

THE EDENFIELD CHORNICLES

Book 1

Draft III

[Drafted in 21st of November, 2024]

Zaydan Akbar

The Edenfield chornicles

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This is a story about a stressed out university student,

For stressed out university students,

And sincerely, by a stressed out university student.

Enjoy.

- Zaydan

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Chapter I



ust hung heavy in the air, swirling in lazy spirals under the beam of afternoon sunlight that spilled through a small, cracked window. The musty scent of old parchment and dried herbs lingered like a ghost of abandoned aspirations, mingling with the tang of salt carried in by the faint sea breeze. The room, a ramshackle attic above the bustling apothecary below, felt trapped in a time long gone, its silence broken only by the occasional creak of warped floorboards and the distant cry of seagulls drifting in from the harbor.

The wooden walls, once warm and inviting, now stood bare and weary, lined with the remnants of a life once lived with passion. Faded posters clung desperately to the wood, their edges curled and yellowed, depicting famous magicians and alchemists with their grins frozen in place. They stared down with expressions of triumph and mastery, now overshadowed by the long tears that split through their faces like cruel reminders of lost dreams. Between them, diagrams of complex magical runes hung in disarray – some torn cleanly from their pins, others scratched out violently, as if the hand that had drawn them couldn't bear to see them whole.

The room felt like a time capsule suspended between two worlds, its silence thick and suffocating. Only the distant cry of seagulls and the faint lapping of waves against the shore provided any semblance of life, filtering in from the coastal town below. The floorboards creaked softly, a murmur of discontent whenever the

wind shifted, and the entire space smelled faintly of mildew and old herbs.

Beneath the melancholy stillness, there were faint signs of a more vibrant past—a cluttered desk strewn with empty potion vials, dried herbs now turned to dust, and scattered quills with broken tips. The rough surface of the desk felt grainy and uneven to the touch, a stark contrast to the brittle, delicate texture of the abandoned notes that lay scattered across it. The sensation of running a hand over the pages evoked a feeling of loss and yearning, as if the very room mourned its forgotten purpose.

At the far end of the attic, tucked against the wall beneath the slanted ceiling, lay a narrow bed with crumpled sheets. The blanket was a tangled mess, draped haphazardly over the edge and exposing the thin mattress underneath. And there, amidst the disorder, Eddie slept.

His body was a motionless silhouette under the faded covers, shoulders curled inwards as if shielding himself from the weight of his own thoughts. His face was turned towards the window, catching the last faint glow of afternoon light. A few strands of his silver hair fell across his closed eyes, shimmering softly in the glow—a bright, ethereal contrast against his pale skin. He looked younger in sleep, almost fragile, with shadows pooling beneath his eyes and his lips set in a faint frown, as if even in rest, he could not quite escape his discontent.

The silver of his hair spilled over the pillow in unkempt waves, catching the light like threads of moonlight caught in a storm, whispering of a brilliance that once burned brightly. But now, it was dulled—like everything else in the room—a reminder of a past self, a past life, that had long since faded.

The creaking of the stairs echoed through the quiet apothecary as Mrs. Welton ascended slowly, each step taken with the careful

weight of a woman bearing years of worry and frustration. The narrow wooden staircase wound up to the attic, the polished railings smooth and cool under her touch. Faint beams of light filtered through a small, round window at the landing, casting elongated shadows that swayed gently as she moved.

With every step, the sound of bustling life from the town below faded further away, replaced by the thick, oppressive quiet that always seemed to hang around Eddie's room. Her free hand brushed against the walls as she climbed, fingertips tracing over rough patches and gouges left by old scuffs—memories of her son's younger, more vibrant days when the house had been filled with laughter, arguments, and the clatter of magical experiments gone awry.

When she reached the attic door, she paused, hesitating for just a moment before raising her hand. The wood was sturdy, yet worn from years of knocks and quiet conversations held late into the night. Mrs. Welton closed her eyes, took a slow breath, and then knocked lightly with her knuckles, the sound a gentle, almost hesitant tap against the stillness.

"Eddie?" she called softly, her voice filled with quiet resolve. She leaned in closer, listening. There was no response from the other side. Her brow furrowed slightly, a subtle crease forming between her eyes. She glanced at the door handle, tempted to turn it, but refrained. Instead, she knocked again, this time with more purpose, the sound reverberating louder through the room beyond.

Silence. Thick and unmoving.

Eddie stirred at the sound, his body tensing slightly beneath the blankets. With a muffled groan, he shifted and grabbed the pillow beside him, pulling it over his head as if to drown out the world. He squeezed his eyes shut tighter, willing himself to sink

back into the empty comfort of sleep. His hair, disheveled and bright against the dark sheets, fanned out messily as he burrowed further under the covers.

“Go away...” he muttered under his breath, but the words were barely more than a whisper, lost beneath the heavy fabric of the pillow. He knew what was coming next—more knocks, more gentle pleading—and he didn’t have the energy to face it. Not today. Not like this.

Outside, Mrs. Welton waited, her hand hovering just shy of the door. She glanced back down the staircase, then turned her gaze back to the door, steeling herself. She knocked again—firmer, with more insistence this time.

Mrs. Welton sighed softly and reached into her apron’s hidden pocket, fingers brushing against the familiar, polished wood of her wand. With a flick of her wrist, the wand appeared—a slender length of dark mahogany engraved with delicate alchemical runes that shimmered faintly in the dim light. Mrs. Welton pointed it at the door’s lock, and with a whispered incantation, a soft click echoed through the stillness.

The spell resonated in the air, causing the runes around the lock to glow briefly before fading back into obscurity. She pocketed her wand with a practiced motion and then, with a gentle push, eased the door open.

The room greeted her like a sullen child. Pale, dusty sunlight streamed in from the narrow gap in the curtains, barely illuminating the space. Shadows clung stubbornly to the corners, and the air was thick with the musty scent of neglected books and lingering sleep. Her gaze swept over the disarray—the piles of papers, discarded clothing, the wayward textbooks left half-open as if abandoned mid-thought—before finally settling on the figure curled up in the bed.

Eddie lay still beneath the heap of blankets, his back turned towards her. His silver hair spilled over the pillow like a pool of moonlight, stark against the worn fabric. It looked almost ethereal in the dim light, catching the faint glow from the hallway as if it alone refused to be dulled by the gloom of the room.

For a moment, Mrs. Welton just stood there, taking in the sight of her son. The boy who had once been so full of energy and promise, now reduced to this—an unmoving shape swallowed by the bed's darkness. Her heart clenched painfully, and she took a steadying breath.

"Alright, Eddie," she murmured, more to herself than to him. "Let's get a bit of light in here."

She moved across the room, stepping lightly around the scattered items. She reached the windows and drew the heavy curtains aside in one swift motion. Sunlight burst into the room, flooding it with sudden warmth and brightness. Dust motes swirled in the golden light, and the salty sea breeze poured in, brushing against her face and making the faded posters on the walls flutter.

The room seemed to sigh at the intrusion of light, as if it, too, had been holding its breath.

Eddie groaned softly, flinching at the sudden change. He pulled the pillow tighter over his head, trying to block out the world now pushing its way back in. He could feel the heat of the sun on his back, the sudden liveliness in the air—it was too much, too soon. He wanted to retreat, to disappear again into the comforting darkness.

Mrs. Welton glanced back at him, hands still gripping the curtain fabric. "You've hidden away long enough, my dear," she said quietly, though her voice carried a gentle firmness. "It's time to wake up."

Mrs. Welton released the curtain, allowing it to sway gently in the breeze, and turned her attention fully to Eddie, her brow creased with concern. "You know, Eddie," she began, her voice warm yet insistent, "you can't lie in your bedroom forever. The world outside is waiting for you."

Eddie shifted under the covers, but the pillow remained firmly pressed against his head, as if it might somehow absorb her words and keep them from penetrating his thoughts. "But it's so comfortable here," he murmured, his voice muffled.

Mrs. Welton took a few steps closer, her tone softening. "I understand. But your father could really use your help at the Alchemical Tower today. You know how much he relies on you, especially now that he's short on staff."

Eddie let out a low groan, half-resentful, half-amused by the prospect. "Dad always finds a way to manage. It's just a few potions, isn't it?" He didn't dare peek from under the pillow, fearing that even the slightest exposure to sunlight might steal away the last remnants of his sleepy comfort.

Mrs. Welton crossed her arms, her kind demeanor tinged with a touch of playful exasperation. "Eddie, you know that's not true! Markus and Lydia can't do everything on their own. They need you there to assist with the more complex orders. Besides," she added, "the market is bustling today, and you might even enjoy it."

His heart sank a little at the thought of bustling streets and cheerful vendors. What was there to enjoy when everything felt so hollow? But he could hear the concern in her voice, the gentle nudging of a mother who simply wanted the best for her son.

"Just think about it," she continued, her expression softening as she leaned against the wall. "You used to love the energy of the

apothecary, the smells of the herbs, the thrill of mixing potions. Remember how you used to watch your father work, how alive it made you feel?"

He hesitated, feeling the memories tug at him like distant echoes. Those days felt like they belonged to someone else, a younger version of himself, full of ambition and dreams. But Eddie didn't want to think about that now. "That was a long time ago, Mom," he replied, his voice barely above a whisper.

Mrs. Welton's gaze softened further, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. "I know, sweetheart. But that passion is still in you; you just need to let it out again. You can't hide in this room forever. You'll feel better once you get up, I promise."

As silence filled the space between them, Eddie felt the weight of her words hanging in the air, heavy and undeniable. Wouldn't it be easier just to stay here, cocooned in the familiar melancholy of his room? But he couldn't ignore the twinge of guilt stirring within him, the reminder of obligations and the growing worry etched into his mother's face.

"Alright," he finally conceded, the word slipping out like a reluctant surrender. "I'll get up. Just... give me a moment."

"Take your time, but not too long," she replied with a soft smile, a glimmer of hope dancing in her eyes. "Your father is counting on you."

With that, she turned and stepped back towards the door, allowing the gentle sea breeze to swirl around her before exiting. Eddie lay there, staring at the ceiling, his heart still heavy but now mixed with a faint stir of determination.

Eddie groaned deeply, burying his face further into the pillow as if trying to escape the day entirely. The soft, faded fabric wrapped around him like a comforting embrace, shielding him

from the world beyond. He listened to his mother's footsteps retreating down the stairs, a part of him grateful for the brief respite, but another part nagged at him, urging him to rise.

The gentle breeze wafted through the open door, rustling the curtains and bringing with it the scent of salt and herbs from the apothecary below. Sunlight streamed in, casting warm patterns across the floor, inviting him to break free from the cocoon of sleep. He shifted slightly, the soft creak of the bed filling the silence, a reluctant reminder of the responsibilities awaiting him.

With a deep breath, Eddie finally allowed himself to emerge from the confines of the pillow's softness. He cracked one eye open, blinking against the bright light, squinting to get accustomed to the day. The room still felt heavy with the weight of his lethargy, but he sensed a flicker of determination buried beneath the fatigue.

Pushing the covers aside, he swung his legs over the edge of the bed, feeling the cool wood of the floor against his feet. The sensation jolted him awake a little more, and he took a moment to gather himself, letting the silence of the attic settle around him.

Eddie stood up, his thin frame swaying slightly as he adjusted to the vertical position. His silver hair fell messily around his face, and he ran a hand through it, trying to smooth it down, though it only fluffed up more rebelliously. The mirror across the room reflected a version of himself he barely recognized – a young man caught between the weight of despair and the ghost of his former ambition.

With a determined nod to himself, he stepped towards the door, the familiar creak of the floorboards beneath him echoing his resolve. He could still hear the bustle of the town below, a vibrant reminder of life continuing without him. It was time to shake off

the remnants of sleep, to step outside of his sanctuary of solitude, and confront the world once more.

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Eddie stepped out of his attic room, the familiar wooden floor creaking beneath his feet as he made his way down the narrow corridor. The hall of the Welton Household unfolded before him like a warm embrace, rich textures and earthy scents wrapping around him. Sunlight streamed through tall, mullioned windows, casting dappled patterns across the polished wooden floor, illuminating the stories hidden within its grain.

The air was thick with the aromatic blend of dried lavender and rosemary, mingling with a faint metallic tang that hinted at the alchemical experiments taking place in the tower above. Eddie paused for a moment to soak in the surroundings—the shelves lined with glass vials and jars filled with vibrant herbs and mysterious powders, each labeled with faded parchment tags, bore witness to his family's legacy.

He walked over to the wooden counter, worn smooth by years of use, where an array of tools lay cluttered—a mortar and pestle, measuring scales, and half-opened tomes filled with notes and sketches. Above it hung a chalkboard, its surface scribbled with formulas and reminders, the words almost seeming to dance in the golden light, a reminder of the brilliance that once filled the air.

With a determined sigh, Eddie grabbed his lab coat, the fabric cool against his skin, and turned towards the spiral staircase that wound upward like a beckoning vine. Its intricately carved banister invited him to ascend into the heart of alchemy and magic. The soft bubbling of liquids drifted from the upper levels, where his father, Mr. Welton, was likely immersed in another complex experiment.

Eddie hesitated for a moment, glancing at the rune inscribed on the floor near the base of the staircase, glowing faintly with an alluring light. The rune, a testament to his older brother Alfred's ingenuity, was designed to activate illusion magic, creating a perception that the daunting climb of a thousand stairs felt more like a mere ten. But Eddie's heart sank at the thought of using magic, a choice he had long abandoned. Instead, he steeled himself for the arduous climb that lay ahead.

With a deep breath, he began his ascent, each step echoing in the silence of the hall. The polished wood creaked underfoot as he climbed, the rhythm of his heart matching the sound of his footsteps. One step, then another—he focused on the burn in his legs, the way his breath quickened, as the stairs stretched endlessly before him.

As he passed the first landing, the warm glow of the candlelight illuminated his path, and he couldn't help but glance at the shimmering vials lining the shelves, each holding secrets he had once dreamed of uncovering. Memories of a time when magic felt like a part of him surged forward, but he quickly pushed them away, gritting his teeth against the ache in his heart and the heaviness in his soul.

The journey upward felt like a test of will, a reminder of the distance he had yet to travel—not just to the top of the tower, but also within himself. Each step was a whisper of potential unfulfilled, a challenge to confront the remnants of his past. With every creak of the floorboards and every sigh of the wind through the tower, Eddie continued, determined to reach his father and face whatever awaited him at the top.

-o-

Eddie finally reached the top of the tower, panting heavily, his breath coming in sharp gasps as he stepped into the alchemist's

lab. The warm glow of enchanted lanterns flickered softly, casting dancing shadows on the rough-hewn stone walls. The rich aromas of crushed leaves and simmering concoctions enveloped him, mingling with the salty breeze wafting in through tall windows, framed by intricate wooden beams. From this vantage point, the panoramic view of Weshaven stretched out below, the coastal town bustling with life.

At a sturdy workbench strewn with an array of raw materials, his father, Mr. Robert Welton, looked up from his meticulous work. A man in his seventies, Mr. Welton was a well-known alchemist, his silver hair matching Eddie's in color but neatly combed back, exuding an air of wisdom and experience. He flashed a warm smile, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "Ah, Eddie! How is it that a young man like you can be so out of breath? I, a mere man in my seventies, can go up and down these stairs without a hitch!"

Eddie rolled his eyes, a faint smile creeping onto his lips as he retorted, "That's because you're cheating, Dad! You use that illusion rune Alfred made to skip all those stairs!"

Mr. Welton burst into laughter, a deep, hearty sound that filled the room and made the jars rattle slightly on their shelves. "Touché! But it's all in the name of efficiency!" He motioned toward the sprawling workbench, cluttered with an array of gleaming crystals, dried roots, and vibrant herbs, each carefully labeled in elegant script.

With a sigh of resignation, Eddie walked over to his father and reached for the to-do list his mother had prepared. "What can I help with?" he asked, glancing at the meticulous notes detailing the tasks for the day.

"Let's get these raw materials processed," Mr. Welton replied, pulling on a pair of protective goggles as he moved to the various ingredients scattered across the workbench. "We need to prepare

them for transport to the apothecary. Your mother is short on staff today, and I could use an extra pair of hands.”

Eddie nodded, feeling a sense of purpose begin to replace the lingering lethargy. He joined his father, picking up a finely wrought knife and slicing through the dried roots with practiced ease. As he worked, he let the familiar rhythm of the lab wash over him—the bubbling of potions, the clinking of glass apparatuses, and the rich scent of herbs mixed with chemicals.

The air in the lab was alive with activity. Glass vessels bubbled and steamed on another table, connected by twisting tubes that glimmered under the soft light. Some potions were brewing, their vibrant colors swirling like living entities, while others rested in delicate glass vials, glowing faintly with an inner luminescence. The shelves lining the walls housed jars of extraordinary ingredients—dried dragon’s blood, shimmering scales from mystical fish, and jars of powdered gemstones—each one sparking memories of Eddie’s childhood dreams of becoming a great alchemist.

“Careful with that,” Mr. Welton cautioned as Eddie reached for a particularly rare herb, its leaves glistening with dew. “We don’t want to waste anything today.”

Eddie nodded, focusing on the task at hand, feeling the warmth of the lantern light and the grounding weight of the raw materials surrounding him. The familiar chaos of the lab began to seep into his bones, reminding him of why he had once loved this place. As he worked alongside his father, a flicker of hope ignited within him—a hint that maybe, just maybe, he could reclaim the magic that had once filled his life.

-O-

As Eddie and Mr. Welton worked side by side, the rhythmic sounds of slicing and grinding filled the lab, accompanied by the bubbling and hissing of potions in progress. The atmosphere was vibrant and energetic, a familiar melody that wove through the air like the salty breeze drifting in from the coast.

"You know, Eddie," Mr. Welton began, carefully measuring a vibrant powder, "you're almost twenty now. Time seems to fly faster than the potions I brew."

Eddie paused, glancing up from the herbs he was slicing. "Yeah, I guess so. Feels like just yesterday I was a kid, dreaming about alchemy and magic."

"So, Eddie," Mr. Welton began, glancing sideways at his son, "have you given any thought to the Sage's Scholarship program?"

Eddie paused mid-slice, the knife hovering above the root he was preparing. "Not really," he replied, shrugging slightly. "I don't know if I'm ready for something like that. It's been hard to think about anything beyond today."

His father nodded, a thoughtful expression on his face. "It's not just about age, son. You have so much potential. If you don't make the most of these years, you might miss out on opportunities. Once you pass twenty-one, you can no longer apply for the Sage's Scholarship program."

Eddie's heart sank at the mention of the scholarship. It had once been a beacon of hope for him, a chance to study under the great minds of alchemy and magic. But ever since the incident at Aella Academy, that dream felt impossibly distant. "I know, Dad. But I—"

"Listen," Mr. Welton interjected gently, his voice firm yet encouraging. "Your aunt Catherine will be disappointed if you don't pursue it. She's believed in you from the start, even when

you've lost faith in yourself. Think about what you could achieve with her guidance."

Eddie, feeling a sudden wave of nostalgia, paused his chopping and looked up at his father. "What about Aunt Catherine? I can't remember the last time I thought about her. How's she doing?"

Mr. Welton smiled, his eyes glimmering with fond memories. "Ah, Catherine. Your aunt is quite the character. You know she's your mother's sister and a Master Alchemist in her own right. It's a wonder how much alchemical talent runs in the family, especially with that elven blood of hers."

"Yeah, I remember her being really good at it," Eddie replied, absentmindedly slicing the herbs. "But I forgot just how long it's been since we last saw her. I miss our adventures together."

"Those were good times," Mr. Welton said, a hint of wistfulness in his voice. "Catherine used to take you exploring dungeons and ruins, remember? You were always eager to learn and had such a brave spirit back then."

Eddie chuckled, the corners of his lips lifting at the memories of climbing into dark, hidden spaces with his aunt, each adventure filled with laughter and magic. "I can't believe I ever had the energy to climb into those old ruins. What was I thinking?"

"You were young, full of curiosity," Mr. Welton replied, a proud smile crossing his face. "And it wasn't just that; you were learning from the best. Catherine was my mentor before she started her own journey. She taught me much of what I know today."

"Wait, so you were her apprentice?" Eddie asked, raising an eyebrow. "You? The legendary Mr. Welton?"

"Indeed! Before I became the legendary Mr. Welton," his father said with a chuckle, waving a hand dismissively. "I was just a

young lad, and Catherine was already making waves in the alchemical community. It's amazing to think of how talented she is. The elven blood runs strong in both her and your mother."

"Is that why she looks so young?" Eddie mused, thinking back to his aunt's youthful appearance, even as she aged. "It's like she hasn't aged a day since those adventures."

"Exactly," Mr. Welton nodded, a hint of admiration in his voice. "That elven heritage keeps her vibrant and full of life. It's a blessing, really. She still travels and explores the world, gathering knowledge and wisdom."

Eddie felt a pang of longing, realizing how much he missed those connections and adventures. "I really should reach out to her. Maybe she can help me find my way again."

"Definitely," his father encouraged. "Catherine would love to hear from you. She's always believed in your potential, even when you've doubted yourself."

Eddie stepped back from the sturdy workbench, wiping his brow with the back of his hand. The last of the ingredients was neatly packed into sturdy wooden cases, ready to be transported to the apothecary below. He took a moment to admire the organization he had achieved, feeling a sense of accomplishment wash over him.

"Alright, Dad, I'm heading down," he called, moving towards the door that led to the winding staircase. The familiar creak of the doorframe seemed to echo his eagerness to leave.

But just as he was about to push the door open, Mr. Welton's voice halted him. "Eddie, wait a moment. Could you stay for a bit longer? I have another favor to ask of you."

Eddie turned, curiosity piqued. "Another favor? What is it?"

Mr. Welton leaned against the workbench, the flickering lantern light casting warm shadows on his face. "It's just something that's come up, something I could use your help with."

"What kind of help?" Eddie asked, an uneasy feeling bubbling in his stomach.

"Nothing too complicated, I promise," his father replied, a hint of a smile playing on his lips, though it did little to quell Eddie's apprehension. "Just something I think you'll find interesting."

Eddie crossed his arms, intrigued yet wary. "Is it something that involves... magic?"

His father chuckled softly, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "In a way. Just stay a little while longer; I think you'll like this."

Mr. Welton's smile faded slightly as he reached under the workbench and produced a small, ornate cage. Inside, a beautiful songbird fluttered its wings, its vibrant plumage glimmering in the light. "Eddie, I need your help with something important," he said, carefully opening the cage.

Eddie's brow furrowed in confusion. "What's this about?"

"Release this songbird," Robert instructed, his tone gentle yet firm. "It's time for it to fly free."

Eddie hesitated, feeling a sense of protectiveness over the little creature. "But... it's a songbird. It might get lost or hurt."

"Songbirds are meant to sing and soar, not be caged," his father replied, the warmth in his voice contrasting the unease growing within Eddie. "Trust me, just let it go."

With a sigh, Eddie stepped forward, carefully taking the cage from his father's hands. As he opened the door, the songbird hesitated for a moment, then burst forth, flapping its wings and

soaring into the sky, a streak of color against the blue. Eddie watched it go, a bittersweet feeling settling in his chest.

"See? Just like that, it found its freedom," Robert said, a glimmer of satisfaction in his eyes.

Eddie turned back to his father, still feeling the weight of uncertainty. "Okay, but what's the point of that?"

Mr. Welton's expression shifted to one of playful seriousness. "Now, I have another task for you."

He reached under the workbench again and brought out a larger, more elaborate cage. Inside sat a stunning Fire Falcon, its feathers shimmering like molten gold, reflecting the warm light of the lanterns. The bird's fierce gaze met Eddie's, and he felt a jolt of recognition for its majestic beauty.

"Release this one, too," Robert instructed, his tone light.

Eddie's eyes widened. "You want me to release a Fire Falcon? But it's valuable! You can't just let it go."

Robert leaned in closer, a twinkle of mischief in his eyes. "What if I bet you 100 gold coins?"

"100 gold?" Eddie repeated, torn between the allure of the bet and the instinct to protect the magnificent creature. "But it's a Fire Falcon!"

"Exactly," Robert said, his smile widening. "This isn't just about the gold; it's about taking a risk. Think of it as a lesson in courage."

Eddie hesitated, the internal conflict raging within him. "But what if it doesn't come back?"

"Then it was meant to be," Robert replied, his gaze steady. "You have to learn that sometimes, you need to let go to see what you can gain."

With a reluctant sigh, Eddie nodded, trying to swallow his apprehension. "Alright, I'll do it."

As he approached the cage, Eddie took a deep breath, his heart racing. He opened the door and gently nudged the Fire Falcon forward, expecting it to take flight immediately. But to his shock, the falcon remained perched inside the cage, its golden eyes fixed on him, as if weighing its options.

"Come on!" Eddie urged, his heart pounding with anxiety. "You're supposed to fly away!"

But the Fire Falcon merely tilted its head, staying put. Eddie's stomach sank as he realized the truth. "No... this can't be happening."

With a chuckle, Robert shook his head. "Looks like I win the bet, son."

Eddie felt a rush of disappointment wash over him, a mix of anger and confusion. "Why? Why didn't it fly away?"

Robert's expression softened as he stepped closer. "Sometimes, Eddie, just like that falcon, we become too comfortable in our cages. We're afraid to leave, even when the opportunity for flight is right in front of us."

Eddie's shoulders slumped as understanding dawned. "So, this was about more than just the bet?"

"Absolutely," Robert replied, placing a hand on Eddie's shoulder. "It's about stepping outside your comfort zone, embracing change. Sometimes, you must risk losing something to find out what you can truly achieve."

Eddie stood there, still feeling the lingering sting of disappointment as he grabbed the neatly packed ingredients from the workbench. The vibrant colors of the herbs and raw

materials caught his eye, but his mind was elsewhere, replaying the moment when the Fire Falcon had refused to leave its cage.

"Thanks for the lesson, Dad," he said, forcing a polite smile as he turned to face his father. The words felt like they were coated in honey, but inside, frustration simmered. He didn't need a metaphor about comfort zones and flying free—he needed to figure out his own path.

As he stepped toward the door, Eddie kept his expression neutral, determined not to reveal the annoyance bubbling beneath the surface. "I'll just take these to the Apothecary," he said, keeping his tone light, though he felt heavy with irritation. "Thanks for the, uh, 'lesson'."

Mr. Welton watched his son's retreating form, a mixture of concern and affection in his gaze. He could see the tension in Eddie's shoulders, the way his jaw tightened. "Eddie," he called after him, but the young man was already out the door, heading down the winding staircase that spiraled from the tower.

Once outside, Eddie took a deep breath of the salty sea air, attempting to clear his mind of his father's lesson. The familiar sights and sounds of Weshaven greeted him—seagulls cawing overhead, the distant sound of waves crashing against the shore, and the vibrant hustle of townsfolk below. He made his way down the stairs, feeling the frustration still clinging to him.

Mr. Welton stood in the lab, the door closing softly behind Eddie. He leaned against the workbench, crossing his arms as he watched his son disappear down the staircase. A sigh escaped his lips, mingling with the fragrant aromas of the alchemical concoctions surrounding him.

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

The alchemist felt a deep ache in his chest, knowing that Eddie was struggling, caught in a web of fear and reluctance. Robert's heart ached for his son, wishing he could impart the wisdom he had gathered over the decades. He understood all too well the fears that kept people from soaring.

"Sometimes, you have to let them figure it out on their own," he whispered, watching the last glimpse of Eddie as he disappeared from view. "Don't stay trapped in that cage, son," he murmured, his voice barely above a whisper. "There's a whole world waiting for you to soar."

Chapter II



ddie's footsteps echoed softly as he descended the winding staircase, the wooden banister gliding beneath his hand. The narrow spiral seemed to stretch endlessly downward, each turn mirroring the twist of thoughts swirling in his head.

"Old man and his riddles," he muttered, the annoyance simmering just below the surface. "Why can't he just say what he means for once?"

He tightened his grip on the rail as if he could squeeze the frustration out of his fingers. The faint smell of herbs and chemicals still clung to his clothes, but instead of the usual comfort it brought, it only served as a reminder of his father's strange lessons.

"Alchemists and their love for fables and metaphors," he continued, his voice a low grumble. "Everything's always wrapped in some convoluted story. 'The falcon that wouldn't fly' or 'the fire that wouldn't burn'—what does any of that even *mean*?" He could almost picture his father's amused smile at his irritation, which only made him feel more irritable.

Eddie had heard his father's strange sayings and allegories all his life. "Alchemy isn't just about mixing herbs and potions," Robert would say, waving his hand in that vague, mystical way of his. "It's about understanding the essence of things, the truth hidden beneath the surface."

But to Eddie, all that wisdom and poetic phrasing seemed to just complicate things more than necessary. Alchemists were known

to be eccentric, even among the magical community, preferring to speak in riddles and analogies that only made sense to them. It's what made alchemy one of the hardest branches of magic to master. You couldn't just read a book and perform the spells—it required years of training, insight, and most frustratingly, a deep understanding of the underlying principles that weren't always straightforward.

"Just tell me what I need to do," Eddie grumbled under his breath, shaking his head. "Is it really that hard?"

He reached the middle landing, glancing out of a small circular window that overlooked Weshaven's cobblestone streets. The townspeople were going about their day, tiny figures bustling around, unaware of the strange philosophical debates that were probably taking place in the upper reaches of the alchemical tower.

Heaving a sigh, he resumed his descent. "Alfred probably understood all of Dad's stories right away," he muttered, thinking of his older brother. "He's got the mind for it, like a sponge soaking up all that cryptic nonsense."

It was true—Alfred had always seemed to grasp the complex theories and allegories that made up their father's teachings, while Eddie often felt lost, as if missing some crucial piece to the puzzle. That realization gnawed at him more than he cared to admit, especially now, when he found himself stuck in a rut, unsure of what direction to take in life.

"If understanding allegories is what it takes to be a good alchemist," Eddie said with a half-hearted chuckle, "then I guess I'm better off sticking to sorting herbs and counting vials."

The winding staircase finally gave way to the lower floor of the apothecary, and Eddie felt a twinge of relief. The warm, earthy

scents of lavender and rosemary washed over him, grounding him back in reality.

“Forget the Fire Falcon,” he muttered. “I’d rather keep my feet firmly on the ground.”

But as he stepped off the staircase and onto the apothecary’s wooden floor, the weight of his father’s words lingered, like a stone dropped into a still pond, sending ripples through his thoughts. Even if he didn’t understand the lesson right now, a part of him—no matter how small—knew there was something important hidden in his father’s cryptic message.

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Eddie stepped into the Brewing Room, blinking against the herbal mist that hung like a shroud in the air. His eyes took a moment to adjust to the dim light filtering through the row of high-set windows, the soft blue glow of the central hearth casting wavering shadows on the walls. The comforting scent of crushed herbs and simmering potions surrounded him, and the familiar sound of bubbling cauldrons and clinking glass filled his ears.

“Morning, Eddie!” came a booming voice from the far end of the room.

Markus Fletcher, a broad-shouldered boy with unruly brunette hair and a perpetual grin, was leaning over his cluttered workstation. His hands—large, calloused, and surprisingly nimble—moved deftly between vials and jars, stirring a bubbling brew that emitted a faint, rosy steam. He looked more like a fisherman than a potion maker, with his rolled-up sleeves revealing sinewy arms that hinted at a life of manual labor. But despite his rugged appearance, his touch was gentle and precise, handling each ingredient with care.

"Finally decided to join the land of the living, huh?" Markus teased, his voice a deep rumble that seemed to vibrate through the room.

"Yeah, yeah. Morning, Markus." Eddie offered a half-smile. "You're here early."

"Couldn't sleep," Markus replied with a shrug. "Figured I'd get a head start on today's orders. Got a batch of muscle-repair elixirs simmering here, and thought I'd experiment a little. Maybe add something for agility or reflexes." He flashed Eddie a grin. "Make those sailors move like they're half their age."

Eddie glanced at the various jars and vials strewn haphazardly around Markus's workstation. Strange objects—small bones, twisted roots, and what looked like the iridescent feather of some rare bird—were scattered among the parchments covered in Markus's messy handwriting. It was a scene of controlled chaos, somehow reflecting the man's unconventional but effective methods.

"Just... be careful," Eddie said, eyeing the unmarked vials near the cauldron. "We don't need a repeat of the gill incident."

"Hey, that was *one* time, and I fixed it before the guy even made it back to his boat." Markus held up his hands in mock surrender, a broad grin splitting his face. "Besides, where's your sense of adventure?"

"Right where it's always been—watching *your* adventures from a safe distance," Eddie replied, shaking his head. Despite his warning, he couldn't help but smile at Markus's irrepressible spirit. He was a puzzle, all contradictions and surprises. Unpolished yet skilled, haphazard yet meticulous, and always pushing the boundaries of what was considered acceptable in potion making.

"Eddie, you're late." A calm, measured voice interrupted them.

Eddie turned to his right, where Lydia Gray stood at her pristinely organized workstation. Everything in her space was arranged with the kind of meticulous order that bordered on obsessive. Ingredients were lined up in neat rows, labeled in neat, elegant script. Vials and jars, each containing a precisely measured amount of crushed herbs or powdered minerals, were grouped by type and color, and the tools on her table gleamed with a polished shine.

Lydia herself was a picture of quiet efficiency. Tall and slender, with her dark hair pulled back into a neat bun, she radiated a calm, almost unshakeable composure. Her eyes, a cool shade of blue, met Eddie's with a steady, appraising gaze. She wasn't one to mince words, and she rarely showed impatience, but there was a definite edge to her tone today.

"What took you so long?" she asked, arching a brow as she turned back to her cauldron. "I needed that dried dragonblood half an hour ago."

"Sorry about that," Eddie muttered, holding up the small, neatly packed case he had brought down from the tower. "I was preparing the ingredients upstairs, and Dad... well, you know how he can be."

"Ah, another one of Mr. Welton's lectures?" Lydia's lips curved into a faint smile, though her eyes remained focused on her work. "Let me guess – something about the transformative nature of life, using birds as a metaphor for the evolution of magical principles?"

"Pretty much." Eddie sighed, shaking his head. "Sometimes I think he does it just to see how many convoluted metaphors he can fit into one sentence."

"Or maybe he's just trying to get you to think," Lydia replied softly, measuring a precise amount of dragonblood into her cauldron. The potion inside shimmered and shifted from pale blue to a deep lavender, a soothing aroma filling the room. "He's always believed in pushing people to see beyond the obvious."

"Yeah, but there's pushing, and then there's *pushing*," Eddie grumbled, though without much heat. He glanced back at Lydia's workstation, marveling at the precision of her setup. Everything about Lydia spoke of order and control—qualities Eddie often envied. He knew that for Lydia, potion making was a discipline as much as it was an art. Each step, each measurement, was calculated, deliberate, and unerring.

"I just hope you didn't keep experimenting with the formula while waiting," Eddie added with a hint of teasing.

Lydia's lips quirked slightly. "I do follow the recipes sometimes, you know. But don't worry, I've got everything under control."

"Of course you do," Eddie said with a smile, setting the dried dragonblood jars down on her table. "Thanks for not biting my head off. I know I've been a bit off-schedule lately."

"Just try to be more punctual next time," Lydia said, her tone softening. She glanced up at him, the hint of a smile still lingering on her face. "We rely on you, Eddie. You're part of this team."

The words, simple as they were, held a weight that caught Eddie off guard. He nodded, feeling a strange mix of gratitude and guilt. Despite his absence of passion for magic, and his inner turmoil, Lydia's quiet faith in him made him feel like maybe, just maybe, he still had a place here.

Markus peered at Eddie over the rim of his cauldron, his brows furrowing as he added a pinch of powdered coral to the simmering brew. The mixture bubbled and turned a vibrant

green. He gave it a few more stirs before leaning back, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Wait, wait... What sort of lecture are we talking about here?" Markus asked, his grin turning into a curious smile. "Did you mess up one of the processes again, or did something blow up?"

Eddie sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. "It's not like that, Markus. I was just finishing up some extracts upstairs when he started talking about freedom and potential and, well..." He hesitated, feeling a mix of annoyance and disbelief well up inside him as he recalled what happened. "Dad just up and *freed* one of the rare Eshari birds I'd been helping him take care of. It flew right out the window."

"Wait, *freed*?" Markus's eyes widened. "You mean the Eshari Duskwing? The one we've been harvesting feathers from for months?" He shook his head, letting out a low whistle. "That bird's worth a small fortune, Eddie. What did he say?"

"That's exactly what I thought," Eddie muttered. "I asked him why he let it go, and he said something like 'A bird that's only valued for its feathers will never soar to its full potential.' Whatever that means."

"Sounds like Mr. Welton's got his head up in the clouds again." Markus shook his head, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "Still, that bird was an investment. And the Weltons—no offense—aren't exactly rolling in gold these days."

Eddie nodded, feeling a familiar pang of frustration. "Yeah, that's the thing. We're known as the best source of advanced medicine around Weshaven, but with all the debts and expenses... we're not as well off as people think."

Lydia, who had been quietly working on her potion nearby, glanced up, her expression thoughtful. "Eddie, I think you're missing the point of your dad's gesture," she said softly.

"What's the point then?" Eddie asked, turning to face her with a faint frown. "He just let something valuable fly away. What are we supposed to get out of that, other than more financial trouble?"

Lydia's gaze was steady as she met his eyes. "Maybe it's not about the money, Eddie. Your dad's always cared more about people—about life and growth—than about making a profit. That bird wasn't just an asset to him. It was a living creature."

"Right..." Eddie shifted uncomfortably, not quite sure how to respond. He glanced at Markus, half-expecting him to make a quip, but for once Markus stayed quiet, a thoughtful look on his face.

"So, what do *you* think I should do?" Eddie asked, tilting his head slightly. "Should I just free everything else that's not making us money and hope it all works out?"

"No, Eddie." Lydia's lips curved into a small, knowing smile. "I think you should stop worrying so much about doing what other people expect you to do. You're young. Go outside, experience the world, and stop rotting away in your bedroom."

Eddie blinked, caught off-guard by the bluntness of her words. "Is that a jab at my sleep habits?" he muttered, a hint of a smile tugging at his lips despite himself.

"It's a suggestion." Lydia's eyes softened, and there was a touch of concern in her voice now. "Markus and I aren't that much older than you, but we're out here every day, trying to figure things out. You're not giving yourself the chance to see what you're capable of. What you really want."

"Hey, hey, wait a minute," Eddie said with a raised brow, smiling despite himself. "Didn't both of you do exactly what I'm doing now? Hiding out, avoiding your problems, spending months just... brewing potions?"

"Now hold on—" Markus started, lifting a hand in protest.

"Eddie, that's—" Lydia added, but before she could finish, a sudden *clack* interrupted their conversation.

The sliding window connecting the Brewing Room to the storefront swung open, revealing Mrs. Welton's cheerful face. She glanced around the room with a knowing smile, her gaze lingering on Eddie before turning to Markus and Lydia.

"Am I interrupting something?" she asked, raising an eyebrow, though her tone was light and teasing.

"No, Mrs. Welton," Markus said with a sheepish grin. "Just giving Eddie a bit of advice."

"Ah, well, there will be plenty of time for that later." Mrs. Welton's smile brightened as she held up a small parchment list. "We've got a new batch of orders from the harbor. A few of the captains are requesting remedies for sea sickness and muscle fatigue."

"Already?" Lydia glanced at the clock on the far wall, surprise flickering across her face. "They're earlier than usual."

"Yes, seems like there's some big cargo shipments coming in this afternoon," Mrs. Welton replied. "So let's get started, shall we?"

Eddie exchanged a quick look with Lydia and Markus before nodding. "Sure thing, Mom. I'll get the base ingredients."

"And I'll handle the preparation for the sea sickness remedies," Lydia added, rolling up her sleeves and turning back to her workstation with renewed focus.

“Which leaves me with the muscle fatigue potions,” Markus said, cracking his knuckles and grinning. “I’ve got a few ideas I’ve been wanting to try.”

Mrs. Welton’s eyes narrowed playfully. “Make sure you follow the guidelines this time, Markus. We don’t want another ‘incident’ like last month.”

Markus held up his hands in mock innocence. “No worries, Mrs. Welton. I’ll keep it strictly by the book.”

With a soft laugh, Mrs. Welton nodded and pulled back from the window, leaving the three of them to their work. Eddie took a deep breath, feeling the familiar rhythm of the apothecary settle around him. Despite everything—the confusion, the uncertainty, the lingering resentment—there was something undeniably comforting about being here, surrounded by the sounds and smells of potion making, with Lydia and Markus nearby.

For now, at least, it felt like he was exactly where he was supposed to be.

Chapter III



As the clock struck 5 PM, the cozy warmth of Welton's Apothecary began to shift, transforming the lively atmosphere into one of serene solitude. The sun dipped lower in the sky, casting a rich tapestry of orange and purple hues that seeped through the large mullioned windows, creating a soft glow that danced over the shelves. Lydia was finishing her last few tasks, ready to take a well-deserved break, while Eddie was busy in the storefront, mopping the displays and rearranging the shelves, his movements methodical yet sluggish from the day's fatigue.

The floor gleamed as Eddie wiped it clean, reflecting the sunset's colors like a stained glass window. He moved to the glass displays, carefully polishing them until they sparkled, revealing the vibrant colors of the remedies inside. With each wipe, he felt the remnants of the day's energy slowly slip away, leaving only the soft sound of the mop gliding against the wood and the faint rustle of the herbs around him.

Finally finished with his chores, Eddie took his place at the front desk, positioned to greet the next customer. But as the minutes slipped by, a heavy stillness enveloped the shop. The usual hustle and bustle of patrons browsing the shelves had faded; the empty aisles and vacant counters stood lonely and abandoned. He glanced at the shelves, once vibrant with eager hands reaching for remedies, now seemingly devoid of life.

Eddie's boredom quickly set in. He leaned heavily against the smooth oak surface of the counter, resting his chin on his arms as he stared out at the empty storefront. The dullness of waiting weighed upon him, and he let out a long, slow sigh, his eyelids growing heavier as the twilight deepened outside. With each passing moment, his posture slouched more, the excitement of the day's customers a distant memory. He watched the shadows stretch across the floor, imagining the ebb and flow of life outside the apothecary—fishermen packing up their nets, children laughing in the streets, and couples wandering hand in hand along the shore.

A gentle breeze wafted through the open door, carrying with it the salty tang of the sea, mingling with the warm, herbal scents of the apothecary. Eddie's mind began to drift, thoughts wandering to the latest potion he had been brewing with Lydia, and the intricate dance of ingredients that had made it come to life. But that faded, too, as he continued to wait, growing ever more lethargic, feeling as if the golden light wrapping around the shop was pulling him into a sleepy embrace.

As Eddie continued to languish at the front desk, the soft creak of the door startled him from his drifting thoughts. He looked up just in time to see a tall figure step into the apothecary, the evening light cascading behind her like an ethereal halo. The air shifted, growing thicker with an unexplainable tension as the lone customer entered, and Eddie felt a curious chill run down his spine.

The Lady in the Red Coat moved with an elegance that seemed almost otherworldly. Her short, bright red hair glinted like a fiery beacon beneath the hood of her black cloak, which was adorned with intricate golden designs that caught the light with every subtle movement. The cloak billowed softly around her,

whispering secrets of far-off places and forgotten enchantments, a stark contrast to the warm hues of the apothecary.

Beneath the cloak, she wore a striking red coat that hugged her frame, the golden buttons gleaming with a polished luster. Eddie's gaze was drawn to the golden badge pinned on her shirt—a symbol of overlapping triangles that held an air of authority and mystery. As she stepped closer, her light blue eyes flickered with an intensity that made him feel as if she were peering into the very depths of his soul.

Eddie swallowed hard, instinctively straightening up, suddenly aware of the disparity between her poised presence and his own slouched demeanor. There was an unspoken weight in the room as she approached, the gentle hum of the apothecary falling silent around them. Each step she took echoed like a heartbeat, filling the space with an enigmatic energy that made the air electric.

"Welcome to Welton's Apothecary," he stammered, his usual cheer faltering under her gaze. "How can I—"

But before he could finish, she raised a gloved hand, and he was struck by the gracefulness of her movements. "I'm here for something particular," she said, her voice smooth and melodic, yet laced with an undercurrent of urgency that sent shivers down his spine. The way she spoke hinted at deep knowledge and experience, as if she were well-acquainted with the hidden layers of magic that permeated the very walls of the apothecary.

"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 stepped even closer, her eyes gleaming like twin sapphires. "I seek something rare, something that is not easily found." Her gaze swept across the shelves, taking in the

array of colorful vials and jars with a discerning eye. "I believe you may have it."

Eddie's breath hitched. The air felt thick with unspoken promises and ancient secrets, and for a moment, he could hardly remember where he was. "I can help you find it," he said, his voice barely above a whisper, feeling as though he were stepping onto a precipice he could not see.

With a subtle nod, she extended her hand, the rich fabric of her cloak parting slightly to reveal a glimmering gold bracelet that encircled her wrist, decorated with symbols that seemed to shimmer with a life of their own. "Lead the way," she urged, her presence commanding yet inviting, drawing him deeper into the mysteries of the apothecary and beyond.

The Lady in the Red Coat stepped further into the apothecary, her presence almost commanding the air around her. She glanced around the cozy shop before fixing her piercing light blue eyes on Eddie. "Is this the renowned Welton's Apothecary in Weshaven?"

Eddie nodded, though a nervous flutter danced in his stomach. "Y-yes, it is," he stammered, acutely aware of the way her gaze seemed to scrutinize him. What could this lady possibly want? He glanced at the clock; it was nearly break time, a moment meant for respite and chatter. But before he could voice his concern, she pressed on, her voice smooth yet unyielding.

"Who is the Alchemist in this apothecary?"

Eddie felt his heart race as unease settled into the pit of his stomach. News of assassins had been circulating through Weshaven like a dark shadow creeping into the corners of everyday life, and he couldn't help but wonder if this striking lady might somehow be connected. The hood of her cloak obscured her features, making him wary. A fleeting thought

crossed his mind: what if she was an assassin, here to gather information—or worse?

“Um, well...” he hesitated, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “It’s Robert Welton.” The name fell from his lips, heavy and reluctant, as if he were sharing a secret that might unravel the very fabric of their reality.

A smile crept across the lady’s lips, a mixture of satisfaction and something he couldn’t quite place. “So she was right,” she murmured, her eyes sparkling with a glint of intrigue.

The statement puzzled Eddie, leaving a tight knot of apprehension in his chest. He could feel the weight of her gaze, as if she were peeling back layers of his soul, seeking truths he was reluctant to reveal. “What do you mean?” he asked, unable to suppress the tremor in his voice.

Her smile widened, revealing a hint of amusement, yet the intensity of her eyes never wavered. “It seems I have indeed found the right place. Robert Welton has quite the reputation, but it is not only his skill that interests me.” She took a step closer, her demeanor shifting subtly as if she were circling around a prized piece of knowledge.

Eddie swallowed hard, feeling the tension in the air tighten like a drawn bowstring. “I—I don’t understand,” 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 curling into a smile that sent another chill racing through him. “I have business that requires an expert’s touch, and I believe the Alchemist you serve is the key.”

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 savoring a delicious secret that only she could fully comprehend.

"I would like to place an order," she declared, her voice smooth and deliberate. "I require the Elixir of the 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 leaned in closer, her eyes narrowing slightly, her interest piqued. "And what makes you so certain it doesn't exist?" "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 truly so?" she pressed, her smile widening, as if to toy with him.

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

Then, without breaking eye contact, the Lady leaned even closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Do you know who I 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.

In that moment, everything clicked into place, the pieces of the puzzle coming together in a whirlwind of realization. "You're a Master Alchemist," he breathed, the name escaping his lips as if it were a sacred incantation. "You've made Philosopher's Stone."

As the tension in the air thickened, Catherine reached up and slowly lowered her hood. The dim light of the apothecary illuminated her features, revealing a familiar face that made 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 light blue eyes sparkled with a mischievous glint, their color reminiscent of a clear summer sky.

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

Her elvish ears peeked out from beneath her hair, adding 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? Maybe just a very dramatic alchemist?"

Eddie blinked in realization, laughter bubbling up despite the earlier tension. "I swear, every alchemist I've met has to act mysterious, shrouded in allegory and cryptic hints."

Catherine chuckled, her eyes sparkling with humor. "It's part of the job description, you know. How else are we supposed to keep the intrigue alive?"

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."

"Cruel of you to forget your favorite 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 face lit with excitement. "Catherine!" she exclaimed, her eyes wide with delight.

"Ah, there's my favorite niece!" Catherine called out, her demeanor brightening even more at the sight of Torrie.

"Did you meet Catherine on your way here?" Eddie asked

Torrie came to a halt, hands on her hips, her curly hair bouncing as she spoke. "Nope! I joined her, I saw Aunt Catherine's carriage on my way home from school! So, I figured I'd tag along!" She flashed a cheeky grin, clearly proud of her spontaneous decision.

"And what was it you were sent to fetch?" Eddie inquired, raising an eyebrow, half-amused and half-concerned.

"Snacks!" Torrie declared triumphantly, like a knight returning from a grand quest. "Catherine asked me to get some for her. And she said I could ride in the carriage, so it's fine!"

Eddie shook his head, a smile creeping onto his face. "Torrie, just because she said you could doesn't mean you should —"

"Oh, hush!" Torrie interrupted, waving her hand dismissively. "Catherine is the best! Plus, who wouldn't want to hitch a ride with a Master Alchemist?"

Catherine laughed, her light blue eyes sparkling with amusement. "Exactly! It's not every day you get to travel in style, right?"

With a playful roll of her eyes, Torrie marched into the apothecary, clearly unfazed by Eddie's mild disapproval. "I'll go inside the house now and see what snacks we have!" she called over her shoulder, skipping past the shelves filled with colorful potions and herbs.

As she disappeared into the back, Eddie chuckled, the earlier tension now a distant memory. "You've got her wrapped around your finger, you know that?"

Catherine grinned, her short red hair catching the light as she leaned against the counter, an air of mischief about her. "It's a gift I've honed over the years. Besides, what's life without a little fun?"

Eddie couldn't help but smile, his worries melting away in the warmth of family and camaraderie. The atmosphere in the apothecary buzzed with energy, and for the first time in a while, Eddie felt a sense of hope.

At that moment, the door to the brewing room swung open, and Lydia and Markus stepped out, their expressions curious.

"What's all this commotion?" Markus asked, raising an eyebrow.

Eddie turned toward them, a smile still plastered on his face. "It's just my aunt Catherine visiting from Solivia."

"Your aunt?" Lydia echoed, her surprise mirroring Eddie's initial shock.

"Yep! The Master Alchemist herself!" Eddie replied, waving a hand dramatically as if unveiling a magician's trick.

Lydia's expression shifted from confusion to amusement. "Well, I must say, she certainly knows how to make an entrance."

Catherine winked, a twinkle in her eye. "You have to keep people guessing, right? It's all part of the charm!"

As laughter filled the room, the atmosphere lightened, the earlier tension replaced with warmth and a sense of familial connection. In that moment, the apothecary felt more like home, with the comforting blend of magic and love weaving through the air like an enchanting potion.

Chapter IV



The Welton's family dining room brimmed with a nostalgic energy, its rustic charm accentuated by the dim, flickering light of the cast-iron chandelier. The room was alive with the soft murmur of conversation and the clinking of utensils against earthenware plates. The 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 absentmindedly to the framed portrait above the hutch, where a younger version of himself smiled brightly 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 him, Catherine Angelina—his mother's younger sister and Master Alchemist—smiled as she reminisced about the last time she visited. Her short red hair shimmered in the firelight, and her light blue eyes, so much like Eddie's, sparkled with amusement.

"It's been, what, six years since I last saw the Gifting Festival?" Catherine mused, glancing at her sister with a fond smile. "I can't believe I let so many of them pass by without visiting. You know how it is—work at the university, research projects piling up... But this time, I made a promise to myself to come back. I didn't want to miss it again."

Mrs. Welton chuckled softly, resting her chin on her hand as she looked at her younger sister. "It's been far too long, Cathy. I was beginning to think you'd forgotten about our little town."

"Forget Weshaven? Never," Catherine said with a grin. "I've just been preoccupied. But this year, I wanted to be here. I've missed the festival's energy – the way the town lights up with excitement. Remember how we used to sneak out at night to see the parade?"

Mrs. Welton's eyes brightened with the memory. "Yes, and how we'd get caught every time and be sent home before the fireworks! Father always knew what we were up to, but he let us go anyway, just to see the look on our faces."

The two sisters laughed, their shared history weaving a tapestry of stories that filled the room with warmth. Eddie watched them, a small smile tugging at his lips. It was rare to see his mother so relaxed, so animated. It made him realize how much Catherine's presence brightened the entire household.

"What's this Gifting Festival about?" Torrie piped up, breaking into the conversation. She leaned forward eagerly, her wide eyes brimming with curiosity.

"It's a celebration of the day magic was first given to mankind," Catherine explained, her tone softening as she turned to her niece. "It's a tradition unique to Weshaven. Every year, the townsfolk gather to honor the Gift – whether through performances, crafts, or the big parade that happens on the last night. There's also a ceremony where people offer gifts back to the sea, a symbol of gratitude for the Gift of Magic."

"Does that mean we're going to the festival this year?" Torrie asked, her voice filled with hope.

"Of course," Mrs. Welton answered, reaching over to brush a stray lock of hair from Torrie's face. "We'll all go together. It's a family tradition, after all."

Eddie shifted in his seat, feeling a pang of discomfort. The Gifting Festival used to be one of his favorite times of the year—before everything changed. He hadn't attended since his expulsion from Aella Academy. The thought of standing in the midst of all that magic, surrounded by people celebrating something he now resented, made his chest tighten.

"What about you, Eddie?" Catherine asked suddenly, her gaze sharp yet kind as she looked at him. "Will you join us? It's been too long since you've experienced the festival."

Eddie hesitated, searching for the right words. "I... I'm not sure." Catherine tilted her head slightly, as if sensing his unease. "You know, the festival isn't just about magic. It's about family and community. It's about remembering who we are and where we come from. Maybe it's time you reconnected with that."

A silence fell over the table, thick and heavy. Eddie glanced down at his plate, the stew he had barely touched reflecting the firelight. He could feel the eyes of his family on him, a mix of concern and encouragement. It was Torrie who broke the silence, her voice soft and tentative.

"Please, Eddie? It won't be the same without you."

He looked up, meeting her earnest gaze. There was a part of him that wanted to refuse, to retreat back into his shell. But then he saw something else in Torrie's eyes—a flicker of hope, a plea for him to be the brother she remembered. The brother who wasn't afraid to face the world.

"I'll think about it," Eddie said finally, offering a small smile. It was a compromise, but for now, it was the best he could do.

"That's all we ask," Mrs. Welton said gently, reaching over to squeeze his hand.

The conversation shifted after that, turning to lighter topics—Catherine's latest research, stories of Torrie's misadventures at school, and Mr. Welton's stubborn insistence on using outdated brewing methods. Laughter flowed freely, the tension easing bit by bit.

As the evening wore on and the plates were cleared away, Eddie found himself relaxing, the warmth of the fire and the rhythm of his family's voices soothing his frayed nerves. Maybe Catherine was right. Maybe the festival wasn't just about magic. Maybe it was something he could reclaim, a small piece of joy he could rediscover.

But for now, he set the thought aside, focusing instead on the here and now—on the family around him and the love that bound them together.

Eddie's gaze lingered on the flickering fire in the hearth, his thoughts drifting as Catherine's question hung in the air. Her voice was just as he remembered—warm, confident, filled with the kind of authority that only a Master Alchemist could possess. But there was a subtle edge of something else, too: a softness reserved for family, for him. It was this very softness that made Eddie's heart tighten, caught between the comfort of familiarity and the coldness of what now lay between them.

A strange, almost dissonant feeling washed over him. He was glad Catherine was back. After all these years, it was a relief to see her sitting at their family table, sharing in their laughter and stories. But at the same time, a heavy ache pulsed beneath that relief, a reminder of what had changed. The last time Catherine was here, he had still been a student at Aella Academy—a hopeful, wide-eyed young man who dreamed of mastering magic

just like his aunt. He had told her all about his projects, the spells he'd learned, the summoning circles he'd perfected. His future had seemed as bright and promising as the stars above Weshaven. Now, things were different. He was different. Magic had once been a source of pride and passion, something that connected him to Catherine and his parents in a way nothing else could. Now, it was a specter, haunting every corner of his thoughts, every interaction. The part of him that used to hunger for knowledge and improvement was dormant—no, it was dead. Torn away by the very thing he had once loved.

It was as if there were two Eddies sitting at the table tonight. One was the Eddie from the past, the eager apprentice who wanted so desperately to be worthy of his family's legacy. The other was the present Eddie, who sat in silence, drifting through life without purpose, chained to a destiny he could no longer bring himself to accept. And then there was 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... Are you still learning from your Conjunction Codex? I remember you saying it was one of your favorites."

The question caught Eddie off guard. For a moment, he stared at her, unsure of how to respond. Catherine had no idea about what had happened at Aella Academy. She didn't know about the incident that led to his expulsion or the shame that had consumed him afterward. To her, he was still the bright young student, perhaps taking a gap year to work under his father's guidance before launching into some illustrious career in magic.

"Uh, yeah..." Eddie finally managed, forcing a smile that felt brittle on his lips. "I'm just... working with Dad for now."

Catherine's face lit up with pride, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "That's wonderful! There's no better way to learn practical magic than by working in a place like this. I'm sure you're gaining invaluable experience every day."

He wanted to wince at the praise, but he kept his expression neutral, his smile frozen in place. "Yeah, it's... it's been a good learning experience."

Oblivious to the truth behind his words, Catherine continued, her voice filled with genuine admiration. "You're doing so well, Eddie. You always had such potential. I knew you'd go far."

The words stung like a knife twisting in his chest. He looked away, his gaze falling to the table's scarred surface. The same table where he used to sit and study magical runes late into the night, his books and notes sprawled across it like a tapestry of ambition. The memory felt distant, like a half-forgotten dream.

"Thanks, Aunt Cathy," he murmured softly, unable to muster anything more.

If only she knew the truth. That there was no Conjunction Codex anymore, no advanced spellwork or alchemical theories he was pouring over. There was just him, stuck in this shop, day after day. Just a hollow shell of what he used to be. He knew he should tell her, let her know that the Eddie she was praising didn't exist anymore. But the words wouldn't come. How could he shatter the illusion she had of him?

Catherine glanced at him, her brow furrowing slightly. "I've heard that Father's been refining his new elixir, the one that's supposed to enhance mana focus. Have you been involved with that project?"

He cleared his throat, trying to sound casual. "Yeah, I've helped out a bit."

"Of course you have," she said, smiling proudly. "I bet you're already coming up with improvements of your own. That's my nephew—always thinking ahead, always pushing boundaries."

The praise felt like a weight on his shoulders, each word adding to the crushing sense of guilt and shame. He hadn't pushed any boundaries in a long time. He was just... here. Stuck. Living day to day without direction.

"Yeah, I'm... trying," Eddie lied again, his voice barely above a whisper.

If she noticed his hesitation, she didn't show it. Catherine simply continued to smile, her expression filled with the kind of hope and faith that made Eddie's heart ache. It wasn't just that he couldn't tell her the truth—he didn't want to destroy that look on her face, the way she still believed in him.

"Just keep at it," she said softly. "You're on the right path, Eddie. I know it."

Eddie nodded mutely, feeling a lump form in his throat. He couldn't bring himself to speak, couldn't find any words that wouldn't betray him. So he just nodded again, pretending that everything was fine, that he was still the nephew she believed in.

But deep down, he knew that the path she thought he was on no longer existed. And as much as he wanted to bridge the distance between them, to connect with her the way they once did, he couldn't help but feel that he was standing on the opposite shore of a vast chasm, unable to reach across.

The conversation moved on, Catherine oblivious to the turmoil swirling inside him. She spoke of new research projects and magical discoveries, and Eddie nodded and smiled in all the right places, the words drifting past him like a distant breeze. All the while, the emptiness inside him yawned wider, the distance

between who he was and who he pretended to be growing with each passing second.

It was strange, he thought. 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.

Maybe, he mused bitterly, that was exactly what he had become.

Eddie felt Torrie's gaze burn into the side of his face like a torch in the dark. 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, pushing around the last remnants of his meal as Catherine's voice filled the room. She was telling a story, something lighthearted about one of her recent lectures, 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. That he was just taking some time off to work with his father before diving back into his magical studies.

But Torrie knew better.

From the corner of his eye, he saw her watching him, her brow slightly furrowed, mouth 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 idolize.

What must Torrie think of him now?

The guilt surged inside him, gnawing at his insides like a parasite. He wasn't just lying — he was betraying them both. Catherine had been his role model, the one who sparked his love for magic, who took him on thrilling adventures when he was younger and taught him that there was so much more to learn and explore. But instead of being honest, he let her cling to a false image of him. He let her keep believing that he was still someone to be proud of. He stole a glance at Torrie, and for a moment, their eyes met. Hers were full of unspoken words, brimming 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 spellwork."

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 said softly. "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."

Eddie swallowed hard, his mouth suddenly dry. 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, Aunt Cathy," 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, 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 banister 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.

With a soft, weary sigh, Eddie made his way up the stairs to his room, feeling more like a stranger in his own home than ever before.

Chapter V



he morning sun poured through the tall windows of the apothecary, casting golden rays across the worn wooden floors. Eddie stood at the bottom of the grand staircase leading to his father's tower, taking a moment to gather himself. He stared up at the seemingly endless ascent of one thousand steps, a daunting task every morning, yet one that had become part of his routine. With a deep breath, he began his climb, each step echoing in the quiet of the early morning, a familiar rhythm that provided a semblance of comfort.

After reaching the top, Eddie entered the spacious workshop filled with the rich scents of herbs, flowers, and the lingering hint of alchemical ingredients. He made his way over to the shelves lined with jars, meticulously labeling each extract as he prepared to fulfill the day's orders. The process was a labor of love, a blend of art and science, but it had grown monotonous over the past few months, a chore that felt increasingly detached from the world of magic he had once embraced.

As he moved through the routine, carefully weighing and measuring, the sounds of laughter and excitement drifted from the adjoining brewing room. Curiosity piqued, Eddie paused, wiping the sweat from his brow, and ventured over to see what was causing the commotion.

What he found made his heart sink and rise all at once.

In the center of the brewing room stood Catherine, surrounded by his co-workers Lydia and Markus, both of whom were completely mesmerized by her presence. Catherine's Solivian equipment glimmered in the sunlight, intricate and sophisticated, its runes pulsing with a gentle glow as she demonstrated its use.

Her hands moved deftly as she explained the mechanics, the magical properties that activated the runes, and the precision required to wield such tools effectively.

"See how this rune interacts with the base? Just a pinch of Frost Essence and –" she demonstrated, the equipment whirring to life and producing a shimmering vapor that caught the light. Lydia and Markus gasped, their eyes wide with awe.

Eddie's heart sank further. The stark contrast between the enchanted Solivian tools and his own standard equipment felt like a chasm between their worlds. He had been using the same old potions equipment for years, a set meant for mere potion makers rather than alchemists. They were functional, yes, but lacking the spark of true magic.

Feeling like a ghost in his own space, Eddie quietly slipped away from the doorway and returned to his usual station, the familiarity of the worn tools grounding him even as he felt the ache of inadequacy. He set to work on the day's orders, trying to drown out the excitement in the brewing room, but the laughter and joy seeped through the walls, amplifying his sense of isolation.

As he measured out the ingredients, he glanced over at Catherine, her laughter ringing like a bell, infectious and bright. She was radiant in her element, a master alchemist sharing her passion. He felt a pang of longing for the connection they once shared – the adventures, the laughter, the magic that felt so alive between them. Now, he felt like an outsider looking in, a spectator rather than a participant.

"Eddie! Look!" Markus called, breaking Eddie's reverie. He gestured enthusiastically toward Catherine, who was demonstrating a particularly complicated spell to activate a set of runes. "You've got to see this! She's amazing!"

Eddie offered a tight smile, not trusting himself to say anything more. He returned to his work, forcing his focus on the mundane tasks at hand. As he stirred a cauldron filled with bubbling liquid, the old equipment clanged and rattled, reminding him that he was still trapped in this cycle of routine. He could feel the frustration simmering within him, a dark, nagging feeling that he was wasting his potential while Catherine and his co-workers reveled in the magic he could no longer access.

He stole another glance at Catherine, who was now guiding Lydia through the intricacies of a potion recipe, her hands moving gracefully as she spoke, embodying confidence and mastery. Eddie's heart tightened at the sight. He wished he could be part of that world again, but the wound of his expulsion and the disillusionment he felt about magic weighed heavily on him.

As Eddie continued to stir the bubbling potion, he felt Catherine's gaze on him. Her voice broke through the clamor of the brewing room, light and melodic. "Eddie! What do you think of the Solivian equipment?"

He looked up, forcing a smile despite the turmoil inside him. "It looks great," he replied, his tone lacking the enthusiasm he wished he could convey.

"Great?" Catherine echoed, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "Just great? You should see how much more efficient it makes the process! It's incredible!"

Markus, ever eager to join the conversation, chimed in, "You know, Eddie and I used to use the same equipment back at Aella Academy. We had some wild times experimenting with those tools! Right, Eddie?"

Eddie managed a nod, the memory of their late-night experiments flickering through his mind. They had spent hours

trying to perfect potions, laughing and challenging each other, fully immersed in the magic they were creating. Now, those memories felt bittersweet, like a distant dream that had slipped through his fingers.

"Yeah, those were good times," he said, forcing a casual tone.

Lydia, her eyes bright with enthusiasm, jumped in as well. "You should join us, Eddie! With Catherine's equipment, we could whip up potions in half the time! Imagine the possibilities!"

Eddie felt the warmth of their excitement, but it only deepened his sense of isolation. Their enthusiasm was infectious, but it highlighted the gulf between them. He had become accustomed to the slow, laborious process of working with standard tools, and the thought of stepping back into that world felt overwhelming.

"Maybe," he replied, trying to keep his voice steady. "But I have orders to fill." He gestured to the cauldron bubbling before him, hoping to divert the conversation back to his work.

"Come on, Eddie! You can't tell me you're not curious!" Catherine encouraged, stepping closer. "Just think of how much easier it would be. You've got to see how it all works!"

Her passion was palpable, and Eddie couldn't help but admire her. But beneath the admiration lay a wave of guilt and longing, feelings that churned within him like the potion in his cauldron.

"I appreciate it, really," he said, attempting to sound sincere. "But I think I'll stick to my routine for now."

Catherine's smile faltered for a moment, a flicker of concern crossing her face. "If you change your mind, you know where to find me. I'd love to show you the ins and outs."

"Sure, I'll think about it," Eddie replied, avoiding her gaze.

As Catherine turned back to Lydia and Markus, Eddie returned to his work, the sound of their laughter mingling with the bubbling potion. It was hard not to feel like an outsider in that moment, as if he were watching a vibrant world unfold just beyond his reach.

As Catherine exited the brewing room, her laughter still echoing off the walls, the atmosphere shifted. Eddie continued to focus on his potions, but the lively banter faded, leaving an undercurrent of tension in the air. Markus, now alone with the Solivian equipment, was utterly engrossed in his work, the excitement of the new tools overshadowing the need for caution.

"Just a little more," Markus muttered, fiddling with the delicate apparatus. Eddie couldn't help but glance over, a sense of foreboding creeping in as Markus' movements became more frantic.

"Markus, maybe you should —" Eddie began, but his words were cut off as a loud *crack* reverberated through the room.

"Uh-oh," Markus gasped, his eyes wide with panic. "I think I messed up!"

Eddie's heart raced. The Solivian equipment was powerful, and any mistake could lead to catastrophic consequences. He pushed himself away from his station, adrenaline surging through him. "What happened?"

"Something's wrong with the rune!" Markus shouted, desperation creeping into his voice. "I can't seem to stabilize it!"

Panic flooded Eddie's senses as he saw the swirling energy flickering dangerously at the apparatus' core. "Quick, give me your wand!" he commanded, his voice sharper than intended.

Markus fumbled for his wand, his hands trembling. "Here!" He thrust it towards Eddie, fear etched on his face.

Eddie seized the wand, feeling its familiar weight in his palm. A surge of memories rushed through him—his days at Aella Academy, the thrill of casting spells, the warmth of magic flowing through him. But now, doubt clouded his mind. Could he still harness that power?

“Just breathe,” he muttered under his breath, grounding himself in the moment. He stepped closer to the chaotic apparatus, feeling the heat radiating from it as the runes began to pulse erratically.

“Eddie, what if it explodes?” Markus whimpered, glancing nervously at the equipment.

“I’m not going to let that happen,” Eddie replied, his voice steady. With a deep breath, he focused on the glowing runes, channeling the magic he had once wielded with confidence.

“Unlock,” he commanded, raising the wand and drawing the necessary sigils in the air. A soft glow enveloped the wand as he spoke the incantation, his heart pounding in rhythm with the thrumming energy of the equipment.

The runes flickered, responding to Eddie’s magic, and the chaotic energy began to stabilize under his control. “Clear!” he shouted, his voice cutting through the tension as he redirected the unstable energy, casting a wave of calming magic over the apparatus.

The room seemed to hold its breath as Eddie poured his focus into the spell. He felt the familiar connection to magic pulse through him, a warm and invigorating sensation. Finally, with a final flourish of his wand, the runes flickered one last time before settling into a steady glow.

Markus let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding. “You did it!” he exclaimed, a mix of relief and awe flooding his expression.

Eddie's heart raced, both from the exertion and the wave of emotions crashing over him. The thrill of saving Markus mingled with an unsettling realization: he hadn't just saved a friend; he had briefly touched the magic he had abandoned.

"Just... be more careful next time," Eddie managed to say, his voice softer now, the tension dissipating into a sense of camaraderie.

"Absolutely," Markus replied, still visibly shaken but grateful.

Markus, still shaken but relieved, turned to Eddie, his eyes wide with gratitude. "Thanks, Eddie! You're still incredible with magic. I knew you could do it!"

But instead of returning the sentiment, Eddie felt a surge of anger swell within him. "Incredible?" he snapped, his voice sharper than he intended. "What were you thinking, Markus? You shouldn't have even touched the Solivian equipment!"

Markus' smile faltered, replaced by confusion. "But it's amazing! We can work so much faster with it!"

"Faster?!" Eddie echoed, his tone incredulous. "You nearly lost your hand! Magic isn't something to toy with; it's unreliable and uncontrollable! It can backfire in ways you can't even imagine!"

Eddie's words hung in the air, charged with an intensity that filled the brewing room. "We should be using our logic, not some fancy equipment designed to amplify power! The gift of mankind is our ability to think and create, not to make a feather fly using a twig!"

He could feel the heat of his own anger as he paced back to his station, where he busied himself with his orders, trying to drown out the storm brewing inside him. The familiar scents of herbs and potions filled the air, yet they offered no comfort. Instead, they amplified his frustration.

"Eddie, I—" Markus started, but Eddie cut him off, not wanting to hear more.

"Just... don't," Eddie muttered, his hands trembling slightly as he mixed the ingredients with more force than necessary. The clattering of glass jars echoed in the silence, his anger rising with each motion. "You have no idea how dangerous magic can be. You're lucky I was here."

Markus stood there, taken aback by Eddie's fierce reaction. "I didn't mean—"

"Exactly," Eddie snapped. "You didn't think! You just dove in because it looked cool!"

The tension between them thickened, a palpable distance growing as Eddie concentrated on his work, gritting his teeth as he measured and mixed. The flickering flames of the nearby burner cast shadows across the room, creating an atmosphere that matched the storm raging within him.

He could feel Torrie's gaze on him from her station, a silent witness to his outburst. He didn't want to look her way; he didn't want to see the disappointment in her eyes.

"Eddie, I understand you're frustrated, but you can't blame Markus for being excited," Lydia said from the storefront, trying to diffuse the tension.

"Excited?" Eddie scoffed, his voice dripping with disdain. "Excitement doesn't justify recklessness! Magic isn't a game, and it can hurt you!"

Silence fell again, heavy and thick, as Eddie focused on his tasks, every movement mechanical. His heart pounded in his chest, the adrenaline from the earlier incident still coursing through him. He felt the anger dissipating, replaced by a profound sadness—

an ache for the magic he once loved, now twisted into something he feared.

With every potion he prepared, Eddie couldn't shake the feeling of being trapped between two worlds: the world of magic he had once aspired to master and the world he now resented, where he felt like a shadow of his former self. The bubbling cauldrons and simmering liquids seemed to mock him, a reminder of everything he had lost.

In that moment, he realized he was not just angry at Markus but at himself, for letting his emotions dictate his actions, for struggling with the memories of a past that felt like a distant dream. He wanted to scream, to let out all the hurt he had buried deep inside, but instead, he channeled it into his work, pouring his heart into each potion, hoping to find some semblance of peace in the chaos.

Chapter VI



The Brewing Room of Welton's Apothecary was awash with the soft afternoon light filtering through the high windows. The herbal scents of rosemary, thyme, and a hint of lavender lingered in the air, blending with the faint smell of seawater that drifted in from the nearby harbor. The rhythmic *swish, swish* of the mop as Markus moved it back and forth across the floor mingled with the occasional *clink* of glass vials and jars as Eddie reorganized the ingredient shelves.

It was their usual break time—1 p.m. to 2 p.m.—a quiet hour where they could catch their breath and take a step back from the morning's orders, the tension in the brewing room lingered like the last traces of smoke from a recently extinguished fire. The faint sound of waves crashing outside drifted through the windows, but inside, the atmosphere was still charged, thick with unsaid words and unacknowledged feelings.

Lydia had headed to the front of the apothecary to attend to customers, leaving Eddie and Markus to clean up the remnants of their potion-making. Eddie grabbed a few empty vials and began reorganizing the ingredient shelves, moving herbs and powders into their proper places. The familiar scents of dried lavender and powdered unicorn horn filled the air, mixing with the briny sea breeze that wafted through the open window.

Eddie paused, his hand hovering over a jar of dried Elder Moss. He frowned slightly, staring at the meticulously labeled rows of herbs and ingredients that he had spent the last fifteen minutes

sorting. Everything was in its proper place, categorized and alphabetized just as his dad liked it. But something felt off, like a question that was nagging at the back of his mind.

But as he reached for a vial of dried herbs, the reality of his actions this morning washed over him. He glanced at Markus, who was still mopping with a quiet intensity, and the guilt surged anew within him. The words he had spoken had come from a place of fear, but they had also stung, and he knew it.

Taking a deep breath, Eddie set the vial down and turned to Markus, his voice softer this time. "Hey, Markus."

Markus paused, looking up from his work. "Yeah?"

"I... I'm sorry for how I acted earlier," Eddie admitted, the weight of his apology feeling heavier than he anticipated. "I shouldn't have yelled at you. I was just... frustrated."

Markus blinked, surprised. "I get it, Eddie. Magic can be dangerous, and I shouldn't have put us in that position. But you were right to be concerned."

Eddie shook his head. "No, I let my anger get the best of me. I just... I want to protect you guys. I've seen what can happen when magic goes wrong." His voice trailed off, the memories creeping back in like shadows.

"Your experience means something, you know? We all respect that," Markus said, a note of understanding in his tone. "But we're still learning. We want to get better."

"Right," Eddie murmured, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly. "I guess I just don't want anyone else to end up like me."

The air felt lighter now, as if a weight had been lifted. Eddie returned to his task, the rhythm of his movements returning to a more relaxed pace. He could feel the shift in the room—a shared understanding growing between them.

"Thanks for saving me earlier," Markus said, a hint of a smile creeping onto his face as he resumed mopping. "You're still the best at using magic."

"Let's just say I've had my share of practice," Eddie replied, trying to inject some humor back into their interactions, even as the remnants of his earlier anger lingered at the edges.

As they continued to work in comfortable silence, the brewing room felt a little less confining, a little more like a shared space. Eddie found solace in the familiarity of the shelves, the herbs, and the potions—the constant in a world that felt increasingly unpredictable.

"Hey, Markus, i think i haven't asked about your opinion regarding this before, but..." Eddie began slowly, glancing over at his friend. "What do you think Dad was trying to say yesterday? About the bird?"

Markus didn't look up from his task, his focus still on the mop. "You mean with that speech of his about freedom and potential and all that?"

"Yeah." Eddie hesitated, then continued, "I don't get it. Why would he do that? It just doesn't make sense to let something go when it's worth so much. Is he trying to teach me some sort of lesson?"

Markus straightened, propping the mop against the wall and wiping his brow with the back of his hand. He turned to face Eddie, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. "I think I might have an idea, but don't quote me on it," he said with a slight smirk. "Maybe it's his way of telling you that you need to get out of your comfort zone."

Eddie furrowed his brow. "Get out of my comfort zone?" He let out a dry laugh. "I did that already, didn't I? I'm here, aren't I? If I hadn't, I'd still be upstairs in my room."

Markus raised an eyebrow, a hint of amusement dancing in his eyes. "Yeah, you're *here*, but..." He gestured vaguely around the room, the mop's handle squeaking slightly as it shifted. "Are you really *here*, Eddie? I mean, physically you're down here helping out. But mentally? Emotionally? You're still up there, hiding away. Your dad's probably just trying to nudge you out into the world again."

Eddie sighed, leaning against the shelf and folding his arms. "But I *am* doing things, Markus. I'm working in the shop, helping out with potions and ingredients, talking to people like I'm supposed to. What more am I supposed to do?"

Markus shrugged, a small smile forming on his lips. "I don't know, man. But your dad's never been one to settle for half measures, you know? It's like Lydia said earlier—he's more interested in what you're *becoming* than in what you're doing right now. Maybe he sees something in you that you're not seeing yet."

Eddie was silent for a moment, staring at the neatly stacked rows of jars and vials. The words echoed in his mind: *What you're becoming*. He didn't know if he even wanted to become anything anymore. The idea of a future—of potential—felt distant and almost foreign to him. After the Academy, after everything that had happened... he wasn't sure what he had left to give.

"Maybe," he murmured finally, his voice barely audible.

"Yeah, you're here with us," Markus said, "But I think he wants you to really push yourself. He sees something in you, Eddie.

Among the three of us, you've got the talent to measure up to Mr. Welton's standards."

Eddie raised an eyebrow, surprised by the unexpected compliment. "What do you mean? Alfred can brew potions like it's second nature. He's older and way more experienced."

"Exactly," Markus said, his tone earnest. "But even your brother Alfred isn't allowed to work in Mr. Welton's personal workstation. You are. You've got no formal training, and yet you're here, learning at his side. That says something."

Eddie shifted uncomfortably, the weight of Markus's words settling in. "But I only got this chance because I'm his son," he insisted, trying to deflect the praise. "That's all there is to it."

"That's not what I mean, Eddie." Markus's voice was firm now, cutting through Eddie's doubts. "Sure, you're his son, but you've also got something he sees in you that he didn't see in Alfred. That's why he's willing to take the risk of having you as his assistant. He believes you could be great if you let yourself be."

Eddie stared at the shelf of ingredients, suddenly feeling a mix of embarrassment and confusion. He knew deep down that Markus was right, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was simply riding on his father's coattails. "I just don't feel like I deserve this chance," he murmured.

"Look, Eddie," Markus began, his tone earnest. "Your dad isn't just anybody. He's a well-known alchemist in Weshaven. If he's letting you work on his medicines, that means he sees potential in you—more than you realize. And honestly? You could do so much more than just sit here and help out."

Eddie felt a mix of pride and embarrassment wash over him at the compliment. "I don't know about that," he said, trying to downplay it. "I mean, I'm just—"

"Just what?" Markus interrupted, his voice firm. "Just the son of Mr. Welton? That's not enough. You're a smart magician, Eddie. You were always ambitious, even back at Aella Academy. You had this drive that most people only dream of. At some point, I was even jealous of your abilities."

Eddie blinked, taken aback by Markus's honesty. "Jealous? Seriously?"

"Yeah," Markus admitted, scratching the back of his neck. "You always seemed to grasp things so quickly. I thought you'd go places, you know? But now... I'd be disappointed if you didn't use your ability to its fullest extent. You can't waste this opportunity."

Eddie shifted uncomfortably, the weight of Markus's words settling in. "But what if I can't measure up? What if I'm just not good enough?"

Markus stepped closer, his expression serious yet encouraging. "You're more than just a name, Eddie. Weshaven is a small town, and it's easy to feel like you're stuck here forever, doing the same thing day in and day out. But you have the chance to break out of that cycle. You can do great things, not just for yourself, but for the town too."

"I know what you mean, but it's hard to see it that way sometimes," Eddie said, glancing at the floor. "I've been stuck in my own head for so long... it feels like the world is moving on without me."

"That's the thing, though," Markus replied, leaning on the counter with a thoughtful look. "You have to choose to move with it. Lydia and I might be content working here, but we don't have the same potential you do. Don't let that go to waste."

There's a whole world out there waiting for you, and it's not just about Weshaven. It's about becoming who you're meant to be."

As Eddie considered Markus's words, Lydia returned from the front of the store, wiping her hands on a towel. "What's this? A pep talk?" she quipped, her tone light but her eyes sharp with curiosity.

"Just trying to get Eddie to see how much he can really do," Markus replied, shrugging slightly as he straightened up.

"Good luck with that," Lydia said, chuckling as she rolled her eyes. "Eddie's like a stubborn mule sometimes. He needs to be kicked into gear."

"Hey!" Eddie protested, unable to suppress a grin at her playful jab. "I'm not that bad!"

Chapter VII



The dim twilight filled the Welton Apothecary, casting long shadows that danced across the cluttered shelves. Eddie sat lazily at the counter, his chin resting on both of his hands, eyes half-lidded as he stared at the flickering candlelight. The warm, earthy scents of dried herbs and brewing potions filled the air, mingling with the musky aroma of aged myrrh. Behind him, Lydia carefully prepared a batch of potions, her movements precise and practiced. The clink of glass vials and the soft hum of her quiet tune were the only sounds, aside from the rhythmic swish of Markus's broom as he swept the floor.

Eddie barely noticed when the door creaked open, but the familiar voice of Mrs. Welton drew him out of his reverie. She walked in, her presence commanding attention despite her gentle demeanor.

"Catherine's planning an excursion into the Deep Glaive," she announced, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face. "And Torrie is very stubborn about going with her."

Eddie's expression remained neutral, but he could feel Lydia's curious glance on his back. He knew what was coming next.

"I need you and Markus to accompany them," Mrs. Welton continued, her tone firm but kind.

Eddie's eyes narrowed slightly as he lifted his head, his reluctance evident. "Why can't I stay here? I'm better off at the shop."

Mrs. Welton approached the counter, her eyes softening as she looked at her son. "Lydia and I will handle the shop. Besides, this is an excellent opportunity to stock up on fresh ingredients from the Deep Glaive. It's a good excuse for you to get out, Eddie. You can't be here forever."

Markus, who had been silently sweeping, perked up at the mention of the excursion. "The Deep Glaive? That sounds amazing! We could find some really rare stuff out there, Ed. It'll be like old times!"

Eddie wasn't convinced. His gaze flicked to Markus, then back to his mother. "I don't know..."

Mrs. Welton reached out and placed a hand on Eddie's shoulder, her grip gentle but firm. "I know you're not fond of going out anymore, but this isn't just for the shop. It's for you, too. You need this."

Eddie sighed, the weight of his mother's words pressing down on him. He knew she was right, but the thought of venturing out into the magical forest filled him with unease. The Deep Glaive was no ordinary place; it was a wild, untamed expanse of ancient trees and hidden dangers. But more than that, it was a reminder of the world he'd tried to leave behind.

Markus, sensing his hesitation, offered a reassuring smile. "Come on, Ed. It'll be fun. And I could use your help. You know I'm not great with this kind of stuff."

Eddie finally relented, his shoulders sagging in defeat. "Fine. I'll go. But only because you're useless without me," he muttered, though there was a faint trace of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Mrs. Welton's face softened into a warm smile. "Thank you, Eddie. I knew I could count on you."

As Eddie stood up, Lydia's voice piped up from behind him. "Don't worry, Eddie. We'll keep the shop running smoothly. Just make sure you bring back something interesting."

Eddie shot her a dry look, but there was no real bite in it. "Yeah, yeah. Don't blow up the place while I'm gone."

"No promises." Lydia winked

With that, the decision was made. Markus was practically bouncing with excitement, while Eddie couldn't shake the feeling of dread that settled in his chest. But he pushed it down, forcing himself to focus on the task ahead.

After all, it was just a simple excursion. What could go wrong?

The garage was dimly lit, the only light coming from a small lantern hanging above the workbench. The air was thick with the scent of oil and old wood, and the walls were lined with tools and equipment. Eddie was there, quietly preparing the equipment for the excursion. The sounds of metal clinking and leather straps being fastened filled the space as he checked and rechecked each item with meticulous care.

As he adjusted the straps of a worn leather satchel, the heavy door creaked open, and in walked Mr. Welton. His broad frame filled the doorway, casting a long shadow across the room. He had the rugged, weathered look of a man who had spent his life battling the elements, his gruff demeanor softened only slightly by the faint smile that tugged at the corner of his lips as he spotted Eddie.

"Getting ready, eh?" Mr. Welton's voice was a deep rumble, tinged with the salt of the sea.

Eddie nodded, not looking up from his task. "Yeah."

Mr. Welton stepped closer, his heavy boots thudding softly against the wooden floor. "So you're goin', then?"

"I am," Eddie replied, his tone resigned. There was no excitement in his voice, just a quiet acceptance of what lay ahead.

Mr. Welton studied his son for a moment, his eyes narrowing slightly. "You takin' your wand with you?"

Eddie hesitated, his hands pausing in their work. "No," he finally answered, his voice firm but low. "I don't think I'll need them."

Mr. Welton grunted in response, his face unreadable as he reached behind him and pulled something from the rack above him. He held it out to Eddie—a flintlock rifle, its polished wooden stock and carved steel gleaming faintly in the dim light.

"I suppose you still remember how to shoot em?" Mr. Welton asked, his voice carrying a hint of challenge.

Eddie looked at the rifle, then up at his father. He took the weapon, feeling the familiar weight in his hands. "Yes, a little."

Mr. Welton's expression didn't change, but there was a glint of expectation in his eyes. "Show me."

Without a word, Eddie reached for a small metal ball from the workbench, loading the flintlock with practiced ease. His movements were fluid, 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.

Mr. Welton allowed a small smile to break through his otherwise stern facade. "Alright, I suppose you still remember. I'd rather you take your wand with you, but if you insist on not using it, at least you'll be able to defend yourself."

Eddie nodded, the rifle still in his hands. "Yeah, I suppose so."

There was a brief silence, the weight of unspoken words hanging between them. Finally, Mr. Welton clapped a heavy hand on

Eddie's shoulder, his grip firm. "Alright then. Be safe out there, Ed."

Eddie met his father's gaze, the flintlock resting comfortably at his side. "I sure will."

As Mr. Welton turned to leave, Eddie watched him go, feeling the weight of the rifle in his hands. It wasn't the same as carrying a wand, but perhaps that was the point. The door closed behind his father with a soft thud, leaving Eddie alone in the quiet of the garage, surrounded by the tools of his trade and the memories of a life he was trying to leave behind.

Eddie stepped out of the garage, the flintlock rifle slung across his back and the leather satchel secured at his side. The evening air was cool, tinged with the salty scent of the nearby sea, and the sky was painted in hues of deep orange and pink as the sun dipped below the horizon. Outside, Catherine and Torrie stood near the stone low wall that overlooked the sea, 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 new wand, a slender piece of dark wood with a silver inlay, twirled in her hands as she spoke.

"Aunt Catherine, if you combine stardust with powdered mandrake root, could you create a potion that enhances spell duration? Or would it just backfire like that one experiment you told me about?"

Catherine, tall and composed, smiled warmly at her niece's enthusiasm. Her alchemic staff, a beautifully crafted instrument topped with a crystal that shimmered in the twilight, was lightly tapped against the ground as she pondered the question.

"Well, Torrie, it depends on the method of infusion and the purity of the ingredients. But you're right to be cautious—alchemy is as much about precision as it is about creativity. Remember the importance of balance in every formula."

Torrie nodded eagerly, her curiosity only growing with each word from her aunt. In this moment, the cold and calculated demeanor she often carried was replaced with a child-like wonder, a reminder of the innocence she still held despite her logical nature.

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, a grin spreading across his face.

"All set, Ed?" Markus asked, pushing off the wall and adjusting the necklace he always wore—a simple silver chain with a small pendant that shimmered faintly with a protective charm.

Eddie nodded, offering a small smile in return. "Yeah, I'm ready." As Eddie joined them, Catherine's eyes were immediately drawn to the rifle on his back. Her brows furrowed in surprise, a stark contrast to the warm smile she had been wearing. "Eddie, what is that? What happened to your wand?"

Eddie hesitated, his heart sinking at the reminder of how much things had changed since she last saw him. Not wanting to disappoint her, he forced a casual tone. "Dad asked me to carry it. Thought it might come in handy."

Catherine blinked, clearly taken aback. She studied him for a moment longer, as if 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, reaching out to touch the rifle.

Eddie quickly swatted her hand away, a playful smile tugging at his lips despite the tension he felt. "No can do, Ma'am. Dad said nobody else should touch it besides me and Alfie."

Catherine pouted, a rare expression for the normally composed scholar. She folded 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 Deep Glaive."

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 quickly regained her usual demeanor, 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. Welton raised a hand in a silent farewell, his expression a mix of pride and concern. Eddie returned the gesture before turning away, his heart heavy with the unspoken words between them.

As they ventured into the gathering dusk, the world around them grew quieter, the only sounds being their footsteps and the distant calls of seabirds. The path ahead was long, and the mysteries of the Deep Glaive awaited.

The path they had been following gradually gave way to softer earth, the cobblestones disappearing beneath layers of fallen leaves as the group approached the edge 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 small 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, becoming cooler, denser, and more vibrant. The small, unassuming trees began to grow taller, their trunks thickening and their canopies stretching higher into the sky. The underbrush, once sparse, now teemed with strange, luminescent flora, casting an otherworldly glow on the path ahead.

Catherine was the first to react, her eyes widening in astonishment as she took in the sight before her. "By the stars... It's more incredible than I ever imagined." Her voice was filled with awe, each word a reverent whisper. She stepped forward, her fingers lightly grazing the bark of a nearby tree, which seemed to pulse gently beneath her touch. "I've read about the Deep Glaive in countless texts, but seeing it in person... It's like stepping into another world."

Torrie, who had been trailing just behind her, was equally mesmerized. Her gaze darted from one glowing plant to the next, her hands practically itching to gather samples. "It's like the trees are alive... I mean, really alive," she murmured, her voice tinged with the wonder of a child seeing magic for the first time. She turned to Catherine, her eyes sparkling. "Aunt Catherine, can we collect some of these? Just imagine the experiments we could conduct!"

Catherine chuckled softly, her earlier playful demeanor returning as she nodded. "Yes, but let's not be too hasty, Torrie. The Deep

Glaive is known for its beauty, but also for its dangers. We must tread carefully."

Markus, who had been lingering at the back, finally stepped forward, his usual cheerfulness replaced with a quiet reverence. He glanced around, his eyes wide with both fear and fascination. "I didn't expect it to be so... vast. It's like the forest goes on forever." He let out a shaky breath, rubbing the back of his neck as he tried to steady his nerves.

Eddie, standing slightly apart from the others, watched their reactions with a sense of detachment. He had read about the Deep Glaive in his academy days, had studied its mysteries in detail. His younger self would have been giddy with excitement, eager to explore every inch of this magical place. But now, as he looked around at the towering trees and the glowing plants, all he felt was a dull sense of indifference.

It's just a forest, he thought to himself. Trees, plants, maybe a few magical creatures – nothing special.

He knew the theory behind the forest's strange properties, how its size was an illusion, how it seemed to stretch endlessly for those who ventured inside. But knowing the how and why stripped away the wonder. What others saw as extraordinary, he saw as simply the result of magical phenomena he had once been so passionate about, now reduced to nothing more than trivial facts in his mind.

Catherine turned to him, her eyes still wide with excitement. "Eddie, isn't this just amazing? I remember how you used to talk about places like this when you were a child. You were always so eager to see them for yourself."

Eddie forced a smile, nodding politely. "It's impressive, I suppose. But it's just a forest. We've seen plenty of those."

Catherine blinked, surprised by his lack of enthusiasm. She studied him for a moment, as if trying to reconcile the man before her with the boy she remembered. "I suppose you're right... But still, there's something magical about being here in person, don't you think?"

Eddie shrugged, his expression neutral. "Maybe."

Torrie, sensing the shift in his mood, glanced at him curiously but said nothing. Markus, on the other hand, looked at Eddie with a hint of concern, but quickly turned his attention back to the forest, trying to absorb every detail.

Catherine, undeterred by Eddie's indifference, smiled warmly at the group. "Alright, let's not waste any more time. We've got work to do, and the Deep Glaive won't wait for us. Stay close, and remember—this forest may be beautiful, but it's also unpredictable."

As they ventured deeper into the forest, Catherine and Torrie continued to marvel at their surroundings, while Markus followed closely, his nerves slowly easing as he became more accustomed to the strange sights around him.

Eddie walked a few steps behind, his rifle still slung across his back, his gaze focused ahead. He knew there were wonders in the Deep Glaive—wonders that would have once thrilled him beyond measure. But now, they were just another reminder of the life he had left behind, and the magic he no longer cared to understand.

As they ventured deeper into the Deep Glaive, the forest's eerie beauty became even more pronounced. The trees now towered above them, their branches forming a dense canopy that filtered the light into a soft, greenish glow. The air was thick with the scent of damp earth and fragrant blossoms, and the occasional

rustle of leaves hinted at unseen creatures moving just out of sight.

Finally, they arrived at a narrow dirt path that wound its way through the forest. The path was lined with small, glowing yellow flowers, their light soft but steady, casting an ethereal glow on the ground. Catherine's eyes lit up as they stepped onto the path, recognition flashing across her face.

"This must be the Traveler's Path," she said, her voice tinged with excitement. "I've read about it, but I never thought I'd actually see it in person."

Torrie, who had been eagerly following every word, glanced down at the glowing flowers lining the path. "What's so special about these flowers, Aunt Catherine? They're beautiful, but... why do they glow like that?"

Catherine knelt beside one of the flowers, her fingers hovering just above its delicate petals. "These flowers are called Luminas, and they're not just here for show. The Traveler's Path is a safe passage through the Deep Glaive, a path agreed upon by the forest itself. The Luminas not only mark the way but also serve as wards. Their glow keeps most of the magical creatures at bay – creatures that are usually sensitive to bright lights."

Torrie's eyes widened in fascination as she absorbed the information. "So, the forest... it's alive? I mean, really alive?"

"In a sense, yes," Catherine replied, standing up and brushing her hands together. "The Deep Glaive is said to have a subconscious, a kind of awareness. It doesn't like to be disturbed, so long ago, travelers struck a sort of truce with the forest. They marked this path, and in return, the forest allows people to traverse it safely, as long as they don't stray too far."

Markus, who had been silently taking in the surroundings, glanced at Eddie. “Well, that’s a relief, isn’t it? At least we know we’re not walking into something we can’t handle.”

Eddie nodded, feeling a slight easing of the tension that had gripped him since they’d entered the forest. The Traveler’s Path was familiar to him—he’d studied it in his academy days, back when his curiosity about the magical world had been boundless. Knowing they were on a path that generations of travelers had deemed safe was comforting, even if his excitement for the journey had long since faded.

“I remember reading about this,” Eddie said, his voice steady. “It’s one of the few places in the Deep Glaive that’s actually safe to walk through without worrying about getting lost or running into something... dangerous.”

Catherine turned to him with a warm smile. “You’ve always had a sharp memory, Eddie. It’s good to know that not all of your studies have gone to waste.”

Eddie forced a smile in return, though her words stirred something in him—something he quickly pushed aside. “Yeah, it’s useful to remember some things.”

As they continued along the path, the conversation flowed easily between Catherine and Torrie, with Markus chiming in every now and then. Catherine spoke with the passion of a scholar, explaining the intricate relationships between the plants and creatures of the Deep Glaive, how the forest’s ecosystem was a delicate balance maintained by the ancient agreements between nature and those who respected it.

Torrie, ever the curious student, peppered her aunt with questions, her enthusiasm growing with each new piece of

knowledge. "So, the Luminas... they're like guardians of the path? Do they ever stop glowing?"

Catherine shook her head, her tone gentle but firm. "As long as the forest is at peace, the Luminas will continue to glow. But if the balance is disturbed—by a careless traveler, or something more sinister—their light could fade, and the path would become much more dangerous."

Markus chuckled, though there was a slight edge to his voice. "Guess we'll just have to make sure we don't disturb anything, then."

Eddie walked a few steps behind them, his rifle slung across his back, listening to the conversation without much interest. He knew all this already—had studied the legends and lore of the Deep Glaive extensively in his youth. But now, the wonder that had once filled him was gone, replaced by a sense of obligation to keep those around him safe, to fulfill the role he had been given.

As they walked, the forest seemed to close in around them, the trees growing even larger, their roots twisting beneath the earth like the veins of some ancient creature. The Luminas continued to guide their way, their soft glow cutting through the gathering shadows, and the group's chatter provided a comforting contrast to the quiet, watchful presence of the Deep Glaive.

The sun had long since set, leaving the forest bathed in the soft light of the Luminas and the pale glow of the moon filtering through the trees. The atmosphere in the Deep Glaive was one of quiet anticipation, punctuated only by the occasional rustle of leaves and the distant calls of nocturnal creatures.

Catherine, Torrie, Markus, and Eddie had made significant progress along the Traveler's Path. Markus had filled his and Eddie's bags with a variety of alchemical ingredients—dried

herbs, rare roots, and even some shimmering mushrooms that would fetch a high price in the market. Torrie, her eyes shining with triumph, had found a jar filled with delicate pixies flitting about in a small, iridescent cloud. The tiny creatures looked curiously at their captors, their faint light casting whimsical patterns on the jar's glass.

They had reached a clearing amidst the path, a small open area where the forest seemed to hold its breath. Catherine stood at the edge of the clearing, her eyes scanning the dense foliage beyond the path. She looked determined, her staff held firmly in one hand, its crystal glinting in the low light.

"Well, I've found what I needed for the moment," Catherine said, her tone a mix of satisfaction and urgency. "But there's something specific I need to retrieve beyond the path. It's a rare type of herb known as the Moonshade Orchid. It only blooms in the deeper, uncharted regions of the forest."

Markus glanced nervously at the dark expanse beyond the glowing flowers of the Traveler's Path. "Catherine, I don't think it's a good idea to go outside the path. I've heard the forest can be dangerous, and it's risky even for those who are well-prepared."

Torrie nodded, her face reflecting concern. "Yeah, Aunt Catherine, it's not worth the risk. We've already gathered so much here. Maybe we should just head back."

Catherine shook her head, her expression resolute. "I understand your concerns, but the Moonshade Orchid is crucial for my research. I can't afford to leave without it. It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

Eddie, who had been silently observing the exchange, spoke up. "Markus, you're the only one here who can help Catherine if

something goes wrong. You're magically gifted; you'll be able to protect yourselves better than the rest of us."

Markus hesitated, glancing from Eddie to Catherine and then back to the darkness beyond the path. "But it's dangerous out there. I... I'm not sure I'm ready for this."

Eddie placed a reassuring hand on Markus's shoulder. "Look, I know it's not ideal, but if anyone can handle it, it's you. You've got skills that could make a difference. And if Catherine really needs this herb, it's worth taking the risk."

Markus sighed, clearly torn. He glanced at Catherine, who looked at him with a mixture of hope and anxiety. Finally, he nodded, though his reluctance was evident. "Alright, I'll go with you. But only because it seems important."

Catherine's face brightened with relief. "Thank you, Markus. I promise we'll be cautious."

Eddie watched as Catherine and Markus prepared to leave, Catherine adjusting her staff and Markus checking his magical charms. The tension in the air was palpable, and Eddie couldn't help but feel a pang of concern. He knew the risks involved and could only hope that their decision to split up wouldn't lead to unforeseen trouble.

"Be careful out there," Eddie said, his voice carrying a hint of unspoken worry.

"We will," Catherine assured him, giving him a warm, albeit slightly strained, smile. "And we'll be back as soon as we can."

As Catherine and Markus stepped beyond the glowing barrier of Luminas, the contrast between the safety of the Traveler's Path and the dark, mysterious forest beyond became starkly evident. The air seemed to grow colder, and the soft glow of the flowers

behind them grew dimmer as they moved further into the unknown.

Eddie turned to Torrie, who was still holding her jar of pixies, her excitement dimmed by the worry for her aunt. "Let's stay put for now. We'll give them some time and make sure everything's alright."

Torrie nodded, though her eyes frequently flicked toward the darkened edge of the forest. "I just hope they come back soon. The forest... it feels different now."

Eddie glanced back toward the path, his own feelings a mix of apprehension and resignation. He had promised himself not to use magic, but as he watched Catherine and Markus disappear into the darkness, he couldn't help but wonder if things might have been different if he had chosen another path for himself.

For now, all he could do was wait and hope for their safe return.



Eddie and Torrie settled down at the side of the Traveler's Path as night deepened around them. The glowing Lumina 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 rifle resting on his lap, his gaze fixed on the flickering lights of the Luminas. Torrie, on the other hand, was absorbed in a more delicate task. She deftly wove Lumina flowers into a crown, her small fingers moving with practiced ease.

Eddie glanced at her, a hint of curiosity in his voice. "So, Torrie, how do you feel about seeing Aunt Catherine again?"

Torrie looked up from her flower crown, her expression one of thoughtful satisfaction. Her normally cold and calculating demeanor softened into a rare smile. "I'm happy. It's not every day you get to meet someone with so much knowledge and experience. Aunt Catherine has traveled far and studied so much. Being able to learn from her is fascinating."

Eddie nodded, a faint smile touching his lips. "Yeah, it's... good to see her again."

Torrie's smile widened slightly, but it didn't reach her eyes as much as it had before. "And what about you? How do you feel meeting her again?"

Eddie shrugged, his tone neutral. "It's alright. She seems a bit thinner than the last time I saw her."

Torrie's smile faltered, her eyes narrowing slightly as she studied Eddie's face. "Just that? Nothing else fascinates you about her return?"

The shift in Torrie's tone was subtle but unmistakable. The casualness of the conversation began to dissipate, replaced by an undercurrent of tension. Eddie's smile faded, and he looked away, his expression suddenly distant.

"It's just... seeing her again is... fine," Eddie replied, his voice lacking its earlier warmth. He glanced at Torrie, whose previously bright demeanor 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 coming back after all this time?"

Eddie shifted uncomfortably, his fingers tightening around the rifle. "It's not like that. I just... I don't see what's so special. She's still the same person she was before."

Torrie's smile had completely vanished, 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. Doesn't it bother you that she seems different now?"

Eddie's eyes flicked to the side, avoiding her piercing gaze. "Maybe. I don't know."

The air between them grew thicker with unspoken emotions. Torrie's frustration and Eddie's indifference created a palpable tension. Torrie's fingers paused mid-motion with the flower crown, her face a mask of both frustration and hurt.

The Lumina flowers glowed softly, their light casting long shadows that danced across their faces. The once-comforting glow now seemed to highlight the distance growing between them.

Torrie finally broke the silence, her voice quiet but firm. "If you're not interested in seeing what's different, then... why are you here?"

Eddie opened his mouth to respond but hesitated, the words seeming to elude him. His gaze remained fixed on the path ahead, as if seeking answers in the darkness.

Torrie's expression hardened, her eyes still locked on him. "It seems like you're not the same Eddie who was so eager to learn about magic and meet Aunt Catherine. What happened to that part of you?"



The moonlight cast long shadows through the dense foliage of the Deep Glaive as Catherine and Markus navigated the undergrowth. The forest was eerily silent, save for the occasional rustle of leaves and the distant call of an unknown creature. Markus walked slightly ahead, his movements jittery, his eyes darting around nervously. The deeper they went, the more the forest seemed to close in around them, its ancient trees and twisted vines forming a maze of darkness.

Catherine, ever observant, noticed Markus's growing unease. She decided to break the silence to ease the tension. "You know, Markus, I used to visit Eddie's home quite often when he was a kid. We'd go adventuring in old ruins and explore places like these. But this is my first time venturing into a magical forest like this."

Markus glanced at her, his face pale. "Really? That must have been something."

Catherine nodded with a reminiscent smile. "It was. Eddie used to love going off-trail, never sticking to the safe paths. He was always so adventurous, always seeking out new experiences, no matter the danger. There were countless times we'd find ourselves in trouble, but Eddie always seemed to enjoy the thrill of it. His older brother Alfred and I would often have to help him out of those scrapes."

Markus swallowed hard, his nerves evident. "Eddie... he seems different now. He doesn't seem like the same person."

Catherine's smile faded slightly as she looked at Markus. "Different? How so?"

Markus took a deep breath, his voice trembling slightly. "Well, there's a reason for that. Back at the academy, I was heavily bullied by a kid named Davies. I wasn't as adept at magic as the

others, so I was an easy target. Eddie was always my friend because he didn't quite fit in with the rest of them either. He'd spend time with me instead of those other guys."

Markus paused, his eyes reflecting the dim light. "One day, when Davies was particularly brutal, Eddie was there. He was impulsive, as he always was, and he challenged Davies to a duel. None of us knew how it would end. Davies didn't take Eddie seriously, but during the duel, Eddie accidentally scarred Davies' face. It was a mess, and Eddie ended up getting expelled from the academy."

Catherine's expression shifted from curiosity to shock and sympathy. "I had no idea. Eddie never spoke about it in detail. I've always wondered why he seemed so distant."

Markus nodded, his gaze dropping. "It was a turning point for him. He became cold and withdrawn after that. It's like he lost something important to him."

Catherine sighed, her heart heavy with the weight of newfound understanding. "I wish I had known. I might have been able to help him see past it, rekindle his love for magic. I hope that's still possible."

As they continued their search, Catherine's eyes caught a glimmer of something in the distance—a small cave hidden beneath a canopy of dense branches. "Look over there," she said, pointing. "I think the ingredient we're looking for might be inside that cave."

Markus's face turned even paler, and he glanced around nervously. "I don't know about this, Catherine. It's getting late, and the forest feels... different."

Catherine waved off his concerns. "We're almost there. Just a bit further."

As they approached the cave, the tension in the air grew thicker. Markus's unease became more pronounced, and he began to sweat visibly. His eyes darted around, searching for something that wasn't there. "Catherine, I—"

He was cut off by a low, rumbling growl that echoed through the forest. Markus's eyes widened in terror as he slowly turned his head to the source of the sound. His gaze locked onto a massive shadow lurking deeper within the cave. The growl grew louder, more menacing.

Catherine, still focused on the cave, hadn't noticed the creature yet. "Just a bit closer. We need to—"

Markus's voice trembled with panic. "Catherine, look out!"

As he shouted, the creature stepped into the light of the Luminas, revealing a massive, fearsome beast with glowing eyes and sharp, jagged teeth. It roared, sending a shiver down Markus's spine. The ground trembled slightly with its roar, and the creature's presence filled the cave entrance.

Catherine turned to see the creature, her eyes widening in surprise. "What in the—"



The air between Eddie and Torrie crackled with unresolved tension as Eddie struggled to find the right words. His fingers absentmindedly traced the grain of his rifle, his gaze still fixed on the dark path ahead.

"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."

Torrie's expression shifted from frustration to something more accusatory. Her eyes narrowed, her voice rising with barely contained anger. "You used to be so eager to meet Catherine. 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—she was confused and disappointed by your reaction. Doesn't that bother you?"

Eddie's face flushed, his patience wearing thin. "It's not that simple. You don't understand—"

Torrie cut him off, her voice trembling with emotion. "Don't I? You used to be passionate about magic, Eddie. You looked up to Catherine like she was some kind of hero. But now you're just... a shell of your former self. You've completely shut down!"

The accusation hung heavily in the air, and Eddie felt a pang of guilt. His hands clenched around the rifle, knuckles white.

Torrie's tears began to flow, her voice breaking with each word. "Don't you feel bad for her, Ed? Magic used to be your life! You used to dream about it, and now—now you just act like it's nothing. What happened to you? Just because you scarred a boy's face during a duel doesn't mean you should give it up!"

Eddie's face contorted with anger and pain. He stood up abruptly, his voice rising in frustration. "I didn't just scar him, Torrie! I ruined his life. I didn't just get expelled from the academy—I destroyed someone's future, and I've done it countless times! Magic wasn't just a hobby for me; it was a weapon, and I used it recklessly."

Torrie's eyes widened in shock, her tears flowing freely now. "You're just using that as an excuse! You've let one mistake define you. You've let it make you cold and distant. Aunt Catherine came back expecting to see the old you, the one who

was so full of wonder and ambition. Instead, she finds someone who's given up on everything that used to matter."

Eddie's voice cracked as he shouted back. "You think I wanted this? You think I wanted to become this person? It's not just about one mistake—it's about everything I lost because of it. I can't just turn it back on like a switch."

The argument continued to escalate, their voices echoing off the surrounding trees. The once-gentle glow of the Luminas seemed to flicker more erratically, casting long, wavering shadows around them. The forest, silent and watchful, seemed to hold its breath as the siblings' emotions spilled out.

Torrie, her face flushed with anger and hurt, took a step back. "You've changed so much, Eddie. It's like you're not even the same person anymore."

Eddie, panting and shaken, looked at her with a mixture of regret and defiance. "Maybe I'm not. 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."

For a moment, the forest seemed to close in 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 just wish you could see how much we still need that part of you, Eddie. The part that believed in magic, that believed in the good it could do."

The tension between Eddie and Torrie still hung in the air as they sat by the Traveler's Path. The sound of hurried footsteps and ragged breathing shattered the silence.

Markus burst through the trees, his face pale and eyes wide with fear. He staggered to a stop, his breath coming in gasps.

"Eddie!" Markus shouted, his voice trembling. "Something's happened! Catherine... she's in trouble. There's something huge in the forest—"

"Alright, alright, calm down Markus, what is it? what had gotten Catherine?" Eddie said

"I-it's like a giant fox, or a cat, but it has six pairs of red eyes!"

Eddie's eyes widened as he absorbed the description. For a moment, he stood still, processing the terrifying reality of what Markus had just described. The Nightingale Fox—legendary for its size, strength, and the eerie, hypnotic glow of its eyes—was a creature of nightmares in magical lore. The very thought of such a beast being involved in Catherine's plight struck a chord of deep fear within him.

Eddie's heart pounded as he imagined Catherine, who had always been a symbol of strength and wonder in his life, facing such a formidable foe. The terror was palpable, a suffocating weight pressing down on him. He could feel his hands trembling, his mind racing with the gravity of the situation.

But amidst the fear, a realization took hold. Eddie was the only one present who had any chance of confronting the Nightingale Fox. Markus was panicked and terrified and he never was Magically inclined to begin with, and Torrie, though brave, was not yet equipped for such a dire confrontation. It fell to him—Eddie—to face the creature.

The fear inside Eddie began to crystallize into a fierce determination. He had to protect Catherine, to prove to himself that he could rise to the challenge despite his past. With a deep

breath, he forced himself to focus, pushing aside the paralyzing dread and replacing it with a steely resolve.

Without a word, Eddie grabbed his rifle from where it lay and slung it over his shoulder. His movements were deliberate, a stark contrast to the frantic panic he had felt moments before. "Stay here with Torrie," he ordered Markus, his voice firm despite the storm of emotions inside him. "I'm going after her."

Torrie's eyes blazed with concern and anger as she jumped up, her voice rising in desperation. "Eddie, this is insane! You can't just go off into the forest after what Markus described. It's too dangerous!"

Eddie's expression was set in determination as he started moving towards the forest. "I don't have time to argue, Torrie. Catherine's in danger."

As Eddie took a step forward, Torrie, in a last-ditch effort, thrust something into his hands. It was an old, polished wand — one that Eddie had given to her long ago. "Take this," she insisted, her voice firm despite her trembling hands. "You may not want it, but it's better than nothing. Edward, Please."

Eddie looked at the wand, his expression conflicted. "I don't need it," he said, shaking his head. "I can handle this on my own."

Torrie's eyes filled with a mixture of pleading and frustration. "You're not yourself anymore, Edward. Just take it. You owe it to yourself and to Catherine."

Realizing she wouldn't back down, Eddie pocketed the wand reluctantly, his fingers brushing against its familiar surface. "Fine," he said curtly.

Without another word, Eddie turned and moved past the protective ring of glowing Luminas, stepping into the darkened forest. The shadows seemed to close in around him as he

ventured further into the unknown. The protective flowers' glow dimmed behind him, leaving the path bathed in darkness and uncertainty.

The forest felt different now—hostile and foreboding. The air grew colder, and a sense of dread seeped into Eddie's bones. He held his rifle tightly, his senses alert for any sign of danger. Every crack of a branch or rustle of leaves seemed amplified in the oppressive silence.

Eddie's heart pounded as he plunged into the darkness beyond the Traveler's Path. The forest around him was dense and oppressive, its shadows closing in like a suffocating shroud. The warm glow of the Lumina flowers faded behind him, leaving only the cold, eerie light of the moon to guide his way.

His rifle rested on his shoulder, but the weapon felt heavy and awkward in his hands. Eddie's senses were heightened, every snap of a twig or rustle of leaves setting his nerves on edge. The forest was alive with whispers and shuffles, the undergrowth crackling with unseen creatures.

As Eddie moved cautiously through the dense foliage, he noticed eyes watching him from the dark. They glowed with an unsettling array of colors—fiery reds, cool blues, and ghostly greens. Creatures of all shapes and sizes peered out from behind trees and rocks, their eyes tracking his every movement. Some were curious, their heads tilted as they observed him with interest. Others were more wary, their gazes sharp and assessing. The forest was like a living entity, a myriad of eyes in the dark, scrutinizing the intruder.

Eddie's breath came in shallow, controlled bursts. He could feel the weight of the forest's gaze upon him, as though the very trees and creatures were trying to decipher his purpose. Was he a hunter? A threat? The forest seemed to sense the intent behind

his presence, but Eddie's focus was not on aggression. His posture, though tense, did not convey a desire to harm but rather a determination to protect.

He had always read about the Deep Glaive's magical creatures and their unpredictable nature, but experiencing it firsthand was an entirely different challenge. The silence between the rustling leaves and occasional growls was deafening, broken only by the distant roar of the Nightingale Fox that drove Eddie forward.

The forest itself felt alive, its magic palpable in the air. The shadows seemed to shift and writhe, as if the trees were watching him, their ancient limbs stretching out to obscure his path. The atmosphere grew colder, and a shiver ran down Eddie's spine. Every step he took was carefully measured, his rifle held ready but lowered—he had no desire to provoke, only to find and rescue Catherine.

As he navigated through the underbrush, Eddie's sharp eyes caught glimpses of strange flora and fauna—vividly colored mushrooms glowing faintly in the dark, and vines that pulsed with a bioluminescent rhythm. The creatures that stared at him seemed to blend into the background, their forms almost camouflaged by the magical light and shadows.

Eddie could feel the weight of the forest's magic pressing in on him, its power both awe-inspiring and menacing. His path was a tangled mess of roots and branches, each step fraught with the risk of stumbling into hidden traps or dangerous plants. The deeper he went, the more intense the feeling of being watched became, as though the very forest itself were holding its breath, waiting to see what he would do next.

The distant roar of the Nightingale Fox grew louder, more urgent. Eddie quickened his pace, his breath coming in short, measured bursts. He moved with the careful precision of someone who

knew the stakes—every noise, every movement, was calculated to avoid drawing unwanted attention.

Finally, Eddie reached a small clearing where the sounds of struggle were clearer. The air was thick with the scent of fear and desperation. Eddie's grip tightened on his rifle as he scanned the area, ready to confront whatever danger awaited him.

The tension in the forest was palpable, the creatures' eyes fading back into the darkness as if to let Eddie pass. The forest was a living maze of shadows and uncertainty, its magic swirling around him like a storm. Every step forward brought Eddie closer to the heart of the danger, and the realization that he was the only one who could save Catherine intensified his resolve.

As Eddie moved cautiously into the clearing, he could make out the shadowy form of the Nightingale Fox in the distance. The beast's six pairs of glowing red eyes glared back at him, the creature's growls vibrating through the ground. Eddie steadied his breathing, ready for the confrontation that loomed ahead, knowing that every moment counted.



Eddie's heart raced as he followed the distant, guttural roar that reverberated through the forest. His steps grew more urgent, driven by a mix of dread and determination. The roar grew louder, and Eddie pushed through the thick underbrush, his senses on high alert.

He emerged into a small clearing, and what he saw stopped him dead in his tracks. The clearing was dominated by a hulking

black figure—the Nightingale Fox. The creature’s immense size and dark, sinuous form were both awe-inspiring and terrifying. Its six pairs of glowing red eyes scanned the surroundings, their eerie light reflecting off the dark foliage like sinister beacons.

The sight was both horrifying and mesmerizing. The Nightingale Fox was unlike any creature Eddie had ever encountered or read about. It resembled a gigantic cat, but its elongated snout and the way its eyes moved in unison made it look unnervingly alien. The beast’s presence was suffocating, casting a dark shadow over the entire clearing.

Eddie’s gaze fell to the ground near the creature’s massive paws. There, partially buried under a tangle of leaves and broken branches, was the top part of Catherine’s alchemical staff, now snapped in two. The sight of the broken staff filled Eddie with a deep sense of foreboding. He could see the remnants of Catherine’s red coat peeking out from beneath the creature, a desperate glimmer of crimson amidst the darkness.

Catherine was struggling, her alchemical knowledge insufficient against the raw, primal power of the Nightingale Fox. She cast spells and incantations with frantic energy, but the creature seemed impervious to her efforts. Eddie could see her movements growing more desperate as the beast loomed closer, its red eyes flickering with an unsettling intelligence.

Eddie stood frozen at the edge of the clearing, his breath caught in his throat. The reality of the creature he had only read about in textbooks was now right in front of him. The Nightingale Fox was a beast of legend, described in horrifying tales of destruction and carnage. Seeing it in person, with Catherine in peril, was more terrifying than Eddie could have imagined.

The fear that gripped Eddie was paralyzing. He had studied the Nightingale Fox’s lore, read about its capacity for terror and

devastation, but nothing had prepared him for the sight of it in the flesh. The beast's power and the dire situation before him left Eddie feeling helpless, his resolve wavering as he took in the scene.



Eddie's mind raced as he realized there was no way to sneak past the Nightingale Fox. The fear that had paralyzed him seemed to grow with each step closer he took, but amid the terror, something deep within him stirred. Memories of his old self, the fearless and impulsive boy who would tackle danger head-on, flashed through his mind.

As he stared at the monstrous creature, Eddie felt a shift within him—a transition from his current state of fear to the reckless bravery of his past. His old self would have acted without hesitation, driven by an unyielding resolve. The very trait that once defined him, the trait he had buried deep within, now surfaced with a force that pushed him forward, *What would the old me done?* Eddie asked himself, With a sudden, almost instinctive decision, Eddie did what his old self would have done.

He took a deep breath and shouted, "Hey!" His voice rang out through the clearing, raw and desperate.

The Nightingale Fox's head snapped around, its six pairs of glowing red eyes locking onto Eddie with a terrifying, predatory focus. Eddie's heart pounded as he raised his rifle and pulled the trigger, aiming for one of the creature's eyes. The shot rang out,

echoing through the forest, and the Nightingale Fox let out a deafening roar as it writhed in pain.

Eddie seized the moment of distraction and sprinted toward Catherine, his focus solely on reaching her. He dodged between the trees, the crackling foliage underfoot blending with the creature's enraged roars. His mind was set on one goal—saving Catherine from the Nightingale Fox.

But just as he neared Catherine, something happened that made Eddie's blood run cold. The creature's eye that he had shot began to twitch and convulse. Eddie watched in horrified disbelief as the wounded eye, along with the metal ball that had dropped from its socket, began to regenerate. The nightmarish creature's wound healed rapidly, and the eye grew back with a sickening squelch.

The Nightingale Fox, now even more enraged and with its full gaze once again trained on Eddie, let out a furious roar. The beast's fury intensified, and its massive form moved with a speed that belied its size. It lunged at Eddie with a terrifying, sinewy grace.

Eddie's heart skipped a beat as he scrambled to raise his rifle. He was barely ready when the Nightingale Fox struck with a powerful swipe of its clawed paw. The impact was like being hit by a battering ram, sending Eddie sprawling across the ground. Pain exploded in his side, and the rifle flew from his grasp, skidding across the forest floor.

Dazed and gasping for breath, Eddie struggled to push himself up. The creature loomed over him, its red eyes blazing with unbridled fury. Eddie's vision swam as he tried to regain his footing, the world around him a chaotic blur of shadows and movement.

The Nightingale Fox's growls and roars filled the clearing, a reminder of the danger Eddie faced. Despite the pain and the creature's relentless aggression, Eddie's mind was still focused on Catherine. He had to find a way to protect her, to defeat the beast that now stood between them.

Eddie's desperation gave him strength. He glanced around, searching for anything that could be used as a weapon or a means of escape. His gaze landed on the scattered remnants of Catherine's shattered staff, and he realized that despite the overwhelming odds, he couldn't give up.

As the Nightingale Fox's growls grew louder and more insistent, Eddie braced himself for another attack. He had faced many challenges before, but none as formidable as this. With a determined, pained grunt, Eddie forced himself to his feet, ready to face the creature head-on and find a way to rescue Catherine.

Eddie was thrown several feet back by the Nightingale Fox's powerful strike. He landed hard against the forest floor, the impact jarring his body and leaving him disoriented. Pain flared in his chest where the creature's claw had raked deeply, a searing sting that made it difficult to think clearly. As he struggled to sit up, the forest seemed to spin around him, shadows and light blurring together.

Through the haze of pain, Eddie glimpsed the Nightingale Fox preparing to lunge at him again. His rifle was nowhere in sight, its clatter lost among the foliage. Panic surged through him as he scrambled to find something, anything, that could help him defend himself. His hands fumbled over the forest floor, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

In his frantic search, Eddie's fingers brushed against the familiar shape of Torrie's wand in his pants pocket. It was the wand he had given her long ago, a reminder of his past and of the magic

he had sworn never to touch again. But in that moment of desperate need, Eddie knew he had no other choice. He grasped the wand tightly, its weight a strange comfort amidst the chaos.

His old self's memories, the thrill of casting spells and the rush of using magic, surfaced despite his vow. Eddie's eyes locked on the advancing creature, his fear and determination blending into a single, potent resolve. He might have sworn off magic, but he couldn't let Catherine die. Not like this.

He raised the wand, his heart pounding in his chest as he focused on the Nightingale Fox. The wand's crystal began to glow, and black tendrils of magic swirled around his hands, crackling with dark energy. Eddie's knowledge of magic, buried deep beneath layers of self-imposed exile, surged to the surface. He felt the magic flowing through him, a sensation both alien and exhilarating.

The black tendrils shot forth, streaking through the air with a powerful, pulsating energy. The spell struck the Nightingale Fox squarely in the head. The creature roared in pain, its six pairs of eyes widening in agony as the spell's impact caused it to stagger. Blood oozed from the wound, dripping down its face as it writhed on the ground, clearly disoriented and enraged.

Eddie's grip tightened around the wand, and with a surge of determination, he cast another spell. The tendrils flared once more, striking the creature with a force that sent it reeling. The Nightingale Fox, now bleeding and clearly suffering, let out a final, thunderous roar before turning and bolting into the depths of the forest. The sound of its massive paws thundering away grew fainter and fainter until it was swallowed by the distance.

Silence settled over the clearing. Eddie, panting heavily, slowly lowered the wand. His chest throbbed with pain, and his

breathing was ragged, but a sense of relief washed over him. The Nightingale Fox was gone, and Catherine was safe—for now.

Eddie glanced around the clearing, taking in the aftermath of the battle. The forest, once filled with the sounds of the creature's rage, now returned to its natural state. Birds began to sing again, and the rustling of leaves resumed, creating a serene contrast to the violence that had just occurred.

He turned his attention to Catherine, who lay on the ground, her face pale but her breathing steady. Eddie stumbled over to her, his wounds making each step a challenge. He dropped to his knees beside her, his old wand still clutched in his hand, now more than just a tool but a symbol of his resolve.

"Catherine," he said, his voice strained but filled with relief. "Are you alright?"

Catherine's eyes fluttered open, and she looked up at Eddie with a mixture of surprise and gratitude. She tried to sit up, but exhaustion and pain held her back. "Yeah," she whispered, her voice weak but sincere. "I think so?... I didn't think you'd come."

Eddie managed a tired smile, though his face was etched with pain. "If i didn't come you bet you had to be that fox's snack."

-o-

The moon hung low in the sky as Eddie and Catherine made their way back toward the Traveler's Path. The once-gleaming alchemical staff was now a splintered ruin, and Eddie's father's rifle was a battered relic of their fight. Despite the injuries, both Eddie and Catherine pressed on, their shared determination the only thing keeping them moving through the darkening forest.

Catherine supported Eddie with a steady hand, her healing spells having eased some of his pain but unable to fully erase the evidence of the battle. Eddie's steps were uneven, his breaths

shallow and labored, but he managed to keep pace with Catherine's careful guidance.

As they walked through the dim, shifting shadows of the forest, Catherine's curiosity got the better of her. She glanced at Eddie, her expression a mix of concern and curiosity. "Eddie, you've been so distant lately. I remember when magic used to light up your world. You used to be so passionate, so eager to learn. What happened?"

Eddie's gaze was fixed on the ground, his face shadowed by the weight of his memories. He took a deep breath, his voice low and heavy. "It's a long story, Catherine..."

"Alright," Catherine said, "You care to tell the story?"

Eddie sighed, "Back at the academy, I used the same kind of magic I used against the Nightingale Fox on a boy named Davies. We had a duel, and I—" He hesitated, the memories painful. "I scarred his face. It wasn't just a mark; it was a permanent scar. I didn't just hurt him; I ruined his life."

Catherine's face softened with empathy as she listened. "I see. It must have been devastating."

Eddie nodded, his voice tinged with regret. "I felt the guilt i never felt before in my life. I couldn't bear the thought of hurting someone like that again. So I shut myself off from magic when i got my expulsion notice. I thought I could protect others by keeping away from it. But it just made me numb. I lost my purpose i feel like i had lost everything since that day."

Catherine stopped walking and faced Eddie, her expression serious yet compassionate. "Eddie, throughout history, magic has been wielded for both great good and terrible evil. There have been sorcerers who used magic to topple kingdoms, enslave millions, and commit unspeakable atrocities. But there are also

countless examples of magic being used to heal, to save, and to build.”

She continued, her tone earnest. “There was a sage who healed an entire country struck by a plague, and an alchemist who created a thriving city in the middle of a desert. Magic has the power to destroy, yes, but it also has the power to create, to heal, and to give hope to those in need.”

Eddie’s eyes were distant as he absorbed Catherine’s words. “But what if I can’t control it? What if I hurt more people?”

Catherine placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “It’s not about whether you have the power to destroy. It’s about how you choose to use that power. You have the ability to do great things, Eddie. You have the power to heal, to help others, and to make a difference.”

Eddie remained silent, his thoughts a whirlpool of conflicting emotions. The weight of Catherine’s words pressed upon him, offering both a challenge and a glimmer of hope. He looked at the darkened path ahead, the forest now seeming less oppressive than before.

As they reached the edge of the Traveler’s Path, the familiar sight of Markus and Torrie waiting for them came into view. The tension of the night was starting to lift, but Eddie knew that his journey of reconciling with his past and rediscovering his purpose was far from over.



Markus paced nervously along the edge of the Traveler’s Path, his face etched with worry. He stopped intermittently to glance

back toward the dark expanse of the forest where Eddie and Catherine had gone. His usually cheerful demeanor was replaced with a palpable anxiety, his eyes darting with each rustle of the leaves.

Torrie sat on a nearby rock, her posture relaxed despite the tension of waiting. She watched Markus with a mix of concern and patience. "Markus, Eddie and Catherine will return. They always do," she said, her voice steady.

Markus shook his head, his voice rising in agitation. "You don't understand, Torrie. You didn't see the creature I saw. It was huge, with six pairs of glowing red eyes. It could have killed them both!"

Torrie's calm demeanor remained unchanged. "You're exaggerating, Markus. They're experienced. They know what they're doing. And Eddie—he's not the same person he was before. He's strong."

Before Markus could respond, a rustling sound came from the underbrush behind them. Both Markus and Torrie turned, their heads swiveling toward the sound. The rustling grew louder, and then Catherine emerged from the shadows, her expression a mix of exhaustion and relief. Eddie followed closely behind, looking worn but alive.

Markus's face lit up with immediate relief. He rushed toward them, his steps quickening. "Eddie! Catherine!" he exclaimed, his voice cracking with emotion. "Are you both alright?"

Catherine, despite her tiredness, managed a reassuring smile. "We're fine, Markus. Just a little worse for wear." She helped Eddie, who was limping slightly, to a nearby rock.

Torrie stood up, her face shifting from anxiety to a cautious smile. She looked at Eddie, her gaze filled with a mixture of relief and unspoken questions. "Eddie, you're back."

Eddie nodded, his expression weary but resolute. "Yeah, we're back. Catherine helped me through some tough spots." He glanced at Catherine, gratitude evident in his eyes.

Markus quickly sprang into action, using some of the alchemical ingredients he had collected to tend to Eddie's wounds. His hands were steady as he worked, applying salves and bandaging the cuts with practiced care.

Torrie watched with a mixture of concern and relief. "So, Catherine," she began, breaking the silence that had settled over them, "what happened outside the Traveler's Path? We were getting worried."

Catherine, despite her exhaustion, flashed a dramatic smile. "Oh, you should've seen it. In all my glory, I single-handedly vanquished the great Nightingale Fox!"

Eddie, leaning on a nearby rock, smirked. "Don't let her fool you, Torrie. Catherine was scared out of her wits and hid under a rock while I was gambling my life on some big fox."

Catherine pouted playfully, crossing her arms. "Oh, you're just jealous because I managed to escape unscathed while you're the one covered in scratches."

Everyone laughed, the sound a welcome relief after the intensity of their encounter. Markus finished bandaging Eddie's wounds and noticed Eddie's favorite blue jacket was ruined beyond repair. "Here," Markus said, handing Eddie his own brown jacket. "You might need this."

Eddie gratefully accepted the jacket, feeling the warmth it provided. He glanced at the brown fabric and then at Markus. "Thanks, Markus."



As Eddie and the group made their way back along the Traveler's Path, Eddie occasionally glanced over his shoulder. The forest seemed to have calmed, but his senses were still alert. The Nightingale Fox had not disappeared from his thoughts, and he wanted to be sure it had truly left them behind.

And there it was again. Eddie saw the Nightingale Fox standing at the edge of the path, its massive black form blending with the shadows. It was watching them intently, but not with the same menacing hunger from before. Eddie felt an odd sense of calm wash over him.

The creature's gaze met his, and for a moment, there was a silent exchange. Eddie saw that the fox was missing a few eyes—the one he had struck was still gone. Despite its fearsome reputation, the Nightingale Fox seemed to hold a sort of respect in its gaze, as if acknowledging Eddie's bravery in facing it. There was no anger, no threat, only a silent recognition.

Eddie was about to point out the fox to the others when Markus called out, noticing Eddie had fallen behind. "Hey, Ed! Where are you?"

Eddie turned back to the spot where he had seen the fox, but it was gone. The Nightingale Fox had vanished as quickly as it had appeared. He scanned the area but found only the calm, enchanted forest, with the Lumina flowers glowing softly.

"It was there," Eddie said, though his voice was calm, almost reflective. "I think The Nightingale Fox is watching us."

Markus and the others looked around, puzzled. "What? I don't see anything," Markus said, his voice tinged with concern.

Catherine, Torrie, and Markus exchanged glances but said nothing more. Eddie's calm demeanor was reassuring, even if the others couldn't see what he had seen.

As they continued their journey back, Eddie felt a strange sense of closure. The Nightingale Fox had been a formidable opponent, but their encounter had given him a renewed respect for the dangers of magic and the strength it took to confront them. The fox's silent acknowledgment felt like a reminder of his own strength and potential.

With everyone now relatively at ease, Markus looked around and asked, "Did everyone get what they needed from the forest?"

Catherine nodded enthusiastically and reached into her bag. "Indeed! I found a rare alchemical ingredient that's quite valuable." She carefully removed a small, glowing vial from her bag, its contents shimmering with an otherworldly light.

Eddie's curiosity was piqued as he took in the sight of the vial. "What's that?"

Catherine's eyes sparkled with a mix of pride and knowledge. "This is a rare essence known as Aetherium Dew. It's a crucial component for several high-level alchemical concoctions. I had to get pretty close to the Nightingale Fox to retrieve it."

Torrie peered at the vial, fascinated. "It's beautiful. What does it do?"

Catherine smiled, her enthusiasm clearly showing. "Aetherium Dew is used to enhance magical properties and stabilize volatile potions. It's incredibly rare and valuable."

As they walked back toward the Traveler's Path, Eddie's interest seemed to be rekindled. He couldn't help but ask more questions about the Aetherium Dew and its uses. Catherine, happy to see Eddie's engagement, explained its various applications and the

intricate processes involved in working with such a rare ingredient.

The group moved forward through the forest, their conversation a blend of excitement and camaraderie. The dark woods that had once seemed so foreboding now felt like a backdrop to their shared adventure. Eddie, despite his earlier reluctance, was slowly rediscovering his fascination with magic, and the bonds between them felt stronger than ever.

As they approached the edge of the forest and the familiar safety of the Traveler's Path, Catherine glanced at Eddie with a warm smile. "I'm glad to see you're interested again, Eddie. Magic is powerful, but it's also wondrous. There's still a lot for you to explore and discover."

Eddie nodded, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Yeah, I suppose there is. Thanks, Catherine." The adrenaline that had fueled Eddie's steps began to wear off. His legs grew heavier with each step, and the pain from his wounds, dulled until now by the urgency of the situation, started to creep back in. The night air was cool, but Eddie's body felt warm—too warm. He wiped sweat from his brow, his vision blurring slightly as the landscape around him began to swim.

He tried to keep up with the conversation around him. Markus was saying something about the alchemical ingredients, Torrie chimed in with a playful retort, and Catherine laughed, her voice light and cheerful. It was the sound of safety, the sound of relief after danger.

But Eddie could barely focus. His thoughts felt like they were slipping through his fingers, and the world around him seemed distant. His breathing grew shallow, and his vision darkened at the edges.

"Eddie?" Markus's voice reached him, concerned. "You alright?"

Eddie opened his mouth to respond, but his voice didn't come. The ground beneath him wobbled, and the familiar surroundings of Weshaven began to fade. He staggered, feeling his body sway.

Catherine turned, her expression shifting from casual to worried. "Eddie, you're —"

But her voice became muffled, as if she was speaking through water. The last thing Eddie saw was the concerned faces of his friends, rushing toward him, before everything went dark.

The world around him vanished, swallowed by blackness, and Eddie finally let go.

Chapter VIII



ddie stirred awake, blinking against the soft sunlight that streamed through the stained-glass panels above. Gone were the dark woods and the weight of exhaustion. Instead, he found himself in a spacious, vibrant ward, a place he didn't recognize. The sunlight cast warm hues of red, blue, and gold across the room, refracting off the intricate stained-glass windows.

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

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

The air in the room seemed charged, but it wasn't the comforting hum of everyday magic. This was a deeper, more potent force—a place of magic meant to heal, but not the kind Eddie was used to.

He didn't trust it. He glanced around warily, trying to shake off the lingering fog from his blackout. Where was he? And what had these healers done to him while he was unconscious?

He sat up slowly, his body protesting with each movement. His fingers touched the bandages lightly, the wound beneath them still raw, reminding him of the fight, of the Nightingale Fox.

Eddie looked around, He turned his head and noticed a small cupcake sitting on a side table next to his bed. Beside it, a familiar little box rested, its lid slightly ajar. His heart lifted a little at the sight, recognizing the playful touch. A folded note, written in a distinct, flowing handwriting, lay next to the cupcake.

He reached for the box first, lifting it open. Inside was his old wand, the worn wood smooth against his fingertips. There was another note tucked beneath it, the handwriting unmistakably his sister Torrie's. He unfolded it and started reading:

"Hey, Figured you might want your twig of a wand back! Don't worry, though – Dad said he's buying a better one for me. ;) Take care of yourself, Eddie. Mom, Dad, Markus, Lydia, and everyone at the Apothecary send their love."

Eddie couldn't help but chuckle, the familiar warmth of Torrie's humor working its way through his lingering exhaustion. The jab about his wand brought back memories of their playful bickering, and for a brief moment, the heaviness of everything he'd been through faded.

He turned the wand over in his hands. It had once been an extension of himself, a part of who he was before... before everything changed. There was still a reluctance, a deep hesitation in his chest about picking it back up, about returning to the world of magic. But here it was, given back to him with a laugh, as if it were no more than an old toy.

His fingers traced the familiar etchings along the handle, memories swirling in the back of his mind. He set the wand down for a moment, leaning back into the pillows, and scanned the room. The ward was quiet, save for the occasional hum of healers moving in the distance. He was alone.

The silence gave him space to think, and for a moment, he allowed himself to wonder what had brought him here. The memory of the Nightingale Fox lingered, along with the raw feeling of casting magic after all this time. He had acted out of desperation, but somewhere, beneath the fear, there had been a spark of something else. Something he'd thought he'd lost.

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, and every movement sent a dull throb of discomfort through his body, but he wasn't one to stay still for long. The cupcake in his hand was half-eaten, and Torrie's playful note lingered in his thoughts, giving him a small sense of determination. He needed to move, even if just for a moment.

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. For a moment, he considered calling for help, but something stopped him. Maybe it was the stubborn part of him that didn't want to appear weak, or maybe it was the curiosity that was starting to stir again after so long. Either way, Eddie took a breath and straightened his back as much as the bandages would allow.

The ward around him was larger than he initially thought, with rows of other beds stretching into the distance, some occupied, others empty. Light streamed in through the high, stained-glass windows, casting colorful patterns on the white stone floor. The

place had a serene beauty, but something about the faint hum of magic in the air made him uneasy.

Eddie took a few tentative steps, his body protesting with each one, but he pushed through the discomfort. His curiosity tugged him forward. He passed by the shimmering curtains that separated his section of the ward from the others, the soft whisper of healers casting spells and tending to their patients blending with the sounds of his own footfalls.

As he walked, he noticed the intricate magical sigils etched into the stone walls, softly glowing with energy. He'd seen similar symbols back at the academy, but now, after everything that had happened, they felt more foreign, more distant. A part of him felt like an outsider in this world of magic, yet he was also drawn to it.

He stopped at one of the windows, gazing out over a courtyard filled with Lumina flowers, their pale glow illuminating the garden. The same flowers that had kept the Nightingale Fox at bay. His mind drifted back to that encounter, and he shivered slightly, remembering the way the creature had looked at him, its gaze almost... respectful.

The air was peaceful here, yet Eddie couldn't shake the feeling that he was standing on the edge of something much larger than himself. He had touched magic again, after all these years. The thought stirred a mix of emotions—fear, guilt, but also a flicker of something he hadn't felt in a long time: possibility.

Before he could dwell on it too long, a soft voice interrupted his thoughts. "You're up already? Shouldn't you be resting?"

Eddie shifted awkwardly as the young healer turned toward him. "I, um," he began, forcing a smile, "I wanted to go for a coffee. Do you know where the cafeteria is?"

The healer's expression softened, though a touch of concern flickered in her eyes. "Coffee?" she repeated gently, her tone compassionate yet firm. "You've just regained consciousness, and you're already thinking of coffee?"

Eddie chuckled nervously, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, well... I'm not great at staying in bed. Thought a walk and some coffee might help clear my head."

The healer stepped closer, her gaze now more assessing as she glanced at the bandages peeking out from under his robe. "I understand you want to feel more like yourself, but your body's still healing. You need rest." Her voice was warm, like she'd dealt with patients like Eddie before—restless, eager to escape the confines of recovery. "The wounds you sustained were severe, and while you're in good hands, overexerting yourself could set you back."

Eddie nodded, feeling a bit sheepish. "Right... I guess I'm not great at sitting still."

She smiled, a soft, encouraging smile. "I understand. How about this—I'll show you to the cafeteria, but only if you promise to take it slow. Your body needs time to recover. Even a short walk could tire you out more than you realize."

Eddie offered a more genuine smile. "Deal."

The healer gently placed a hand on his shoulder, guiding him to the door. "Just remember," she added kindly, "healing takes more than just physical recovery. Give yourself time, both body and mind. You've been through a lot."

As they reached the door, she nodded down the corridor. "The cafeteria is just down the hall. If you start feeling lightheaded, come back here immediately. Don't push yourself too hard, alright?"

"Thanks," Eddie said, his smile tinged with a bit of gratitude.

As he made his way down the hall, the healer's words lingered in his mind. He couldn't quite shake the feeling that he wasn't just healing physically. Something deeper was shifting, and maybe – just maybe – he needed to give that the time it deserved too.

Eddie made his way down the bright hallway toward the cafeteria, each step feeling like a small victory. The soft colors of the walls wrapped around him like a comforting embrace, while the enchanted sconces flickered with a warm, golden glow that seemed to dance in tune with his heartbeat.

As he walked, he couldn't help but admire the whimsical art hanging in shifting frames. A painting nearby showed a vibrant garden, flowers blooming with each passing moment, while a bird flitted joyfully from branch to branch. It was a delightful reminder of the magic surrounding him, a stark contrast to the chaos he'd just experienced.

Potted plants lined the corridor, their leaves glistening with a hint of enchantment, releasing a fresh, earthy scent that grounded him. He inhaled deeply, allowing the aroma to fill his lungs and push away the lingering unease. It felt good to be in a place where magic was a source of healing, rather than fear.

To his right, large arched windows opened up to the courtyard. He paused for a moment, captivated by the lush oasis outside. The vibrant flowers danced in the gentle breeze, and the serene greenery provided a backdrop to the laughter of patients soaking in the sun. Benches beckoned to those seeking respite, creating a tranquil haven amidst the busyness of life.

As he continued on, the soft echo of footsteps accompanied him, weaving through the comforting hum of conversation. The

atmosphere buzzed with a sense of purpose and warmth, the very walls infused with magic that pulsed like a heartbeat.

Just as he rounded a corner, the inviting aroma of freshly brewed herbal teas and baked goods wafted toward him, urging him onward. The sounds of vibrant chatter and laughter grew louder, wrapping around him like a warm blanket. It felt as though he was approaching a gathering of kindred spirits, a heartwarming community sharing not just food, but connection.

Eddie's stomach growled in agreement, reminding him of the warmth and nourishment that awaited. With each step, he felt a flicker of excitement mingling with the remnants of unease. Perhaps, in this magical place, he could find not just sustenance for his body but also for his spirit.

Finally, he reached the cafeteria entrance, taking a moment to gather himself. With a deep breath, he stepped inside, ready to embrace whatever awaited him in this lively space.

As Eddie stepped into the cafeteria, the warm aroma of freshly brewed coffee and baked goods enveloped him, mingling with the gentle laughter and chatter of fellow patrons. The vibrant decor—colorful 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 was a stark contrast to the heaviness that had weighed on him before.

When the barista placed the steaming cup and the neatly arranged toast in front of him, Eddie gave a grateful nod. He settled at a table by the window, where the sunlight streamed in, illuminating the intricate patterns of the courtyard outside.

As he took his first sip of coffee, he felt a sense of warmth spread through him, almost as if the magic of the place was seeping into his very bones. He couldn't help but smile, the familiar flavors 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 caught a glimpse of 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 ambiance, 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 choice of menu," he said with a friendly smile.

"Yeah, I kind of got used to it," Eddie replied, taking another sip of his coffee.

"Comfort food, right? Helps you get through the day," the barista added, his eyes twinkling with a hint of mischief.

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, the way he spoke—it all began to make sense.

As the light from the window illuminated the barista's nametag, it struck Eddie like a bolt of lightning: "Davies Mortimer." His

heart raced. This was his old classmate from the academy, the very boy he had scarred during that fateful duel.

"Davies?" Eddie asked, his voice a mix of surprise and uncertainty.

The barista turned, eyebrows raised in recognition. "Eddie! Wow, it's been a while. I didn't expect to see you here."

Eddie felt a wave of emotions crash over him—relief, nostalgia, but also the lingering guilt. "I, uh, I didn't realize it was you. How have you been?"

Davies shrugged, a grin spreading across his face. "Can't complain. Took some time off from magic and decided to focus on something more grounded. Turns out, brewing coffee is pretty rewarding."

Eddie smiled, but he 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 said, his voice low and earnest. "I'm really sorry for what I did back then."

Davies blinked, confusion flickering across his face. "You did what?"

Eddie felt a knot tighten in his stomach. "The duel. I mean, back in the academies, remember?"

For a moment, Davies's expression shifted from confusion to something deeper, an acknowledgment of the past. "Honestly, Eddie," he said slowly, "I think you did the right thing. I was a kid back then, I knew no better. I know my actions hurt a lot of people, and I think that moment made me realize that. I think I'm

the one who should say sorry, Ed – for being a piece of shit back then.”

The weight of his words hung in the air, and Eddie felt a lump rise in his throat. It was unexpected, this admission, a small yet significant step towards healing.

“Davies, I didn’t mean to –” Eddie began, but Davies held up a hand.

“Just let it go. We were all lost in that chaos, trying to figure things out. It took me a long time to understand that my actions had consequences. I’m not proud of who I was back then.”

Eddie studied Davies’s scar, the silent testament to their shared history, and something in him softened. “It’s not easy to forget.”

“No,” Davies replied, his tone somber. “But we can learn, can’t we? You’re here now, and that means something. We’ve both grown.”

Eddie nodded, feeling the heaviness of guilt begin to lift, if only a little. “Yeah, I guess we have.”

The atmosphere shifted, a shared understanding blossoming between them—a fragile thread connecting their past to the present, whispering of forgiveness and the possibility of moving forward.

After a while of catching up with Davies, Eddie felt a warmth in his chest—an unexpected connection rekindled amidst the shadows of their shared past. As the conversation flowed, he learned he was at Sage Diana Hospital in Osthaven, not far from Weshaven.

“Oh, and by the way, Eddie,” said Davies, a hint of mischief in his tone, “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 at 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 shrugged. "She had a sling on her arm, so she must've broken it. She's having tea in the courtyard. You should go meet her."

Eddie felt a mix of urgency and concern wash over him. "Is she okay?"

"Yeah, she seemed fine. Just a bit frazzled, I guess. But it sounds like she could use a friend," Davies replied, his expression softening.

Eddie nodded, grateful for the nudge. "Thanks, Davies. It's good to see you again."

"Take care of yourself, Eddie. And tell Catherine I said hi," Davies said, offering a supportive smile.

Eddie stood up, his resolve solidifying. With a wave, he made his way towards 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.

Eddie stepped out of the cafeteria and into the hallway, the vibrant atmosphere of the hospital still buzzing around him. As he approached the courtyard, the sounds of gentle laughter and the soft splashing of water from the central fountain grew clearer.

Upon entering the courtyard, Eddie paused, momentarily captivated by the enchanting scene before him. The space was a serene haven, bursting with colorful flowerbeds of delicate daisies, fragrant lavender, and ethereal bluebells swaying gently in the breeze. Some of the flowers shimmered faintly, as if kissed by stardust, while an aromatic herb garden filled the air with the comforting scents of fresh basil and rosemary.

His gaze was drawn to Catherine, who 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 hinting at her skill. She held it close to the flowers, and 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 as if 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 very fabric of life around her. The courtyard felt alive with energy, and for a moment, all his worries melted away.

“Catherine,” he called softly, breaking the tranquility.

She turned, a warm smile spreading across her face. “Eddie! You’re 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 sound of 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."

Eddie nodded, absorbing her words. "And you? What happened to your arm?"

Catherine glanced down at her sling, a wry smile playing on her lips. "Oh, that's a little more embarrassing. I might have overexerted myself while trying to fend off the Nightingale Fox. In the heat of the moment, I wasn't as careful as I should've been." She chuckled softly, a hint of self-deprecation in her voice. "So now I'm here, healing like everyone else."

Eddie smirked, relieved to see her humor shining through. "So, the great Master Alchemist has a broken arm? You must be feeling quite vulnerable."

"Vulnerable, yes, but not without my wits," she retorted playfully. "I can still conjure a spell or two with one good arm!"

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.

"Now, what are you going to do with it back?" Catherine asked, lightly tapping the bottom of her staff against Eddie's pant pocket.

"Have what back?" Eddie replied, feigning innocence.

"Your wand," she said, her tone teasing. "That thing is no more than a piece of tree trunk if you're just going to keep it like that."

Eddie chuckled and pulled the wand from his pocket, examining its wood and crystal. "I don't know. Maybe I'll help out Mom and Dad more with the magical stuff," he said, a hint of uncertainty creeping into his voice.

Catherine's playful demeanor shifted, a more serious glint appearing in her eyes. "Eddie, listen. You have talent. If you're going to hold onto that wand, you should do something meaningful with it. You shouldn't just let it gather dust."

He met her gaze, feeling the weight of her words. "I'm not sure I'm ready for anything serious," he admitted.

With a sudden determination, Catherine reached into her pocket and pulled out a card, holding it out to him. "Here. This is a scholarship to the Sage's Institute. I know how much you wanted to go to Edenfield before, and I believe you still can."

Eddie stared at the card in disbelief, a mix of emotions swirling within him. "You...you want me to go to the Institute?"

"Of course I do," she replied, her voice firm but encouraging. "You have a gift, Eddie. Don't waste it. This is your chance to embrace magic again, to learn and grow."

Eddie's heart raced. He thought back to the days when he had dreamed of studying at the Institute, of mastering magic. "But what if I mess up again?" he said, vulnerability creeping in.

Catherine stepped closer, her expression softening. "Everyone stumbles, Eddie. It's how we rise from those stumbles that matters. You've already faced your past; now it's time to step into your future."

He looked at her, the weight of her belief in him igniting a spark of hope. "You really think I can do it?"

"I know you can," she affirmed, a warm smile spreading across her face. "Just take it one step at a time."

Eddie glanced down at the scholarship card, then back at Catherine, his brow furrowed. "It's been seven years since I last really engaged with magic. I don't know if I can go through it all again."

Catherine stopped walking, turning to face him fully. "Eddie, seven years is a long time, but it's also just a moment in the grand scheme of things. You've grown. You've faced challenges that most wouldn't even dream of. You've learned to be stronger than you were before."

He felt a knot in his stomach. "But what if I fail again? What if I lose control? I can't bear to hurt anyone else."

Catherine stepped closer, her expression earnest. "You won't. You've learned from your past, and that makes you wiser. Remember that day in the courtyard, when we talked about fear? It's time to confront it, not let it control you."

Eddie hesitated, glancing at the card again. "What if I'm just chasing a dream that isn't meant for me?"

"Then you'll find out for sure," she said, her voice unwavering. "But if you don't try, you'll never know. This card is more than just an opportunity; it's a chance for you to reclaim a part of yourself."

After a moment, Eddie took a deep breath, feeling the weight of her encouragement sink in. "Alright. I'll take it. I'll give it a shot."

Catherine's smile widened, a mixture of pride and relief flooding her expression. "That's the spirit! You won't regret it. Just remember, you're not alone. We're all here to support you, no matter what."

Feeling a surge of determination, Eddie tucked the card into his pocket, a small but significant step toward a future he thought he

had lost. As they resumed their walk, the sunlight filtering through the trees felt warmer, the path ahead a little brighter.

Chapter IX



Eddie's mother knocked gently on the wooden door of his room. "Eddie?" she called softly, waiting for a moment. No answer. She furrowed her brow and knocked again, this time a little firmer. Silence still greeted her.

Concerned but curious, she slowly turned the handle and pushed the door open. The familiar scent of Eddie's room – salt from the sea breeze, the faint aroma of old parchment, and a hint of potion ingredients – welcomed her.

But something was different. The bed, usually a tangled mess of blankets and pillows, was neatly made. The covers were pulled tight, the pillows fluffed and positioned just so, as if someone had taken care to leave it in perfect order. His desk, once cluttered with scattered papers, half-opened books, and potion vials, was now arranged in neat stacks. Old alchemical texts, which had gathered dust for so long, were piled with an intentional care that hadn't been there for years.

Her eyes moved to the window. It was open, letting the golden morning light pour in, bathing the room in warmth. The soft murmur of the sea drifted in, accompanied by the cry of gulls. Eddie was gone, but not in the way he used to disappear into himself. This time, something had changed.

A soft smile tugged at the corners of her lips. Her heart swelled with quiet joy as she realized what had happened. Eddie had finally woken up – not just from sleep, but from the fog of

despair that had weighed him down for so long. He had tidied his room, made his bed, and left with purpose. It was a silent message, clear as day. He was ready to move forward, ready to re-engage with the world outside.

She stood there for a few moments longer, taking it in, feeling pride swell in her chest. Eddie, her boy, was finding his way again.

With a soft sigh of contentment, she pulled the door shut behind her, allowing the room its quiet stillness. She turned and made her way downstairs, a little lighter on her feet, a little more at peace, knowing her son was beginning a new chapter.

She had a day to get on with – the apothecary to tend to, potions to brew, customers to assist – but everything seemed just a little brighter now. Eddie had woken up from his long slumber, and that was all she needed to know.

-o-

Eddie is standing in the bustling streets of **Aria**, the capital city of Argantheia. The city's grandeur overwhelms him at first, with its wide streets filled with the clatter of horse-drawn carriages and the occasional hum of sleek, modern automobiles. Towering buildings, some etched with ancient runes, rise around him, their ornate facades blending old magic with new technology.

People hurry past, some dressed in finely tailored suits, others in long robes that mark them as practitioners of various magical disciplines. Street vendors shout, selling everything from enchanted trinkets to steaming bowls of food. Eddie looks around, taking in the energy of the capital. It's his first time here, and the sheer scale of the place leaves him slightly disoriented.

Clutching the card from the Sage's Institute, he squints at the streets, trying to find his bearings. "Where do I even start?" he mutters to himself. After a moment of hesitation, he approaches a man in a dark overcoat, "Excuse me, do you know where I can find the Sage's Institute?"

The man gives him a puzzled look but nods. "Head down this street until you reach the Crosswind Plaza, then take a left. You'll see the spires of the Institute rising beyond the Alabaster Library. Hard to miss."

Eddie thanks the man and begins weaving through the busy crowd, his heart pounding with a mixture of excitement and anxiety. Each step forward in this unfamiliar city brings him closer to the possibility of starting fresh, though doubts about what lies ahead still tug at the back of his mind.

After stopping a few times to ask for directions, Eddie finally stumbled upon the Sage's Institute. The moment he spotted it, he knew it was the place – there was no mistaking it.

The building loomed ahead, its towering stone structure weathered by centuries of time yet unyielding, exuding authority. Ivy crept along its walls like veins of green magic, and grand arched windows gazed down at him like watchful sentinels. Above the enormous oak doors hung the Institute's emblem: a bronze owl perched atop a scroll, its wings spread wide. The bronze had long since dulled, but the sense of power and wisdom it radiated remained.

Eddie stood still for a moment, taking it all in. The air seemed thicker here, as if the centuries of magical knowledge within the Institute's walls added weight to the atmosphere. There was something both intimidating and awe-inspiring about it. The

building felt alive, humming with the quiet energy of countless scholars, wizards, and researchers who had passed through its doors.

His heart pounded as he realized the significance of the moment. Seven years ago, he would have dreamed of standing here, but now, with the card from Catherine in his pocket, he felt both out of place and strangely at home. The grandeur of the building almost dared him to step forward, as though testing his resolve.

The large double doors stood in front of him, imposing yet inviting in a way only magical institutions could be. He took a deep breath and walked toward them, feeling the weight of the past and the future merge in that single step. The carved owl emblem seemed to watch his every move, as if assessing whether he was ready for what lay inside.

This was the place where his life could change again.

Eddie walked through the heavy oak doors of the Sage's Institute, feeling a wave of warmth as the air changed from the busy streets of Argentia to the quiet, scholarly atmosphere inside. The scent of old parchment and aged wood hit him immediately, a sense of academic grandeur wrapped in an almost mystical aura. His footsteps echoed across the polished stone floor, each tile etched with faintly glowing runes that seemed to hum with the wisdom of ages past.

In the center of the reception hall stood a massive circular desk, staffed by clerks in deep blue robes. The space buzzed with quiet efficiency, the occasional murmur of conversation drifting through the grand chamber. Above the desk, a vast map of Solivia and the surrounding realms was etched into the stone

wall, golden pins marking various magical academies across the land.

Eddie approached the desk, feeling a bit out of place among the others waiting — some in robes, others carrying enchanted items, all with an air of purpose and certainty that Eddie wasn't quite sure he shared. One of the clerks, a middle-aged man with thin spectacles and a tired yet composed expression, glanced up at Eddie.

"How can I assist you?" the clerk asked, his voice soft but authoritative.

"Uh, hi. I'm here about a scholarship to Edenfield," Eddie said, trying to keep his voice steady. "For the Sage's Institute's sponsorship."

The clerk raised an eyebrow, his quill momentarily pausing over the parchment in front of him. "The Edenfield scholarship?" he repeated, a hint of skepticism in his tone. "That's quite a selective program. Are you a registered applicant?"

Eddie shifted uncomfortably. "No, not officially. But I have this..." He reached into his pocket and pulled out the card Catherine had given him, feeling a surge of self-doubt as he handed it over.

The clerk took the card, inspecting it with a practiced eye. His expression remained neutral as he turned it over in his hands, and for a moment, Eddie thought it wouldn't make any difference.

"I'm sorry," the clerk began, "but we don't usually accept walk-ins for a program of that —"

Then his eyes flicked to the signature at the bottom of the card. The man's expression shifted almost imperceptibly. He stood a little straighter, then glanced at Eddie more closely, as if reevaluating him.

"Wait here for a moment," the clerk said, his voice now more measured. He disappeared through a doorway behind the desk, leaving Eddie standing in the middle of the vast reception hall, alone with his thoughts.

Eddie's mind raced. He had no idea what Catherine's influence truly meant in a place like this, and for a moment, he felt the weight of it all – this was a pivotal moment. If the card didn't work, this whole attempt could fall apart. His gaze wandered around the room, taking in the portraits of past scholars watching him from the walls, their eyes following his every move. It felt like they were judging him, questioning whether he was worthy to walk the same halls they had.

Time seemed to stretch on as Eddie waited, the quiet hum of the Institute suddenly louder in the silence of his thoughts. His heart beat a little faster. He was on the precipice of something – he could feel it.

The door opened again, and the clerk returned, his expression now softened with a touch of respect. "Mr. Welton, if you would follow me, someone will speak with you shortly."

Eddie nodded, tucking the card back into his pocket, feeling the slight weight of it as he followed the clerk deeper into the halls of the Sage's Institute.

As Eddie stood there, waiting by the front desk, a girl in a deep blue robe approached him. Her robe bore the emblem of the

Sage's Institute – a stylized owl perched on a scroll, its wings elegantly outstretched. She looked at Eddie with calm, appraising eyes before offering a slight nod.

"Eddie Welton?" she asked.

Eddie nodded.

"Come with me," she said, her voice steady but kind. "I'm Emma Somers. I'm one of the agents responsible for the Edenfield Scholars program."

Eddie fell into step beside her, feeling a mixture of nerves and anticipation. They walked in silence for a moment before Emma led him to a spiraling staircase at the far side of the hall. As they began their ascent, Eddie glanced around, taking in the intricate carvings on the banisters – symbols of magic from all the schools he had once dreamed of mastering. The stairs spiraled upwards, the balustrade intricately carved with symbols of various schools of magic – Conjunction, Destruction, Alchemy, and more. Soft light from floating orbs illuminated their way, casting long shadows on the walls.

The stairs seemed to wind endlessly upward, and the air grew quieter as they ascended, the sounds of the busy reception hall fading into a soft hum below.

"First time going to the Sage's Institute?" Emma asked

"Yeah, the place is huge for a magic academy." Eddie said

"Indeed it is," Emma answered, "the Sage's Institute is more than just a magical academy. Its roots go back centuries, to the time of the Nine Sages."

Eddie's eyes drifted to the portraits lining the walls as they passed. He counted nine figures, each painted with solemn dignity, their robes flowing around them like shadows. Their faces were ageless, eyes sharp with wisdom. He recognized the style – elven, no doubt.

"The Nine Sages were appointed by the old High King of Solivia," Emma continued, her voice reverent as they climbed, "long before the unification of the magical academies. Their mission was to spread the knowledge of magic across the continents, to teach and guide the next generation of magical scholars."

Eddie listened quietly, feeling the weight of history in each step they took. The winding stairs seemed almost like a metaphor for the journey ahead – a long, uncertain path through the unknown.

"The Sage's Institute was founded to carry on that mission," Emma said, glancing at Eddie as she spoke. "Our Scholarship program to places like Edenfield exists to ensure that the vision of the Nine Sages continues, even today. We're not just looking for students with magical talent – we're looking for those with the potential to carry on that legacy, to spread knowledge and contribute to the world of magic."

Eddie took it all in, feeling the weight of the history around him. As they passed under a large painting of the sages standing together before the High King, he felt a renewed sense of awe for the institution he was now a part of, even if he was still uncertain about his place in it.

"You'll see portraits of the sages throughout the Institute," Emma said, gesturing to the figures on the wall. "They were instrumental in creating the very first magical universities, Edenfield being the most prestigious. Many of the magical

traditions and practices we follow today are derived from their teachings."

They continued upward, the steps seeming endless, but the further they went, the quieter the building became. The sounds of the bustling reception hall below faded into a deep, almost reverent silence.

Emma finally glanced over her shoulder at Eddie. "You're lucky, you know," she said, her tone softening a little. "Not everyone gets a recommendation like the one you have. Master Alchemist Angelina's name holds a lot of weight here."

Eddie didn't quite know how to respond to that, so he just nodded, gripping the card Catherine had given him a little tighter in his pocket.

As they entered the room labeled "Edenfield Office," Eddie felt a mix of anticipation and anxiety. The space was filled with shelves of books and scrolls, the air thick with the scent of old parchment and ink. Emma settled into her chair behind a sturdy desk, while Eddie took a seat across from her.

"Alright, Eddie," Emma began, her tone sharp and professional. "I'll add you to the list of Scholarship Applicants. But let me make something very clear." She fixed him with a steely gaze. "I know you're connected to Catherine, but that won't mean a thing in this process. You're not getting in just because of your aunt. You will earn your place here on your own."

Eddie swallowed hard, nodding slowly. "I understand."

Emma continued, her voice unwavering. "You're going on the entrance exam list. But unlike most applicants who have three

months to prepare, you have three weeks. Three weeks to prove that you're worthy."

His heart sank. "Three weeks? That's... really tight."

Emma leaned forward slightly, her expression unyielding.

"That's the reality of it. This isn't a charity; it's a test. You need to be ready for anything. No excuses, no exceptions."

Feeling the weight of her words, Eddie straightened in his chair.

"I'll do it. I'll prove that I deserve this chance."

Emma's expression remained cold, but there was a flicker of something – perhaps respect – in her eyes. "Then we'll see if you can rise to the challenge. Let's discuss what you'll need to prepare." Emma studied Eddie for a moment, her expression scrutinizing. "What faculty do you intend to study in at Edenfield?"

Eddie hesitated, the weight of her gaze making him feel uneasy. He racked his brain for other options, but nothing compared to his fascination with Alchemy. Finally, he managed to say, "Alchemy."

A flicker of suspicion crossed Emma's face. "Alchemy? Is that really your only choice?" Her tone was challenging, as if she expected more from him.

Eddie shifted in his seat, feeling the discomfort settle in. "I mean, I've always been drawn to it. I want to learn more about it."

Emma raised an eyebrow, making a note on her paperwork. "Interesting. Just remember, this isn't a game. Your past will shadow you in this field. I trust you know that."

He nodded, unsure how to respond.

"Now, let's get to what you'll be tested on for the entrance exam to Edenfield's Faculty of Alchemy." She pushed the paperwork aside and leaned forward, her demeanor shifting to a more informative one. "You'll need to demonstrate your understanding of basic alchemical principles, including transmutation and the properties of common materials. There will also be a practical component where you'll perform a simple alchemical process."

Eddie's heart raced as he took it all in. "What kind of process?"

"Something straightforward," Emma replied coolly. "Perhaps a potion or a basic elixir. It's not just about knowledge; we need to see how you think under pressure and whether you can execute your ideas effectively."

"Understood," Eddie said, trying to mask his apprehension.

Emma continued, her tone returning to its earlier sharpness. "I expect you to come prepared. Alchemy is a demanding discipline, and if you want to succeed, you'll need to prove you can handle it." She paused, her eyes locking onto his. "No room for failure, Mr. Welton."

-o-

The train chugged steadily through the inky darkness of the night, its rhythmic clattering echoing in the silence that enveloped the world outside. Inside one of the dimly lit wagons, Eddie sat alone, his silhouette framed by the flickering glow of overhead lights. He leaned against the cool, metal window, staring out at the blur

of shadows and fleeting shapes that raced by – trees bending low in the wind.

As the train rumbled along the tracks, Eddie stared out the window, watching the landscape of Argantheia blur by in a swirl of greens and browns. The rhythmic clatter of the wheels provided a comforting backdrop to his swirling thoughts. He could hear the distant hum of murmurs from other passengers, but they felt miles away, as if he were encased in a bubble of stillness. The comforting thrum of the train's engine contrasted with the somber weight pressing down on his chest, an ache that had settled there long before this journey began.

How am I going to re-learn Alchemy in three weeks? The weight of Emma's expectations loomed over him like a dark cloud. The idea of preparing for the entrance exam felt daunting, especially after years of stepping away from magic.

He recalled the lessons from his childhood – Catherine's patient guidance, the endless experiments in her workshop, the intoxicating scent of alchemical ingredients filling the air. But now, those memories felt distant, almost like a forgotten dream. Could he really reclaim that knowledge in such a short time?

Eddie took a deep breath, his mind racing. He would need to gather his old textbooks, dust off his notes, and practice the fundamentals. But where would he even begin? The thought of diving back into a world he had distanced himself from sent a shiver down his spine.

A sudden jolt of the train snapped him back to reality. He glanced around at the other passengers, each absorbed in their own worlds. Eddie's heart pounded as he wondered if they had ever faced a challenge as monumental as his.

Outside, the landscape darkened further, swallowed by the night, and the Eddie felt a chill creep into the wagon. He wrapped his arms around his knees, a fragile shield against the creeping thought. The world beyond the window was a canvas of obscurity, yet within it, he felt the weight of every unspoken word and every missed connection.

Chapter X



Catherine took in a slow, measured breath, letting the salty air fill her lungs as she opened the window to the glimmering expanse of the sea. The weeks spent drifting through Weshaven's bustling markets and quiet coastal paths had been refreshing — an indulgence in her otherwise regimented life. Her fingers brushed the weathered windowsill as she gazed out, committing every line of the distant horizon to memory. This was a freedom she craved and found so rarely.

But her duties awaited her, and that sense of inevitability tugged at her like the weight of the tides. She could practically hear the echo of her students' voices back in Edenfield, their endless questions and their wide, hungry eyes. A half-smile played across her lips; teaching was rewarding, she'd admit that much. But her daily routine at the court — lecturing the king's princess, who saw alchemy as little more than a fancy parlor trick — made her sigh. The princess's attempts at concoctions were often careless, fueled by boredom rather than a true grasp of magic's inner workings. And Catherine, bound by duty, played her part with patience, though her heart yearned for more than gilded halls and perfumed laboratories.

These days of sun and saltwater had reminded her what it meant to be untethered, free to follow the currents and trust her instincts. She wanted nothing more than to stay, perhaps wander to some uncharted shore, pursuing her own alchemical studies without the restraint of royal obligation. But duty was calling her back,

like the tide's pull to the shore, and she knew she'd answer. She always did.

A subtle knock broke the early morning quiet, a gentle but insistent tapping on Catherine's door. She paused, hands mid-air as she finished securing her few belongings. Another knock followed, more tentative this time, accompanied by the faint sound of shuffling feet.

"Who is it?" she called, her voice firm but curious. No answer. Only more rustling, like the visitor hadn't quite decided if they were ready to be seen.

Catherine's gaze narrowed, her curiosity sharpened by the silence. She moved toward the door with a graceful caution, and, sliding open the small viewing slit, she peered through to the dimly lit hallway beyond. There, framed by the early light that seeped through the cracked window at the end of the corridor, stood a figure – a boy, slight but familiar, with tousled silver hair that caught the glint of dawn.

"Eddie?" she murmured, almost disbelieving. He seemed smaller somehow, standing there nervously, as though weighing his next words.

He gave her an awkward, sheepish smile, the kind she remembered from his childhood. "Hi, um, Miss Catherine," he said, his voice barely a whisper through the door. "It's Eddie. There's... something I want to talk about."

Catherine hesitated for only a moment, then slowly drew back the bolt, her curiosity now piqued. What could he possibly want to discuss with her, just as she was preparing to leave?

Catherine poured the steaming tea into two simple earthenware cups, setting one in front of Eddie before taking a seat across from him. She took a slow sip, studying him over the rim, her sharp eyes catching every fidget, every nervous glance.

"So, Eddie," she began, her voice casual but with a hint of bemusement, "what brings you here, hmm? Come to say farewell before I leave for Edenfield? Or has your mother sent something for me to carry back?"

Eddie shook his head, clutching his cup with both hands as if the warmth might steady him. "No, it's not that," he said, taking a deep breath, his green eyes meeting hers with a spark of conviction. "I... I've taken the Entry Exam for the Sage's Scholarship program."

Catherine raised an eyebrow, the weight of his statement settling between them like a held breath.

He continued, "I want to study in the Faculty of Alchemy. At Edenfield."

A glimmer of pride softened her gaze, though she allowed herself a slight chuckle. "The Faculty of Alchemy?" she repeated, the words edged with a hint of respect. "You do realize the challenge you've set yourself, yes? Edenfield is no common academy; it's one of the oldest magical institutions on the continent. The Faculty of Alchemy," she paused, considering the many legends tied to its history, "is the second oldest and no less demanding than any other."

"I know." Eddie's voice grew more confident as he met her eyes. "That's why I came here, to you, for the last time before I leave. If

I'm going to make it, I want to learn from the best. I know you're the best, Miss Catherine. I... I want you to teach me."

For a moment, Catherine said nothing. She watched him closely, sensing the spark of raw ambition, tempered by something she hadn't expected: a quiet, steady resolve. This wasn't a mere whim; Eddie wanted this deeply, and it stirred a feeling she hadn't anticipated – a hint of pride, and maybe a bit of nostalgia.

Catherine's expression grew pensive. She stood, setting her teacup aside as she drifted toward the window. Her gaze fell on the harbor, where fishing boats bobbed with the gentle rise and fall of the tides, their sails catching the pale morning light.

"Why should I teach you alchemy, Eddie?" she asked, her voice distant, almost as if speaking to herself. "You've only just begun to believe in magic. Wasn't it only two days ago that you were ready to dismiss it all as superstition? If it weren't for that Nightingale Fox appearing before us..." She shook her head, her tone carrying a faint, bemused edge.

Eddie looked down, the memory of that strange creature – a fox with feathers that shimmered in hues of twilight and dawn – still fresh in his mind. Its call had resonated within him, filling him with a sense of wonder he'd never known before. That night had changed something fundamental in him; it had awakened something he couldn't ignore.

Catherine glanced back at him, her gaze sharp. "Alchemy isn't just some formula to memorize or a spell to repeat," she said. "It's an art – and a challenging one at that. It requires constant care, precision, and a belief in things unseen. It's not easy to teach, and it's even harder to learn." Her words hung in the air, like a test of his resolve.

But Eddie's eyes shone with a steady determination. "I know it's hard," he said, his voice unwavering. "I didn't come here because I thought it would be easy. I came because I want to understand. When we saw that fox... something changed. I felt it. And if there's any way I can learn, any way at all, I'm willing to try. I need to."

Catherine watched him, searching his face, his steady green eyes meeting hers without flinching. She let out a quiet sigh, a mix of reluctant admiration and lingering doubt.

Catherine crossed her arms, her gaze steady as she finally spoke. "I'll agree to teach you, Eddie," she said, her tone measured, "but under one condition. I'll only teach you the basics – the foundational practices of Alchemy, nothing more. When it comes to the entrance exam for Edenfield, you're on your own."

Eddie's face lit up, relief mingling with excitement as he nodded. "That's all I need," he replied. "If I can understand the basics, I'll learn the rest. I can study the theory myself."

Catherine tilted her head, her eyes narrowing as she studied him, a touch of skepticism in her gaze. "Be careful what you wish for," she said, though there was a hint of a smile at the corner of her lips. "A week isn't much time, and if you're serious about this, it'll be intense. I'll need you to book a room here at the Inn. For the next week, you'll barely have time to eat, let alone rest."

But Eddie's resolve was unshaken. "I don't care," he said, his voice steady and sure. "I'll do whatever it takes. I... I want this."

For a moment, Catherine said nothing, watching him with a critical eye, searching his expression as though testing the depth

of his commitment. Then, with a single nod, she turned to gather her things.

“Very well, then,” she murmured, her tone almost resigned. “Meet me here tomorrow at dawn.” She gave him one last look, both amused and impressed by his determination. “We’ll see how much Alchemy I can hammer into that head of yours in a week.”

As Eddie left to book his room, his heart raced with a mixture of excitement and nerves. He knew the road ahead wouldn’t be easy, but for the first time, he felt a sense of purpose as vast and deep as the sea itself. He was ready.



It was the dead of night, Eddie was sound asleep, on the previous night, Eddie had booked a room in the Inn where Catherine is staying, that same night Catherine gave Eddie lots of codex for him to read, she said she agreed to lend him her codex as long as he is her

apprentice, and in this short week, he is her apprentice, the shortest term of apprenticeship Catherine herself have ever done, but she agreed nonetheless

A footstep is inching towards Eddie's room, a bright yellow light shone through the keyhole, and the whole brass handle of the door turned into a fine brass dust, unlocking it, the figure behind the door, it was revealed, her pointy elven ears made a striking silhouette on her tall figure, she entered Eddie's room

Eddie shifted his positions, knocking some of the codex from his bed that he apparently read before he sleep, countless of scroll paper notes scattered on his bed, indicating his tireless study

the tall figure, Catherine inches to his bed, looking at him, "Edwaard?" Catherine called, "Wake up sleepy boy, it's time for your first lesson."

But Eddie didn't budge, he groaned and only shifted "I should've known i will be dealing with this," Catherine sighed, she looked around, and see Eddie's glass of water on his bedside cabinet, Catherine smirked, "Well i didn't know it have to come to this."

She moved her precious codexes out of the bed and with a swift motion poured Eddie's water on top of his head

Eddie, jolted awake, "What the—" he looked around, his blurry vision "Catherine? how'd you get in? I locked the door!"

Catherine walked towards the doorframe, "Come now, it's time for your first lesson." Catherine then walked out of the door, from Eddie's vision, it is revealed that the brass handle of the door, had turned into a fine metal dust, "Oh and also," Catherine added, "It's Master Catherine for you, my one week apprentice!" She said in an amusing

tone, "You don't want to be late on your first class do you?"

Eddie then got up from his bed, he looked at the clock, it's 3am, he only slept for two hours tonight

Eddie blinked groggily, still reeling from the rude shock of cold water dripping down his face. He squinted at the door, where Catherine's silhouette was fading into the hallway. With a groan, he dragged himself out of bed, rubbing his eyes and muttering to himself. *Two hours of sleep and she's already dragging me off to a lesson?*

The codexes Catherine had lent him were piled haphazardly on the bed and floor, evidence of his late-night studying. He quickly brushed off any dampness, patting down a particularly crumpled scroll that had taken the brunt of his sudden wake-up. Still half-asleep, he reached for his jacket, pulling it on as he shuffled toward the door.

Outside, the hall was dimly lit, casting long shadows that only added to the eerie stillness of the inn at this hour. Catherine stood a few paces ahead, arms crossed and a small, amused smile on her face as Eddie approached, looking thoroughly disheveled.

"Catherine," Eddie said, barely hiding his sarcasm as he stifled a yawn. "Isn't it a bit early for... whatever this lesson is?"

Catherine raised an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Time waits for no one, especially not sleepy apprentices. If you want to master Alchemy, you must learn to operate beyond the limits of comfort." She turned and motioned for him to follow, leading him down the hall and out into the cool night air.

The cobbled streets of Weshaven were deserted, save for the occasional flicker of a streetlamp or the distant sound of waves crashing against the harbor. Eddie shivered, pulling his jacket tighter as they walked toward a small, secluded garden behind the inn. A stone circle stood at its center, worn by time and covered in moss. Catherine gestured for him to stand in its middle.

Eddie barely managed to keep up as Catherine led him down to the harbor. The streets were still dark, touched only by the soft glow of lamplight that made the damp cobblestones gleam. A fog hung over the town, drifting in from the sea, giving everything a hazy, dreamlike quality. Eddie stumbled a little, still groggy from his abrupt wake-up call, but Catherine moved with a practiced grace, her gaze steady and purposeful.

As they reached the harbor, the salt air hit Eddie's face, cool and bracing. Fishing boats swayed gently in the water, their lanterns casting ripples of light across the waves. The sound of the sea was calming, almost rhythmic, and Eddie felt a bit more awake, though he couldn't help but wonder what they were doing here at such an ungodly hour.

"Tell me, Edward," Catherine began, her tone deceptively light as they paced along the quiet harbor. "Why Alchemy, of all things? You could've chosen Conjuraction, or Bardry if you fancied a bit of drama."

Eddie hesitated, glancing at the water. "Well, I guess it's because my dad was... he was an Alchemist," he said, though even he knew that didn't quite feel right.

Catherine stopped and gave him a look that was both amused and scrutinizing. "Nonsense. Your father was a Master Potion Maker — a skilled one, but no Alchemist. He

dabbled in Alchemical philosophy, yes, but only because he learned it from me." She resumed walking, her footsteps echoing against the damp stone. "So, I'll ask again: what *truly* draws you to Alchemy?"

Eddie fumbled for a response, cheeks coloring slightly. "I suppose... maybe it's because Alchemy doesn't focus as much on magic. I want to understand magic, but I'm still a bit, I don't know, cautious of wielding it."

Catherine gave a small nod, her expression unreadable. "An honest answer," she said finally. "But there's much you'll need to reconcile in yourself if you intend to pursue Alchemy. It's not simply tinkering with elements or brewing potions like potion makers. Tell me, Edward," she said, fixing him with a steady gaze, "do you believe in the gods?"

"Er, I don't know," Eddie admitted, caught off guard by the sudden turn in conversation.

"A shame," Catherine murmured, though she didn't sound particularly surprised. "Well, perhaps you'll at least know this: according to our oldest teachings, the gods bestowed upon humankind two gifts. Can you name them?"

"Magic and Logic?" Eddie ventured.

"Precisely," she replied, with a satisfied nod. "Logic governs reason, while Magic governs wonder. Now, Edward—tell me, which of these two do you think Alchemy requires most?"

"Logic?" Eddie guessed, though uncertainly.

"Wrong." Catherine said. "Alchemy demands both—each in equal measure." She stopped by a wooden crate and turned to face him. "You read from my codex last night, didn't you? Tell me, what did you gain from it?"

Eddie scratched his head. "Honestly? Not much. You said it was about Alchemical processes, but I found fairy tales, plays, recipes for stews and ales—nothing that actually seemed useful, Catherine. It was more like ancient books rather than codexes."

A glint of annoyance crossed her face. "*Master* Catherine, if you please," she corrected, folding her arms. "You're only half-wrong, though. They're indeed fairy tales, plays, recipes... but you looked at them solely through the lens of Logic. If you read with the lens of Magic whilst using the Lens of Logic to structure your thoughts, you'd see them for what they are: secrets hidden in plain sight. An Alchemist's first ability is to see meaning in the seemingly meaningless, to transform the mundane into something profound—to turn lead into gold, as it were."

Eddie couldn't help but grin a little. "Alright, *Master* Catherine. So, if seeing meaning in meaningless things is lesson one... why bring me here?"

"Oh, that?" she said, a mischievous smile quirking her lips. "I fancied a bit of fresh air, and a walk with my apprentice seemed as good an excuse as any."

Eddie sighed, exasperated. "You could've told me that back at the inn."

She chuckled. "But where's the fun in that? And besides—your first lesson is right here." She pulled a small scroll from beneath her red overcoat and handed it to him.

"Open it."

Eddie unfurled the scroll, revealing a short poem:

The Dust of Kings

I

The Edenfield chornicles

*Once, pillars pierced the heavens,
where winds dare not rise,
where suns grew weary with awe –
and we, craftsmen of fate,
raised silver walls*

II

*But now see how its pillars meets the heaven,
softened by time's unseen hand.
The dome splits in silence,
dust crumbles from every ledge,
and the empire we molded like gold
shifts back to silt and ash.*

III

*O, scholar of lost empires,
dost thou know the art of dust?
In the scrolls of kings it is written
a craft to turn iron to sand,
In a way by which stones breathe,
by which roots are freed of clay.*

IV

*Take the hardened relics –
limestone, steel, and bone,
chant the verses lost to ages,
whisper their weight to the winds.
Each grain that falls is a king forgotten,
each crumble a reign undone.*

V

*For which the empires falls
Its heart heat with time,
It drown in midnight hours,
and the years grind it all
to that which moves in breezes –
towers fallen, histories blown thin.*

VI

*So crumble, O mighty walls,
split as you must.
This is our final conquest –
Empire to earth,
a whispered art beneath the stars
that even empires cannot withstand.*

As Eddie read the piece of poetry, the sun had rose from its slumber

"This," she said, "is an Alchemical technique hidden within verse. I've translated it from the old Alamirian tongue. Your task is to decode it and demonstrate the technique by the end of the week."

Eddie scanned the lines again, furrowing his brow. "But... how am I supposed to know what technique it's even talking about?"

"That's for you to discover, dear Edward." She folded her arms, a smug gleam in her eye. "What would be the use of me handing it to you outright?"

Eddie groaned. "You're not going to help at all?"

"Not one bit. I'm off to buy groceries," she said, already turning back toward the narrow cobbled street. "And remember: it's *Master* Catherine." She gave him a final wink. "See you back at the inn, my one-week apprentice!"



Eddie slumped over his desk, eyes rimmed with dark circles, a steaming bowl of stew forgotten at his elbow. His room was

chaos: codexes lay open on every surface, scrolls and papers strewn across the floor. He'd been at this all night, pouring over Catherine's poem with increasing frustration. It seemed so simple on the surface, a few verses about crumbling empires and forgotten kings. Yet Catherine insisted it contained an alchemical technique, some hidden knowledge he was supposed to decipher.

He squinted at the parchment for the hundredth time, muttering the lines under his breath.

"Each grain that falls is a king forgotten... each crumble a reign undone."

What was he supposed to take from that? He frowned at the words, hoping their meaning would magically rearrange itself in his head. All he could see were images of ruined castles and dust – dust everywhere, shifting, falling, collapsing. Was he supposed to turn something to dust? But that seemed absurd. He couldn't fathom what purpose that would serve. He'd spent hours reading and rereading, trying to untangle the riddle with every scrap of logic he could muster, and yet nothing seemed to click.

Eddie groaned, resting his forehead on the desk. *Alchemy requires both magic and logic*, Catherine had said. But even with both at his disposal, this poem still felt like nonsense. There was a pattern here, some thread he wasn't grasping, but what? His mind drifted to the images: pillars piercing the heavens, silver walls, stone and bone turning to dust. It sounded grand and poetic, yes, but there was nothing practical in it – no clear instructions, no guidance on what he was supposed to actually do.

Frustration simmered. He reached for the stew, gulping down a bite of the now-cold broth, then set it aside with a sigh, glancing back at the verses.

"In a way by which stones breathe, by which roots are freed of clay..."

He closed his eyes, willing himself to understand. Maybe there was a clue in that line, something about breathing, about freeing things from what binds them. He scrawled random notes, theories, even doodles in the margins of the parchment. But every theory fizzled, leading only to more dead ends.

A soft breeze from the door, now permanently open thanks to Catherine's "entrance," stirred the papers on his desk. As he watched a scroll edge flutter, it hit him: he was, perhaps, meant to be thinking less like a scientist and more like...a poet?

"Dust? Maybe...maybe Catherine wants me to make dust?" Eddie mumbled, scratching his head. He wasn't exactly sure why, but the notion tugged at him. Something about the way Catherine's codex spoke of empires crumbling into nothing, like dust scattering in the wind – it felt important, even if he couldn't yet see how.

Digging through his bag, he pulled out his old Magicka Tome from his academy days. There was a spell he'd learned, an incantation to conjure dust for simple illusions. *Maybe this could be the start*, he thought. And so he began, poring over the pages with renewed focus.

For hours, he studied and practiced, his voice hoarse from muttering the spell over and over, each attempt falling short of the image he had in his mind. Fine dust formed, but it scattered too quickly, or clumped awkwardly. Still, he pressed on, feeling a

kindling excitement despite his fatigue. He hadn't lost himself in study like this in ages. There was something exhilarating about the mystery, even if he still felt lost.

Outside, the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm, fading glow through the window. Catherine returned from her long errands, her arms full of bags. As she passed Eddie's room — its door ajar, unable to close from her earlier trick — she stopped, peering in. A soft smile tugged at her lips as she took in the sight.

There was Eddie, slumped over his desk, eyes puffy but alight with determination, his fingers coated in chalky dust, and his brows knitted in fierce concentration. He looked tired but...alive, a spark of purpose in his eyes. Catherine lingered a moment, watching, her smile widening. Then, with a quiet chuckle, she continued on to her room, leaving Eddie to his quest.

-o-

The next morning, Catherine was sprawled across her bed, blankets tangled, deep in slumber. A sharp knock at her door jolted her awake. She groaned, rubbing her eyes as she shuffled over and opened it. There stood Eddie, his face lit with a cocky grin.

"I've deciphered it," he declared, a touch of mischief in his tone.

"Oh?" Catherine arched an eyebrow, masking her curiosity with a cool expression. "Come on, then. Show me what you've uncovered."

They sat across from each other, Catherine's scroll of poetry between them. She poured tea for both, her gaze unwavering, fixed on Eddie with the weight of a test about to be graded.

"So..." she prompted, sipping her tea. "What technique did you learn?"

"The poem—it's about producing dust," Eddie said, his voice brimming with confidence.

"Is it now?" Catherine's tone was neutral, her fingers tapping softly on the table. "Well, show me what you've got."

Eddie straightened, taking out his wand. He muttered an incantation, his hand steady. Catherine watched intently, her eyes narrowing as Eddie focused. With a flash, a few grains of dust trickled from the wand's tip, scattering onto the table.

There was a beat of silence.

"Oh," Catherine said flatly, a flicker of disappointment settling on her face. "Splendid."

Eddie blinked, suddenly unsure. "So... am I... am I right?"

Catherine's eyes bore into him, her tone icy. "You were on the right track at first," she said. "I thought you'd finally understood something." Her gaze grew colder. "But you missed the mark entirely. You're wrong."

"What?" Eddie's face fell. "But the poem—it clearly talks about the production and conjuration of dust!"

"And you latched onto that word like a drowning man," she replied, voice hard as stone. "So fixated on the dust that you missed the rest of the poem. The relationships between the verses, the symbols—did you even notice them?" Her words cut, sharp and unsparing. "If this were a full codex, with your current

approach, you'd be hopelessly lost. This isn't Alchemy, Eddie – it's mimicry."

Eddie stared at her, bewildered, his confidence crumbling. Catherine sighed, leaning forward, her voice cool and commanding. "Try again. You still have two days."

"But... it doesn't make any sense!" he protested, his voice cracking with frustration. "I don't get it!"

Catherine's face hardened. "If you can't understand the metaphors in Alchemy, then perhaps Alchemy isn't for you. You're wasting both your time and mine, not to mention interrupting my sleep." She gestured dismissively at the door. "Go on, Eddie."

Biting back a scowl, Eddie stormed out of the room, cheeks flushed, frustration boiling.

Catherine watched Eddie storm down the hallway, his footsteps echoing until they faded. She let out a long sigh, leaning against her closed door, a shadow of a memory flickering in her mind. She saw Robert Welton – Eddie's father, her old apprentice, a young man brimming with potential yet sensitive to her criticism. She remembered the night he, too, had stormed out, his face twisted with frustration, her words like barbs lodged in his pride. He hadn't returned to her atelier, choosing instead the safer path of a Potion Master.

Had she pushed Robert away? She wondered, as the same old twinge of doubt surfaced. Alchemy demanded precision, resilience, and a clear understanding of its risks. She couldn't afford to soften her approach, especially with apprentices; they had to be strong enough to face its depths without flinching. If

Eddie continued, he'd need that strength — the tenacity to see the meaning behind metaphors, to dig past the obvious. And if he couldn't, well, it was better he found out now than later.

She glanced toward the door, her gaze softening. "Good luck, Eddie," she whispered. Then she returned to her bed, knowing she had to rest.



Eddie's fury bubbled over as he burst into his room, his chest heaving with adrenaline and frustration. He slammed the door behind him with all his might — or he tried to, only for it to swing back open. With a growl, he hurled his notes against the inn's wall, scattering parchment everywhere. His Magicka Tome followed, its bindings cracking as it hit the floor, pages flapping like wounded birds.

As the adrenaline waned, he sank to the floor beside his bed, panting, his breath ragged and shallow. Each inhalation was a reminder of his defeat. *Maybe they were right; maybe he was a failure.* The thought gnawed at him, relentless. Why had he even come to Edenfield? He could've stayed home, helping out in Welton's Apothecary, where expectations were low and the world felt manageable. Alchemy, magic — maybe they were simply beyond him.

"Maybe I should just pack my things and leave," he muttered weakly, the sound barely reaching his own ears.

He picked up the scattered remnants of his Tome, shoving them into his bag with a weary resignation. But as he cleared the mess,

his eyes landed on the doorknob, reduced to a fine brass dust a few days ago. *I have to fix that before leaving, or the innkeeper would throw a fit.* But how?

A thought struck him — dust. He stared at the remnants, a spark igniting within him. *Dust...* he mused, the word echoing in his mind. His gaze drifted to the pillar in his fireplace. *Pillar...* It was a solid object, just like the door handle. He turned to the window, watching the seagulls glide effortlessly against the backdrop of the sky.

His gaze fell to the brass dust still scattered near the door. His fingers brushed over it absently, eyes dull, until something in the glinting particles drew him in. *Dust.* He remembered the poem. *The art of dust...* Was that it? The realization slinked into his mind like a flicker of light in a pitch-black room.

He gathered the dust into his palm, staring at it intently. The poem's words echoed in his mind: *"The Dust of Kings... pillars that touched the heavens... the empire molded like gold, turned back to silt and ash."*

Outside, the cart below tipped over, scattering glass shards across the cobbled street. A shiver ran down his spine as he connected the dots.

Eddie's heart thudded with new understanding. *Dust... Empire... Fall... Heaven... Sand...* The words coalesced, the connections finally clicking into place.

"Yes!" Eddie exclaimed, gripping the brass dust in his hand. *The pillars* were a metaphor for solid forms, *the heavens* for the air they disintegrate into, and *dust* — the broken remains, the essence of

transmutation. The empire's fall, a once-whole structure reduced to fragments.

Suddenly, everything clicked into place. The pillar represented solid objects, while the heavens symbolized the air! The dust was merely a byproduct of transmutation. The poem's story of the empire was a metaphor for solid objects being broken down into something simpler — dust. And the ruins were a representation of that transformation!

Eddie bolted back to his desk, his heart racing with newfound clarity. He rummaged through his bag, retrieving his scrolls and quill, fingers trembling with excitement. He began writing furiously, the words spilling forth like a waterfall. He finally understood — the technique was about dust! No, it was about transmuting solid objects into dust, capturing the very essence of Alchemy!

With each stroke of his quill, the frustration that had consumed him melted away, replaced by an invigorating sense of purpose.

Chapter XI



It was a dreary, rain-soaked day, the sky a relentless canvas of gray. Inside her modest quarters, Catherine meticulously packed her belongings into a well-worn leather suitcase. Yet, as she paused to glance out the window, watching raindrops race each other down the glass, a knot of worry twisted in her stomach. *It's been two days...* she mused. *Perhaps Eddie has indeed abandoned his apprenticeship.* A small, bitter smile crossed her lips. *He lasted even shorter than his father did.*

Her breath fogged the window, mingling with the rain, as she exhaled a heavy sigh. Maybe she had been too harsh, too unforgiving. She shook her head, dismissing the thought. *No, this is Alchemy. Weakness has no place here.*

"Master Catherine," a voice called, pulling her from her reverie. Startled, she turned to find Eddie standing in her doorway, his posture tense and determined, but his usual mischief replaced by something more serious.

"You know it's rude to pry open a locked door into someone's private quarters?" she remarked, attempting to inject a hint of humor into the moment.

Eddie ignored her teasing. "I have decoded the poem," he announced, a fire igniting in his emerald eyes.

"Ah, so you did?" Catherine replied, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips, intrigued. "Show me, then. What is the poem about?"

Eddie drew a deep breath, steeling himself. "The pillar in the poem represents solid objects," he began, his voice steady. "The heavens symbolize the air, while the dust is merely a byproduct of transmutation. The story within speaks of the fall of the Solivian Empire, but it serves as a metaphor for solid objects being broken down into something simpler — a dust. The ruins of the empire illustrate that transformation."

Catherine's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "Good eye," she said, a genuine smile breaking through her previously guarded demeanor. "Now show me how it's done."

Eddie squared his shoulders, a determined glint in his eye. The rain drummed steadily against the window, but inside, the atmosphere buzzed with newfound energy.

Eddie took a deep breath, steadying his racing heart. He grabbed a small block of brass and put it on Catherine's desk, the cool metal feeling heavy in his palm. The air was thick with tension, a silence pressing down around them like a weight, each second stretching painfully. He placed the brass block before him, his hands trembling slightly as he prepared to focus. *This is it*, he thought, recalling the intricacies of the poem, the metaphors that had finally clicked into place.

He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to drown out the echo of Catherine's earlier criticism, the sharp sting of her words still fresh in his mind. *Don't fail again, Eddie*, he chided himself. *You can't walk away from this.*

With determination, he reached out, palms hovering just above the block, feeling the energy coursing through his fingers. The brass felt almost alive, the tension crackling in the air. Eddie focused, drawing upon everything he had learned.

A pulse of energy surged through him. The room seemed to hold its breath, as if the very walls were waiting for him to succeed or fail.

The brass block began to tremble, a low humming resonating between them. Eddie's heart raced. *Will she dismiss me again?* he thought, anxiety tightening his chest. His fingers twitched as he forced the transformation to take place. Sweat beaded on his forehead as the brass crumpled, the metal surrendering to his will. It wasn't a gentle change; it was raw, primal, as if the very essence of the brass was being unraveled.

With a final, shuddering breath, he opened his eyes, staring at the desk. Where the brass block had once stood, a fine pile of metal dust glimmered in the dim light of the room.

"Very splendid..." Catherine's voice sliced through the silence, cool and measured, a hint of surprise lurking beneath her stoic exterior.

"Am I right this time?" Eddie asked, frustration lacing his tone, the weight of her scrutiny pressing down on him like a storm cloud.

The air hung heavy in the room, a tense stillness enveloping them as Catherine scrutinized the dust, her expression inscrutable. Moments stretched on, each second feeling like an eternity, the room holding its breath, waiting for her verdict.

Catherine erupted into a squeal of delight, her eyes sparkling with joy as she returned to the exuberance of her younger days — the jovial young elf who had first taken Eddie under her wing.

“You did it!” she exclaimed, practically bouncing on her toes.

“You’re absolutely right about the metaphors, and your transmutation process is flawless! Well done, Eddie!”

“T-Thank you, Master Catherine,” Eddie stammered, the weight of frustration lifting like a morning fog. A lightness filled him as he realized he had succeeded. “N-now did I pass?”

“You passed with flying colors!” Catherine declared, her voice brimming with pride. “Though what you’ve done is only the first step — deciphering a simple transmutation. But now you have the foundation to delve into Alchemical codexes and scrolls. I’m truly proud of you.”

“Thank you, Master Catherine,” Eddie said, warmth spreading through him.

“Now, now, you can drop the ‘Master’ bit,” she replied with a playful wave of her hand. “It’s been a week, and as we agreed, you’re no longer my apprentice. Before you head back to your apothecary, would you mind seeing me off? My ship will be arriving this afternoon.”

“Sure thing! Who knows how many decades it’ll be before you visit again?” Eddie teased, a smirk tugging at his lips.

“I’m a busy elf, you know!” Catherine shot back with a laugh. “I’m off spreading my elven wisdom across the globe to all of mankind!”

“Or rotting in the Edenfield Palace trying to teach the crown princess magic,” Eddie countered, sarcasm dripping from his words.

“H-hey, did Torrie tell you that?” Catherine’s cheeks flushed slightly, a sheepish grin crossing her face.

“She did!” Eddie laughed, the sound light and carefree. “Anyway, I’ll continue packing my things. Thank you so much for teaching me Alchemy, Catherine. You’re a great teacher.”

Catherine watched him with a fond smile, a sense of warmth flooding her chest. “Anytime, Edward,” she replied softly, her eyes glinting with the bond they shared. In that moment, the tension of the past days melted away, leaving only the promise of new beginnings ahead.

As Eddie strode out of her room, Catherine turned her gaze toward the door. Her smile faltered as she noticed that the doorknob, once a solid piece of brass, had disintegrated into a fine dust, glittering on the floor like scattered stars, Eddie had turned it into dust to pry it open to get to her room. It dawned on her that the block of brass he had left on her desk was the very same doorknob she had transmuted just a week prior.

Not only had Eddie deciphered the transmutation process detailed in the poem, but he had also reverse-engineered the technique, transforming the dusts that were once a solid brass door knob into a solid brass block, and back again from the brass block into dust. A spark of pride ignited within her. *He’s truly talented*, she mused, her lips curling into a smile.

“Impressive,” a smile creeping across her face despite her annoyance. Eddie was indeed talented, perhaps even more so

than she initially realized. His potential shone through the chaos he often brought with him.

But then the annoyance hit. *That petty brat* she thought, rolling her eyes as the corners of her mouth quirked upwards. *He'd turned my doorknob into dust, and now I'll have to pay the innkeeper twice for a broken door handle*

Her smile faded as she imagined the indignation of the innkeeper upon discovering the state of her door. Catherine shook her head, half-amused and half-irritated. She couldn't help but chuckle at the absurdity of the situation, a mix of pride and irritation swirling in her chest. *Only Eddie could achieve such a feat and leave a mess in the process.*



As Eddie and Catherine strolled along the harbor town, the overcast sky mirrored Catherine's sulky demeanor. The salty breeze tousled her hair, but it did nothing to lift her spirits.

"You haven't said sorry," she said, crossing her arms as they walked.

"Why would I?" Eddie shot back, his tone laced with indifference.

"Because you turned my doorknob into dust!" Catherine snapped, frustration bubbling over. "Now I have to pay the innkeeper for two brass doorknobs instead of one!"

"Hey, it was your transmutation that started this mess! I had to sleep with my door half open for a week, listening to the clatter of

footsteps in the hall all night. Not exactly a great experience! Consider it payback," Eddie retorted, a smirk playing on his lips.

"Ugh," Catherine groaned, shaking her head as if trying to rid herself of his annoying logic. "You're hopeless."

"Hey, I learned from the master, alright?" Eddie chuckled, nudging her playfully. "Can't blame me for being a good student, right?"

Catherine shot him a sidelong glance, trying to suppress a smile. "You may have learned well, but you also inherited my knack for chaos. It's a bit alarming, really."

"Everything begins in a state of chaos as one of the codex said," Eddie quipped, matching her pace.

Catherine shot him a sidelong glance, her lips twitching with the hint of a smile despite her annoyance. "I suppose I should have seen this coming. But do try to refrain from using my teachings as a means to irritate me, you are worst than your father."

Eddie shrugged, a cheeky grin lingering. "No promises. It's just too easy!"

Catherine rolled her eyes, sighing. "If only transmutation had a lesson in humility."

Catherine couldn't help but chuckle again, the tension between them easing as they walked side by side.

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.

"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 Welton, son of Robert Welton."

"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 pass your entrance test, you'll be boarding this exact same ship toward Edenfield. Our paths might cross again."

"Yeah, indeed," Eddie said, his smile returning as hope sparked within him. "Take care of yourself, you chaotic elf."

"I will," she chuckled, her eyes twinkling. "So long, petty brat."

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 succeed in the entrance exam, I'll be boarding that exact same ship.

No, he thought fiercely, I will pass the entrance exam.

Chapter XII



ddie sat slumped in the corner of a rickety old tram rattling along Weshaven's cobbled streets. His hair was more unkempt than usual, his jade green eyes weary beneath heavy shadows of sleepless nights. He blinked hard, fighting the pull of sleep as the tram jolted over another bump. On his lap lay a pile of hastily scrawled notes and intricate alchemical diagrams, some in Catherine's neat handwriting and others barely legible from his own feverish study sessions. They were precious reminders of her rigorous mentorship, each symbol and line a bridge between him and the elusive secrets of alchemy he was so close to grasping.

Eddie's gaze kept dropping to the diagrams, his eyelids growing heavy as the tram rocked, but he forced himself to focus, clutching at these final moments of study. Determination surged, stronger than exhaustion. He scanned Catherine's notes on the transmutation of metals and the carefully labeled phases of alchemical processes, silently mouthing words as he went. The

noise of passengers boarding and disembarking blurred into the background as he tried to fit each piece of knowledge into place. It was like solving a puzzle in his mind, the pressure building as the tram drew closer to his destination.

Finally, with a hiss of steam and the squeal of brakes, the tram jerked to a stop, jostling him out of his haze. Eddie quickly stuffed the crumpled notes back into his satchel and scrambled to his feet, swaying slightly as he regained his balance. As he stepped onto the street, he found himself facing a grand, imposing building with large stone pillars and a banner fluttering above the entrance.

Eddie stood in front of the Sage's Institute, feeling the pulse of the place that had once overwhelmed him. Two weeks prior, its towering stone façade, wrapped in ancient ivy and etched with weatherworn details, had struck awe into his heart, making him feel small and uncertain. Today, though, his view had shifted; the imposing structure, with its iron-framed windows and the owl-emblazoned emblem above the double oak doors, was no longer a symbol of wonder and intimidation. It was now a challenge — something he was determined to conquer.

The entrance loomed, daring him forward. With his bag slung over his shoulder, Eddie clenched his fists, steeling himself as he approached the doors. The scent of old parchment, ink, and polished wood filled his lungs as he stepped inside. As he entered the reception hall, the glow of warm, golden light from the chandeliers bathed the scene in an inviting warmth. The floor tiles hummed beneath his feet, each one etched with softly glowing runes. The knowledge and wisdom contained within these walls were palpable, like a current of energy thrumming just beneath the surface.

Eddie took in the circular chamber with wide eyes. At its heart was the massive mahogany desk, staffed by blue-robed clerks who attended to the quiet stream of students and scholars with an air of precision. Behind them was a grand, engraved map of Solivia and its surrounding realms. Golden pins marked affiliated schools, each one a testament to the reach and influence of the Institute.

For a brief moment, Eddie felt the old wonder bubble up, but it quickly gave way to renewed purpose. He scanned the room, taking in the portraits of past scholars with their solemn, assessing gazes that seemed to measure each newcomer. Eddie met their stares, silently vowing to prove himself worthy of the path they had once tread. His journey might have started with uncertainty, but now, standing in the Institute's grand halls, he felt his purpose sharpen.

This was the beginning of something, and he was ready. With his head held high, Eddie moved toward the grand staircase, where the real test awaited.

Eddie approached the reception desk, heart pounding, but he kept his expression steady. His fingers clenched around the strap of his bag as he forced himself to breathe steadily. Despite the familiar weight of nervousness in his chest, he reminded himself why he was here, why he'd come this far. He couldn't let fear slip through now.

"I'm here for the entrance exam," he said, his voice stronger than he felt. "I'm scheduled for today, Faculty of Alchemy."

The receptionist, a middle-aged woman with a bored expression, barely looked up from her ledger. Her eyes flicked over him, taking in his travel-worn clothes, the faint circles under his eyes,

and the ink-stained notes poking out of his bag. She raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

"No exams scheduled for today," she said flatly, flipping a page as if dismissing him entirely.

Eddie blinked, thrown off balance. His nerves surged into confusion, and for a moment, the confidence he'd been holding onto wavered. His mind raced as he searched for an explanation. Had he made a mistake? Had the letter given the wrong date? No, he remembered it clearly. He'd checked it more times than he could count.

He forced himself to stand a little straighter. "Are you certain? I was sent an invitation by the Sage's Institute itself. This is my scholarship exam."

The woman sighed, glancing at him again, with perhaps a trace of interest in her otherwise disinterested gaze.

The receptionist's gaze hardened with finality. "No exam for today," she said, already turning back to her ledger.

Eddie's heart dropped, but the shock quickly gave way to a determined resolve. He wasn't about to be dismissed so easily. Reaching into his bag, he pulled out the letter he'd kept carefully folded, the invitation signed by Emma Somers herself. He held it out, his hand steady.

"Here. This letter," he said, keeping his tone respectful yet firm. "It's from Emma Somers. I was asked to come today."

The woman looked at the letter with raised eyebrows, then, as though sensing a shift in the situation, she took it. Her eyes moved over the parchment slowly, her expression softening with

something close to interest. She looked up at him, now with a different sort of scrutiny.

"Hmm," she murmured, folding the letter back and giving it to him. Her lips quirked, and there was a new gleam in her eye as she regarded him. "Very well. Go through to the second hall on the right."

Eddie tucked the letter safely back into his bag and nodded, exhaling as he felt a new surge of energy. Holding his head high, he stepped past the desk, feeling the weight of the Institute's stone halls surround him as he made his way to the hall, ready to face whatever awaited him.

Eddie stepped into the second hall, and his breath caught. The ceiling soared high above, and each wall was lined with portraits of towering figures in the history of magic – the legendary wizards, mages, alchemists, and sorcerers whose discoveries and teachings had shaped Solivia's magical arts for centuries.

He paused, taking in the details of the painted faces, each marked by the presence of wisdom, age, or the restless ambition of youth. Some of the portraits seemed to regard him with a curious, distant awareness, their eyes carrying the weight of the knowledge they had once held.

Then, his eyes fell on a familiar face. Catherine.

Eddie's heart gave a small, unexpected lurch. There she was, rendered in rich, striking detail, her expression every bit as composed and focused as he remembered in their week together, yet now imbued with the gravitas of legend. How easy it was to forget that beneath her humor and quiet eccentricity, his aunt was famous throughout the world of Alchemy. Catherine

Angelina – an innovator in alchemical techniques, a name written in nearly every codex on the subject. To the world, she was one of the greatest alchemists alive.

Eddie felt a swell of both wonder and pride, a fresh realization of just how much of her knowledge she'd shared with him, and he couldn't help but feel the weight of that inheritance on his shoulders. She wasn't just his aunt; she was an indelible part of magical history.

Straightening his posture, Eddie turned to face the hall's long path. These portraits watched over his journey as if silently appraising him, and he knew he wanted to prove himself worthy of their gaze.

Eddie reached the open doorway, his heart hammering in his chest. Beyond it, a small cluster of candidates waited, seated on stiff-backed chairs arranged in a neat row. The exam room's waiting area was quiet, the air dense with anticipation. He quickly took an empty seat and folded his hands in his lap, glancing around.

The people beside him were not at all what he'd expected. There was no one near his age – in fact, the closest seemed to be in their early thirties. One of the women, wrapped in deep emerald robes with a cascade of arcane symbols embroidered on her sleeves, looked every inch a seasoned sorceress. Beside her sat a bearded man flipping through a well-worn alchemical tome, his face etched with lines of experience and patience. Another candidate, an older woman with silver-streaked hair, held a staff on her lap, its gemstone glowing faintly as though it had a life of its own. Each one radiated an air of experience and competence, and Eddie felt his stomach twist.

He fidgeted with the strap of his satchel, his fingers grazing the notes from Catherine's lessons, as though the feel of the parchment could give him some courage. Was he really in the right place?

He double-checked Emma's letter, the crisp parchment clutched tightly in his hand as he read over her clear instructions for the day. And the receptionist had told him to come here, hadn't she? Still, a creeping sense of doubt slipped in as he glanced once more at his neighbors. They seemed leagues ahead of him, their eyes calm and calculating, a sharp contrast to the quiet storm brewing inside him.

He took a deep breath, steadying himself. Catherine's voice echoed in his mind: *"Alchemy isn't easy, but it will bend to the determined."*

With that thought, Eddie forced himself to sit up straighter, squaring his shoulders.

The door to the exam room swung open, and Eddie's eyes widened as Emma Somers stepped out. She looked as intimidating as ever — her sharp gaze scanned the waiting area before settling on him, her expression unreadable. She walked over briskly, her gaze piercing through his nervousness.

"Ah, Mr. Welton," she said in a tone that held both appraisal and challenge. "So you've come."

Eddie took a deep breath, willing himself to keep steady. "I did. I decided from the start."

A hint of approval flickered in her eyes, and she nodded. "Good. I wish you luck, then. This examination may prove... challenging. The professors here consider it one of the harder assessments."

"I've prepared," Eddie replied, determined to sound more confident than he felt.

But just then, a booming voice rang through the examination hall, echoing off the stone walls.

"All candidates, please be advised: the Intermediate Alchemist Proficiency Examination will begin in one minute. Proceed to the designated testing area."

Eddie's stomach dropped. *Intermediate Alchemist Proficiency Examination?* His heart pounded as he looked around at the other candidates, who barely reacted, already looking seasoned and ready. It hit him with sickening clarity — Emma hadn't registered him for the entrance exam; she had signed him up for an Intermediate Proficiency test, meant for those with experience and skill well beyond his.

A cold sweat prickled his forehead as he turned to Emma, searching her face for any sign of a mistake. But her expression was calm, composed, as if this had been the plan all along.

"Emma, I... I thought..." His words caught in his throat.

She raised an eyebrow. "I assumed you'd prefer a true challenge, Mr. Welton. You came here to prove yourself, did you not?"

Eddie's mouth was dry, his thoughts racing. All of Catherine's lessons flashed before his eyes, every scrap of paper he'd pored over in the dead of night. *Was he ready?* He forced himself to swallow, the determination flickering under his shock.

Eddie leaned in, his voice a tense whisper brimming with frustration. "This is a test for *Intermediate Alchemists*, not a basic entrance exam for Bachelor's."

Emma's eyes barely flickered. "You'd be correct," she replied coolly.

"It's *unfair!*" he hissed, struggling to keep his voice low. "I came here to take the entrance exam for the Bachelor of Alchemy, not – whatever this is!"

Emma's gaze hardened, her voice quiet but unyielding. "You walked into this Institute with connections, Mr. Welton. Unfair advantages are rarely without their price." Her lips curled in a faint, knowing smile. "This should be a walk in the park for the student of the *renowned* Master Alchemist Catherine Angelina. I wish you the best of luck."

Before he could respond, she turned on her heel, leaving him standing there, his mouth half-open in protest.

Eddie cursed under his breath, his fingers tightening into fists at his sides. His suspicions hadn't been wrong. As he glanced around the room, he saw it clearly now – there was something *off*. The other candidates weren't wide-eyed, hopeful, or anxious like him. No, they were calm, collected. Experienced. Some even wore faint smirks, like they already knew what kind of test they'd be facing.

It hit him all at once.

This wasn't just an entrance exam. This was something far more advanced. And the bitter taste of betrayal settled in his chest as he finally understood.

The announcer's voice boomed across the hall, cutting through his thoughts.

“Welcome, candidates, to the Intermediate Alchemist Proficiency Examination.”

Eddie froze, his blood running cold. So that was it. The truth. He wasn’t just here to prove he belonged in the Institute — he was here to *prove himself* as an *Intermediate Alchemist*. This was no entrance exam. No, Emma wasn’t testing Eddie — she was *challenging* him.

His heart began to race. His palms felt clammy. He was in the deep end now, and there was no turning back.

He glanced at the candidates again. Their eyes held a mix of confidence and subtle challenge, and Eddie knew — he wasn’t just competing for a spot. He was fighting to stay in the game.

The announcer’s voice rang out across the hall again, steady and commanding. Eddie turned his attention to the podium, where a neatly-dressed, elderly man stood in red robes — robes that spoke of years of expertise, and of a life dedicated to alchemy. His face, while grizzled with age, carried an air of efficiency, the kind one might expect from someone who’d spent decades in a lab, turning base metals into something more. His eyes twinkled with the quiet authority of someone who had seen it all.

“Candidates,” the announcer began, his voice echoing in the silence, “Welcome to the Intermediate Alchemist Proficiency Examination. The task before you is simple, but no less challenging — turn *Lead into Gold*.”

A murmur rippled through the room as the weight of the statement hit the candidates. The task was one of the oldest, most coveted alchemical feats — the transmutation of base metal into

precious gold. Eddie's heart skipped a beat. That was... no small feat.

"You have until the evening to complete this task," the announcer continued. "Each of you has been assigned a desk equipped with the basic tools and materials. Use them wisely. You may begin when you are ready."

Eddie's eyes flitted around the room. Sure enough, desks lined the walls, each outfitted with a variety of alchemical tools – glass beakers, stirring rods, copper cauldrons, and crucibles. A few desks even had small bundles of lead sitting at their centers, waiting to be transformed. It was a simple setup, but that only made it more intimidating. The tools at his disposal were nothing fancy – just the basic necessities for an alchemist at work. And yet, in this moment, they felt like the key to his success, or the instrument of his failure.

The announcer's voice broke through his thoughts. "Good luck to all of you. The clock starts now. Please proceed to your desks and begin your work."

Eddie took a deep breath. There was no turning back now. He straightened up, his muscles tight with anticipation, and made his way to the desk in the far corner of the room. As he approached, he couldn't help but glance at the other candidates, each of them moving with quiet confidence, their hands already reaching for their tools. They weren't just here to pass – they were here to *succeed*, to prove their mastery.

His heart pounded harder in his chest. But he wasn't about to back down. This was his moment. He had come this far, and he wouldn't let fear dictate his actions. Taking his place at the desk,

Eddie carefully set down his materials, his hands steady despite the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

This was it. Lead into gold.



Eddie sat at his desk, his elbows propped on the cold surface, staring down at the tools in front of him. The nameplate before him read "Edward Welton," as if to remind him who he was – and what he was supposed to be capable of. But right now, Eddie didn't feel like an alchemist. He felt like a fraud.

Two hours had passed since the test began, and still, he hadn't lifted a single tool. His fingers hovered just above the alchemical instruments – flasks, tongs, and glass vials – but his hands refused to make a move. Instead, they rubbed at his messy silver hair in frustration, tugging at strands that had already begun to fall in front of his eyes. The task in front of him – a simple enough request, at least in words: turn lead into gold – was anything but simple.

Eddie had read every codex Catherine had shoved at him. Every scroll, every tome, every crumbling parchment detailing the impossibility of such a feat. The transmutation of base metals into gold was a legend, a metaphor – something to be aspired to but never achieved. The very foundation of alchemy was based on the understanding that this was *not possible*. The laws of nature couldn't be bent that far. The balance of the world wouldn't allow it.

But here he was, sitting at his desk, surrounded by seasoned alchemists and magicians who, like him, had seen these truths. Eddie wasn't some fool. He knew what the job entailed. He knew

what they were asking. He'd seen what it took to even begin to grasp the basic principles of alchemy, and he was damn sure that turning lead into gold was no more possible than flying by flapping your arms.

Yet, as Eddie glanced around the room, at the others already bent over their tasks with calm, deliberate focus, he couldn't help but feel the crushing weight of doubt. Were they pretending? Or was he the one who had missed something?

A sick knot twisted in his stomach. His gaze flicked back to the lead on his desk, the dull, gray metal sitting there as if mocking him. "Lead into gold," he muttered under his breath, his voice strained. The thought of trying to make this happen felt like trying to fight a bear with a toothpick. *Impossible.* And the more he thought about it, the more absurd it all seemed. He could already hear Emma's voice in his head, her smug tone as she threw him into this test, watching him flounder. She knew this was a lost cause. She had to.

"Fuck," Eddie cursed, grinding his teeth. His eyes stung with frustration. *How am I supposed to do this?* Catherine never prepared him for this kind of nonsense. She'd taught him the fundamentals – the transformation of one material to another, the study of the elements, the intricate steps of alchemical process – but *this*? This wasn't alchemy. This was some ridiculous, idealistic dream that didn't even belong in a classroom.

The more he thought about it, the angrier he became. He had been dragged into this mess, thinking it was the entrance exam he had prepared for. Instead, he was being asked to do the impossible. *Turn lead into gold.*

The more Eddie wrestled with the task, the clearer it became: this wasn't about alchemy. It was about something else entirely — a test of his resolve, a challenge designed to make him confront his own limitations, to see how far he'd go when faced with the impossible. And for all his studies, all his preparation, Eddie wasn't sure if he was ready to face this kind of challenge. He had always believed in the rational, the attainable. Now? He was standing at the edge of a cliff.

"You're asking me to fight a bear with a toothpick at this point, Somers," he muttered bitterly, his hands gripping the edge of the desk. He was at a crossroads, and it was dawning on him that no amount of knowledge could help him now.

It was all or nothing.

Eddie sat back in his chair, his fingers flexing in frustration, the lead on his desk still staring back at him like some cruel joke. The pressure was beginning to take its toll, and a weight settled in his chest as he racked his brain, trying desperately to pull anything from the depths of his memories that might help him. His mind flickered between the different phases of his life — his childhood in Weshaven, the long hours spent working with his father in the apothecary, the few years he'd spent at the Minor Academy before his expulsion — but nothing seemed to connect.

The faces of his classmates from the academy blurred into one indistinct mass. The late-night lessons with his father felt distant, like a forgotten dream. He couldn't recall a single instance when he had been taught how to turn lead into gold — because *that* had never been something to learn.

Then, the memory of Catherine's gruff, determined voice cut through the fog. The long hours spent in her company, her

relentless drive to push him to his limits, to teach him not only alchemy, but to question everything he thought he knew. The way she drilled into him the concept that Alchemy wasn't about following orders or repeating ancient rituals.

"Alchemy is about turning something ordinary to extraordinary," Catherine had said. "From meaninglessness to something with meaning. From Lead to Gold."

Eddie winced at the words. Her meaning was clear, but it felt impossible to apply to the task at hand. He shook his head, pressing his palms against his eyes in frustration. He was stuck, hopelessly caught between wanting to respect her teachings and the glaring, irrefutable fact that *this* — the task before him — was a concept too grand to even fathom.

"Fuck it," Eddie muttered aloud, the words slipping out of him in exasperation. "This is meaningless anyway."

For a moment, he just stared at the lead. The harsh, dull metal that mocked him. *Lead to Gold* — it was a mantra, an ideal. But what if it was nothing more than a meaningless, unattainable dream? Wasn't alchemy about transformation? About change? And yet, here he was, caught in the impossible.

Then, with a sudden snap, the idea hit him. A thought so simple, it felt almost like a revelation. *What if I don't have to make Lead into Gold?* What if, instead of trying to achieve the impossible, he could *prove* it? What if he could write down the very reasons why this task was *impossible*?

He slammed his palms down on the desk, making the tools and papers shake with the force of it. The decision had been made. Eddie wasn't going to try and turn the lead into gold. No. He

wasn't crazy. He wasn't going to throw himself into a futile task. Instead, he would write. He would prove to everyone in this room, to every idealistic bastard watching, that it could never be done.

Eddie grabbed the nearest parchment and a quill, the nib trembling slightly in his hand as he started to write. The words poured out of him, not with the desperation of someone trying to make an impossible thing happen, but with the clear, focused conviction of someone standing firm against a lie.

He would show them, in excruciating detail, the reasons why turning lead into gold was *impossible*. He would go through the codices he had studied, cite the scrolls Catherine had forced him to read, and write down every bit of alchemical knowledge that made the task unachievable.

For the first time since this challenge had started, Eddie felt his breath steady. He felt a glimmer of resolve burn inside of him. He wasn't crazy. He wasn't some naive kid who had misunderstood what alchemy was. No. Alchemy was about meaning. It was about purpose. And this task — the one he had been handed — was the perfect opportunity to show that even in a world of magic and science, some things were just beyond reach.

Eddie's fingers gripped the quill harder, the ink flowing smoothly as he began to scribble down his theory. *What if Lead could be turned into Gold?* He would tear down the myth, lay bare the truth, and prove to everyone — especially Emma Somers — that *some things can't be done*.

"Let's see how they like the truth," Eddie muttered to himself as he continued writing.



The sky outside the testing hall had shifted, its colors now a blend of orange and purple, casting a warm, ethereal glow over the room. The flickering light reflected off the polished surfaces of the desks and tools, marking the passing of time. The scent of ink and parchment still lingered in the air, but the mood had shifted, becoming tense as the final moments of the test came to a close.

The announcer's voice boomed, clear and commanding, shattering the silence. "Time is up! All candidates are to submit the result of their task to the examiner in the next room!"

A chorus of grumbling rose from the candidates, some of them sighing in defeat, others shaking their heads in frustration. The task had been more grueling than they expected, and for many, the impossible challenge had left them with little to show for it.

Slowly, the candidates began to stand, their movements heavy with the weight of their failure. Some, like the older alchemist near Eddie's desk, carried their results, but not with pride. The gold he held in his hands was impure, a mockery of the golden perfection they were supposed to achieve. It looked like gold from a distance, but up close, the imperfections were too glaring to ignore. His shoulders slumped as he gazed down at the mess he'd made. It was a hollow victory, the type of result one could only present with a sense of resignation.

As the man gathered his things, he glanced over at Eddie, still hunched at his desk, a figure almost too still amidst the motion around him. Eddie hadn't moved, his back hunched, his silver hair falling over his brow as he scribbled fiercely. The man took note of the clean desk in front of him, untouched by alchemical

tools or spilled materials. Unlike the others, whose desks were filled with charred parchment, broken equipment, and hastily drawn diagrams, Eddie's desk remained neat, his only sign of progress the array of scrolls he'd been writing on.

A tinge of curiosity mixed with his own disbelief as he approached Eddie's desk, his footsteps slow and hesitant. "Um, young sir," he began, his voice unsure, "The time is up. You should head to the examiner."

Eddie didn't look up. His fingers continued to scrawl furiously across the parchment, his eyes locked on the words in front of him, as though the test was not over, as though he could finish what he had set out to do. His brow furrowed, the ink on his quill drying in the faint, warm light of the room.

"Five more minutes, and I will finish," Eddie muttered under his breath, a statement of utter conviction.

The older alchemist stood for a moment longer, watching Eddie's unwavering focus. It was strange — this young man, sitting amidst a sea of failure, so determined. He turned away slowly, his impure gold hanging heavily in his hand, the weight of his own doubts mirrored in the younger man's steadfastness. The older candidate's eyes lingered for a moment longer on Eddie's desk, then he left, the sound of his footsteps fading as he made his way to the examiner's room.

Eddie, still hunched over his scrolls, ignored the man's departure. His world was contained within the lines of ink before him, and he wasn't going to stop now. There was no time for doubts, no time for second guesses. He had a purpose. He had to prove something — not to anyone else, but to himself.

As the last few minutes ticked away, the orange light outside deepened, casting long shadows across Eddie's desk. His quill scratched the parchment, the soft sound the only sign of life in the otherwise still room. And though he knew he would not be bringing gold before the examiners, Eddie was more certain than ever that what he had written – what he had set out to prove – was the real answer to this impossible test.



Master Alchemist Borman sat in the examination room, flipping through the results with a deep frown. His eyes scanned the various reports, each one more disheartening than the last. The candidates had not impressed him in the slightest. He sighed heavily, his breath a mix of exhaustion and disappointment. The gold produced by the candidates was impure, full of imperfections that made it almost laughable. Some had even resorted to illusion spells to trick the examiners into thinking they had succeeded. Others hadn't even bothered to transmute their lead at all. It was as if the very essence of alchemy had been lost to these so-called "prodigies." His mind wandered to the past, to the alchemists who had once dazzled him with their brilliance, the ones who had been true to the craft.

"Is there any great Alchemist still around?" he muttered under his breath, his tone tinged with exhaustion and disappointment.

Emma Somers, perched elegantly in her chair, sipped her tea, her gaze flicking briefly over to Borman. "There might be one," she replied, her voice calm and measured. "This one is a student and niece of the renowned Master Alchemist Catherine Angelina, the Elf from the Katarina Tribe."

Borman looked up from the results with a raised brow. "Oh?" he asked, his interest piqued. "The Elf had a niece?"

Emma nodded as she set her cup down on the saucer, her expression unreadable. "It was her adopted sister. She lived with the Welton family for many years, considers Alyssa Welton her own sister. They're not blood-related, but that's what they are to each other."

"Very interesting," Wizard Aelfric chimed in, his voice light and amused as he added sugar to his tea. The Chancellor of Edenfield University was intrigued, the notion of a niece of such a legendary alchemist catching his attention. "I hadn't heard of this."

Borman nodded slowly, his fingers tapping the edge of the table. "It is said that she's an entire different league on her own. It's not an easy path, following in Catherine Angelina's footsteps."

Emma gave a small nod, eyes sharp and focused. "Indeed. Let's see what this young one has accomplished."

Wizard Aelfric chuckled softly. "Well then, let's not keep him waiting. Can we move on to the next candidate?"

Emma's gaze flicked toward the announcer as she gave a subtle nod. The announcer, standing nearby, understood the signal and stepped forward, preparing to call the next name.

The announcer's voice boomed through the hall, cutting through the air with precision and authority. "Edward Welton, please go to the examination room!"

Borman, Aelfric, and Emma turned their attention toward the door, their thoughts all momentarily on the young man who

would soon be entering. Eddie Welton, a name that meant little to most, but could hold the promise of something extraordinary. They waited, intrigued by what he might bring to the table.

Eddie entered the examination room with his unruly silver hair falling around his determined, slightly angry face. His green eyes glinted with a fire that had only been fueled by the frustration of the day. He strode to the desk, looking carefully at the three examiners – Master Alchemist Borman, Wizard Aelfric, and Emma Somers – who were seated before him. The air in the room was thick with anticipation, but Eddie stood resolutely, as if the weight of the test had already been settled in his mind.

"Now, if you please, the exam result," Master Alchemist Borman said, his voice crisp and commanding.

Eddie didn't hesitate. With a deep breath, he placed his scrolls on the desk, the paper unassuming at first glance, but the quiet confidence in his posture said otherwise. He met Borman's gaze, his expression unwavering.

The examiners exchanged puzzled looks. Borman raised an eyebrow, his lips curling into a smirk. There was a subtle trace of offense in his tone as he spoke, his words coated with a hint of sarcasm.

"If I remembered correctly," Borman began, leaning forward with a sharp glint in his eyes, "The task is to turn Lead into gold, not Lead into papers, Mr. Welton."

Eddie didn't flinch. Instead, he remained focused, his voice steady as he responded.

"It is simply impossible, sir," Eddie said, his words calm but firm. "So I didn't bother."

Borman's eyes narrowed, his irritation growing, but a flicker of intrigue lingered beneath the surface. "You don't even return the Lead?" he asked, incredulity in his voice. "Now, what makes you think we won't just fail you right here?"

A tense silence filled the room, the weight of Borman's words hanging heavily in the air. Eddie stood his ground, his jaw set, refusing to be intimidated. The examiners continued to scrutinize him, each one weighing his decision, each one trying to understand what he had done.

Emma Somers, ever the observer, studied Eddie's face carefully, her expression unreadable. She had seen potential in this boy before, but now, with his unorthodox approach, she wondered if he had just crossed the line between genius and madness. Wizard Aelfric, who had remained silent until now, tilted his head thoughtfully, his ancient eyes scanning Eddie's demeanor.

The silence stretched, and Eddie could feel the eyes of the examiners on him, but he didn't flinch. He knew he had done the right thing. After all, this was a test not just of skill, but of understanding the true nature of alchemy itself.

It was Borman who broke the silence, his voice low and measured. "And what exactly do you expect us to learn from this, Mr. Welton? This is not a test of your beliefs. This is a test of your capability. And as far as I can see, you've wasted your time."

Eddie's eyes didn't waver. "I haven't wasted anything. I've done exactly what alchemy teaches us. Transformation is about

understanding the limits of what is possible, and recognizing when the impossible is just a lie we've been taught to believe."

Emma's gaze softened ever so slightly, impressed by his conviction. Aelfric raised a brow, intrigued by Eddie's response. Borman, however, remained unimpressed. His mouth tightened into a thin line, his disappointment clear.

As the examiners looked at the scrolls Eddie had placed before them, the tension in the room was palpable. Eddie, his silver hair still falling messily around his face, now stood behind a large whiteboard, dragging it into place with a steady, determined grip. The motion caught the attention of the examiners, who slowly began to shift their focus from the scrolls to Eddie himself.

Master Alchemist Borman, still skeptical, folded his arms, but the glint of curiosity was starting to edge into his sharp gaze. Wizard Aelfric's eyes, though ancient and calm, sparked with a flicker of intrigue. Emma Somers, always composed, leaned forward slightly, the faintest trace of a smile tugging at the corner of her lips as she waited for Eddie to explain himself.

Eddie cleared his throat, glancing at the three of them before he began, his voice steady and unwavering. "There is no way for lead to turn into gold," he started, the weight of his words sinking in. "Alchemy isn't about bending reality to meet impossible standards as it was with Sorcery, and Conjuraction; Alchemy is about understanding the limits of nature and, when those limits are found, knowing where to push them — ethically, and with purpose."

The room was silent as Eddie stepped forward to the chalkboard, picking up a piece of chalk. He drew a series of complicated diagrams, symbols, and intricate notations, his hands moving

with a fluidity that suggested a deep familiarity with the subject matter. His eyes were intense, focused on the board, but he spoke as if he were in a lecture, explaining his thoughts aloud.

"This test asked for Lead to Gold," Eddie continued, his tone now a mix of frustration and awe, "But alchemy tells us that such a thing is a myth, a metaphor for a transformation that is spiritual and not physical. Lead is a base metal, but it symbolizes something more – it represents potential, untapped power." He glanced at Borman briefly before continuing, the words flowing from him as he recalled the teachings of Catherine. "However, the texts, the codexes I've studied, tell us that in theory, with the proper methodology, one could create a hypothetical pathway to transmute Lead into something closer to Gold. Not in a simple, transmutative sense, but through a deeper understanding of materials, energy, and elemental forces."

He paused, running his hand through his hair in frustration. "I've crafted this hypothetical analysis – a detailed procedure, mixing theory and practice, drawing from ancient spells, some dating back thousands of years. These aren't just spell formulas, but techniques that take into account the nature of the base metals, their relationship to gold, and the raw energy required for such an endeavor."

The room was quiet as Eddie turned to the board, walking them through the steps of the spell he had devised. There were complex symbols, sigils, and diagrams, each one an integral part of the process. Eddie spoke quickly, explaining how the spell would need to be executed under precise conditions, with the right catalyst and ancient incantations from texts passed down through generations of scholars and alchemists.

"By combining elemental transmutation techniques," Eddie said, "and incorporating older, almost forgotten spells – ones only a few would know – I believe you could, in theory, create the conditions needed for Lead to transform into Gold, not by physical means alone, but by manipulating the inherent energies within both metals, balancing them." He finished with a flourish, stepping back, his chest rising and falling as he exhaled, his eyes scanning the three examiners' expressions.

Master Alchemist Borman's mouth was slightly ajar as he studied Eddie's work. He had expected a failure, something half-hearted, perhaps a hastily scribbled theory or nonsense. But instead, there was structure, logic, and above all, depth to Eddie's reasoning.

Wizard Aelfric was nodding, slowly, his fingers stroking his beard. "You've taken what was meant to be a challenge and turned it into an exploration of possibility," he murmured, more to himself than to anyone else.

Emma Somers was still as composed as ever, though now there was an appreciative gleam in her eyes. "The test asked for transmutation," she said, her voice quiet but approving. "Not just of Lead to Gold, but of thought – transforming a seemingly impossible task into something with meaning. You've done that."

The room seemed to hold its breath as Borman exhaled sharply, shaking his head with a mixture of frustration and respect. "A lot of words, Mr. Welton," he said, his voice still stern. "But no gold."

Eddie met his gaze, unflinching. "No, sir. There is no gold. There's a truth, though. A gold that cannot be touched, only understood."

Emma glanced at the scrolls Eddie had placed before them and then back at him, her voice soft but firm. "You've done something no one else here has done, Eddie. You didn't just try to follow an impossible directive. You questioned it, challenged it, and turned it into a meaningful exploration."

Aelfric chuckled softly, leaning back in his chair. "The boy's stubborn, but he has the spirit of an Alchemist."

Borman sighed, his disappointment still evident but tempered by a grudging respect. "Perhaps... but can an Alchemist afford to spend so much time on what is impossible?"

Eddie stood a little straighter, his voice steady. "Maybe it's impossible now. But it's never a waste to explore the boundaries of the impossible."

There was a long pause. Eddie's scrolls — his answer to the task — were laid out in front of the examiners. Unlike the other candidates, Eddie had not presented gold or fake gold, but something far more valuable in the eyes of the examiners: a way of thinking.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Borman stood up and spoke, his tone softer now. "You may not have succeeded in transmuting Lead to Gold in the traditional sense, Welton, but you've proven something else. You've proven you understand Alchemy better than most other candidates."

Eddie looked at the scrolls, feeling the weight of his mentor's teachings and his own frustrations finally come together in a meaningful way. The impossible had been challenged. And that, he thought, was the true goal.

As Eddie stood there, watching the three examiners scribble notes on their scrolls, he couldn't help but feel a mix of exhaustion and relief wash over him. The weight of the test, the tension in the room, the suffocating pressure of the impossible task – it was all over now. He'd done his part.

"That was a nice explanation, Mr. Welton," Master Borman muttered, his voice dripping with reluctant approval. But there was no mistaking the thin veil of annoyance in his tone, his pride clearly bruised. He didn't like being outshone, especially not by a young candidate with unruly silver hair and a cocky, confident air about him.

"Now get the hell out of my examination room," Borman finished, his stern gaze unwavering.

Eddie caught the slight twitch of Borman's lip, the barely contained irritation in his voice, and it made him smirk just slightly. *A blow to his ego*, Eddie thought, but he wouldn't rub it in. He didn't have to. The man had already been bested by his own rigid approach to the test.

Wizard Aelfric, on the other hand, seemed far more entertained, a glint of pleasure dancing in his eyes as he leaned back in his chair, clearly satisfied with Eddie's performance. His hands moved lazily, absentmindedly adjusting his robes as he let out a low chuckle, clearly pleased with the way things had unfolded. *A clever young one*, Aelfric must have been thinking. *Not easily deterred, and quick on his feet.*

Emma Somers, though, smiled at Eddie in a way that felt both approving and secretive. There was no outward judgment, only a subtle satisfaction in her expression, the slight arch of her brow saying more than words ever could. She, at least, seemed to

appreciate the depth of his answer, not merely for the fact that he had defied the task's original constraints, but for how he had reframed the entire test in a new light.

"You can get the souvenirs at the reception desk on your way out, Mr. Welton," Emma said, her voice gentle yet still carrying that hint of authority that made it clear she was in charge of the candidates' fates.

Eddie nodded, stifling a smile as he made his way toward the door, only for Emma's voice to stop him in his tracks. "Oh, and before you leave, Eddie..." she called out, her tone laced with just enough amusement to catch his attention.

Eddie paused, half-turning back. "Yes?"

Emma met his eyes, her smile widening. "You're not fighting a bear with a toothpick," she said, her words soft yet pointed. "You're a lot more capable than you give yourself credit for." She gave him a knowing look.

Eddie's cheeks flushed, a wave of embarrassment creeping over him. He managed a sheepish smile, scratching the back of his head. "Uh... Thank you, Mrs. Somers." he muttered, cheeks warm as he tried to hold onto his remaining dignity knowing she heard him curse back during the examination.

Without a word, Eddie turned and exited the examination room. The door clicked shut behind him with a finality that made his chest rise and fall in a heavy breath. The hallway outside was quiet, the faint echo of footsteps from other candidates still lingering in the air.

He made his way to the reception desk, each step feeling lighter as the weight of the exam and its uncertainty fell away from him.

Souvenirs, he thought with a half-smile. It seemed almost fitting. He hadn't come out of the exam with gold, but with something more valuable: an answer, his own. And that was worth far more than any gilded trophy.

Chapter XIII



Torrie sat cross-legged on the living room floor, arranging her dolls in a perfect little row. She'd given each one a name and decided they'd be attending a royal tea party, except half of them weren't dressed properly yet.

"Torrie, breakfast is almost ready," her mother called from the kitchen. "Could you wake your brother?"

Torrie sighed, setting her favorite doll down reluctantly. She padded down the hallway to Eddie's door and knocked lightly. No answer. She knocked again, a little louder this time. Nothing.

"Eddie! Breakfast!" she said, her voice slipping into a singsong tone as she leaned her ear against the door. Silence.

After a pause, Torrie set her jaw and gave one last, insistent knock, her patience starting to wear thin. "Eddie, if you're in there and ignoring me, I'm telling Mum!"

"Go away, Torrie." a faint mumbling voice could be heard behind the door

Her eyes narrowed, her frustration growing. Of course Eddie was in there – probably still sulking from the exam or pretending to sleep through breakfast. Torrie had no time for this. She had a world of dolls to organize, and Eddie was being completely uncooperative.

She reached into her skirt's pocket, fingers brushing against her new wand. A small, polished piece of wood – still unfamiliar in her grasp, but just powerful enough to get the job done. With a quick flick and a murmur of the unlocking incantation her mother had taught her, she felt the familiar tingle of magic work through her fingertips. The door handle clicked open.

Torrie grinned, pushing the door just enough to slip inside.

"Finally," she muttered to herself.

But as the door creaked open, she couldn't help but feel a twinge of excitement. This was her first time using her wand on her own – unlocking her brother's door was, in a way, a small triumph.

Torrie slipped inside and wrinkled her nose at the overwhelming mix of smells – herbs, burnt metal, and a strange smokiness that made her eyes water a bit. Eddie's room was a disaster zone. Rune papers were scattered across the floor, some with hastily drawn symbols and others crumpled up as if they'd been tossed in frustration. Books lay open, half-buried under empty potion vials, and a small burner was still faintly glowing from the last experiment he must have conducted.

And there, in the middle of this alchemical chaos, was Eddie – sprawled out on his back, an arm covering his eyes, surrounded by scrolls, like he'd just collapsed and decided the mess of a bed was good enough for a nap. Torrie tiptoed over and gave him a small nudge with her foot.

"Eddie," she whispered sharply. "Mum says breakfast is ready."

No response. He didn't even flinch.

She nudged him harder. "Eddie, you're going to miss breakfast!"

Still nothing. He looked completely wiped out, and she could see faint circles under his eyes, hinting at his exhaustion. It was clear he'd probably worked himself to the bone over the last few weeks with little sleep and barely any time at home. But that didn't make her any less annoyed.

"Ugh, come on, Eddie!" she huffed, folding her arms, and gave him one last, resolute kick. But he lay there, oblivious, dead to the world, still lost in the heavy sleep of someone who'd pushed himself too far.

Torrie scowled, crossing her arms. "Fine! Be that way," she muttered, half to herself. But, as she looked around at the scattered rune papers and potion bottles, an idea began to form — a mischievous little grin creeping across her face.

Torrie grabbed a half-full glass of water from Eddie's cluttered desk, her mischievous grin widening as she tiptoed back over to his sleeping form. She hesitated for a split second, then quickly dumped the cold water onto his face.

Eddie jolted up, sputtering. "Torrie — what —" He wiped his face, blinking at her in shock. "You could've just woken me up normally, couldn't you?"

Torrie shrugged, looking entirely too pleased with herself. "I did, but you wouldn't budge. I knocked, called your name, everything!"

He groaned, glancing at the damp floor. "You didn't have to soak me to get me up."

"Well, it worked, didn't it?" she replied with a cheeky smile.
"Mom said to eat breakfast," she added as she backed out of his room, turning to leave with a triumphant grin.

Eddie watched her disappear down the hall, shaking his head.
Typical Torrie—always finding the most "creative" ways to get her way.



Eddie poked at his omelette absentmindedly, glancing now and then at Torrie, who was happily munching on her fish and mashed potatoes. Mrs. Welton noticed her son's half-hearted bites and gave him a gentle nudge.

"So, how did it go?" she asked, concern woven into her tone.
"Your time with Catherine, the exam..."

Eddie sighed, leaning back in his chair. "Mentorship was... rough. Catherine went all out on me, like it was life or death," he replied, a faint smile flickering. "Guess I should've expected that."

Mrs. Welton chuckled knowingly. "That sounds just like her. Catherine's never been one to ease anyone into anything—especially her students. She was like that when I was learning magic too."

Torrie perked up, pausing mid-bite. "Wait, Catherine taught you too, Mom? But... how?"

Mrs. Welton turned to Torrie, smiling as if she'd waited a long time for that question. "Well, elves age differently. They go through a childhood, sure, but at some point, they just... stop

aging. Catherine looked just like she does now when I was a little girl, studying magic myself. And to this day, she still treats me like her younger sister, even if it seems the opposite now.”

“Doesn’t that get confusing?” Torrie asked, eyes wide.

“A little.” Mrs. Welton laughed, giving Eddie a knowing look.

“But Catherine’s heart is always in the right place. Her standards are just – well, impossibly high. It’s hard to be one of her students, but she teaches with the same passion she learned with... And how about the examination, Eddie? did you do well?” Mrs. Welton asked

Eddie paused for a moment, his fork halfway to his mouth as he thought over his answer. He knew his mother would want to hear something optimistic, but the truth was a little messier.

“Not a single bit of what Catherine taught me came up,” Eddie said, shaking his head. “And what I thought was the entrance exam? Turns out it was a proficiency test. Emma Somers set up the whole thing, and it was way beyond what I was prepared for.” He sighed, the frustration still lingering in his voice.

Mrs. Welton chuckled softly, her eyes twinkling with a knowing amusement. “Would it surprise you if I said that’s exactly what Catherine would have done?”

Eddie looked up from his plate, eyebrows raised in confusion. “What do you mean, mom?”

“Well,” Mrs. Welton began, “Catherine’s never just handed down information. She doesn’t just teach her students what to think, she makes them dig deeper – reach for answers they’d never expect. Catherine will often test her students in ways that don’t

come up in her lessons to push them beyond what they know. She's wickedly good at it."

Eddie blinked, piecing together the exam and Catherine's training with a new understanding. "So... they were trying to get me to do something impossible?"

"Or rather," Mrs. Welton said, "they were challenging you to think beyond the obvious."

Eddie nodded, lost in thought as he slowly chewed his food. "She is indeed one wicked elf."

Mrs. Welton chuckled again, clearly pleased by Eddie's response. "She is indeed. But that's what makes her such a good teacher. She doesn't let you settle for the easy way out. So, how'd it go? Did you do well?"

His mouth felt dry as he fiddled with his fork, barely noticing that the rest of his breakfast had gone cold. "I don't know, Mom," he muttered, looking down at his plate. "Maybe I went too far. I mean, I did give them that scroll instead of anything physical. And then when the examinee asked me, I... I got too cocky. I should've just kept my head down. What if they think I'm arrogant? What if they fail me because of that?" His voice was full of distress as he overanalyzed his every word and action from yesterday's exam. "Maybe I messed up with how I responded to them."

Torrie, who had been poking at her mashed potatoes, looked up with a mischievous grin. "Maybe you should learn to be a little more humble next time, Eddie," she teased, her voice playful.

Eddie shot her an incredulous look, his brow furrowing as his tone grew defensive. "What? It's not like they didn't challenge me first," he said, his voice rising with a slight hint of annoyance. "I'm not going to sit there and pretend to fail just to make them happy. If they want me to act all meek and proper, they should've just go to Aella Academy!."

Mrs. Welton chuckled softly, a knowing smile curling at the corners of her mouth. "Oh, Eddie, always so ready to argue." She turned her gaze to Torrie, who was now snickering quietly at her older brother's reaction. "You do know he gets that from you, right?" she added to her younger daughter with a wink.

Torrie, clearly enjoying Eddie's exasperation, just laughed and shook her head. "Maybe, but you should've seen how worked up he got over something as small as a comment. He looked like he was about to set the place on fire."

"Look, I'm not *that* bad," Eddie grumbled, but his tone lacked the usual sharpness as he slouched back in his chair. The familiar banter between him and his family eased some of his nervous tension.

As Eddie sat back, his thoughts drifting once again to the exam, he heard his father's footsteps coming in from the storefront. Mr. Welton, a tall, steady man with warm eyes and a patient smile, walked into the kitchen holding an envelope in his hand. "Eddie," he called out, holding the letter up with a slight smile, "you've got something here. It's from Edenfield."

Eddie's heart skipped a beat as he took in the letter's elegant, cream-colored paper, stamped with the Owl Emblem of Sage's Academy and the Laurel Wreath of Edenfield University. He'd seen those symbols countless times in his dreams of attending the

university – but now that they were in front of him, he wasn't sure he wanted to look. A heavy silence filled the room as Eddie stared at the letter, suddenly feeling as though his entire future rested on the small piece of paper.

Torrie looked over from across the table, her eyes wide with anticipation. "Go on, Eddie, open it!" she urged, a little too excitedly.

But Eddie's hand hovered over the envelope, hesitating. "What if it's... what if it's a rejection?" he muttered, almost to himself. He could already imagine the polite phrasing, the cold dismissal of his efforts, and the distant words wishing him "Good luck next time." He could hear Master Borman's voice telling him he'd failed. His stomach twisted at the thought, and he felt an uncomfortable lump in his throat.

Mrs. Welton reached over, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Whatever it says, Eddie, you've come this far," she said softly, her voice filled with reassurance. "No letter can take that from you."

Eddie took a deep breath, his fingers finally closing around the envelope as he held it up. The official seals gleamed under the light, adding to the weight of the moment. He glanced at his family, who were all watching him with encouragement and curiosity, and, with one last steadying breath, he slowly tore it open.

Eddie's fingers trembled slightly as he carefully slid the delicate letter out of the envelope. The paper felt expensive, sturdy, and he noticed the intricate elven embroidery along the edges – a shining Solivian pattern, as delicate as spider silk, printed in a glossy silver ink. He ran his fingers over the embossed texture,

marveling at its craftsmanship. This was no ordinary letter; it was a message from Edenfield, crafted with the utmost care.

The text, written in elegant cursive with perfectly even strokes, must have come from one of Isgardia's renowned writing automatons. Eddie held his breath, his eyes scanning the first few lines.

"To Edward Welton of Weshaven,

In recognition of your application and recent performance during the assessment, we, the Faculty of Alchemy, hereby acknowledge the diligence and effort displayed. It has been noted that while your general knowledge of magic remains somewhat outdated, your performance in the field of alchemical theory has been nothing short of extraordinary. We were especially impressed by your depth of understanding in hypothetical transmutation and the innovative approach you applied to solve the impossible." _

Eddie's pulse quickened, but he couldn't quite read the tone — were they impressed enough to overlook his weaknesses? Torrie leaned over his shoulder, eyes wide as she followed the text.

"We recognize the unconventional nature of your submission and the courage it took to present an idea rather than a product, an exploration rather than a final result. This approach, though unorthodox, has shown a promising insight into the true nature of alchemical study, a quality highly valued within the hallowed halls of Edenfield University."

Eddie's heart was pounding. His throat felt dry as he read further, still unsure — were they acknowledging his potential, or merely giving him polite recognition before a formal rejection?

"Thus, the council has reached a decision – "

Eddie paused, the words lingering in his mind like the cliff edge of a steep precipice. He could feel his mother's gaze on him, her encouragement silent but palpable, while Torrie held her breath beside him, barely containing her own anticipation.

Eddie's eyes raced down the final lines of the letter, and his breath hitched in his throat as the words finally came into full focus.

"That, despite the unconventional nature of your submission, your efforts have not gone unnoticed. Your knowledge of alchemy proves extraordinary, and it is with great pleasure that we announce your acceptance into Edenfield University of Applied Magical Knowledge."

Eddie's mind buzzed, but the next sentence hit him like a thunderclap.

"The Faculty of Alchemy welcomes you with open arms."

He stared at the signature beneath it, his gaze moving over the elegant cursive once, twice, to make sure it was real.

At the bottom of the letter were two names – one in flowing script, the other bold and authoritative:

***Aelfric of Glyndorith**, Wizard, Chancellor of Edenfield University*

***Horatio Borman**, Master Alchemist, Head of Faculty of Alchemy, Edenfield University*

It was real. Eddie could hardly believe it. He was staring at his future in that letter, proof that everything he'd worked for, the

countless sleepless nights, the grueling test – everything – had led to this moment.

Eddie's eyes widened, and for a moment, it felt as though time itself had stopped. He looked up at his mother, his father, and then at Torrie, all of them equally stunned, yet hopeful in the way they stared at him.

For a moment, Eddie said nothing. He could feel his pulse thundering in his ears, the air suddenly too thick to breathe. Then, his mouth dry, he managed to stammer out,

"I'm in." His voice cracked, and he said it again, louder this time, though still unsure if he fully believed it. "I got accepted to Edenfield."

The room seemed to hold its breath before erupting. Mrs. Welton's face softened into an expression of pride, and Torrie, barely able to contain her excitement, jumped out of her seat and flung her arms around her older brother.

"You did it, Eddie! You really did it!" Torrie's voice was filled with disbelief and joy, and Eddie could hardly hold back a grin as he hugged her back, feeling the weight of the past weeks of stress finally lift.

Mr. Welton, his stern face breaking into a rare smile, clapped his hands together. "I knew you had it in you, Eddie. Well done."

Mrs. Welton's eyes twinkled with pride. "Edenfield... This is just the beginning for you, my boy. You've made us proud."

Eddie sat there, the letter still in his hands, hardly able to take it all in. It felt surreal, like some dream he hadn't dared to hope for.

He was going to Edenfield — he was going to become part of something bigger, something that would change everything.

For the first time in days, Eddie allowed himself to relax, the overwhelming anxiety and uncertainty giving way to something else entirely: hope.



Eddie sat on the edge of his bed, the warm glow of his bedside lamp casting a gentle light over his room. Outside, rain drummed softly against the window, filling the night with a steady, soothing rhythm. He held the now-crinkled envelope from Edenfield University, still in disbelief that its contents had changed his life in just one morning.

As he turned the envelope over, his fingers brushed against a hidden weight within it. Curious, he reached back into the envelope and pulled out a second, more personal-looking letter. His brows knitted together as he carefully unfolded it, recognizing the neat script of Emma Somers.

He read quietly, the room settling into a hushed stillness as her words sank in:

"Dear Edward,

First and foremost, congratulations on your acceptance to Edenfield University. You have earned it through merit, hard work, and courage. I am writing to tell you how genuinely pleased I am for you and to provide details for your departure to Edenfield next month. I hope you're as ready for this journey as I know you will be.

I owe you an apology for the last few weeks. You've no doubt sensed my hesitation – my doubt, even. Know that it was never personal, only the weight of the expectations placed upon this institution. Yet you exceeded every challenge placed before you, and I can confidently say you belong in Edenfield.

I wish you all the best in what's to come, and may this journey be everything you hope for. I believe you'll find your way to greatness in the path that lies ahead._

With warm regards,

Emma Somers"

Eddie stared at the letter, a quiet pride settling into him as he read her words. He could feel a renewed determination stirring within him. This wasn't just a new beginning; it was an acknowledgment of his efforts, his worth. Her words held a weight he hadn't expected, and for a moment, the self-doubt that had haunted him seemed to fade.

Eddie lay back on his bed, staring at the ceiling as memories washed over him, each one like a page turning in a story he'd only just begun to understand. He thought of the long days spent poring over books with Catherine, the whispered doubts that had crept into his mind as he'd struggled to understand alchemical principles, and the seemingly endless nights when he'd questioned if magic was even his path to follow. How many times had he stared into his potions and incantations, feeling that, somehow, magic itself was just beyond his reach?

He could remember moments of frustration – those days when the spells didn't work, when his concoctions fizzled, when he felt like he was forcing something that didn't belong to him. And yet,

he could remember, too, the joy when things did click, when he created something marvelous, even if small. But until today, he'd always wondered whether he deserved any of it.

Now, reading Emma's letter, he felt a new sense of validation. Her faith in him felt like more than just an endorsement for Edenfield; it was the first real, solid proof that others saw in him what he'd so often struggled to see in himself. For the first time, he felt the quiet weight of the responsibility that came with magic – not a burden, but a privilege he had earned.

Closing Emma's letter, Eddie took a deep breath, letting a feeling of calm settle over him. The journey ahead was daunting, yes, but it was also one he was ready for. Edenfield would be another chapter – a chance to discover not just the magic in the world, but the strength within himself. He'd earned his place, and for the first time, he truly believed it.

The rain continued its soft murmur outside, and as Eddie drifted into sleep, a sense of peace filled him, as though all his past struggles had prepared him for the journey ahead.

Zaydan Akbar

Chapter XIV



More stories to come...