

Edenfield Chornicles I

The Lost Codex

Jaden Abrams

5th of April, 2025

Draft VII

Prologue

"By the gods! H-his face!"

The girl's scream pierced through the silence that had blanketed the classroom, drawing the attention of the other students.

All eyes turned towards him now, three boys stood at the center. The classroom smells of books, papers, chalks, and blood.

The first, a boy kneeling on the coarse floorboards, clutched his face as blood oozed through his fingers, staining the wooden floorboards beneath him. His sobs were muffled, drowned out by the overwhelming horror of the moment. His wand, made of sturdy ashen oak and silver engraved accents lies in defeat in front of him. A dragon finally slain... But amidst its den.

The Second, stood over him, the second boy's breath came hard and fast, his chest heaving. His fist was still clenched, the jade ring on his finger pulsing with a sickly green glow. The air around him crackled, the lingering green transmutation circle hovers over his hand. The mark of an Alchemist in training.

The duel. The anger. The need to win. It still burned in his chest, a fire refusing to die. But then, a voice broke through behind him... shaken and small.

"E-Eddie?"

"Stay back Markus," The second boy said, "I got this—"

"Eddie... his face..."

The voice was small, coming from behind him, The Third boy called Markus stood rigid, his face pale, his wide eyes locked on the scene before them. His hands twitched at his sides, as if wanting to reach for Eddie—then thinking better of it.

"What have you done?" Markus said to him at last.

The glow of the ring flickered. Then, as if drained of life, it dimmed.

Eddie, the second boy blinked. The fire in his chest sputtered, giving way to something colder. He followed Markus's gaze down—

And saw what he had done.

The Boy lay sprawled on the floorboards, blood seeping between his fingers as he clutched his face. His breathing ragged, wet and pitiful.

Eddie's stomach lurched.

The duel was over. But the nightmare had just begun.

Whispers began, low and fearful at first, but quickly growing in intensity. Fingers pointed, eyes narrowed in disgust and fear.

"Did you see that spell? isn't that..."

*"Isn't it obvious?... And Welton just used **it** against him?"*

"Yeah, look at him..."

"Someone call the headmaster! Now!"

Eddie stood in the center of it all. The room felt too bright, the lamps flickering against the polished tables, illuminating every horrified stare. His breath came shallow, too fast. He could feel their eyes crawling over him, stripping him bare.

A sense of sickness. The jade ring on his finger sat cold and heavy, and it started to get heavier and heavier. an anchor dragging him down. The weight mounting and mounting.

He followed their gazes—past the blood on the floor, past Markus's stricken face—back to his own trembling hands. He looked at it, shaken.

The weight of what he had done pressed in, suffocating.

The door to the classroom burst open.

Gusts of cold air followed, sweeping through the aftermath of the classroom. Then came the headmaster, his heavy robes rippling like a gathering storm. His gaze sharp enough to cut through the air itself.

Behind him, a procession of teachers flooded in, their presence a verdict before a trial had even begun. Nurses, and Healers pushed through the throng of students, ordering them to make way, their voices sharp and urgent. The Boy was lifted onto a stretcher, his bloodied hands weakly grasping at nothing, his screams still muffled. Someone pressed a cloth to his wound. Someone else muttered a healing incantation.

Eddie barely saw it... He don't want to,

A hand landed on his shoulder—firm, steady.

He looked up. A round face framed by thinning hair. Brass-rimmed glasses slipping down the bridge of a wide nose. It was Mr. Ferie, his mentor. Deep lines etched into his

dark skin with age. His lips were pressed into something that wasn't quite a frown, not quite a smile—just controlled, measured.

He wasn't panicking. Or maybe he was, just not showing it. His grip on Eddie's shoulder remained firm, grounding. His voice, when it came, was quiet but unwavering.

"It's okay," He said, his hand firm, "Everything's going to be okay."

Eddie wanted to believe him. But he couldn't.

The jade ring on Eddie's index finger felt as heavy as the mountain itself, its magic... or whatever it had just conjured, now has long gone.

He barely noticed as they took it away from him, as if the weight of the mountain has been lifted from his very index finger... he felt somewhat free... but he dreaded that feeling.

They led him away from the classroom, away from the chatter, away from the accusations.

The whispers followed him down the corridor, curling against the stone walls, not only his classroom, the whole hallway is filled with students poking their heads out of the classroom windows, muttering his fate in hushed, pitiless tones as Eddie continues his walk of shame. *Aella Academy*, the very institution itself seemed to recoil before him—walls narrowing, shadows deepening, as if it could no longer bear to house him.

He had spent years dreaming of these halls. Studying, pushing himself, proving himself.

And now, step by step, it was all being stripped away. Death by a thousand cuts.

The end was waiting for him at the headmaster's office. A place of judgment. A place of exile.

He knew his sentence had already been passed.

Edward Welton is going to be expelled.

Chapter 1

Seven years.

The past had settled like dust, left undisturbed by time.

And in its place,

A new beginning bloomed.

A girl stood before a tall mirror, adjusting the brim of her pointed black hat. Her long, silky brown hair swayed in twin tails as she tilted her head, inspecting her reflection with wide, eager eyes behind oversized round glasses. A yellow knit sweater peeked out from beneath the freshly pressed folds of an Aella Academy robe.

She grinned.

The robe. The hat. The feeling of it all—it was real. She was finally going to Aella. She was finally going to learn the arts and traditions of magic... She is going to be a magician.

Her heart swelled with excitement, her fingers tracing the embroidered crest on her robe. Today was the first step toward something wonderful.

A voice carried through the house, breaking her reverie.

“Torrie! Breakfast is ready! Come to the dining room!”

She spun away from the mirror, practically bouncing on her feet.

“Yes, Mom!” she called back, already rushing toward the door.

Torrie stepped into the dining room, the scent of fish soup filling the air, rich and comforting.

Sunlight streamed through the small window above the sink, glinting off the wooden table where two steaming bowls sat waiting. Her mother, stood by the counter, wiping her hands on a cloth, her expression brimming with quiet pride.

Torrie adjusted her hat before pulling it off and setting it aside, the excitement still buzzing in her chest. Today was the day. The start of something new.

“Look at you, beginning your first years in Aella Academy.” Mrs. Welton smiled, lingering by the table, her eyes soft with nostalgia. “Let me see you properly,” she said, stepping closer.

Torrie straightened, smoothing the folds of her robe. “Like this?”

With a playful grin, Torrie twirled in place, the hem of her robe flaring out as she spun. She came to a stop with a little flourish, looking up at her mother expectantly.

“How do I look, Mom?”

"Like a grand magician," she said, reaching out to adjust a stray lock of hair from Torrie's face. "Or at least, one in the making."

Torrie sat back down.

"You remind me so much of your brother," Mrs. Welton mused.

Torrie looked up, curious, "Do I?"

"Not exactly, but you both are very excited. On his first day at Aella Academy," her mother continued, "He was so eager, he didn't even bother with breakfast. Just grabbed his things and took off on his bicycle straight to the harbor. Couldn't wait to board the ferry to Osthaven."

Torrie chuckled, stirring her soup. "Didn't expect him to be that excited."

Mrs. Welton laughed, "Oh, but he was," she said warmly.

"Speaking of your brother..." She glanced toward the staircase. "Where is he? Didn't he say he'd be the one to take you himself?"

Torrie shrugged. "Haven't seen him."

Mrs. Welton exhaled, rubbing her temple. "Of course." She stood, pushing her chair back with a sigh.

Then she cupped her hands around her mouth and called up the stairs. "Edward?!"

Silence.

Mrs. Welton huffed. "You stay here, hon. I'll go see if he's still in his room."

She turned and strode toward the staircase, muttering under her breath. Torrie just smiled, spooning up a mouthful of soup as she waited.

-0-

The stairs groaned softly, their creaks reverberating in the stillness of the apothecary.

Mrs. Welton carefully mounted the steps. An attic was reached by a narrow wooden staircase. The polished railings sparkled under her fingertips. A small, circular window at the landing let soft light cast long shadows that danced with her every step.

With each step, the town below faded into a whisper of bustling life. Replaced by her son's room's oppressive stillness. As she rose, her free hand gently caressed the coarse wooden walls. She touched the rough spots and gouges, scars from her son's growing.

As she approached the attic door, a moment of hesitation gripped her. Pausing for a brief moment, she lifted her hand with a touch of uncertainty. The wood stood strong, though it bore the marks of time.

Mrs. Welton closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, and then rapped softly with her knuckles, the sound a delicate, almost timid knock against the quietude.

“Edward?” she whispered into the quiet, her voice barely breaking the stillness of the attic. She leaned in.

The other side lingered in their silence. Her brow knitted together, a delicate line appearing between her eyes. She cast a fleeting look at the door handle, an urge to twist it, yet she held back.

Instead, she knocked again, this time with a deeper intent, the sound echoing more profoundly through the room beyond.

Silence. Thick and unmoving.

Beyond the attic door, the room lay in comfortable chaos. The space was dim, save for the slivers of morning light through his curtains, casting long, golden beams across the floor.

Clothes strewn carelessly across the floor, some draped over the back of a chair, some half-tucked under the bed, some long forgotten.

Books were *everywhere*. Its stacked haphazardly on the desk, toppled over on the nightstand, spread open on the unmade bed as if abandoned mid-thought.

Loose parchment spilled onto the wooden floor, some pages crumpled, others torn at the edges. Half-sketched transmutation circles and scribbled formulas peeked out from beneath the clutter, most of them bore the chaotic scribbling of frustration.

Its walls bore remnants of faded posters. Some curling at the edges, one hanging on by a single pin.

A calendar sat pinned to the wall near the door, its pages frozen in time.

The last date marked in red ink from seven years ago.

26th of April, 1920.

Near the farthest wall, a wooden desk was buried beneath the weight of research. Transmutation circles sketched and then discarded overflowed from a bin at the desk’s side. Diagrams detailing herbs, plants and mushrooms. Their alchemical properties meticulously annotated in a careful yet restless hand.

Stacked books, their spines cracked from repeated use, bore names in gilded lettering—, *Modern Alchemy* by Magnus Borman, and a vintage tome *The Ancient Arts of Alchemy* signed only *Catherine*. Amid the scholarly collection sat a battered notebook filled with translations of an even older text, one written by *Casnius Bolos*, one of the nine sages of enlightenment. The Father of Alchemy.

And slumped over it all, was the room’s lone occupant.

His maroon diamond-patterned sweater hung loosely over his slumped shoulders, its sleeves pushed up to his elbows. His silver hair fell messily over his forehead, unkempt from restless nights. His posture was hunched, arms folded beneath his head, his breathing slow and steady in slumber.

In his ears, a pair of makeshift headphones—wired together in an unorthodox fashion—hummed faintly with a distant, crackling signal. Plugged into an even more makeshift radio, the device played something indiscernible, some half-lost frequency from far beyond Weshaven. Whether it was music or the muffled voices of a broadcast, only he could tell.

The knocking at the door continued. A soft, measured rhythm, persistent against the wood.

Still, he did not stir. Succumbing to his sleep and the sounds from distant lands.

-0-

She knocked again—more resolutely, as if the sound itself could unravel the silence that enveloped the room.

“Eddie?” She called, yet no answer.

Mrs. Welton sighed, “Of course, I knew it’ll come to this.”

Slipping her hand into her skirt pocket and touching her wand's smooth wooden surface. With a slight wrist movement, the wand appeared. A thin piece of dark oak with intricate interlocking ornaments.

She pointed it at the door's lock, and a gentle click rattled the quiet attic, flickering the runes around the lock before dissolving into the shadows. She tucked her wand away and gently opened the door.

The room was full of clutter.

Mrs. Welton's gaze swept the room, her eyebrows lifting slightly as she took in the disarray.

“Of course,” she muttered under her breath, stepping carefully over a crumpled tunic on the floor. “A storm couldn't have done a better job.”

She stared at the figure slumped on the desk, immovable except for his breathing. Crackling of faint jazz music could be heard from the makeshift headset on the radio.

“*Edward Welton!*” she yelled, her tone sharp but laced with exasperated fondness.

The name cut through the attic like a thunderclap.

Eddie jolted awake so violently that his chair tipped backward. His arms flailed, his headset yanked free with a sharp crackle of static, and the makeshift radio tumbled off the desk with a clatter.

Books, parchments, loose papers exploded into the air, cascading down like confetti in a parade of overwork. His foot caught on something—could be a discarded tunic, nor it could be an open book—he tumbled off his chair entirely, landing flat on his back with a heavy *thud*.

From the floor, he let out a groggy, half-incoherent groan. "Mum—what the hell?!—"

Mrs. Welton, unimpressed, loomed over him with her hands on her hips. "You agreed weeks ago to accompany Torrie on her first day of school! I'm not letting her get lost in Osthaven while you spend all morning hibernating like some bear in winter!"

She crossed the room with purpose, the floorboards thumping beneath her feet.

Eddie sat up, rubbing his silver hair, still blinking off the remnants of sleep. "Could you at least *knock* first?" he grumbled.

"I *did* knock!" Mrs. Welton shot back, pointing at the unlocked door. "But you were too busy listening to—" she gestured vaguely at the tangled mess of wires, the radio now buzzing with distorted, half-drowned static. "—whatever *that* is."

Eddie picked up his fallen headset, giving the radio a once-over before dusting it off. "It's called *jazz*, Mum," he said, as if that explained everything. "They're pretty famous in the city, you know?"

"Like I care about *that*, Edward!" Mrs. Welton huffed. "Now *get up* before Torrie is late for her first day at Aella!"

Eddie groaned, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Aella?" he muttered, his voice still thick with sleep. "Torrie's in Aella now?"

Mrs. Welton pinched the bridge of her nose. "She *is*. Did you forget that *too*?"

"Look, Mum," Eddie pushed himself up, wincing as he untangled his legs from a mess of books and crumpled clothes. "It's *difficult* to keep track of things when Dad's remedies need tweaking every two days." He stretched, his back popping as he tried to shake off the last bits of sleep. "Can I clean up a bit before we go?"

Mrs. Welton bent down with a sigh, picking up the books and papers that had scattered across the floor. Unlike Eddie, who left things in precarious heaps, she stacked them neatly, smoothing out crumpled pages before placing them back onto his desk.

"You should at least *try* to keep things organized," she scolded, adjusting a pile of alchemy notes. "Honestly, Edward, I don't know how you can work like this."

"I *do* work like this," Eddie shot back as he pulled a fresh shirt from a chair—though it was debatable how *fresh* it actually was. He gave it a quick sniff before pulling it on. "I've been busy experimenting with potion ingredients for the apothecary. It's not like I'm just *lounging* around."

"Experimenting?" Mrs. Welton raised a skeptical brow, lifting a parchment with a half-sketched transmutation circle and an irritated scribble of *DOES NOT WORK*. "It looks more like you've been *failing* repeatedly."

Eddie scoffed, fumbling to button his shirt. "That's *how* experimentation works, Mum. Trial and error. Mostly error."

Mrs. Welton shook her head, muttering something about *alchemy not excusing poor housekeeping* as she continued gathering the mess. Eddie, meanwhile, laced up his boots at a painfully slow pace, buying time.

Their banter bounced back and forth, the practiced rhythm of a mother and son who had long since mastered the art of exasperating each other. Eddie mumbled complaints about *unfair criticism*, while Mrs. Welton countered with *pointed reminders about personal responsibility*.

Until—

She paused.

A single sheet of paper had slipped beneath a stack of old notes. As she reached for it, her fingers froze over the words printed neatly at the top:

Sage Institute Scholarship Referral for University Program.

Her eyes traveled lower.

At the bottom, in crisp ink—

Recipient: Edward Welton of Weshaven.

Her breath hitched.

"...Edward?" she said, quieter this time.

"What?" Eddie turned around, still adjusting the sleeve of his brown field jacket.

Mrs. Welton didn't say anything at first. She just held up the letter.

The paper was heavier than standard parchment, its edges embroidered with intricate silver filigree. The ink, a deep, rich black, had been pressed so precisely into the page that it hadn't faded with time. Stamped at the bottom in dark blue wax was the unmistakable insignia of the **Sage Institute**—one of the highest authorities on magical education.

"This," Mrs. Welton said slowly, tilting the letter toward him, "*This* is real. This is official. Care to explain what exactly it's doing hidden under a pile of—" she gestured vaguely at the mess, "—whatever all *this* is?"

Eddie blinked. Then, as if a switch flipped in his mind, he let out a short chuckle. "Oh, that?" He rubbed the back of his head, offering an easy grin. "*That's* from long ago, remember? Gosh, I forgot how long ago that was."

"You never told me you've got this."

Eddie hesitated for just a fraction of a second before shrugging, he was already turning back toward the door, grabbing his satchel as he moved.

"Look, it doesn't matter now," he said, forcing an easygoing smile. "I'm off with Torrie. Bye, Mum!"

And before she could stop him, he slipped out the door.

Her lips pressed together, unreadable thoughts flickering behind her eyes as the floorboards creaked with Eddie's retreating steps.

Mrs. Welton stood there for a long moment, the letter still in her hands, her eyes lingering on the name at the bottom.

Edward Welton of Weshaven.

Chapter 2

Eddie trudged down the stairs, rubbing the grogginess from his face. The scent of fish soup still clung to the air, though it had long since cooled. As he descended, the creaking steps announced his arrival before he even reached the bottom.

Torrie was already waiting for him. She sat on the couch, legs swinging slightly, her satchel tucked neatly by her side. Her uniform—crisp and freshly pressed—was complete with the wide-brimmed hat perched atop her head. She looked ready to march straight into her first lesson.

Her large round glasses caught the morning light as she turned to face him.

"You *overslept again*," she said, crossing her arms.

Eddie scoffed, running a hand through his silver hair. "It's called *resting*, actually. Pretty important, y'know. Keeps you from turning into a ghoul."

Torrie eyed him. "You *did* remember you were supposed to take me to Aella, right?"

Eddie hesitated just long enough for her smirk to widen.

"Oh my *god!*" she groaned dramatically, leaning her head back. "You *forgot*."

"Hey, hey, I didn't forget!" Eddie protested, pointing a finger at her. "I just... temporarily *misplaced* that piece of information."

"That's *forgetting*."

Eddie clicked his tongue. "*Temporarily misplaced information*."

Torrie shook her head, exasperated but amused. "You're the worst."

"And yet," Eddie shot back, standing up and stretching, "Here I am, awake and ready to escort you like the *responsible* older brother that I am."

Torrie squinted at him. "*Barely*."

Eddie ruffled her hair on the way to grab his satchel, ignoring her protests as she batted his hand away. "C'mon, let's go before Mum decides to hex me into a broom and fly you there herself."

The garage was old—probably older than Eddie himself. The wooden beams sagged slightly, and the scent of oil, damp wood, and rust lingered in the air. Dusty sunlight filtered through the gaps in the planks, casting streaks of gold across the scattered tools and forgotten crates.

In the middle of it all stood Eddie's bike.

It was an ancient, clunky thing—red paint chipped at the edges, the metal frame scuffed from years of use. It had once belonged to his father, and before that, he wouldn't be surprised if his grandfather had ridden it through these very streets. A relic of the Welton family, barely held together by years of hasty repairs and just enough luck.

Eddie tightened the straps on the back, securing both their satchels before giving the bike a few testing bounces. It creaked but held firm.

Torrie stood nearby, hands behind her back, watching as he worked. "Do you *ever* clean this thing?"

Eddie scoffed. "It's got *character*."

"It's got *rust*."

"Rust *and* character," he corrected, checking the pedals. "That's what gives it charm."

As Eddie adjusted the handlebars, he glanced over at her. "So, you thought about what you wanna do for your magical concentration yet?"

Torrie scrunched up her nose. "I *just* got into Aella, Ed. I've got plenty of time to figure that out."

"You say that now," Eddie smirked, "And one day, *boom*, second year sneaks up on you, and suddenly you have to choose whether you wanna be an Alchemist, an Illusionist, a Conjuror, or whatever fancy new stuff they've added since my time."

Torrie shrugged. "Right now, I just wanna make friends, get to know the teachers. No rush."

As Eddie adjusted the straps on their satchels, Torrie swung her legs idly and tilted her head. "So... are the teachers at Aella really as strict as Mom says?"

Eddie snorted. "Some of them? Absolutely." He straightened up and leaned against the bike.

“Take Mrs. Neira” Eddie began, “She teaches Runes. And she teaches that class with an Iron Fist. She’s the kind of teacher who can spot an untucked shirt from fifty paces.”

Torrie groaned. “Great. That sounds *fantastic*.”

“Oh, and don’t even *think* about dozing off in her class,” Eddie added. “She once hexed my notes into paper rabbits and hopped away mid-lecture because I didn’t pay attention.”

Torrie’s eyes widened. “You’re joking.”

“Wish I was.”

She slumped dramatically against the wooden railing. “This is already sounding so fun.”

“Well, not *all* the teachers are terrifying,” Eddie grinned. “Mr. Ferie’s the exact opposite. He teaches Alchemy, and he’s probably the most laid-back teacher at Aella. You’ll like him.”

Torrie perked up. “Why? What’s he like?”

“Well, for one, he actually *likes* students,” Eddie said, tightening a bolt. “And he’s big on competitions—he’s always picking out students to send to alchemy tournaments. I think he just enjoys the chaos of it all.”

Torrie chuckled. “Sounds like someone I’d actually want to take a class with.”

“Oh, you will,” Eddie smirked as he stood up. “And when you do, tell him I send my regards, and....”

Torrie narrowed her eyes. “...And?”

“And that his socks *smell*.”

“You’re *terrible*!” Torrie burst into laughter, “I’m not telling that on my first day!”

Eddie shrugged, grinning. “He’ll know what it means.”

Still giggling, Torrie shook her head as Eddie made the final check. Satisfied, he strode over to the garage door and grabbed the handle. With a heave, he pushed it open.

Light poured in, golden and fresh, chasing away the dust and shadows. Outside, the streets of Weshaven beckoned—cobble roads damp from morning mist, lined with wooden houses that leaned ever so slightly from the years. The sea breeze carried the scent of salt and fish, mixing with the distant chatter of merchants setting up their stalls.

Eddie swung a leg over the bike, glancing back at Torrie. “Alright, You ready?”

Torrie adjusted her hat, eyes bright. “Ready.”

And with that, they rode off, the old bike rattling down the street as the Welton siblings made their way through the waking town.

The town of Weshaven stirred to life as Eddie and Torrie rolled down the sloping streets, the crisp morning air tinged with the scent of brine and freshly caught fish. The narrow roads twisted and wove between clustered stone-and-timber houses, their rooftops slick with morning dew.

Below them, the harbor sprawled like a great wooden beast, its docks lined with fishing boats bobbing gently in the tide. The air thrummed with the sounds of the morning commute—sailors calling out as they hauled in nets from the previous night's catch, shipwrights hammering away at weather-worn hulls, and merchants rolling out their stalls, their carts stacked with exotic wares from distant shores.

Eddie steered carefully as they gained momentum, their satchels bouncing slightly against the back of the bike. The road sloped steeply ahead, the cobblestones uneven in places, but he knew this path like the back of his hand. He kept one foot ready on the brake, just in case.

The street curved, and the town slowly unfurled before them—a lively, salt-kissed pocket of the world, waking up to another day.

Further ahead, moving steadily against the flow of early-morning foot traffic, a broad-shouldered figure in a worn flat cap trudged up the pavement.

His thick brown curls peeked from beneath the cap, and he carried himself with an easy, unhurried gait despite the weight of the heavy satchel slung over his shoulder. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing arms dusted with faint stains—herbs, ink, or maybe soot from the apothecary's furnace.

Torrie, perched behind Eddie, squinted as they neared. Then, with a small gasp, she nudged Eddie's shoulder. "Isn't that Markus?"

Eddie followed her gaze. Sure enough, it was Markus, making his way toward the apothecary, likely just coming off a delivery run.

With a grin, Eddie squeezed the brakes, slowing the bike as they rolled up beside him. "Oi, Markus! You heading back already?"

Markus glanced up, his tired but good-natured expression shifting into a small smile. "Morning, you two." His voice was soft, polite as ever. "Making a stop before opening up."

"I'm clocking in late today," Eddie admitted, adjusting his grip on the handlebars. "Gotta take Torrie to school first."

Markus raised his brows, impressed. "That so? What academy are you off to, then?"

Torrie straightened in her seat, her face glowing with pride. "Aella Academy!"

Markus let out an approving hum. "That's a fine place. You'll do well there." Then he glanced toward the harbor. "Ferry leaves in an hour. You two best get going."

"Yeah, we should," Eddie agreed, nudging the bike forward. "See you later, Markus!"

"Take care," Markus said with a small wave.

With that, Eddie and Torrie pushed off, rolling down the street once more, weaving through the waking town.

Eddie gritted his teeth as he steered through the crowded streets, weaving between fishermen hauling in their morning catch, merchants haggling over crates of imported goods, and dockhands rolling barrels toward waiting ships. The salty breeze carried the scent of fish and brine, mingling with the shouts of sailors calling orders across the bustling Bright Harbour.

The ferry was leaving in an hour—but at this rate, it might as well be five minutes.

"Come on, come on," Eddie muttered, scanning for a gap in the throng.

Torrie clung tightly to his waist. "We're not gonna make it!"

"Yes, we are," Eddie shot back, his eyes locking onto an opening between a pair of arguing traders. He hit the pedals hard, propelling the bike forward, skimming past them with barely an inch to spare.

The dock came into view. A bell rang—final boarding call.

With a final burst of speed, Eddie rode up the wooden planks, skidding to a halt just as a deckhand moved to pull up the gangway.

"Two for Osthaven!" Eddie panted.

The deckhand raised an eyebrow but waved them on. Eddie and Torrie scrambled aboard, collapsing onto one of the wooden benches as the ferry gave a low horn and lurched away from the dock.

Torrie exhaled, catching her breath. "That was close."

Eddie wiped his brow with a grin. "Told you we'd make it."

"You *had* to make it," she teased, nudging him. "You can't miss the ferry, *especially* on my first day!"

Eddie chuckled, leaning back against the bench, feeling the weight of the rush fade as the ferry rocked gently with the waves. His eyes drifted out to the horizon, where the sea stretched endlessly toward the east.

Osthaven.

It had been a while since he set foot there.

Chapter 3

Eddie stepped off the ferry first, tossing a few coins to the ferryman before offering a hand to Torrie. As her boots hit the wooden planks, she immediately turned to take in their surroundings, but Eddie tugged his flat cap lower over his forehead, his gaze flickering warily over the busy dock.

The air here was different—crisper, drier. It lacked the thick, briny scent of Weshaven, replaced instead by the rich aromas of spice crates being unloaded, the earthy tang of dried herbs, and the occasional whiff of parchment and ink from merchants tallying their stock.

Osthaven was busier in a different way. Where Weshaven had the steady rhythm of fishermen mending nets and gutting the morning's catch, Osthaven hummed with the brisk efficiency of trade. Dockhands hauled crates marked with foreign sigils, couriers weaved through carts, and merchants haggled over silk and spices from distant lands.

Torrie took it all in, wide-eyed. "It's... bigger than I thought."

Eddie forced a smirk. "Told you. Less fish guts, more commerce."

But even as he spoke, his steps were measured, his shoulders tense beneath his coat. He pulled his flat cap down further, a quiet gesture of habit—of avoidance of the last time he'd walked these streets.

He tried not to think about it. Tried not to wonder if someone in the crowd might recognize him, might turn and whisper. It had been a year, but memories had a way of lingering.

Torrie, oblivious to his unease, strode ahead, drinking in every detail.

"Look at that!" she pointed excitedly to a trio of scholars in deep blue robes, their arms laden with books as they argued in hushed, hurried tones. "Are they from the university?"

"Yeah," Eddie muttered. "Researchers, probably. Aella's got plenty of them."

They continued down the road, weaving through colorful stalls and past warehouse workers shouting orders.

Eddie's gaze landed on a small stall by the corner, where the scent of roasted chestnuts drifted through the air. His fingers brushed against the strap of his bag as a familiar memory surfaced.

"See that?" He nudged Torrie. "Markus and I used to stop there after classes. We'd split a bag of chestnuts and complain about assignments the whole way home."

Torrie wrinkled her nose. "You two really bonded over complaining, huh?"

Eddie smirked. "It's an art form, I tell you."

But the warmth of nostalgia faded too quickly, replaced by the weight pressing at his ribs. He shouldn't be here. Not for long.

As they walked past a faded green awning, his steps faltered.

"And that place," he pointed, voice quieter now, "was where I used to get supplies for my... projects."

Torrie arched a brow. "What kind of *projects*?"

"Alchemy, mostly," Eddie said, exhaling softly. "The owner—grumpiest old man you'd ever meet—used to grumble about every single request I made, but he never actually turned me away."

Torrie grinned. "Sounds like he liked you."

Eddie scoffed. "I think he just liked my coins."

The humor felt thin, fleeting. His fingers curled slightly, pressing into his palms. It was strange, being back. The streets hadn't changed, but everything *felt* different.

Torrie, still beaming, nudged him lightly. "You've been here a lot, huh?"

Eddie hesitated before nodding. "Yeah... long ago."

"Well," Torrie said, her voice light, "now I'm here too."

Eddie huffed a quiet laugh, shaking his head as if to brush away the past. "Yeah. Let's get you to Aella."

-0-

As they left the bustle of Osthaven behind, the roads stretched wider, the houses growing sparser until they gave way to rolling fields and clusters of trees. The scent of salt and spice was gradually replaced by damp earth and the fresh, clean air of the countryside.

Torrie clung to Eddie's coat from her seat on the back of the bicycle, her voice bright with curiosity. "Are we almost there?"

"Still a ways to go," Eddie said, pedaling steadily. "We have to go through the forest first."

She tilted her head. "Forest?"

The road sloped upward, and as they crested the hill, the trees thickened. Oaks and pines stretched high, their boughs intertwining to form a dense canopy overhead.

Shadows pooled beneath them, deep and unmoving. The further they went, the heavier the air seemed, as if they had crossed into another world entirely.

Then, the first glimmers of light appeared—small, golden blossoms lining the path, their petals glowing softly like embers in the dusk. The light wove between the cracks in the stone pavement, illuminating the way forward.

A rustle came from the trees. Then, a low, distant call. Not quite a growl, not quite a voice—something in between.

Torrie tensed. “Eddie...” she murmured. “Is it safe here?”

“Yeah,” Eddie replied, his voice even. “It’s just an Illusory Forest.”

She clutched his coat a little tighter. “Illusory?”

“Yeah. There are plenty of ‘em in Osthaven,” he said. “Scarwich Grove—this one— isn’t too bad. There’s another near here, the Northern Gibdon Depth. That one’s trickier, denser. The deeper you go, the stranger they get.”

Torrie hesitated before asking, “Is there one back in Weshaven?”

“Yeah,” he said, slower this time. “But it’s different. Older. Nobody goes in—not even Aella students. It’s the deepest Illusory Forest in Solivia.”

Torrie swallowed. “Why?”

“The one back in Weshaven is called the Deep Glaive,” Eddie said. “It’s said to go so deep, it swallows anything that enters. It’s full of ruins—Elven ruins, from the Nocturnilus Period. Some say it’s cursed. Others say it’s just been forgotten.”

The trees around them whispered as they passed, but Eddie kept his eyes ahead.

“But don’t worry though,” Eddie continued, “This one’s not as dense as others.” He gestured at the glowing flowers. “These will keep us safe.”

Torrie peered down at them. “What kind of flowers are they?”

Eddie didn’t answer right away. The soft whirl of the bike’s wheels filled the silence, the golden blossoms casting faint, flickering patterns on his hands. His grip on the handlebars tightened.

“Eden Flowers.”

There was something distant in his voice, something just out of reach. Torrie glanced up at him, but his face was set, his eyes fixed ahead, unreadable. It wasn’t like him to hesitate over a simple question.

The bike rolled on, past the flowers swaying gently in the cold morning breeze.

The forest thickened around them, but the path remained clear. A warm hush filled the air, like a place caught between worlds.

Torrie’s curiosity sparked again. “So... what else makes an Illusory Forest like this special?”

Eddie's grip on the handlebars shifted. "The arcane flow here is denser," he said. "It gathers in the forest itself. It makes spellcasting easier—you'll see once you start practicing."

He hesitated, then added, "But it also makes the forest... strange. Paths shift. Sounds echo. Some people say the trees whisper, but that's probably just superstition."

Torrie frowned. "Why does that happen?"

Eddie exhaled, adjusting his grip. "I don't really know," he admitted. "It's something to do with the way the arcane flows in the forest, but I never really studied that. If you want real answers, you should ask the Conjunction teachers. They're the ones who understand all these weird arcane stuff."

The reassurance settled over her, but still, she couldn't shake the feeling that this place held more than it let on.

They rode on, the golden glow flickering at their sides. Then, slowly, the trees began to thin. Their towering forms shrank away, letting sunlight trickle back in. The air grew warmer, the scent of earth replaced by something lighter, drier.

And then—open space.

The forest fell away behind them, revealing rolling fields of golden hay, stretching endlessly beneath the afternoon sky. Farmhouses dotted the hills, smoke curling gently from their chimneys. The road dipped downward, and as they coasted down the slope, a grand structure rose in the distance.

Torrie's breath caught.

Aella Academy.

Perched atop a hill, its spires gleamed in the sun, its stonework bright against the sky. The domed towers stood tall, their stained-glass windows glinting like gemstones. A wide bridge arched over a gentle river, leading to an iron-gated entrance. Beyond the gates, students in deep blue robes moved across sprawling courtyards, their voices carrying in the wind.

Torrie tightened her grip around Eddie's waist.

He exhaled, slow and measured.

"Welcome to Aella," he murmured.

Eddie pedaled through the last stretch of road, the cobbled streets of Osthaven giving way to packed dirt as they left the bustle of town behind. Fields of golden hay swayed gently in the morning breeze, stretching far and wide, their soft rustling the only sound accompanying them now.

And then, past the gentle slope of the hill, Aella Academy came into view.

It stood just as Eddie remembered—tall, sturdy, with its weathered stone walls and a modest courtyard nestled at its center. It wasn't the grandest school in Solivia, not the kind spoken of in hushed reverence like Edenfield, but around here, it was everything. A place of learning, discipline, and quiet ambition.

Eddie slowed the bike to a stop near the front gate. Torrie hopped off, adjusting her satchel, her eyes gleaming as she took in the sight before her.

"Well," she said, turning to him, a wide grin breaking across her face, "I guess this is it."

"You'll do fine, Torrie." Eddie said, forcing a small smirk. "You better not cause too much trouble."

She stuck her tongue out playfully before stepping forward, her pace quickening until she was practically skipping through the front gate.

Eddie lingered by the entrance, watching her go.

He saw himself in her.

The same eagerness, the same restless energy that had carried him through these very gates years ago. He remembered what it was like, standing on the threshold of something new, looking ahead and seeing only possibility.

Now, he stood on the other side of it.

Eddie let out a quiet breath, gripping the handles a little tighter before shaking his head.

"Go get 'em, Torrie."

And with that, he turned the bike around and started pedaling back towards town.

He just had to get back to town, maybe find a quiet corner to sit for a while before catching the ferry home. But as he was about to mount his bike, a voice cut through the crowds of students.

"Edward!"

He flinched. His fingers tightened around the handlebars. For a second, he considered pretending he hadn't heard. Plenty of students had the name Edward, right? It didn't have to be him.

"Edward!... Welton!"

Eddie slowed, his stomach knotting. Slowly, hesitantly, he turned his head.

Near the front gate of Aella Academy, amidst the stream of students hurrying into the school, stood Mr. Ferie. Eddie's old Alchemy mentor was just as he remembered—dark-skinned, balding, his round brass glasses perched on his nose, and an ever-present spark of energy in his step despite his age. The students passing by greeted him with cheerful nods and waves, a testament to how well-liked he was. And then, as he spotted Eddie, his face lit up with recognition, his hoarse but warm voice cutting through the morning air.

Mr. Ferie strode toward him, clapping a firm hand on his shoulder. "Hah! I thought that was you! It's been years! How have you been, my boy?"

Eddie swallowed, forcing his lips into something that resembled a smile. "Uh... yeah. It's been a while."

Mr. Ferie beamed. "More than a while! I haven't seen you since—" He paused, brow furrowing slightly as he searched for the last memory he had of Eddie. Then, his face brightened again. "Ah, since that competition! You had the judges hanging onto your every word—Professor Borman from Edenfield even wrote you a recommendation, didn't he?" He chuckled, adjusting his brass-rimmed glasses. "So? Did you take the chance? Studying Alchemy at Edenfield, I hope?"

Eddie felt something sour coil in his stomach. He gripped the strap of his bag a little tighter.

"Something like that."

Mr. Ferie chuckled. "Ah, I knew it. You always had a mind for it, Edward. All those competitions—still remember the time you turned an iron ingot into living vinework? That was a masterpiece! One of the finest young alchemists I ever had the pleasure of mentoring."

Eddie stiffened. He could feel the expectation in Mr. Ferie's voice, the unshaken belief in who he used to be.

His hands felt clammy. The last thing he wanted was to stand here, listening to praise that didn't belong to him anymore.

Mr. Ferie, oblivious to his unease, clapped his hands together. "So! What brings you back to Osthaven? Surely not just a visit?"

Eddie shifted his weight. "Just dropping someone off."

"Oh? A friend?"

"My... sister."

Mr. Ferie's brows lifted. "Torianna, was it? Following in your footsteps, then! That's wonderful."

Eddie forced a chuckle, but it barely held.

Mr. Ferie sighed wistfully. "Ah, you know, I always hoped I'd see you again, Edward. You had such promise. I can only imagine the things you've accomplished since Edenfield."

Eddie's throat tightened. He glanced away, fingers gripping the strap of his bag as if it could anchor him. His mind scrambled for an exit.

Lie. Tell him you're doing fine. That you're excelling. That you're still the student he remembers.

But the words wouldn't come.

"I—uh, I should get going," Eddie blurted. "Mum's expecting me, sorry."

Mr. Ferie blinked, surprise flickering across his face. "Oh? Well, I suppose we'll catch up properly another time—"

But Eddie was already moving, swinging himself onto his bike. "Yeah—yeah, of course," he called over his shoulder, forcing a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes.

And then he was pedaling away, fast enough that the cobbled road rattled beneath his tires. Fast enough that Mr. Ferie's voice faded into the morning hum of Aella Academy. Fast enough that he didn't have to see the warmth in his mentor's eyes turn into something else—realization, maybe, or disappointment.

He didn't look back.

-o-

Eddie pedaled steadily through the streets of Osthaven, the hum of the town buzzing around him. The salty breeze had thinned, replaced by the scent of fresh bread, spices, and something sweet roasting over an open flame. His stomach reminded him, with a low grumble, that breakfast had been hurried.

He slowed to a stop near a familiar stall, the one that sold honeyed almonds and sesame biscuits. The sight alone pulled him back to old routines—grabbing a bag for himself, an extra for Markus. It had been a while, but some habits never quite faded.

After paying the vendor, he stepped back toward his bicycle, ready to sling the bag over the handlebars—when something caught his eye.

A building stood across the street, its architecture different from the others around it. Age clung to its stone walls, yet the towering columns bore intricate carvings, their shapes unmistakably Elvish. Time had weathered them, but their elegance remained, a relic of a bygone era.

Above the heavy wooden doors, an emblem was set in iron: an owl, perched upon a scroll, wings tucked close. Beneath it, carved into the worn brass plaque, were two simple words.

Sage Institute.

Eddie stared, something stirring in his chest. He hadn't noticed it before—maybe he had never cared to look. But now, standing there, it felt like the building was watching him back.

Eyes tracing the contours of the emblem, Eddie lingered a moment longer, the owl's unblinking gaze seeming almost knowing. The Sage Institute. He knew nothing about it—had never needed to—but something about it gnawed at the edges of his mind. A curiosity, fleeting yet persistent.

With a breath, he shook it off, tucking the bag of snacks securely inside his satchel before turning back to his bicycle. The world outside his thoughts rushed back in—the chatter of merchants, the rhythmic clatter of hooves on cobblestones, the occasional call of dockworkers hauling cargo.

He swung a leg over the bike and pushed off, weaving through the streets of Osthaven with practiced ease. The town passed him by in a blur of nostalgia and familiarity, but his mind remained half elsewhere, lingering on the building, on the emblem, on the feeling.

The distant chime of a bell tower reminded him of the time. He wasn't in a hurry, but he didn't want to miss the next ferry back to Weshaven either.

By the time he reached the harbor, the ferry was already boarding. He rolled his bicycle up the gangway, found a quiet spot near the railing, and exhaled, letting the sea breeze wash over him.

Back to Weshaven. Back to his routines.

Chapter 4

By the time he reached the apothecary, the comforting scent of herbs and simmering potions greeted him like an old friend. He pushed open the wooden door and stepped into the brewing room, where golden light streamed through the lofty windows, casting long, shifting shadows.

A deep but gentle voice called out from the far end of the room, its warmth filling the space like the heat of a hearth.

"Morning, Edward!"

Markus stood hunched over his workstation, his broad frame making the desk seem almost too small for him. His wild curls peeked out from under his cap, and a faint flush colored his round cheeks—likely from standing over boiling cauldrons all morning.

He was a large presence in every sense, but his movements were measured, careful, and full of practiced ease as he stirred a simmering mixture, his huge hands treating delicate ingredients with surprising gentleness.

Eddie smirked and reached into his satchel. "Got you something."

Markus glanced up, his dark eyes curious as Eddie handed over a small paper bag. A familiar scent wafted from within.

"You didn't," Markus breathed, opening the bag to reveal golden-brown roasted chestnuts. His expression flickered between delight and nostalgia.

"Stopped by the old stall," Eddie said. "Figured you'd appreciate it."

"You really do know how to make a guy's morning." Markus chuckled, popping one into his mouth and sighing contentedly. "So, how'd it go? With Torrie, I mean."

"Good. Aella still looks like Aella." Eddie exhaled, glancing past Markus as if he could still see the academy in the distance. "Nothing much has changed since we were there."

Markus hummed, a small smile tugging at his lips. "I bet she was buzzing with excitement."

"Practically skipping through the gates," Eddie admitted with a chuckle.

Markus laughed, shaking his head. "Yeah, that sounds about right." He rolled up his sleeves, returning his focus to the potion before him. "She's gonna do great there, you know. Always knew she had it in her."

Eddie didn't respond immediately, just nodded, watching the steam rise from Markus's cauldron.

For a moment, it was like old times.

Eddie had just popped a chestnut into his mouth when Markus spoke, his voice casual but laced with meaning.

“Oh, by the way—Mr. Welton wants to see you earlier.”

Eddie froze mid-chew. A slow, creeping realization dawned on him.

He was supposed to hand over the formula today.

“Damn it—I forgot!” He shot upright, swallowed hard, nearly choking. nearly knocking over a stack of parchment on the counter.

“Yeah, figured.” Markus raised an amused brow, still munching on his snack. “He’s already up at the tower.”

Cursing under his breath, Eddie spun on his heel and bolted toward the stairs. His boots thudded against the wooden steps as he rushed to his desk, rummaging through scattered notes, ink-stained pages, and unfinished drafts. Where the hell was it?

He shoved aside a worn-out alchemy textbook, and there it was—the carefully scribed formula, buried beneath a pile of old scribbles.

Snatching it up, he didn’t waste another second. He turned on his heel and sprinted towards the tower, heart pounding.

-0-

Eddie barely slowed as he shoved his bedroom door open, the hinges groaning in protest. His pulse pounded in his ears as he bolted down the narrow passageway, the floorboards creaking beneath his hurried steps.

His arms clutched a haphazard stack of papers and notebooks, some pages slipping loose in his rush.

He was late.

The scent of dried lavender and rosemary clung to the air, undercut by the sharp, metallic tang wafting from the tower above—his father was already deep in his alchemical work.

Markus had warned him, and yet he had still lost track of time.

Eddie skidded to a stop at the base of the spiral staircase, his breath quick and uneven. His gaze flicked to the rune glowing faintly near the stairwell, a familiar aqua shimmer against the stone floor. Alfred’s spellwork. It would cut the thousand-step climb into mere moments.

For a brief second, he hesitated. The rune was convenient. Useful. But magic never quite worked right in his hands, and he didn’t have time for a mishap now.

No choice. He gritted his teeth and lunged up the first step, taking the stairs two at a time.

His boots struck the wood with heavy thuds, the polished steps groaning under his frantic ascent. The wind howled through the narrow side windows, whipping against his cheeks as he climbed higher, the stone walls tightening around him like a winding tunnel.

His lungs burned, his legs ached, but he didn't slow.

The tower stretched above him, seemingly endless, but Eddie pushed on, gripping the rail with one hand while keeping his papers pressed against his side with the other.

He was late. He had to move faster.

-o-

Eddie finally reached the top of the tower, his lungs burning and breath hitching in quick, ragged bursts as he crossed the threshold into the alchemist's lab on top of the tower.

Soft light from the open window cast amusing shadows on the craggy stone walls. He was surrounded by the odours of crushed plants and boiling concoctions and the saline air from big windows with delicate wooden beams. This vantage position revealed the Hamlet of Weshaven, a seaside hamlet full with merchants and fishermen ready for their voyages.

"Hey there, Eddie!" Mr. Welton said, looking up from his meticulous work with a casual air.

Mr. Welton looked up from his desk, relaxed. Ageing grey hair neatly brushed back, giving him a quirky genius look. On his nasal bridge, round glasses framed his bright blue eyes that gleamed with warmth and mischief. He looked like someone who had spent his life studying and working, wearing a basic collared shirt with rolled sleeves. Despite his age, his slender frame was nimble.

Mr. Welton looked up from his desk the moment Eddie burst into the tower, his lips twitching into a smirk.

"Well, well," he drawled, leaning back in his chair, "Where in the world could my son's *brilliant* backache potion formula be? Surely it hasn't been lost to time and space?"

Eddie let out a breath, half-exasperated, half-relieved, as he rushed to the desk and dropped his bundle of notes and notebooks with a satisfying thud.

"Right here," Eddie said, smoothing out the topmost page. "And I didn't lose it—I just... took Torrie to her first day at Aella Academy."

Mr. Welton, who had been preparing for another playful jab, paused. His teasing smirk softened into something warmer.

"Ah," he said, nodding as he adjusted his glasses. "Now *that* is a worthy excuse."

Eddie ignored the jab, quickly straightening his notes before launching into an explanation. "So, I was thinking—the base potion we use for muscle relief has a long absorption time, right? What if we swap out the oak bark infusion for something more reactive, like willow extract? It has natural pain-relieving properties, and it should cut the absorption time in half."

Mr. Welton hummed as he followed along, his fingers tapping against the parchment while he skimmed Eddie's work. His expression, usually lighthearted, turned serious with concentration. He nodded occasionally, making quiet sounds of approval.

After a long moment, he let out a low whistle. "This is brilliant," he said, setting the page down. "I might actually use this."

Eddie sat back, his chest swelling with pride. He had expected constructive criticism, maybe even a few amused remarks about overcomplicating things, but *praise*? That was rare.

Finally, Eddie asked, "So, what's on the agenda today?"

"Alright, we will need to get these raw materials processed," Mr. Welton said, slipping on a pair of protective goggles as he approached the array of ingredients strewn across the workbench. "We've got to get them ready for brewing in the apothecary. Your mom's a bit understaffed today, and I could really use another set of hands around here."

Eddie nodded, shaking off his lengthy sleep's fog. He joined his dad and used a wicked-looking knife to slice through the twisted roots. The boiling concoctions, clinking glass devices, and scent of plants and chemicals comforted him as he worked.

Lab was busy. On another table, glass jars bubbled and steamed, their twisting tubes blazing like ancient monster veins in the faint light. Some bubbled with vibrant hues, while others lay in little glass vials with ethereal light. Eddie saw jars of dried dragon's blood, sparkling scales from mythological fish, and powdered gems on the walls and recalled his childhood ambitions of becoming a famous alchemist, which he had long abandoned.

-o-

As Eddie and Mr. Welton toiled together, the harmonious symphony of slicing and grinding resonated through the lab, mingling with the bubbling and hissing of potions brewing in their cauldrons. The air was thick with the rich scents of crushed herbs, mineral powders, and simmering extracts.

"You know," Mr. Welton began, his tone casual as he measured out a vibrant powder, "your mother found something this morning."

Eddie paused mid-chop, glancing up from the herbs he was dicing. “Found something?” He furrowed his brow. “What is it?”

His father didn’t answer right away. Instead, he reached for a folded parchment on the workbench and smoothed it out with deliberate care. The thick, cream-colored paper bore an emblem Eddie didn’t recognize at first—but then, his stomach lurched.

Mr. Welton turned the letter toward him, tapping a finger against the wax seal. “This,” he said, “is no ordinary letter, son. Especially not one that just happens to turn up in a mountain of parchments.”

Eddie swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. The words on the front of the letter gleamed in elegant, embossed script.

Sage’s Institute – Referral for Scholarship Consideration.

Mr. Welton tapped the letter again, his voice steady but firm. “This isn’t just any invitation, Eddie. Look here.”

Eddie leaned in, his eyes following his father’s finger as it traced a line of text near the bottom of the parchment.

Referral valid until the 29th of December, 1927.

His stomach twisted. “That’s barely a month from now,” he murmured.

“Exactly.” Mr. Welton folded his arms, watching Eddie’s reaction carefully. “If you don’t make a decision before then, the opportunity vanishes. You won’t get another chance.”

Eddie exhaled slowly, setting his knife down on the wooden cutting board. “I just... I haven’t really thought about it,” he admitted, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’m not sure I’m cut out for something like that. It’s been tough to think about anything beyond today.”

His father nodded, but there was something searching in his gaze, as if he saw past Eddie’s words. “I know it’s a lot,” he said, his tone gentler. “But this isn’t just about potential—it’s about timing. If you let this slip by, you might regret it down the line.”

“I get it, Dad. But I—”

Mr. Welton set down the vial he had been handling and leaned slightly against the workbench. “Do you remember Aunt Catherine, Edward?”

“Aunt Catherine?” Eddie blinked, caught off guard. “I... kind of? I mean, I haven’t seen her in decades.”

His father chuckled, shaking his head. “Figures. You were young. But you certainly remember that old alchemy book you’ve practically memorized, don’t you?”

“That was from her?”

“She gave it to you when you were just starting to experiment with transmutations.” Mr. Welton continued, “You spent hours poring over that thing, scrawling notes,

testing theories. And back then, you wrote to her constantly, asking questions, exchanging discoveries. She was the one who pushed you to enter that competition.”

Eddie stared down at the referral letter, his mind flickering back to the late nights he’d spent scribbling formulas, the excitement of testing a new method—how much of it had been shaped by that book?

“She practically helped you won those referral, Eddie,” his father continued. “Without her, you might not have even known half the techniques that set you apart. Imagine how she felt if you didn’t consider this.”

Eddie swallowed, suddenly feeling the weight of it all. Catherine had believed in him long before he’d even considered believing in himself.

“It’s been ages since Catherine crossed my mind. So, how’s she holding up?” Eddie asked.

“Your aunt is a real piece of work for sure!” Mr. Welton grinned, a spark of nostalgia dancing in his eyes, “She’s a pretty impressive Alchemist all on her own.”

“Yeah, I remember her being amazing at that,” Eddie said, his mind wandering as he chopped the herbs with a casual flick of his wrist. “But I totally blanked on how much time has passed since we last met.”

Mr. Welton let out a soft chuckle, shaking his head. “That’s because time doesn’t pass for her the way it does for us.”

“Catherine isn’t just anyone, Eddie.” He picked up the referral letter, his gaze lingering on it. “She’s an *Elf*. The last remaining ones, that is. For all we know, she’s lived through the rise and fall of kingdoms, seen the Solivian Empire in its prime. She’s a living piece of history.”

Eddie paused mid-slice, glancing up. “Huh.” He hadn’t really thought about it that way. Catherine had always just been... Catherine—brilliant, eccentric, and endlessly knowledgeable. But now that he thought about it, there was something timeless about her, the way she spoke, the way she carried herself, as if she had seen far more than she ever let on.

Mr. Welton smirked. “And yet, despite all that, she still took the time to mentor some scrawny kid with a head full of ambition. Catherine was my Master before she set off on her own epic adventure. She taught me much of what I know today.”

“Hold on, you were her apprentice?” Eddie enquired, arching an eyebrow in curiosity. “You?” The legendary Mr. Welton?

“Absolutely!” Mr. Welton laughed “Before I became the legendary Mr. Welton,” his father continued, waving his hand as if brushing away a pesky fly. “I was just a kid, and Catherine was already stirring up quite the storm in the alchemical world. It’s incredible to consider just how gifted she truly is.”

Eddie felt a twist in his gut, a sharp reminder of how much he craved those wild connections and epic adventures. “I totally need to get in touch with her, write a letter or something.”

“Absolutely,” his dad cheered on. “Catherine would totally be stoked to hear from you. She’s always seen the greatness in you, even when you couldn’t see it yourself.”

-0-

Eddie took a step back from the solid workbench, swiping the back of his hand across his forehead to clear the sweat. With a flourish, he stuffed the final ingredients into robust wooden crates, ready for their journey down to the bustling apothecary below. He paused for a second, taking in the impressive organisation he had pulled off, a wave of pride swelling within him

“Okay, Dad, I’m heading down,” he shouted, striding towards the door that opened to the twisting staircase. The doorframe creaked like it was just as eager to escape as he was.

But just as he was about to swing the door open, Mr. Welton’s voice stopped him in his tracks. “Eddie, hold up for a second. could you hang around for just a little while longer? I’ve got one more favour to ask of you.”

Eddie spun around, his curiosity ignited like a spark in a dark room. “Another favor?” What is it?”

Mr. Welton propped himself against the workbench, the morning light streaming in and painting warm shadows across his face.

“So, there’s this thing that popped up in my head, and I could really use your help with it.”

“What sort of thing are we talking about here?” Eddie asked, a twist of anxiety churning in his gut.

“It’s nothing too complicated, I swear,” his dad said, a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth, but it didn’t do much to ease Eddie’s nerves. “Just a little tidbit I think you’ll find interesting.”

Mr. Welton’s smile dimmed just a touch as he bent down beneath the workbench, retrieving a small, intricately designed cage. Within the confines of the cage itself, a lovely songbird flitted about, its radiant feathers shimmering in the soft glow of the light.

“Let this songbird go free,” Mr. Welton said, his voice a mix of kindness and authority. “It’s time for it to spread its wings and soar.”

Eddie paused, a surge of protectiveness washing over him for the tiny creature.

“But... it’s a songbird.” It could totally go missing or end up in a bit of trouble.”

“Songbirds are meant to sing and soar, not be caged,” his father said, the warmth in his voice clashing with the unease bubbling up inside Eddie. “Seriously, just let it slide.”

With a heavy sigh, Eddie stepped forward, gently accepting the cage from his father's grasp. As he opened the cage's door, the songbird paused for a heartbeat, then erupted into the air, its wings a flurry of motion as it ascended into the vastness of the sky, a vibrant splash of colour against the endless blue. Eddie observed its departure, a bittersweet sensation unfurling within his heart.

“And just like that, she is free,” Mr. Welton declared, a spark of triumph dancing in his gaze.

Eddie spun around to face his dad, the heavy cloak of uncertainty still draped over his shoulders.

“Alright, but what's the deal with that?”

Mr. Welton's face transformed into a mask of mischievous gravity.

“Alright, I've got another task for you.”

Mr. Welton then went on digging under the workbench again, he found a bigger, more elaborate cage. The morning light illuminated a gorgeous Fire Falcon in its cage, its plumage shimmering like liquid gold. The bird's ferocious glance fell on Eddie, and he suddenly saw its magnificent majesty.

“Let this one go, too,” Mr. Welton said, his voice playful.

Eddie's eyes went as wide as saucers. “You want me to release the Fire Falcon?” But it's worth a fortune! You can't just let it go!”

Mr. Welton leaned in closer, a glint of mischief dancing in his eyes. “How about I wager you a hundred gold coins?”

“A hundred gold coins?” Eddie found himself caught in a whirlwind of temptation, the thrill of the wager tugging at him while his instincts screamed to safeguard the awe-inspiring beast before him. “But it's a Fire Falcon!”

“Exactly,” Mr. Welton said, a grin spreading across his face like he'd just uncovered a hidden treasure. “This isn't merely about the wager; it's about daring to leap into the unknown.” Consider it a crash course in bravery.”

Eddie paused, a storm of thoughts battling it out in his mind. “But what if it just doesn't return?”

“Well, I guess that's how the universe works,” Mr. Welton said, his eyes unwavering. “Sometimes, you've got to release your grip to discover what treasures await you.”

Eddie let out a reluctant sigh, his head bobbing in agreement as he fought to push down the knot of apprehension twisting in his stomach. “Alright, I'll do it.”

As he drew near the cage, Eddie inhaled deeply, his heart pounds. He opened the cage's door and with a gentle push, urged the Fire Falcon onwards, anticipating its swift ascent into the sky.

Yet, to his astonishment, the falcon stayed resolutely perched within the confines of the cage, its golden eyes locked onto him, as though contemplating the choices before it.

“Come on!” Eddie urged, his heart racing like a runaway chariot on a quest. “You’re meant to soar off into the sky!”

But the Fire Falcon just cocked its head to the side, refusing to budge. Eddie felt a heavy weight settle in his stomach as the truth dawned on him. “No way... this is not happening.”

Mr. Welton let out a hearty laugh, shaking his head in disbelief. “Well, well, well, it seems I’ve come out on top, son.”

Eddie was hit by a wave of disappointment, swirling with anger and confusion like a storm brewing in his chest. “Why not?” Why didn’t it just take off into the sky?

Mr. Welton's expression turned warm as he moved in closer. “Sometimes, Eddie, just like that falcon, we get a little too cosy in our cages. We hesitate to take that leap, even when the chance to escape is staring us in the face.”

Eddie lingered, the disappointment brushing against him like a cool breeze, as he reached for the meticulously arranged ingredients resting on the workbench. The vivid hues of the herbs and raw materials drew his gaze, yet his thoughts wandered, circling back to that moment when the Fire Falcon had stubbornly remained in its cage.

“Thanks for the lesson, Dad,” he said, managing a tight smile as he turned to face his father.

He sensed the words dripped with sweetness, yet beneath the surface, frustration bubbled like a volcano ready to erupt. He wasn’t looking for some fancy metaphor about comfort zones and soaring through the skies—he just needed to find his own way forward.

As he approached the door, Eddie wore a mask of calm, resolute in his mission to keep the irritation simmering just below the surface a secret. “I’ll just take these to the Apothecary,” he said, trying to keep his voice cheerful, even though a storm of irritation brewed inside him. “Appreciate the, um, ‘lesson’.”

Mr. Welton observed his son's silhouette, worry reflected in his eyes. He could perceive the strain in Eddie’s shoulders, the manner in which his jaw clenched tightly. “Eddie,” he called after him, but the young man had already vanished through the door, descending the twisting staircase that spiralled down from the tower.

The lab door creaked shut behind Eddie as Mr. Welton leaned against the workbench, arms folded, watching his boy descend the stairs. His quiet sigh blended with the rich, aromatic alchemical concoctions around him.

“Ah, Edward,” he murmured to himself, shaking his head slightly. “If only you could see what I see.”

Mr. Welton felt a deep ache in his chest, aware that Eddie was ensnared in a tangle of fear and reluctance. His heart ached for his son, longing to share the wisdom he had

known through the years. He grasped, with a profound clarity, the anxieties that tethered souls to the ground, preventing them from taking flight.

“At times, one must allow them to navigate their own path,” he murmured, observing the final sight of Eddie as he faded from sight.

“Do not remain in that cage, son,” he breathed softly, his voice a mere flutter in the air. “A vast realm lies ahead, eager for you to take flight.”

Chapter 5

The darkly lit apothecary was filled with the smell of herbs and oils. Eddie pushed the broom over the hardwood floor, the quiet, rhythmic swish reverberating in the motionless store, a lonely sound in a still universe. The shopfront was bathed in lantern light and a candle's subtle dance on the counter as daylight faded.

Markus had left a while ago, and Lydia had bid her goodbyes hours earlier. Now, it was just Eddie, enveloped in a space that oscillated between a warm embrace and a suffocating silence.

He pushed the broom casually, not noticing the dust and crumbs on the floor. He contemplated the pub conversation. Markus's comments hit hard, unfolding slowly like a dream in the night.

Eddie never considered it that way. Each syllable of Markus's remarks stabbed deeper and had an unanticipated weight in his thinking. Envy? Disappointment? Markus had always been there, able to laugh off Eddie's mistakes with a grin and a joke. But this? This seemed unlike him.

Since that encounter, Markus's frustrated and vulnerable tone continued to loop in his brain over and over like a broken record. Eddie never realised the impact of his decisions and mistakes on others, leaving traces he never considered. His mind kept thinking about it. Had Markus always been that resentful towards him? Watching him miss opportunities Markus could only dream of?

Eddie came to understand that it was never solely about magic. But of Possibility. Achievement. The sort of future that seemed perpetually out of reach for Markus. And Eddie had allowed it all to slip through his fingers, oblivious to the pain it might inflict on those nearest to him.

He glanced up at the shelves, curious. Dried herbs, tinctures, and little vials line the walls like troops waiting for a command. Everything had unfolded as a result of his father's influence—his father's enterprise, his father's aspirations.

His father.

Eddie wiped his fingers on his face to erase the shadowy feeling. Mr. Welton was always a dreamer. He lived with serene conviction, never questioning his decisions and constantly encouraging him to fulfil his full potential.

Eddie momentarily rested on the broom, wondering whether it was the bird metaphor should've meant. This morning, the Blue Songbird flew. However, his look conveyed an underlying emotion as he watched the bird fly into the sky.

It was as if his father had been waiting for Eddie to notice it, to see it as more than just a simple act of freeing a beloved bird. Perhaps it was a sign. A nudge, as Markus had put it. But what was Eddie supposed to do with it?

He shifted his gaze to the counter. The waning candlelight danced softly upon the grain of the wood. It stretches its elongated shadows across the gleaming surface of the wood. The apothecary was a small, tranquil refuge, yet it had transformed into a prison of his own design, its walls closing in around him.

Eddie saw a shadow as he swept the final shopfront window corner. Under the flickering gas light outside, everything seems odd. Looking up, his breath stopped in his chest

A hooded figure stared at the apothecary in the faint light of the gas lamp. Eddie tightened his grasp on the broom handle and slowed. Their stance was too steady and purposeful.

For a moment, Eddie attempted to ignore his sense of unease. It was late. Maybe a late-night wanderer? Is someone going home? Maybe they were fatigued and lost in thought.

He focused back on the sweeping, but the unease didn't let up. There was something about the way the figure stood. The way their presence seemed to linger a little too long. Eddie's eyes flickered back to the shadow beneath the lamplight.

The figure hadn't moved.

Eddie's pulse quickened, but he tried to push the feeling away. "Come on, get a grip, god damn it." he muttered under his breath. He had enough to worry about—his father, the shop, Markus's comment towards him, his own restless thoughts. But still, the figure remained. Silent and unmoving, casting a long shadow on the cobbled street.

Then, without warning, the figure began to move.

Slowly. Methodically. Each stride towards the shop was deliberate and calculated. Eddie's gut wrenched, heart accelerated. The figure vanished. it approached him directly.

Slowly. Methodically. Each stride towards the shop was deliberate and calculated. Eddie's gut wrenched, heart accelerated.

Eddie realised the figure was a woman as it approached. Her dark cloak with a deep hood hid her face. He was mainly impressed by her crimson coat below. Red cloth peeping out from black, like a bloodstain in the night.

Stable, quiet footfall emanated from the lady. Her speed never slowed as she approached.

He told himself it was nothing. Just a passerby, maybe someone with a message or inquiry. But the way she moved, the cold air around her, it wasn't normal. It felt... ominous.

The lady was now at the shop's doorway, a few feet away. Her black cloak flaps in the wind.

The lady raised her brass mahogany staff and tapped it gently against the front glass door. The sound echoed through the quiet shop, deliberate and unhurried—each tap as methodical as her approach.

Eddie hesitated, the broom still in his hand, his body tense, but he forced himself to breathe, to act normal.

“I'm sorry,” Eddie finally said, his voice polite, though his unease tugged at his words. “We're closed. We don't serve customers at this hour.”

The Lady in Red Coat was unfazed. She remained motionless. Her eyes were fixated on Eddie through the glass, the night's shadows hiding her face. But not her frightening glint emerald eyes. Her chin rose slightly. She smiled, as if his reaction delighted her.

“How about an old friend?” she replied.

Her voice was smooth. It laces with an easy familiarity that sent a shiver down Eddie's spine.

Eddie's heart jumped. An old friend? The words were cryptic. Who the hell is she? Someone from his past? A forgotten friend? Eddie doesn't recognise the figure.

A dozen names and faces sprang to his mind, but none suited the intriguing lady before him. The question made him choke on his breath. Does he know her?

Eddie froze. Her coldness lingered between them as she stared at him. He opened his mouth to speak. He wanted to remind her that it was late and he couldn't serve anybody. His instincts kept him back. Her words had an intangible pull that compelled him to allow her in and embrace it.

A sigh escaped his lips, the resistance fading like a fog lifting. “One more order it is,” He muttered to himself.

He turned the lights back on, lighting the apothecary softly. As he lifted the latch and pulled open the door, the storefront echoed its unlocking.

The Lady in Red Coat entered quietly. The hardwood floor creaked when her boots clicked. She studied the room with her glance without speaking.

Eddie returned to the reception table. Leaning on the counter, he folded his hands and watched her. She exuded calm authority, like she knew something he didn't.

Her black, silky cloak trailed after her like a shadow, its edges moving with a subtle charm. Eddie could now see her red coat—bright and brilliant against the dark, flowing softly over her legs and hinting at her exquisite figure—under the cloak.

Her fingers brushed over a glass jar filled with shimmering blue powder. She touches lightly, testing its weight. She held a few fragile vials of rare tinctures and resins. Eddie noticed her deliberate, slow movements. She seemed in control. Eddie was uneasy about a skilled hand examining the potions and elixirs.

As she stopped by a shelf of dried sage and cinnamon sticks, her eyes flicked toward Eddie for the first time, meeting his gaze directly.

“You run quite an establishment here, Mr Welton,” she said, her voice soft, deep and yet cutting through the silence like a blade.

Eddie swallowed hard, reflexively standing himself, seeing the contrast between her grace and his slouching. The chamber seemed heavy as she approached, the apothecary's soft hum quieting. Her footsteps resonated like a pulse, infusing the air with an inexplicable energy that made it electric.

He stammered, his usual cheer faltering under her gaze. “How can I—”

But before he could finish, she raised a gloved hand, and the gracefulness of her movements struck him. “I have come seeking a matter of great significance,” she remarked elegantly.

“What... what are you looking for?” Eddie managed to ask, his heart racing as a mix of curiosity and apprehension bubbled within him.

The Lady in Red Coat approached, her eyes shining. “I am on a quest for that which is truly remarkable, a treasure that dances just beyond the reach of the mundane..” Her eyes scanned the shelves, examining the various vials and jars. “And I hold a firm belief that it may dwell within your very grasp.”

Her grin expanded, expressing enjoyment, but her eyes remained intense. “It appears I have stumbled upon the perfect place. Robert Welton is indeed a figure of some renown, yet my curiosity extends beyond merely his talents.” She approached, her demeanour changing gently as if she were surrounding a valuable information.

Eddie swallowed hard, feeling the tension in the air tighten like a drawn bowstring. “I—I don’t understand. What is it that you need?” he stammered, trying to keep his composure. The thought of secrets swirling in the depths of her cloaked figure made him uneasy. He could hear the distant sound of waves crashing against the shore, a reminder of the normalcy that felt like a world away.

“Perhaps you will soon,” she replied cryptically. The corners of her lips curled into a smile that sent another chill racing through him. “I find myself in possession of a venture that yearns for the deft hand of a master, and I am convinced that the Alchemist residing within these very walls possesses the skill I seek.”

The tension hung thick in the air as the Lady in the Red Coat continued to observe Eddie, a knowing glint in her eye that made him feel even more on edge. A slow smirk played on her lips as if she was savouring a delicious secret that only she could fully comprehend.

“I would like to place an order,” she proclaimed, her voice flowing with a measured grace. “I seek the fabled Elixir of the illustrious Philosopher’s Stone.”

Eddie’s heart sank at the mention of the fabled elixir. “There’s no such thing as the Elixir of the Philosopher’s Stone,” he stammered, his mind racing to process what she was asking. Even the existence of the Philosopher’s Stone was a long-standing myth, its origins shrouded in ambiguity and legend. “I’m sorry, but we don’t have it,” he said, trying to keep his tone polite but firm.

The Lady drew nearer, her gaze sharpening with a flicker of intrigue, as curiosity stirred within her heart. “Pray tell, what grants you such unwavering confidence in its nonexistence?”

“Because it’s just a myth,” Eddie replied, his voice trembling as uncertainty gnawed at him. “It’s never been proven to exist in any real form.”

“Is that indeed the case?” She pressed forth, her smile broadening.

Eddie nodded, feeling the heat rise to his cheeks. He wished he could stand taller, and appear more confident, but her presence felt overwhelming.

Then, without a flicker of gaze averted, the Lady drew nearer still. “Pray, Dost thou know who I verily am?”

Eddie froze, caught off guard by her question. He glanced at the intricate embroidery of her cloak, the vibrant red of her coat, the glimmer of her golden buttons, and the staff she held, which seemed to pulse with an aura of authority. As he took in the details, he felt a shiver run down his spine.

At that moment, everything clicked into place, the pieces of the puzzle coming together in a whirlwind of realisation. “You’re a Master Alchemist.”

As the tension in the air thickened, The Lady in Red Coat reached up and slowly lowered her hood. The dim light of the apothecary illuminated her features. It reveals a familiar face that makes Eddie’s heart skip a beat. Her short, bright red hair framed her face perfectly. Glinting like polished copper in the warm light. High cheekbones accentuated her fair skin, and her striking emerald green eyes sparkled with a mischievous glint.

“Catherine?” he exclaimed, his voice a mix of disbelief and confusion.

Her elvish ears peeked out from beneath her hair. It adds an ethereal quality to her already captivating appearance. She wore a mischievous smile. One that transformed the atmosphere from ominous to delightfully playful. “Surprise!” she said, her tone shifting. “Did you really think I was an assassin? Perchance just a very dramatic alchemist?”

Eddie blinked in realisation, laughter bubbling up despite the earlier tension. “I swear, every alchemist I’ve met has to act mysterious, shrouded in allegory and cryptic hints, I’m fucking done.”

Catherine chuckled, her eyes sparkling with humour. “It’s part of the job description, you know. How else shall we sustain the air of mystery that beckons us forth?”

Before he could respond, she stepped forward and enveloped him in a warm hug. “Look at you! You’ve grown so big! The last time I saw you, you were half this size!”

Eddie couldn’t help but laugh, the tension evaporating like mist in the morning sun. “I’m still the same old me, just a bit taller.”

“How unkind of thee to let slip the memory of your beloved aunt!” she teased, giving him a mock pout as she stepped back to assess him with a playful glint in her eyes.

As Catherine stepped back from the embrace, still chuckling at Eddie’s playful jab, the door to the apothecary swung open once more. In bounded Torrie, Eddie’s little sister, her curls bouncing with every step and her face alight with excitement.

“Catherine!” Torrie exclaimed, her voice full of delight as she practically launched herself into a hug.

“Well, well, if it isn’t my favourite niece!” Catherine announced with exaggerated flair, her light blue eyes twinkling with mischief. With a flourish, she spun Torrie around in a grand gesture before gently placing her back on the ground, tousling Torrie’s hair.

“You won’t believe it! I spotted Aunt Catherine’s carriage while I was heading home from Aella Academy!” Torrie jumped in, her excitement practically bubbling over. “So I caught a lift! Catherine totally said I could!”

“Torrie!” Eddie let out an exasperated groan, pinching the bridge of his nose. “You really shouldn’t—”

“And I totally did!” Torrie wrapped things up with a victorious grin. “Catherine even told me what to get for snacks later!” She made a face at Eddie, sticking her tongue out before sprinting towards the back room, her laughter echoing in the air behind her. “I’ll stash them in the kitchen!”

Catherine let out a laugh, her head shaking in disbelief. “She’s got more energy than a fire-breathing dragon on a rampage.”

Just as Eddie was about to respond, the door swung open once more, unveiling Mr. and Mrs. Welton.

Mrs. Welton’s eyes sparkled with delight at the sight of Catherine. “Catherine!” she called out, her voice filled with warmth and affection as she rushed forward to wrap her in a loving embrace.

Mrs. Welton stepped back, “You appear to have hardly aged a day, just as ever.” It’s utterly infuriating.

“That’s exactly why you hold the title of my favourite younger sister,” Catherine replied, her smile full of mischief. “I daresay you carry your seventy years with a grace that surpasses anyone I have ever encountered.”

Mrs. Welton rolled her eyes good-naturedly. “Flattery will get you nowhere, Cathy.”

“Oh, it always brought me treats when we were young,” Catherine replied with a playful tone.

As the two women shared their laughter, Mr. Welton drew near to Catherine, a grin spreading across his face. “Ah, Catherine! Still as keen as ever, I see.”

“And yet, here you are, still on your feet.” Catherine smiled, “It seems that the potions is working its magic on your joints, Robert.” Catherine remarked with a playful lift of her eyebrow.

Mr. Welton chuckled. “Or maybe I’m just that stubborn.”

“Oh, do not be so humble. You were truly one of my most unforgettable apprentices,” Catherine remarked, a playful glint in her eye. “I recall the time you mishandled that levitation potion, almost sending the cauldron soaring through the ceiling.” She crossed her arms and fixed him with a pointed gaze, yet the corners of her mouth betrayed her with the hint of a smile. “And don’t think for a moment that I’m unaware you did it intentionally to catch Alyssa’s attention.”

Mr. Welton feigned innocence, shrugging his shoulders in mock surrender. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, please.” Catherine rolled her eyes. “You orchestrated the explosion with such precision that she would come rushing to our aid. And do you know who had to clean up the mess afterward? Me!”

Mrs. Welton chuckled softly, her hand delicately covering her mouth. “Hold on, is that the reason the cauldron found itself lodged halfway into the ceiling?” I had always believed it to be merely one of his typical, awkward instances.”

“I had to make sure she noticed me somehow,” Mr. Welton admitted with a sheepish grin. “And it worked, didn’t it, Alyssa?” He glanced at Mrs. Welton, his expression softening.

“It did,” she confessed, a gentle smile gracing her lips. “Yet, you felt it necessary to explode the brewing room to capture my notice.”

Catherine let out a huff, though it was more amused than irritated. “You used *me* as your unwitting accomplice in your courtship shenanigans. The nerve!” She shook her head dramatically. “I should’ve charged you extra for those lessons.”

“And yet,” Mr. Welton said, his grin widening, “you still wrote me a glowing recommendation to the guild after I finished.”

Catherine waved a dismissive hand, though a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “Only because I felt sorry for Alyssa. I figured she deserved a husband who could at least brew a half-decent potion without destroying half the brewing room.”

The playful banter between them drew laughter from Mrs. Welton, who nudged Catherine lightly. “Admit it, you’re proud of him. He turned out alright in the end.”

“Proud?” Catherine exclaimed with feigned outrage. “I felt a wave of relief wash over me at the thought of not having to contend with him once he had graduated. You cannot fathom the countless moments I wished to transform him into a fish and set him free in the vast ocean.”

The room filled with lighthearted laughter, the bonds of friendship and family weaving together like the strands of a well-crafted spell. For Eddie, watching them interact felt like a reminder of the strength that came from those connections—something he didn’t often realize he needed.

Chapter 6

The Welton’s family dining room brimmed with a nostalgic energy. Its rustic charm is accentuated by the dim, flickering light of the cast-iron chandelier. The room was alive with the soft murmur of conversation. Clinking of utensils against earthenware plates fills the room as the conversation goes. Fire crackled in the hearth, casting playful shadows that seemed to dance to the rhythm of voices blending together in warm familiarity.

Eddie sat at his usual spot, his gaze drifting to the framed portrait above the hutch. He sees a younger version of himself smiling beside his parents. His thoughts were a jumble, caught somewhere between the present and the past. It felt surreal to have his aunt Catherine here after so long, joining them at the family table.

Across from Eddie sat Catherine. Her short, uneven red hair shimmered in the firelight, and her emerald green eyes—eerily similar to Eddie’s—sparkled with the humour that always seemed ready to burst into mischief.

“It’s been, what, fifteen years since I last came through Weshaven?” Catherine mused, leaning back in her chair and shooting Alyssa a playful glance. “Barely feels like a moment.”

Alyssa raised an eyebrow, her lips twitching into a smirk. “Fifteen years is hardly a moment, Cathy. Only an Elf like you would think that’s a short time.”

“Oh, come now, Ally.” Catherine replied with a mock huff. “You make it sound like I abandoned you!”

“You did!” Alyssa protested, folding her arms. “You vanished to chase adventure while I was stuck here, growing wrinkles and silver hair.” She gestured dramatically at herself before leaning forward with a grin. “Meanwhile, you look exactly the same as you did when I was twelve.”

“Perks of being the responsible older sister,” Catherine shot back with a wide smile.

“Responsible?” Alyssa laughed, the sound rich and familiar. “You call skipping town for years on end ‘responsible’? If memory serves, you’ve been running from responsibility for as long as I can remember.”

Catherine flashed a fond smile. “I wasn’t running. I was traveling. Learning. And teaching, thank you very much.”

“Oh, teaching?” Alyssa leaned in, clearly enjoying herself. “You mean picking up random kids off the streets and dragging them along on your whirlwind adventures?”

Robert, who had been listening with an amused expression, decided to interject. “Sounds familiar. Pretty sure I was one of those random kids once.”

“Exactly, Robert!” Catherine said breezily, though her smile widened. “They’re lucky to have me. My last student, for instance—a kid from the school somewhere in King’s Grave—turned out to be the princess of a royal family living there. She insisted on following me everywhere. ‘Teach me this, Master Catherine,’ ‘Show me that.’” Catherine mimicked the princess’s voice with exaggerated drama, throwing her arms in the air. “Honestly, she was so pushy.”

“And yet, you let her,” Alyssa said knowingly.

“Of course, I did,” Catherine admitted with a shrug. “She had potential. Couldn’t exactly say no, could I?”

Robert, who had been quietly enjoying their banter, chimed in. “So, what brings you to Weshaven this time, Catherine? We both know you don’t just pop in for family reunions.”

Catherine hesitated for a moment before smirking. “You know me too well. My last lead brought me here. I’m looking for... something.”

Robert immediately caught the evasive tone and leaned forward, her eyes narrowing playfully. “Something? That’s suspiciously vague, even for you.”

Catherine waved a hand, brushing off the comment. “Just something important. And, before you ask, yes, I made up some excuse to leave the princess behind. She’ll survive without me for a while.”

Alyssa shook her head, chuckling. “Still dodging your responsibilities, I see. Some things never change.”

“I call it delegating, Alyssa.” Catherine corrected, her grin brightening. “But I’ll have you know, I’m quite responsible when it counts.”

Alyssa snorted, leaning back in her chair. “Sure you are, Cathy. Sure you are.”

The warmth of their sisterly bond filled the room, their teasing banter weaving a tapestry of history and affection. Eddie watched the exchange with a small smile, realising just how much Catherine's presence brought out a side of his mother he rarely saw—playful, nostalgic, and full of life.

"Aunt Catherine, Aunt Catherine!" Torrie piped, "What exactly did you teach the princess?" She said, breaking into the conversation. Leaning forward, her wide eyes brimming with curiosity.

"I was teacher her Alchemy," Catherine said, her tone shifting into that of a natural tutor. "She had potential, even if she didn't always have the patience."

"Oooh, What's Alchemy?" Torrie asked, her head tilting. "And what makes it different from other kinds of magic?"

The opportunity to teach shone in Catherine's sparkling light blue eyes as she leaned back. "Ah, an excellent question! Let me explain. Let's take Bardry for example, Bardry is about amplifying what already exists—like making a whisper echo like thunder, or turning a small flame into a roaring fire. Enchantments, on the other hand, infuse an object with something new—like making a sword unbreakable or a cloak resistant to flames."

"Alchemy is different." She leaned forward, eyes locking onto Torrie as she continued. "It doesn't just amplify or add—it transforms. It takes what already exists and changes its very essence. A stone can become iron. A tree can become medicine. Even people... can become a better version of themselves."

Catherine paused, letting the thought linger, then smiled. "Alchemy sees potential in everything and everyone. It believes that anything can become something else, something better, with the right understanding and effort."

Catherine's voice broke through his thoughts. "Talking about Alchemy, Torrie," she said brightly, her light blue eyes landing warmly on Eddie. "Your big brother Edward was an exceptional Alchemist back at Aella, if I'm not mistaken."

The room stilled. Torrie's curiosity faded into quiet confusion, and Alyssa exchanged a quick glance with Robert, her expression unreadable. Even the crackle of the fireplace seemed to recede into the background.

Oblivious to the shift in atmosphere, Catherine continued, her tone full of admiration. "Your mother wrote me the sweetest letter years ago, detailing all your accomplishments. Winning the regional alchemy competitions, consistently ranking at the top of his class..." Catherine's voice was filled with pride, her admiration genuine. "She even said the headmaster personally complimented his work! Quite the prodigy, weren't you, Eddie?!"

Eddie's gaze remained fixed on his plate, the stew untouched. The praise, though meant kindly, cut deeper than Catherine could have known.

The dining room fell silent. Torrie's wide eyes darted between Eddie and Catherine, and Alyssa's smile faltered, her hands tightening slightly around her fork. Robert cleared his throat, but even he seemed unsure of what to say.

Alyssa cleared her throat gently, reaching out to refill Catherine's glass of water as if to shift the conversation. "Catherine, why don't you tell us more about King's Grave? The princess sounds like quite a handful," she said, her tone light but pointed.

Catherine blinked, glancing between Eddie and her sister-in-law. Slowly, understanding dawned on her face. "Oh... of course," she said quickly, adjusting her posture. "Well, the princess has been my most persistent student yet. She has this way of..."

The conversation shifted after that. It turns into lighter topics. Catherine's latest travel destinations, stories of Torrie's misadventures at school, and Mr Welton's stubborn insistence on using outdated brewing methods. With each burst of laughter, the tension lessened.

With his appetite vanished, Eddie remained fixated on his plate. The warmth of the firelight on his face felt suffocating now. He clenched his fists under the table, willing himself not to react, but his pulse thundered in his ears.

Tonight, it felt like two Eddie's were sitting at the table. One was the Eddie from the past, the eager apprentice who aspired to be worthy of his family's legacy, of the alchemical tradition. The other was the present Eddie, who sat in silence. The one drifting through life without purpose. Chained to a destiny he could no longer bring himself to accept. Then came Catherine. Smiling at him with the same admiration and encouragement she'd always had. Unaware that the nephew she thought she knew was long gone.

"Eddie?" Catherine's voice brought him back to the present, her eyes searching his face with gentle concern. "How have you been? It's been so long... Oh, I was meaning to ask—do you still have that recommendation letter from the Sage's Institute Scholarships? The one you got after winning that national alchemical competition in your second year at Aella? Are you thinking of taking the tests now that you're in your twenties?"

The question struck Eddie like a blow, his pulse quickening. He forced his grip to stay loose around the spoon in his hand. Catherine didn't know. She couldn't know. To her, he was still the prodigy, the star student destined for greatness.

"Uh... yeah," Eddie said after a beat too long, his voice steady but hollow. "I'm... considering it."

Catherine's face lit up with excitement, her smile wide and brimming with pride. "Oh, Eddie, that's wonderful! Do you know which university you're planning to apply to? Concordia? Pinesworth? Alikria?" Eagerly, she leaned forward, her eyes sparkling. "Or maybe Edenfield? I remember you talking about it so much when you were younger."

Edenfield.

The name landed like a stone in Eddie's stomach. His chest tightened, and for a fleeting moment, he thought he might not be able to respond. Edenfield was everything he had ever wanted—everything he had worked for. The hours of study, the competitions, the

sleepless nights poring over alchemical formulas—it had all been for Edenfield. And then it had been ripped away.

But Catherine was watching him, her smile so full of hope and pride it made his skin crawl. He couldn't bear to shatter that image. So he lied again.

"Yeah," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "I've always wanted to go there."

Catherine beamed, her joy filling the room. "I knew it! You were born for a place like Edenfield. The professors will be lining up to have you in their classes. Oh, Eddie, you're going to do amazing things. I just know it."

Her words, so full of praise and confidence, cut deeper than any insult could have. Eddie's heart felt heavy, weighed down by the growing tangle of lies.

He wanted to tell Catherine to stop, to let it go, but he couldn't. Instead, he forced another smile, nodding along as she continued to gush about his potential. The room felt stifling, the air thick with unspoken truths.

"Thanks, Catherine," he murmured, unable to muster anything more.

If only she knew the truth. Aella Academy was gone; there were no more late-night transmutation projects or intricate alchemical theories to explore. Just him, trapped in a tiny Weshaven apothecary, crafting potions for some local fishermen. He wasn't the promising young Alchemist anymore, the one who had wowed his classmates and professors with his brilliant mind.

No, if they could see him now, they wouldn't be filled with awe. They would see only shame, disappointment. He wasn't an Alchemist anymore, not in the way he once dreamed. He was just a potion maker—a far cry from the future he had imagined in the grand halls of Aella.

It was peculiar; Sitting here with his family, he felt both more connected and more isolated than ever before. Like a ghost trapped in the shell of his former life.

Eddie felt Torrie's gaze burn into the side of his face like a spear through a knight's armour. He didn't need to look up to know what she was thinking. He could sense it — the quiet understanding, the pity, and that other emotion he couldn't quite stomach: disappointment.

The worst part was that it wasn't the cold, judgmental kind of disappointment you'd get from a stranger. It was softer, but more cutting, the kind you'd get from someone who believed in you once and had watched you fall.

Eddie stared down at his plate. He pushes the last remnants of his meal as Catherine's voice fills the room. She was telling a story. Something lighthearted, about one of the latest distant towns she visits, oblivious to the truth. Still caught up in the illusion of who she thought he was. He had let her believe it — that he was still the same promising student she once knew. He was just taking some time off to work with his father before diving back into his magical studies.

But Torrie knew better.

He noticed her watching him from the corner of his eye; her brow was furrowed, and her mouth was set in a tight line. She knew the truth. How Eddie had come back home, broken and ashamed, how he'd withdrawn into himself, abandoning the magic that once defined him. She had seen it all happen, step by step, as he slipped further and further into this empty shell he'd become.

Now she was watching him lie to Catherine — the very person he used to idolise.

What must Torrie think of him now?

He stole a glance at Torrie, and for a moment, their eyes met. Hers were full of unspoken words. It brims with that same question she'd silently asked him a hundred times: Why don't you just tell her the truth?

Eddie's gaze dropped to his lap. Because I can't, he wanted to say. Because I'm not ready. Because I'm a coward. He couldn't bear to lose the last shred of admiration Catherine still held for him. He couldn't face the look on her face if she knew the whole truth. That he hadn't just lost his place at Aella Academy, he'd lost himself.

"—and I was thinking, Eddie," Catherine said, breaking into his thoughts, "Maybe we could spend some time together this week. You could show me what you've been working on — some of your own projects, if you have time. You always had such a knack for transmutational work."

The praise felt like a punch to the gut. He managed a strained smile, his throat tightening. "I... haven't really been working on much lately," he mumbled. "Just helping out at the apothecary. I've been... busy with that."

"Oh, that's perfectly fine!" Catherine's smile widened, still radiating that same encouraging warmth that used to light up his world when he was younger. "You've got plenty of time. You're still young. The important thing is that you're putting in the effort — that you're still trying."

A sudden dryness overcame Eddie's mouth; he swallowed. He felt a wave of shame wash over him. Still trying? He wasn't trying at all. He was stuck, drifting, hiding away from the very thing he once loved. How could she not see it? Or maybe she just didn't want to see it. Maybe she was holding on to who he used to be, just like he was.

He had to get out of there.

"I'm sorry, Catherine, Mom, Dad, Torrie," he said abruptly, pushing back his chair and standing up. His legs felt unsteady, and he gripped the back of his chair to keep from swaying. "I think I'll turn in for the night. I've... I've been up since dawn, helping Dad. It's been a long day."

There was a flicker of surprise on Catherine's face, but she quickly recovered, nodding understandingly. "Of course, Eddie. You've been working so hard." Her eyes softened, her smile filled with pride. "I'm so proud of you. You've always been so diligent and so responsible. You're doing great."

The words hit him like a dagger to the chest, sharp and cruel. He wanted to tell her to stop. Stop being proud of me. Stop thinking I'm someone I'm not. But the words stayed lodged in his throat, suffocated by the guilt that threatened to choke him.

"Thanks," he murmured, barely able to get the word out. He turned away quickly, his shoulders hunched as if trying to shield himself from the weight of her praise.

As he left the dining room, he felt Torrie's eyes on his back, heavy and piercing. He knew she was disappointed — disappointed in his cowardice, in his inability to tell the truth, in the way he was letting Catherine believe in a lie. And that disappointment hurt more than anything Catherine could have said.

He reached the stairs and paused for a moment, his hand gripping the bannister tightly. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. The guilt, the shame, the pain — it all swirled inside him, a dark, suffocating storm.

He was a liar. A coward. He was letting down everyone who ever believed in him.

And yet... he couldn't stop. He couldn't tell the truth.

Not yet.

Chapter 7

Eddie hunched over his desk, his headset snug over his ears, listening intently to the static crackling through the earpieces. His self-made radio—a tangle of gears, rune-etched components, and salvaged circuitry—sat before him, flickering weakly as he prodded at its inner workings with a screwdriver.

The device had been in perfect condition until a few days ago, when he'd lost his balance and sent both himself and the radio crashing to the floor. Now, after hours of painstaking adjustments, he was determined to get it working again.

He turned the dial with precise, deliberate movements, the static shifting in pitch, but still nothing recognizable came through. With a grunt, he adjusted a rune-etched copper coil, pressing it into place with the tip of his screwdriver. The blue light on the radio wavered, then stabilized.

Then—

Bzzt—crackle—shhhh—

Something different. A faint distortion, something buried deep within the noise. Eddie's fingers tightened around the radio's frame as he slowly tuned the frequency. The sound wavered in and out, shifting between static and—

A voice.

It was distant, barely above a whisper, but unmistakably human. Eddie's pulse quickened. He had tapped into a frequency! He leaned in closer, carefully adjusting the rune alignment, his breath held—

BAM!

The door swung open, slamming against the wall.

“Eddie!”

Eddie flinched, the screwdriver slipping from his grasp. The radio let out a sharp *whine* before the voice disintegrated into a wall of static. Gone.

“...Damn it.”

Torrie peeked inside, clutching a thick, leather-bound book to her chest. Her twin tails bounced slightly as she hurried up to his desk, her huge round glasses reflecting the morning light. “Can you teach me Alchemy?”

Eddie sighed, barely looked up, too focused on his broken radio. “Why not ask Catherine, Torrie?” He waved a hand vaguely. “She’s a Master Alchemist. And an elf. She’s a million times better at this stuff than I am.”

“She’s out with Mom and Dad,” Torrie said, stepping closer. “They went into town, and I’ve still got a few hours before school.”

Eddie muttered something unintelligible as he prodded a rune-etched component with his screwdriver. Torrie, undeterred, plopped herself onto his bed.

“Come on, Eddie! I just got my textbooks and wand! And I wanna learn something cool before class!” She swung her legs impatiently, staring at him expectantly. “Just the basics! Please?”

Eddie sighed, rubbing his face with his free hand. “Torrie—”

“Pleeease?” She leaned forward, her big eyes practically doubling in size behind her glasses.

Eddie groaned, finally setting down his tools. “Fine. But just the basics.”

Torrie let out a triumphant cheer as Eddie shook his head, already regretting his decision.

-0-

The curtains diffused the morning light, creating a warm ambiance in the cosy living room of the Welton household. The house was quieter than usual—no bustling activity from the apothecary or the usual scent of herbal potions drifting from the brewing room. The usual hum of the apothecary was absent, leaving only the two of the siblings in the house for the moment.

The living room was quiet, save for the soft *clink* of a small vial being set onto the wooden table. Inside, a globule of shimmering Quicksilver shifted lazily, reflecting the morning light in liquid ripples. Torrie sat on the edge of her seat, her new Alchemy textbook spread open beside her, eyes gleaming with anticipation.

“So,” she said, tapping the assignment page. “On the first Chapter the task is to Change the Quicksilver from liquid to solid. How do I do that?”

Eddie leaned back in his chair, arms crossed. “Well, before you even think about manipulating it, you need to understand *how* it changes.”

Torrie frowned. “What do you mean how?”

Eddie picked up the vial, tilting it so the Quicksilver pooled to one side. “Alchemy works because we understand how materials are structured. Every substance exists in

one of four fundamental states that an Alchemist can manipulate. Think of them like different forms of the same thing.”

He held up a finger. “First, Solid. It’s stable, structured, and holds its shape.”

A second finger. “Then, Liquid. Like this Quicksilver, it flows and adapts, but still has mass.”

A third finger. “Gas. Unstable, hard to control, spreads quickly.”

And finally, his pinky. “And lightning, or Plasma. The most chaotic, the hardest to transmute, but the most powerful in raw energy.”

Torrie’s eyes widened at that last one. “Wait—*lightning* counts as a state of matter?”

Eddie smirked. “Yeah, where else can you lump lightnings to?”

Torrie huffed. “Okay, okay. So how do I actually change Quicksilver’s state?”

Eddie grabbed a piece of chalk and started sketching on the wooden surface. A circular pattern took shape—rings of symbols and interwoven lines forming a precise geometric array.

“This is a Transmutation Circle,” Eddie explained. “An Alchemist doesn’t just *will* something to change like a Wizard. We are physically telling it how it should change. A properly drawn Transmutation Circle acts like a bridge between the material world and the Arcane Realm.”

Torrie nodded, watching intently. Then, after a moment of thought, she asked, “What is the Arcane Realm, exactly?”

Eddie exhaled, tapping the chalk against the floor. “That’s... complicated. Someone in Conjunction or Illusion would probably be able to explain it better. They deal with it more directly.”

“From what I’ve heard,” Eddie frowned slightly, trying to recall what little he knew. “It’s a place where time is a place. Like, you couldn’t just walk through it. That’s where all sorts of spectral creatures live, and where magic is drawn from.”

Torrie’s brows furrowed. “So it’s like another dimension?”

“Sort of. It’s said to overlap with our world—the Material Realm—but no one really knows how. Some people think you could step into it if you found the right place, but I wouldn’t try.” He shrugged. “Not my area of expertise. I just know that Alchemy communicates with it. The Arcane Realm makes the transmutation happen.”

Torrie nodded, watching intently as he added markings within the rings.

“For this exercise, you’d need to break the Quicksilver down at a fundamental level—understand its structure, its bonds, its potential for shifting states.” He tapped the chalk against the center of the circle. “Then, by channeling magic through the circle, you *command* the Arcane to rearrange those bonds—turning liquid to solid, or back again.”

Torrie stared at the glowing lines of the circle, excitement bubbling up. “So... can I try?”

Eddie gave a half-smile and slid the chalk toward her. “Go for it.”

Torrie straightened her back, reaching into her satchel with an eager glint in her eyes. She pulled out a small wooden box, its surface embossed with the Aella Academy crest. She lifted the lid, revealing a pristine wand nestled in velvet lining. It was brand new—smooth, polished, and untouched by use.

She picked it up, running her fingers along the lacquered wood. It was a standard-issue wand from Aella Academy—nothing special, mass-produced for students. The polished surface gleamed faintly in the morning light, reflecting her excitement.

But to Eddie, it was just reminder of the past. He had once owned the same kind of wand, back when things were simpler.

Pushing aside the memory, Eddie watched as Torrie tapped the wand against the transmutation circle.

Nothing.

She frowned, furrowing her brows in concentration. With a sharp breath, she tried again.

This time, a faint white glow pulsed from the circle... but then it fizzled out like a dying ember.

Eddie barely contained his chuckle, but the slight shake of his shoulders gave him away.

Torrie turned to him, eyes narrowing. “What?”

“No, Nothing,” he said, biting back his grin. “You’re doing great.”

She pouted. “You’re *lying*.”

Eddie leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Alright, alright. Tell me—do you still have that ring I gave you a few years ago?”

Torrie blinked. “You mean *your* heirloom ring?”

Eddie nodded, “Yeah, that one.”

With a curious look, Torrie reached under her sweater, pulling out a thin silver chain. Dangling at the end was the ring—a simple band of dark metal, faintly etched with intricate alchemical symbols.

Eddie let out a small breath of relief. “You kept it well.”

“Of course, I did,” Torrie said, holding it up. “But... why?”

Eddie took the ring gently from her grasp, turning it between his fingers. “Your wand’s fine for spellcasting, but it’ll be different for Alchemy. The ring will help focus your magic—make channeling the Arcane much easier.”

Torrie hesitated, then nodded. She slipped the ring onto her index finger. It was far too big for her—heavy, oversized—but she clenched her fist, determined.

Then, something changed.

The transmutation circle pulsed with a deep green light, arcs of energy crackling through the etched symbols.

The Quicksilver in the vial trembled. Then, as if responding to an invisible force, it rose—slowly at first, then faster—solidifying into jagged crystalline peaks.

Torrie gasped. “I—I *did it!*”

She turned to Eddie, beaming.

Eddie smirked. “Told you so.”

Torrie let out an excited laugh, fists clenched in triumph. She had just performed her *first transmutation*.

Eddie laughed under his breath. The silence between them lingered for a moment, broken only by the soft hum of the fan and the rustling of Torrie’s broom.

Then Torrie spoke, her tone more curious than teasing. “Hey, Eddie...”

“Hmm?”

“Why’d you give me the ring?”

Eddie froze in his seat. The question hung in the air like a weight, heavier than the smell of burnt copper. He set the cloth down, avoiding Torrie’s gaze.

“You never told me,” she continued, her voice quieter now. “I mean, it’s your family’s heirloom, right? From your *real* family.”

Eddie exhaled, his hand tightening around the edge of the table. “Yeah, it is.”

Torrie stopped sweeping, leaning on the broom as she watched him. “So why me?”

Torrie was perched on the armrest of the couch, still fiddling with the jade-silver ring. She twirled it around her finger, her gaze thoughtful.

Eddie glanced at the silver-jade ring on Torrie’s finger as she turned it, the green stone catching the light.

“You’ll use them more than I will,” Eddie said, his tone casual, though there was an edge of finality to it. “You’re just starting in Aella Academy. You’ll need all the help you can get.”

Torrie tilted her head, her eyes narrowing. “But why don’t *you* need it?”

The question was so simple, so direct, that it caught Eddie off guard. Momentarily, he just stared at the textbook on the table, as though it held the answer.

Torrie leaned forward, her tone still curious but now laced with something deeper.

“What do you mean, Eddie? Why don’t you use it anymore?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it again, the words sticking in his throat.

“I just... don’t, alright?” he finally said, his voice quieter than usual.

Torrie frowned, unsatisfied. “That’s not an answer.”

Eddie ran a hand through his silver hair, the gesture betraying his frustration. “It’s complicated, Torrie.”

“Then un-complicate it,” she shot back, her tone sharper now. “You were amazing at Alchemy. The teachers at Aella Academy said so. So why—” She stopped herself, hesitating.

The room felt smaller, the air heavier, even with the window open and the fan whirring. Eddie leaned back against the table, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Torrie... I don’t think you’d understand,” he said finally, his voice low.

Torrie stood, her expression a mix of defiance and hurt. “Then make me.”

After a moment, he managed a half-hearted smile. “It’s because I’m focusing on potion-making now. You know, that doesn’t really use magic much.”

Torrie raised an eyebrow, unconvinced. “Really? Potion-making doesn’t use magic much?”

Eddie chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck. “Well, it’s true. You don’t need fancy transmutations for chopping herbs or boiling cauldrons, you know?”

Torrie crossed her arms, her expression skeptical. “Eddie, you’re terrible at lying. You know that, right?”

Before she could press further, the front door creaked open.

“Eddie?” Markus called from the doorway.

He stepped inside, holding the edge of the doorframe with one hand and looking flustered. “Do you have the key to the shop? It’s opening time, and I can’t find it anywhere.”

Relieved, Eddie slumped his shoulders, then straightened, taking the opportunity. “Oh, uh, yeah, I think I’ve got it.” He patted his pockets with exaggerated enthusiasm, already making his way toward the door. “Let me check.”

Torrie watched him go, her eyes narrowing. “Eddie...” she started, but he cut her off.

“I’ll be right back!” he said over his shoulder, his tone too bright, too eager. “Markus and I need to get the storefront sorted.”

Eddie was just about to step out the door, a mix of relief and escape flooding through him, when Torrie’s voice cut through the air.

“Eddie?”

He froze, his hand on the doorframe, the cool wood under his fingertips feeling heavier than before. He turned back to see her standing in the doorway, holding something in her hand.

Torrie's fingers were wrapped around the chains, and Eddie's heirloom ring—engraved with symbols of his family—rested on top. She was offering it back to him, the delicate metal glinting in the light.

"Here," Torrie said, her voice small but firm. "Take it back. It's yours. They are meant to be yours."

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Torrie's eyes were steady, piercing his green eyes, as though trying to read something he wasn't saying. Eddie felt a strange knot tighten in his chest. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words stuck in his throat.

Then, with a deep breath, he smiled—a soft, forced thing that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"No," Eddie said quietly, his voice almost lost in the air between them. "Keep it. It's better suited for you than me."

Torrie's brows furrowed, a flash of confusion in her expression. She didn't argue, as if accepting the weight of his decision. Slowly, she closed her fingers around the ring once more, her grip firm and determined.

Eddie gave her one last glance, a final, fleeting look that held everything they both left unsaid, then turned away, slipping out the door and into the early morning light.

He walked, his steps quick and purposeful, as if the moment with Torrie had never happened. As he passed the familiar sights of Weshaven, his thoughts shifted back to his routine—The Apothecary, his work, the things that didn't ask him to explain anything.

The weight of the ring was no longer in his pocket, but he could still feel it, a reminder he had left behind.

And just like that, he lost himself in the rhythm of his day.

Chapter 8

The day blurred into the same dull monotony as always. Eddie filled orders for medicines and remedies, extracted ingredients, and stocked the shelves—just as he had for years. The routine never changed.

That evening, the glass front door of Welton's Apothecary clicked shut, the chime of the bell overhead ringing softly as Eddie locked up. He let out a slow breath, stretching his shoulders.

"You're not coming to the Swordfish Pub?" Eddie asked, glancing at Markus, who was securing the last of the wooden shutters.

"Sorry, Eddie." Markus sighed, rolling out his shoulders. "My old man's back has been acting up again. I need to help him out."

"Well, alright then. Can't be helped." Eddie huffed but nodded. "Give Mr. Fletcher my best. If he needs anything from the Apothecary, just take it."

Markus smiled. "Thanks, Ed, but I've already brewed him a custom remedy. Figured I can't rely on you forever."

Eddie blinked in surprise, then let out a small, approving chuckle. "Look at you, making your own remedies. That's solid work. Tell your old man to rest up, yeah? Maybe stay off the sea for a while."

Markus snorted. "You know that's never happening. The sea could swallow him whole, and he'd still find a way back onto a boat." He adjusted his satchel and gave a tired grin. "At least I can help with the back pain."

Eddie smirked. "That's something, at least."

Markus clapped him on the shoulder. "See you tomorrow, Ed."

With that, he turned and headed down the road, his silhouette vanishing into the evening fog.

Eddie watched as Markus's silhouette grew smaller, swallowed by the dip of the road down the hill. Now, it was just him.

A sharp breeze rolled in from the sea, cutting through his clothes with its usual evening chill. The distant cries of seagulls mixed with the howling wind, carrying the scent of salt and damp wood.

Eddie sighed, shoving his hands into his pockets as he stepped onto the quiet street. The last traces of the workday lingered in the air—dim lights in shop windows, the occasional murmur of voices. But the town was winding down.

And so, alone with the cold and the fading bustle, Eddie made his way toward the pub.

The sign bearing the name Swordfish Pub swayed in the sea breeze as Eddie neared the pub, Fishermen, Merchants, and all sorts of people began to gather to cool off in the evening, including Eddie.

He opened the door, and entered the welcoming yet warm chaos within.

Wood-panelled walls adorned with fishing nets surrounds him. Mounted fish and faded nautical charts decorated its walls. Roaring fire crackled in the hearth, casting flickering shadows across the bustling room. A comforting wave of grilled fish and strong ale washed over him.

“Well, well, if it ain’t young Welton!” the barman greeted as Eddie approached the counter, wiping down a tankard. “Come to grace us with your vast wisdom on herbs and potions, have you?”

“More like blessing myself with a pint,” Eddie chuckled, settling onto a stool.

“The usual, then?” The barman grinned.

“You know me.” Eddie smirked.

With a practiced motion, the barman filled a tankard to the brim and slid it across the counter. “There you go.”

“Cheers, mate.” Eddie said, taking a sip.

“Hard day at the Apothecary?”

“Something like that,” Eddie muttered, setting his drink down.

The barman leaned on the counter. “You know, you can always talk to me about that kinda thing. Lightens the load. People come sit here to do that from time to time.”

Eddie snorted. “What are you, my therapist now?”

“My rates are cheaper.”

Eddie let out a laugh. “Right. I’ll be sure to book a session next time I’m in the middle of a life crisis.”

“See that you do,” The barman laughed, The barkeep chuckled, but the sound was cut short as another patron waved him over. “Duty calls. I’ll see ya later, Welton,” he said, setting the clean mug aside and heading to the other end of the bar.

Eddie was left with his drink. He stared into the amber coloured liquid for a moment. Letting the pub’s ambience fill his ears—the murmur of conversations, the occasional clink of tankards, and the crackle of the fire.

Then, his attention was caught by a voice. Its rhythm sharp and musical. But layered with an unfamiliar guttural quality. Eddie's attention peaked; the tone familiar, though he couldn't remember it.

Turning his seat, he looked around, scanning the room. Maybe it's Lydia? Or someone he knows, but then, his eyes landed on a figure seated at a corner table.

The figure's sharp, pointed ears were a dead giveaway; Eddie knew instantly who it was.

It was Catherine.

Her figure is leaning forward. Her apple-red hair caught the lantern light. Her sharp, pointed ears made a silhouette distinguishing that she is an Elf. She speaks in rapid bursts of a foreign tongue Eddie didn't recognise. Opposite her sat three merchants, their attire adorned with intricate patterns and jewellery that marked them as travellers from distant lands. On the table between them lay a worn, yellowed map, its edges curled and frayed.

What the hell is Catherine doing here? In his usual pub? And what the hell is she doing with those merchants? Is she selling something? Buying something? Didn't she go with his mother earlier this morning?

The scholars were speaking now, their voices hushed. Catherine's response was fluent, her voice low and measured. Eddie could barely follow, but a few phrases in the common tongue broke through, and from Eddie's old lesson in Alamirian language, it began to slowly be pieced together, like fragments of a puzzle:

"...the Forbidden Codex of Craemonia Bastion..."

Eddie's curiosity flared. Quietly, he picked up his tankard and moved to a table a few feet behind her. He moves, taking care not to draw attention to himself. He leaned back, feigning a casual demeanour as he sipped his drink, his ears straining to catch the conversation.

The scholars leaned closer to Catherine, one gesturing toward the map.

"We will pay you whatever you ask," the man said desperately, "You're one of the remaining Elves we can contact... or ever. You are the only one who knows the entrance to their gates."

"The codex's rumour, if they were right," The second scholar said, "This can revolutionize everything... It will elevate Alchemy into a more powerful magic."

Catherine tilted her head, her expression unreadable as she considered their words.

The third merchants chuckled. "Study, leverage—it's all the same in the right hands. Think of how many lives we can save with this knowledge, Katarina."

"You know where it is, and we have the means to recover it. Name your price."

Eddie's thoughts churned. Why was Catherine speaking to these scholars about such dangerous things? And why hadn't she mentioned any of this before?

Catherine leaned back in her chair, fingers drumming lightly against the wood. Her expression was impassive, but there was an edge to her voice when she finally spoke.

“You’re asking me to unearth something that was never meant to see the light of day,” she said. “Have you even considered the consequences? The codex wasn’t written for healing or progress—it was written in blood, for a war that killed millions.”

“You think we don’t know that?” The younger scholar shot back. “But this isn’t about its past. It’s about what it could do now. How many lives could be saved if we understood its knowledge?”

“And what happens when the wrong hands get hold of it?” Catherine shot back, “You don’t get to decide who wields that power once it’s out in the open.”

“No knowledge is inherently good or evil.” The merchant gave a knowing smile, lacing his fingers together. “It’s how you use it that matters. I suppose you understood that best.”

She didn’t answer right away, studying them in silence. The weight of her decision settled between them, thick as the candlelit shadows that flickered against the tavern walls.

Finally, she sighed, her fingers stilling. “If I agree,” she murmured. “You pay me upfront. No games. No bargaining.”

The scholar barely hesitated. “Done.”

With a sharp nod, he reached into his satchel and withdrew a worn parchment, unfolding it across the table. His finger traced a point near the jagged outline of a mountain range.

“The codex is likely kept here—an old research laboratory, buried beneath the ruins of the bastion itself. We believe it was sealed centuries ago, by the Elves...” He glanced at Catherine pointedly. “This is where I suppose you come in.”

Catherine leaned in, studying the map. Her fingers brushed over the inked lines, taking in the details before she swiftly folded the parchment and tucked it into her sash.

The merchant beside him wordlessly placed a small pouch of coins on the table and nudged it toward her.

The shift was instant. Catherine’s seriousness melted away, replaced by a wide, triumphant grin—like a child handed a sack of sweets. She scooped up the pouch with a flourish, weighing it in her palm.

“Well, gentlemen, it’s been a pleasure doing business,” she said, her tone once again airy and playful. “Here’s hoping you don’t get yourselves hexed along the way.”

She left the table with a spring in her step, dodging the crowded pub toward the door. On her way, she tossed a few coins onto the bar, calling out a quick thanks to the barkeep.

Eddie's heart raced as she approached. He sank deeper into his chair, his body to remain hidden in the pub's dim lighting. The flicker of a gas lamp threw shadows across his face, and he held his breath as she passed mere feet away.

She didn't notice him. The door swung shut behind her with a soft creak, and Eddie exhaled, relief washing over him.

The merchants remained at their table. They are deep in conversation, their voices slipping back into their native tongue. So many questions had popped inside Eddie, who were Catherine talking to? What is she doing here? And most importantly, what does she have to do with The Nightingale Dragon?

Maybe It's a conversation for another day, Eddie wasn't supposed to hear about this anyway, it was Catherine's business, he shouldn't pry. Eddie relaxed, taking another sip from his tankard,

But then—

"Were you listening, boy?"

-0-

The voice carried an unfamiliar accent, clipped and precise, with an edge of quiet authority. Eddie's gaze snapped to the speaker—one of the scholars, the eldest among them. His grizzled beard was streaked with silver, his sharp eyes shadowed with suspicion.

"What did you hear?"

Eddie opened his mouth, but before he could answer, another of the scholars spoke up, his tone hushed but urgent. "What are you doing, brother? Leave him be."

"No." The elder scholar didn't look away. "He was eavesdropping. He heard things not meant for him."

The third scholar straightened, his expression darkening. "How long?"

"Don't know," the elder said, still watching Eddie like a hawk. "That's what I intend to find out."

A slow, heavy silence settled between them. The air in the tavern felt suddenly thicker, the clatter of mugs and distant laughter a world away.

At the elder scholar's words, the other two followed suit. Their previous air of casual conversation had vanished, replaced by something colder, more calculating.

They moved as one, stepping away from their table and closing in around Eddie's. The flickering gas lamp above cast long shadows across their faces, leaving their eyes

glinting in the dim light. Eddie sat in the darkness beneath them, trapped under their watchful gaze.

“Look, I—I wasn’t—” Eddie stammered, his mind scrambling for an excuse.

“Don’t lie to me, boy.” The eldest scholar leaned closer, his tone low and deliberate. “How long were you listening? What did you hear?”

“N-no, I wasn’t listening, I—I’m just here for a drink,” Eddie stammered, his grip tightening around his tankard. His eyes flicked between them, searching for any sign of mercy.

“Liar,” the second scholar spat.

The third folded his arms, his expression grim. “He’s too well-dressed to be some common Weshaven drunk. And he’s alone. Could be one of *them*.”

Eddie’s stomach turned. *Them?*

The elder scholar exhaled sharply. “The Black Hand has eyes everywhere. That’s how they work—blend in, listen, report. If he’s one of their spies... We’re done for!”

Eddie’s hand patted against his jacket pocket. Then the next, and the next, his fingers patting each in turn as if searching for a lifeline. Nothing. He moved to the inner pocket. Still nothing.

Then—his pants pocket. His heart skipped a beat. There it was. A wand.

Torrie’s wand.

How did he still have it? He had meant to give it back earlier this morning, but with Markus coming in and everything else, it must’ve slipped his mind. His fingers curled around it instinctively.

The fishermen at the bar let out a booming laugh, the sound breaking briefly through Eddie’s rising panic, Indifferent to his danger.

Eddie’s eyes darted around the room, scanning for anything—*anything*—he could use. Then he saw it.

A dusty, half-forgotten bottle sat on a shelf behind the bar, its glass clouded with age. The dark liquid inside barely sloshed, thick and undisturbed, a relic from some long-gone era. But more importantly—Eddie knew what that meant.

Bingo! He thought.

Old spirits. High proof. Stored for years.

His mind raced. Over time, alcohol evaporates, saturating the air within the bottle. A single spark, the right amount of heat—*boom*.

A perfect distraction.

His stomach twisted. He had sworn never to use alchemy again. Never after—*No, not now. Focus.*

The scholars edged closer, their suspicion pressing down like a weight on his chest. He could talk his way out of a tavern brawl. But this? This was something else entirely. He couldn't be tangled up with them. He had no choice.

Beneath the table, Eddie's fingers brushed against Torrie's wand.

A grim irony.

Slowly, he slid it free, concealing it against his leg. Taking a steadying breath, he traced a circle on the worn wood of the table, moving with quiet precision. Runes followed—*water, alcohol, vapor, ignition*. Each stroke glowed faintly before fading into the grain.

His heart pounded. He could feel the magic humming beneath his fingertips.

Just one spark...

With a swift flick of Torrie's wand hidden beneath the table. He triggered the stages of transformation, shifting the bottle's integrity.

A sharp crack.

The bottle didn't just crack—it exploded.

A fiery burst of vapor and shattered glass erupted behind the burly fisherman, dousing his head in a splash of decades-old liquor. The shockwave sent nearby bottles toppling, and with them, more bursts of flame as their alcohol-rich vapors ignited.

A chain reaction.

But Eddie wasn't done.

In the split second before the explosion, he lunged forward and *shoved* one of the scholar straight into the fisherman.

The timing was perfect.

The burly man staggered as the explosion seared the air behind him. And when he spun around, fists clenched, his furious gaze locked onto the scholar sprawled at his feet.

"You fucking bastard!" the fisherman roared.

"My vintage collection!" The barkeep screamed in horror, but his wail cut through the tavern as he watched years of fine wine flows down to the floor.

The scholar barely had time to stammer out a protest before the fisherman's massive fist *slammed* into his jaw, sending him crashing into the second scholar.

The scimitar-wielder reached for his blade—too late. A second fisherman tackled him to the ground, locking thick arms around his waist.

The third scholar saw the chaos unfold and did the only thing he could—*ran*.

Eddie didn't wait to see how it all played out.

He was already moving.

The pub filled with the sounds of shouting, breaking chairs, and clattering glass. Other fishermen joined in, eager for an excuse to throw a punch. The merchants, caught off guard, scrambled to defend themselves.

Eddie slid his chair back quietly, sinking deeper into the shadows. The commotion provided the perfect cover.

As fists flew and tables overturned, he clutched the wand tightly in his hand and edged toward the door.

Eddie slipped out of the pub and into the cool night air, the sounds of the brawl fading behind him. His heart pounded in his chest as he shoved Torrie's wand back into his pocket.

Chapter 9

His breath is still rugged as he panted, he took a long deep breath.

The gas lamps above flickered, their dim glow casting long shadows across the empty street. His fingers tightened around the wand in his hand. He looked down at it—Torrie's wand—feeling the weight of what he'd just done.

He looked down at the wand in his hand, a mixture of disbelief and relief flooding through him. The smooth, slender stick of wood had pulled him out of yet another mess—a mess that could've ended with him face down in the wooden floorboards.

A slow chuckle escaped him, half disbelieving, half resigned.

Alchemy. *Again.*

"God damn it," he muttered under his breath, "I could never escape using you, huh." grinning to himself.

But before he could enjoy a moment of quiet and stillness, a voice broke through.

"Nice feeling, isn't it?"

Eddie's head snapped up. His pulse spiked, but he forced himself to stay still.

A figure stepped out from the alleyway, framed by the golden lamplight. Catherine.

She sauntered closer, her lips curled in amusement, her emerald eyes gleaming like a cat who had just found its next game. "You know," she mused, tilting her head, "the Alamirian Scholars were right about one thing, Edward. Eavesdropping *isn't* the most polite thing to do."

Eddie exhaled through his nose. *Of course.* She was always a step ahead.

Behind them, the pub door burst open, spilling light, shouting, and a few flailing bodies onto the street. The brawl was in full swing now.

Catherine glanced over at the chaos, then back at Eddie. "Come," she said, stepping closer, voice smooth and coaxing. "Let's get away from this mess."

Eddie cast one last glance at the ruckus before letting out a slow breath. He shoved Torrie's school-issued wand into his pocket.

"Yeah," he muttered. "I could use a walk."

With an effortless turn, Catherine strolled down the street, her red coat swaying behind her.

Eddie followed.

-0-

As they walked, the streets seemed quieter now. Save for the distant clink of metal and breaking wood from the pub's brawl muffled behind them.

Catherine, however, seemed to be deep in thought. After a while, she broke the quiet.

"Do you remember that day at the dining table when I first arrived?"

"Vaguely," he replied.

"You said you were working on something."

"Yeah, I am."

"You are working for your advanced magical education in the Universities," she continued.

"Yeah, I am," Eddie lied.

"And when I asked if you were considering applying for the Sage's Institute Scholarship, you said yes."

"Yeah, I am." Eddie continued his lie.

"But you're not, are you, Edward?" She continued,

Eddie stopped his track, the wind continues to howl, there is no point in hiding it anymore

"Yeah," Eddie said, admitting the truth, "I... I'm not."

"Why lie?" Catherine stopped, looked back towards Eddie, her voice soft, "I know you have so much ambition for Alchemy, but now you act like it's something to run from."

Eddie froze, his jaw tightened. He couldn't do this—not with Catherine, not now. She was pressing on a wound he wasn't ready to open.

But Catherine wasn't about to let it go. She had always been the type to ask the hard questions, to dig until she found the truth, unlike him, she is an Alchemist, a *real Alchemist*, and like an Alchemist she will dig the truth.

"I might not be around by the time you enrolled in Aella Academy," Catherine said, her voice gentle but insistent. "But I was around when you're so passionate about your first transmutation, when you're going to ruins and dungeons retracing the steps of famous Alchemists, when you said you wanted to go to Edenfield University to become an Alchemist."

"You used to be so passionate about Alchemy. What happened?" Her eyes searched his face, hoping to understand the change she couldn't quite place.

He couldn't tell her. He couldn't tell anyone.

"Fifteen years, Eddie." Catherine's voice broke through his spiralling thoughts, "Fifteen years is nothing for someone like me. But for you... for you, I know it must have felt like a lifetime. Something happened to you during those years I was gone, something that changes you."

He kept his gaze forward, avoiding Catherine's eyes; the words swirling in his mind but not forming on his tongue. How could he explain the loss, the guilt, the fear? How could he explain the day he had ruined his life—and someone else's—forever?

He still couldn't tell her. He still couldn't tell anyone.

Finally, she sighed. "Look, I'm not going to pretend I understand what happened to you, because I certainly don't. But I do know that you've changed."

"And not in a good way." Catherine continued, "You're not the person I knew, you're not the person Torrie knew. You've built up walls around yourself, and from what I've seen, it's tearing you apart—"

"Just drop it." Eddie interrupted, still trying to keep a polite smile.

"I beg your pardon?" Catherine responded

"Just drop it." Eddie said with more resolution, his voice now laden with more frustration, "People has been prying on that fact, *Eddie why are you not doing alchemy anymore? Eddie why aren't you doing your transmutation anymore? Eddie where is your passion in Alchemy?*"

Eddie stood there, his smile fading, he is not trying to be polite anymore, he is not lying anymore, "I'm sick of it. I'm not interested in Alchemy anymore, okay? I'm sick of people bringing it up, I'm sick of Alchemy. So please, Catherine..."

"Just fucking drop it."

Catherine stood there clearly taken aback, Eddie expected for her to get offended, then throwing him a three hour lecture about the importance of Alchemy, but then, she just smiled, a teasing smile as if she just found something amusing.

“I see,” Catherine finally said, sighing, crossing her arms, “Fine by me, then. I’ll drop the topic.”

A sense of ease fills Eddie, finally, some peace and quiet, no more prying, no more question-

“But I will only drop the topic only if you can drop your act.”

Eddie stood there, his heart lurching.

“What?” Eddie said, not quite sure what he was hearing, “What do you mean?”

“Don’t you see yourself, Edward?” Catherine said, now turning towards the pier, her arms resting on its wooden railing, “If you’re truly disinterested in Alchemy... sick of it, even.”

She then turned her head, facing Eddie, her short hair blown by the cold, sea breeze, “Then why keep working on it?”

“I see the formula you perfected up in Robert’s tower, Edward.” Catherine continued, “The assignments you’ve helped Torrie with.”

“And don’t even get me started with your room.” Catherine continued, now turning her body, still leaning to the wooden railing, “The transmutation circles you’ve designed in your spare time, the copies of Alchemical tomes scattered on your desk, how you tried to continue your research from Aella Academy, and don't say that you did all of that hard work just for *'fun'*.”

Catherine opened her arms, “Why do all of that, if you’re sick of it?”

She now puts her hands back on her coat’s pocket, “I would’ve let you slide if you truly, truly hate it, Edward, sure. But the fact is that you don’t. You still have that passion roaring deep within you that you tried to suppress, you’re playing an act of hating Alchemy whilst the fact that you still passionate about it. That, I can’t stand.”

“Then what do you want me to do?” Eddie asked, chuckling sarcastically, his voice low, his eyes finally meeting hers. “Do you want me just to get back to it? Pick it up again like nothing happened?”

Catherine stood there for a moment, leaning against the pier.

“I wished you were, but i know it’s not that simple, is it? I don't know what happened to you during the years i was gone, and surely Torrie and your parents didn't know too because you didn't tell them.” Her gaze steady, and then she gave him a small, determined smile. “So, despite all of that. I’m going to offer you something different.”

Catherine stood there, the wind blows her short apple-red hair, her red coat flutters in the cold evening breeze like a flag of declaration, the silhouette of her sharp elven ear made the whole scene felt like a fairy tale. She then looked at Eddie’s eyes, taking her hand out of her pocket, and raising it, and points it straight at his face.

“I’m offering you an adventure.”

For a moment, Eddie could only stare. The scene before him felt unreal—like something out of a storybook, a fleeting moment of magic woven into the fabric of his mundane, daily life.

The streets were hushed, distant from the uproar of the tavern. The world around them had shrunk to just this.

Flickering lamplight, whispers of the wind, the gentle sound of the ocean waves hitting the pier. And the unwavering intensity of Catherine's gaze.

"What?" He laughed softly, as if snapping back to reality, still trying to process it. "What are you even talking about?"

"I'm offering you an Adventure for you to be a part of." Catherine repeated, her voice steady and firm. "There's a Codex hidden deep within the illusory forest of The Deep Glaive, that was what i was discussing with the Alamirian Scholars back there, it will be a journey into the unknown part of Weshaven. I could use a fellow Alchemist like you." She smiled, "It'll be like the old days, isn't it?"

"A fellow, is a hard stretch don't you think, Catherine?" Eddie chuckled, his face sombre, "It can't be like the old days, you know? I'm not that kid anymore, Catherine," he said quietly. "I can't be that kid. That kid is no more."

"Of course you're not, you'll never be as idiotic and reckless as your younger days..." Catherine laughed, "You don't have to be that kid, Eddie. You just need to be you."

Eddie looked into her eyes, seeing the earnestness in her gaze. An invitation, a chance to leave behind his regrets and step back into something larger than himself.

He didn't have an answer right away. But in the silence that followed, he knew that Catherine wasn't going to let him walk away from this, not that easily. Not when she knew something about him.

"I don't know," Eddie said.

"It's okay," Catherine said, now continuing her pace, Eddie followed, the cadence of their footsteps echoes through the hard cobblestone road, "But you don't have to lie anymore, it's futile. You can lie all you want to Torrie, to Markus, Alyssa, Robert. But one thing for certain."

"You can't lie to a fellow Alchemist."

Chapter 10

The breeze continues to blow despite his raging thought. Eddie let out a long sigh, the mist of his breath flutters in the cold evening air as he did so. He walked down the uneven cobblestones of the harbour road. The faint murmur of waves lapping against the pier faded behind him, leaving just the smooth cadence of his feet on the sidewalk. Above, the moon stood high, throwing a weak reflection on Weshaven's damp roads. Catherine is already nowhere to be found, in her usual manner. One minute she was at his side, her words pierced something within him he hadn't felt in years, giving him the existential crisis of a lifetime; the next, she was gone, as if nothing had just happened.

Eddie walked, stuffing his hands into his coat pockets, his breath formed a mist everything he sighed. Catherine's words remained in his memory, playing over and over like a broken record.

What happened to you?

Eddie still didn't want to acknowledge how deeply the question had pierced him. He remembered her face, how uncharacteristically serious it looked. How seriously dejected it looked, and how within all of that, how concerned it looked.

As he moved through the streets, the distant noises of the port gave way to the faint echoes of excited conversation and laughing. Eddie stopped as he rounded a corner.

On the town square of Mariner's Ranch stood a little, old carriage with brightly fading paint on its sides that depicted legendary heroes and mythological animals. A banner with the words "Vandruff's Travelling Tales" in gold calligraphy was draped over its front; the wording faintly reflected the light from a nearby street lamp.

Eddie stood still. He had grown up loving evenings like these, when storytellers from different lands would bring their tales to this little hamlet called Weshaven. Knights would fight monsters and tricksters outwitted monarchs.

He remembered back when he was a kid, pushing his way to the front row, with all eyes fixed on the little stage. Back then he still believed in knights defeating the dragons, Back then he still believed in happy endings. Back then, the world beyond the stage was irrelevant for a few mere seconds as he watched these tales unfold.

However, it was years ago, when he was someone different, someone who could lose himself in heroic and adventurous stories without thinking twice.

You just need to be you.

The words continues to repeat in his minds, their simplicity belying the weight they contained. Now, what does that even mean? Who was "him" ? The Eddie she recalled? Before everything went wrong, was he the Eddie he was?

"Thank you! Dear audience!" Announced the Puppet Master, "The next tale, is The Dragon of Groville!"

Eddie was startled out of his reverie by the children's quiet laughter. To the joy of the audience, one of the puppets—a cunning fox, apparently—had taken the knight's sword and was bouncing about the stage. Despite his advanced age, the puppet master's motions were vibrant as he laughed with them.

Eddie remembered how he was used to be one of those children, laughing and having the time of his life.

He remembered what he told Catherine a while before, how he wasn't that kid anymore. How he had grown, how he had lost his passion.

Well, let's see whether that little Eddie was still there somewhere. Eddie thought to himself.

Before he could second-guess himself, Eddie walked up to the booth.

The ticket booth near the carriage had the words "Admission: 2 Coppers" written on it. He dug into his pocket, his fingers brushing against a few coins.

It was ridiculous, a somewhat inebriated, unkempt man purchasing a ticket to a puppet show. But the thought of sitting in the warm glow of the lanterns, surrounded by stories, felt like a tether to a simpler time, back when he was still a kid, back when that kid was still alive.

The vendor handed him a small red ticket in exchange for the coins. Eddie muttered a quick thanks before slipping into the small gathering.

The children's laughter drowned him out as he settled at the back, their chatter a vibrant wall of sound. His dark coat and weathered boots made him stand out against the cheerful patchwork of colourful scarves and jackets the children wore.

Over the little stage, which was embellished with painted stars, trees, and a bright moon, the lanterns created a lovely, flickering light. A wiry old guy with a sparkle in his eye, the puppeteer emerged and opened the play with a theatrical flourish.

"Now! Onto the next tale! Gather thee close, good folk," the puppeteer intoned, his voice deep and inviting, "And hearken thee to a tale of old—a tale of valour, cunning, and the strength of noble hearts. 'Tis the story of Groville, a village fair, and the fearsome foe known as the Nightingale Dragon!"

Eddie leaned back. As the stage came alive with colourful puppets, he couldn't help but feel the nostalgia seeping in.

The puppeteer brought out the Groville puppet, a cheerful little village bustling with tiny puppet villagers: "Behold, a day most fair and bounteous!"

The puppeteer introduced the puppet of The Alchemist next, a regal figure robed in Red. "Stand ye strong, good folk!" the old man declared in a commanding voice, the puppet raising its glowing staff. "Together shall we face this darkness, and ne'er shall we let it consume our light!"

Eddie's smile faded as the story unfolded. The Alchemist couldn't fight the Nightingale Dragon alone; she needed the help of others—a cunning Witch and a valiant Bard. The

puppets joined forces, their combined strengths weaving a glowing barrier around the village.

The battle was fierce, the air heavy with the Dragon's fiery wrath and the trio's resolve. Intently, Eddie watched, the children's eager sounds receding.

"Thou shalt harm no more, vile beast!" The Alchemist cried. "By this bond of light, shadow, and song, I banish thee to the deep forest, where none may find thee!"

The Dragon puppet was drawn into the shadowy forest, its flames extinguished. The village erupted in cheers as the puppeteer guided the tiny villagers into a jubilant dance.

"And so, my friends," the puppeteer said, his voice solemn now, "remember this tale well. True strength is not in power or might, but in courage, wisdom, and the bonds we share. Let thy hearts be brave, thy spirits steadfast, and thy light unyielding."

As the puppets took a bow and the curtain closed, the children's enthusiastic clapping and laughter filled the air. Eddie sat unmoving, the storyteller's words echoing in his head. True strength is in the bonds we share.

The children cheered, their applause echoing in the night as the old puppet master took a bow, his smile as warm as the lantern light. Eddie clapped too, though his hands moved slowly, the sound almost drowned out by the surrounding kids.

Back then, he'd believed in happy endings.

The children leaned forward, their wide eyes reflecting the warm glow of the lanterns. Eddie stayed where he was, his head bowed slightly.

Courage, Wisdom, and Bonds.

The words twisting in his chest. Catherine's voice echoed in his mind, her words overlapping with the puppet master's. What happened to you? You just need to be you.

But who was he now? A stranger sitting among children, trying to grasp at a piece of his past that no longer fit. He could laugh at the absurdity of it all if it didn't hurt so much.

As the crowd began to disperse, Eddie lingered in his seat, watching the children scamper off with their parents, their laughter filling the air.

Eddie stood and brushed the dust from his coat. The streets felt quieter now, the cold breeze of the night settling in again.

He shoved his hands into his pockets, The breeze continues to blow despite his raging thought. Eddie let out a long sigh, the mist of his breath flutters in the cold evening air as he did so. He walked down the uneven cobblestones of the harbour road. His footsteps echoing as he made his way back to the apothecary.

Chapter 11

A couple of days had passed since that night, it is Sunday morning now, despite that fact, the word from Catherine still hadn't left Eddie's mind at all, it kept spinning, and playing like a broken record in his mind, mocking him in his futile attempt at hiding his passion for Alchemy.

The living room of the Welton's household is cozy today, the low table cluttered with herbs and parchments. The warm morning lights casts a ray of sunshine shimmering through between the curtains, casting onto the mismatched furniture where Eddie sat.

Torrie sat across from him sprawling on the carpet, her legs kicking as she flipped through her notebook, her wand resting on top of her ears as she flipped through her notes.

"So," She said, breaking the silence, "You were at Vandruff's Travelling Puppet Show last night, weren't you, Eddie?" Torrie teased, her voice was sing-song in tone.

"What? No! Of course not!" Eddie countered, "What makes you think that?"

"Oh, I don't know." Torrie's smirk widened, "Maybe because my classmate's brother who worked part-time as a ticket seller with Mr. Vandruff said he saw someone with a dishevelled silver hair sitting in the back row, looking all serious and broody. It was nothing he had ever seen before! An adult in a kid's travelling puppet show! Sounds familiar?" She continued her tease, her grin widening.

Eddie groaned, covering his face with Torrie's Alchemy Textbook, his groan muffled. "Look, there are plenty of people with dishevelled silver hair who enjoy puppet shows, alright? Leave them alone!" he muttered, the sound still muffled by his textbook.

Torrie laughed, her legs kicking before she sat up, "Oh come on, Eddie! You're a terrible liar! You've got that look, you know? Just admit you've been there!"

"Look," Eddie shot back, putting down the textbook that has been hiding his face, "Do you want help with your homework or not? If not, I've got better things to do."

Her laughter softened into a giggle, "Fine, fine. But seriously, what's so bad about going to a puppet show anyway? They're so fun!"

Eddie lets out a long sigh, running a hand through his hair—an unintentional act that only made it messier. "It's not about that, Torrie. It's just... you know what, never mind. Let's focus on your homework, okay?"

"Alright then, grumpy." Torrie said with a mock pout, then joined Eddie on the low table.

But before Eddie could start working on the first assignment, the front door opened, he had expected it to be his father coming home early from shopping for ingredients, but as the front door opens, it was someone he didn't expect.

It was Markus.

Eddie glanced up, clearly puzzled. It was Sunday morning—Markus isn't supposed to be working today. His expression softened as Markus set down a small bag of supplies and adjusted his jacket.

“Oh hey Markus.” Eddie greeted, slightly raising an eyebrow, “What’s going on? It’s Sunday, you’re supposed to be on break, right? Or were you transferred to weekend shift or something?”

“Oh hey Eddie,” Markus greeted back sheepishly, “Sorry I forgot to give you a heads up.”

“It’s alright,” Eddie chuckled, “What’s on your mind today? You wanna help Torrie with her homework with me?”

“Oh no, I’m good, I’m not really good with that stuff.” Markus said, settling on the chair by the door, “The Elf lady called me yesterday, saying that she needed me for something, willing to give me something for the trouble too! Generous, right?”

“Oh wow, that’s interesting--” But something caught Eddie’s attention, a discrepancy.

“Wait... Elf Lady?” Eddie blinked, “What Elf Lady?”

“You know... Man, I forgot her name, but red hair? Short? Red coat? She almost wear all-red now that you mention it.”

“Wait...” Eddie tries to dig his brains for faces, “Catherine?”

“Yes! That’s the one, the Catherine fellow called me.”

“What the bloody hell does Catherine wants with you, Markus?” Eddie said, puzzled, “Hope she didn’t tangle you in her shady businesses, She’s a pretty shady person if you can see through her wacky personality.”

“Oh, nothing shady, but she mentions something about an Adventure, though.”

Eddie’s heart drops, *an Adventure... wait... does this mean...*

“No, no, no...” Eddie muttered under his breath, “Are you sure she said adventure? She can’t be that vague right?”

“Well, she is pretty vague, but I’m sure-“

“Wait, Markus?” Torrie interjected, “Did Aunt Catherine invite you too?! She was gathering a party to go on an epic adventure to the woods! She said I can come by!”

Wait, wait, wait. Eddie thought, his mind beginning to spiral.

“Wait, Torrie. What are you talking about?” Eddie said

“Didn’t you know, Eddie? Aunt Catherine is gathering an adventure party!”

But before Eddie could respond, the door opened once more, he couldn’t make of the face at first due to the bright morning light, but from the silhouette it was clear. Short hair, and sharp, elven ear.

It was Catherine

"Mornin' everyone!" She chirped, "Well, I see everyone is here," she continued, setting down the bags of grocery on the low table. She turned to Eddie with a teasing glint in her eye. "What's all this fuss about?"

"Catherine, you've gotta address something for me." Eddie said sternly, his face is a mix of confusion and frustration, "What the hell is going on. Why is Markus clocking in on a Sunday morning, and most importantly. Why are you involving my fucking sister into this?"

"Language, Eddie!" Torrie shouted from the low table.

"Well, firstly." Catherine said, her tone is matter-factly, "I said a few days ago, right? I was planning an excursion to the Deep Glaive. It wouldn't be a balanced party if was just two Alchemists isn't it? So I decided to recruit more!"

"You what?!" Eddie shouted, standing abruptly. Textbooks pens and notebook falling down to the low table.

"What's wrong, Ed?! She said it will be an exciting adventure! There's nothing wrong with it!" Torrie plead

"Look, there is so many things wrong with this, Torrie. Firstly, you are involved! Do you know how dangerous this is?!"

"Oh, I think you're overthinking this, Edward." Catherine said, brushing off her hands in front of her face, "It'll be just a little adventure! A bit of detour, if you will. I mean- come on, you were exploring an even more dangerous dungeons when you were her age!"

"Look, Catherine. It's different, she's different!"

"She'll be fine." Catherine said, "It'll be like the old times!"

Eddie's heart sank. He looked at his little sister, who was still so young, so eager to prove herself. He glanced at Catherine, the woman who had once been his mentor and aunt, now standing so confidently before him, acting like nothing was wrong.

He opened his mouth to argue again, but then he turned to his mother, Alyssa Welton. Who just entered to the kitchen across the room, hoping for some sense. "Mom!" he called out, his voice tinged with frustration. "Are you listening? Are you okay with this? Why isn't anyone thinking straight about this?"

Alyssa, who had been arranging the groceries Catherine just bought, turned around, her expression warm but unreadable. "I trust Catherine. She's always been dependable in her way. She gets you in and out of dungeons in the past, although I can argue all I want, I know she'll find her way to get you guys out. Let's just say if she's confident, this will work out, I believe her."

Eddie stared at her. "You believe her? Just like that? What happened to thinking things through? What happened to being cautious?"

Alyssa smiled softly as she took out a carrot out of the grocery bag and putting it on the chopping board, "Eddie, sometimes you have to trust people and take a leap. You haven't gone to adventures like these since Alfred goes to the army haven't you?"

"In fact," She continued, her chopping sounded harder against the carrots.

"If anything happens to any of you.."

Chop,

"I can just hold a certain Elf accountable can I?"

Another chop,

Catherine lets out a deep gulp, "Y-you heard your mother, Edward." She said, "I'll make sure to keep you guys safe!"

Alyssa's chopping began to soften again, "If you are going, Eddie. You'd better get prepared. You should have your things ready in the garage."

Eddie felt a sharp sting in his chest. Was his mother, the one who always kept a careful eye on things, saying this? He wasn't sure if it was reassuring or terrifying. His mind was still racing, caught between his fears and the urge to protect his family from the reckless dangers that seemed spiralling out of control.

He clenched his fists, turning to Catherine again. "Fine," he said gritting his teeth.

Chapter 12

The door towards the garage creaked open, the lights from the main room streaked through as Eddie paced his way inside.

The garage was dimly lit, the only light coming from a small lantern hanging above the workbench. It smelt of old wood, tools and equipment lined the walls. A rusty beaten-down car sat on the corner, the automobile definitely hadn't ran for ages.

"This is ridiculous," Eddie muttered under his breath. His fingers ran over bandoliers, satchels, and tools he hadn't touched in years.

Eddie's eyes landed on one particular satchel with a keychain bearing the Aella Academy emblem on it, a worn leather satchel that he hasn't touched in years.

He took the satchel and opened it.

He adjusted the straps of a worn leather satchel. "An illusory forest," he scoffed.

"Because, sure, Catherine, that's exactly where I want to take Torrie. Nothing says

'quality family time' like trudging through a place that's basically a trap pretending to be nature. Brilliant idea."

His hands moved faster now, checking the buckles.

"And she just assumes we'll be fine. No map, no plan, just a wave of her hand and a 'Oh, it'll be fine! It's perfectly safe!' Perfectly safe, my arse. Since when is anywhere safe when it's been illusory forest to confuse you, lure you into dead ends, or worse? What next? A quick detour into a cave full of angry wyverns? Maybe invite the bloody thing for tea while we're at it?"

The lantern above him swayed slightly, casting jittery shadows on the walls as his agitation grew.

He exhaled sharply, the sound halfway between a sigh and a growl, and raked his fingers through his hair. "Ridiculous. Absolutely, unequivocally ridiculous."

The satchel finally settled into place with a heavy thud, and he reached for a pair of gloves, inspecting them for wear.

As the heavy door creaked open, Eddie spun around, expecting Catherine or, worse, Torrie coming to ask some inane question about how much longer he was going to be.

Instead, it was Mr. Robert Welton, his father.

"Oh hey there, Son." Robert chuckled, on his sides are satchels filled with alchemical ingredients, he goes to one of the workbench and settle it down, it settles with a very heavy thud. He then looked at Eddie, "What're you up to?"

"It's just..." Eddie said, his hands scraping the leather of his satchel, "Catherine."

"Catherine?" Robert raised his eyebrow. "Oh are you two going to your little adventures like the old times?"

"Well, maybe a little is an understatement." Eddie chuckled, leaning to one of the workbench, "She also invited Torrie and Markus."

"A big party?" Robert whistled, walking towards Eddie and pats him in the back "You guys got a big adventure ahead of ya!"

"Yeah, I suppose we are." Eddie chuckled

"Stay safe, son." Robert finally said

Eddie then puts his satchel on, and walked towards the door, glancing back to reply.

"I will, dad." Eddie said. But before he could turn and twist it.

"Eddie." Robert called

"Yes, dad?"

"Are you going to take your ring with you?"

Eddie stood there, looking below.

"No, I gave the ring to Torrie years ago."

"I see." Robert said, his expression becoming more sombre, "Then come here for a sec."

Eddie then walked from the door, joining his father on the workbench.

"It should be somewhere around here..." Robert said, rummaging through his chest, taking out all sort of tools, hammers, fishing rods, axes, until...

"Ah, there she is!" Robert said in glee, and from the chest, there is a Flintlock Rifle.

"Alfred's gun?" Eddie said, raising his eyebrow.

"*My* gun, before I gave this to Alfred, and since he is away overseas nobody has used it ever since." Robert said.

"And what do you want me to do with it?"

"Let's see whether you still know how to use 'em." He said, then tossing the rifle to Eddie, in which he catches it. "Go on, do you still remember how to load the thing?"

Eddie reached for a small metal ball from the other satchel without a word, loading the flintlock with practised ease. His movements were fluid and confident as if the muscle memory had never left him. He secured the powder, placed the ball in the barrel, and snapped the mechanism into place. When he finished, he looked up at his father.

Robert smiled. "Alright, I suppose you still remember. I'd rather you take your ring with you, but if you insist on not using it, at least you can defend yourself. Now put the hammer down, Edward."

Eddie puts the hammer down gently, then slung Alfred's rifle on his back, then took the other satchel, containing gun powders and metal balls. "Yeah, I suppose so."

There was a brief silence. Finally, Robert clapped his hand on Eddie's shoulder, his grip firm. "Alright then. Be safe out there, Ed. Keep Torrie safe out there, alright?"

Eddie met his father's gaze, the flintlock resting comfortably at his back. "I will."

As Eddie turned to leave, Robert watched him go, feeling the rifle's weight in his back, Eddie turned the door. It wasn't the same as carrying his usual ring, but perhaps that was the point. The door closed behind his father with a soft thud.

-o-

Eddie stepped out of the garage, Flintlock rifle slung across his back and two satchels secured at his sides, one leather, containing his personal stuff, the other is a canvas satchel, containing his ammunition. The morning air was cool, slightly obscured by the morning fog. Muted grey painted the sky. Outside, Catherine and Torrie stood near the

low stone wall overlooking the sea, Catherine is leaning on the stone wall. Their figures bathed in the fading light.

Torrie, her eyes wide with excitement, was practically bouncing on her heels as she bombarded Catherine with a flurry of questions about magic. Her silver-jade conduit ring bouncing on her metal chains on her neck as she talk.

"Catherine, Catherine! Could you transmute copper into gas if you added enough heat and pressure? Or would it just destabilize like Eddie's brilliant idea last week? You know, the one that nearly made the whole living room smell like burnt coins for days?"

"Well, Torrie, theoretically, yes, you could, but transmuting metals on that scale requires an extraordinary amount of precision—far more than most Alchemists can safely handle. And Eddie's experiment wasn't entirely off-base," she added with a faint smile.

Markus, meanwhile, leaned casually against the stone wall. His gaze fixed on the sea as the waves gently lapped against the shore below. He looked up as Eddie approached.

"All set, Ed?" Markus asked. Pushing himself off the wall.

"Yeah," Eddie nodded, "I'm ready."

As Eddie joined them, Catherine's eyes were drawn immediately to the rifle on his back. Her brows furrowed in surprise. "Eddie, what is that?"

"Err... dad asked me to carry it." Eddie said, straightening the flintlock on his back, "For protections, of course."

"Why not use your ring?" Catherine said

Eddie stood there, "I uhh,"

"Eddie gave the ring to me." Torrie said, "I'll be using the ring."

"Well that's a disappointment," Catherine sighed. She studied him longer, searching for the boy she remembered in the man before her. "I see... Well, I suppose a bit of extra protection never hurt anyone."

She then stepped closer, her scholarly curiosity piqued. "May I?" she asked, touching the rifle.

Eddie quickly swatted her hand away, a playful smile tugging at his lips despite his tension. "No, can't do, Ma'am. Dad said nobody else should touch it besides me and my brother Alfred."

Catherine pouted. Folding her arms, sulking playfully. "Hmph, and here I thought I'd get to examine something new. Very well, I suppose I'll just have to content myself with the mysteries of the Artefacts."

Torrie giggled at the exchange, and even Markus couldn't help but chuckle. Eddie shook his head, still smiling, as he adjusted the strap of his satchel.

Catherine regained her usual demeanour, though a hint of amusement lingered in her eyes. "Alright, let's get going. The Deep Glaive waits for no one."

The group began to make their way down the path leading away from the house. Catherine walked at the front, her staff clicking rhythmically against the cobblestones. Torrie followed closely behind, practically skipping with every step. Markus and Eddie brought up the rear, with Eddie casting one last glance back at the house where his father stood watching from the doorway.

Mr and Mrs Welton raised a hand in a silent farewell, his expression a mix of pride and concern. Eddie returned the gesture before turning away.

Chapter 13

The wooden creak and clacking of horse hoofs filled the journey after Eddie, Torrie, Markus and Catherine boarded the carriage that agreed to take them to Gunther's Farm, that is the northernmost point the carriage is willing to take them.

Scents of hay and the faint earthy breeze drifting through the open sides of the carriage. Eddie sat quietly, his gaze fixed on the passing fields, The rifle sat leaning on his shoulder. Catherine, ever the scholar, kept stealing glances at the weapon. Finally, her curiosity got the better of her.

Catherine then reaches her hand to touch one of the engravings.

But as usual, Eddie swatter her hands away.

"Come on, Edward." Catherine sighed, "Can't I get just a little touch of it?"

"No, Catherine." Eddie reminded, "Dad said so."

"Fine," Catherine said, "Have it your way then."

Markus and Torrie laughed at the exchange, but Catherine is far from over, she continued,

"But I've been meaning to ask about that flintlock of yours. It's not exactly what you see every day, especially for someone helping out at the apothecary."

"It's more of a hand-me-down, I guess," he sighed, "Back when Weshaven was still full of Streamwyrms, Dad taught my brother Alfred how to use it. Alfred would go into the shore with the others and scare off anything too close to the Apothecary. Sometimes, he'd even shoot them if they were too bold."

"Streamwyrms? What's that?" Torrie asked,

"It's those fishes coming out of the shores every August, remember? Sharp teeth, four legs, you were almost bitten by one last summer."

"Oh those!" Torrie said, "But they are so cute, why did Alfred shoot them?"

"No they aren't cute, Torrie, they're pest!" Eddie hissed.

Catherine tilted her head, her gaze flicking back to the rifle. "And now? I assume there aren't any Streamwyrms around anymore."

"Not really," Eddie replied. "They still comes out of the shores every August, since Alfred's not around, I takes his place, but honestly Markus was much more better shot than me, so I haven't had to use this thing in ages. Honestly, it's just been collecting dust."

"So why bring it now?" Catherine pressed, a note of curiosity creeping into her tone.

"Eh," Eddie shrugged. "Because it's cool."

"You just said that Robert asked you to take it." Catherine said

"But it's still cool nonetheless."

"Since it's *oh so cool*," Catherine said theatrically, "You would let me touch them."

"No!"

-0-

The carriage came to a slow, creaking halt in front of a farmstead, a modest property framed by sprawling fields and a weathered wooden fence. The farmhouse stood stoically against the horizon, its roof patched in places and its walls bearing the marks of years spent braving the elements. A few chickens scattered at the sound of the wheels stopping, clucking indignantly as the group prepared to step down.

The driver gave the reins a gentle flick. "Here we are. Gunther's Farm. Northernmost point, just like I said."

Eddie was the first to hop off, his boots crunching against the dirt path as he turned to help Torrie down. She leaped with an exaggerated flourish, as if pretending she were dismounting a noble steed. Markus followed, stretching his arms and squinting at the farm with mild curiosity. Catherine climbed down last, brushing her red coat off with an air of elegance—until the driver called out.

"Right, miss. That'll be two silver for the lot of you."

Catherine froze, her hand lingering in her pocket as she turned to the driver with an awkward smile. "Ah... I think..."

The driver looked more unamused.

"I... seem to have misplaced my coin satchel..." Catherine said, her voice uncharacteristically hesitant. She glanced back at the group. "Eddie," she said, flashing an overly sweet smile. "Be a dear and lend me a bit, would you?"

Eddie looked at Catherine, seemingly taken aback by her uncharacteristically sweet and regal tone.

"What." Eddie said

"I misplaced my coin purse."

"You spent all your coins didn't you—"

"*I said* I misplaced it. Happens to the best of us, you know."

"Fine," Eddie sighed, and reluctantly dug into his pouch, fishing out two silver coins and handing them to the driver, who nodded in thanks and clicked his tongue to set the horses moving again.

As the carriage rolled away, Eddie turned to Catherine.

"You're a master alchemist, and you don't have two silver to your name?"

"Exactly," Catherine said, "Also I'm not just a Master Alchemist, Edward. I'm a Travelling Master Alchemist, and that is why I accepted that gig!"

"*I sometimes wonder how my younger self could even like you.*"

-0-

Eddie, Torrie, Markus and Catherine continued their journey northward. Sea of tall green grass sways rhythmically as a gentle breeze carried the scent of sea from the shore. Their shadows stretched long and lean under the waning sunlight. The land ahead gradually sloped upward, and as they crested a small hill, the forest of Deep Glaive came into view.

At first glance, it seemed like just a newly planted tree farm. A scattered cluster of saplings, small bushes, and a few modestly sized trees lined the edge.

Markus stopped and glanced around his surroundings.

"This is it, ma'am?" he asked, glancing at Catherine. "The infamous Deep Glaive... Doesn't seem so deep to me. Looks more like a glorified garden."

"That's because you're standing on the shallow end," Catherine replied.

"Shallow end? What's that supposed to mean?" Markus asked back

"The Deep Glaive isn't an ordinary forest." Catherine said, turning toward him, gesturing to the trees ahead.

"It's Illusory in nature, in a way. It mimics the ocean. The closer you stay to the edges, the smaller everything seems. But as you go deeper..." She trailed off, her gaze drifting to the horizon.

"What... happens as we go deeper?" Markus frowned.

"The trees grow larger. The creatures more dangerous. The forest doesn't just grow—it deepened," Catherine explained, her tone steady but laced with a hint of caution. "It's why they call it the Deep Glaive. You won't understand the depth of it until you're in the deep end."

"Great..." Markus sighed, "That's... comforting to hear."

"Don't worry, Markus." Eddie said, patting his friend on the back, "I'm sure we'll figure things out."

"If things go bad..." Eddie continued, "We have a certain Elf to sue."

"Not funny, Edward." Catherine said.

The group pressed onward, stepping into the forest's threshold. As they ventured deeper into the forest, the world around them grew quieter. Their footsteps and the distant calls of seabirds were the sounds they could hear. The path they had been following gave way to a darker earth. The green swaying grasses disappear beneath layers of dark earth. The group began approaching the middle of the Deep Glaive. The sun was now just a sliver on the horizon, casting the last rays of daylight through the trees. As they drew nearer, the forest ahead seemed almost unremarkable—a large cluster of trees, their branches swaying gently in the evening breeze. But as they crossed the threshold into the forest, the air seemed to shift.

It became cooler, denser, and more damp. The small, trees and saplings they saw before had passed, now the trees are taller, bigger and thicker. Their trunks twists, and their canopies stretched higher into the sky that began to get covered more and more. The underbrush, once sparse, now teemed with strange, luminescent flora, casting an otherworldly glow on the path ahead.

Eddie glanced at Markus, who was inspecting one of the emissive flowers clinging to a nearby trunk.

"Do you feel something?" Eddie asked.

"Yeah..." Markus replied. "The air is denser here... it's like swimming."

"That's one weird way to put it..." Eddie said, "But I agree with you."

Torrie trailed behind them. She looked up, craning her neck to take in the towering trees.

The barks of the trees spiraled skyward, their leaves forming an interwoven canopy so thick it blocked out the remnants of the sun light. Shadows danced across her freckled face, and her voice piped up, soft but curious.

"Is it night already?" Torrie asked, looking around.

"Not quite," Catherine said, who is in the front most of the group. Her apple-red hair shimmered faintly, catching the luminescence of the forest flora.

"The deeper we go, the larger the forest grows, remember?" Catherine continued, "The Deep Glaive is not just a place, but a world within itself. Like the ocean, it swells with depth. The trees grow taller because we're swimming deeper."

"So..." Torrie said as she looked around her, "Is it like we're walking into... another layer of reality?"

"You can say it like that," Catherine said, stepping forward again. "The Deep Glaive is an ancient place, shaped by elven spells older than any of us. Even myself. It doesn't follow the rules of the outside world."

"Older than you, huh?" Eddie interjected, "This thing must be pre-historic."

Markus chuckled softly as he joined Catherine, tapping the flask on his belt. "And yet, here we are, bringing mundane supplies into a place like this. It's humbling, isn't it?"

As they ventured further, the luminescent plants grew brighter, painting the towering trees in hues of blue and green. The hum grew louder, joined by faint rustlings in the dense underbrush. Shadows flickered at the edges of their vision, always just appearing in his peripheral.

"Are we in the center of the forest yet?" Torrie broke the silence.

"Not quite," Catherine said, gesturing toward the dense wall of trees ahead. "But we will be at The Gates in a few moment."

"The Gates?" Torrie echoed.

"The Gates to the forest's center." Catherine explained, "If you know where to look—and what to do—you can open them. And lucky for you... I just knew where to look and what to do."

"That is great Catherine but..." Eddie said as he adjusted the strap of his satchel and the rifle on his back, "How exactly do we 'open' them?"

"*Follow me,*" Catherine said, Leading the way forward.

Chapter 14

They walked for several hours into the forest. The trees ahead seemed to part, and Eddie noticed a faint, golden glow peeking through the gaps.

And then Catherine stopped abruptly.

"There it is!" Catherine stopped abruptly, Eddie, Markus and eventually Torrie bumped into her like a domino. She pointed toward the center of the clearing.

"What?!" Eddie hissed, looking annoyed. "You could've told us to stop, you know—"

"We have arrived at the gate!" Catherine said with a glee.

As Eddie stepped to the side to look at what in front of Catherine, he saw it.

At the heart of the space was a patch of delicate yellow flowers, their petals arranged in a near-perfect circle. They seemed to shimmer faintly, catching and reflecting light that wasn't visible to the naked eye.

"Whoa," Eddie finally said in awe, "I think I've seen those before."

"Of course you have," Catherine said with a smirk, "These are Eden Flowers!"

The group then gets closer to the clearing, as they arrive at the clearing, the darkness began to encapsulate them, save for the faint glow of the Eden Flowers at their center.

"Eden Flowers," Catherine murmured, kneeling beside them. Her hands brushed lightly over the petals, careful not to disturb their fragile beauty. "I didn't think I'd find them here of all places."

Torrie dropped to her knees beside Catherine, "Are they a special flower, Aunt Catherine?" she asked, her voice filled with wonder.

"They are here," Catherine said, "But not in a city called Edenfield where they're from. But in ancient times, they were widely cultivated. Eden Flowers are incredibly receptive to magic—ideal for enchantments, alchemical transmutations, and even energy storage. These might have been planted centuries ago, perhaps by Sage Consurion himself."

"The namesake of the city of Edenfield too, right?" Eddie said, sombre.

"You are correct," Catherine replied, her voice tinged with admiration. "This was his legacy. A flower that could shape entire eras of magic. And now... we need them to guide us through this place."

She stood, brushing the dirt from her white dress's skirt. "I'll prepare a transmutation circle to reveal a safe path. But first, I'll need light. The process will eliminate the glow of the Eden Flowers for a few minutes."

"Yeah, I think we got some flashlight," Eddie glanced at Markus. "Do you have it on you, Mark?"

"Oh, sure." Markus said, then tapped at his jacket, then at his satchel...

Then his backpack... his expression is grim as he looked back to Eddie,

"Damn it. I think I left it back at the brewing room."

"You're joking."

"Sorry." Markus scratched the back of his head, his sheepish grin doing little to help. "I thought the forest would provide enough glow."

"Well," Catherine sighed, "Maybe a few moments of darkness wouldn't hurt, does it?"

"But I'm afraid of the dark!" Torrie plead, "Also what if there is a monster behind us?!"

"Look it's alright, Torrie." Eddie said, putting his hand on Torrie's shoulder

"Alright..." Catherine said, "Here I go..."

Catherine took her staff and pierced it to the dirt below, her staff tracing elegant, sweeping arcs across the ground. Her movements fluid like dances, as she wove intricate patterns into the soil.

The transmutation circle began to take shape, an intricate fusion of artistry and precision. The elven language spiraled outward.

Interwoven with the runes were geometric designs of a distinctly foreign origin, their angular lines and curved edges forming a perfect harmony with the fluid Elven script. It was a style originating from the Far East, known for its symmetry and balance, and it added an otherworldly mysticism to the circle.

The group watched Catherine at work in silence, the clearing lit only by the fading glow of the Eden Flowers.

Torrie stood close to Eddie, her hands gripping the edge of his coat tightly. Her wide eyes darted nervously to the growing shadows around them, the encroaching darkness pressing in like a living thing.

"I don't like this," Torrie whispered, her voice trembling. "It's too dark. What if something's out there?"

Eddie glanced down at his little sister. Her fear palpable; the way her fingers clutched his coat. She was trying to be brave, but the darkness seemed to stretch endlessly around them, and the faint rustle of leaves only deepened her unease.

Sensing her fear, Eddie sighed. Torrie is always afraid of the dark, there is no other way to get light it seems.

"Fine," Eddie sighed. "I've got this."

He reached into Torrie's backpack, pulling out a wand that had been tucked away among her belongings. The wood was plain, its surface worn smooth from years of use, but as Eddie held it, a faint warmth spread through his fingers, familiar and comforting.

He focused on the gunpowder he carried on his other satchel, channeling its latent energy into the spell.

A small flame ignited at the tip of the wand, flickering and dancing in the growing darkness. The warm, golden light illuminated Torrie's face, chasing away the shadows and softening the lines of worry etched across her features.

"There," Eddie said, holding the wand low next to Torrie. The firelight illuminated Torrie and the flowers, "Happy now?"

Torrie nodded quickly, her grip on his coat loosening. "Yeah... thanks," she said softly, her voice still a little shaky but steadier than before.

The firelight cast dancing shadows across their faces and glinted off the edges of Catherine's transmutation circle.

Catherine paused, stepping back to admire her handiwork with a satisfied smile. The flowers themselves seemed to shimmer faintly, their golden hues complementing the firelight of Eddie's spell.

"You've still got it, huh?" Markus taps his elbow towards Eddie.

"It's just a light." Eddie shrugged, avoiding Markus's gaze. "Torrie's scared of the dark, and nobody else had one handy."

Catherine clapped her hands, drawing their attention back to her. "Alright, folks," she said. "It's going to be dark for a while, so stick close."

She knelt at the center of the intricately etched transmutation circle, her staff resting lightly across her knees.

She closed her eyes, inhaling deeply as the clearing fell silent.

Rustling leaves and distant chirps fading into an almost oppressive quiet.

For a moment, it seemed as though nothing would happen.

Then, subtly at first, the glow of the surrounding Eden Flowers began to dim. Their golden radiance, a natural luminescence that had lit the forest edge, flickered faintly before extinguishing one by one.

The clearing plunged into total darkness, save for the flickering orange light of Eddie's wand, its fire casting long, shifting shadows over the group and the inert circle.

Torrie clung to Eddie's arm, her wide eyes darting nervously around the shadowed clearing.

But then, a faint hum broke through the darkness—a deep, resonant vibration that seemed to pulse from the earth itself.

The Eden Flowers' glow began to return, but not to their blossoms. Instead, their golden light streamed toward the transmutation circle, like threads of liquid light weaving their way into its grooves and runes.

A wave of energy burst outward from Catherine's transmutation circle, a ripple of power that swept over the clearing, rustling the leaves and sending a chill upwards.

At first Eddie was wondering what those forces was, why is it coming seemingly from underneath the transmutation circle?

But then he remembered, it was mana.

The runes etched into the dirt ignited, glowing with an otherworldly golden glow that once emitted from the Eden Flowers.

Catherine remained still at the center, her posture serene even as the manas enveloped her. Her short, apple-red hair began to rise, defying gravity as if lifted by an unseen force.

The light of the circle reflected in her closed eyes, and her expression was one of deep concentration, her connection to the magic undeniable.

The glow reached its zenith, the clearing bathed in shimmering golden light, before it began to subside. The runes dimmed.

Their golden glow ebbing away until the circle was dark once more. The clearing returned to the stillness it once was, the only light now coming from Eddie's spell.

"Eddie, look!" Torrie said, pointing to the dark bushes ahead.

Eddie looks towards the spot she pointed, then, just as quickly as the glow had faded, a new light appeared.

It was soft, golden, and steady. A single Eden Flower ahead of them began to glow again, brighter than before.

Another followed.

Then another.

The blossoms igniting one by one in a line that stretched forward into the dark forest.

The flowers formed two parallel rows, their light creating a luminous pathway that cut through the shadows.

In the center of the now-dormant transmutation circle, the Eden Flower glowed softly, its light flickering before returning to its natural state.

Catherine opened her eyes and took in the sight before her, a wide smile spreading across her face.

"The Forest has granted us safe passage through the Traveller's Path," she said, her voice brimming with satisfaction and awe.

She rose gracefully, brushing dirt from her dress's white skirt.

"What are we waiting for?"

Chapter 15

For the first time after Eddie entered the forest, he felt safer. The ground below crunch as he made through his way along the Traveller's Path. Torrie and Markus was up ahead, marvelling the surroundings beyond the Traveller's Path. They are at the heart of the Deep Glaive now, they are at the deep end, as Catherine puts it, it's like the depth of the oceans, and it shows.

Catherine walks behind Torrie and Markus, but in front of Eddie, she doesn't seem to be marvelled by the sight of the enormous forest, she just strolled through the Travellers Path as if it was a walk in the park.

As they walk deeper and deeper. The trees grew thicker and taller as they go. Their trunks now as thick as a castle's tower, the barks gnarled and ancient.

Eddie looked up, following the bark's reach above, only to find that the clouds had swallowed them before it could reach the heavens.

The thick canopy above had sealed them from the skylight, occasionally streams of moonlight passes through the heavy canopy, only to be swallowed by the darkness below.

"Alright, folks. We will be stopping here." Catherine said, stretching her arms, "We should arrive at the Heart of the Deep Glaive—the deepest, most ancient part of the Illusory Forest itself. We can rest here for now."

"Yay!" Torrie exclaimed, "Can I go exploring now, Aunt Catherine?"

"You may," Catherine said, "But don't go over the Eden Flowers, Torrie. You don't want to be snatched up by whatever creatures in here don't you?"

Torrie nodded, then went off.

"You too can go on explore too, you know?" Catherine glanced to Eddie and Markus with a teasing expression, "Adventures are not just for sightseeing."

Eddie and Markus exchanged a glance

"Alright then," Eddie said, "Let's go Mark, We can get something for the apothecary."

Eddie and Markus then off wandering, keeping close enough to stay within sight of the glowing Eden Flowers. They marvelled at the unique vegetation that thrived on the massive tree trunks.

Vivid green mosses with faint silver veins, delicate flowers that shimmered with an iridescent glow, and clusters of mushrooms that emitted soft blue light.

"Whoa... this is incredible..." Eddie said to himself. "These are Everglow Mushrooms. And that moss... it's Silverweave. These are rare—used for potent healing potions and wounds regenerations."

Markus then leaned closer. "You're right, this is worth a fortune."

“Catherine?” Eddie called, “Can we pick these? Please tell me we can pick these.”

Catherine though, seemed distracted, she is looking at the paths ahead, then to the dark abyss on the sides, as if looking for something.

“Catherine?”

“Yeah?” Catherine jolted

“I was asking whether can we pick the plants here, just making sure it’s not cursed or something.”

“Of course not, it’s not cursed,” Catherine chuckled, “Take as much as you like! As long as it’s withing the paths of course, just don’t stray over it.”

That was all the confirmation Eddie needed. He and Markus began gathering the rare ingredients, their earlier fatigue forgotten in their excitement.

As Eddie and Markus gathered ingredients, Torrie sat cross-legged on the side of the path, her attention captured by the Eden Flowers. She plucked a few blooms, weaving them together into a delicate crown. The golden light of the flowers reflected onto her face as she placed the crown on her head.

“How do I look?” she asked, turning to show Eddie, and Markus.

Markus chuckled. “Like the queen of the forest.”

“Don’t let it go to your head, Torrie.” Eddie added, “The queen shall never let go of her crown!”

Torrie responded with a laugh, The party seemed to relax for the first time since their journey began. The forest, once so foreboding, now felt welcoming, even protective.

For now, all seemed well.

After filling their satchels with rare Ingredients, Eddie, and Markus settled back to the Traveller’s Path, joining Torrie.

When Eddie and Markus joined her at the side of the Traveller’s Path, Torrie puts two of the Eden Flower crowns on top of Markus and Eddie, he could see to that Catherine also had one in her head, and Torrie didn’t seem to be stopping making the crowns.

“And now I shall pronounce you King of the Deep Glaive!” Torrie said with a flourish.

“Don’t you hear that, Ed? We’re kings now!” Markus joked.

“A kingdom doesn’t have two kings, Torrie.” Eddie said back, “If me and Markus are Kings, and you are the Queen, that what you make of Catherine then?”

Torrie then stopped and thinks, and then her face lit up with mischief.

“Aunt Catherine would be the irresponsible Princess!”

Eddie and Markus then burst into a laugh, The air seemed to lighten.

Eddie's gaze lingered on Catherine thinking she would make witty response to Torrie's joke, it is weird that she seemed very occupied. She stood apart from the group, her hand clutching something—a map, Eddie realised her frustrated expression.

Shouldn't she be pleased? Happy? The fact that they made it safely to the heart of the Deep Glaive? They conquered the Illusory, after all. Shouldn't that be a reason to be happy in this scenario?

Then, out of the blue, Eddie recalled something...

It hit him like a blast of cold air. The conversation they'd had a few nights ago, outside the Swordfish Pub, rushed back to him.

She isn't here for rare ingredients.

She isn't here for adventures.

She is here for an ancient artefact.

Eddie swallowed, watching her as she folded the map, the parchment old and weathered, its edges frayed and stained with dirt. She folded it, then unfolded it again and again, once in a while looking over the abyss beyond the Traveller's Path.

Catherine then walked to the edge of the Traveller's Path just next to Eddie. Her gaze was overlooking the abyss in front of her, the seeming darkness that enveloped the Illusory forest, as if searching something beyond its darkness.

Looking at her, Eddie stood up and looked to the direction Catherine is gazing.

"Catherine?..." Eddie began, "You alright? You seemed really occupied."

"We didn't arrive where I thought we would..." Catherine said almost whispering, "We were off a couple metres... this can't be good."

"What do you mean?" Eddie frowned, glancing at the map. "We are at the Heart of the Deep Glaive isn't it? Isn't this... where you wanted to be?"

Catherine lets out a frustrated sigh. She tapped a spot on the map, near a series of intricate symbols. "The Traveler's Path doesn't lead directly to the ruins I was hoping to explore."

"I thought it might cross through, but... it doesn't." Catherine continued, turning her gaze toward the abyss beyond the glowing Eden Flowers. "The ruins are only a few meters off the path. Not far."

"I'm going over."

Eddie stared at her, his pupils dilating in panic, did he heard her correctly? Didn't she just said a few moments ago to Not go beyond the safety of the Eden Flowers? Is this the same person who just gave that advice?

"Catherine..." Eddie said, his eyes piercing towards Catherine, *"Are you fucking crazy?"*

Chapter 16

“Crazy?...” Catherine asked back, now looking back at Eddie, her eyes pierced him back. “Do I look crazy to you?”

“Yes!” Eddie groaned, “Yes you are! You’re talking about stepping into the darkness with whatever creatures that howled when we walk here! You said it yourself, Catherine! It’s dangerous to go beyond the Eden Flowers!”

“This time it’s different Edward.” Catherine said with determination, “I didn’t come all this way to turn back now... that Artefact is out there, Edward, the ruins aren’t far—“

“Forget the artefact!” Eddie said, “We are talking about risking your life for just... a piece of history, Catherine! Let’s just go back, and get more people or something!”

Catherine then stayed silent,

“Do you even know what the Artefact is, Edward? The significance of it.”

“No, and I don’t think it worth sacrificing your life over.”

“The Artefact is Codex Chilandar.” Catherine said, “The Alchemical Codex rumored to contain the secret of transmuting the matter of a living being.”

Eddie stood there... His breath caught in his throat, his mind scrambling to process what he had just heard. His lips parted, but no words came out. His body tensed, arms stiff at his sides, fingers twitching as if trying to grasp something solid—something real—to ground himself against the absurdity of Catherine’s claim.

“Isn’t that... impossible? T-that's something bordering Necromancy.”

"I can assure you, it is not Necromancy." Catherine said, turning her gaze towards the abyss again, “Not according to the rumor circulating about that codex...”

“I can’t let that go to the wrong hands...” Catherine continued, “Especially with that rumors spreading.”

"You’re seriously going to risk it?"

Catherine folded the map, tucking it into her coat’s pocket.

"I am," she said simply. "You can stay here if you want. I understand."

Her words stung. He didn’t want to admit that the thought of leaving the safety of the path terrified him, but the idea of letting her wander into danger alone was somehow worse.

Before Eddie could say anything, Markus stood up.

His movements slow, but deliberate, as he dusted off his hands and adjusted the satchel of ingredients he’d been collecting.

"I'll go with her," Markus said, his voice calm but resolute.

Both Eddie and Catherine turned to him in surprise.

"What?" Eddie asked, blinking.

"You clearly don't want to go, I get it." Markus shrugged, stepping closer. "This place gives me the creeps too. But I'm not about to let Miss Catherine go out there alone. Someone's got to watch her back."

"You don't even know what's out there,"

"Neither do you." Markus responded, "But someone's got to keep her out of trouble"

Markus extended a hand toward Eddie. "Come on, Ed. Hand it over. If I'm going into uncharted ruins with her, I'm going armed."

Eddie hesitated, the weight of his flintlock rifle suddenly feeling heavier. His instincts told him to hold onto it.

"Come on, Ed." Markus's gaze softened, "Let me do something for you at least once. You can't be the hero all the time, can you?"

Markus's unwavering gaze—and the quiet determination behind his easygoing demeanor—made him think twice.

"Fine," Eddie said reluctantly, finally handing the rifle over, along with the satchel of metal balls and gunpowder. "Just... don't waste all the gunpowders trying to hit trees, alright?"

"Don't worry. I will not miss." Markus took the rifle with a small smile, slinging the rifle over his shoulder.

Eddie chuckled, then watched as Markus turned to Catherine.

"Thank you Markus." Catherine said with sincerity, "I'll make sure to watch your back."

"That's my job ma'am," Markus chuckled, "You just focus on your treasure ahead of ya!"

Catherine chuckled. The two exchanged a brief glance of understanding, and then, without another word, they stepped off the safety of the Traveler's Path.

The golden glow of the Eden Flowers illuminated their silhouettes for a few paces before the dense forest swallowed them.

The faint crunch of their boots against the underbrush grew quieter, until it was lost entirely to the eerie silence of the Heart of the Deep Glaive.

Eddie stood motionless, his hands now felt significantly lighter, the weight of what had just happened settling over him like a heavy cloak. Torrie, oblivious to the gravity of the situation, was still playing with her flower crown a few paces away.

For a long moment, Eddie stared after them, a deep unease gnawing at his stomach.

What if they don't come back?

Chapter 17

As Markus and Catherine went outside the perimeter of the Eden Flowers, Eddie and Torrie settled down at the side of the Traveller's Path. The glowing Eden Flowers cast a gentle, golden light over the path, creating a serene atmosphere amidst the dense darkness of the Deep Glaive.

Eddie sat with his elbows resting on his knees, absently watching the slow sway of the glowing flowers. Beside him, Torrie's small fingers moved with delicate precision, weaving the blossoms into a crown. She worked with quiet focus, her brows furrowed in concentration, but every now and then, she stole glances at her brother.

"So, Torrie," Eddie began, filling the silence. "How do you feel about seeing Catherine again?"

Torrie glanced up, twisting the final stem into place.

"I'm happy." She said, "Not every day you meet someone with so much knowledge and experience. Aunt Catherine has travelled far and studied so much. Being able to learn from her is fascinating."

"Yeah," Eddie flashed a smile "it's... good to see her again."

Torrie's smile remained, but something about it was off—too small, too polite. She studied him for a moment before tilting her head.

"And what about you? How do you feel about meeting her again?"

"It's alright."

"Just that?" Torrie's fingers stilled on the flower crown. Her voice was light, but there was something searching in it, something cautious. "Nothing else fascinates you about her return?"

Eddie hesitated, shifting where he sat. The glow of the flowers reflected in his eyes, but there was something distant about them.

"It's just... seeing her again is... cool... She's awesome." Eddie replied. He glanced at Torrie, whose previously bright demeanour had now shifted to something more serious.

Torrie's eyes searched his face, her gaze intense. "Are you telling me that's all there is to it? You don't feel anything else about her returning after all this time?"

Eddie shifted uncomfortably. "It's not like that. I just... I don't know."

Torrie's smile had vanished entirely, replaced by a frown of concern and confusion. "Eddie, I thought you'd be more... interested. You used to look up to her so much when we were young!"

Eddie's jaw tensed, his eyes flicking toward the trees. "Maybe... I don't know," he muttered.

Torrie's fingers paused mid-motion with the flower crown, her face a mask of frustration and somewhat hurt.

The Eden Flowers glowed softly. Their light cast long shadows that danced across their faces. The once-comforting glow now seemed to highlight the distance growing between them.

Finally, Torrie let out a breath. "If you're not interested..." She hesitated, then turned her gaze back to him, firm and unrelenting.

"Why are you even here?"

-0-

Moonlight pierced through the dense canopy of the Deep Glaive, casting jagged patterns across the forest floor. Twisted vines and ancient trees loomed like sentinels, their gnarled forms seeming almost alive in the shifting light. The forest was oppressively silent, broken only by the occasional rustle of leaves and the distant, haunting call of some unseen creature.

Catherine walked through the darkness of the forest, lit up by a white glow she conjured from her staff, Markus is following behind her, his grip tight on Eddie's flintlock rifle. The weapon was raised, its polished barrel glinting faintly in the pale light. Every whisper of movement sent his heart racing, his eyes darting toward every shadow. At the slightest rustle of a bush, the rifle twitched in his hands, his finger hovering dangerously close to the trigger.

"You haven't answered my question, Markus." Catherine said, her eyes still forward.

"Look, ma'am. I'm here because Eddie clearly don't want to!" Markus groaned, "In fact, I'm clearly a better shot than he is!"

"But you clearly looked scared," Catherine said, brushing the bushes out of her way with her staff, "You're holding that thing like we're about to be ambushed by an army of bandits."

"Easy for you to say, ma'am!" Markus lowered the rifle but kept it ready. "You've got magic and stuff! And you're like.. Elven! I'm just a fisherman's son and I've only got only this—and it's not exactly comforting." He gave the rifle a wary look as if it might betray him at any moment.

"We'll be fine." Catherine said, her voice quiet but steady. "I've been through worse, believe me. And I promise you, we won't be facing it alone if anything comes at us. Beasts this centuries tend to be much more smaller in size, so it will be a piece of cake."

“Alright,” he muttered. “One centuries old or one week old, I’m still keeping this thing ready.”

They continued deeper into the forest. The silence between them seemed to press in even closer, distant howls and rustles of bushes are the only thing they could hear, the darkness growing thicker. Catherine kept her senses sharp, but sensing Markus’s unease, she knows he needed something to keep his mind off his surroundings.

“You know,” she began, her tone conversational, “I used to visit Eddie’s home a lot when he was younger. We’d go adventuring in ancient dungeons, exploring caves and abandoned ruins. But an illusory forest is definitely first for me in ages.”

“Really?” Markus glanced at her, his face pale. “Yeah, I remember Eddie used to talk a lot about his adventures in the dungeons, that was what made him quite popular at school.”

“Was he now?” Catherine chuckled. “Eddie was always the first to stray off the path, treading the path uncharted. He was always adventurous, seeking new experiences, no matter the danger.”

She paused. “We got ourselves into trouble more times than I can count. But no matter what, Eddie always seemed to enjoy the risk of it. Alfred and I had to pull him out of danger more times than I’d like to admit.”

“Yeah...” Markus exhaled, his breath slow, measured. “That sounds like him,” he murmured. “That was the Eddie I remember. He was reckless, always pushing the limits. Even when he was in school.”

Catherine frowned slightly at his tone. “You talk as if we’re speaking about two different people. What’s the matter with Eddie now?”

“Eddie now...” Markus sighed, “He seems different. He doesn’t seem like the same person.”

Catherine slowed her pace, turning to look at him fully. “Different?” she echoed, the warmth from before ebbing away. “How so?”

“Didn’t you know he was expelled?”

Chapter 18

“I had no idea...” Catherine voice barely rose above a whisper. “Eddie never spoke about it. I’ve always wondered why he seemed so distant.”

Markus let out a slow breath, his shoulders sagging. “It was a turning point for him. He became cold—cut off from everything he was passionate about. From that point on, he believed Alchemy was black magic. He burned all of his textbooks, got rid of his uniform—” Markus swallowed. “It’s like he tried to erase that part of himself.”

He hesitated, his voice quieter now. “That’s why... I’m here.” His fingers tightened on the wooden stock of the flintlock. “Because at least—I want to give back to him. To show him that he doesn’t have to throw himself into danger for my sake anymore. That someone else can protect him or anyone he cares and loves. For once.”

“You’re a brave one, Markus.” Catherine said, smiling. “You definitely have a mark of a knight.”

Catherine and Markus ventured further, guided by the lights of Catherine’s staff. The dense forest gradually thinned, revealing scattered fragments of stone.

At first, just a few half-buried columns, their faded white surfaces cracked and leaning, worn down by time. The air grew heavier, thick with the scent of damp earth.

As they ventured deeper, the ruins around them became more distinct. More columns lay toppled, some broken in half, others standing in defiance of centuries past. Then, beyond a ridge, the remnants of a vast structure emerged—a ruin far greater than the scattered fragments before.

Its once mighty walls stood in defiance, their surfaces adorned with creeping vines and twisted roots. Whatever this place had been, nature had not only reclaimed it—it had consumed it, growing through the stone like a slow and patient conqueror.

Markus abruptly stopped, his grip tightening on the flintlock rifle. His gaze landed on a stone sign, half-buried in the dirt. The faint, scorched lettering was written in an unfamiliar, elegant script.

Catherine stepped closer, brushing some of the dirt away with her gloved hand. Her eyes traced the symbols carefully. “It’s Elvish,” she murmured. “‘Bastion of Craemonia.’”

Markus let out a slow breath. “Bastion, huh?” His voice was dry, uneasy. “Doesn’t feel very bastion-like to me.” He swept his gaze over the ruins, rifle raised slightly, as if the shadows themselves might lunge at them.

“What is this place, anyway?” Markus continued.

“Just like the sign said, It’s Craemonia...” Catherine answered, “The Bastion of Craemonia. This was an elven stronghold, built under the reign of Emperor Nocturnilus the Conqueror.”

“His empire reaches far at the time,” Catherine stepped forward, her staff tapping against the stones as she walked. “Weshaven might be a small island, but he probably had found some use for it. And he used this bastion as a research outpost... for Alchemy.”

“Alchemy?” Markus raised an eyebrow. “But I thought Elves had already known Magic at that time. Like y’know... Conjunction, Illusions... Alchemy.”

“Oh yes we did, we have everything Magic has to offer... All but Alchemy,” Catherine confirmed. “It remained a mystery for us, Alchemy came from the nomadic tribes of the eastern dunes. At the time, the Elves hadn’t discovered it yet. Emperor Nocturnilus was determined to unlock its secrets before the mortals and the dwarves.”

“So...” Markus frowned. “What happened?”

“If you read your history books, you should know that Nocturnilus’s reign collapsed, the once solitary Elven community integrated with the mortals, they had forgotten and lost faith to their Emperor.” Catherine’s steps slowed. She looked up at the ruined bastion. “But the remnant of his conquest lay littered across the continents, like this one here. And whatever he discovered... it wasn’t Alchemy.”

A breeze stirred the overgrown foliage, whispering through the ruins like a voice lost in time. Markus exhaled sharply. “Then... What is it?”

But Catherine stayed silent...

The road ahead narrowed as they reached the outer walls—vast, towering things that still bore the remnants of intricate carvings. Beyond them, deeper in the ruins, loomed what remained of the Bastion’s inner sanctum.

“Yeah... I really don’t like this place, Miss Catherine.” Markus adjusted his rifle uneasily. “You’re sure this is where we need to be?”

“This is the place.” Catherine nodded, her eyes fixed on the ruin. “The Codex may be still inside.” She paused, then added, “If it’s still here.”

Markus groaned, lowering the rifle enough to look at her. “If it’s still here? Great. We came all this way for a maybe.”

“Not just a maybe.” Catherine smirked faintly. “A once-in-a-lifetime, maybe. There’s a difference.”

Markus shook his head, muttering under his breath as he adjusted his grip on the rifle. “Now I get it why Eddie don’t want to go.”

The mossy pavement wound between crumbling archways and open courtyards, as Catherine and Markus made their way.

Step by step, the ruins revealed themselves. Beyond the fallen columns and collapsed archways, a massive structure came into view. The grand edifice stood partially intact, its vast stone walls weathered but unyielding. To the right, another building loomed, connected by a ruined hallway. The skeletal remains of a shattered dome crowned the secondary structure, and within its collapsed roof, an enormous telescope lay broken and rusting, its once-polished frame now dulled by time.

Markus let out a low whistle. “That’s... not what I expected.”

Catherine stopped beside him, her gaze sweeping over the structures. “This is the Aeron Laboratory.” Her voice carried a quiet awe. “Named after Aeron, one of the Nine Sages of Enlightenment. But before he became a Sage, this was his laboratory.”

Markus eyed the ruins warily. “And what exactly was he researching?”

Catherine exhaled slowly. “Alchemy. Or at least... that was the intention.”

They crossed the threshold into the ruined laboratory. The temperature seemed to drop as they stepped inside. The roof had caved in long ago, and moonlight streamed through the gaps, illuminating rows of tarnished silver equipment. Alembics, retorts, and distillation coils still lined the cracked stone tables, their glass components shattered into jagged remnants on the floor. A thick layer of dust coated everything, disturbed only by the occasional shift of wind.

“This was a laboratory?” Markus muttered. “Doesn’t look like much now.”

Catherine stepped forward, brushing dust off a silver alembic, its once-polished surface dulled with age. “It was more than that,” she said. “Aeron was one of Nocturnilus’s chief researcher. This was his work.”

Markus shot her a look. “Nocturnilus’s? You mean the same Nocturnilus who tried to conquer half the world? I didn’t expect they had worked together.”

Catherine nodded. “Before he saw the truth of what he was serving.” She ran a hand over a series of faded engravings on the wall. “Aeron was a scholar, fascinated with the nature of Alchemy—back when the Elves knew nothing about it. Nocturnilus wanted him to uncover its secrets, to wield it as a tool of power. But... something changed.”

Markus frowned. “What do you mean, ‘changed’?”

“He left,” she said quietly. “Abandoned his work. Abandoned this place. He never spoke of what he found here.”

Markus exhaled, scanning the ruined lab once more. The broken equipment, the fractured ceiling, the eerie quiet. “So whatever he discovered...” He gestured around them. “It wasn’t Alchemy.”

Catherine didn’t answer.

The wind stirred through the open roof, rustling the overgrown foliage. Somewhere in the ruins, something shifted—stone settling, or perhaps something else.

Catherine tore her gaze away from the wall, stepping back from the runes. “Let’s find what we came for.”

The arching corridor led them forward, deeper into the ruined bastion. The white stone walls narrowed, then expanded into a vast, open chamber. As Catherine and Markus stepped through the threshold, their breath caught at the sight before them.

The Grand Hall of the Observatory stretched wide, its ceiling once a magnificent dome, now fractured and open to the night sky. Jagged remnants of the collapsed telescope loomed above, its broken frame catching the silver light of the moon. The glow filtered through the shattered structure, casting long, spectral beams onto the marble floor. Dust swirled in the air, dancing in the pale luminescence.

At the center of the hall, standing alone beneath the celestial glow, was the lectern.

It was ancient, carved from the same pale stone as the bastion itself. Intricate elven engravings ran along its sides, whispering of knowledge long forgotten. And resting atop it, bathed in the moon’s embrace, was a book—its leather cover faded, its gilded edges worn with time.

Catherine’s steps were slow, deliberate. Her fingers hovered over the tome before she lifted it with a reverence reserved for something sacred. The weight of history pressed against her palms.

She turned the first page, then another, eyes sweeping over the delicate, curling script within. The scent of aged parchment filled the air as she flipped through its contents, scanning, absorbing.

Then, at last, she stilled. A slow, satisfied exhale escaped her lips.

Catherine turned to Markus, her eyes gleaming with something between triumph and awe.

“This is it,” she whispered, her voice carrying through the grand hall like a proclamation. Her fingers traced the worn title inscribed within.

“Codex Chilandar.”

Catherine stood still, her fingers lingering on the worn pages of the Codex, her heart still steady from the thrill of discovery.

Then—something shifted.

A flicker. A whisper of movement.

The moonlight, so pristine only moments before, dimmed—just for an instant. As if something vast and unseen had passed before it.

Catherine’s breath caught. She turned sharply, eyes scanning the ruined chamber.

“What was that?” Markus whispered. His grip tightened around the flintlock rifle as his instincts flared. He raised the barrel, eyes darting to the shadows. Nothing moved. Nothing stirred. And yet—

A distant creak. A soft, falling pebble.

Then—

With a deafening roar, the ceiling above them shattered.

White stone and rusted metal rained down as the remnants of the collapsed dome gave way. A monstrous form plunged through the fractured sky, wings of shadow unfurling with a terrible force. Dust and debris surged outward in a choking storm.

Catherine staggered back, the impact tearing her from her thoughts. Her hands slipped—the Codex tumbled from her grasp, landing with a hollow thud before the lectern.

Markus fired. The shot rang out, the flash of gunpowder illuminating the chaos for an instant—then fading uselessly against the dark, scaled hide of the beast.

The creature stood before them now, massive and inescapable. Dark wings unfurled, their jagged edges slicing through the settling dust. A maw lined with glistening fangs parted, exhaling a deep, shuddering breath that smelled of ash and decay.

And between its taloned feet, the Codex lay, untouched.

“Markus, go.” Her voice was firm, urgent.

He didn’t lower the rifle. “I’m not leaving you.”

Catherine’s eyes flicked between him and the dragon.

“Markus,” she snapped. “I can handle this. But not with you in the way.”

He clenched his jaw. “I can help—”

“You’ll die!”

The words cut through the air sharper than any blade.

Markus stiffened.

Catherine’s expression softened, just slightly. “Go back to the Traveller’s Path, get to Eddie and Torrie.” Her voice lowered, urgent but not unkind. “I need you out of here. Now.”

Markus hesitated. “Catherine—”

“I have lived longer than you and your entire lineage combined.” She took a step forward, her staff firm in her grip. “I know what I’m doing.”

The dragon inhaled sharply.

Markus cursed under his breath. His fingers twitched against the rifle. He stole one last glance at her. Then—

He turned and ran.

The Grand Hall trembled behind him as the beast let out a bone-rattling snarl. The last thing he saw before vanishing through the broken archway was Catherine, standing firm, facing the creature alone.

Chapter 19

“Look, Torrie. It’s not that it doesn’t fascinate me,” Eddie said finally, his voice strained. “There’s just... nothing else to discuss. I don’t know what else to say about her.”

“You used to be so eager to meet Aunt Catherine!” Her eyes narrowed. Her voice rose, “You’d spend hours talking about her, sharing everything you learned from her with me. Now, you act like she’s just another stranger. She noticed it, too. Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Look, Torrie...” Eddie’s face flushed, his patience wearing thin. He shook his head, frustrated by her insistence. “It’s not that simple. You don’t understand—”

“Don’t I?!” Torrie’s voice cracked as she cut him off. Her whole body trembled, but she stood her ground. “Don’t I understand what happened that day? The day Mom and Dad were called to your school out of nowhere? The day you left home grinning, rambling about alchemy like always, and then came back—” Her breath hitched. “Looking like something inside you had died!?”

Eddie flinched.

Torrie’s voice wavered, but she pressed on, desperate. “You used to be passionate about Alchemy, Eddie. You used to talk about it like it was everything. You looked up to Aunt Catherine like she was some kind of hero—even though you hadn’t seen her in years. Even though it would take decades before you got to meet her again, you still dreamed about it! You were going to share your research with her, show her everything you’d learned.”

Her hands trembled. “But now you’re just... empty.”

Silence hung between them, heavy, suffocating.

“Don’t you feel bad for her, Ed?” Her voice cracked, raw with emotion. “Alchemy used to be your life. You used to dream about it. Chase it. And now you just—” She sucked in a shuddering breath. “Now you act like it’s nothing.”

She wiped at her face with the sleeve of her coat, her shoulders rising and falling as she struggled to keep control.

“What happened to you?!”

Eddie's jaw clenched. His fingers curled into fists. His whole body tensed like a wire stretched too tight.

Then—

“Enough!” he shouted.

Eddie stood up, looking at Torrie, “You want to know what happened? Do you?”

Torrie swallowed, her lips parting as if to speak, but no words came out.

Eddie let out a bitter laugh, shaking his head. “Fine. You want the truth? Here it is.”

His hands trembled at his sides, but he forced himself to keep talking. The words came spilling out, like a wound torn open.

“Back at Aella Academy... when I was still a student there...” His hands curled tighter, fingernails digging into his palms. “I’ve got a classmate named Davies. Arrogant, cruel—he had everything handed to him, and he liked to remind people of it.”

“He especially liked tormenting Markus.... And Markus wasn’t as adept at magic as the rest of us. He was an easy target. And I was the only one who gave a damn about it.”

He took a step forward, his voice rising. “I didn’t fit in either. I didn’t try to. But Markus... He was my friend. My only real friend.”

He looked away, as if the memory was too much to face. “One day, Davies pushed too far. He cornered Markus, humiliated him—said he was leeching off me, that he had no right to even be there. He challenged Markus to a duel, knowing damn well he couldn’t win.”

Torrie’s lips parted slightly, but she said nothing. She just listened.

Eddie let out a ragged breath. “He never stood a chance. And I—I couldn’t just stand there. I was so goddamn angry, so sick of Davies, so tired of the way he tore people down just because he could.” His voice cracked, but he forced himself to go on. “So I challenged him instead.”

He turned away for a moment, as if he couldn’t bear to look at her. “Davies laughed in my face. He was a Conjunction student—everyone knew Alchemy wasn’t suited for dueling. I should’ve lost.” He let out a shaky exhale. “I should’ve lost.”

Silence stretched between them, thick and suffocating.

Torrie’s hands trembled at her sides. “But you didn’t.”

Eddie’s jaw tightened. His throat ached, his vision blurred. He forced himself to meet her gaze.

“No,” he said, barely above a whisper. “I didn’t.”

His breath hitched, and he turned his hands over, staring at them as if they still carried the weight of that moment. “I don’t even know how it happened. One second, I was transmuting, trying to redirect his attack, and the next—” His voice faltered. He shut his eyes, as if he could block out the memory, but it was burned into him.

“His face,” Eddie whispered, the horror creeping back into his voice. “Half of it was gone.”

Torrie’s breath caught in her throat.

“There was nothing left but burns and warped flesh. His screams—” Eddie stopped himself, his whole body shuddering. “There was no coming back from it. And after that, I was expelled.”

The word hung in the air like a sentence passed down in a courtroom.

“The Aella Council called it black magic,” he muttered, his voice hollow. “Said what I did was unnatural, dangerous. That I should’ve lost. That expelling me was easier than letting it turn into a scandal.”

Eddie let out a bitter laugh, but there was no humor in it. “And you know what the worst part is?” He looked up at Torrie, his eyes dark, haunted. “I don’t even know if they were wrong.”

Torrie’s lips trembled. “Eddie...”

He turned away sharply. “Now you know,” he said, his voice thick with exhaustion. “Now you understand.”

“But still...” Torrie, took a step back. “You’ve changed so much, Eddie. It’s like you’re not even the same person anymore.”

“Maybe I’m not.” Panting and shaken, Eddie looked at her with regret and defiance. “Maybe I can’t be the person I was before. You don’t know what it’s like to live with the consequences of your actions. And I hope you never.”

For a moment, the forest seemed to close around them, the weight of their argument pressing down on both of them. The glow of the Luminas felt colder, and the distance between them seemed to widen with every harsh word.

Torrie’s tears continued to flow, her voice a whisper of anguish. “I just... I wish you could see how much we still need that part of you, Eddie... The part you’ve killed that day... The part that believed in Alchemy and the good it could do.”

“There is no good coming from it, Torrie.” Eddie said finally, “Nothing...”

The silence between Eddie and Torrie was thick, the weight of their argument still pressing down on them. The soft rustling of leaves, the distant hum of crickets—everything felt muted, suffocated beneath unspoken words.

Then, a sharp noise—footsteps, fast and uneven, crushing through undergrowth. A breathless, ragged gasp broke the stillness.

Markus burst through the trees, his silhouette illuminated by the golden glow of the Eden Flowers. His face was pale, streaked with sweat, his wide eyes darting wildly. He clutched his flintlock rifle with both hands, knuckles white, as if his grip was the only thing keeping him grounded.

“Eddie!” His voice cracked. His chest heaved, each breath short and desperate.

Eddie scrambled to his feet. “Markus?”

Markus staggered forward, barely able to steady himself. “Catherine—” He choked on the words, forcing them out between gulps of air.

“She’s in trouble. There’s something in there... something huge!”

Chapter 20

“Alright, Markus, breathe.” Eddie straightened, his pulse quickening. “What happened to Catherine?”

Markus shook his head rapidly, his breath still ragged. “I—I don’t know! It all happened so fast—”

“Slow down, Mark,” Eddie pressed, stepping closer. “What did you see? What attacked Catherine?”

Markus’s grip tightened around the rifle as he cast a wary glance over his shoulder, as if expecting something to lunge from the shadows. His voice came in a whisper, hoarse with disbelief.

“It was... like a dragon.” He swallowed. “But its eyes—”

He squeezed his own shut, as if trying to unsee the memory. When they opened again, they were filled with something raw, something barely held together.

“It had six pairs of them. Red. Watching. Burning.”

Eddie’s stomach turned to ice.

His mind stuttered, refusing to process what he’d just heard. His breath felt short, his heartbeat a slow, echoing drum in his ears.

Six pairs of eyes.

His hands clenched into fists, nails digging into his palms. But the answer had already lodged itself in his gut, a cold, immovable weight.

Markus’s rifle trembled in his hands, the barrel still pointed toward the trees—toward the unseen thing lurking just beyond their fragile circle of light.

Eddie forced himself to speak, his voice hollow.

“It’s the fucking sentinel.” He swallowed, the name like lead on his tongue.

“The Nightingale Dragon.”

Silence settled over them, thick and suffocating.

Eddie's gaze flickered to Markus, who was still gripping the rifle like a lifeline, his breath uneven. He turned to Torrie, whose fists were clenched at her sides, her jaw tight with unspoken fear. The three of them stood in the golden glow of the Eden Flowers, their faces pale, eyes searching one another—seeking answers neither of them had.

"What are we going to do?" Markus's voice was barely more than a whisper.

"W-we should help her..." Torrie responded.

"Are you insane?!" he hissed. "We don't even know if she's still—"

"Still what?" Torrie shot back. "She's out there, and we're just standing here? We should get help from town!"

"There is not time, Torrie!" Markus said, "Don't you know how long it is to go out of this forest alone? Even Gunther's farm is miles away!"

Eddie's hands were ice-cold. His breath came too fast, too shallow. Every instinct screamed at him to run—to turn away, to pretend he hadn't heard Markus's terrified description of the creature lurking beyond the trees. His stomach churned at the thought of it.

Catherine was out there. Alone. Against *that*... Against the Sentinel, Nightingale Dragon.

His fingers twitched uselessly at his sides.

His body wanted to flee. His mind wanted to shut down.

But then he thought of Catherine. The way he used to speak about her, eyes shining with wonder. The way he used to believe she was invincible. The way he had once dreamed of being like her.

And now, *now*, when she needed him—

He took a sharp breath.

He couldn't let this be another regret. Eddie exhaled, slow and steady. His hands stopped shaking.

He turned to Markus, his voice firm, unwavering.

"Mark," he said, holding out his hand. "Give me the rifle."

"Wh-what?" Markus stammered, his knuckles white where they gripped the weapon.

Eddie met his gaze, steady and sure, "You stay here with Torrie."

"I'm going after her."

Torrie's eyes blazed with concern and anger as she jumped up,

"Eddie, this is insane!" her voice rising in desperation. "You can't just go off into the forest after what Markus described. It's too dangerous!"

Eddie didn't answer immediately. Instead, he reached into his satchel and pulled out a small, worn paper bag of gunpowder. His movements were deliberate, almost mechanical. He tore the bag open, dry powder spilling between his fingers like dust as he spat out the remaining paper.

"I don't have time to argue, Torrie," he said, his voice sharp but steady. "Catherine's in danger."

Torrie let out a frustrated breath. "And so will you!"

Eddie ignored her. Raising the rifle's hammer, he poured the fine black powder into the pan. The grains settled in the shallow basin, an eerie moment of stillness before the storm. With a soft snap, he closed the frizzen, sealing the charge.

"You don't even know what you're walking into!" Torrie pressed. "You heard Markus. It's a dragon! Do you think you can just go in there and—"

With swift, practiced motions, Eddie poured the rest of the gunpowder into the barrel. He placed a round inside, feeling the shift in weight, the gravity of what he was about to do. The heavy ball rested against the powder. He tapped it down with the ramrod, his hands steady despite the storm raging inside him.

The final motion—the priming, the preparation—snapped something into place within him. He stood tall, rifle in hand, decision made.

"Eddie, Listen—" Torrie, realizing he wasn't stopping, made a last-ditch effort. She took something underneath her shirt, a chain.

Eddie's gaze flickered towards her, the sight is familiar.

It's a ring.

It's his ring... his old heirloom.

A jade stone, deep green, set within a silver band. He had always known it was important, even if he never fully understood why. A relic of a family he had never known.

"Here," Torrie insisted. Her voice wavered, but her grip was firm. "Take it back. It's yours, Edward, please."

Eddie stared at it, his throat tight. "I don't need it," he muttered, "I can handle this on my own."

"Just take it, Edward." Her voice was softer now, but the weight of her words pressed into him. "They're yours. They are meant to be yours!"

Eddie hesitated, then pocketed the ring. His fingers brushed against the cold, familiar metal.

"Fine," he said.

And without another word, he turned toward the forest.

Eddie turned and moved past the protective ring of the Eden Flowers. Stepping into the darkened forest. As he ventured further into the unknown, the shadows seemed to close around him. The protective flower's glow dimmed behind him, leaving the path uncertain.

Chapter 21

Eddie pushed forward, the golden glow of the Eden Flowers fading behind him as he crossed into the dark embrace of the Illusory Forest. His breath came fast, his pulse hammering in his ears. The rifle weighed heavy in his hands, but he barely noticed. He had no time to think—only to run.

The forest closed around him, thick with gnarled roots and twisting branches that reached for him like grasping fingers. Overgrown bushes snagged at his coat, thorns scraping against his skin, but he didn't stop. Every rustling leaf, every whisper of movement sent a fresh jolt of fear through his spine.

Catherine was in here. Somewhere.

The Nightingale Dragon was in here.

A branch snapped behind him. Eddie spun, rifle raised, heart hammering against his ribs. Nothing. Just the shadows shifting, the wind curling through the trees. He swallowed hard, forcing himself to keep moving.

Then—movement to his right.

Eddie whirled, pulling the hammer of his flintlock back with a sharp click, aiming into the darkness.

Something was there.

A shape, barely visible through the gloom, shifting between the trees. Then, it stepped forward into the faint sliver of moonlight.

It's an owl. At least, it looked like one. White-feathered, round-faced, black eyes reflecting the dim light. Eddie exhaled sharply, lowering the rifle slightly.

Then the owl turned its head. Further than it should have. Tilting it in an unnatural, unsettling way.

Eddie's grip tightened on the rifle. The creature blinked at him, and only then did he see its body in full—a pair of powerful, feathered forelimbs pressing into the earth,

another set of taloned hind legs shifting beneath its weight. It wasn't perched on a branch. It was standing.

It was the size of a horse.

Eddie stood frozen, his pulse thundering in his ears. A shudder crawled down his spine, but he forced himself to refocus. The fear clawing at his chest wouldn't help Catherine. He had to keep moving.

Then, where the owl-beast had stood, he saw it.

A white column, fractured and ancient, standing among the tangled roots. A ruin, half-buried in time.

He was close.

Steeling himself, Eddie pressed on, deeper into the dark.

His breath coming in short, sharp gasps. The rifle felt heavier in his hands now, the weight dragging at his arms, but he didn't slow. The ruins had to mean something—he was getting close.

Then, through the shifting shadows of the forest, he saw it. Another column. Stark white, fractured by time, rising from the tangle of roots.

He ran past it, his boots crunching over fallen leaves.

Another column.

Eddie's brow furrowed. His mind struggled to place it. Had there been two? Had he miscounted?

He kept moving, branches clawing at his sleeves, the whisper of unseen creatures brushing past his ears. His pace quickened, his pulse hammering as the trees thinned for a brief moment—

And another column loomed ahead.

Eddie's stomach twisted. He was sure now. The jagged break along its top, the way the roots coiled around its base—

It was the same column.

He sucked in a breath, pushing forward despite the tight knot of unease forming in his chest. Maybe if he just kept moving. Maybe if he ran faster—

Another column.

Eddie's steps faltered. His hands clenched into fists. The realization crawled under his skin like ice.

"Damn it!" The word ripped from his throat as he hurled the rifle to the ground, the impact kicking up dirt and dead leaves. His vision blurred with frustration, his pulse a roar in his ears. He dropped to his knees, fingers curling into fists as he punched the earth. Once. Twice.

The ground beneath him did not yield. The forest did not shift. The column still stood.

His chest heaved as he gritted his teeth, hands trembling against the damp soil. His breath came ragged, his thoughts spiraling.

He was alone.

And if he didn't find a way out soon—

So will Catherine.

Eddie curled in on himself, his breath slowing as the weight of frustration settled over him. His fingers pressed into the damp earth, cold and unyielding beneath his touch. He had no plan. No way forward. No way out.

Then, something caught his eye—a glint of silver against his chest. It was his ring.

It still hung from its chain, resting against his collarbone. A simple thing, jade set in silver, smooth and worn from years of absentminded touch. He reached up and unhooked the chain, pulling the ring free. It felt heavier than he remembered.

How long had he carried this?

He turned it over in his palm, the jade catching the faintest traces of light that slipped through the trees. He had always known it was more than just an heirloom. It was a conduit—a stable and powerful one, more reliable than any wand or staff he had ever held. He had used it before. Back in the academy.

His lips parted slightly at the thought, a memory unfurling like a page turning in his mind. He could see himself hunched over workbenches, vials bubbling, chalk scratched across slate. The endless nights spent refining formulas, the competitions that drove him forward, testing himself against others in his pursuit of alchemy.

One of those competitions had taken him to Edenfield.

He had left Weshaven for the first time, stepping into a city far grander, far more modern than his home. Weshaven was small, familiar, a town of fishermen and merchants. But Edenfield—Edenfield was different. Towers rising against the sky, the weight of history pressing down upon its streets, magic humming in every stone.

He had stood there, a boy from a port town in the corner of the world, he promised himself— **one day**.

One day, he would get out of Weshaven. One day, he would make it to Edenfield. Not as a visitor. Not as an outsider. But as a student of its oldest academy.

A dry, bitter laugh escaped his lips.

What a stupid, naive dream.

He looked down at the ring again, still resting in his palm. The same as it had always been. The same size, the same weight.

Slowly, almost hesitantly, he slipped it onto his index finger.

It still fit.

The ring settled against his finger, a snug, familiar weight. Eddie flexed his hand, staring at it for a moment longer.

Then, something flickered in the corner of his eye.

A glow. Faint, but unmistakable.

Eddie stiffened, his breath catching in his throat. He turned his head, searching the darkness. There—just beyond the trees, past the twisted roots and shifting shadows—a golden shimmer pulsed, like the last light of a dying ember.

Without thinking, he reached for his rifle, brushing off the dirt before slinging it back over his shoulder. His boots crunched against the damp earth as he pushed forward, drawn toward the glow.

The forest twisted around him, branches stretching like skeletal fingers, the air thick with the scent of moss and damp leaves. The glow remained steady, leading him forward, past the pale columns that had mocked him only moments before.

And then, he saw it.

A single Eden Flower.

Eddie came to a halt, frowning. The golden petals glowed softly, swaying ever so slightly as if stirred by an unseen breeze. It stood alone, its light delicate yet defiant against the gloom of the Illusory Forest.

What the hell is it doing here?

Eden Flowers never grew alone.

He had seen them in thick clusters, blooming in vibrant patches along the gates of the forest and dotting the Traveller's Path like fallen stars. They flourished in groups, never isolated. Never like this.

Eddie stared at the glowing flower, his mind racing.

Catherine had gone into the forest with a light.

A golden light.

Just like this one.

The thought struck him with a mix of excitement and doubt. It was stupid. It was ridiculous. But what if—what if Catherine had taken the glow of the Eden Flowers into the Illusory Forest to bypass its effects?

Eddie exhaled sharply. He had no other choice.

Slowly, he extended his hand—the one wearing the ring—and cupped the delicate flower. The golden glow spilled over his fingers, seeping into his skin like liquid light.

Then, something shifted.

The jade on his ring pulsed with a faint luminescence, a deep green glow blooming within the stone. The Eden Flower brightened in response, its golden light intensifying until it was nearly blinding.

Eddie's breath hitched.

Before he could comprehend what was happening, the light detached from the flower, gathering into a swirling, luminous orb in the palm of his hand.

He curled his fingers slightly, watching as the ball of light hovered weightlessly above his skin, pulsing like a steady heartbeat.

Eddie swallowed, turning back toward the looping white pillars. He had no proof this would work. No guarantee.

But it was worth a try.

He stepped forward, the golden light casting long, flickering shadows across the trees. His boots crunched over the earth, his heart hammering in his chest as he braced for the familiar sight—the same damn white column mocking him yet again.

Instead, a white stone sign stood before him.

Eddie stopped, his breath catching. He blinked, his eyes adjusting to the unexpected sight. The sign was carved with an inscription, the letters curling in an elegant, foreign script. He had broken free.

Eddie lifted his gaze, his chest tightening as he took in what lay ahead.

Beyond the sign, a ruin stretched before him—ancient, crumbling, swallowed by time and shadow. The air was thick with dust, and the scent of aged stone filled his lungs.

And then—

A deep, guttural roar split the silence.

The ground trembled. Somewhere within the ruins, stone collapsed in a thunderous crash.

Eddie's pulse pounded in his ears. He took the rifle that was slung on his back, and made his way into the ruins.

Catherine might be there.

Chapter 22

Eddie moved cautiously through the ruins, his footsteps echoing in the vast emptiness. The shattered remains of Craemonia Bastion stretched before him—toppled columns, cracked stone archways, and walls worn down by time and nature. The air was thick with dust, the scent of damp stone mingling with the crisp night breeze.

His eyes scanned the remnants of what must have once been a grand stronghold, now reduced to a skeletal shadow of its former self. What was this place? A fortress? A sanctuary? Or perhaps something more?

Then—

BAM.

An explosion shattered the stillness.

The force of it sent a shockwave through the ruins, shaking loose dust and debris. Eddie flinched as a cloud of smoke and stone erupted from a collapsed section of the bastion, somewhere ahead. His pulse quickened.

Through the smoke and chaos, a figure sprang backward.

The figure soared through the air, their long coat billowing around them as if caught in an unseen current. The air itself seemed to hold their weight, slowing their descent in an effortless glide. Eddie, still at the edge of the bastion, stood frozen, watching the scene unfold.

At first, he struggled to recognize the figure through the dust and shifting shadows. But then—there was no mistaking it.

It was Catherine.

She landed smoothly, feet skimming the fractured stone as she turned to face her opponent. Her brass-mahogany staff was held at her side, her stance relaxed.

And then—

From the ruins of the observatory, **it** emerged, at first a shadow... then a silhouette.

Then it's Nightingale Dragon.

The ancient sentinel of the Illusory Forest loomed over the shattered laboratory, its obsidian-black scales gleaming under the fractured moonlight. Its six pairs of glowing red eyes, locked onto Catherine with an almost calculating gaze.

The beast let out a slow, reverberating growl.

A blur of black scales and outstretched talons shot toward Catherine with terrifying speed. She pivoted on her heel, barely dodging as the beast's claws raked across the stone where she had stood moments before, carving deep gashes into the earth.

Catherine retaliated. She hurled a jagged slab of stone toward the dragon, transmuting it mid-air into a hail of sharp-edged weapons—spears of iron, serrated daggers, bolts of steel. They **shot forward** like an arrow storm, striking the dragon's gleaming black scales.

But they bounced off. The weapons clattered uselessly to the ground, failing to pierce the dragon's obsidian-like scales. The beast barely flinched, its thick armor impenetrable.

The dragon lunged again.

She ducked, rolling across the rubble-strewn ground as its talons slammed into the stone behind her, sending shards flying. She flung another boulder, transmuting it into a cascade of jagged spikes, but the dragon merely twisted its body, letting the shards **shatter** harmlessly against its scales.

Nothing was working.

The dragon's eyes gleamed. And then—

It reared back. Its chest expanded.

Catherine's instincts screamed at her. Something was coming.

The dragon's maw opened, and with a deep, reverberating roar—it breathed.

A storm erupted from its throat, a deathly blizzard that roared forward in a freezing, unnatural wind. Everything in its path was consumed by frost. The shattered ruins, the broken pillars, even the very air seemed to crystallize, turning into jagged ice.

Catherine dove aside just in time, feeling the air turn bitterly cold as the icy storm sliced through the ruins of the bastion. The place she had stood just seconds before was now a frozen landscape of sharp, glistening spires.

She couldn't keep dodging forever.

Catherine's eyes darted across the ruins. Then—there.

The remnants of a massive hearth stood at the center of the bastion, its stone structure still intact. Scattered around it were splintered remains of old, dry wood.

The dragon snapped its head toward her, locking onto its prey. Its chest expanded again.

Another breath was coming.

The dragon reared back—and unleashed its full power.

A blizzard howled toward Catherine, spiraling forward like a spear of frozen death.

And then—

A roar of fire storms forth from Catherine's staff.

The hearth ignited, the remnants of wood transmuting into a raging inferno. She lifted her staff and with a forceful swing, she commanded the flames forward.

Her fire storm met the dragon's blizzard.

The two forces collided in a blinding clash of elements—searing heat against freezing cold.

The ground shook beneath the sheer power of their battle. Flames and frost spiraled into the air, twisting and crackling as the two energies fought for dominance. Sparks and embers rained down, steam and mist billowing across the battlefield.

For a moment, neither force relented.

A grand stalemate.

Eddie stood frozen at the edge of the ruins, the clash of fire and ice raging before him.

Catherine and the Nightingale Dragon were locked in a deadly stalemate, their powers grinding against each other in a battle of extremes.

The dragon's ice breath roared forward like a storm, its jagged frost spreading across the ground, creeping closer. Catherine's fire lashed back, searing the air, steam and mist billowing into the night sky.

Neither side was winning.

Eddie's mind raced. There was no way around the dragon, not in these ruins, not in this confined space where every collapsed wall and broken archway became another obstacle.

The monstrous creature **loomed**, half-shrouded in shadows, its six pairs of glowing red eyes cutting through the darkness like burning coals. The air was thick with the stench of burning and the sting of cold, a suffocating mix of heat and frost.

His pulse pounded in his ears. His breath came fast, rugged bursts. His body trembled.

His thoughts scattered, crashing into each other. Panic lawed at him.

Then, something flickered inside him. A memory—sharp, vivid.

The boy he used to be.

Fearless. Reckless. Always the first to act before thinking.

That boy hadn't hesitated. That boy had thrown himself headfirst into chaos.

Eddie clenched his jaw. He could feel it again—the reckless bravery, the stubborn impulse to do something, anything.

What would the old me have done? Eddie thought to himself.

He knew the answer. He had always knew the answer.

He would've done something stupid.

He took a deep breath—and raised his rifle.

The weight of it settled in his hands. The polished wood, the cold metal, the faint scent of gunpowder. His grip was steady. His heart was not.

The hammer clicked back, the metallic rasp slicing through the roaring battlefield.

He took aim.

Then—he shouted.

“HEY!”

The word ripped from his throat, sharp and defiant.

The Nightingale Dragon turned.

Catherine’s eyes snapped toward him.

For the briefest second, everything stopped.

The beast’s gaze locked onto him, its six glowing eyes narrowing in eerie unison.

Eddie exhaled—and pulled the trigger.

A deafening crack.

The rifle kicked back hard, slamming against his shoulder. His arm screamed in protest, but the shot had already torn through the air, a streak of fire and metal racing toward its target.

The bullet struck home.

A wet, sickening crack.

The creature’s head jerked violently to the side as the round punched into one of its glowing red eyes.

A splatter of fluid and shattered bone burst from the wound, painting the ruins in streaks of glowing red ichor.

The Nightingale Dragon screamed. It roared in pain.

A wretched, soul-piercing roar of agony and rage tore through the air. The beast’s entire body convulsed, its spine arching as it thrashed against the ruins.

Massive claws scraped the stone floor, carving deep gouges into the rock. Cracks splintered across the ancient ground.

The dragon clawed at its face, its remaining eyes flickering wildly in pain. Blood poured from the ruined socket, dripping onto the cold earth.

It screeched, stumbling back, its massive wings flaring as it flailed in a blind frenzy.

The stalemate was broken. Eddie ran.

The ruins blurred around him—shattered ruins, burning embers, frost creeping over stone. The Nightingale Dragon howled in agony behind him, its monstrous body writhing, claws tearing at its ruined eye. But Eddie didn't stop to look back.

Catherine stood near the crumbling hearth, her brass-mahogany staff still clutched in her hands, breath heaving from the clash of fire and ice.

Eddie skidded to a stop beside her, grabbing her arm.

"We have to go," he snapped, shaking her slightly. "The Traveller's Path—now!"

But Catherine didn't move.

Instead, she rounded on him, anger flashing in her eyes. "How foolish can you be?!"

Eddie blinked. "Excuse me—what?"

"You shouldn't have come!" she shoved his hand away. "I've got it under control!"

"Under control?!" Eddie shot back. "Are you fucking serious? That thing nearly killed you!"

"I know what I'm doing, Edward!" Catherine growled. "I don't need your help! Now get back to the Traveller's Path!"

"I'm not leaving without you! Especially with that thing around!"

"I am not leaving without the Codex."

Eddie's frustration boiled over. "You are *not* seriously risking your life over a damn book!"

"It's not just a book!" Catherine's voice rose, her grip tightening on her staff. "The fate of magical education—"

BOOM.

A deep, thunderous tremor rocked the ruins.

Both of them froze.

The Nightingale Dragon let out an ear-splitting roar, its entire body seizing with fury. Blackened wings flared wide, broken stone and debris raining from above.

Its tail lashed out.

Neither of them saw it coming.

A split second of weightlessness—then impact.

The world lurched sideways. Eddie collided hard with the stone wall, the breath ripping from his lungs. Pain exploded through his back and shoulder. His vision blurred, dark spots dancing at the edges of his sight.

The ringing in his ears drowned out everything else.

For a moment, he couldn't move.

Then—he forced himself to look up.

His rifle lay in pieces a few feet away, the wooden stock snapped clean in two, the barrel twisted and broken beyond repair.

His stomach sank.

He turned—Catherine lay crumpled a few feet away, her staff clattering to the ground.

Eddie's pulse spiked in fear. He dragged himself forward, his entire body protesting the movement. He reached her, grabbed her shoulders, shook her.

“Catherine?” he rasped. “Are you alright?”

Eddie knelt beside Catherine, his fingers trembling as he shook her shoulders again. No response. She remained limp, her breathing shallow.

No response.

Chapter 23

His stomach twisted. *Damn it. She isn't waking up.*

And then... A shadow loomed over him.

Eddie's breath stopped as he looked up.

The Nightingale Dragon made its way through the smoke, its monstrous form wreathed in fire. Its obsidian-black scales glistened like molten glass, reflecting the flickering embers that floated through the air. And then, through the shifting haze, Eddie saw them—

Five glowing red eyes. His pulse pounded in his ears. He had shot one of those eyes. Destroyed it. But now...

The ruined eye twitched.

A sickening squelch could be heard in the middle of the hearth.

The shattered socket bulged, raw flesh writhing like something alive. The jagged ball of lead he had fired into it slid loose, falling to the ground with a hollow clink, discarded like a worthless pebble. Echoing through the ruins.

Before his very eyes, a new eye pushed its way into place—larger, grotesque, its veins pulsing with a deep, hellish red glow.

Eddie's breath caught..

This thing... it regenerates.

A cold, primal fear sank its claws into his chest.

His gaze darted to his surroundings—his rifle lay in splinters, shattered beyond repair. Catherine's staff was broken, its elegant wood snapped in two.

They had nothing.

His fingers curled into fists.

His thumb brushed over the smooth surface of his jade ring.

His heart slowed as he realised one thing... *He was never unarmed.*

Eddie closed his eyes. Took a breath.

I was an Alchemist, he thought.

Then, he stood... The dragon's eyes narrowed.

No... He straightened his back, shoulders squaring.

I am an Alchemist... I always was.

His jade ring began to glow.

From his outstretched hand, a luminous transmutation circle flared to life. Radiant, intricate, lines of emerald light spiraling outward.

The dragon growled—a deep, guttural sound like stone grinding against stone.

Eddie met its gaze.

His hands clenched around the metal and powder.

He stepped forward.

-O-

The Nightingale Dragon loomed, its jagged silhouette framed by the flickering glow of distant fires. Its five glowing eyes followed Eddie's every movement, but it did not strike. It was waiting.

Eddie stepped forward.

The dragon did not move.

He took another step.

Then another.

His walk quickened.

The dragon's massive chest expanded, its ribcage stretching outward, a deep, hollow rumble growing from within.

Frost began to creep across its obsidian-black scales, and the air turned bitterly cold.

It's inhaling.

Eddie's jog turned into a sprint.

The dragon's throat glowed pale blue, veins of freezing energy pulsing beneath its skin.

Eddie gritted his teeth.

The dragon reared its head back.

Eddie charged forward.

The dragon roared.

Then—

A howling burst of frost exploded from the creature's maw.

A blizzard of pure ice erupted into the ruins, freezing the stone in an instant. The ground cracked and shattered under the pressure of sudden frost, jagged spires of ice erupting from every surface.

Eddie hit the ground hard, his shoulder slamming into the frozen earth as he rolled behind a crumbling archway. Ice crackled and groaned around him, jagged spires erupting where he had stood only moments before.

His breath came in ragged gasps, each inhale sharp and burning in the freezing air. The courtyard—once a shattered ruin of ancient stone—had transformed into a glacial tomb. The dragon's breath had turned the ruins into a maze of glittering ice, cold and unyielding.

Eddie's heart pounded against his ribs, his pulse drumming in his ears. He turned, searching for an opening, a weakness—anything—but every exit had been sealed beneath thick walls of ice. The stone pathways leading out were gone, buried beneath translucent barricades that caught the moonlight like stained glass.

His fingers curled into fists. *No, no, no—he couldn't be stuck here.*

Eddie pressed himself against the frozen wall, his breath turned into mist in front of him. Think. He had to think. Alchemy. Transmutation. Anything. But his fingers were stiff, the cold digging into his bones, numbing him from the inside out. He could feel frost clinging to his skin, biting deep through his clothes.

He was running out of time.

The dragon let out a low, guttural growl, the vibrations rattling through the ice. Its five glowing eyes narrowed, its breath misting in the frigid air. It knew he was trapped. It was toying with him.

A tight knot of panic curled in Eddie's stomach. He couldn't die here. Not in this place. Not like this.

Move. Find a way.

His eyes darted across the courtyard, searching. He had one chance—just one. If he could manipulate the ice, destabilize it, break through—

The dragon inhaled again.

The air around Eddie dropped to a deathly chill.

No time.

He had to act. Now.

His hands moved frantically over his jacket, his satchels—there had to be something. Something he could use. The ice was useless to him, too frozen to manipulate without the right reagents.

His fingers brushed against the rough fabric of a pouch strapped to his belt. Bingo.

Gunpowder. Lead bullets. Ignition powder. Metal. Fire.

Fireballs.

A flicker of hope cut through the crushing fear. His mind raced, pulling together the pieces. The transmutation circle—how it needed to be structured, the conversion of energy, the propulsion—

Yes. He could make this work.

But first—an opening.

Eddie exhaled slowly, forcing his breathing under control. He kept his body low, his movements precise. Every crunch of ice beneath his boots was a risk. He had to keep moving, stay out of the dragon's direct line of sight.

Above him, the Nightingale Dragon shifted. Its long neck curved slightly, its five glowing eyes scanning the frozen courtyard. It was searching for him. Hunting.

Eddie pressed himself against the jagged wall of ice, fingers tightening around the pouch at his belt. He had one shot at this. If the dragon saw him before he was ready—he was dead.

His pulse hammered as he inched forward, step by careful step, avoiding the shimmering patches where the ice was thin and fragile. One wrong move, and the crunch of breaking frost would give him away.

He clenched his jaw. He could do this.

Just a little closer...

Just a little more...

The dragon's breath subsided, leaving behind a ruin of jagged ice and frost. The air shimmered with the aftershock of unnatural cold. Crystals of frozen mist settled onto the ruined stone, turning the battlefield into a frozen wasteland.

The Nightingale Dragon lowered its head, its long neck curving as its five eyes gleamed in the dim light. It sniffed, the deep sound reverberating through the silent ruins.

It had trapped its prey. There was no escape... There should be no escape.

Its claws scraped against the ice as it leaned in, peering into the crystalline prison it had forged. The fractured ice reflected its own jagged silhouette back at it, but something was missing...

It narrowed its eyes. No movement. No heartbeat. No breath.

The dragon exhaled, a low growl rumbling deep in its throat.

Then, a flicker—something faint.

Its gaze snapped to a section of the ice.

A hole. Small but unmistakable. And melting.

The realization dawned too late.

It whipped its head around, scanning the ruins. Its tail lashed behind it, sending a sharp gust of freezing wind through the air.

And then—

It saw him.

The boy.

Standing there, beyond the shattered remnants of a falling archway, his gaze locked with the dragon's.

There was a glow in the boy's hand. The light was sharp. Focused. Dangerous.

A circle. Floating. Pulsing with arcane symbols, burning bright like molten gold.

And in its center—a sphere of metal. Encased in fire.

The fireball shot through the air like a comet, striking the Nightingale Dragon's head dead-on. A surge of satisfaction surged through Eddie's chest as he saw the impact. The flames licked across the creature's obsidian scales, searing a bright red mark into its thinner plating near the temple.

Then... nothing.

The dragon didn't fall. It didn't stagger. It didn't even recoil.

Instead, its five eyes burned with a new fury.

The smoldering mark he had left was shallow, insignificant. A dent, no more. The beast was not wounded. It was enraged.

The dragon moved.

A blur of black and blue.

Before Eddie could react, a shadow loomed over him—a massive tail, jagged with ice and spines, whipping through the air with deadly speed.

Impact.

Eddie barely had time to brace before the force hit him like a cannonball.

Pain exploded across his ribs as his body was hurled backward, air ripping from his lungs. He saw the world spin—jagged ruins, a glimpse of sky, a blur of movement—before he crashed straight into an ancient archway.

The stone crumbled upon impact.

Dust and ice filled his vision as the world tipped sideways. His back screamed in protest, his limbs numb from the sheer force. His body lay sprawled amidst the shattered debris, pain crackling through every nerve like wildfire.

His ears rang.

His vision swam.

He tried to move, but his arms felt like lead. A faint coppery taste filled his mouth.

The heavy sound of approaching footsteps rumbled through the frozen ground.

The dragon is coming.

The rubble beneath Eddie felt cold. Unforgiving. Sharp edges of broken stone dug into his palms as he tried to shift, but his body refused to obey. His ribs ached, his head spun, and each breath came shallow and ragged.

The Nightingale Dragon inched closer.

Its five glowing eyes bore into him, its jagged maw parting with slow, deliberate hunger. Each breath it took sent a deep, guttural vibration through the frozen air, a terrible hum that rattled in Eddie's bones.

Is this it?

Is this really how he was going to die?

His fingers curled into a fist, weak, trembling... It wasn't supposed to end like this.

He had fought so hard, come so far—only to fail. Only to be powerless.

His mind drifted.

Back to his childhood.

Back to the dream he once had.

To be an Alchemist. To create. To discover. To prove himself.

Once, that dream had been everything.

And yet, over the years, he had let it fade. He had let it be swallowed by doubt, by failure, by the weight of expectations that he could never meet.

And now?

Now, he would die here—without ever realizing what he truly wanted.

The dragon drew in a breath.

Its chest glowed an eerie, pale blue, veins of ice pulsing beneath its obsidian scales.

It was preparing its breath again.

Eddie shut his eyes.

Then—

A crack of heat.

A sudden, explosive roar cut through the frozen air.

Eddie's eyes snapped open just in time to see fire—a brilliant, searing torrent of flame—slam into the dragon's side.

But this wasn't his.

This one was stronger. More powerful.

It burned through the dragon's thick scales, piercing deep, forcing the beast to stagger back with a pained, guttural screech.

Eddie turned, dazed.

And then—he saw her.

Catherine.

She stood at a distance, supported by her staff—the very same staff that had been broken in two not long ago.

But now, it was whole. Mended.

Her robes were torn, her face bruised, her breath uneven—but her stance was firm.

A storm brewed in her golden eyes.

“Damn fool,” Catherine spat, voice sharp with frustration.

She took a step forward, gripping her staff tighter.

“You should’ve stayed with the others, Edward.”

-o-

Catherine stood squarely before the dragon, her earlier wounds seemingly erased, as if the very concept of pain had never touched her. Elves were said to heal fast, their bodies resilient beyond mortal comprehension—but seeing it firsthand, seeing her move with such precision, was nothing short of myth made real.

She lifted her staff, then a shattered column from the ruins trembled, it shot forward like a cannonball—hurtling straight at the dragon’s face.

The beast turned sharply—just in time for the debris to smash against its snout.

The strike wasn’t enough to harm it.

But it was enough to enrage it.

The dragon’s five glowing eyes flared with fury.

It let out a guttural snarl, jaws snapping, and lunged toward Catherine, moving like a shadow, a blur of ice and fire.

Catherine rolled beneath it, slipping under the beast’s massive body with the grace of wind itself. She glided over the frozen rubble, weightless, effortless, as if the world itself bent to her will.

Then—her hand reaches, “Edward! The gunpowder! Now!”

Eddie didn’t hesitate.

He tore the ammunition satchel from his shoulder and hurled it toward her.

Catherine caught it—

Or rather, she didn’t.

The satchel never touched her hands. Instead, it hovered, suspended in mid-air, caught in the torrents of wind spiraling around her.

And then—she, too, was floating.

Eddie's breath caught.

His injuries, the pain in his ribs momentarily forgotten.

Catherine held her staff aloft, eyes glowing like embers, and spoke in a tongue older than time itself.

It was Elvish—but not the kind Eddie had ever heard before.

Older... More ancient... More primal...

Then—light.

A large transmutation circle flared beneath her, its glow casting shifting shadows across the ruins.

And then—more.

Circles ignited one after another, rising, expanding, multiplying—until the very sky burned with their radiance.

Orange, Red. Like the sun had shattered, as if she had called upon the sun itself into the night, and its fragments had been sewn into the heavens.

Eddie could barely breathe.

The dragon turned.

And in the beast's many eyes, reflected in the glow of the spiraling sigils above, Eddie saw something he had never seen before in a beast.

Not anger.

Nor rage.

But Fear.

Then—Catherine brought her staff down.

Like an executioner's axe.

Like a warlord commanding an army.

Like a knight delivering the final blow.

And from the transmutation circles...

Fire.

At first, fireballs.

Then more of them...

Until eventually... a fire storm.

A maelstrom of molten lead and infernal flames rained down upon the Nightingale Dragon.

Each blast pierced its obsidian scales, the molten metal searing through its hide, embedding into flesh.

The dragon shrieked in agony.

It staggered.

It lurched back, trying to shield itself with its wings—but the firestorm was unstoppable.

Catherine pushed forward.

With every step she took, the inferno intensified.

The dragon backed away.

One step.

Another.

And then—

It spread its wings.

A single, powerful beat sent a shockwave of dust and debris spiraling into the air.

The beast hurled itself backward, rising—slowly at first, then faster, faster, until it was nothing but a dark silhouette against the burning sky.

Catherine lifted her gaze.

The dragon let out one final, piercing shriek—

And then—

It was gone.

The transmutation circles dimmed.

The firestorm ceased.

Catherine floated back down, her feet touching the frostbitten stone as the winds gently set her down.

The satchel fell beside her, the remaining bullets clinking softly against the frozen ground.

Then—

Silence.

The ruins of Craemonia stood still.

Chapter 24

The ruins had fallen silent.

The acrid scent of burnt stone and charred scales still clung to the night air, mixing with the damp earth beneath them. Smoke curled lazily into the sky, blotting out the moon in murky tendrils. The battle was over, but the weight of it still pressed on them, settling into the quiet.

Eddie sat propped against a broken pillar, his body a tapestry of bruises, burns, and deep, aching exhaustion. His right arm throbbed—dislocated, maybe broken. His ribs ached with every breath. Blood dried in jagged streaks along his temple. He had felt worse. But not by much.

Catherine knelt beside him, her fingers deftly grinding herbs and crushed roots into a thick salve. The Codex—the ancient tome they had come for—was now securely strapped to her belt in a leather book holster, its weight a reminder that their mission, at least, was a success.

She worked in focused silence, her movements quick, practiced—too practiced. This wasn't the first time she'd patched someone up in the field.

"Damn fool, you're no different from your father," she muttered under her breath, dabbing the salve onto a particularly nasty bruise along Eddie's jaw. It burned.

Eddie hissed, his body tensing.

Catherine scoffed. "Oh, don't be dramatic."

"You could at least warn me," he grumbled.

She sighed, applying another layer with absolutely no regard for his comfort. "If you had half an intellect about you, you wouldn't have jumped into the fight like that. You nearly got yourself killed."

Eddie let out a breathy chuckle, though it ended in a wince. "You're welcome, by the way."

Catherine paused. Just for a second.

Then, without looking up, she murmured, "I couldn't find a proper ignition source." She rubbed the salve into his shoulder, her touch firm but careful. "If you hadn't brought the gunpowder... I would have lost."

Eddie blinked, caught off guard by the quiet admission.

She didn't elaborate. Didn't need to.

Instead, she reached for his arm, fingers hovering just above the dislocated shoulder. "This is going to hurt."

Before he could protest, she jerked it back into place.

A sharp, searing pain shot through his body. Eddie bit down a curse, his vision going white at the edges. For a moment, all he could do was sit there, breathless, waiting for the pain to dull into a manageable throb.

Catherine, to her credit, at least had the decency to look mildly guilty. "It needed to be done."

Eddie groaned. "Next time—give me a damn warning."

A ghost of a smile flickered across her lips. "I'll think about it."

She busied herself again, checking over his wounds, ensuring there was nothing worse she had missed. The night stretched on in silence, the only sound the crackling embers of dying flames in the distance.

Then, quietly—too casually—Catherine spoke.

"You never told me you were expelled from Aella Academy..."

Eddie hesitated.

His gaze flickered to the ground, fingers idly tracing patterns in the dust. Aella Academy. The name alone sat heavy on his tongue, like a stone he couldn't quite swallow.

"I... um..." he started, then faltered.

Catherine didn't push, not right away. She simply watched him, waiting. Unyielding, but patient.

Then, in a quieter voice, she said, "Markus told me everything."

Eddie's stomach twisted.

"I want to hear the story from you."

He swallowed. His gaze flickered toward the ruined path, the smoldering embers in the distance. Everything ached—his body, his head, his pride.

"It's..." he exhaled, "...a long story, Catherine."

She let out a small, amused sigh as she dipped a clean strip of cloth into the salve.

"Well," she mused, pressing it gently against one of his deeper bruises. Eddie tensed at the sting, but Catherine barely seemed to notice. "We've got all the time in the world now."

"It's not like the dragon's coming back anytime soon." She gave a small chuckle at that, as if trying to ease the weight in the air.

Then, more softly, "So... how did it go?"

Eddie exhaled slowly.

For a moment, he just listened—to the crackle of distant embers, the whisper of the wind through broken stone. To the quiet.

Then, at last—

"His name was Davies... Davies Mortimer... He was the one I duelled—" Eddie began

The memory coiled around him, suffocating. His fingers twitched, then clenched into a fist.

The firelight flickered between them, casting long, shifting shadows across the ruined stones. Catherine said nothing, waiting.

Eddie exhaled sharply, shaking his head. "I didn't just hurt him... I ruined him."

The night pressed in, cold and unyielding. It gnawed at his skin, but the ice settling in his gut was far worse.

"And all I could think was—" his voice cracked, breath unsteady. His heartbeat pounded in his ears. "I was a monster."

He could still see their faces. The stares. The unspoken verdict.

His fists tightened, nails digging into his palms, but the ache was distant—nothing compared to the weight in his chest.

And then, after a long silence, he whispered, "Maybe they were right."

He swallowed hard, the words thick in his throat.

"And I—I couldn't bear it. Not anymore. I was done."

His fists clenched, nails digging into his palms. The bitterness burned, hot and sharp.

"So when the academy expelled me..." He let out a hollow laugh, devoid of warmth. "Part of me was relieved."

The fire crackled between them, filling the silence where his certainty should have been.

"It was an excuse. A reason to walk away. To leave it all behind. To finally be free of that world. That power. To stop being this... thing everyone had to fear."

His voice trembled on the last word.

The confession left him raw, exposed. He forced himself to look at Catherine, bracing for judgment, for disgust—

But she only watched him, quiet.

Eddie exhaled, a shuddering breath. He ran a hand down his face, fingers curling against his jaw.

"But deep down..." His voice dropped to a whisper, haunted. "I know I can't leave it. I can't run from it. It's a part of me. I can't escape. No matter what."

Silence.

Catherine didn't speak right away. She didn't rush to fill the void his words left behind. She just stood there, the weight of his guilt settling between them.

Then, finally—

Her expression softened. "I see." Her voice was gentle, but there was no pity in it. Just understanding. "That must have been devastating."

Eddie nodded, his voice low, tinged with regret.

"I felt a guilt I'd never known before." The words came out hoarse, as if admitting it made the weight heavier. "I couldn't bear the thought of hurting someone like that again. So when I got my expulsion notice... I shut myself off from Alchemy."

He exhaled sharply. "I thought if I stayed away, I could protect people. That it was the right thing to do."

His fists clenched. "But it just made me numb." His gaze dropped to the ground, lost in the patterns of dirt and shadows.

Catherine hummed thoughtfully as she tied off the last bandage, her hands moving with practiced ease. She didn't offer some grand speech or elaborate wisdom, no reassurances that everything would be fine, no lofty words about fate or redemption.

Instead, she simply patted the side of his arm and grinned.

"There we go!" she declared, sitting back with satisfaction. "Good as new. Well—" she eyed his bruised limbs and tattered clothes with a smirk, "—good enough that Torrie won't burst into tears the second she sees you."

Eddie blinked. He wasn't sure what he had been expecting—some profound remark, maybe. Something wise, something complicated.

But Catherine was just... *Catherine*.

Jovial, lighthearted, moving forward like the weight of the world never quite stuck to her.

"Now," she said, pushing herself to her feet and brushing the dirt from her skirt, "Let's get moving before Torrie and Markus think we actually died."

Eddie huffed a quiet laugh, shaking his head. The ache in his chest remained, but it felt lighter now—just a little.

With a groan, he braced his hands against the ground and pushed himself up. His legs wobbled beneath him, the weight of exhaustion pressing down, but he steadied himself with a deep breath. His fingers curled around the broken remains of his father's rifle, using it as a crutch.

Catherine watched him with an arched brow. "You good?"

"Not even remotely," Eddie muttered, adjusting his grip on the rifle. "But I can walk."

"Good enough for me." She flashed a grin and turned toward the forest path.

Eddie inhaled, feeling the crisp night air sting his lungs. His body ached, his thoughts still churned, but he took a step forward.

And then another.

And another.

-0-

Eddie and Catherine trudged through the shattered remnants of the Illusory Forest, the path barely recognizable beneath the rubble. The trees loomed around them, casting long, jagged shadows over the uneven ground, their shapes twisting in the dim light.

Catherine walked beside him, clutching the splintered remains of her once-proud brass mahogany staff. The delicate engravings that had once gleamed with alchemical precision were now marred by cracks and soot, hastily mended by Alchemical Mending.

Eddie's rifle—his father's rifle—lay in two broken halves, its finely crafted compartments torn apart. Every step pressed the weight of the battle deeper into his chest.

Catherine's alchemy-infused salves had eased some of his pain, but the bruises, burns, and sharp, unnatural angle of his arm were beyond simple remedies. He barely winced but held it close, as if acknowledging the injury would make it worse.

His entire body ached, a dull, persistent throb that had settled into his bones. His limbs felt leaden, his breaths shallow. The forest around him felt distant—like he was walking through a dream, his senses dulled at the edges.

But he refused to slow down.

The night stretched on, the forest shifting around them. Quiet. Too quiet.

Catherine finally spoke, her voice hesitant, breaking the fragile silence.

"Say, Edward," She began, "Have you heard about the History of Nocturnilus the Conqueror?"

"The Elven Emperor?" Eddie asked back,

"Correct,"

"What of it?"

Catherine stayed silent, then continued, "There have been sorcerers who toppled kingdoms, enslaved millions, and committed atrocities beyond mortal imagination."

She let that sink in before continuing. "Once, he was just a spellcraftsman millenias ago—a sorcerer in service to the Northern Elven Kingdom. The elves have always lived by magic. For us, it was a birthright, a force of creation."

Her voice darkened.

"But for Nocturnilus, it was never enough."

She glanced at the treetops, as if searching for memories carved into the night sky.

"Blinded by greed, by the hunger for more, he turned his power toward conquest. He was the first sorcerer to raise a city of stone with a mere gesture—and the first to reduce one to ash just as easily. He marched across the lands, toppling kings, razing kingdoms, and forging an empire from the ruins of others."

Eddie swallowed, the earlier pain still pressing against his chest.

"His armies enslaved millions, binding them with chains wrought from his own magic. He thought himself invincible."

Catherine's voice dropped lower, almost a whisper. "But the more he took, the more magic consumed him. It changed him. His flesh, his mind... his very soul. By the end, he was no longer a man. Some say he was no longer even an elf. Just a shadow, a being twisted by his own power."

"And there was Aeron the Founder... One of the nine sages."

The name lingered between them like a spark in the cold night air.

"He was an elf, like Nocturnilus. In fact, he once served under him—stood at his side as a fellow conjurer, weaving spells to expand Nocturnilus's empire. For years, he followed orders, watching cities crumble, watching people enslaved by the very magic that was meant to enrich elven lives."

Catherine's voice grew firm. "But then, something changed. Aeron looked at the ruins they had left behind, at the lives shattered by conquest, and he could no longer bear it. He chose to walk away."

Eddie frowned. "He just... left?"

"Not just left," Catherine corrected. "He rebelled. He turned against the empire he had once helped build. He traveled to the very lands he had once helped destroy—not as a conqueror, but as a healer. A teacher."

"He taught magic to those who feared it, gave power to those who had none. And in the end, it was his students, his disciples, the very people Nocturnilus had enslaved, who brought the tyrant down to his knees."

Eddie swallowed, the weight of her words settling in his chest.

"Aeron could have followed the same path," Catherine continued, "But he chose differently. He eventually founded and became one of the Nine Sages, the very founders of the magical world as we know it."

"He and the others built cities where there was only wasteland, cured diseases that once ravaged nations, opened doors to possibilities no one had dared to dream of before."

Eddie's fingers twitched at his sides. His thoughts churned, Catherine's words fighting against years of self-doubt.

Catherine didn't hesitate. She placed a hand on his shoulder, firm and reassuring.

"It's not about what magic *can* do," she said. "It's about what *you* can do with it."

The weight of her words settled in his chest, pressing against the scars he had buried deep.

For a moment, neither of them spoke. The night stretched quiet and still around them

His thoughts swirled, heavy as the night pressing in around them. The conversation lingered in his mind, every word, every confession.

But it wasn't just his own past haunting him now. It was the stories Catherine had told him—the truth behind history.

Nocturnilus, the Elven Emperor who razed nations in conquest.

Aeron Consurion, the Founding Sage who shaped the magical world anew.

Both had walked this very path.

Both had wielded the same magic.

One was a tyrant.

One was a pioneer.

The history books painted them in stark contrast—opposites in morality, in purpose. Two figures who should never have shared the same road.

And yet... they had.

So what did that make him?

His vision blurred at the edges. His body felt heavier, like something was pressing down on him, urging him to stop. His head pounded, a dull, rhythmic ache that made the trees around him sway slightly.

His grip tightened around the rifle, but his fingers felt numb.

He walked.

And walked.

And walked.

The trees thinned, shadows giving way to the open road. And through the haze of exhaustion, he saw them.

Markus stood ahead, arms crossed, his sharp eyes scanning the darkness, pacing slightly.

Torrie, wrapped in her yellow knit sweater, bounced anxiously on her heels, her twin tails swaying as she strained to see down the path.

His best friend.

His sister.

They were waiting for him.

Eddie took a step toward them—

His knees buckled.

The world lurched sideways. The earth tilted, a sudden, violent pull that yanked his stomach down with it.

He barely registered the shouts—Catherine’s startled gasp, the panicked voices ahead—before the ground rose up to meet him.

Darkness swallowed him whole.

Chapter 25

Eddie drifted awake.

At first, there was warmth—the kind that seeped into his bones, heavy and lulling. Then came the weight pressing down on him, the dull ache that pulsed with each breath, tethering him back to reality.

Light filtered through stained-glass panels above, casting fragmented hues of crimson, sapphire, and emerald across the ceiling. The colors shifted as the breeze stirred the silken curtains surrounding the beds, sending ripples of light across the room. He blinked against it, his vision hazy, the shapes around him swimming into focus.

The ward was vast and open, lined with pristine white beds, each separated by shimmering silk drapes that glowed faintly in the shifting light. The air was thick with the scent of herbs and incense, laced with an eerie sort of quiet, still and controlled. Faint murmurs wove through the silence, rhythmic incantations carried on soft voices. The hum of magic pulsed in the air, subtle yet undeniable.

Healers moved gracefully between the beds, their robes flowing like water with each step. Their hands glowed as they worked, weaving healing spells with careful precision. Eddie watched them through half-lidded eyes, the sight stirring an unease deep in his chest.

He tried to move. A sharp pull in his side stopped him. A hiss of pain escaped through clenched teeth. He dragged his gaze downward, finding his chest bound in fresh white bandages. The faint scent of salves clung to them—earthy, sharp, and strangely familiar. His brown wool jacket was gone, replaced by a loose, soft robe.

Memories surfaced sluggishly.

The Deep Glaive. Catherine. The Nightingale Dragon.

The fight. The cold bite of exhaustion. The weightlessness of his body giving in.

He had blacked out.

His breath wavered slightly.

Eddie turned his head, taking in his surroundings.

Beside his bed, a small wooden table held a single cupcake, its frosting slightly smudged. Next to it, a familiar little box rested, its lid ajar. His chest tightened, recognition settling in before his mind had fully caught up.

Two envelopes lay beside the cupcake, each scrawled in distinct, familiar handwriting.

For the first time since waking, something other than the heaviness in his limbs stirred inside him.

He reached for the box first, lifting it open. Inside was his jade ring, the heavy silver bands coarse against his fingertips. Another note was tucked beneath it, the handwriting unmistakably his sister Torrie's. He unfolded it and started reading:

"Hey, figured you might want your antique ring back! Don't worry, though—Dad said he's buying a better one for me. ;) Take care of yourself, Eddie. Mom, Dad, Markus, and everyone at the Apothecary send their love."

Eddie couldn't help but chuckle. The familiar warmth of Torrie's humour worked its way through his lingering exhaustion.

He turned the ring over in his hands. It was once an extension of himself, a part of who he was before... before everything changed. There was still a reluctance within him. He was hesitant about picking it back up, about returning to the world of Alchemy. But here it was, given back to him with a laugh as if it were no more than an old toy.

Setting the note aside, Eddie reached for the second letter. The paper was thicker. The handwriting was unmistakably his mother's—precise, sharp, and severe. His stomach knotted as he unfolded it, already sensing the anger etched into every line.

Eddie,

I hope you're reading this with both eyes open and your head still attached, because I have a lot to say. First of all—what in the world were you thinking?

Catherine told me she was taking you, Torrie, and Markus to see the old ruins. THE RUINS. She did not mention anything about a dangerous, unpredictable Illusory Forest! I trusted her to keep you all safe, and instead, you come back bruised, battered, and unconscious in a hospital bed. Do you have any idea what that put me through? Do you have any idea how close I was to marching down there myself?

And as for Catherine—oh, she is getting an earful when she returns. You can be sure of that.

That being said... I'm relieved. More than I can put into words. You and Catherine may be worse for wear, but you're alive. You're safe. That's what matters most. Even if you scared ten years off my life.

—Mom

P.S. *Your father is devastated about the rifle. He's been muttering about it for hours. Do you know how long he's had that thing? If you were hoping for a dramatic, heartfelt fatherly lecture, well—tough luck. He's too busy mourning his 'poor, faithful companion' to be mad at you.*

Eddie exhaled through his nose, amused and guilty. His mother's words stung, but not in an unfair way—he really hadn't thought he'd get into *this* much trouble when he agreed to follow Catherine. But he did. And yet...

He ran a hand through his hair, sinking back into the pillows. Even with the bruises, the exhaustion, and the scolding he'd surely get once he was home, a part of him couldn't deny it—he'd had more thrill, more excitement, more *life* in those few days than he had in years.

A quiet chuckle escaped him.

Then a thought stirred. A vague, nagging feeling that he was forgetting something.

Wasn't there something important happening at the end of December?

He frowned, trying to sift through his sluggish memory, but nothing surfaced. His mind felt like a fogged-up window, the answer just out of reach.

His eyes drifted to the calendar hanging on the wall opposite him.

3rd of January, 1928.

Huh.

How had he lost track of time? It felt like he had only been out for a few hours, maybe a day. But a whole new year had begun without him.

A strange unease settled in his chest, but before he could dwell on it, his gaze landed on the last unopened letter on his bedside.

Right. There was one more.

Eddie turned the letter over in his hands, frowning. It wasn't like the others. The paper was stiff, slightly worn at the edges, as if it had been folded and unfolded too many times.

Then he saw the writing on the envelope.

Sage Institute Scholarship Referral for University Program.

His breath caught.

Below it, written in the neat, official script of an academy scribe:

Recipient: Edward Welton of Weshaven.

And at the bottom, the final line—the one that made his stomach drop:

Referral valid until the 29th of December, 1927.

His heart sank. The scholarship he had once fought so hard for—the one that had been his golden ticket to a future in Alchemy, the one that had been shoved in his pocket, ignored, carried with him all this time—was finally, *officially* expired.

A hollow silence filled his chest.

It's over.

The weight of the letter in his hands felt different now, heavier yet hollow. He had carried it for so long, stuffed it in his jacket pocket, ignored it whenever someone asked. *Why don't you go to university, Edward? Why not Alchemy, Edward? What happened to you, Edward?*

And now, finally—*finally*—he was free of it. No more questions. No more expectations. His mother wouldn't bring it up over dinner, Torrie wouldn't make her teasing remarks, Markus wouldn't give him that disappointed look.

It was over. He was free.

So why did it feel like he had just lost something?

A strange emptiness stretched inside him—like stepping out of a cage only to realize he had nowhere to go.

Only back to his family's Apothecary.

Back to the brewing room.

Making potions.

His fingers slackened. The letter slipped from his grasp and landed soundlessly on the blanket. His arm dropped back onto the bed, too heavy to lift again.

He tilted his head back, staring at the ceiling. The late morning light shimmered through the stained-glass windows, casting fractured patterns across the walls. He watched them flicker and shift, his mind blank.

Then, out of nowhere, a sting pricked at his eyes. A tightness swelled in his throat.

He sniffed.

Once... and then Twice...

His nose was running. A flu? Did he just get a cold?

He raised a hand to wipe at his face, only to realize his fingers were damp.

Before he knew it, his vision blurred. His shoulders trembled.

Eddie frowned, wiping them away quickly, but they kept coming and coming. Silent and stubborn. He swiped at his nose, frustrated, confused.

Why?

Why was he crying?

He didn't care about the damn letter.

He didn't care about the damn university scholarship.

He didn't.

But his body betrayed him. His chest ached. His breath came in shallow, uneven gasps as the tears refused to stop.

He clenched his jaw, pressing his palms against his eyes as if that would stop them. But his emotions protested, breaking past his defenses, spilling over in quiet, shuddering breaths.

And for the first time in a long while, Eddie let himself feel it.

-0-

Eddie carefully swung his legs over the edge of the bed, testing his strength as his feet touched the cool floor. His chest ached under the bandages. Every movement sent a throb of discomfort through his body. The letter lay tucked back into his jacket, hidden away once more. He didn't want to look at it.

His stomach grumbled. Right—he hadn't eaten since... when? He exhaled, rubbing his eyes before pushing himself up. His limbs felt sluggish, weighed down by exhaustion, but hunger gnawed at him enough to force him forward.

He stood slowly, wobbling slightly as his body adjusted to the weight of his injuries. His hands instinctively reached for the bedside table for balance. His body protested, but he ignored it, moving past the silk curtains and into the open ward.

The space was still and bright, golden light filtering through the stained glass. Healers drifted between beds, their robes trailing soundlessly behind them. Soft murmurs of magic wove through the air, mixing with the faint scent of herbal salves.

He hadn't made it far before a voice called out.

"I'm sorry, but you shouldn't be up yet, Mr. Welton."

Eddie turned.

A healer stood nearby, watching him with a raised brow. She was a tall, willowy woman with auburn hair pinned in a loose bun. The glow of healing magic still shimmered faintly around her hands.

Noticing his face, the healer asked, "Are you alright?"

“I— um,” He straightened, attempting a polite smile. “Yeah, I’m alright. Just got a bit of a cold.”

Her skeptical gaze flickered over him, lingering on the paleness of his face, the sluggish way he held himself.

“A cold, hm?” she said dryly. “Well, your ribs might disagree.”

Eddie huffed a quiet chuckle. “Fair point.” He cleared his throat. “I was just wondering... is there anywhere I could get coffee around here?”

The healer sighed but didn’t argue. Instead, she gestured toward the hallway leading to the courtyard. “The hospital café is just around the corner, near the garden.” Then, with a knowing look, she added, “But take it slow. You’re still healing.”

He gave her a small, grateful nod. “Thanks.”

She shook her head, muttering something about *reckless patients*, before turning back to her work.

Eddie exhaled and made his way toward the courtyard.

Chapter 26

Eddie stepped into the cafeteria. The warm aroma of freshly brewed coffee and baked goods enveloped him, mingling with fellow patrons' gentle laughter and chatter. The vibrant decor—colourful banners and enchanting murals—added to the lively atmosphere, making the space feel inviting and alive.

He approached the counter, where a barista with a scarred face greeted him. There was something familiar about the man, though Eddie couldn't quite place it. The barista offered a friendly smile as he took Eddie's order.

"A coffee and a toast with egg, please," Eddie said, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Coming right up," the barista replied, working swiftly. As Eddie waited, he scanned the room, noticing the bright, cheerful faces around him. It starkly contrasted with the heaviness that had weighed on him before.

When the barista placed the steaming cup and the neatly arranged toast in front of him, he gave a grateful nod. He settled at a table by the window. The sunlight streamed in, illuminating the intricate patterns of the courtyard outside.

As he took his first sip of coffee, a warmth spread through him. He couldn't help but smile, the familiar flavours comforting him in a way he hadn't expected.

While chewing on the toast, he glanced back at the barista, who was busy serving another customer. The man turned slightly, and Eddie saw the scar again. Something about it sparked a distant memory, but it was fleeting. Eddie shrugged it off, focusing instead on the moment—the peaceful ambience, the delicious food, and the comforting feeling of being cared for.

As Eddie enjoyed his toast, the barista struck up a conversation. "A toast with an egg? That's a specific menu choice," he said with a friendly smile.

"Yeah, I kind of got used to it," Eddie replied, taking another sip of his coffee.

"Comfort food?" the barista asked, small talks.

"Yeah, it's my comfort food." Eddie nodded, feeling the warmth of the conversation. They chatted about the cafeteria's best dishes and shared a few laughs. But as Eddie leaned in to catch a better look at the man's face, something clicked in his mind. The scar and the way he spoke began to make sense.

The café was alive with the low hum of conversations and the clinking of ceramic cups. But Eddie's world seemed to narrow as he caught sight of the barista's nametag. His heart stopped, then lurched into a wild, unsteady rhythm.

Davies Mortimer.

The name flashed in his mind like a warning bell, dragging a cascade of memories he'd long tried to suppress. He clenched his fists, the edges of his fingernails biting into his palms as anxiety clawed at his chest. Of all people... *why him?*

Eddie's stomach churned as he stood frozen. His mind racing through worst-case scenarios. Would Davies recognise him? Would he hate him for what he'd done? The scar on Davies' face had been Eddie's doing—a permanent mark of his recklessness. The shame and guilt that Eddie thought he had buried came rushing back, each thought heavier than the last.

Summoning his courage, Eddie takes a deep breath. There was no flicker of recognition in Davies' eyes. No immediate sign that he remembered the boy who had left such a mark on him.

"Davies?" Eddie's voice wavered, a mix of surprise and hesitation.

The barista's eyebrows furrowed slightly, then lifted in polite curiosity. "That's me. Can I help you?"

Eddie felt the pit in his stomach deepen. "It's me—Eddie," he said, his voice softer now, almost apologetic. When that didn't register, he added, "Eddie Welton."

Davies' brow furrowed, the name not quite connecting. "Sorry... Should I know you?"

Eddie felt a knot tighten in his stomach. Of course, it wouldn't be obvious—it had been years... Seven years, in fact. He swallowed hard, forcing himself to continue. "We were classmates. Back at Aella Academy."

Something flickered across Davies' face. His eyes widened slightly, the pieces finally falling into place. "Wait a second..." He stepped closer, leaning against the counter as realisation dawned. "The Edward Welton? The guy who won the second years Alchemy Tournament?"

Eddie blinked, stunned by the sudden shift in tone. "Uh, yeah. That's... me."

"Holy shit, man!" Davies laughed, his voice full of genuine warmth. He stepped out from behind the counter. Arms outstretched, and clapped Eddie on the shoulder like an old friend. "Man, it's been ages! I can't believe you're here!"

The tension in Eddie's chest loosened, replaced by a confusing swirl of relief and disbelief. He hadn't expected this—any of this. Where he had imagined hostility or fear, there was only friendliness.

"You remember me?" Eddie asked cautiously, his voice tinged with uncertainty.

"Of course I do!" Davies said, grinning. "You were the top Alchemy student in our class. Everyone talked about how you were going to change the field someday. What are you up to now?"

Eddie hesitated, still grappling with the unexpected warmth of the encounter. He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "I... I'm working with my dad. At Welton's Apothecary."

Davies' grin widened. "No kidding? That place is still around? I remember hearing about it back at Aella. Your dad used to send us those fancy potions for school projects. You're lucky—you've got actual experience now."

Eddie managed a small smile, though his mind was still reeling. "Yeah, it's... it's good. A lot of work, but it keeps me busy."

"Busy is good," Davies said, leaning against the counter. "And you were always one of the best. No surprise you ended up doing something with Alchemy."

"How are you, Davies?" Eddie asked back. "How's life for you?"

Davies shrugged, a grin spreading across his face. "Can't complain. Took some time off from the academy and decided to focus on something more grounded. Turns out, brewing coffee is pretty rewarding."

Eddie smiled but couldn't shake the feeling that their past loomed between them. "I'm glad to hear that. I've... been through a lot myself."

There is a silence

"Look, Davies..." Eddie's voice cracked slightly as he broke the silence, his words coming out in a rush. "I need to say this. I'm really sorry for what I did back then."

Davies blinked, confusion flickering across his face. "What are you talking about?"

Eddie swallowed hard, his gaze fixed on the counter between them. "The duel. Back at Aella. You know... when I—when I..." Eddie said, then gestured at the scar on his face, "When I did that."

Davies tilted his head, a faint crease forming between his brows. "Eddie, that was years ago—"

"No, let me finish," Eddie interrupted, his voice tinged with desperation. "I need to say this. I've carried the guilt from that day with me ever since. It was my fault. I lost control, and you—" His throat tightened, and he had to pause to steady himself.

"You got hurt because of me. I've replayed it a hundred times in my head. I thought about what I could've done differently and how I should've stopped before it got that far. And... I just—I hate myself for it... I'm sorry."

Davies' expression softened as Eddie's words spilt out. "Ed—"

"I thought you'd hate me... I thought everyone would," Eddie continued, his voice barely above a whisper. "Whenever I thought about seeing you again, I imagined you'd look at me with anger, or... or fear. Whenever I pass through Aella Academy or the town of Osthaven I expected rumours, side eyes and gossips. And I wouldn't blame you, I wouldn't blame them. I deserve that."

Davies sighed, leaning against the counter. "Eddie, look at me, man."

Reluctantly, Eddie raised his eyes, bracing himself for the condemnation he was sure would follow.

"Yeah, it sucked," Davies said plainly, his voice steady but kind. "It hurts like a bitch back then, and I was mad for a while. But I'm not mad now. We were kids. Stupid kids who didn't know better. And besides, I should've backed off too. We were both trying to prove something that didn't even matter in the grand scheme of things."

"But it wasn't your fault," Eddie interjected, guilt pooling. "It was mine. I started it—"

"No, Edward, I wasn't blameless either," Davies said firmly. "I let my ego get the better of me, too. I pushed you. I wanted to humiliate you in front of everyone, and that's on me. And..." He hesitated, rubbing the back of his neck. "I hurt Markus, your friend. I knew how close you two were, and I went to rile him up just to get to you. That was low, and I'm sorry for that. I should've never dragged him into it."

Eddie's eyes widened at the admission, his guilt momentarily giving way to surprise. "You don't have to apologise for that—"

"Yeah, I do," Davies interrupted gently. "Markus didn't deserve that, and neither did you. I was a cocky fucking jerk back then, and I hurt people just to feel like I was on top. I regret it. Just as much as you might have regretted what happened in that duel."

Eddie's shoulders sagged, the knot in his chest loosening slightly. "I don't know what to say. I thought... I thought you'd hate me. I was sure you'd never want to see me again."

Davies gave a small, rueful laugh.

"I did hate you. For a little while, anyway. But you're not the same kid you were back then, are you? Neither am I. Life's too short to hold grudges." He lets out a chuckle, "Grudges will prevent you from brewing good coffee."

Eddie looked up, chuckling. "You're a better person than I am. I've spent years avoiding my past, fearing what I'd find if I faced it."

"Well," Davies said, clapping Eddie on the shoulder with a grin, "sounds like you're facing it now. That's a start, isn't it?"

"I... I don't know what to say," Eddie admitted, his voice thick.

Davies grinned, clapping Eddie on the shoulder. "How about 'thanks for not spitting in my coffee'? Or better yet, 'thanks for making it extra strong'?"

Eddie let out a shaky laugh, the tension in his chest easing just a fraction. "Thanks for not spitting in my coffee," he said, his voice lighter now, "But no, it's not strong enough, Davies."

"Screw you Welton." Davies laughed. "Now, how about we catch up properly? Tell me what you've been up to since the academy."

"Well, for starters," Eddie began, rubbing the back of his neck, "I'm not at Aella anymore."

Davies raised an eyebrow. "Not at the academy? Where are you now? Don't say you just spend the last seven years brewing potions?"

Eddie laughed, feeling more at ease. "Yeah, well, I wouldn't exactly say I'm blowing things up anymore. But I guess it's... it's quieter. More grounded."

"Good for you," Davies said, nodding. "Sounds like you've found a path that works for you."

"Sort of..." Eddie's smile faltered for a moment. He remembered his struggles with his magic, but he quickly pushed it aside. "Actually, a few days ago, I had a visitor. An elf—she's a little... eccentric, but she's been a big help. I guess she was looking for something... a lost piece of history or magic. Some ancient codex or something. She's kind of a wanderer."

Davies raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "An elf, huh? Sounds like she left quite an impression,"

At that moment, Davies leaned in, his grin widening. "Oh, and by the way, Eddie," he said, a teasing glint in his eyes. "A lady with red hair said that if I met a guy with white hair and green eyes, I should ask him to meet her in the courtyard. You reckon it was you?"

Eddie's heart skipped a beat as he processed the information. "Catherine? What is she doing here?"

Davies raised an eyebrow, clearly piecing things together. "Wait... red hair, green eyes? Yeah, that sounds like her. She had sharp ears too, didn't she? Must've been the elf you're talking about."

Eddie nodded. Feeling a slight weight lift from his shoulders as he confirmed Davies' realisation. "Yeah, that sounded like Catherine."

Davies' expression shifted to one of mild concern. "Huh. That explains a lot. She was in the cafeteria earlier this morning and had a sling on her arm—it wasn't hard to spot her. Then she left pretty suddenly and said she was heading to the courtyard. That was a couple of hours ago, though."

Eddie's stomach clenched at the thought of her alone out there, especially after everything. "She... broke her arm?" he asked, his voice tinged with worry.

"Yeah," Davies said, shrugging. "Seemed like she might've hurt it. But she didn't look too upset, just—well, you know—distracted, like something else was on her mind."

Eddie's mind raced. He couldn't shake the image of Catherine alone in the courtyard, nursing an injury. "Is she okay? Should I go check on her?"

"Yeah, she seemed fine enough," Davies replied, his tone softening. "But, uh, sounds like she could use a friend. Probably a good idea to go meet her."

Eddie hesitated for a moment, his concern for Catherine growing stronger. "I... I should go. Thanks for telling me, Davies."

"No problem," Davies said, giving him a nod. "Take care of her, Eddie. Sounds like you've got some catching up to do."

Eddie stood up, his resolve solidifying. With a wave, he approached the door, a new sense of purpose guiding him as he headed to the courtyard. The lingering warmth of their conversation bolstered him, reminding him that change was possible—not just for Davies but for him, too.

As Eddie reached for the door, a voice called out from behind him. "Hey, Eddie!"

He turned, seeing Davies leaning against the counter, a grin tugging at his lips. "If you're considering continuing to university, choose Alchemy! You've got a real knack for it!"

Eddie blinked, surprised by the words. But the compliment made his chest swell with something between pride and guilt. He gave Davies a slight nod, feeling a spark of encouragement. "Thanks! I'll keep that in mind."

With that, Eddie stepped out of the cafeteria and into the hallway. The vibrant atmosphere of the hospital still buzzed around him. As he approached the courtyard, gentle laughter and the soft splashing of water from the central fountain grew clearer.

Chapter 28

Upon entering the courtyard, Eddie paused, captured by the enchanting scene before him. The space was a serene haven bursting with colourful flowerbeds of delicate daisies, fragrant lavender, and ethereal bluebells. Some flowers shimmered as if kissed by stardust. At the same time, an aromatic herb garden filled the air with the comforting scents of fresh basil and rosemary.

His gaze was drawn to Catherine. She stood amidst the blooms, wearing a hospital gown that mirrored his own. Her broken alchemical staff, once a ruin after their encounter in the Deep Glaive, had been magically restored. The weld marks hint at her skill. She held it close to the flowers. Eddie watched in awe as the blooms seemed to respond to her presence. Flourishing as if she were watering them with magic.

As Catherine gently fed the magical flowers with her energy. They began to bloom even brighter, a testament to her alchemical prowess and deep connection to nature. It was like she was sharing a part of herself with the garden. Fostering growth and vitality in this enchanting space.

Eddie took a step closer, his heart swelling with admiration. Here was Catherine, a master of her craft, weaving her magic into the fabric of life around her. The courtyard felt alive with energy, and all his worries melted away for a moment.

"Catherine?" he called softly, breaking the tranquillity.

"Edward," She turned, a warm smile spreading across her face. "Finally awake?"

He couldn't help but smile back, feeling the comfort of their friendship envelop him like a warm embrace. "Yeah, thanks to some good company," he replied. Gesturing toward the vibrant flowers around her.

Catherine chuckled, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Come, let's go for a walk," Catherine suggested. Her voice light as she began to stroll along one of the winding paths in the courtyard.

Eddie fell in step beside her, taking in the vibrant surroundings. The bubbling water from the fountain filled the air, mingling with the soft rustle of leaves. He turned to Catherine, curiosity bubbling up inside him. "What happened after I passed out? I mean, why did I even pass out in the first place?"

Catherine sighed, her expression shifting to something more serious. "You fainted during our walk back. Markus gave you some painkilling sedatives to help with your injuries, but they can only last so long. We thought it best to bring you here for proper care."

As they strolled through the courtyard, Eddie and Catherine fell into a rhythm of playful banter. Reminiscent of their earlier days. Though Eddie had matured, he couldn't help but engage in their familiar teasing.

As they continued walking through the courtyard. Catherine's expression shifted. A glint of something thoughtful appeared in her eyes. She paused for a moment, looking out at the trees as if she were piecing together a memory.

"You know," Catherine said casually, leaning against the railing, "I remember when I first arrived in Weshaven. You told me you were off to university—Edenfield, right? Big dreams and all that."

"I know, I know," Eddie muttered in frustration, hand running through his hair. "I know I shouldn't have lied. I never went to any university. I didn't even try. That damn referral letter—" He let out a humorless chuckle. "It doesn't matter now. It expired weeks ago. Just another thing I let slip through my fingers."

Catherine tilted her head, studying him, but he wasn't done.

"Now, there's nowhere else for me to go but back home," he continued, voice flat. "So that's it. Back to Weshaven, back to the damn apothecary. Making potions and remedies for the rest of my life. Probably going gray behind the counter while Dad tells me how to grind herbs properly."

Silence stretched between them.

Then, Eddie exhaled, his shoulders loosening just a little. "But you know," he added, glancing at her, "the past few weeks... running around with you, getting into all this mess—it's been the most fun I've had in years. Even with the bruises, even with the near-death experiences... I haven't felt that thrill, that excitement, since I was a kid doing my first transmutation. So Thank you."

Catherine's expression softened, but there was a quiet intensity in her gaze. She stepped closer, her voice dropping lower, more serious.

Catherine stood there, her gaze softer than before. "Hmm, I suppose you're right."

Eddie blinked, caught off guard. For a moment, he thought he'd misheard her. Catherine... agreeing with him? Not pushing, not nudging, not prodding him with yet another half-hearted motivational speech? His confusion deepened as she turned and began walking again.

"I'm sorry," Catherine said, her voice gentle but steady. "I suppose these past few weeks I've been pushing you too hard. 'Eddie, why not this, why not that,'" she added with a faint chuckle, shaking her head. "I've been so caught up in what I think is best for you that I didn't stop to think how much it might've hurt you."

Eddie stood rooted to the spot, watching her walk ahead. The words settled over him like a weight—heavy and suffocating. She had finally given up. After all her pushing, nagging, and coaxing, she was done.

And for the first time, the thought of Catherine stopping felt far worse than any of her nagging ever had.

This is it, Eddie thought, his chest tightening. This is how it happens. You stop arguing, you stop trying, and you go back to the apothecary, back to Weshaven, back to—

Back to a mundane life.

She turned and continued walking, her pace unhurried. Eddie trailed behind her, the weight in his chest growing heavier with every step.

“There’s nothing wrong with staying here in Weshaven, I suppose.” Catherine went on, her voice soft, almost wistful. “It’s quaint, beautiful, calm. And being an apothecary here, in the middle of all this... I think there is nothing wrong with it.”

No.

The word struck him like a thunderclap, reverberating through his entire being.

No, There is something wrong with that, in fact, it’s wrong to him.

His feet moved before his mind caught up. He stepped forward, his voice rising before he could second-guess himself.

“That’s what’s wrong for me, Catherine!” Eddie interrupted, his voice breaking as he stopped in his tracks.

She stopped and turned, surprised by the sudden outburst.

“It’s wrong for me to just stay here and pretend this is enough,” he said, his voice trembling. “It’s wrong for me to give up on Alchemy! Do you know what it feels like to love something so much it’s all you think about?”

His voice cracked, but he pushed through, the words spilling out as if he’d been holding them back for years.

“I’ve spent so much time lying to everyone—my parents, my friends, you—and pretending I don’t care, but I do. I care so much it hurts. I can’t keep pretending that this... this little life here in Weshaven is what I want. But It’s not. It’s never been enough.”

Catherine’s eyes softened, her lips parting as if to speak, but Eddie didn’t let her.

“And you know what’s worst of all?” His voice dropped to a near-whisper. “I’ve been lying to myself. Telling myself I can be happy here, that I can make this work. But I can’t. Because deep down, I know who I am, and I know what I want. I don’t want to be an apothecary. I don’t want to stay in this quiet, deadbeat hamlet, watching the years slip away.”

He looked at her, his expression filled with a mixture of desperation and resolve.

“It’s wrong for me to give up on my dreams, Catherine. It’s wrong for me to not go to Edenfield.”

The courtyard fell silent, save for the faint rustle of leaves in the breeze. Eddie stood there, his chest heaving as if he’d just run a great distance. For the first time in years, he felt the weight on his shoulders lift, replaced by a flicker of hope.

Eddie pressed forward, his steps heavy, his outburst echoing in his own ears. He didn’t look back at Catherine, too embarrassed by the rawness he’d just exposed.

“Sorry for the outburst,” he muttered, trying to sound nonchalant, though his voice wavered. “But I guess it’s all too late now, isn’t it?”

“It is not,” Catherine replied firmly, her voice carrying an undeniable conviction as she quickly caught up to him.

Eddie stopped, turning his head just enough to glance at her. He scoffed bitterly, shoving his hands into his pockets. “The recommendation letter for the Sage’s Institute Scholarship has expired, Catherine,” he said, his tone biting, though the bitterness was clearly aimed at himself. “What should I do? Walk in with an expired recommendation letter from seven years ago and beg for them to take me back?”

Catherine grinned slyly, the corners of her mouth quirking up as she tilted her head. “I don’t know,” she said, her tone playful. “I guess you could make that work.”

Eddie blinked, caught off guard by her lightheartedness. “What are you—”

Before he could finish, Catherine reached into the pocket of her medical gown, her movements deliberate yet casual. From it, she withdrew a gleaming brass card, holding it up between two fingers. The metallic surface caught the sunlight, casting a faint shimmer.

Eddie’s eyes narrowed as he focused on the object. He stepped closer, his curiosity overriding his frustration. The brass card bore Catherine’s name etched in elegant script, alongside an intricate alchemical symbol: a circle intertwined with a rectangle and a triangle.

“Tell them I sent you,” Catherine said, her voice steady, almost daring him to argue.

Eddie froze, staring at the card, the weight of her words sinking in. “Catherine... what is this?”

“It’s my recommendation,” she explained, her tone softening. “I may not be the head of the Sage’s Institute, but I’ve got enough credibility in Alchemy circles that they’ll have to think twice before dismissing you. An expired recommendation? That’s nothing. Not when they see this.”

His fingers twitched, and he reached out hesitantly, as if the brass card might vanish if he moved too quickly. When he finally took it, he felt the cool, smooth metal against his palm. It was heavier than he expected, carrying not just its physical weight but also the weight of her belief in him.

“You... you’d really do this for me?” Eddie asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

“Of course,” Catherine said, her expression softening into something more genuine. “I’ve seen what you can do, Eddie. I know how much Alchemy means to you. And if you want this, if you really want to go to Edenfield, then I’ll stand by you.”

Eddie’s throat tightened, and for a moment, he couldn’t find the words. He looked at the card again, then back at Catherine, who gave him an encouraging nod.

Eddie held the brass card tightly, a sense of determination reigniting within him. For the first time in years, the dream that felt so distant now seemed just within reach.

Chapter 29

The moonlight filtered in through the high stained-glass hospital window, casting a pale, silver glow across the room. The soft rustling of the night breeze was the only sound, yet Eddie couldn't sleep. He lay on his back. He stared up at the ceiling, the quiet hours of the night stretching out before him like an endless expanse.

The card Catherine had given him rested on his chest. Its brass surface was calm and weighty beneath his fingers. The owl sigil of the Sage's Institute gleamed faintly in the moonlight. Beneath it, Catherine's name and title—*Master Alchemist*—stood in sharp contrast to the softness of the room.

Eddie turned the card over, tracing the edges with his thumb. Its weight felt symbolic as if it were more than just a gift. A decision was waiting, a door standing wide open before him.

He had always wanted this—Alchemy, the pursuit of magic in its purest form. It had been his passion, his purpose back at Aella Academy, and now, it was within reach. But doubts crept in. He was no longer the same person he had been back then. He wasn't the golden student of the class. He had fallen, been expelled, and now he was just... stuck.

A deep sigh escaped him. His mind raced, replaying everything that had happened. Catherine's words, the moment they'd shared earlier in the courtyard. Davies's encouragement still ringing in his ears:

"If you're considering continuing to university, choose Alchemy! You've got a real knack for it!"

Davies, of all people. The same guy he thought would never forgive him, who now had reminded him of the very thing he had buried deep inside. His talent. His potential. What if he didn't pursue this? What if he let this chance slip away like all the others? Would he ever get another one?

Eddie closed his eyes and breathed deeply, trying to calm his racing thoughts. *It's not too late*, he told himself. *I don't have to keep running away from what I really want.*

He opened his eyes and stared at the card again. The sigil glowed faintly as though it were waiting for him to make his choice. It was as if the universe had placed this opportunity in his path, and now it was his turn to decide if he would take it.

The thought of walking into Sage's Institute. Of knocking on that front door in the heart of Central Weshaven. It filled him with a mixture of excitement and fear. But then, a sense of resolve settled over him.

When I get better, Eddie thought, *I will go. I'll knock on that door and tell them I'm ready. I'll make my way to Edenfield University. I'll pursue Alchemy for real.*

With the decision, Eddie felt a shift, a quiet sense of purpose taking root. His hand tightened around the brass card, his thumb retracing the edges.

He would do it. He would become the Alchemist he was meant to be.

Chapter 30

The cold morning air bit at their skin, the mist curling around their feet as they stood on the harbor's wooden planks. The sea stretched beyond, an endless gray expanse, the silhouettes of ships barely visible through the thick fog.

The low, resonant blast of the steamship's horn broke through the morning mist. Deep and mournful. It blasts like a slumbering giant stirring awake. Eddie followed Catherine and everyone towards the harbour. Catherine is leaving today. The planks beneath his boots creaking faintly with the tide's rhythm. The steamship loomed ahead, its dark silhouette emerging through the haze as smoke curled lazily from its towering funnel. The steam hiss and ropes clatter against the dock mingled with the distant cries of gulls overhead.

Catherine adjusted the strap of her bag, shifting the weight of her luggage—now considerably heavier thanks to the codex she had yet to tell Mr. and Mrs. Welton about.

Mrs. Welton let out a deep sigh, arms crossed over her coat. "Honestly, Catherine, I don't know what you were thinking."

Catherine, unfazed, gave her a lopsided grin. "You're going to have to be more specific, Ally. I think about a lot of things."

"Oh, don't be cheeky with me!" Mrs. Welton huffed. "Taking my children and Markus into that—whatever it was—Illusory Forest. I thought you were taking them to see some old ruins, not traipsing into actual danger!"

Catherine winced, rubbing the back of her neck. "I mean... in my defense, I never said it was just ruins."

"You never said it wasn't!"

"Look, they're all fine, aren't they? Bit of bruises, maybe some close calls, but we made it out in one piece."

Mrs. Welton narrowed her eyes. "You and Eddie came back looking like you lost a fight with a brick wall."

"Well," Catherine shrugged, "The wall hit first."

Torrie, standing beside Eddie, giggled. Markus, on the other hand, wisely kept his mouth shut, looking as though he wanted to stay out of any and all scolding.

Mrs. Welton exhaled sharply, but her expression softened. “You’re lucky you’re leaving, Catherine. Otherwise, I’d have you here scrubbing cauldrons for one hundred years as penance.”

Catherine gasped, placing a hand over her chest in mock offense. “You wound me, Alyssa.”

The ship’s horn bellowed in the distance, signaling final boarding.

The air grew a little heavier, the weight of parting settling in.

-0-

Eddie puts his hands on his pocket. His jacket provides warmth, although very little, grounding him. Around him, the dock bustled with quiet energy. Dockhands shouted to one another as they secured the ship. Travellers called out farewells to loved ones, and crates thudded against wood as loaded into the cargo hold.

As they reached the bustling harbor, the salty sea breeze ruffled Eddie’s hair while Catherine approached the ticket booth, ticket in hand. Behind her loomed a magnificent ship destined for Edenfield, its sails billowing in the wind like a giant, proud creature. Eddie gazed up in awe, imagining himself aboard such a vessel, a prospect that seemed closer than ever if he passed his entrance exam.

The ship’s horn echoed across the misty harbor, a low, resounding call that sent a shiver through the wooden planks beneath their feet. The cold morning air was thick with salt and silence as Catherine turned to face each of them in turn, her usual grin softened by something more tender.

Mrs. Welton—Alyssa was the first. Catherine stepped forward, adjusting the strap of her bag, and met the older woman’s gaze.

“Alyssa,” she said, with rare sincerity, “thank you.”

Mrs. Welton sighed, shaking her head. “Don’t make me worry so much next time.” Then, her voice softened. “You stay safe, alright? And if you ever pass through Weshaven, our home will always welcome you.”

Catherine swallowed, her usual wit failing her for a moment. Then she smirked. “That’s very sweet of you, Alyssa... but don’t work yourself too hard, yeah? You’re not exactly young anymore.”

Mrs. Welton scoffed, smacking Catherine lightly on the arm. “Oh, shut up. I’m seventy-two, not dead.”

Catherine laughed. “Still. Try not to keel over before I visit next, alright?”

Next was Mr. Welton—Robert. Their dynamic had always been different—a student and his old mentor. Catherine studied the man before her, the apothecary’s steady hands, the slight wrinkles of experience marking his face.

“I have to say, Robert,” she said, crossing her arms, “I’m proud of you.”

Mr. Welton raised a brow. “For what?”

“For this.” Catherine gestured vaguely behind him, as if the whole of Weshaven and its quiet little apothecary were wrapped into a single point. “You took what I taught you and made it something more. You built something that lasts.”

A ghost of a smile touched Robert’s lips. “I had a good teacher.”

Catherine grinned. “Damn right, you did.”

Then came Markus. She turned to him with an appraising look, her sharp eyes scanning him like she had just seen him in a new light.

“You’re braver than you think, Markus,” she said simply. “And I mean that.”

Markus blinked in surprise. “Oh. Uh, thanks?”

Catherine chuckled. “You’re going to go places.”

Markus rubbed the back of his neck, unsure of how to respond, but the words stuck with him.

Then, Torrie. The youngest of the group, standing small in the mist, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. Her lips wobbled, but she bit them, determined not to cry.

Catherine crouched slightly to meet her eyes. “Hey,” she said gently.

Torrie sniffled. “I’ll miss you.”

Catherine ruffled her hair, grinning. “I’ll miss you too, little firecracker. But you’ll be fine. You’ve got a whole adventure ahead of you.”

Torrie nodded quickly, blinking away tears.

And then, she turned to Eddie.

“I guess this is where I’m off,” Catherine said, a playful glint in her eye as she turned to face him. “I’ll see you in a decade or so, Edward..”

“You should visit more often,” Eddie replied, a note of longing in his voice. “Torrie really enjoyed your company, you know?”

“Maybe she did,” Catherine replied, her smile fading slightly. “But I have my own matters to attend to. I don’t have much time to relax and visit family.” She paused, her expression shifting to one of quiet reflection. “In fact, why don’t you visit me instead? If you go through and accepted in your entrance exam, you’ll be boarding this exact same ship toward Edenfield. Our paths might cross again someday.”

“Yeah, indeed,” Eddie said, his smile returning as hope sparked within him. “Take care of yourself.”

With a flourish, Catherine stepped onto the dock, her red overcoat dancing dramatically in the sea wind, creating a striking silhouette against the backdrop of the

ship. Eddie stood rooted in place, watching as the ship began to pull away, his aunt's elven ears and tall figure becoming a fading outline against the horizon.

As the ship sailed further into the distance, Eddie turned on his heel, determination surging through him. He made his way back toward the train station, the rhythm of the waves echoing in his mind.

If I go in the entrance exam, If I got accepted, I'll be boarding that exact same ship.

No, he thought fiercely, I will go to the entrance exam.

I will board that ship towards Edenfield.