine stepped over a root before answering, “Since my first year.” Her voice was calm, nostalgic. “I signed up as a volunteer the moment I arrived in Edenfield. But to be honest, it started long before that.”

Eddie raised an eyebrow. “You grew up around magical creatures?”

“You could say that,” she said with a small laugh. “But not exactly, I was obsessed with them. Always reading about them. Drawing them. Pretending I had one hidden under my bed.” She slowed her pace a little, eyes scanning the path ahead.

“There was one time,” She continued, “When I was maybe eight or nine—me and two of my best friends were playing by the creek near my place. We stumbled on this injured hatchling. Tiny thing. Could barely stand. It must’ve gotten separated from its pack.”

Eddie listened, the rhythmic thud of his crutch tapping the dirt between her words.

“We couldn’t tell our parents,” she continued. “They’d have made us give it up right away. Said it was too dangerous. So we took turns sneaking out food and blankets. One of us would always be on watch while the others fed it and tend to its wing.”

“It took almost a year.” She smiled, “But one day, it just stood up, flapped its wings, and took off. Just like that. No warning. No goodbye. Just gone.”

“Didn’t that... I don’t know... Hurt?” Eddie asked.

“What do you mean?” Madeleine asked back.

“I don’t know...” Eddie said, “Taking care of something for almost a year. You must’ve grown attached to that thing, you know?”

Madeleine shook her head. “Some people say letting go is painful. But I didn’t feel that. It’s just that the feeling I felt finally seeing them fly again outweighs the feeling I felt when they left. Seeing it soar... If felt as if we did something good, and that was enough.”

They walked in silence for a few more steps.

Eddie looked at her. “That’s a lot of heart for an eight-year-old.”

“It wasn’t heart.” Madeleine smiled at him. “It was hope.”

They walked for some time, the path narrowing until it became little more than a trail of flattened leaves and twisted roots. Eventually, Madeleine veered off the track, motioning for Eddie to follow her. He hesitated for a moment, then sighed and limped after her into a quiet clearing surrounded by towering trees.

At the far end of the clearing stood two trees unlike any Eddie had seen before. They were impossibly tall, ancient, their gnarled trunks wide enough to fit a whole bus between them. Roots like thick ropes coiled at their bases, and their dark green canopies loomed high above the rest of the forest like silent sentinels.

Eddie stood in the middle of the clearing, taking in the sheer scale of them.

Madeleine, meanwhile, walked toward the space between the trees. She paced to and fro in front of them, scanning the area.

“What are you doing?” Eddie called.

Madeleine squinted at the ground, then up at the trunks. “Someone must’ve closed the gate.”

“The what?”

She turned to him. “Did you bring a wand?”

Eddie scoffed. “I’m an Alchemy student. We don’t really do wands.”

She winced. “Right. Of course. I don’t have mine either.”

With a resigned sigh, Madeleine stepped up to one of the trees and began patting the bark, feeling around the grooves like someone searching for a hidden latch.

After a few moments, she let out a soft “Ah-ha!” and pulled something free from a hollow in the bark.

It was a staff—twisted wood woven into a lattice, with a simple, clouded crystal embedded at the top. The whole thing looked as if it had grown that way.

Madeleine approached the first tree and tapped it once with the staff. Then she crossed over to the other and did the same.

Finally, she returned to Eddie's side, held the staff upright, and brought its base down against the earth with a soft *thunk*.

At first, nothing happened.

Then, high above, something stirred.

Eddie looked up just in time to see a thick branch from one tree curl inward like a bending arm. The other tree responded in kind. The two branches reached across the empty space between them and interlocked, forming a curved archway of living wood.

And beneath that arch, the world changed.

Where moments ago there had only been trees and brambles, now stood an open expanse of green fields stretching gently toward the horizon. A wooden fence traced the edge of a nearby pasture, and beyond it were low cabins with mossy roofs, a few smoke trails curling lazily from chimneys. The scent of hay and something vaguely sulfurous wafted from the invisible threshold.

Eddie blinked. "That's... new."

Madeleine grinned. "Welcome to the Edenfield Mythical Creature Sanctuary."

Chapter 3

Eddie stepped through the gate, and the moment his foot crossed the threshold, the air changed. It was warmer here, lighter. He could hear the rustle of grass underfoot, the creaking of wood in the distance, and the soft grunts and murmurs of things—living things—all around him.

He followed close behind Madeleine, taking in the view.

The sheer scale of the place stopped him in his tracks.

Compared to the Book Pirates' so-called “headquarters”—a musty, booze-stained basement barely large enough for a table and mismatched chairs—this was... acres. Fences crisscrossed the landscape, separating fields and paddocks, with stone paths winding between tall grass and wildflowers. Some cabins stood off to the side, their moss-covered roofs blending with the landscape, while distant sheds and enclosures dotted the horizon like watchful outposts.

And the creatures.

There were creatures everywhere.

A herd of something deer-like but scaled grazed lazily near the fence. Bright-feathered bird-beasts perched on low posts, ruffling their wings with annoyed chirps. A furry, long-legged animal with too many eyes blinked up at Eddie from behind a fence and then went back to chewing on a branch.

“This is the front range,” Madeleine said, her tone casual but proud. “We keep the gentler ones closer to the gate. Rescue gryphlings, retired hippogriffs, a few centaur folk who don’t mind being neighbors.”

Eddie’s eyes wandered further out, where the landscape dipped into shadowy groves and distant enclosures. “And the dragons?”

“Back there,” she said, nodding toward the tree line in the far distance. “We keep the more aggressive or high-risk creatures farther out—dragons, manticores, anything that breathes fire or bites through steel.”

Eddie raised an eyebrow. “And that’s where you want to take me?”

She nodded. “Eventually, yes.”

Eddie gave a skeptical chuckle, leaning slightly on his crutch. “Because nothing says recovery like a stroll through the fire-breathing death animals.”

Madeleine laughed. “You haven’t even met one of the *cute* fire-breathing animals yet.”

Eddie blinked. “I’m sorry, did you just put ‘cute’ and ‘fire-breathing’ in the same sentence?”

She grinned. “You’ll see.”

Eddie looked out over the Sanctuary again. Even from here, he could see the faint shimmer of heat waves rising from the far end, where the tree line thickened and the fences became taller, reinforced with wards and polished iron. Something inside him stirred—a mix of nerves, curiosity, and that same stubborn instinct that had made him board the bus in the first place.

Madeleine rolled her eyes fondly. “Before that, I need to speak to someone,”

She led the way toward a modest stone building tucked under a slope, ivy creeping along its walls and a slanted roof sagging just slightly at the edges. A hand-painted sign above the door read: *Caretaker’s Office*. Eddie followed her in, the faint scent of parchment and pine oils wafting from within.

At the reception desk, instead of the usual student attendant, Madeleine nearly collided with Professor Gareth Hudson—tall, silver-haired, and impeccably dressed in a charcoal-gray waistcoat, his presence as polished as the alchemy vials he

carried. A harried student trailed behind him, arms stacked with ledgers titled *Species Classification & Behavioral Anomalies*.

“Oh, I’m so sorry Professor, I was-“

“Ah, Mrs. Daedallia, not to worry,” Hudson said, his voice smooth and deliberate, like honey over steel. “A pleasure, as always.” His gaze flicked to Eddie, and a faint smile touched his lips. “Mr. Welton. States Transformation, isn’t it? I must admit, I never expected one of my own students to show such... enthusiasm for mystical fauna.”

Eddie stiffened at the backhanded compliment but forced a grin. “Guess I’m just... expanding my horizons, Professor.”

Hudson’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “How commendable.” He turned back to Madeleine, tilting his clipboard toward her. “Now, what brings Edenfield’s finest caretaker to the administrative den? Surely not my scintillating company.”

Madeleine’s fingers twitched toward the empty keyhook behind the desk. “I need access to the Back Range. For a tour.”

“A tour?” Hudson’s eyebrow arched. “With *this* one?” He gestured to Eddie’s crutch, his tone light but edged with skepticism. “The Back Range is no place for convalescents. Unless”—his voice dropped, almost playful—“you’ve discovered a therapeutic application for wyvern venom I haven’t?”

The student behind him stifled a nervous laugh. Madeleine’s jaw tightened.

Hudson tapped his clipboard with a gloved finger. “Fortunately for you, I’ve just finished compiling data from the Back Range.” He gestured to the student behind him, who hurried to place the ledgers on the desk. “Though I’d advise against lingering for too long.” His gaze lingered on Eddie’s crutch. “Predators do so love uneven footing.”

Madeleine ignored the jab. “We’ll manage.”

“I’m sure you will.” Hudson’s smile was razor-thin. “Mr. Jones has the key. Do remember to return it.” He paused, as if struck by a thought. “Ah, and Madeleine? The Student Council’s new security memo applies to *all* staff. Even you.”

Hudson smiled—polite, practiced, and utterly unreadable. “Excellent. I’d hate for your enthusiasm to be... misconstrued.” He adjusted his cuffs, then gestured to the waiting student. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, these reports won’t transcribe themselves.”

As he turned to leave, he paused, as if struck by an afterthought. “Oh, and Madeleine?” He didn’t look back. “Do give my regards to the Alamirian tiger. She’s had quite the appetite lately.”

Then he was gone, the sound of his polished shoes fading down the hall, leaving behind the faint scent of bergamot and something sharper—ozone, maybe, or the ghost of an alchemical reaction.

At the reception desk, a student leaned back in a worn leather chair, on the table there is a name tag Hughes Jones. He is flipping through a thick ledger with one hand and munching on something out of a paper bag with the other. He looked up as they entered.

“Hey Hughes,” Madeleine greeted, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “Who was in charge of the gates today?”

Hughes—tall, freckled, popped the rest of his snack into his mouth and replied around a chew. “Victor. Why?”

Madeleine’s brows furrowed. “Then why were the gates closed? It’s not past hours yet.”

Hughes shrugged, “As you heard from Professor Hudson,” he said as he flipped the ledger around lazily. “Security reasons.”

Madeleine blinked, clearly offended. “What security? We already have three layers. There’s the perimeter fences, the Illusory Gate, *and* the fact that the entire Sanctuary is surrounded by a cloaked forest. Nothing gets in or out without going through the gate. You know that right?”

Hughes sighed like he’d been waiting for this part. “Look, I just follow the memo, alright. Got word from the Student Council folks that we needed to re-evaluate the Sanctuary’s security measures. Something about recent creature attacks near campus.” He held up a crumpled newspaper. “They’re calling it a warning. If we don’t comply, they’ll start pulling campus support.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Madeleine snapped, eyes narrowing. “We’ve done a full count. There’s nothing missing, nothing added. Every species is accounted for.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Hughes said, shrugging again. “If the Student Council says jump, I ask how high. I don’t make the rules, Madeleine.”

Madeleine, more composed now, held out her hand. “Fine. Just give me the key to the Back Range. I’m giving my friend a tour.”

Hughes hesitated a beat, then opened a drawer and slid out a slender iron key. “Here,” he said, but gave Eddie a pointed look. “Just... be careful, alright? Last thing I need is a second ‘incident report’ because someone wandered into a wyvern nest with a limp.”

Eddie raised a brow. “Oi, you guys talking about me?” he said, in mock offense. “Because I *thrive* in wyvern-infested terrain, thank you very much.”

Madeleine smirked but didn’t linger. “Thanks, Hughes,” she said, snatching the key before turning on her heel. “Come on.”

Eddie followed her out, crutch thudding softly against the wooden floor as the door creaked shut behind them. Sunlight filtered through the trees again as they stepped onto the winding dirt path toward the Back Range, the air cooler, quieter, and oddly charged—like something was waiting just ahead.

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As Eddie and Madeleine walked deeper into the Sanctuary, the mood began to shift. Near the front, sunlight still touched the fences and grassy paths, where Sanctuary members were leading tours for wide-eyed elementary-aged students in matching cloaks. A small group clustered near a gentle, antlered beast with scales like polished stone, giggling as it bowed to let them pet its snout.

Farther along, two caretakers were gently helping an older couple onto the back of a large, feathery creature. It had the wide, watchful eyes of an owl, a powerful bear-like body covered in dappled down, and tucked at its sides—massive, elegant wings folded like cloaks. The creature gave a low, soothing hoot as it crouched to let the riders on, its claws curling into the grass with surprising care.

It moved with the softness of snowfall, each step deliberate, like it was trying not to startle the breeze.

Madeleine nudged him. “Not a nightmare after all, hm?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Eddie said, but his eyes stayed on the retreating wings. “But I didn’t think Professor Hudson for the type to volunteer here,” he said abruptly. “That man acts like he’d sanitize his hands after petting a dog.”

Madeleine’s smile softened. She plucked a stray feather from the fence and twirled it between her fingers. “He’s head of the Sanctuary’s research program. Has been

for years.” Her voice was measured, the way she explained things to spooked animals—gentle but firm.

“His connections at the university and the Alchemy Ingredients Warehouse keep our supplies stocked.” She continued, “Without him, half the creatures here wouldn’t get their specialized tonics in time.”

Eddie snorted. “Yeah, but does he actually *like* them? Or are they just... test tubes with fur?”

She laughed, tossing the feather into the breeze. “I took his Botanical Alchemy course this year. He’s... meticulous. But people aren’t just one thing, Edward.” A pause, her gaze drifting toward the Back Range. “The man who lectures on ‘precision over passion’ also hand-feeds sugar cubes to the hippogriffs when he thinks no one’s looking.”

Eddie raised an eyebrow. “You’re telling me Professor Hudson has a *soft side*?”

“I’m telling you,” she said, turning to lead him down the path, “that even the prickliest people can surprise you.”

As they walked deeper into the sanctuary, the cheerful sounds began to fade, replaced by the hush of thickening woods. The trees here grew denser, the canopy forming a living roof that swallowed the sun. The air turned cooler, stiller, and more humid. Eddie noticed the path narrowing as vines and moss crept along the edges, and the sound of their footfalls became muffled on the leafy ground.

Madeleine glanced back at him. “This is part of the containment,” she said. “The trees are grown close on purpose—enchanted and cultivated this way. Nothing with wings can take off easily in here.”

Eddie blinked. “A forest as a cage.”

“A forest as a net,” Madeleine corrected gently. “A soft one. The creatures don’t feel trapped, but it keeps everyone safe.”

They finally stepped into the Back Range, marked by a simple wooden arch wrapped in glowing vines. The shadows here were thick, and the only light came from hanging lanterns and fruits that glowed softly like moonlight—violet, blue, and faintly golden.

Many of the enclosures were hidden by dark fabrics or veils of moss. Muffled growls and low, thudding breaths rumbled from behind them, unseen but deeply felt. One enclosure bore claw marks on the bark of the trees surrounding it, but no sign of the creature inside.

Madeleine’s expression grew somber. “These ones are all recovering,” she said softly. “Most of them were pulled from military use. Trained, abused, pushed past their limits. They weren’t made for war—but they were used like weapons.”

Eddie looked around, his gaze flicking from veil to lantern to the faint glow of eyes peering through a curtain of vines. “So they’re injured?”

“Body and spirit,” she said. “Some are still too aggressive to be handled. Others...” She paused. “Others just need someone to sit near them and remind them they’re not tools.”

The silence that followed was heavier than before. Around them, the woods seemed to watch.

And as they moved forward, Eddie began to see more of the creatures—strange, otherworldly, and awe-inspiring. A towering quadruped with armor-like plates over its shoulders huffed in its sleep. A translucent, almost ghostly winged cat with double pupils crept along the high branches. A half-curved serpent with burning red eyes followed them with its gaze from behind a thick enchanted net.

Eddie gripped his crutch tighter. “Remind me again why we’re walking *towards* the terrifying creatures?”

Madeleine smirked. “Because you need to see one of them.”

She led Eddie off the path, up a wooden ramp that creaked under their feet, toward one of the enclosed indoor glass sanctuaries tucked between the thick roots of the forest. The structure was built into the trees, its windows fogged and dark, blending into the woodland like a secret hidden in plain sight.

Inside, the light dimmed. The sanctuary enclosure was cloaked in heavy shadow, its interior a terrain of sand, rock, and thick branches stacked like ribs. The plaque on the glass read in precise lettering:

South Alamirian Tiger – *Panthera Alamaris*

Female. Estimated Age: 7. Confiscated from illegal exotic circus. High reactivity. Do not tap on enclosure.

Eddie shifted his weight onto his crutch and looked around. “Right. So... what exactly am I supposed to see?”

“Keep your voice down,” Madeleine murmured, already crouching near a sack on the side. She reached inside and pulled out a thick slab of meat wrapped in brown cloth. With practiced hands, she unraveled it and picked up a feeding stick—a long rod with a clamp at the end—and gently stabbed the meat.

Eddie was about to ask another question when he heard it.

A low, reverberating growl rolled through the enclosure like a slow thunder. He stiffened.

Madeleine didn’t flinch. She simply walked forward and held the rod out, her voice suddenly soft and coaxing. “Here, girl,” she said, like she was trying to tempt a housecat out from under a couch.

A blur of motion. Something large and lean lunged from the shadows—and in a blink, the meat was gone. Snatched mid-air with a sickening *crunch*. The rod quivered slightly in Madeleine's hand.

Then it stepped into view.

Eddie's breath caught in his throat.

The creature was tall—taller than any normal big cat he'd ever seen. Its body was thin, almost gaunt, but taut with power. A desert-colored coat stretched over sharp muscles, broken only by black stripes like brushstrokes. Its eyes glowed amber in the gloom, wild and intelligent. It prowled low, its massive paws silent against the rock, its tail twitching.

But it wasn't the size that struck Eddie dumb.

It was the familiarity.

He knew this shape. The lean torso. The long arms. The face—feral but almost knowing.

This was it.

It was the same silhouette that had lunged at him through the firelight back on campus. Except... not quite. This one was unmistakably an animal. Its movements were feline, graceful, natural. Not like the twisted, upright thing that had ambushed him.

Madeleine, still holding the rod, glanced at Eddie and smiled gently. "She's a South Alamirian Tiger," she said, her voice tinged with affection. "Hails from the furthest end of the Alamirian Dunes. Not many left in the wild. This one was taken from a traveling circus in the Northern Markets. Starved, overworked, shackled since she was a cub. She barely knew how to use her claws when they brought her in."

Her eyes sparkled now—pride, defiance, maybe even joy—as she spoke. “She’s the only one we have in the Sanctuary. Took months before she would even let us stand this close. Now she eats from the stick. One day I’m hoping she’ll come right to my hand.”

Eddie didn’t answer right away. He was still watching the tiger, who now licked the blood off her paw with slow, deliberate motions.

Madeleine’s grip tightened on the feeding rod. “Is this what attacked you?”

Eddie shook his head. “No. Not exactly.”

“But it’s close?” Her voice was taut, like a wire about to snap.

“Same claws. Same eyes. Same way it *moves*—” Eddie’s hands flexed at his sides, as if trying to sculpt the memory out of the air. “But the thing that came at me stood *upright*. Two legs, like a person. Except...” He shuddered. “It wasn’t *pretending* to be human. It was like... something had *forced* it into the shape of one.”

Madeleine went very still. Then, with deliberate slowness, she set the rod down and pulled a small notebook from her pocket. The pages fluttered as she flipped to a blank sheet, her pencil already moving. “Show me,” she said, her tone calm but edged. “Start with the silhouette.”

Eddie leaned in. “Taller than me. Thin, but not starved—*wiry*.” He watched her sketch the rough outline: a hunched spine, elongated limbs. “Shoulders more... *here*,” he corrected, tapping the page. Madeleine adjusted the lines without a word.

“The face?” she prompted.

“Feline. But the jaw was wrong—*broader*.” His finger slashed across the sketch.

Madeleine's pencil froze. A drop of sweat slid down her temple. "Did it have *hands*?"

"Not—not quite. The fingers were fused halfway. Like it got stuck mid-change."

Her pencil snapped. She didn't seem to notice. The sketch was taking shape now: a grotesque fusion of tiger and man, its posture twisted as if its bones had been broken and reset wrong.

Eddie's stomach turned. "Yeah. That's the one."

Madeleine stared at the drawing, her breath shallow. Around them, the Sanctuary's usual chorus of chirps and growls had gone eerily quiet, as if the creatures themselves were listening.

"That's..." she started, then stopped, her jaw clenched. "That's terrifying."

Eddie stayed quiet.

"I know."

"It's not just that *one* of them were loose in Edenfield," she went on, voice low, nearly a whisper. "It's that I don't want to imagine what they *stitched together* to make something like that."

Eddie swallowed. The silence stretched. Only the soft, wet sound of the tiger chewing filled the air, methodical and primal.

Madeleine finally looked back at him, eyes more focused now. "We need to do something about this."

Eddie nodded. "We should meet up with the others. At the Library. Midnight as usual."

Madeleine blinked. Then, slowly, a small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. She stepped forward and tapped him gently on the arm. “Next week,” she said softly. “You need to rest first.”

Eddie exhaled. He hadn't realized how tightly he'd been gripping his crutch. “Yeah... okay. Next week.”

Madeleine nodded, her expression softening. “I know someone who might be able to help,” she said quietly. “They’ve got connections with the district government—real ones, not just student council nonsense. I can let them know about our next meeting.”

Eddie looked up at her, curious. “You trust them?”

“I do,” she said, firm but calm. “They’ll be glad to help. Especially if something this dangerous is walking around Edenfield.”

Eddie nodded slowly. The silence returned, filled only by the soft crunching of the tiger eating its meal behind the glass. The weight of what they’d just discussed still lingered, but something in Madeleine’s certainty settled him a little.

Outside, the leaves rustled in the thick trees above. The tiger, finished with her meal, settled back into the shadows, vanishing like a ghost into the enclosure’s far corner.

Chapter 4

Madeleine sprinted down the stone corridors of the Alchemy Faculty building, her boots skidding against the flagstones as she careened around a corner. Her satchel

slammed against her hip with every frantic step, but she didn't dare slow to adjust it—not when the minute hand on her watch had already crept two minutes past the hour.

Damn it, damn it, damn it—

Professor Hudson's class had started sixty seconds ago. And everyone knew what that meant: the door would be locked. No exceptions. No mercy. Not even for Sanctuary caretakers with perfect attendance.

She hadn't meant to lose track of time. But between her backlog of Herbology assignments and the notes she'd been scrawling—notes about the tiger, about Eddie, about that *thing* that moved like a man but wasn't—the hour had bled away like ink in rain. Now her lungs burned, and the puzzle pieces she'd been trying to force together only grew sharper, more jagged in her mind.

She turned sharply down a narrow hallway, nearly colliding with a floating cart of flasks.

Focus.

One thing at a time.

The heavy oaken door to the Herbology lab loomed ahead, carved with ivy and curling vines that shimmered faintly in the light. As she reached for the handle, her heart pounded—half from the run, half from the fear that she was already too late.

But the soft murmur of voices inside met her ears, and when she eased the door open, she exhaled with relief.

Professor Hudson wasn't here yet.

Inside, students clustered in groups, tending to glass terrariums, adjusting runic lighting, or arguing softly over pruning techniques. The scent of damp moss and pollen clung to the air like mist.

Madeleine slipped inside quietly, closing the heavy door behind her with a soft click. She scanned the room quickly, eyes darting over the clusters of students and their green, glowing plants, until they settled on a familiar figure near the back. Walther sat hunched over his workstation, his fingers moving steadily across a piece of parchment covered in neat, looping script.

Without hesitation, Madeleine crossed the room and slid into the chair beside him. The moment her weight settled, the door creaked again—Professor’s arrival—and the low hum of anticipation rippled through the lab.

Walther looked up briefly, his dark eyes narrowing as he took in the flushed, breathless expression on her face. “Madeleine, you’re late,” he said, voice quiet but edged with mild amusement. “You’re usually the first one here. What kept you? Another all-nighter at the Sanctuary?”

She swallowed, forcing a tired smile. “Something like that.”

She didn’t want to say more, especially not here—not with half the class listening and Walther’s perceptive gaze pressing gently but firmly.

Instead, she nodded toward his parchment. “What are you working on?”

“The assignment, of course.” Walther rotated the specimen, revealing veins of bioluminescent blue threading through the cactus spines. “Alamirian sun-cactus and Edenfield’s midnight mushroom. Grafted at cellular level.”

She recoiled. “That should be impossible. Their cellular structures are polar opposites—one thrives on light, the other decays in it.”

"It might be if you are talking in Herbology terms," Walther's lips twitched. "And yet." He tapped the dish; the hybrid tissue shuddered. "In, Alchemy. the creation of the mythical philosopher is to merge two essential substance of an opposite spectrum into one great creation called the *Magnum Opus*. If you understand its most essence, all things can merge. Even opposites." His eyes flicked to hers, sharp as a scalpel. "Imagine *what else could be made if only people study cross-disciplines*."

"Well," Madeleine smiled, "I'm sure it will make something great—"

The door groaned open.

Conversations died mid-syllable. The scrape of chairs, the rustle of parchment—everything stilled as Professor Gareth Hudson stepped into the lecture hall.

He moved like a blade being sheathed: smooth, silent, and sharp enough to draw blood. His polished boots clicked against the stone floor, each step measured, deliberate. The air thickened with the scent of bergamot and iron—his signature blend of alchemical reagents and something darker.

No one breathed too loud.

Hudson didn't glance at the class. He simply took his seat, slid a leather-bound tome from his desk, and flipped it open. The crack of the spine echoed like a gunshot in the silence.

A full minute passed. The only sound was the turn of a page.

Then—

"What," he said, without looking up, "Is the subject of today's lecture?"

The silence grew teeth.

Students stiffened in their seats. A first-year near the front gripped their quill so tight it snapped. Hudson didn't react. He just waited, his finger resting on a line of text as if to say: *I have all day. You don't.*

Then—

“The application of alchemical grafting in medicinal botany.”

Madeleine's voice cut through the quiet, clear and unflinching.

Hudson's finger paused. Slowly, he lifted his gaze to hers. The lantern light caught the silver in his hair, the frost in his eyes.

“Can anybody elaborate?”

Madeleine opened her mouth—

“Not you, Mrs. Daedallia.” His voice was a scalpel. “Give chance to the others.”

Silence.

Then—

Then - the scrape of Walther's chair. His voice, calm: "Cross-species grafting via alchemical mediation. Reducing both specimens to their essential salts before recombination allows hybridization beyond natural taxonomical boundaries." His fingers absently traced the petri dish's edge. "Even between monocots and dicots."

Hudson's pen stopped mid-margin note. The nib split the paper.

Hudson's expression didn't change. “Excellent... Excellent, Mr. Schroder.” He closed the book with a thud that made half the class flinch. “Though you omitted the critical flaw.”

Walther's pen hovered above his notes. “The... the mortality rate, sir?”

“The *arrogance*.” Hudson’s fingers steepled, his voice a whip. “What you just described is *alchemy*—not herbology. You are *herbologists*, not *alchemists*. Use your own bloody terms.” His gaze swept the room. “Anyone else?”

Hudson’s gaze locked onto Madeleine like a falcon sighting prey. “

Since you’re so *confident* in your herbology knowledge, Mrs. Daedallia—” He gestured to the chalkboard with a flick of his fingers. “Enlighten us.

In *correct* terms.”

A beat of silence. The class held its breath.

Madeleine exhaled through her nose, then stood. Her chair didn’t scrape. Her steps didn’t falter. She reached the board and plucked a piece of chalk from the tray, her fingers steady.

Madeleine nodded absently, still feeling the weight of sleepless nights and the gnawing mystery at the back of her mind. She reached down to her satchel to pull out her binders, intending to get her notes ready.

But as she yanked the bag up hastily, her tired fingers slipped. Instead of the binder’s sturdy spine, her grip caught the loose papers tucked behind it. In an instant, a flurry of parchment spiraled out, fluttering down like autumn leaves across the stone floor.

“Oh, no,” Madeleine muttered under her breath, cheeks flushing as she crouched to gather the scattered sheets.

Walther, sitting beside her, was already reaching down to help, his calm presence a quiet anchor amid her embarrassment.

“Here,” he said softly, handing her a few papers with an easy efficiency.

“Thanks,” she murmured, biting her lip as she carefully stacked them back into the binder.

“Be careful next time alright? This is not a good time to-“

As Madeleine crouched, carefully gathering the scattered papers with Walther’s steady help. Each sheet slipped back into her binder brought a small wave of relief. Almost all of it was accounted for—except one.

Her eyes followed Walther’s gaze as he held a single page between his fingers. His expression shifted sharply, a flicker of something like horror mixed with disbelief crossing his usually unreadable face.

“Walther?” Madeleine’s voice was low but urgent.

He didn’t say a word, his fingers tightening around the paper as if it burned him. Her heart quickened, unease prickling beneath her skin.

A shadow fell over them.

“Is there a problem, Mrs. Daedallia?”

Professor Hudson loomed above, his polished boots inches from the scattered papers. His gaze flicked to the sketch still trapped between Walther’s fingers.

A beat. Two.

Then—

“I see you’ve taken up *art*.” Hudson’s voice was dry as bone. “Though your proportions are off. Alamirian tigers have *five* lumbar vertebrae, not six.”

With a quick tug, she yanked the page from his grasp, pulling it closer to her. Her breath caught as she recognized the sketch sprawled across the parchment.

It was the drawing she’d made—the detailed, haunting sketch Eddie had described to her of the tiger-human chimaera.

Madeleine's pulse hammered in her ears as Walther's wide eyes met hers, his usual calm shattered for a fleeting moment. She quickly hid the paper beneath her binder, forcing her voice steady.

"Where did you...?"

Walther's lips pressed into a thin line, eyes darkening. For the first time, the mysterious distance around him felt like something more—something dangerous.

Madeleine swallowed, her secret suddenly feeling heavier than ever.

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The moon hung low over Edenfield's towering spires, its silver glow pooling on the cobbled pathways. Lanterns flickered in the cold breeze as Madeleine stepped out of the Alchemy building, tugging her scarf tighter and buttoning her coat all the way up to her chin. The night bit at her cheeks, and the long day pressed against her shoulders like a weight.

The classroom emptied like a sinking ship—students fleeing into the night, their chatter swallowed by the groan of the oak doors. Madeleine lingered just long enough to seem unhurried, adjusting her scarf with deliberate slowness. The wool scratched her jaw, but the cold bit deeper.

"Mrs. Daedallia."

Hudson's voice slithered through the drafty hall. He stood framed by the window, moonlight carving his silhouette into something sharp and surgical.

"You care for a chat?"

It wasn't a question.

Madeleine's fingers tightened around her satchel strap. "Of course, Professor."

Hudson leaned against the stone windowsill, the moonlight cutting across his face. For a moment, he looked almost human—tired, maybe. Then the mask slid back into place.

"That sketch of yours," he said, tapping his gloved fingers against the sill. "Where'd you get the idea? Not many have seen a South Alamirian Tiger up close."

A beat. Madeleine's pulse thudded in her throat.

"Just something I cobbled together," she said. "Probably inaccurate."

Hudson chuckled—a rare, dry sound. "I've handled more of those beasts than the Sanctuary's records show. Their stripe patterns are like fingerprints. Yours was... *close*."

Too close.

Madeleine's fingers twitched toward her satchel, where the sketch was hidden. "Lucky guess."

"Of course." His smile didn't reach his eyes. He knew she was lying.

Silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken things. Then—

"You remind me of her," Hudson said abruptly.

Madeleine blinked. "Who?"

"My daughter." His voice was quieter now, the edge dulled. "Livia. She was like you—curious. Smart. Argued with professors twice her age just to see if she could win." A pause. "It got her into trouble sometimes."

There was something in his tone—a warning, or a regret. Madeleine couldn't tell.

"She sounds like someone I'd like to meet," she offered. "Maybe she could volunteer at the Sanctuary with—"

"She's gone." Hudson cut her off, his voice flat. "Vanished before she ever set foot in Edenfield."

The words hung in the air like frost.

Madeleine's breath caught. "I... I'm sorry."

Hudson straightened, his gloves creaking as he flexed his hands. "Don't be. Curiosity isn't a crime." He met her gaze, and for the first time, his icy demeanor cracked just enough to show the grief beneath. "But it has consequences."

The words hung between them, sharp as a scalpel left on a lab table. The wind outside rattled the windowpanes, but neither moved.

Then—

"Tell me, you've known me two years now," Hudson said, his voice quieter than she'd ever heard it. "In class. At the Sanctuary. Tell me honestly...

"do you think I'm a bad father?"

Madeleine's breath caught.

This wasn't Professor Hudson the alchemist, the disciplinarian, the man who locked lecture doors at the first chime of the clock. This was just Gareth Hudson, a man with a missing daughter and a grief he couldn't dissolve in acid or bury in research.

She could lie. She *should* lie.

But Madeleine had never been good at that.

"I don't know," she said slowly, meeting his gaze. "But if you raised your daughter like you teach your classes..." She hesitated, then forged ahead. "She might've thought you didn't care. Even if you did."

Silence.

Hudson's face didn't change, but his gloved hand flexed at his side, like he was gripping an invisible vial too tight.

Madeleine immediately regretted it. "I'm sorry. That was—"

Hudson chuckled.

A real, genuine laugh—low and rough, like gravel underfoot. Madeleine had never heard it before. Her face flushed hot.

"Do you hate my teaching so much," he said, shaking his head, "that you assumed I raised my children the same way?"

Madeleine stiffened, her ears burning. "I— That's not what I—"

"Oh, I think it was." His smirk was faint but unmistakable. "Go on, then. Since we're being *honest*." He crossed his arms. "What's so *extreme* about my methods?"

Madeleine exhaled sharply. "You lock students out for being a *minute late*. You grade like a war tribunal. Half your class has stress-induced nosebleeds before midterms." She paused, then added, "Sir."

Hudson's smirk deepened. "And yet, you're still here."

"Because I- not everyone can do what I do," she admitted grudgingly. "It's brutal!"

For a moment, he just studied her, the ghost of amusement still lingering. Then his gaze drifted past her, toward the darkened hallway, as if seeing something—or someone—else.

"In my previous career," he said, voice softer now, "that was how we taught. No second chances. No room for error." A pause. "And we produced the finest alchemists in the kingdom."

There was something in his tone—pride, yes, but also a quiet ache.

Madeleine tilted her head. "Previous career?"

Hudson's expression shuttered. "Go home, Mrs. Daedallia." He turned back toward the window, the moonlight washing him pale again. "And for God's sake, stop drawing creatures you don't understand."

The dismissal was clear. But this time, as Madeleine turned to leave, she caught the way his fingers brushed against the locket at his throat—just once, like a reflex.

Madeleine hesitated at the corridor's edge, her scarf fluttering in the icy draft. "You're not going home? Curfew's in ten minutes."

Hudson didn't turn around. "Campus business." His gloves flexed around a brass key—too large for a desk drawer, too small for a door.

She should've left. But curiosity hooked into her ribs.

"Professor," she called after him, "what *did* you do before Edenfield?"

Silence. Then—

"Crownstead Military Academy." His voice was flat, stripped of its earlier humor. "Instructor, Seventh Spearhead Division. I was a Military Alchemist."

Military alchemist. The words landed like a lit fuse.

Images snapped into place: his precision, his contempt for hesitation, the way he'd described grafting as "*arrogance*"—not on ethical grounds, but tactical ones.

Then he was gone, his footsteps echoing down the hall—too rhythmic to be anything but marching.

Chapter 5

Madeleine's boots clicked softly on the stone path as she crossed the campus grounds, the foggy air curling around her like ghostly ribbons. Her scarf was pulled tight around her neck, and she buttoned her coat all the way up, her gloved hands tucked into her sleeves to fend off the creeping cold.

The lamplight from the faculty buildings spilled in golden puddles onto the walkway, but the rest of Edenfield was dim and quiet—students tucked away in their dorms or libraries, the hum of campus life reduced to stillness.

She reached the bus stop at the edge of the quad, where the wrought-iron sign swayed slightly in the breeze. The enchanted schedule flickered faintly, glowing with runes that shifted to show *Aetherell Reach – 6 min.*

With a quiet sigh, Madeleine sat down on the bench, the cold seeping through the wooden slats. She leaned back and let her head tilt toward the sky, watching her breath fog in the moonlight.

Her gaze drifted out across the empty road, unfocused.

But her thoughts didn't stay still for long. They circled back—inevitably—to her conversation with Professor Hudson.

Military alchemist.

The words rattled in her thoughts. Professor Hudson—*Gareth Hudson*—had been a soldier. A Military Alchemist. A man who'd trained cadets at Crownstead Academy, where the kingdom's most lethal alchemists were forged. How had she never known?

No wonder he locks lecture doors at the first bell. No wonder his grading feels like a tribunal.

And his daughter.

Madeleine's breath fogged in the moonlight. If the girl had vanished before ever attending Edenfield, she must've been young. Twelve? Thirteen? The age when kids still pressed flowers into books and dreamed of working with gryphons.

Had Hudson searched for her? Had he turned his alchemy toward something darker in his grief?

Stop. She shook her head. She'd volunteered beside him for two years—watched him soothe a newborn hippogriff with hands steady as a surgeon's, heard him mutter corrections to first-years with more patience than they deserved. The man she knew was strict, yes, but not...

Not what?

A gust of wind hissed through the trees. The lamplights flickered, painting the path ahead in erratic gold.

The nickname some students used for him suddenly made sense, her classmates used to call him *Sergeant*. She'd always assumed it was just for his drillmaster demeanor. Now, she wondered if they'd known more than she did.

Her steps slowed near the bus stop. The wrought-iron sign creaked in the wind, the enchanted schedule flashing *Aetherell Reach – 6 min.*

She sat heavily on the bench, the cold seeping through her coat.

How much do we really know about anyone?

Hudson with his military past and missing child. Walther with his too-precise knowledge of tiger anatomy and those surgical scars on his wrists.

Her hand drifted to her satchel, where the sketch of the chimaera lay hidden.

Two men with secrets. Two men who'd stared at that drawing like it was a ghost.

The bus loomed in the distance, its windows glowing like a beacon.

Still, something didn't sit right.

She sat up straighter, her fingers curling against her knees. *Wait.*

Two things clicked. Then three. Then four.

Madeleine's breath caught in her throat.

Research... deep anatomical knowledge... access to vulnerable populations... a strange, cold fascination with a creature that shouldn't exist...

Her hand flew to her satchel, as if instinctively checking her sketches were still there.

Her face slowly paled, lips parting slightly as a horrible thought took shape. Not fully formed—but enough to cast a shadow over everything she'd been trying to ignore.

Could it be?

No. No, that's insane... she told herself. But her gut didn't agree. Her heart was thudding now, dull and fast beneath her scarf. The pieces didn't fit perfectly—but they sat too close not to touch.

The wind picked up again, rustling the trees behind the shelter.

Madeleine stared ahead, her eyes wide, her breath held.

The bus rolled up in the distance. But she no longer felt the comfort of home awaiting her. Only a hollow, rising dread.

-0-

The bus hissed to a stop at the edge of Aetherell Reach. Madeleine didn't wait for the doors to fully open before stepping down. She didn't thank the driver—a small, almost sacred courtesy she *never* forgot. But tonight, it slipped her completely.

Her boots hit the pavement. Cold air bit at her cheeks.

She moved fast.

Madeleine spotted the phone booth at the corner just beyond the wrought-iron fence, tucked beneath a flickering lantern. She broke into a brisk jog, her satchel thudding against her side.

The glass door rattled in her grip. She shoved it open and stepped inside, heart pounding. The booth smelled of damp copper and dust, the glass fogged from the cold. Her breath ghosted across the surface as she picked up the receiver with fingers that wouldn't stop shaking.

She slipped a coin into the slot.

Dialled the number from memory.

The ring buzzed against her ear. Once. Twice.

C'mon, Eddie. Please pick up.

-0-

Eddie sat at his desk in the corner of Dormitory 7, shoulders hunched over a thick Alchemical textbook. The diagrams sprawled across the page in tight, looping script, encrypted formulas showing the delicate thresholds between copper and verdigris, gas and flame, matter and memory. Notes were scrawled in his own handwriting along the margins. The desk lamp hummed faintly, casting sharp shadows that danced with every flick of his pen.

He didn't hear the guitar at first—barely registered the sound amid the quiet storm of his concentration. Will was on the bottom bunk, leaning against the bedframe, head bobbing slightly as he coaxed soft scales out of his guitar. Each note plucked from the strings glowed faintly in the air, trailing runes that pulsed and faded like sparks drifting on water.

The room was quiet, save for the occasional creak of the bunk frame, the gentle thrum of guitar strings, and the scratch of Eddie's pen as he annotated a particularly difficult transfiguration formula.

He didn't notice the sound of footsteps approaching.

Didn't register the hurried knock.

Didn't hear the door swing open.

"Ashley?" Will said, glancing up.

Ashley stood in the doorway, slightly breathless. Her eyes went straight to Eddie.

"You've got a call," she said. "It's Madeleine. On the hall phone."

Eddie looked up, blinking as if surfacing from underwater.

“A call?” he repeated. “Now?”

Will grinned. “Oho, the mystery deepens. She finally cracked and confessed her undying—”

But Ashley didn’t laugh. She didn’t roll her eyes or shove him in the shoulder like she usually would.

She just said, quietly, urgently, “Eddie. You need to come. *Now.*”

Eddie was already out of his chair.

Eddie jogged down the corridor, bare footsteps thudding against rough floorboards. The dorm hallway was mostly quiet—just the faint hum of lanterns and a distant laugh from someone two floors down. He rounded the corner and spotted the wall-mounted phone at the end of the corridor, its receiver swinging like a pendulum from the base.

His heart kicked up.

He grabbed it mid-swing. “Hello?”

There was a sharp breath of relief on the other end.

“Eddie. It’s me.”

“Madeleine?” His back straightened. “Are you okay? You sound—”

“Listen,” she cut in, voice taut and quick, like a pulled string. “I don’t have time to explain. I need you. I need all of you—Will, Ashley, everyone—at the library. Tonight.”

Eddie blinked. “Wait, what’s happened? What’s going on?”

“It’s—” Her voice cut out for a second. A faint crackle distorted the line. “It’s Professor Hudson. I think he knows—”

Bzzzt.

A loud burst of static screamed through the receiver. Eddie yanked it away from his ear, flinching.

“Madeleine?” he called into the noise, trying the hook. “Hello? Madeleine?”

Silence. Then a low mechanical whir. Then nothing at all.

He glanced back down the hall as if expecting Ashley to still be there. “Come on...”

Suddenly—

Click.

“Hello?” he tried again, breath held.

A gasp. “E-Eddie!”

He gripped the receiver tighter. “Madeleine, what’s happening?”

“I think someone’s following me.”

His stomach dropped. “Where are you?”

There was a pause. A rustle. Then, distantly: the creak of a booth door opening.

Her voice dropped to a whisper.

“I’m at my apartment. Just past the old fence. Near the east ward sign. There’s someone—he’s not moving, but—”

The line cracked again.

“I’ve got my wand—he’s coming closer—Eddie, I—”

Pop.

The line went dead.

Eddie stood there, frozen, the soft dial tone humming against his ear like a dirge.

Slowly, he lowered the receiver.

He turned.

Will and Ashley were already there at the end of the corridor. Ashley's face was pale, tense—she'd heard enough to know. But it was Will's expression that struck Eddie now: no smirk, no joke, just quiet alarm setting into his features like a stormcloud.

Eddie's eyes met theirs. A flicker. A pause. A breathless moment where nothing needed to be said.

We've got to do something.

Ashley gave a sharp nod. Will was already moving.

They grabbed their jackets from the hooks near the dorm stairs, Will slinging his guitar bag over his shoulder out of instinct. No time to ask why. No time to prepare. Only the urgency in Eddie's blood and the fading echo of Madeleine's voice in his ear.

Then they stormed out into the night.

Through the arching gates of the dormitory. Across the frost-hushed campus. Their breath rose in quick clouds as they ran—past silent halls, over cobbled paths slick with dew, the gaslamps stretching their shadows long and fast.

Toward Aetherell Reach.

Toward her.

Chapter 6

The streets of Aetherell Reach blurred past him, gaslamps flickering like dying stars as he pushed himself forward, lungs burning, slippers slapping against stone. The chill of the northern district clawed at his skin—through his thin t-shirt, through his worn jacket—as if the night itself wanted to slow him down.

But he didn't stop.

His breath came in ragged bursts, each one sharp in his throat. The frost-bitten wind stung his eyes, numbed his fingers, howled past his ears like a warning—but still, he ran.

He'd outrun Will and Ashley back at the quad, their shouts falling behind him, swallowed by the dark. He didn't look back. Couldn't bear the thought of losing time. Every second pounded louder than his footsteps.

Please be alright.

Aetherell Reach was quieter than usual. Windows shuttered. Market stalls empty. Only the occasional flutter of paper in the gutter or the creak of a distant weathervane marked the silence.

He turned a corner too fast, nearly lost his footing on a slick patch of cobble, caught himself on a lamppost, and kept moving. His legs screamed, but his mind screamed louder.

Madeleine's voice echoed in his memory—panicked, cut short. That sound at the end. The static. Her breath catching.

Something was wrong. Deeply wrong.

The familiar row of stone apartments came into view up ahead, their rooftops hunched against the dark. Madeleine's place was just beyond the iron arch with the ivy-covered wall, the one she'd once pointed out to him with a quiet smile and a joke about noisy upstairs neighbors.

He passed beneath it now, breath ragged, eyes scanning every shadow, every doorway.

And then he saw it.

The phone booth.

The door hung ajar. One panel of glass shattered at the base. The receiver swayed gently on its cord like a pendulum, clinking softly against the frame.

Eddie slowed, chest heaving, heart somewhere in his throat.

“Madeleine?” he called out, voice hoarse. “Madeleine!”

No answer. Just the rustle of the ivy. The night.

A dim glow pulsed from the jade ring on his right hand. Soft green lines curled outward from the gem, forming a faint, floating transmutation circle that hovered just above his knuckles.

He inched forward.

Eddie’s eyes flicked to the windows above. Empty. Dark. Watching.

His fingers twitched at his sides. With each step, the weight in his chest grew heavier, the air colder. The transmutation circle sparked faintly as his boot brushed over broken glass.

He reached the booth.

Paused.

Looked inside.

And opened the door.

It creaked—slow, deliberate, far too loud. He winced at the sound, then froze.

Nothing.

No sign of a struggle. No blood.

Only a single object lay on the ground.

Her wand.

Abandoned. Resting in a small patch of frost just beneath the shattered glass, its wood chipped at the grip, still faintly warm with her magic.

Eddie stared.

The chill that ran through him now had nothing to do with the wind.

He crouched slowly, picked up the wand, cradled it in both hands.

His heart hammered in his ears. His mind screamed to reject the sight.

She wouldn't have left this behind.

One of hers.

Eddie dropped to his knees beside it, heart in freefall.

The wand trembled in his hands.

Footsteps pounded up behind him—Will and Ashley at last, their breaths ragged, eyes scanning the shadows.

Ashley skidded to a stop, staff already in her grip, the silver crystal at its tip flickering with ready light. Will pulled his wand from his guitar bag, lips parted in alarm.

“What happened?” Ashley asked, voice low and sharp, scanning the street. “Where is she?”

Will moved closer, spotting the shattered booth. “Eddie—what’s going on? What did you see?”

But Eddie couldn't answer.

He stared down at the wand in his hands like it might vanish if he blinked. His lips parted, but no sound came out.

Ashley stepped toward him, slower now, realizing something was deeply wrong.

“Eddie—”

“She’s gone,” he choked out.

They both froze.

Eddie looked up at them, and the guilt was written all over his face—etched in deep, cracked lines like faultlines across stone.

“This is my fault,” he whispered, voice fraying. “I should’ve seen it coming. I should’ve known something was wrong with Walther. I *did* know. I just—I thought...”

He swallowed hard, shaking his head as if trying to rewind time.

“I... I should’ve stopped her.”

His fingers clenched around the wand.

“I should’ve told her not to go. If I hadn’t gone out that night, if I hadn’t let Walther fool me, none of this would have happened.”

Will crouched down beside him, quieter now. “Mate... don’t do this.”

But Eddie didn’t seem to hear him.

“none of this would have happened... She’d still be here.”

Ashley knelt beside him, slowly, her staff still in one hand, the other reaching out to steady his trembling shoulder. “It’s okay, Eddie. Everything will be alright.”

Even as she said it, the words rang hollow in her own ears.

Because deep down, she wasn’t sure they would.

She'd seen the state of the booth. The blood smeared on the glass. The cold, unnatural silence that still hung in the air. And the way Eddie held that wand—like it was all he had left.

But she said it anyway. Because Eddie needed her to.

Eddie's breath hitched, and he gave the smallest nod—barely a twitch of muscle, but enough.

Behind them, Will stood at the edge of the pavement, silent.

He wasn't the type to say much in moments like these.

Instead, he watched. Took in the way Ashley leaned into Eddie's pain. The way Eddie clung to Madeleine's wand like a lifeline. The way the wind didn't dare blow too loud around them.

For a moment, everything felt suspended.

The streetlamp flickered. The city breathed in silence. Will didn't move.

It was like watching a dream dissolve into a nightmare.

Then—

A voice cut through the quiet, sharp as a snapped string.

"What's going on here?"

Will's head turned slightly, brow furrowed at the interruption. A silhouette stood on the pavement just beyond the booth's shattered edge—tall, brisk, chin lifted with effortless command. Familiar in the worst way.

Will turned, half-annoyed already. The kind of voice you don't want in a moment like this—too pointed, too knowing.

"Friend went missing," he muttered, not really caring to explain. "That's what's going on."

The figure stepped closer. “Who?”

Will opened his mouth—but then stopped mid-breath as the figure moved into the full lamplight.

The figure was tall, poised, and unmistakably deliberate in every movement. A flannel tailored skirt hugged her frame, neat and pressed, paired with a deep navy wool blazer. Her shirt collar peeked crisp beneath it, fastened with a brooch shaped like a serpent swallowing its tail.

Silky blonde hair fell in smooth waves past her shoulders, not a strand out of place despite the wind, as if the night itself dared not touch her. Even now, at this hour, on this street, she looked as if she’d walked straight out of a portrait hanging in the Chancellor’s Hall.

Then Will’s stomach sank.

Of course it was her.

“Aynesworth? The hell are you doing here?”

“The hell do you mean am I doing here? I live here!”

Student Council President. Prefect of North Tower. Daughter of a minor noble house. She carried her titles like swords, sharp and gleaming, and she’d nearly had them all expelled three months ago after the incident in the library archives.

“Who’s missing?” she repeated.

Will’s expression curdled. His jaw tightened.

“It’s none of your business,” he muttered coldly.

But Victoria’s eyes weren’t on him.

She stepped forward, drawn to the wand in Eddie's hands like iron to magnet. Her expression shifted—an almost imperceptible crack in the polished veneer. Her lips parted just slightly.

“That's her wand,” she said.

Ashley straightened. “Yes.”

Victoria's brow furrowed. The question followed, brittle and breathless.

“Madeleine's missing?”

Will blinked, thrown. “Wait... you knew Madeleine?”

Victoria tore her eyes from the wand just long enough to shoot him a look of exhausted disbelief.

“Of course, dumbass,” she snapped. “She's my roommate.”

Chapter 7

The Edenfield Police Department felt nothing like the rest of campus.

Gone were the whimsical arches, the enchanted sconces, the scent of parchment and old spellbooks. Here, the walls were flat stone and the light was sterile, humming faintly overhead from charmed crystals embedded in the ceiling. The waiting room was too large and far too empty, its rows of bolted-down iron chairs left mostly unoccupied, their surfaces cold and uninviting.

A steaming cup of tea would've felt absurd here. Even a fire rune would've died out from shame.

Eddie sat forward in his chair, elbows on knees, hands clasped so tightly his knuckles had gone white. Across from him, Will tapped his foot, the soft *tick-tick-tick* filling the silence like a clock running out. Ashley sat between them, shoulders drawn in, her staff across her lap like a protective ward.

Two Paladins flanked the stone archway into the main precinct—tall, gleaming figures in full white steel, faces hidden behind opaque visors. They didn't move. They didn't speak. Just stood as if carved from the same walls they guarded, radiant symbols faintly glowing from the glyphwork etched into their armor.

Besides them, there was no one else.

Except Victoria.

She sat apart—one row down, two seats to the left. A deliberate distance. She had her coat draped across her lap, hands folded atop it with eerie stillness. Her blazer still looked pristine. But the shadow under her eyes betrayed something closer to human.

No one had said anything since they arrived.

The air was heavy with grief unspoken. Questions without answers. The kind of silence you didn't want to break, because it might just shatter you with it.

Eddie stared at the floor. A hairline crack ran through one of the stone tiles.

He couldn't stop thinking it looked like the ones inside him.

A voice crackled through the intercom on the far wall.

"Edward Welton?"

Eddie's head snapped up.

He rose slowly, the missing person paperwork clutched tightly in his grip. It was still warm from his hands—creased and smudged from where he'd rewritten parts of it, over and over again, as if clearer words could change reality.

Will gave him a nod. Ashley didn't speak, but her eyes followed him until he reached the desk.

The reception counter loomed under flickering crystallight. Behind the reinforced glass sat a tired-looking officer in navy-blue robes, his badge dulled and his eyes glazed with bureaucratic fatigue. Without looking up, he extended a hand through the opening.

Eddie passed the form through.

The officer glanced over the details, flipped a few pages, then sighed and reached for a stamp. A dull *thud* echoed as red ink met parchment.

"We've logged the case," the man said flatly. "Estimated processing time is one month."

"A month? But... she is missing today."

"We've got over three hundred active missing persons reports," the officer said, finally looking at him. "You'll be contacted when a field detective is assigned."

"That's too long," Eddie said, his voice rising. "She was taken. This isn't someone who wandered off. This is different. They're making Chimaeras. They're experimenting on people—"

"Chimaeras?" The man scoffed. "Right. And maybe dragons are nesting in the west tower again."

"Look, I'm serious," Eddie said, stepping closer to the glass. "We saw one. Someone's continuing the research. They've got her."

The officer's tone flattened. "The creation of Chimaeras has been outlawed for four hundred years. No confirmed sightings in three centuries. Every known text on the process has been destroyed or locked away in Council vaults. They don't exist anymore, kid."

“But they do,” Eddie said, louder now. “I’ve seen one. Madeleine’s missing. Her wand was left behind. There were signs of a struggle. We don’t have a month. She doesn’t have a month—”

“Look,” the man snapped, tapping the form with one ink-stained finger. “I’m telling you what I tell every family that comes through this door: sit tight and wait your turn. We don’t have the manpower to chase fairy tales. You want help? Get in line.”

Eddie stood there, chest heaving, a bitter heat rising in his throat.

The officer let out a tired huff and leaned back in his chair. “Is there anything else,” he asked, voice thick with boredom, “or are you just going to stand there?”

Eddie stared at him for a beat longer—jaw clenched, knuckles white at his sides—then turned without a word.

His footsteps echoed down the polished stone floor as he walked back into the waiting room. The two paladins guarding the doors didn’t flinch. They stood motionless in their gleaming armor, visors down, like statues of judgment watching over a tomb.

Ashley and Will looked up from their seats, expectant—but Eddie didn’t meet their eyes.

Victoria spoke before anyone else could.

“You won’t get anywhere with them,” she said quietly. “Not with the police. Not with a case like this.”

Eddie didn’t respond. Not right away.

He just walked past her.

Through the heavy oak doors. Down the pale marble steps of the Edenfield Police Department.

And into the cold, sleepless city night.

-0-

Eddie sat slumped against the cold stone wall just outside the police department, legs drawn up, arms limp at his sides. The sharp night wind tugged at his jacket, but he didn't move. Didn't shiver. Didn't speak. His eyes stared ahead, glassy and hollow, reflecting nothing but streetlight and the faraway haze of passing carriages.

He looked like someone who'd already buried what mattered.

The heavy doors creaked open behind him.

Ashley stepped out first, followed by Will. Their footsteps slowed when they saw him on the ground.

Ashley's brow furrowed. She looked down at him, voice tight. "That's it?"

Eddie didn't move.

"You're just going to sit here?" she pressed, sharper now. "Let them do nothing? Let her be gone?"

Will glanced between them, uneasy, but stayed quiet.

Eddie didn't move. "The police said it themselves. They're overwhelmed. Missing people all over the place. If even they can't help... what chance do we have?"

Will lingered behind her, unusually silent.

"She's gone, Ashley." Eddie said, letting his head fall back against the stone wall, eyes closing. "It's over,"

Ashley stared at him—then dropped to a crouch in front of him, eyes fierce and unwavering. Her staff was still clutched tight in one hand like a torch not yet snuffed.

“No,” she said. “It’s not over.”

“What?” Eddie asked back, “What did you just said?”

“I said, it is not over.”

“Come on,” Eddie said. His voice was low and hoarse, but angry now. “Don’t give me that nonsense. Don’t you see that we’re standing inside a building full of knights and mages trained to uphold the law. *Do you see justice served in that building?*”

Ashley’s mouth parted slightly, but he didn’t stop.

“You think if we just *try hard enough* we’ll find her?” His voice cracked. “That we can just charge off into the night and save her like some a hero?”

Will stayed behind them, his expression unreadable.

“You’re not being realistic. You’re talking like someone who thinks justice always wins if you just *want it hard enough. When you scream enough.* But justice doesn’t come because we *believe* in it. It comes with power, with reach—and we don’t have any of that. We’re just bunch of fucking kids. So let it go, Ashley. We’re not going anywhere with this, It’s over.”

Ashley leaned closer, the wind tousling her wavy brunette hair with blond fades, eyes burning with quiet defiance.

“If you give up. If *we* give up. Then we’ve lost. We will *lose* Madeleine.” Her voice caught—just for a moment—but she didn’t look away. “But we haven’t yet.”

“That’s what they want us to do,” she continued, voice burning now. “Wait. Fade. Let the fire go out. But we don’t have to. We don’t have to wait for permission to fight for her.”

Eddie looked at her, something fragile flickering in his eyes.

“You said there’s no hope,” she continued. “But there is. There’s still *us*. We saw what happened. We know who took her. That’s more than enough to start.”

“You don’t know what’s out there, Ashley.” Eddie said, “If they can create a Chimaera, god knows what else can they do... and you think we can go against something like that?”

She stood, her voice steady and resolute when she said:

“It’s not over if you deem it is not over.”

The words hit Eddie like a pulse through the chest. He’d heard them once before—different place, different pain.

He hadn’t expected to hear them again.

Not halfway across the continent. In a city so far removed from the corner of the world. And most of all.

He hadn’t expected to hear them from *Ashley*.

Those words. *Her words* had pushed him to stand when he wanted to fall and stay on the ground a few years ago.

And now, in some strange, fractured way, she was still pushing him. Not in flesh and voice, but through Ashley, of all people.

Through the echo of a creed he’d thought was buried.

A laugh escaped Eddie’s throat—more morbid than amused. It was ironic.

He looked at Ashley—her eyes steady, her resolve burning—and in that moment, the old promise rang out louder than the despair threatening to drown him.

Damn you, Catherine. Eddie thought. *You never leave me alone, huh.*

He tried to rise, muscles stiff and heavy, like dragging himself out of quicksand.

Will and Ashley didn't hesitate—they each reached out a hand to steady him.

Eddie grasped them, letting their strength pull him upright.

He wiped a hand over his face, eyes searching Ashley's with a flicker of reluctant hope.

"So," he said, voice rough but steady, "What's the plan? If you're the one who's not giving up, I'm betting you've got a few tricks left up your sleeve."

Ashley's gaze sharpened, determination flaring.

"We're going to need help moving this faster," she said quietly, then looked over toward Victoria, who was standing nearby, arms crossed but watching intently.

"Then we need a help from her," Ashley said, "Her father's the police chief. Maybe he can push things along, make sure Madeleine's case doesn't get buried."

Eddie's eyebrows lifted. "Victoria?"

Victoria folded her arms tighter, eyes cold. "Huh? Why would I? My father's never around. He's more interested in his own world than anything happening here. In fact, why would I want to do it for any of you?"

Will stepped forward, cutting through the tension like a blade. "Come on, cut the crap."

He didn't bother softening his tone.

"I don't care how much you hate us. But there's one thing I know for sure—you cared about Madeleine, I see that you are close friends to some sense. Maybe you

hate how things went down with us, maybe you hate us, and you don't trust any of us, but you love Madeleine. Just like we do... Like we all do."

His voice cracked with urgency, raw and unyielding.

"So put aside whatever disdain you have for us, for whatever grudge you're holding onto. Help us get her back. Don't do it for us, do it for her."

The words hung heavy in the cold air, a desperate plea—and maybe the only chance they had.

Victoria's eyes flickered, something unreadable breaking through the walls she kept up.

Chapter 8

The familiar bustle of Edenfield University pulsed around Eddie, but it barely registered. His eyes were sharp, fixed, alive with fury and purpose. In his hands, a thick stack of "Missing Person" flyers, each one bearing Madeleine's smile, her name, and the date she vanished.

She was still out there. He could feel it in his bones. And he wasn't going to let her stay missing.

Will walked beside him, quieter, eyes scanning the crowd as if Madeleine might emerge from it any second. But it was Eddie who moved like a storm waiting to break—his stride clipped, his jaw clenched, his every motion carried with it the weight of a vow.

With every poster he plastered to a pole, a wall, a gate, it was more than paper and tape—it was a promise. Madeleine was not forgotten. She would not become just another name in a file cabinet collecting dust in the police archives.

People stared as they passed—some with curiosity, some with pity, some with guilt. Eddie didn't care. Let them look. Let them see the fire in his eyes.

He pressed another flyer onto a weathered campus bulletin board, smoothing it flat with his palm. Her face stared back at him—smiling, bright, alive.

Eddie sank onto a weathered bench just outside the library, the sun dipping low behind the university spires, casting long amber shadows across the cobblestones. Beside him sat a half-empty bucket of glue, its rim crusted with dried paste, and a battered cardboard box overflowing with freshly printed missing person posters—the ones he'd run off from the old Book Pirates printer, still smudged with ink in some corners.

His fingers were sticky, his shirt clung to his back, and his shoulders ached from hours of postering. But he didn't stop moving until there was nowhere left to go. Only then did he sit.

A moment later, Will returned, handing him a can of something cold and fizzy before dropping onto the bench beside him. The drink hissed softly as Eddie popped it open, the first real sound of relief either of them had heard all day.

The breeze picked up, brushing through the trees above, carrying with it the scent of fresh grass and the distant hum of campus life—normal, detached, as if the world hadn't just shifted beneath their feet.

Eddie took a sip, the chill biting his throat, grounding him for a second. He stared straight ahead, silent, the posters fluttering faintly beside his feet. Madeleine's face smiled up at him from every one.

Will popped open his can, the fizz breaking the silence like a sigh. He took a sip, then leaned back, stretching his legs out in front of him as he eyed the fluttering posters.

“You really think Victoria’s going to go through with it?” he asked, not looking at Eddie.

Eddie didn’t answer right away. He rolled the cold can between his palms, then gave Will a sidelong glance. “You tell me,” he said, dryly. “You’re the one who told her.”

Will let out a short chuckle, bouncing off Eddie’s jab. “Fair enough.”

They lapsed into quiet again. A leaf scraped across the stone path in front of them.

“But seriously though,” Will said, turning a little more toward him. “What do you actually think?”

Eddie exhaled, long and low. “I think...” He hesitated, then shrugged. “I think she won’t.” He tapped the can against his knee. “She will pull away. She’s the type who keeps her hands clean.”

Will didn’t reply right away.

Eddie tilted his head, eyeing him. “So why’d you trust her?”

Will stared at the posters for a long moment. Then he said, quietly, “Because I believe in second chances.”

“Really?” Eddie chuckled, “Second chances?” He gave Will a look, half-curious, half incredulous. “I always figured you more the type to throw a punch and move on. Didn’t peg you for the forgiving kind.”

Will shrugged, but there was no flippancy in it. “If you believe it’s not over if you deem it’s not over...” he said, nodding toward Eddie, “Why can’t that apply to people too?”

Eddie looked at him, “What do you mean?”

“She’s not untrustworthy,” Will continued, “Not unless I say so. Not until she proves it.”

He leaned forward, elbows on knees, eyes on the distance.

“If I gave up on people every time they screwed up, I’d have no one left. And I bet you wouldn’t either.”

Eddie said nothing for a moment. The wind tugged at the edges of the poster stack beside his feet. Madeleine’s face stared up at him—bright, kind, unknowing.

“Fair enough,” he muttered.

Eddie and Will sat silently for a few minutes, the kind of silence that didn’t need to be broken. The kind that hummed with exhaustion and quiet resolve. The late sun painted long amber streaks over the stone paths, and the paper stack at Eddie’s feet rustled faintly in the breeze.

“Eddie!”

A voice, distant.

“Will!”

Another followed.

Both heads turned, jarred from their reverie.

Across the lawn, a small silhouette darted into view—cloak billowing, hair catching the sunlight in a flare of brunette and blonde. Ashley. She looked impossibly small from that distance, like the news itself was dragging her forward. Her pace was uneven, frantic, as she sprinted across the lawn, her figure growing sharper with every step. The sound of her boots striking pavement echoed like heartbeats.

She stopped front of them, chest heaving, strands of hair stuck to her flushed face. Her black jacket hung half-off one shoulder, twisted and lopsided from the run, as if she'd barely managed to throw it on.

“Ed—Will—” she gasped, trying to catch her breath. “Meeting at the library... tonight.”

The two stared at her, startled, adrenaline surging anew.

Ashley leaned forward, palms on her knees, trying to speak between gulps of air.

“Victoria...” she finally said, lifting her gaze to meet theirs. “She found a lead into Madeleine’s kidnapping.”

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They settled into their usual spots in the Grand Library’s back alcove. Eddie perched on the edge of the long oak table, Alchemy textbook open to a half-finished diagram, notebook balanced on his knee. Will flopped into the chair beside him, elbow propped on the table. Ashley drifted down a nearby aisle, rifling through tomes on witchcraft lore. And, behind the reception desk, Claire kept her head buried in a stack of reference scrolls, though Eddie could see the tension stiffen her shoulders whenever she thought no one was watching.

Will broke the silence. “Seriously, you’re off chasing kidnappers, sneaking into Chimaera dens, and *still* thinking about Alchemy?” He waved at Eddie’s open textbook and the neat rows of notes piling up. “Finals aren’t for another few months—have a little fun.”

Eddie didn’t look up. He tapped a pencil against the page. “Finals *are* in a few months,” he said evenly. “If I survive whatever hellhole we’re about to break into,

at least I won't have to scramble through half a semester's worth of material at the last minute."

Will whistled, slapping the table with mock horror. "I'm so glad I stuck with Bardry. I'd be dead by lecture two if I'd taken Alchemy."

Eddie glanced up at him, grin sharp. "Given how you treat your coursework—showing up late, doodling song lyrics in your margins—you wouldn't survive a week in Rheagan's lab."

Will threw his head back in laughter. "Hey, those lyrics are going to change the world one day!"

Hearing a knock on the door, Claire stood up, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

"Victoria's here," she announced,

Claire then rose from her stool at the reception desk. She strode to the heavy wooden door, produced a small brass key, and slid the lock open with a practiced click.

The door swung inward, and Victoria stepped into the lamplit hush of the library, flanked by two of her closest allies on the Student Council—each in similarly tailored blazers and perfectly pleated skirts. Their polished shoes tapped softly on the marble floor as they entered.

Victoria's gaze swept the long oak table where Eddie, Will, and Ashley waited.

"Operating hours are over by now," she said crisply, arms crossed beneath her blazer. "By Council regulations, the library is closed after dusk. Claire, what are you doing? You can't break the rules just because you feel like it."

Claire met her squarely. "According to the library's charter," she replied firmly, "it remains open whenever the key holder is present. And as the current volunteer

librarian, I decide its hours. My availability extends past dusk—so I’m opening the library.”

Victoria opened her mouth to retort—something about Council oversight and disciplinary procedures—but before she could speak, one of her silent companions stepped forward.

“Actually, Victoria,” the girl said calmly, “this library falls under the University’s Public Service Mandate, not the Student Council’s jurisdiction. Council rules don’t apply here.”

Victoria’s eyes snapped to her friend, and for a moment, her carefully cultivated composure faltered. She drew in a breath, lips pressing into a thin line.

“Fine,” she said at last, voice quiet but laced with bitterness. “Do as you will.”

She turned, smoothed the front of her blazer, and took a seat at the far end of the long table—just close enough to the group to listen, but far enough to keep her distance. Her two friends fell in beside her, and the library’s hush settled around them once more, the rules upheld and the real work about to begin.

Ashley leaned forward, voice low and urgent. “Is it true you actually found a lead on Madeleine’s disappearance?”

Victoria said nothing. Instead, she ordered her silent council companions. The girl gave a slight bow, then rose and reached into her sleek leather satchel. She produced three official-looking folders—embossed with the crest of a well-known private investigation firm—and laid them carefully on the table.

The folders clicked open as Victoria drew them forward. Their contents—handwritten notes, hastily sketched maps, and transcribed witness statements—spilled into view.

Victoria's tone was cool but purposeful. "I didn't wait for the police. I engaged a private investigator—someone with the resources to move faster than the precinct ever could." She tapped one dossier. "Their latest lead points to a pet shop in the Hallowmere district. Owner's name is Gareth Hudson." She then turned to Eddie, "your Alchemy lecturer."

Eddie's pen clattered against the table. "Blythe? As in Professor Blythe, the one teaching States Transformation Basics?" He glanced at Claire, then back at Victoria. "He's obsessed with mythical creatures. I ran into him months ago at the Sanctuary."

She paused, letting the weight of that information sink in. "It's not conclusive. But it's the best lead we have."

Will exchanged a look with Eddie. Ashley's hand drifted to the edge of the paperwork—fingers hovering as if she could sense Madeleine's presence in the lines and smudges.

Ashley glanced at Victoria, brow furrowed. "And your father? Have you managed to reach him with this?"

Victoria rubbed the bridge of her nose, her impeccable composure faltering for the first time. "I've tried," she said, voice tight. "I sent him the dossiers first thing this morning. I called his aide twice." She paused, folding and unfolding her hands. "But there's no guarantee he'll act on it. He's... distracted by higher-profile cases, political pressure, things I can't influence."

Eddie frowned. "So we've got a lead, but no official backing?"

Victoria met his gaze, jaw set. "For now. His office won't commit until they have more concrete proof—financial records, witness affidavits, physical evidence. My involvement only gets the file a few floors higher."

They exchanged a quick, knowing look around the table—Eddie’s fingers brushed the edge of the dossier, Will’s eyes flicked to the maps and witness statements, Ashley’s hand hovered over the sketch of Blythe’s shop. Everything they needed was right there.

Victoria’s voice cut through the moment. “Whatever you do from here on, you’re on your own. I’m not getting any further involved—I’ve done my part.”

Eddie met her gaze. It was the first time he’d seen any warmth in her expression. “Thank you, Victoria,” he said quietly. “I’m... sorry I doubted you before.”

She looked at him, surprised on his sudden positive response, “Whatever,” then turned back to the files without another word.

Eddie shifted, moving to stand at the head of the table. He caught Will’s and Ashley’s eyes in turn. A spark of urgency lit in them both.

“What are we waiting for?”