

ACT II

PART II

THE EDENFIELD CHORNICLES

Book 1 [ACT II] [Part II]

Draft III

[Drafted in 2nd of December, 2024]

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The Edenfield chornicles

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First Printing Edition, 2024

ISBN: 0123456789

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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ACT II pt 2 | Chapter 1



Eddie sat cross-legged on the cool grass under the sprawling oak tree, the shade casting soft shadows around him. In his lap was a sandwich wrapped in wax paper, which he unwrapped slowly, taking absentminded bites. The park was alive with the gentle rustling of leaves in the breeze, the occasional laugh of students walking past, and the cheerful chirping of birds above. Yet, despite the beauty and tranquility of Eithrel Park, Eddie's thoughts weighed heavily on him.

His gaze was fixed on the bronze statue of Sage Caerwyn Eithrel standing at the heart of the park. The Founder's serene, wise expression seemed to pierce through Eddie, his open palm a silent call for introspection. Eddie swallowed a bite of his sandwich and shifted uncomfortably, feeling the statue's imposing presence.

The words inscribed on the circular platform echoed in his mind: *"To unite knowledge with life, and magic with purpose."* Eddie's thoughts spiraled. Was he truly worthy of standing here, in this prestigious university built on the ideals of unity and purpose? Or was Christine right—was he only here because of Catherine's influence?

His fingers fidgeted with the sandwich wrapper as his thoughts grew darker. *What am I even doing here?* he thought bitterly. *I can barely manage my spells without causing chaos, let alone live up to these ideals. How can I, of all people, carry the weight of something like that?*

Eddie glanced at the Alchemy Faculty Building in the distance, its gothic spires looming over the park like silent sentinels. He hadn't even stepped foot inside yet. His Foundational Courses kept him far from the specialized halls where real Alchemy students worked, and now he wondered if he'd ever belong there. The idea of walking into that building someday felt like staring up at a mountain he was unfit to climb.

Another gust of wind ruffled the pages of the notebook lying beside him. The sound snapped him out of his thoughts, and he realized his sandwich had gone cold in his hands. He sighed and took another reluctant bite, his appetite all but gone.

The faint chiming of the park's fountain carried on the breeze, mingling with the distant sounds of student life. Eddie's eyes drifted back to the statue, searching Caerwyn's bronze expression for some kind of reassurance or sign. Of course, none came. He huffed, annoyed at his own spiraling thoughts. *It's just a statue. Get a grip.*

Still, he couldn't shake the creeping sense of impostor syndrome gnawing at him. The founder of magical education had envisioned a place where brilliance and potential flourished, and Eddie couldn't help but feel like a glaring exception to that vision.

Eddie leaned back against the sturdy oak tree, half of his sandwich still wrapped and resting in his lap. His jade-green eyes stared out at the statue of Caerwyn Eithrel, though his mind was elsewhere. The bustling park seemed to fade into the background, the laughter of students and rustling of leaves drowned out by the familiar hum of self-doubt.

The faint crunch of approaching footsteps barely registered to him until — "Peek-a-boo!"

Eddie jolted upright, nearly dropping his sandwich. His gaze snapped up to see Madeleine standing over him, a playful grin lighting up her face. She tilted her head, clearly amused by his startled reaction.

"Madeleine!" Eddie exhaled, clutching the sandwich wrapper like a lifeline. "Don't sneak up on me like that!"

She laughed, her bright, carefree tone cutting through the weight in his chest. "I couldn't help it! You looked like you were lost in some kind of deep, brooding hero moment."

Eddie sighed, trying to settle his racing thoughts. "More like a deep, doubting failure moment."

Madeleine's smile softened as she swung her satchel—a near twin to Eddie's—over her shoulder and carefully swept the back of her skirt. She plopped down on the grass beside him, her movements graceful yet casual. "Well, now I'm here to interrupt your self-pity session," she teased gently.

Her tone softened further as she added, "How are you holding up?"

Eddie shrugged, avoiding her gaze and staring back at the statue. "I'm... fine, I guess."

Madeleine tilted her head, watching him carefully. "You don't look fine," she said lightly, though her eyes betrayed genuine concern. "Want to tell me what's going on, or do I have to poke and prod until you spill it?"

Eddie managed a faint chuckle, finally turning to meet her gaze. "It's just... I've been thinking about whether I really belong here. You know, at Edenfield."

Madeleine's expression shifted, her playful demeanor tempered by a quiet understanding. She didn't interrupt, giving him the space to continue.

"Everyone seems so sure of themselves," Eddie went on, his voice low. "Like they were born for this. But me? I'm just stumbling around, barely getting by. Sometimes it feels like I'm the only one who doesn't have it all figured out."

Madeleine leaned back, resting her hands on the grass. She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment before speaking. "Eddie, no one has it all figured out. Trust me. Some of us are just better at pretending."

Madeleine, sensing the shift in the air, turned her gaze toward Eddie, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. "So, Eddie, have you ever read much about Sage Eithrel, the Founder?" she asked, her voice casual, but with a trace of curiosity.

Eddie looked at her and nodded. "Yeah, I've read about him. He was some kind of hero, right? He's the one who united the Nine Sages—three Elven Mages, three Wizards from the Mortal Men, and three Inventors from the Dwarves. That's about all I know. He helped lay the foundation for magical education. All that heroic stuff." He gestured toward the statue. "Seems like a big deal."

Madeleine smiled faintly, her expression far less exuberant than Eddie's. She shifted on the grass to face him more directly, her voice growing more measured. "That's true, but there's more to his story. Not exactly the one they teach in the standard textbooks."

Eddie frowned, intrigued. "What do you mean?"

Madeleine glanced back at the statue. "Well, historically, Sage Eithrel wasn't exactly the shining hero they make him out to be. In fact, when he first started teaching magic to mortals, the Elves saw it as sacrilege." She paused, letting that sink in. "He was actually an outcast among his own people, banished from the

Elven Kingdom for defying tradition. Everyone thought he was a fool, trying to teach magic to humans and dwarves. The Elves considered it a disgrace.”

Eddie blinked, surprised. “But... he was one of the Nine Sages, wasn’t he? Why would they reject him?”

Madeleine shrugged, her eyes distant. “Because Sage Eithrel was something of a revolutionary. He didn’t fit their mold. He believed magic should be shared, that it shouldn’t be confined to one race or one group of people. His vision wasn’t popular.”

She leaned forward slightly, her gaze intense. “He spent years wandering, teaching, trying to spread magic as a way to unite different cultures. The humans didn’t exactly take kindly to him, either. At first, they saw him as just another outcast, not someone worthy of respect. And the dwarves were... well, they weren’t big fans of anyone who wasn’t a Dwarf. It took time before he gathered the Nine Sages who shared his vision.”

Eddie, still processing this new perspective, shifted on the grass, his eyes now focused on the statue. “So, Sage Eithrel was a bit of an outsider, then?”

Madeleine nodded, her voice lowering a little. “Exactly. But here’s the twist: Despite all that—despite uniting magical education, despite his success in building Edenfield University and spreading magic across the lands—Sage Eithrel was... unable to cast magic in a stable, controlled way himself.”

Eddie’s eyes widened. “Wait, what? You mean, he couldn’t do magic properly?”

Madeleine’s smile was gentle, almost wistful. “He couldn’t. His magic was chaotic, destructive, unstable. He was a combat mage during the Great Mages War, and his magic was powerful—

sure—but it was always unpredictable. It was wild magic, like the kind you're struggling with."

Eddie froze. His heart beat faster, a sudden pang of disbelief surging through him. "You mean... he was like me?"

Madeleine turned fully toward him now, her expression soft but knowing. "Yes. He was like you, Eddie. He could create devastation, but it was never clean, never controlled. His magic was a reflection of his own inner turmoil, just like yours is. But in the end, it didn't stop him from accomplishing what he did. He still made history, even with his imperfections."

Eddie blinked, staring at her in a mix of shock and realization. He had always thought of Sage Eithrel as a figure of unwavering mastery, someone to be admired for his control and skill. But now... now he saw the hidden cracks in the image. Madeleine's words resonated deep within him, filling the spaces between his doubts. He hadn't been alone in his struggles. He wasn't broken just because his magic didn't behave the way it was supposed to.

Eddie's chest tightened. He hadn't expected the comparison, but somehow, it didn't feel like an insult. In fact, it felt like a strange kind of relief, though he couldn't place why. "What do you mean? I'm nothing like that. I don't even know what's happening with my magic half the time."

Madeleine looked at him thoughtfully. "Maybe you're more like him than you realize. Perhaps, just like Sage Eithrel, you come from a long line of magical combatants. Mages bred for battle, their power meant to be unleashed in chaos, not in controlled, everyday life. It could be something passed down to you—magical inclinations that make you a powerful mage, but one who will struggle to stabilize it in ordinary circumstances."

Eddie's heart raced, and his thoughts swirled as the weight of her words sunk in. Could it really be that simple? Was his erratic magic not a flaw in himself, but something inherited, a legacy of warriors and combatants who had been trained to fight, not to study?

Eddie's hands clenched into fists at his sides, a surge of frustration building inside him. "But how do I fix it?" he asked again, his voice tight. "It's not right. I can barely control it."

Madeleine's smile softened, and she shook her head slightly, a gentle laugh escaping her. "You don't fix it, Eddie," she said, her voice calm, almost maternal. "It's not broken. It's part of you. Something you were born with, passed down from your lineage. It's not something to fix. It's just something you have to learn to work with."

Eddie blinked, taken aback by her words. He had always seen his magic as a flaw, something that was wrong, something that needed to be corrected. But what if it wasn't wrong at all? What if it was just... part of who he was?

Madeleine stood up, brushing the grass and dirt off her skirt with practiced ease. "Now," she said, tapping her hands on her hips, "ready to start the practice, Eddie Eithrel?"

Her teasing tone caught Eddie off guard, and he looked up at her, startled for a moment before a small grin tugged at the corners of his mouth.

"Eddie Eithrel?" he echoed with a raised eyebrow. "Is that what you're going with now?"

Madeleine winked, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "You said it yourself—Eithrel, the founder. And here you are, sitting under his statue, pondering your magic. If you're going to inherit his legacy, you might as well live up to the name."

Eddie chuckled, shaking his head. "I don't know about all that. But alright, let's give it a try."

He stood up, feeling the weight of the books still slung over his shoulder, but somehow, his mind was lighter. Madeleine was right—his magic wasn't broken. It was just part of him, something to work with, not against. Maybe it was time he started thinking of it that way.

Madeleine gave him a quick nod, her face turning serious for a moment. "Good. Let's start small, alright? Focus on the basics. Trust your instincts. I'll guide you through it."

Eddie nodded, feeling a new sense of resolve settle into him. Maybe he wasn't as broken as he had always thought. Maybe there was more to his magic—and to him—than he had given credit. And with Madeleine by his side, maybe he could finally start to find his way.



Eddie sat cross-legged on the grass, his hands resting on his knees, a small quartz crystal laid out in front of him. He glanced at Madeleine, who was standing a few feet away with her arms crossed, observing him intently. The sunlight filtered through the leaves above, casting dappled shadows across the park, but Eddie's mind was elsewhere—on the textbook notes he'd crammed into his head, the countless theories on mana flow, and the endless exercises he'd attempted with little success.

"I've read everything I could find on mana projection," Eddie started, his voice tinged with frustration. "Textbooks, practical

guides, even the old journals in the library. None of it works for me with *this* condition." He gestured vaguely at himself, as if his magic was a tangible thing he could push away. "I need to stabilize it. Understand how mana flows. The mechanics of it. That's the only way I'll make sense of this chaos."

Madeleine listened quietly, her gaze never leaving him. When he finished, she tilted her head, considering his words. After a moment of silence, she spoke.

"You're looking for a textbook solution, Eddie," she said, her tone soft but firm. "Just because something works for the majority of magicians doesn't mean it's going to work for you. Magic's not always something you can explain. Sometimes, you just have to *feel* it."

Eddie furrowed his brow, his fingers tapping restlessly against the grass. "I want to stabilize my magic, understand the exact mechanics of mana flow. I want to make it... predictable. Controlled. Why can't I do that?"

Madeleine stepped closer, her voice steady. "Magic isn't always something you can explain or control with the same methods that work for everyone else. Sometimes, you just have to *feel* it. Magic is an instinct. It's a part of you that flows through you, not just a set of steps you can follow."

Eddie grimaced, running a hand through his hair. "That's not exactly... helpful," he muttered under his breath.

Eddie, still feeling the residual energy from the earlier attempt, carefully placed the small quartz crystal on the ground in front of

him. His fingers lingered over it for a moment, and then he grasped his wand – carved from driftwood, its surface rough in his hand, a small token of his Weshaven roots. The familiar weight of it brought him a sense of grounding, but as he looked down at the crystal, he felt a knot of tension twist in his stomach.

Madeleine's words echoed in his mind: *Don't force it. Let the magic come to you.*

He took a deep breath and raised his wand, focusing on the crystal. He imagined his magic flowing smoothly through the tip of his wand, channeling his mana into the stone. The air around him seemed to hum with potential, and for a fleeting moment, he thought he could feel the familiar surge of power coiling in his chest.

He pushed harder, trying to command the energy, willing the crystal to glow as he had seen in the textbook. But as soon as the first tendrils of mana reached the crystal's surface, it flickered – just a quick burst of light before it sputtered out. The light pulsed erratically, flickering like a dying flame, until finally – *crack* – the crystal shattered into jagged pieces, scattered across the grass.

Eddie stared at the fragments, his breath shallow. He had failed again. His magic, unpredictable as always, had exploded in the same chaotic manner. Frustration rose in his chest, and he felt a lump of distress clog his throat. He looked over at Madeleine, silently pleading for something, anything, that would make it stop feeling like he was wasting his time.

Madeleine didn't say anything right away. Instead, she stood still, watching the shattered pieces of the crystal. Then, after a beat,

she nodded calmly. "It's okay," she said, her tone reassuring. "The crystal is fine. If it overcharged and shattered, it can't hurt anyone. It's just a reaction."

Eddie's eyes were still fixed on the broken shards. He clenched his fists in frustration. "I just —" He stopped himself, then shook his head, his voice heavy with disappointment. "I tried to make it glow like in my first assignment. I thought if I could just do it, then I'd —" He cut himself off, letting the words trail off into the night air.

Madeleine crouched beside him, her presence calm and unwavering. "You were forcing it," she said softly, not in criticism, but as a simple observation. "You don't need to make it glow, Eddie. Magic isn't something you should *order* around, like following a set of instructions. It's not about trying to control it — it's about letting it flow naturally."

She paused for a moment, letting her words sink in, before continuing. "What you need to do is wait for it to glow. Don't force it. Let the magic respond to you, rather than trying to impose your will on it."

Eddie's brow furrowed. It was difficult for him to comprehend, to *unlearn* what had been drilled into him about the precision of magic and the orderliness of it all. He glanced down at the broken crystal pieces, still skeptical. "But if I don't force it, what am I supposed to do?"

Madeleine gave him a soft smile. "Trust it. Trust yourself. And wait for the moment when the magic is ready to flow."

She reached into her satchel and pulled out another crystal — this one smooth and slightly larger than the last. She handed it to Eddie with a small nod. "Try again. Don't think too hard about it. Just... feel it."

Eddie's fingers tightened around the driftwood wand, the weight of it grounding him for a moment. He took a deep breath, trying to steady himself as he stared at the crystal on the grass in front of him. He remembered Madeleine's words: *Don't force it. Let the magic flow.*

But there was something about it that felt *wrong* to him. He didn't know what "feeling it" meant. To him, magic had always been logical, mechanical. It was something that could be dissected, understood, controlled. There had to be a way to approach it like any other subject — like any other system that made sense.

Feel what? Eddie thought to himself, frustration bubbling up. How was he supposed to make sense of something so vague, so intangible? The idea of just waiting for it to happen, to *feel* it, was something he couldn't wrap his mind around. It was all so... *chaotic*. And he was the one who was supposed to control the chaos, to give it shape. He wasn't like the others. He couldn't just *feel* his way through it.

He raised his wand again, pointing it at the crystal, trying to follow the advice. He closed his eyes for a moment, focusing inward. The familiar rush of energy swirled inside him, but it was unruly, like a storm that refused to be tamed. His thoughts, despite his best efforts, were racing ahead, calculating, measuring, seeking control. He wasn't sure if it was the rush of energy or his

own mounting anxiety, but he could feel the mana spiking, surging out of him.

The crystal began to glow. Not a steady light, but an erratic flicker. A bright burst, and then — *crumble*. It shattered, turning to fine ash, scattering across the grass.

Eddie exhaled sharply, his shoulders sagging with the weight of his failure. His heart pounded in his chest, a mix of frustration and helplessness. He looked down at the pile of ash, feeling a heat rise in his cheeks. "I can't just *feel* it, Madeleine!" he muttered, his voice tight with irritation. "I need something to *do*. Something to follow. A system! Something I can work with, not just these vague instructions!"

Madeleine, who had been watching with calm patience, didn't seem bothered by the outburst. She waited for Eddie to finish speaking, letting his frustration air out before she spoke, her voice soft and understanding.

"Magic does have rules," she said, her tone steady. "But those rules won't work unless you know yourself first. And that's what you're missing — understanding who you are as a magic user. You can't rely on textbooks for that. Not every system works for everyone."

Eddie felt the heat of anger rise again, but it was different this time. It was less about the failure and more about the sense that he was failing to *understand*. But when he glanced at Madeleine, her expression kind and patient, something in him quieted. He felt a knot in his chest loosen. She wasn't trying to frustrate him; she was only offering him something he didn't know he needed.

He let out a frustrated sigh and ran a hand through his hair, trying to calm the storm of thoughts swirling inside his mind. "But how am I supposed to know what's *right* for me? How do I even start figuring that out?"

Madeleine smiled softly, her eyes warm with encouragement. She reached into her satchel and pulled out another crystal, just like the last one. "You'll figure it out, Eddie. It's not about finding the perfect method, it's about discovering your own way." She extended the crystal to him, her voice light. "Now, try again. You can do this."

Eddie stared at the new crystal in her hand. The urge to feel frustrated gnawed at him, but the sincerity in her eyes – the unspoken faith she had in him – was enough to quell it, at least for the moment.

He took the crystal from her, still feeling a little unsure, but more determined than before. He placed it on the ground, pointed his wand at it, and tried again, this time with a new focus. Instead of trying to control it, he let go of his need to understand every aspect of it. He focused instead on the crystal, letting his mind clear, feeling the energy swirl inside him, but this time, without trying to force it into any shape.

Eddie stood still for a moment, wand in hand, his brow furrowed in concentration. This time, he tried something different. Closing his eyes, he shut out everything – the crystal on the ground, the flickering glow it had cast moments before, Madeleine's patient presence beside him. He wouldn't look. He wouldn't think about what he was supposed to be doing. He was simply going to trust

his instincts. He'd been too rigid with magic before, too focused on rules, on systems. Maybe this time, he'd just *feel* it.

His heart beat a little faster as he focused inward, feeling the familiar surge of mana building inside him, swirling restlessly. He kept his mind empty, allowing his thoughts to settle, trusting that his body would know what to do. He pointed his wand toward the crystal, not caring if it was perfect, just letting the flow happen.

The mana moved through him — less frantically this time — but still with a pulse of erratic energy. The crystal began to glow again, faintly at first, then a little brighter, but not as wild as before. It flickered a few times, still unstable, but it was definitely *there*. For the first time, Eddie felt like he might be getting it under control.

But then, right as he thought he had it, the glow faltered and the crystal began to dim. It wobbled, and then — *shatter* — the crystal fractured and fell apart into tiny shards, dissolving into the grass beneath him.

Eddie sighed, frustration washing over him. He opened his eyes, looking at the remains of the crystal, the same sense of failure bubbling up again.

Madeleine, though, was smiling. She was patient, almost proud. "You see? You can do it. You just need to trust yourself."

Eddie shook his head, his shoulders tense with frustration. "No," he muttered, his voice thick with irritation. "That wasn't trust — that was luck. If I can't repeat it, it doesn't count."

He paced a few steps away, clenching his fists at his sides. "Magic has rules. Systems. You can't just ignore them and trust something as vague as instinct."

Madeleine's expression shifted slightly, though she remained calm. She approached him slowly, her words careful but gentle. "I'm not ignoring the rules, Eddie. I'm working *with* them. Your problem isn't that magic doesn't have a system, it's that you're trying to force it into a box it doesn't fit in."

Eddie spun around to face her, his voice rising as the frustration continued to swell inside him. "So I'm supposed to just abandon logic? Pretend that 'feeling it' is enough? That's not how it's supposed to work! I can't just *guess* my way through this. Magic needs structure. It needs precision."

Madeleine stood her ground, her tone soft but resolute, like someone who knew exactly where the conversation was headed. "Maybe that's why you're struggling," she said, her eyes meeting his with quiet understanding. "You're so focused on what magic is *supposed* to be that you can't see what it *is* for you. Magic doesn't have to fit a mold to work. Sometimes, you just have to find your own way."

Eddie stared at her, his mind racing. He didn't have an immediate response. The frustration was still there, but now something else was building — a flicker of doubt, or maybe curiosity. *What if he had been thinking about it all wrong?*

But he couldn't shake the thought that the system, the rules, had to exist for a reason. They were the foundation. Without them, how could anything truly be controlled?

Madeleine's words hung in the air, lingering in the space between them, as if they carried an entirely new weight to the practice of magic — a weight Eddie wasn't sure he was ready to carry yet. But as he stood there, breathing deeply, he realized something had shifted. Perhaps the answer wasn't just about the rules. Perhaps it was about how he approached them. And maybe — just maybe — it had something to do with *trusting* himself, not just the system.

But for now, the question remained: how could he reconcile the logic that had guided him for so long with the unpredictable flow of magic?

As Madeleine glanced at her watch, her expression shifted to one of mild surprise. "Oh, it's that time already," she murmured, adjusting the straps of her satchel. She gave her skirt a quick brush, removing the dirt and grass that had clung to it during their practice. Her movements were fluid, efficient, yet somehow graceful, as if she didn't mind the brief disruption to their session.

Eddie, still sitting on the ground with his wand resting in his lap, watched her with a mix of frustration and admiration. As he watched her prepare to leave, a small wave of realization hit him. He hadn't just failed to stabilize the magic — he'd lost his temper too. "Hey, uh..." Eddie called after her, standing up awkwardly. His voice faltered as he met her gaze. "I'm... sorry about earlier. I didn't mean to snap."

Madeleine paused, turning back to him with a soft smile. "It's alright, Eddie. It happens," she replied, her voice light and understanding. "You're still learning, and you're a first year. It's a lot to take in."

She gave him a reassuring wave before slinging her satchel over her shoulder again. With a soft, almost wistful smile, she began walking toward the Alchemy Faculty building. Eddie watched her go, but before she disappeared into the distance, Madeleine called back to him, her voice loud but warm, carrying across the expanse of the lawn in front of the building.

"You're not broken, Eddie. You just need to stop fighting yourself!"

Eddie blinked, the words catching him off guard. He stood there for a moment, as if the world had briefly stopped, before he waved a hand in response, though his heart still felt conflicted. The message echoed in his mind, louder than he wanted it to be. *Stop fighting yourself?*

As she made her way toward the building, her figure growing smaller in the distance, Eddie sank back down onto the grass under the oak tree. He crossed his arms over his chest, looking up at the sky, but Madeleine's words refused to leave him. *You're not broken...* It was maddening how simple they sounded and yet how difficult they were to accept.

He gripped his wand tightly, not ready to acknowledge how much of what she said might be true. He wasn't sure he could trust her logic – after all, magic was *supposed* to be systematic, right? He wasn't like her. But still... as he sat there, lost in thought, the words lingered, quietly rattling the walls of his certainty.

"Stop fighting yourself..."

Eddie shook his head, the thought too heavy to hold on to. He wasn't ready to admit she might be right — not yet. But for the first time, he wondered if there was something more to magic than he had been taught to believe.



The evening air was crisp, and the sky above was painted in hues of orange and purple, the last traces of daylight slipping away as the sun sank behind the ancient towers of Edenfield. Eddie walked slowly along the cobbled streets of the campus, his footsteps light but weighed down by the storm of thoughts swirling in his head.

As he made his way back to Dorm 7, his mind replayed Madeleine's words. *You're not broken. You just need to stop fighting yourself.* He couldn't shake the echo of her voice. He wanted to dismiss it — he wanted to tell himself that magic was about logic, about control, about systems that worked for everyone. But part of him couldn't quite ignore the flicker of doubt that had crept into his mind.

"What if she's right?" Eddie thought to himself, scuffing his boot against the cobblestones. *What if I've been approaching this all wrong?* It wasn't a thought he wanted to entertain, and so he buried it deep, vowing to find a solution his way. But the tension between his structured thinking and Madeleine's free-flowing approach clung to him, like an itch he couldn't scratch.

His chest tightened as he approached the dorms, the cool evening breeze lifting his hair slightly. He tried to push the feelings aside, but they lingered, and the unease began to settle in his gut.

Suddenly, a loud thud hit him from behind, followed by a pair of arms wrapping around his shoulders in a playful, unceremonious hug.

“Well, well, Eddie!” Will’s voice rang out, full of teasing mischief. “How’s the date with Madeleine going, huh?”

Eddie’s face instantly flushed a deep red. His heart skipped a beat, and he stammered out a quick response, trying his best to shake off Will’s arms. “It’s not — It wasn’t a date, Will!” He pulled away, his voice a little too defensive. “We were just practicing magic! You know, *studying*.”

Will raised an eyebrow, his grin widening. “Oh sure, studying, huh? Magic practice, huh? I can *totally* see it. You two were probably making sparks fly, eh?”

Eddie’s face burned hotter, and he quickly threw back, trying to regain some composure, “Shut up. I was just trying to figure out some new techniques. No sparks — no romance — no nothing.”

Before Will could continue, a voice came from behind them, sharp but playful, cutting through the teasing. “Will, for the last time, *knock it off*.”

Eddie turned to see Ashley walking up, shaking her head in mock exasperation. She was grinning, her eyes bright with

amusement as she shot Will a look. "Honestly, you're worse than a pair of gossiping hens."

Will laughed and threw his hands up in mock surrender. "Alright, alright, I'll leave the poor guy alone. For now." He shot Eddie a wink before stepping back.

Ashley grinned at Eddie, her playful banter momentarily lightening the air. "You alright, Eddie?" she asked, her tone softening slightly as she gave him a knowing glance. "You look like you're in the middle of some sort of inner crisis."

Eddie sighed, rubbing the back of his neck as he glanced at both of them. "I guess... just a lot on my mind," he muttered, trying to hide the storm brewing inside him. "Not about —" he cut himself off, shaking his head with a huff. "Forget it."

Will, noticing the shift in Eddie's demeanor, raised an eyebrow but didn't push it further. "Well, you've got to admit, it's nice to see you and Madeleine getting along so well." He grinned mischievously, poking Eddie's side. "Maybe one day you'll even *thank* me for this."

Eddie glared at him, but there was a slight smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Yeah, sure. Whatever, Chester."

Ashley nudged him playfully, though her eyes were soft with concern. "Just take it easy, alright? Whatever's going on in your head, don't let it get to you too much. We've all got our stuff to figure out."

Eddie nodded, though he felt far from settled. He didn't know how to explain the swirling mess inside him — how the growing tension between his logic and Madeleine's approach seemed like a puzzle he couldn't solve. But for now, he pushed those thoughts aside, focusing on the banter and the company of his friends.

As they all walked together toward Dorm 7, the last rays of the sun cast long shadows behind them. And for a moment, Eddie let himself enjoy the warmth of their laughter and the feeling of normalcy. Tomorrow, he would tackle everything head-on. But for tonight, it was enough just to walk with them, surrounded by the hum of the evening and the comfort of friends.

ACT II pt 2 | Chapter 2



Madeleine rushed down the stone corridors of the Alchemy Faculty building, the sound of her boots echoing off the walls as she hurried toward her Herbology lab. Her satchel bounced against her side with each step, and she barely spared a glance at the enchanted timepiece hanging from her belt, the hands rapidly ticking past the minutes. She had completely lost track of time.

Damn it, Madeleine, she thought, how did I let this happen?

She hadn't intended to be late, but after her practice session with Eddie, the minutes slipped away faster than she could account for them. She had been so focused on guiding him through his frustrations with mana control, encouraging him to trust himself, that she didn't even notice the sun slipping lower in the sky. She had barely left the lawn when she realized the time.

I really hope the professor isn't already inside... Madeleine thought as she rounded the corner to the lab. The door loomed ahead, and just as she reached it, she breathed a sigh of relief. The professor hadn't arrived yet, and the room was still buzzing with the chatter of her classmates, their voices soft as they prepared their workstations.

Madeleine slipped inside quietly, closing the door behind her and quickly scanning the room for an empty seat. Her eyes landed on Walther, who was sitting near the back, scribbling something down on a parchment. Without hesitation, she made her way

over to him, sliding into the chair next to his just as the door creaked open, signaling the professor's arrival.

Walther glanced up from his notes, raising an eyebrow as he noticed her breathless state. "Madeleine, you're late," he remarked, his tone laced with mild amusement. "You're usually the first one here, what happened?"

Madeleine ran a hand through her hair, giving a sheepish smile. "Yeah, I know... I was teaching Eddie how to control his mana. Lost track of time." She shrugged as if it was no big deal, though a part of her wondered if Walther would make a bigger deal out of it.

"Eddie?" Walther repeated, his interest piqued. "The new kid? The one from Weshaven?" His eyes narrowed slightly, as if trying to piece things together. "Is he still struggling with that... chaotic magic of his?"

Madeleine nodded, feeling a bit of a pang of sympathy for Eddie. "Yeah, that's him. He's having a tough time with it. His magic's all over the place, and he's been really frustrated with it. I'm just trying to help him get a handle on it. We're making some progress, but it's slow."

Walther gave a small, noncommittal grunt, returning his attention to his notes. "Hmph, well, it's good that you're helping him. But you've got to be careful, Madeleine. You can't lose yourself in someone else's problems. We all have our own to deal with."

Madeleine was about to respond, but the door swung open, and the professor entered, cutting off the conversation. Professor Griselda, a no-nonsense woman with sharp eyes and a stern expression, made her way to the front of the room, her robes rustling as she moved.

Madeleine turned her focus to the front, knowing that Walther's attention would shift back to the lesson as soon as it started. But even as the professor began her lecture on the properties of rare herbs and their applications in alchemy, Madeleine's mind drifted back to Eddie.

She couldn't shake the thought of his frustration, his doubts, and the way his magic flared out of control no matter how hard he tried to rein it in. She was starting to wonder if maybe, just maybe, there was more to his struggles than he let on. But for now, she would focus on the class, and later, when she had more time, she'd check in on him again.



The Herbology lab was filled with the scent of various herbs and the rhythmic sound of bubbling potions, each student focused on their tasks. Madeleine, however, seemed distracted. Her usually quick hands were moving slower, her eyes unfocused as she worked on her potion assignment. The once-precise measurements were now a little off, the colors in her brews not as vibrant, the consistency slightly off.

Walther, sitting across from her, glanced up from his own work, noting the subtle change in her demeanor. Madeleine, who usually cracked jokes and kept the atmosphere light, was unusually quiet today. Her brow furrowed slightly in concentration, but there was a distance in her gaze, as though something – someone – was preoccupying her mind.

He cleared his throat, leaning in a little closer. “Madeleine,” he said softly, “you’re... not yourself today. Something on your mind?”

Madeleine didn’t immediately respond, her attention still on her potion. She added a few more drops of essence, but the liquid didn’t shimmer as it was supposed to. She frowned, but then sighed, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I’m fine,” she said, trying to sound casual, but her voice lacked the usual cheer. Walther didn’t buy it. He raised an eyebrow, leaning back in his chair.

“You know, it’s not like you to get so... distracted,” he said. “You’ve always been the upbeat one. What happened?”

Madeleine glanced at him, catching the concern in his eyes. She opened her mouth to brush it off, but something in her expression softened, and she closed it again. She put down her stirring rod, her gaze dropping to the bubbling potion. She hesitated, then exhaled slowly.

“It’s... just something that’s been bothering me lately,” she admitted quietly, her voice laced with uncertainty.

Walther, sensing there was more to it, leaned forward, his tone lowering with interest. "Is it about Welton?"

Madeleine didn't immediately answer, "He looked awfully familiar..." .

Walther tilted his head, as if processing the idea, "He looked like your childhood friend, didn't he?" he asked, his voice still quiet but laced with curiosity.

Madeleine's breath caught in her throat, and her gaze flickered over to Walther. Her heart skipped a beat, as though his words had struck a nerve. Slowly, she nodded, but her expression darkened. She looked down at the table, fiddling with a stray piece of parchment as she tried to gather her thoughts.

"Yes," she murmured softly, her voice distant, almost lost in the noise of the room. "He... he looks just like him."

Walther's eyes narrowed, and a small frown tugged at his lips. "That's... impossible, Madeleine. You know that, right?" He lowered his voice further, glancing around the room to make sure no one was listening. "The king's family was murdered that night, 17 years ago. The Twin Princes – if they even survived – would have been..."

"Dead," Madeleine finished for him, her voice heavy with a sense of finality. "I know."

She fell silent for a moment, her gaze far away. Walther studied her face, noticing how her usual lighthearted demeanor had been

replaced with something darker. She had a sadness in her eyes now, an uncertainty that hadn't been there before.

"But... you think it's him, don't you?" Walther asked quietly, his voice almost a whisper. "You think Eddie could be one of them, the Prince?"

Madeleine's breath caught again, and she bit her lip, her gaze flickering toward the window, where the fading light of day cast long shadows across the floor.

"I don't know," she whispered, as if admitting it out loud would make it too real. "I just... I have this feeling, Walther. When I look at him, I see something familiar. I don't know how to explain it, but... something in my gut tells me that there's more to him than he's letting on. That he might be... someone I've lost."

Her hands clenched slightly, her knuckles pale. Walther watched her carefully, then sighed, leaning back in his chair.

"Well, whatever it is, it's clearly been eating at you," he said, his voice more neutral now. "You can't let it consume you, Madeleine. We've all been through a lot, and if Eddie *is* the Twin Prince, then... there's nothing we can do about it. Not until you know for sure."

Madeleine nodded slowly, her eyes fixed on the potion in front of her. She had the sinking feeling that she wasn't going to get any answers – at least not soon. But she couldn't shake the feeling that somehow, Eddie was tied to her past. A past she thought she had buried long ago.

"I know," she replied softly.

Walther, ever the perceptive one, took a slow breath, glancing at Madeleine as she focused on her work. There was something off about her today – more withdrawn, less engaged. He'd noticed it from the start, and now, he was more determined than ever to understand why.

He cleared his throat casually, though the question he asked was anything but. "So, Eddie... how's he doing with his mana training? I hear he's been struggling a bit. Does he always have that... natural flair for things? Or is it just you helping him out?" His tone was light, almost teasing, but there was a sharpness in his eyes that didn't match his casual facade.

Madeleine paused, her eyes flickering toward him. She didn't like the way he phrased the question – too probing, too specific. But she couldn't quite place why. She turned her attention back to her potion, her hands steady despite the odd discomfort building in her chest.

"He's learning," she said slowly, trying to keep her voice neutral. "He's... got a different way of approaching things, but I think he's getting there. He's just... stubborn."

Walther chuckled, though his eyes didn't quite meet hers. "Stubborn? That sounds like him. Not so different from some of the other first-years, I'd imagine. But you seem... invested. You've been spending a lot of time with him, huh?" He tapped his fingers on the edge of his table, the sound rhythmic, almost too deliberate.

Madeleine tensed slightly, but she shrugged, trying to dismiss the growing discomfort. "He's a student, Walther. I'm just helping out a friend."

Madeleine's hands trembled slightly as she stirred her potion, but she kept her eyes on the task at hand. The soft bubbling of the liquid was almost soothing, but Walther's words still hung in the air, heavy and insistent.

"Mm," Walther hummed thoughtfully, tapping his chin. "A friend, right. I'm sure it's nothing more than that. But... it's funny, isn't it? How someone like Eddie can just appear out of nowhere and... stir up memories like that. Especially with everything that happened so long ago. You've got quite a history with the princes, don't you?"

Madeleine's breath hitched, and she looked up sharply, her pulse quickening. The mention of the princes, the very thought of them, struck her like a blow to the chest. She hadn't expected him to bring it up so directly. There had always been an unspoken understanding between her and herself about the past – about those memories she'd buried so deep. But Walther was unearthing them, pulling at them with careful precision.

For a moment, she was silent, her eyes lingering on the swirling liquid in her cauldron. Her hands were still, frozen in place, as memories came rushing back. She could see the twin princes clearly in her mind's eye – their laughter echoing through the grand halls of the palace, their innocent smiles as they ran through the lush gardens. She had been so young then, unaware of the danger and the complexities of court life.

Her voice was low and distant when she finally spoke, almost as if she were speaking to herself. "When I was a child... my family lived in the palace. My father was the Court Architect." She swallowed, feeling the weight of the words as they left her mouth. "I didn't just grow up in the palace—I was a part of it. And the Princes... they changed my life in ways I can't even explain. They were kind to me. To a little girl who had nothing to give but her admiration." She looked at her potion again, the bitterness of the memory creeping in, and her grip tightened on the stirring rod. "They were more than just royalty. They made me see the world differently."

Walther watched her closely, his expression unreadable, though his eyes gleamed with quiet interest. He was patient, waiting for her to continue.

Madeleine took a shaky breath before continuing, her voice tightening. "I wanted to repay them for everything they had done. To say thank you, to show them how much they meant to me. But... that night..." Her words faltered, and she had to pause for a moment to steady herself. "The king's family was murdered. The palace was attacked. The princes were never found. Their bodies... their bodies were never recovered. They were gone."

She closed her eyes, the painful memories washing over her like a cold wave. It felt as though the years had never truly passed, as though she was still that little girl, desperate for the princes' kindness, still haunted by the night they disappeared. "I never got to thank them. I never got to say goodbye. And it's been... seventeen years."

Her voice softened as she finished, the vulnerability seeping through. "I've wondered ever since if I was meant to repay them in some way. But I never could. And now... now I see someone who looks so much like one of them. Eddie." She gave a small, shaky laugh, though it sounded hollow in her own ears. "But it's impossible, isn't it? The twins... they couldn't have survived. Could they?"

Walther leaned back slightly, his expression thoughtful. He said nothing for a long while, letting the silence stretch between them. Madeleine was still caught in her memories, her mind lost in the past. He watched her with a look that was almost unreadable, his voice calm and measured when he finally spoke.

"I suppose... it's impossible to say. The dead don't come back. But you're right about one thing," he said, his eyes flicking toward her in a way that made her uneasy. "Eddie does look like him. And the timing... it's too strange. Maybe there's more to this than just coincidence."

Madeleine's breath caught in her throat at his words, and she turned to face him, her brow furrowed. But before she could respond, Walther continued, his voice soft and disarming.

Madeleine felt the air grow heavier, her heart quickening. The question was too pointed, too insistent for her liking. But Walther wasn't looking directly at her, his gaze fixed on his work as he stirred his own concoction. There was a faint smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

She forced a tight smile of her own, feeling the walls around her mind shift slightly as she tried to steer the conversation away

from Eddie, away from the uncomfortable path Walther was pushing her toward.

"I've known Eddie for a while now. But that's all it is. Nothing more to it," she said, her voice steadier than she felt.

Walther's smile remained, but there was a flicker of something darker behind it – something that Madeleine didn't quite catch. "I suppose you're right," he said, though his voice was soft, almost too calm. "Still... interesting how someone who's supposed to be dead, someone like Eddie, could be here. Out of all the places, to end up at Edenfield, of all universities. It's almost as if fate has a hand in it, don't you think?"

Madeleine's stomach churned, her thoughts racing, but she kept her expression neutral. "Fate doesn't have anything to do with it. Eddie's just a student like the rest of us," she said firmly, though the words felt hollow even to her own ears.

Walther chuckled again, but it was quieter this time, more controlled. "Sure, sure. Just a student. But there's something about him, don't you think? Something that feels... different."

Madeleine felt a coldness at the back of her neck. She was beginning to understand what Walther was getting at, but she wasn't ready to confront it. Not yet. She didn't want to entertain the idea, and she didn't want to let him think he could manipulate her like this.

Instead, she straightened up, brushing the unsettling thoughts from her mind. "I think we're both just getting a little too caught

up in things,” she said, her tone now sharper, though she kept it light. “Let’s focus on finishing this assignment, shall we?”

Walther raised an eyebrow, his smile lingering for just a moment longer than necessary before he nodded, the look in his eyes unreadable. “Of course. I was just curious, that’s all.”

Madeleine turned her attention back to her potion, but her mind was no longer in the room. She couldn’t shake the sense that Walther’s questions had been more than idle curiosity, that they were leading somewhere she wasn’t ready to go. The feeling lingered, but she buried it under the surface, knowing that whatever Walther was up to, it wasn’t something she could deal with just yet.

As the class continued, the conversation turned to other topics, but Madeleine couldn’t quite shake the feeling that something was amiss – something was starting to unravel, and it all tied back to Eddie.



The evening had settled in, and the warm orange and purple hues of the sunset had already started to fade from the sky. Eddie sat on his bed, holding Will’s electric guitar awkwardly in his arms. He had no idea how to play, but Will had insisted – after noticing his friend’s somber mood – that Eddie needed something to distract him.

Will was lounging on his own bed, strumming his guitar effortlessly with a grin on his face. "Alright, Ed, first thing's first – you need to press down on the frets harder. You're being too gentle."

Eddie glanced down at his fingers, unsure of how to press the strings with any more force. "No, Ed, you are pressing the frets too lightly! It doesn't sound good!" Will protested from across the room, sitting cross-legged and looking at Eddie with that typical confident, slightly cocky grin.

"Look, how am I supposed to press this?" Eddie grumbled, fumbling with the strings. "My fingers aren't that long! I'm not some sort of contortionist."

Will laughed, shaking his head. "It's all about finding the right pressure, mate. You just gotta get used to it. Trust me, you'll get there."

Eddie sighed, turning the guitar in his hands again, as if trying to figure out how to make it do something remotely musical. "I don't know, Will... this doesn't seem like something that's supposed to make sense."

"Well, it's not gonna make sense if you keep whining about it!" Will chuckled. "Here, let me show you again." He scooted closer, leaning over and gently pressing Eddie's fingers down on the fretboard. "Just like this."

Eddie shifted uncomfortably. Will's hands were much more confident, and his own were struggling to mimic the movement. He tried again, this time pressing the frets more firmly. It

sounded less like a dying animal and more like an actual chord, but just barely.

"See? That wasn't so bad," Will said, nudging him playfully.

"Now try this one."

Eddie shot him a look. "Oh sure, just keep throwing more chords at me, Will. What's next, the solo?"

Will grinned. "You'll get there, but let's take it one step at a time. Think of this as... therapy. For your brain."

Eddie chuckled, a little begrudgingly, but he appreciated the effort. The frustration that had been brewing all day seemed to melt away, at least a little. There was something oddly calming about the simple repetition of trying to play the guitar, even if it wasn't something Eddie was particularly good at.

But before they could continue their musical therapy session, the door to their room opened, and Walther stepped inside, his usual calm demeanor softened by the evening's quiet. His eyes flicked between Eddie and Will, sizing up the situation with that quiet, observant way of his.

"Hey, Walther," Will greeted, flashing his usual grin. "What's up?"

Eddie's attention shifted to Walther, unsure what this visit was about. He hadn't seen the older student much today, and with everything going on, he'd almost forgotten Walther existed in his little world of alchemy and awkward mana control.

"I need to talk to Eddie," Walther said, his tone polite but serious. He glanced at Will, who raised an eyebrow before slowly standing up.

"Alright, mate," Will said with a nod, stretching his arms above his head. "I'll leave you two to it."

He shot Eddie a quick, knowing look, as if sensing something off in the air. Eddie just gave him a small wave as Will exited the room, leaving the door slightly ajar.

The warm, earthy smell of cocoa filled the air as Walther placed a steaming mug of hot chocolate in front of Eddie at the dining table. The flickering candlelight cast soft shadows over the small, cozy space in Dorm 7's common room. Henry was sprawled across the couch not far from them, his research papers scattered in a chaotic mess on the table beside him. He was face-down in a book, snoring loudly, his final-year exhaustion hanging heavy over him. Eddie could tell Henry had been burning the candle at both ends, and the sight of his worn-out roommate made him feel even more out of place in comparison.

Walther sat across from Eddie, the quiet clink of his mug setting the tone for the conversation. He gave Eddie a small, knowing smile, his calm demeanor never wavering. "So," Walther began, his voice as smooth as the chocolate between them, "How's the training with Madeleine going?"

Eddie took a sip from his mug, savoring the warmth that spread through him. It was a rare comfort – hot chocolate in the evening, far from his coastal home, surrounded by strange faces and even stranger magic. "It's... going pretty well," Eddie replied, his brow

furrowing slightly as he thought back to the earlier struggles. "I just get a little confused with her approach. She's more about feeling it, and... I don't know, it's hard for me to wrap my head around. I'm used to something more structured, more... systematic."

Walther leaned back in his chair, his gaze thoughtful but curious. "Hmm," he mused. "Well, it sounds like you're making progress. Getting that kind of control isn't easy for anyone." He paused, eyes flicking toward the mess Henry had left behind on the couch before meeting Eddie's gaze again. "I take it you're not the only one in her circle, though?"

Eddie raised an eyebrow, clearly caught off guard. "What do you mean? How do you know about it?"

Walther smiled, leaning forward slightly. "Madeleine and I are classmates. We're both second years in Herbology. We work together on a few projects, so I've seen her work up close." He looked down into his mug, swirling the drink absently before locking eyes with Eddie again. "Why do you ask?"

Eddie's eyes widened with surprise. "Wait, Madeleine's your classmate? I had no idea!" he admitted, his mind racing with the sudden realization. "So... what's she like in class? What's she like as a student?"

Walther's lips curled into a subtle, almost amused smile, but there was something about it that seemed a little guarded. "She's... dedicated," he said carefully, choosing his words as if measuring them. "She takes her work seriously, but she's not as rigid as some of the others. She has her own way of thinking about

magic – unconventional, but effective. I'd say she's pretty well-liked by most of the faculty."

Eddie nodded thoughtfully, absorbing this new information. "Unconventional, huh? Yeah, that sounds like her."

Walther's eyes twinkled, as if he could see through Eddie's thoughts. "I wouldn't be so quick to dismiss her approach," he said. "Sometimes, magic isn't something you can bend to fit into a neat little box, no matter how much you try."

Eddie, a little taken aback by the implications of Walther's words, tried to keep his tone light. "I guess that's the part I'm struggling with. I don't know if I'm built for her way of learning."

Walther raised an eyebrow, setting his mug down on the table with a soft clink. "You're a first year, Eddie. You've got time to figure it out. Besides," he said with a small, almost imperceptible smile, "Madeleine seems to think you've got potential."

Walther leaned back slightly, the flickering candlelight casting shadows across his face. His voice took on a slow, almost nostalgic quality, as if recounting a well-known tale he'd heard many times before. "Are you familiar with the history of Edenfield's monarchy?" he asked, his tone casual but with a glint of curiosity behind his words.

Eddie blinked, taken slightly off guard. "Not really," he admitted, shifting in his seat. "I never really read much about the city's history itself. I was just more focused on the university and, you know, getting in." He shrugged, feeling a little sheepish.

Walther nodded, as if that answer made sense. He had probably assumed as much. "Fair enough," he said, then leaned in a bit, his fingers lightly tracing the rim of his mug. "Well, let me give you a bit of background. The Edenfield monarchy goes way back. In fact, their lineage stretches all the way back to the time of the Great Mages War. The royal family were descendants of powerful paladins, warriors who fought to protect the realm during that brutal conflict."

Eddie's brow furrowed slightly as he listened, intrigued despite himself. Walther's tone was a bit too casual, almost as if he were setting the stage for something important. "They were a powerful family," Walther continued, "and after the war, they settled here in Edenfield. At first, they provided protection for the fledgling academy. Over time, the city grew, and their role evolved. Eventually, they were entrusted with the rule of Edenfield itself."

Eddie nodded along, absorbing the history, but still unsure of where this conversation was heading. Walther seemed to savor the next part of the story. "It was about 17 years ago when things took a turn. The king – he was a bit of a traditionalist. Wanted to keep magic tightly controlled, tightly regulated. But the people of Edenfield had other ideas. The academy, the founders' ideals... they all pointed to magic being free. Unregulated. The king and the people didn't see eye to eye on that. And as you can imagine, that caused some tension."

Walther paused for a moment, letting the weight of the words settle in the air. Eddie, sensing the change in tone, leaned forward slightly, intrigued but still uncertain. "What happened?" he asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Regicide," Walther said simply, his voice low. "A group of assassins, hired by those who opposed the king's stance, struck during the night. The palace was set ablaze, and the royal family was slaughtered. The king and queen died in the fire, but the twin princes – well, they were never found. Their bodies were never recovered, and the entire royal lineage was wiped out in one fell swoop."

Eddie's eyes widened, and he involuntarily glanced over at Henry, still snoring on the couch. He wasn't sure why, but the idea of regicide – of a royal family wiped out in a single night – struck him deeply. "That sounds... grim," Eddie said quietly, almost to himself.

Eddie leaned back in his chair, his fingers absently tracing the rim of his cup. He felt a strange weight pressing down on him, as if the conversation had shifted into a territory he wasn't ready to explore. Walther's story about the royal family, the fire, and the missing princes had stirred something deep within him, something he hadn't really thought about in a long time.

"I think i've had nightmares about them," Eddie murmured, more to himself than to Walther. "I've had them... a lot. About that story you just told. The fire, the screams, the people in black hoods and cloaks. All carrying daggers, like they were coming for someone..." He paused, feeling a chill creep up his spine as he recalled the vivid images from his dreams. "And for some reason, my aunt Catherine was there. But, I mean, it's probably just because I think about her a lot. I don't know why, it's just a feeling."

He swallowed, shaking his head as if to dismiss the thoughts. "But it's nothing, really," Eddie added quickly, trying to brush the discomfort aside. "I used to read a lot of books when I was a kid. My older brother, Alfred, he'd take me to the library all the time. Horror books, mostly. I think it just got mixed up in my mind with all the weird stuff I used to read. So, I don't know... it's probably nothing."

Walther's gaze sharpened, his expression unreadable as he sipped his chocolate, but his silence spoke volumes. The pause between them stretched, and Eddie suddenly became acutely aware of the tension in the air. Something about the way Walther was looking at him made Eddie feel... exposed, as if he'd said more than he intended.

"Hmm," Walther hummed thoughtfully, his eyes narrowing slightly as he leaned forward. "That's... interesting, Eddie. You've had those dreams more than once, right? About the fire, the people in cloaks... and your aunt Catherine."

Eddie shifted uncomfortably in his chair, now regretting the words he'd let slip. "Yeah, a few times," he said, trying to keep his tone casual, though his voice wavered just a little. "But, like I said, it's probably just my imagination running wild."

Walther's lips curled into a slow smile, but there was something unsettling about it. "Imagination, huh? Maybe. But it's strange, isn't it? To dream of something so vivid. So detailed. And so connected to the things you just learned, right? Almost like your mind's pulling from somewhere deeper. A subconscious connection, perhaps?" He let the question hang in the air, a subtle challenge in his voice.

Eddie felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. He wasn't used to being probed like this, especially not by someone like Walther, who had a way of making even casual questions feel loaded. "It's just dreams," Eddie muttered, feeling a flicker of irritation. "Nothing to make a big deal out of."

But Walther didn't let up. "I don't know, Eddie. You say it's nothing, but then you mention Catherine. And the people in the hoods. You think that's just random? Just some coincidence?"

Eddie's heart skipped a beat, and he looked away, suddenly wishing he hadn't said anything. "I don't know," he repeated, his voice quieter now. "I told you, it's probably just the books I used to read. And — " He stopped himself, realizing how flimsy that excuse sounded.

Walther pressed on, his voice dropping just low enough to sound almost conspiratorial. "I find it curious, Eddie. The whole thing. The dreams, the fire, the people with the daggers... all of it. It sounds like something more than just stories. Don't you think?"

Eddie opened his mouth to respond, but no words came out. For the first time, he started to feel like maybe there *was* something more to his dreams, something that went beyond his childhood imagination. But he quickly shook the thought away, unwilling to entertain it.

"Look, I really don't think it's a big deal," Eddie said firmly, trying to steer the conversation away from the uncomfortable direction it was heading. "It's probably just... one of those things."

Walther's lips curled into a smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Mhm. One of those things." His voice dropped a notch, barely audible, almost as if he were speaking to himself, but loud enough for Eddie to hear. "It's funny, though, how some dreams are so *persistent*. Almost like they're trying to tell you something."

Eddie's stomach churned, and he quickly stood up, his chair scraping the floor with an unpleasant screech. "I really need to go," he said, his voice tight. He couldn't explain why he was suddenly so eager to leave, but it felt like he needed to get away from Walther and the uncomfortable questions that seemed to burrow deeper with each passing second.

Before Walther could respond, there was a sudden knock at the door, followed by a loud voice from the outside. Eddie froze, relief flooding through him as he heard Ashley's familiar call.

"Eddie! Will!" she shouted, her voice clear and bright. "Come on! Don't say you forgot we wanted to check the Edenfield fair tonight!"

Eddie exhaled, an almost imperceptible sigh of relief escaping his lips. *Finally*, something to break the tension. He quickly turned to the window, spotting Ashley standing outside, peering through the blinds with a mischievous grin on her face.

Eddie hurried over to the door, not sparing another glance at Walther as he called out, "I'm coming, just a sec!" He then turned to the second floor, raising his voice. "Will! Get ready! We're heading out!"

As Eddie rushed to get his things together, he didn't notice the way Walther's eyes had darkened. The moment of discomfort was gone, replaced by a quiet stillness. Walther's thoughts were far away, lost in the maze of things he had just learned. The pieces were beginning to fall into place, and a slow smile stretched across his face — one that was colder than before.

He remained seated at the table, his gaze fixed on the door long after Eddie had left the room, a sinister glint in his eyes.

Something's ignited, he thought, feeling a spark of something dark take hold. The realization had clicked, and Walther knew that Eddie's presence was no longer just a coincidence.

It was much, much more.



The cool evening air felt refreshing as Eddie, Will, and Ashley made their way down the cobble streets toward the University Fair. The warm orange and purple hues of the setting sun bathed the campus in a soft glow, casting long shadows across the pathways. The sound of distant chatter and laughter floated through the air, growing louder as they approached the bustling grounds.

"Come on, Ed! I swear you'll love it," Ashley said, her excitement practically radiating off her. She was practically skipping ahead,

her satchel bouncing with every step. "The fair's always so much fun! And you two could use a little distraction, right?"

Eddie glanced over at Will, who had his hands shoved into the pockets of his leather jacket. He had a relaxed smile on his face, but Eddie could see the hint of weariness in his eyes. Will wasn't the type to pass up a chance for a good time, though, so Eddie wasn't surprised when he shrugged and grinned.

"She's right, Ed. You can't spend all your time buried in books and... *whatever* you've been up to in your head." Will gave him a playful nudge, clearly trying to lighten the mood. "Let's go see what all the fuss is about."

Eddie couldn't help but roll his eyes. He had more than enough on his mind, especially with finals coming up, but Ashley's infectious enthusiasm had a way of pulling him along. And besides, he figured it might be nice to get out of his head for a little while.

"Alright, alright," Eddie muttered, trying to sound begrudging but secretly relieved to have an excuse to step away from his worries for a bit. "But if we get lost in some weird corner of the campus and end up in the middle of a crowd trying to sell me enchanted spoons or something, I'm blaming you."

Ashley threw him an exaggerated wink, her eyes sparkling. "Oh, you *will* get lost, trust me. But that's half the fun!"

As they walked, the fair came into view. Students manned colorful booths that lined the campus lawn, selling everything from hand-made magical trinkets to second-hand spell books,

clothing, and rare alchemical ingredients. The air smelled faintly of sweet pastries, and the sound of upbeat music mixed with the chatter of students haggling over prices.

There was something about the fair that always felt alive — a different energy from the usual quiet study sessions or the formal lessons at the university. Here, everyone seemed to be letting go, enjoying the freedom of the weekend, and Eddie found himself relaxing despite the lingering tension in his chest.

Ashley led the way, pointing out various booths with excitement. "I told you! They have some of the best second-hand magical equipment here. You'd be surprised at the bargains you can find!"

Eddie nodded, trying to look interested, though his eyes kept darting around. He wasn't really one for crowds, and the chaos of the fair made him a bit uneasy. Still, he kept walking, trying to be present for Ashley. He knew she was just trying to have fun.

Will nudged Eddie again, a teasing grin on his face. "Bet you five silver coins you can't haggle with that booth owner over there," he said, gesturing to an old man who was selling strange-looking potions. "You seem like you'd be good at it."

Eddie shot Will a skeptical glance. "You're on. But only because I need something to distract me from everything else right now."

The three of them wandered through the fair, with Ashley pulling them in different directions, chatting about the vendors and their goods. Eddie, though still a bit lost in thought, couldn't

help but feel a small sense of relief. The fair was a welcome distraction, even if only for a little while.

As they passed a booth with colorful glass vials filled with shimmering powders, Eddie spotted something that caught his attention—a strange, intricately carved amulet displayed behind a curtain of beads. Something about it felt familiar, like a memory he couldn't quite place.

Before he could get a closer look, Ashley grabbed his arm. "Come on, Eddie! We've got a whole fair to explore!"

He smiled faintly, following her lead once again. For a moment, he let the chaos of the fair wash over him, pushing aside the darker thoughts that had been plaguing him. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to be out here after all.

As the evening deepened, the sky now a canvas of rich purple and dark blue, the trio found a quiet corner near the university grounds, away from the hustle and bustle of the fair. A wooden picnic table sat under the shadow of a tall oak tree, its branches swaying gently in the cool evening breeze. The air was crisp, carrying the sweet scent of pastries mixed with the earthy fragrance of the grass.

Ashley unwrapped her snack—a savory pastry filled with some kind of magical herb—and took a large bite, her face lighting up at the flavor. She was always the one with the boundless energy, always moving, always talking. Will, on the other hand, was content, sitting back with a small bag of dried fruit, his collection of patches laid out beside him on the table, clearly excited about his recent find.

Eddie, though, was more subdued, unwrapping a small bundle of leather satchels and vials he'd bought. He eyed the tiny bottles, imagining the various ingredients he'd fill them with – tinctures, elixirs, perhaps something experimental. His mind, however, kept drifting back to his conversations earlier in the day, particularly the unsettling ones with Walther.

"You know," Ashley began between bites, looking at Eddie with an almost mischievous grin, "we're not going to have a lot of time to relax after today. Finals are creeping up on us." She took another bite, chewing thoughtfully before continuing. "And we still have to nail that Harmonisation Ritual by the end of the term."

Eddie looked up from his satchel, frowning slightly. The Harmonisation Ritual was something every first-year Alchemy student had to master by the end of the semester. A complex ritual that required precision and a deep understanding of magical energies, it was one of the most important assessments, and failure could mean being held back or even losing a place at the university. The pressure had been building for weeks now, and Eddie couldn't help but feel the weight of it more with each passing day.

"I know," Eddie muttered, his fingers absently tracing the edge of a vial. "It's just... I don't know if I'm ready for it. I still don't feel like I've got the hang of managing my mana the way Madeleine does."

Ashley shrugged, nonchalantly popping a piece of pastry into her mouth. "You're making progress, Ed. You just have to trust the

process. You've got until the final exam, right? You've got time. And besides, you've got me and Will to help if you need it."

Will, who had been quiet until now, finally spoke up, leaning forward and tapping the table with one of his patches. "Yeah, Eddie, you've still got time to perfect your technique. Just don't overthink it. You can't force the magic. It's like trying to make a song sound perfect – if you focus too much on getting every note right, you'll lose the flow." He flashed Eddie a reassuring smile. "You'll get it. You're just in your head too much."

As the three friends sat around the picnic table, their snacks nearly finished, the atmosphere was light despite the weight of their upcoming finals. Eddie absentmindedly fiddled with the straps on his leather satchels, listening to Will as he casually suggested something that made Eddie pause.

"You know," Will began, his fingers absently tracing one of his guitar patches, "maybe you should practice with Walther. He's a second-year Alchemy student, just like Madeleine, and he knows his stuff. You'd probably learn a lot faster if you practiced with both of them. Two perspectives, right?"

Eddie blinked, surprised by the suggestion. "Walther? You mean the same Walther I was talking to earlier?"

"Yeah," Will nodded, glancing over at Eddie. "A few nights ago, Walther actually asked me about helping you practice. I told him it'd be a good idea, so you should probably take him up on it. If he's offering, it's worth considering."

Eddie shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He couldn't quite shake the feeling that something about Walther didn't sit right with him. The conversation with him earlier had left him with a sense of unease, one that he couldn't fully explain. "I don't know, Will. He's... kinda pushy, don't you think?"

Will raised an eyebrow, not fully convinced. "Pushy? He's just enthusiastic. He seems like a guy who knows what he's talking about. Plus, you could use the extra practice."

Eddie hesitated, still unsure. But Will's suggestion had planted a seed in his mind, one that grew the more he thought about it. "I guess I could give it a try... but something about him just doesn't feel right. It's like he's trying too hard."

Will grinned, always the optimist. "Come on, Ed. You're overthinking it. It's going to be fine. And speaking of Walther," Will leaned in a little closer, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, "what were you guys talking about earlier? You looked pretty deep in conversation."

Eddie sighed, running a hand through his messy silver hair. He felt a slight chill as the conversation drifted back to Walther, remembering the way he'd pried into his past, into the old stories of the royal family. "We just... talked about the history of Edenfield, the monarchy and all that. Walther seems to know a lot about the royal family's past. He asked me some questions about my dreams, too."

Will raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued. "Your dreams? What kind of questions?"

"Well," Eddie said, shifting in his seat, "He asked about the nightmares I've been having. You know, the ones about fire and the screams, all the stuff from the night the king's family was murdered. He seemed... really interested in them." Eddie's voice trailed off, his unease about the conversation growing stronger in retrospect. "It felt a little strange."

He turned his attention to the fairgrounds nearby, the soft chatter of students and the warm glow of lights casting long shadows across the lawn. The sounds of laughter and casual conversation mixed with the scent of freshly baked goods, but Eddie felt distant from it all, lost in his own thoughts.

Before he could voice more of his doubts, Ashley chimed in, clearly having overheard their conversation. She was finishing the last of her pastry, one eye on the fair, the other on her friends.

"Be careful, Eddie," she said, her voice calm but firm. "You don't know Walther that well. You've barely spoken to him. Sharing personal information, especially about your magic or your dreams, might not be the best idea." She paused, eyes narrowing slightly as she spoke. "In witch culture, dreams are seen as a doorway to the soul. You can tell a lot about a person just by the way they describe them. If someone knows what your dreams mean, it gives them power over you, and they can use that against you."

Eddie blinked, caught off guard by the seriousness of her words. Will looked over at her, his usual carefree demeanor shifting as he too seemed to listen more intently.

Ashley took another bite of her snack, continuing as if this were common knowledge for her. "When you tell someone your dreams, you're not just telling them about what happens while you sleep. You're giving them a glimpse into your subconscious, into your fears, desires, and even the parts of you that you don't consciously acknowledge." She paused, eyes flickering briefly to the fairgrounds, as if she were considering her next words carefully. "In some cultures, it's even said that your dreams can be used to curse or manipulate you. Or worse, it can show someone how to break you down."

Will raised an eyebrow at her, his tone light but tinged with concern. "Wait, are you saying Walther could, like, use Eddie's dreams against him?"

Ashley shrugged, leaning back in her seat. "Not necessarily. But you should be cautious. You don't know what Walther might do with that kind of information, especially if he knows what kind of dreams you're having. It's a lot more personal than you think."

Eddie felt the weight of Ashley's words, the unease creeping back up. His dreams, the ones he'd brushed off as nothing more than a quirk of his mind, suddenly seemed a lot more dangerous. His visions – of fire, of the screams, of Catherine's face – felt heavier now, knowing that someone might try to interpret them in a way that gave them control.

Will gave a dismissive wave of his hand, clearly not as concerned. "I don't know, Ash. Walther's not like that. He's just trying to help Eddie with his magic, that's all. I don't think he'd try anything weird with his dreams."

Ashley didn't seem convinced, but she didn't push the matter further. Instead, she took another bite of her pastry, her gaze flickering to the fairgrounds. "I'm just saying, you should be careful with who you trust, especially when it comes to things that could affect your future here."

Eddie didn't respond immediately. He wasn't sure what to think. On one hand, Will's reassurance gave him a sense of comfort, but on the other, Ashley's caution made him question the risks of opening up to someone like Walther. He wasn't sure if he wanted to risk learning more from someone who made him feel so uncomfortable.

For now, though, he decided to let it go, focusing on the fair instead of the tension in the air. "Well, I'll think about it," Eddie said after a moment of silence. "Maybe I'll talk to Walther again before I decide."

Will grinned, clearly satisfied with the direction the conversation had gone. "That's the spirit. Now, enough talk about finals and mysterious people. Let's go check out the rest of the booths before the fair closes. I hear there's a new Alchemy book for sale."

Eddie managed a smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. As they stood up and walked toward the next booth, the unease about Walther still gnawed at him, but he pushed it to the back of his mind. For now, he had more immediate distractions – like the upcoming finals and the people around him who still had their own way of dealing with the pressure.

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The next morning, Eddie found himself trudging across the dewy university grounds, the early Sunday sun barely casting a glow over the campus. He yawned, the kind that made his whole body shiver, and shoved his hands deeper into the pockets of his coat.

"Great," he muttered under his breath. "Now both of my weekend days are gone." His words came out in a low, bitter grumble, carried off by the crisp morning breeze, "First my Saturday with Madeleine, then my Sunday with Walther... Great." He continues grumbling

He stopped in the middle of the lawn, staring up at the Alchemy Building. He had seen it a hundred times before in passing, its pale stone façade adorned with intricate carvings of transmutation circles and gilded embellishments. But standing here now, gazing up at its towering height, it seemed larger than life, almost oppressive.

The top of the building was shrouded in mist, and Eddie squinted at the roof where Walther had instructed him to meet. He wasn't sure if it was allowed – or even safe – to be up there, but Walther hadn't seemed to care much about either detail. The thought of climbing the spiraling interior to reach the top filled Eddie with a mix of dread and frustration.

He sighed, glancing at the lawn where he and Madeleine had practiced yesterday. The guilt from his outburst lingered like a

weight in his chest. At least Madeleine had been considerate of his time, setting their practices at a reasonable hour. Walther, on the other hand, had decided 6 *a.m.* was a perfectly fine time to meet.

"Unbelievable," Eddie muttered. "What kind of person doesn't think this is ruining someone's weekend?"

Still, he couldn't back out now. Walther's insistence — and Will's encouragement — had boxed him in. Eddie sighed again, longer this time, before finally taking the first step toward the imposing building. Its shadow stretched across the lawn like a dark reminder of the challenge ahead.

Up close, the building seemed even more intricate, its stone etched with alchemical symbols that almost seemed to shift and glow in the dim morning light. Eddie placed a hand on the cold surface of the front doors, taking a moment to steady himself.

"Alright," he said softly to himself. "Let's get this over with."

He pushed open the heavy doors, stepping inside to begin his climb to the top. Behind him, the towering structure loomed, its peak lost in the morning fog, like a gateway to a whole new set of problems Eddie wasn't sure he was ready to face.

Eddie pushed against the heavy wooden gate of the Alchemy Building, its aged surface etched with intricate alchemical symbols that seemed to shimmer faintly in the early morning light. The door creaked open, the sound reverberating like a groan through the stillness.

He hesitated on the threshold, peering into the dim interior. The building looked desolate, its grand halls cloaked in shadows that stretched long and eerie. Dust motes swirled in the beams of light filtering through high, narrow windows. Taking a breath, Eddie stepped inside, the chill of the place prickling at his skin as he swung the door shut behind him.

Thud.

The sound of the door closing echoed through the cavernous space, followed by an unsettling silence. Eddie adjusted the strap of his satchel, his every step clicking sharply against the smooth stone floor. The sound bounced off the high arches of the hallway, amplifying until it felt like the whole building was listening.

He glanced around as he walked, the dim light barely illuminating the intricate carvings along the walls – depictions of transmutation circles, ancient glyphs, and figures of old alchemical masters locked in acts of creation. They seemed to watch him as he passed, their expressions frozen in stoic judgment.

"Why does it feel like no one's been here in years?" Eddie muttered under his breath, his voice swallowed by the shadows.

The air was cool and carried a faint metallic tang, as though it had absorbed centuries of experimentation. Eddie rubbed his arms, trying to shake off the creeping unease as he continued deeper into the building. Every sound – his steps, the faint rustle of his jacket, the occasional distant creak of the old structure – felt amplified in the silence, pressing down on him.

He paused at an intersection of hallways, glancing down the darkened corridors that stretched out like veins through the heart of the building. For a moment, he considered turning back. The thought of climbing all the way to the top, in this hollow, lifeless place, felt unreasonably daunting.

But then Walther's words echoed in his mind: *"You want to be ready for the finals, don't you? This is your chance to catch up."*

Eddie shook his head, sighed, and pressed on. The shadows of the Alchemy Building seemed to shift around him, as if the place itself were alive, waiting, watching.

Eddie trudged through the halls, climbing staircase after staircase, his footsteps echoing in the stillness of the Alchemy Building. He passed lecture halls with rows of empty seats, their high windows casting patterns of light and shadow across the room. He slowed, peering inside one of the labs. Shelves lined the walls, brimming with vials of colorful liquids, jars of mysterious ingredients, and tools he could only dream of using.

He lingered for a moment, his hand resting on the doorframe. The thought burned in his mind: *If it weren't for these foundational courses, I'd be in here by now. Experimenting, learning...* His fingers clenched slightly, his determination rekindling. He tore his gaze away and continued upward.

As he climbed higher, the stairs grew narrower, the air cooler, and the silence heavier. After what felt like an endless ascent, Eddie reached what he was sure had to be the topmost floor. He stepped into a small hallway that seemed unremarkable except for its emptiness.

"Now what?" Eddie muttered, looking around. He turned down the hall, glancing at the ceiling until his eyes caught sight of a folded iron ladder tucked neatly against the wall, leading up to a trapdoor. *Bingo*. His heart gave a little jump of excitement. *That has to be the way to the rooftop*.

Standing before the ladder, he hesitated. *Okay, just get it down*, he thought, his hand gripping his wand. He took a deep breath, focusing on the spell he'd been practicing. *Steady... You've got this*.

Just as he raised his wand and muttered the incantation, a sudden croaky voice startled him.

"Oi, young lad!"

Eddie jumped, spinning around to see an older man standing in the hallway, a broom slung over one shoulder and a look of suspicion etched into his weathered face. The janitor's clothes were simple and worn, his sharp eyes glinting under bushy eyebrows.

"What're ye doing early this morning?" the man barked, his voice cutting through the stillness. His gaze flicked down to Eddie's wand, then up to the ladder, and his expression darkened. "Don't yer think of going to the rooftop! It's off-limits to students like ye!"

Eddie froze, lowering his wand as his mind raced for an explanation. "I-I wasn't—uh, I mean, I was just—"

The janitor narrowed his eyes. "Don't yer give me that. Ain't no reason fer a first-year to be muckin' about up there. Ye'll be in

heaps o' trouble if I catch ye meddlin'. Now, off with ye, before I report this!"

Eddie swallowed hard, nodding quickly. "Yes, sir. I was just, uh, lost. Won't happen again."

The janitor huffed, muttering something under his breath, and pointed toward the stairs with his broom. "Lost yer way back to yer dorm, I reckon. Get goin'."

Eddie retreated down the hall, his cheeks burning. As soon as he was out of sight, he let out a shaky breath, clutching his satchel strap tightly. *Great. Just great. What am I supposed to do now?*

The creak of footsteps echoed faintly through the dim hallway as Walther emerged from the shadows, his tall, lean figure cutting an imposing silhouette against the muted light filtering through the high windows. His long black coat flowed behind him as he approached, his movements precise and deliberate.

"Ah, there you are," Walther's voice rang out, calm and cold, yet carrying a commanding presence. "Master Alchemist Borman himself requested that my peers and I conduct our studies on the rooftop this morning. He believes the fresh air at such a height sharpens the mind for alchemical practice."

The janitor, still clutching his broom, wasn't convinced. His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Oh aye? Master Alchemist Borman don't send students off without proper paperwork. Let's see it."

Without hesitation, Walther reached into the folds of his coat, producing a blank scroll. Eddie, standing nearby, watched closely

as Walther's fingers deftly scanned the paper from top to bottom, his movements deliberate. Eddie noticed the faint glow of a ring on Walther's middle finger, the dim blue light trailing his hand's motion.

With a sharp snap of his fingers, Walther handed the parchment to the janitor.

The old man squinted at the scroll, tilting it slightly as if inspecting it under invisible writing. To Eddie's bewilderment, the janitor nodded, his expression easing into one of acceptance. "Fine, off ya go," he muttered, handing the parchment back and resuming his sweeping.

Walther offered a curt "Thank you," and stepped toward the ladder. With a flick of his hand, the folded iron ladder creaked and groaned before descending smoothly. The blue glow of his ring lingered faintly in the air before fading.

Eddie stared, his voice barely above a whisper. "Walther, what the hell was that?"

Walther turned his head slightly, his icy gaze meeting Eddie's for a moment. "That, Welton," he said, his tone as clinical as ever, "is a simple illusion trick." He grasped the ladder, his words hanging in the air as he began his ascent.

Eddie hesitated, glancing back toward the janitor, who was now muttering to himself as he worked, seemingly unaware of the peculiar exchange. With a deep breath, Eddie followed Walther up the ladder, his curiosity mingled with unease as they ascended toward the rooftop.



The rooftop of the Alchemy Faculty Building was vast and flat, surrounded by a low stone railing. From this height, Eddie could see the entire city of Edenfield sprawled below him. The skyline was a blend of gothic spires and cobbled streets winding like veins through the city. Dorm 7 was easily recognizable, a comforting speck in the distance, as was Dorm 9 where Ashley lived. Beyond them, the university grounds stretched out, dotted with students bustling about their early morning routines.

The cold morning wind whipped across the rooftop, tugging fiercely at Eddie's brown wool jacket. He pulled it tighter around himself, shivering slightly, while Walther stood near the edge, his black long coat billowing dramatically behind him. The sharp contrast of Walther's composed figure against the lively panorama of Edenfield struck Eddie as surreal.

Walther turned, his eyes gleaming with a mix of interest and calculation. "Quite a view, isn't it?" he began, his tone low and deliberate. "Fitting for a student with potential like yours. Rarely do we get to look down on the world like this."

Eddie glanced away uncomfortably, focusing instead on the distant horizon. "It's... nice, I guess," he mumbled.

Walther stepped closer, his boots clinking softly against the stone. "I've heard stories about you, Eddie. About what happened in Professor Rheagan's session with the acorn."

Eddie's head shot up. "What? That was... I mean, it was just an accident. I didn't mean to —"

"To turn a simple acorn into a hundred-year-old oak?" Walther interrupted, his tone heavy with admiration. "An accident like that is no accident at all. It's strength, raw and untempered. It's potential that most can only dream of."

Eddie rubbed the back of his neck, his unease growing. "I don't know. Everyone just made such a big deal out of it. It's not like I could do it again if I tried."

"Because you're holding yourself back," Walther said firmly. "I see it in you, Eddie. You don't want to push too far, afraid of what might happen if you fail or if you succeed too much. But that's not strength — that's a leash."

Eddie's jaw tightened, but before he could respond, Walther continued, his voice softening, almost empathetic. "I know how it feels to have people doubt you. To feel like every misstep is a reason for someone to give up on you, to turn away." He leaned against the stone railing, gazing out over the city as if lost in thought. "When I first started here, I was just another name on a roster, another face in a crowd. Nobody saw what I could do — until I stopped holding back. Until I let myself truly explore the depths of my potential."

Eddie hesitated, Walther's words stirring a mix of emotions. "But what if... what if it's not enough?" he asked quietly. "What if I mess up?"

Walther turned to him, his expression both intense and reassuring. "Messing up is part of the process, Eddie. It's how we learn. It's how we grow. But you'll never know what you're truly capable of until you let go of the fear." He paused, his gaze piercing. "Trust me, I've been where you are. I've felt the weight of those doubts, but overcoming them? That's where real strength lies."

The cold wind howled around the rooftop, the tension between Eddie and Walther palpable. Walther leaned casually on the stone railing, his sharp eyes fixed on Eddie, who stood a few steps away, arms crossed defensively.

"You're still thinking about Madeleine, do you?, her advice might work for her," Walther said, his voice cutting through the wind like a blade. "But not everyone can afford to take the gentle route. Magic isn't about feelings – it's about results. Do you think the examiners will care how you feel? They just want to see power."

Eddie frowned, his jaw tightening. He could feel Walther's words digging into the insecurities he rarely let surface. "That's not what Madeleine meant," he muttered. "She's just trying to help me find a way that works."

Walther stepped closer, his black coat whipping in the breeze. "And that's where you're wrong, Eddie. Her approach works for her. But you and I both know it's not going to work for you. You're not like her – you're not about 'feelings' or 'intuition.'

You're logical, methodical. You know magic is a force to be mastered, not coddled. And you've got the brains for it, so stop holding back."

Eddie's hands clenched into fists at his sides. "I'm not holding back," he said, though his voice lacked conviction.

Walther smirked, his tone shifting to something almost playful, though no less sharp. "A logical thinker like you should see the flaw in that statement, Eddie. If you weren't holding back, would you still be here, worrying about whether you'll pass the final ritual? Or would you be down there, confidently preparing to take on whatever they throw at you?"

Eddie glared at him, his frustration bubbling. "I just... I don't want to mess up, okay? You don't get it."

Walther's smirk faded, replaced by a cold intensity. "Don't I?" He stepped back and drew his staff from beneath his coat. It was a striking piece, black wood polished to a gleaming finish, with a silver snake coiling sinuously around a dark crystal at its apex. The air seemed to hum faintly as he held it.

"Magic should be used as it was intended in its inception," Walther declared, his voice taking on an almost ceremonial tone. "To show strength."

Eddie stared at the staff, his heart pounding. Walther's presence seemed to fill the space, the weight of his words pressing on Eddie's chest.

Walther tilted his head, studying him. "You're afraid, aren't you, Welton? I can see it in your eyes. That hesitation, that doubt. Let me help you. Let me show you what you're capable of." He stepped closer, his expression now one of cold challenge. "A duel. Right here, right now. Let's see what you're made of."

Eddie took a step back, shaking his head. "I'm not doing that. I don't want to hurt anyone."

Walther scoffed, the sound dripping with disdain. "Hurt me? Don't flatter yourself. Besides—" he glanced toward the trapdoor they'd climbed through—"I've already handled the janitor. A simple illusion. He won't remember a thing. If you kill me, nobody will bat an eye. You'll be fine." His grin was predatory now, a hunter closing in on his prey. "So come on, Eddie. Show me what you've got."

Eddie's breath caught. Memories from his childhood surged forward—flashes of chaos, of screaming, of that terrible accident that had gotten him expelled from his first school. The raw, unrestrained power that had exploded from him back then.

"I don't—" Eddie stammered, his voice shaky.

"Enough excuses!" Walther barked, planting his staff into the stone with a resonant thud. "You have the strength. You're just too afraid to use it. And that's the difference between you and me, Eddie—I'm not afraid. So let's see if you've got what it takes."

Eddie swallowed hard, his mind racing. He hated the way Walther's words twisted in his head, stirring both doubt and defiance. Part of him wanted to refuse, to walk away—but

another part, deep down, wanted to prove Walther wrong. To prove himself.

His hand hovered over his wand. The wind howled louder, as if urging him to decide.

The air was thick with tension as Eddie stood across from Walther, his feet planted firmly on the cold stone rooftop. The wind whipped through his hair, but he barely noticed. His mind was entirely focused on the duel that had started so innocuously, but was quickly becoming something much more. Walther stood poised, his black staff raised, the crystal gleaming in the early morning light.

"Ready, Welton?" Walther's voice was cool, almost bored as he studied Eddie. "Let's see what you've learned."

Without warning, Walther flicked his wrist, and a crackling bolt of lightning shot from the tip of his staff. It was fast, but not too fast. Eddie had seen lightning before – he could handle it. With a calm breath, Eddie raised his wand in defense, summoning a shimmering shield of arcane energy just in time to block the strike.

The bolt hit the shield with a violent crackle, sending sparks flying. Eddie's hand trembled slightly as the force pushed against him, but the shield held, absorbing the energy.

"Not bad," Walther said, his voice approving but distant. "You're quick to react." He stepped back, his eyes gleaming with calculation. "But that's not enough, Eddie. Not nearly enough."

Walther waved his staff again, sending another, slightly stronger bolt of lightning Eddie's way. The sound of it crackling through the air was deafening as it shot toward him. Eddie's pulse quickened, but his wand reacted instinctively, forming another shimmering barrier just in time to deflect the strike.

Walther didn't seem impressed. "Good. But still, you're only playing defense. Magic is more than just stopping the attack. You need to *show* power. You need to *control* it."

Eddie swallowed, the weight of Walther's words settling into his chest. He had to admit, there was some truth to them. In every lesson, every training session, he had always been taught to focus on control – on perfecting his defensive skills, on making sure he could react in any situation. But now, standing on this rooftop facing Walther, he wondered if that was enough. He had always been told that control was the key to success in magic. But what if *strength* was what really mattered?

Walther waved his hand again, sending another bolt of energy at Eddie, this time with more power, more intent behind it. The attack was faster, the air around it crackling with raw energy.

Eddie's instincts kicked in again. He raised his wand, the shield springing into place with a sharp snap. The bolt hit the shield with a deafening crash, but this time, Eddie's knees buckled slightly, and he staggered back, struggling to maintain his footing.

Walther raised an eyebrow, a small smile tugging at his lips. "Good reflexes," he said, but his tone was edged with something darker now. "But still no offense. Still no *real* magic."

Eddie took a deep breath, his mind racing. He hadn't attacked. He hadn't even tried to strike back. He'd just reacted — defended. Was that really all he had?

Walther stepped closer, his voice low and almost taunting. "Not bad, Eddie. But is that all you've got? The examiners will eat you alive if you don't show them real magic. Magic isn't about playing it safe. It's about showing your strength. Power. And right now, you're only showing fear."

Eddie's heart skipped a beat. His mind flashed back to the accident — the raw, uncontrolled magic that had nearly destroyed everything. It was still a part of him, that fear. The fear that the power inside him was too much.

But Walther's words kept pushing at him, gnawing at him. Was he really holding back? Was that all he was? A scared little boy who couldn't control his magic?

"Stop holding back," Walther urged, his voice growing more insistent. "Show me what you're really capable of. *Attack me.*"

Eddie's hand clenched around his wand. He could feel the raw magic inside him, buzzing, waiting. But that fear still clung to him. The accident. The consequences.

The wind howled around them as the duel continued, the tension building with every passing second. Walther's eyes gleamed with that same cold, calculating intensity, but now there was something more — frustration. Eddie could feel it. Every lightning bolt that shot toward him seemed stronger, faster, more

dangerous. Walther was no longer just testing him. He was pushing him, trying to break him.

Another bolt of crackling energy flew at Eddie, its force sending a ripple through the air. Eddie raised his wand, his breath shallow as the shield formed in front of him, just in time. The impact sent a shockwave through his body, his knees shaking, but the shield held.

Walther stepped back, a thin, mocking smile curling at the corner of his lips. "Still playing it safe, Welton?" he sneered, raising his staff again. "You really think this is enough? You think the examiners will care about your little shields and clever tricks? They want power, Eddie. Real power."

Eddie's heart pounded in his chest, his hands cold and trembling as he focused all his energy on keeping the shield up. Each bolt of lightning was a reminder of what had happened in the past – of the accident that had haunted him for years. But now, that fear was beginning to cloud his judgment, and Walther could see it.

Walther's eyes narrowed as he took another step forward, his voice low and menacing. "You're afraid, aren't you?" His tone was laced with venom. "Afraid you don't belong here. Afraid you're not strong enough. Afraid that all this – everything you've worked for – is just going to crumble the moment you face the truth."

Eddie flinched, the words cutting deeper than he expected. He swallowed hard, but Walther wasn't done.

"Prove me wrong, Welton," Walther taunted, his voice rising with a challenge. "Stop hiding behind your shields. Stop pretending you're not scared. *Show me the power you're hiding.*"

The moment Walther's staff flicked with a smooth, practiced motion, Eddie's heart skipped a beat. The metal railings that lined the rooftop groaned and shuddered, and with a hiss of magic, they twisted and warped before Eddie's eyes. The railings didn't just bend – they transformed.

Long, sinuous snakes made of iron hissed and slithered from the railings, their eyes glowing with an eerie, metallic sheen. The hiss echoed through the air as they lunged toward Eddie, their jaws snapping with sharp, pointed fangs.

Eddie didn't hesitate. He slammed his wand forward, his mind already calculating the alchemical formula in his head. With a sharp incantation, he concentrated on the transformation. The iron snakes' bodies began to crumble, their form disintegrating into fine, jagged iron dust. The alchemical technique he used was precise – he was turning solid iron into dust, something he had studied countless times.

But before he could even catch his breath, the iron dust began to swirl and shift, coiling back together with unnatural speed. With a sickening, metallic screech, the snakes reformed, snapping back into their original, terrifying shapes.

Eddie's eyes widened in disbelief. "You're fucking mental, Walther!" he screamed, his voice strained with fear and frustration.

Walther only smirked, his cold eyes glinting with an unsettling mixture of amusement and calculation. He raised his staff again, and the snakes lunged forward once more, this time faster, angrier. Walther wasn't playing around anymore.

Eddie's mind raced. This wasn't just a friendly duel – it was something more. Walther was pushing him harder than anyone had before, testing him, seeing if he could break through whatever invisible wall Eddie had built around himself. He wasn't just fighting to win; Walther was searching for something deeper. *What the hell is he after?* Eddie thought, his fingers trembling as he gripped his wand tighter.

He could feel Walther's eyes on him, cold and calculating. Walther wasn't simply trying to beat him – he was *watching*, waiting for something. Eddie couldn't shake the feeling that Walther was looking for something more, something that had to do with him. Eddie's instincts told him it had to do with magic. But which magic? Why was Walther so intent on pushing him to the brink?

"Is that all you've got, Welton?" Walther's voice sliced through the air, his tone taunting, like he was daring Eddie to prove him wrong.

Eddie's heart thudded in his chest. The snakes were closing in again, their jaws snapping, their metallic bodies gleaming under the morning light. Eddie's thoughts raced as he frantically searched for a way out. He needed to fight back – not just defend, not just react. He needed to *do more*. But his mind kept returning to the accident, to the time he lost control, to the fear that surged within him every time he faced his magic head-on.

With a strangled breath, Eddie stepped back, his legs shaking, but his resolve hardening. He couldn't let Walther win. He *couldn't* let this go on any longer. Whatever Walther was looking for, Eddie wasn't going to give it to him – not unless he was ready to confront his fears.

The snakes were almost upon him.

Then, in a split-second decision, Eddie pushed past his hesitation. His wand flicked with a sharp motion, and this time, he wasn't just turning the metal into dust. He was manipulating it at a deeper level – twisting, bending, shaping the very molecules within the metal. He could feel the magic coursing through his veins, a raw surge of energy he hadn't tapped into before. The snakes froze, their bodies shaking as if they too could sense the power growing.

Eddie's mind raced as he studied Walther's spell, the intricacies of the movement and the surge of power. The metal snakes coiled around each other, their glowing eyes fierce, their movements lightning-quick. Eddie's pulse quickened as he saw the magic in a new light – Walther's power was raw, chaotic, but there was a control there, too. Eddie could replicate it. He could do it. *I can do this.*

With a focused breath, Eddie drew his wand with precision. He wasn't trying to outdo Walther. He wasn't trying to prove anything. His goal was simple: control. With a soft incantation, Eddie focused on the iron around him, gathering the magic as his will surged through his wand. The raw, untamed magic that flowed through him was powerful, but it was also unpredictable. He had to direct it, tame it.

Before his eyes, a snake made of iron formed from the air around him. It hissed, a smooth, metallic sound. He could feel its energy, but it was controlled – calm, precise. It swayed in the air like a serpent, its sharp metallic body gleaming in the early light.

Then, Walther's snake lunged toward his, its jaws snapping fiercely. Eddie's iron snake responded, striking back with incredible force. The two snakes clashed, their bodies twisting and coiling, metal scraping against metal. Eddie focused, guiding the magic, making sure his snake stayed just one step ahead.

In a sudden motion, Eddie's snake opened its jaws wide and engulfed Walther's, absorbing the magic, reducing it to nothing but a flickering, fading shimmer. The last remnants of Walther's magic scattered into the air, fading like dust on the wind. The victory was quiet – controlled. The spell was less flashy than Walther's, but it was effective. It was Eddie's magic, and it was *his* to control.

Eddie stood tall, his breath steady, as he watched Walther's snake crumble into nothing. He felt a surge of relief. It was a subtle victory, but it felt significant. He didn't need to unleash his full power. He had done it his way – calm, controlled, as Madeleine had taught him. He had stayed grounded, staying true to the lessons he had learned.

Before Walther could make a move, a bell rang loudly in the distance, a sharp, clear sound that echoed through the air. The first class had started, signaling the end of their impromptu duel.

As if some unseen force had paused the moment, both snakes halted their movements. Walther's iron snake froze mid-coil, its

body stiffening like a statue. Eddie's iron serpent crumbled into fine dust, falling to the ground like a soft, metal rain. The brief, tense atmosphere between them softened, and for a moment, it was like nothing had happened.

Walther, visibly frustrated, masked it with a forced smile, his words laced with an air of superiority. "Not bad..." he said, his tone calculating, though his eyes betrayed his irritation. "But you'll need more than that for the finals." He gave a half-hearted wave of his hand, as if dismissing the duel.

Eddie stood silently, a mix of relief and confusion stirring inside him. He had done it his way. He hadn't broken, hadn't let the pressure take over. But Walther's praise felt like a trap, something designed to make Eddie feel like he wasn't enough.

Walther, unfazed by the earlier tension, brushed off the duel like it was nothing more than a casual sparring session. "It was fun, wasn't it?" he said, his voice casual, as if they hadn't just tried to kill each other moments ago. "Meet me again next Sunday if you want another dueling session. I'm sure you have more things to show than that."

Eddie didn't respond immediately, his thoughts swirling. Walther's words felt like a game—a game with stakes Eddie couldn't quite understand. But for now, all Eddie wanted was to leave this rooftop, to step away from the power that had surged through him and the chaos Walther seemed to revel in.

He nodded slightly, his gaze distant. "Next Sunday," Eddie said, his voice steady but with a quiet edge to it. He turned and began

to walk away, leaving Walther to stand alone on the rooftop, his words trailing behind like a distant echo.

As Eddie descended the stairs, he couldn't help but wonder what Walther truly saw in him. Was it just his magic? Or was there something more? He wasn't sure, but for now, he had learned something important: control wasn't about power. It was about knowing when to hold back, when to let go, and when to trust your instincts.

And for the first time since arriving at Edenfield, Eddie felt like maybe, just maybe, he was starting to understand what that meant.



"You what?!" Madeleine shrieked, her eyes wide with disbelief. She nearly dropped her cup of tea on the lawn, but just managed to catch it before it hit the ground.

Eddie watched her in a mixture of amusement and unease, wondering just how much of a surprise it really was. "I dueled Walther this morning," he said, his voice steady, as though the whole thing hadn't just nearly spiraled out of control.

Madeleine blinked, obviously perplexed. She glanced at him, her brows furrowed, clearly trying to process what he just said.

"You... You *what*?" she repeated, still in shock.

Eddie nodded, shifting slightly on his feet. "Yeah, it was... spontaneous," he muttered, unsure of how to explain what had just happened. "We were on the rooftop, and it kind of escalated."

Madeleine's expression turned to concern. She set her tea down carefully on the table, her hands shaking a little. "Are you okay? Did he hurt you?" Her voice was urgent now, filled with worry.

Eddie shook his head quickly, though the tension in his chest remained. "I'm fine. I... I didn't hurt him either." His words sounded more reassuring than he felt.

At that, Madeleine's face twisted with anger. "*That prick!*" she cursed under her breath, her eyes flashing with something far sharper than Eddie had ever seen before. "He shouldn't have done that! Not only is it dangerous, but it's *against the rules* – didn't you read the student handbook?!"

"Umm i don't think so..." Eddie's brow furrowed slightly. "I didn't think it would get that far. He... He pushed me." He paused, then added quietly, "He was trying to get me to use more of my magic – like some sort of test. I didn't really have a choice."

Madeleine exhaled sharply, frustration and concern blending in her expression. "Eddie, this isn't the sort of place where you throw magic around for fun. You don't duel other students without permission – especially not with someone like Walther. He's dangerous."

Eddie winced, her words hitting harder than he expected. "I didn't want it to go that way. I didn't... I didn't even know he

was going to turn the railings into snakes." His voice trailed off, the memory of the shifting metal serpents still vivid in his mind.

Madeleine huffed, rubbing a hand over her face. "Of course he would do that. That's exactly the kind of thing he'd do to mess with someone. It's not just about power, Eddie. It's about control. He wants to see how far he can push you before you break." She shook her head in frustration. "But you should've come to me first. We could've figured something out, without you risking getting yourself expelled!"

Eddie bit his lip, knowing she was right. "I didn't want to cause a scene," he admitted, though it sounded like a poor excuse even to him.

Madeleine's gaze was sharp as she looked at Eddie, her arms crossed over her chest, her voice firm. "What were you thinking, accepting Walther's dueling offer?" she asked, disbelief lacing her tone.

Eddie hesitated for a moment, then shrugged, trying to sound more confident than he felt. "I wanted to prove myself," he said, his voice steady but with a hint of uncertainty. "I figured if I could win against him, it would proof that I can handle my magic, that I'm not just some weak first-year."

Madeleine's eyes widened, and her lips pressed into a thin line. "Eddie, that's not the way to do it," she said firmly, her voice tinged with concern. "Fighting him just to prove something? That's not how you learn to control your magic. You don't have to prove anything to anyone, especially not him."

Eddie's jaw tightened, a flash of frustration flickering in his eyes. "But if I can manage to defeat him in a duel, then maybe my Harmonisation Ritual for the finals will go smoothly. I can prove to myself that I'm capable of handling my own magic, that I can keep it under control when it counts."

Madeleine's expression softened but remained concerned. "There are other ways to practice, Eddie," she argued, her voice gentle but insistent. "You don't need to duel with the risk of getting hurt or, worse, killed. Magic is powerful, and it can be dangerous, especially when you're just starting to tap into it. You don't have to prove anything to yourself like that."

Eddie sighed, his frustration bubbling up again. "I thought of no other ways," he admitted, his voice lowering as he looked down at the ground. "Every time I try, it feels like I'm not making any progress, Madeleine. Maybe this way I can actually... I don't know, feel like I've accomplished something. Like I'm actually good enough for this place."

Madeleine's expression softened further, but there was a sadness in her eyes now. "Eddie, you *are* good enough. You don't need to do this to prove it. You don't need to fight someone just to show you can handle your magic. There are other ways, better ways. You don't have to put yourself in danger like that."

For a moment, Eddie said nothing, the weight of her words sinking in. But he still felt a tinge of doubt gnawing at him. He wanted to be sure. He wanted to know that he was strong enough, that he wasn't just some accidental fluke.

Madeleine's shoulders slumped slightly, and she exhaled, the fight draining from her. "Look, I... I just care about you, okay?" she said quietly, her tone softening as she placed a hand gently on his arm. "I don't want you to get hurt. I don't want you to feel like you have to do this to prove something. You have your own strengths, Eddie. You don't need to force them. Please, don't risk it."

Eddie met her gaze, her concern clearly written across her face. He felt a pang of guilt but also something else – something like relief. He knew she was right. Deep down, he knew this wasn't the right way to handle things, but the pressure of the upcoming finals had made him lose sight of that.

As Eddie and Madeleine sat there, the air between them still heavy with unspoken words, the sound of footsteps approached, and soon Will and Ashley appeared, rounding the corner. Will, ever the energetic one, immediately noticed Madeleine's sulking expression and raised an eyebrow with a teasing grin.

"You two have a fight or something?" Will asked, unable to hide the amusement in his voice.

Eddie's face immediately flushed, and he quickly waved a hand. "Knock it off, Will," he muttered, clearly embarrassed by the thought of the conversation being dragged into teasing territory. He glanced at Madeleine, unsure whether he was more embarrassed by her silent reaction or by Will's antics.

Ashley, trailing behind Will, glanced between the two, immediately sensing the tension. She gave Eddie a wide-eyed look, clearly more concerned than amused. Her face paled

slightly, her voice a bit shaky as she addressed the pair. "What's going on? Why does it feel like there's a storm cloud over here?"

Madeleine, always quick with her sarcasm when she was annoyed, replied dryly, "Excuse me," she said with a mock tone, "But your roommate just got into a duel. Are you not concerned?"

Will, far from intimidated, burst out laughing, his enthusiasm bubbling over. "Yo what?!" he exclaimed, his eyes lighting up with excitement. "My man! Ed, did you win?"

Eddie rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "It was a draw," he muttered, glancing at Madeleine to gauge her reaction. It wasn't exactly the victory he had hoped for, but he didn't want to dwell on it too much, especially not in front of Will.

Will let out a dramatic sigh, looking slightly disappointed but still clearly impressed. "A draw?" he said, shaking his head. "Man, I thought you'd go full beast mode, Eddie!" He gave Eddie a playful shove, clearly proud of him. "Still, you must've done something cool, right?"

Ashley, however, looked like she had just seen a ghost. Her face was pale, her eyes wide with fear. She took a step closer to Eddie, her voice trembling slightly. "A duel? Eddie, you – what were you thinking?" she exclaimed, her usual calmness nowhere to be found. "That's – *dangerous*! What if you had gotten hurt?"

Eddie's awkward smile faltered as he turned to her, his embarrassment shifting into something more genuine. "I didn't think it'd get that out of hand," he said, trying to downplay the

tension. "I just wanted to prove to myself I could control my magic."

Madeleine stepped in before Ashley could say anything else, her tone more measured but still pointed. "It wasn't worth it, Will. Eddie's lucky he didn't get seriously hurt."

Will, still smiling, gave a half shrug, clearly not grasping the full gravity of the situation. "I mean, come on, it's just a duel, right? A little friendly competition, nothing to worry about."

But Ashley, still rattled, wasn't so convinced. She crossed her arms tightly and shot a look at Will, clearly unimpressed. "It's not just 'a little friendly competition.' People get *killed* in duels, Will! Eddie could've been hurt!"

Will raised his hands in mock surrender. "Alright, alright," he said, flashing a grin, though his excitement had definitely been tempered by Ashley's reaction. "I get it. Still, Eddie, you have to tell me more about this duel later. I can't believe you actually went through with it!"

Eddie shrugged, still feeling a little awkward about it all. "Yeah, well, let's just leave it at that," he said, hoping the subject would change. He was still trying to wrap his mind around the fact that he'd actually dueled Walther at all. "A draw's good enough for me."



The week following Eddie's duel with Walther had been a whirlwind. Will, as expected, made a massive fuss over it. Every time they ran into someone in the dorm or on campus, Will would eagerly share the details of the duel, hyping Eddie's bravery and downplaying the fact that it had nearly spiraled out of control. "You should've seen Eddie go toe-to-toe with Walther," Will would boast, clearly enjoying the spotlight. "My man, Eddie, didn't back down, even when Walther brought out the big guns!"

But Eddie was far from thrilled by the attention. He knew that both Madeleine and Ashley were furious with him for getting involved in something so dangerous. Madeleine, in particular, had given him an earful every time they crossed paths. She was relentless in her disapproval, scolding him about the risks he'd taken, especially considering how close he had come to losing control of his magic. "Eddie, you can't just go around dueling people like that!" she had snapped one day, her expression a mixture of concern and frustration. "What if you hurt someone? What if *you* got hurt?"

Ashley, though quieter, had also expressed her worries. Her disapproving glances whenever the topic of the duel came up were enough to make Eddie feel guilty. She was more the type to worry about Eddie's well-being than to engage in heated arguments. "You didn't need to prove anything," she'd told him

softly, shaking her head. "There are safer ways to get ready for your finals, Eddie."

Despite their concern, Eddie couldn't shake the thought that kept repeating in his mind: *If I can defeat Walther without getting my magic out of control, I can finally do the Harmonisation Ritual and get my finals over with.* The idea of proving himself, of mastering his magic, still held a powerful pull on him, no matter how much Madeleine or Ashley tried to convince him otherwise.

That morning, Eddie was determined to avoid making the same mistakes as before. He arrived early at the Alchemy Faculty building, his nerves slightly frayed. He had decided against using Walther's sinister methods – no illusions, no trickery to sneak past the janitor. He didn't want to take the easy route, especially when it could come back to bite him.

Instead, Eddie sneaked around the back of the building, where the faculty's old stone walls towered above him. Using a rope and hook he'd brought from his room, he managed to lower a ladder from the roof. His heart raced with the adrenaline of breaking the rules in such a bold way, but he didn't allow himself to hesitate. Climbing the ladder with quiet precision, he made his way to the top of the Alchemy Faculty building, feeling a strange sense of accomplishment. It wasn't the most conventional way of getting to the rooftop, but it was a way that required his own skill and determination – something he could stand behind.

As he reached the top and pulled himself up onto the roof, Eddie paused for a moment, looking over Edenfield below. The city stretched out beneath him like a living map, the rooftops of Dorm 7, the towering spires of the university, and the distant horizon

beyond. In this moment, he felt a strange sense of clarity. He wasn't just trying to prove something to Walther. He was trying to prove something to himself.

As Eddie climbed to the top of the Alchemy Faculty building, he saw Walther standing in his usual spot, near the edge where the stone wall met the sky. The tall, dark figure looked down at him as he approached, a smirk spreading across his face. "You're early," Walther remarked, his voice dripping with a mix of amusement and expectation.

Eddie couldn't help the smirk that crept across his own face. He had made up his mind the moment he climbed that ladder — this time, he was in control. "Gotta arrive early so I can defeat you before the bell rings," Eddie shot back, his words confident, but his heart pounding beneath the surface. He wasn't sure if he fully believed it, but he had to keep pushing forward. He had to prove that he could win — on his own terms.

Walther chuckled darkly, clearly expecting Eddie to show up for more of the same. He had been waiting for this. Walther was no fool — he knew what Eddie's motivations were, and he had prepared accordingly. His mind was already working, thinking of ways to goad Eddie into unlocking the raw, untapped power he suspected was lying dormant within him. A power, he believed, that could mark Eddie as something much more than just a first-year alchemy student.

The kind of power that could confirm Eddie as the true heir of Edenfield, one of the Twin Princes.

But Eddie wasn't aware of Walther's ulterior motives. He was still focused on proving himself, still fixated on what he had been trying to prove since the duel the week before. Despite Madeleine's warnings, despite her concerns for his safety, Eddie had made up his mind. He was going to win this duel – not by using brute force, but by using the techniques she had taught him. If he could stay calm, if he could control his magic like she had shown him, he could prove he was more than just a frightened, insecure boy.

He was an alchemist with potential, someone who belonged at Edenfield.

"Ready, Welton?" Walther smirked, his fingers gripping the staff hidden beneath his overcoat. Eddie's eyes narrowed, his posture shifting as he drew his wand from his side. There was no turning back now.

"Yeah, let's go." Eddie said with a resolution

As the duel began, Walther wasted no time showing Eddie just how serious he was. With a flick of his wrist and a low muttered incantation, he unleashed a powerful barrage of elemental thunder magic. Bolts of lightning crackled through the air, followed by a deafening roar of thunder. Walther didn't just stop there – he transmuted the iron railings along the rooftop into writhing, serpentine creatures. The snakes hissed and lunged toward Eddie, their metal bodies gleaming menacingly in the pale morning light.

The speed of Walther's attack was overwhelming, each burst of energy a calculated show of force meant to rattle Eddie. It was

clear: Walther wanted to break Eddie's concentration, to provoke him into unleashing whatever hidden power he might be suppressing.

Eddie's first instinct was to retaliate. His heart raced as he grasped his wand, muttering a spell under his breath. He conjured a burst of lightning, aiming it at Walther's oncoming assault. But the magic didn't behave the way he expected – it faltered, sputtered, and veered off-course. Instead of a precise bolt, Eddie's lightning crackled chaotically in every direction. His frustration mounted as he tried again, pushing more mana into his spell, but the result was the same – his magic was wild and untamed, its form shifting unpredictably. A violent crack of thunder sounded, but it was nothing like the controlled, deliberate strikes Walther had sent.

His breath coming faster, Eddie knew he had to do something. Walther's attacks were relentless, and Eddie could feel the tension building inside him, the unstable energy swirling like a storm inside his chest. He tried to push it all down, but it was so much – too much. He needed to regain control.

Eddie stumbled backward, ducking behind a spire of stone on the rooftop for cover. His heart pounded in his chest, the frustration almost overwhelming. He cursed under his breath. He had always struggled with controlling his magic, and now, under pressure, it was all spiraling out of control.

From behind his stone refuge, he heard Walther's voice – laced with mockery and challenge. "What's the matter, Welton? Too scared to use your real power? You'll fail if you keep holding back. I can feel it. You've got more than this."

Eddie bit his lip, sweat trickling down his brow. He was tempted to prove Walther wrong, to let his power explode in a brilliant display. But something inside him, something that Madeleine had taught him, told him to hold back, to stay calm. He couldn't let the chaos consume him. Not now.

"I'm not going to let you control me," Eddie muttered to himself, steeling himself against the fear and uncertainty that was gnawing at him. He had to remain steady. He had to think. The flashing lights of Walther's magic might be dazzling, but Eddie knew he couldn't fall into the trap of trying to match it with sheer power.

Eddie closed his eyes, focusing on his breath, on the steady flow of energy inside him. He couldn't let it go out of control – not yet.

The relentless crackling of lightning and the roar of thunder filled the air as Walther continued his assault, sending bolts of raw energy crashing into Eddie's stone cover. The sound was deafening, but Eddie blocked it out, closing his eyes for a moment. His hands, still gripping his wand, trembled slightly – but only for a heartbeat.

He stopped thinking about winning. He stopped thinking about the chaos of the duel, about proving himself. All of that – the desire to beat Walther, the pressure of the upcoming exams, the fear of failure – melted away as he took a long, steady breath. The world seemed to fade, and he was left in silence, in the quiet space inside his mind where only the flow of magic mattered.

For so long, Eddie had relied on trying to control everything – his thoughts, his magic, his fears. But now, as the lightning rained

down on him, he understood. *This was different.* Magic wasn't something to dominate, it wasn't a force to be commanded through sheer will. It was something that *flowed*, like water, and all he needed to do was let it.

The realization struck him like a sudden burst of clarity. His past attempts to reign in his mana, to force it into something clean and orderly, had been the problem. He had been fighting against it, struggling to impose his own control over something that couldn't be controlled in such a rigid way. Madeleine's words echoed in his mind: "*Let the mana flow.*"

Eddie's fingers relaxed around his wand, the tension easing from his shoulders as he allowed his mind to empty. He didn't try to control the mana anymore. He simply *felt* it, letting it move naturally, letting it exist alongside him rather than inside of him like a pent-up storm waiting to break.

The moment he let go, the chaos inside him began to settle. His connection to the alchemical energy that ran through the world around him deepened, and the force of the storm outside him seemed to slow, even if just for a moment. It wasn't about overpowering Walther, or outmatching him. It was about trusting in his own power — his knowledge of alchemy, his calm.

His eyes fluttered open. The world felt sharper now, clearer. The air around him was thick with energy, but instead of feeling overwhelmed, Eddie felt connected to it, like a channel through which mana could flow.

As Walther unleashed another barrage of lightning, each bolt cracking through the air like a whip, Eddie could feel the tension

rising. The rooftop around him was beginning to crack under the onslaught — stone bricks chipped away in small, jagged pieces, the force of Walther's magic leaving deep scorch marks on the once-solid surface. The air was thick with the smell of ozone, and the sound of thunder was almost deafening.

But Eddie remained calm.

I need to think differently. The realization came to him in an instant: the elements on this rooftop weren't just destructive — they could be *controlled*. Wind. Air. He had worked with them before, in his alchemical studies. He had learned how to alter their properties, how to create pressure points, even how to trap and compress them. It wasn't just about the lightning or the force of the attack. It was about the environment.

Eddie closed his eyes for a brief moment, feeling the air around him — the gusts of wind rising from the building's height, the subtle shifts in the atmosphere, the pull of the energy in the storm. He focused, dialing back the chaotic rush of power, concentrating on a different kind of control. He had to act fast.

With steady hands, he subtly began to manipulate the air around him. It was like pulling a string, adjusting it to the exact point where he needed it. He created small, controlled pockets of wind, shaping them with the quiet precision he had learned in his alchemical studies. At first, it was barely noticeable — just a slight disturbance in the air. But then, Eddie focused harder, pushing the pockets of wind to build, shaping them into tight, swirling eddies that began to take on strength.

With careful concentration, Eddie built up pressure within the confined air. His eyes opened as he saw the wind gather and compress, the invisible force building in strength, swirling around him like a growing storm in miniature. Slowly, he formed a circular entrapment, the wind held within a tight boundary, pushing against the edges, ready to be released. It was a pressure point, a controlled force of nature.

As Walther advanced toward Eddie's position, his staff crackling with ominous energy, the storm around them grew more intense. His eyes gleamed with an almost predatory confidence. He was sure that his final lightning strike would crush Eddie into oblivion. Walther didn't need to think twice—he'd end this now, no mercy. With a mocking sneer, he raised his staff, preparing to unleash another devastating bolt of raw thunder.

But when he stepped around the spire, ready to deliver the final blow—he didn't meet Eddie's expectant gaze.

Instead, he was met with a *ball* of swirling air.

It was sudden, like the shift of a storm's eye. The wind roared with a controlled fury, a tight, focused sphere of force that seemed to hum with potential. Walther barely had time to react before the concentrated gust hit him with precision, like an invisible fist slamming into his chest.

The wind didn't explode outward; it was a sudden, focused rush of air, building pressure like a spring wound too tight, about to release its stored force. Walther's eyes widened as he tried to adjust, but the wind pushed him back with incredible speed, throwing him off balance. The pressure was so tightly controlled,

so precise, that it knocked the staff from his hands in one swift motion, sending it flying several meters away. Walther staggered backward, barely managing to keep his footing as the force of the wind pressed against him.

It was no longer just air – it was Eddie, the alchemist, at his most focused. Eddie's face was no longer frantic or desperate. In that moment, he was calm, precise, and in control. Behind the ball of wind, Eddie stood with a calm and smug expression, his stance steady, his eyes clear and sharp.

The air around him shimmered as if the very atmosphere had bent to his will. Walther, bewildered, stood for a moment, his hands reaching out in disbelief, trying to regain his balance.

"Wha – ?" Walther stammered, his voice faltering as he glanced at his now-empty hands. His staff was gone. It was impossible. *How could this be?* Walther's face shifted from confidence to confusion, and a slight tremor ran through his posture.

The smirk on Eddie's face was almost too much to hide, and there was a subtle gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. He stood tall, his wand now pointing directly at Walther's face, the tip of it unwavering. The powerful, precise wind hung just behind him, an extension of his control, ready to strike again if needed.

Eddie stood there, his hands relaxed by his sides, an almost smug smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "Guess you underestimated me, Walther."

For the first time in the duel, the tables had turned. Walther was disarmed – physically and mentally – and Eddie’s alchemy had shown its true potential.

The wind died down, but the silence that followed spoke volumes. Eddie had won this round, and Walther was left in shock, grappling with the realization that this wasn't just about magic. This was about control. And Eddie had finally taken it.

Walther stood there, disoriented, his chest still rising and falling with heavy breaths. His eyes flicked from the wand now aimed squarely at his face, to the wind swirling behind Eddie, ready to strike at his command. The moment was thick with the tension of a battle fought, a battle won.

Walther’s jaw clenched in frustration, his hands slowly falling to his sides, almost as if he were surrendering to the weight of the defeat. He took a step back, glancing at the ground where his staff lay discarded. His pride, his carefully cultivated image of superiority, had been shattered.

A bitter laugh escaped his lips, the sound hollow and forced. He raised his hands in a gesture of mock surrender, his eyes meeting Eddie’s with a mixture of begrudging respect and seething irritation.

"I guess you've won, Welton," Walther said, his voice laced with reluctant acknowledgment. "Congratulations."

It was not the kind of victory Eddie had expected – there were no dramatic boasts, no grand finale. Walther's defeat was not marked by a humiliating collapse but by a quiet resignation, the

kind that came when one's carefully constructed walls had crumbled under the weight of reality.

Eddie held Walther's gaze, his wand still steady, but the tension in his shoulders eased. He had won — not just the duel, but a deeper battle within himself. The magic wasn't wild and uncontrollable, nor was it flashy and overbearing. It was calm, precise, and in that moment, Eddie knew he had finally found his balance.

"Thanks," Eddie replied coolly, his voice firm but not without a touch of satisfaction. He didn't need to rub it in. Walther had already done enough damage to his own pride. "But you should've known better than to underestimate me."

Walther scoffed, a faint grimace pulling at his lips as he turned away, clearly struggling to reconcile with his defeat. Eddie didn't let it faze him — he had proven what he needed to. The duel was over, and so was the game of proving himself.

As Walther began to walk off, Eddie lowered his wand, the winds dying down around him. The rooftop felt quieter now, as if the air itself had sighed in relief. He had faced his doubts and come out on top, and for the first time, it felt like the weight of the upcoming Harmonisation Ritual might not be such an insurmountable challenge after all.

Eddie stood there, confused by Walther's sudden shift in tone. The tension in the air was thick, but he couldn't shake the feeling that Walther had more to say — something he wasn't quite prepared to hear.

"I guess you're not one of the twin princes after all," Walther said, shrugging as though the revelation was a casual afterthought.

Eddie blinked, completely thrown off. His brows furrowed, and his wand instinctively tightened in his grip. "What do you mean?" he asked, genuinely puzzled by the words that seemed to spill from Walther with a sense of finality.

Walther's smirk was almost too self-assured, his posture relaxed despite the still-charged atmosphere. "Madeleine," he said, drawing the name out with deliberate slowness. "She told me about her suspicion. She thinks you could be one of the missing twin princes. But I was wrong." He shrugged again, as though dismissing the thought entirely. "The Prince of Edenfield – the heir of the Paladins who won the Great Mages War – wouldn't use such a simple alchemical trick in a duel like that."

Eddie scoffed, shaking his head in disbelief. Walther was either making a joke or completely losing his mind. "That's ridiculous," Eddie muttered, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I'm just some kid from a backwater town. A poor son of an apothecary from Weshaven. You've got the wrong guy."

For a brief moment, Eddie lowered his wand, his guard slipping as he laughed off the absurdity of Walther's theory. But that small movement, that moment of vulnerability, was exactly what Walther had been waiting for.

Before Eddie could react, Walther's expression darkened with a sudden, sinister gleam in his eye. With a swift motion, his hand shot forward, and a crackling bolt of lightning erupted from his

right hand. The bolt hit Eddie's wand arm with the force of a thunderclap, sending a searing shock through his body.

Eddie gasped, his fingers convulsing with the sharp, electric pain. His wand slipped from his grip, clattering to the ground. His arms trembled as he struggled to stay upright, feeling his heart race from the shock.

Walther, now standing over him, began to sneer. "You forgot about your magical ring, didn't you, Welton?" His voice was low, mocking. "You should always have a secondary."

Before Eddie could even process what was happening, another surge of lightning erupted from Walther's hand, a second, more powerful strike hitting Eddie squarely in the chest. The blast sent him sprawling backward, crashing into the stone wall behind him with a sickening thud.

The world spun around Eddie as he slid down the wall, feeling dazed and barely able to breathe. The pain from the electric shocks surged through his body, leaving him weak and vulnerable. Walther's taunting words echoed in his ears, but Eddie couldn't muster the strength to respond.

Walther stepped closer, his eyes gleaming with a cruel, triumphant satisfaction. "I was right about one thing," he said, his voice now barely above a whisper. "You're nothing but a pawn. But you're about to learn that your little tricks won't save you now."

Walther's cruel laughter echoed through the rooftop as he advanced on Eddie, each burst of lightning intensifying, pushing

Eddie further into a haze of pain and confusion. The lightning was no longer a mere show of strength — it was a weapon, a tool of torment. Walther wasn't treating this like a duel anymore. He didn't care about honor, about proving superiority. His only goal was to break Eddie. To force him into a corner where he had no choice but to use his raw, unbridled power.

Eddie's body convulsed with each surge of lightning, but it wasn't just physical pain that overwhelmed him — it was the mounting frustration, the growing sense of helplessness. His thoughts were clouded, his focus was shattered. There was no room for strategy, no calm control anymore. Every few moments, another burst of lightning tore through him, leaving him weaker, more unstable. He could feel his mind slipping away, drowned in the chaos of his own tortured body.

"You're pathetic, Welton!" Walther spat, his voice dripping with disdain. Each surge of electricity was designed not just to hurt, but to push Eddie to the breaking point. "What do you think you'll prove with your tricks, huh? You'll never be good enough. You'll never —"

Then, in the midst of it, something stirred deep inside Eddie — something ancient, something powerful. It was like a spark igniting in the darkness, a flicker of something beyond himself. His body, wracked with pain and frustration, responded instinctively, and for the first time, Eddie felt something shift. The raw surge of energy he'd been holding back suddenly broke free.

Eddie's body surged upward, his mind in a trance-like state, completely out of his control. The lightning that had been

tormenting him before was replaced by a kind of focused fury. His bloodline — his blood — stirred, awakening a power that had been dormant for so long. His hand shot out, and before he could fully comprehend what was happening, Walther was lifted off the ground.

His blood boiled, and it wasn't just anger. It was something else. Something ancient.

Without thinking, Eddie pushed himself to his feet, his hands trembling. His whole body hummed with a strange, unfamiliar power that surged through him like wildfire. He reached out toward Walther, and with an eerie calmness, Eddie gripped the air itself.

Suddenly, Walther's feet left the ground. The shock of it was instant, and Walther's eyes went wide with confusion as he began to float, suspended in midair. Eddie was no longer in control, not fully. It felt as if something divine had taken over him, a force beyond his comprehension.

All around Eddie, the stone bricks and iron railings began to levitate, their weight irrelevant as they hovered in the air, caught in Eddie's unseen grasp. Walther's frustration morphed into twisted glee as he grinned up at Eddie.

"Yes! YES!" Walther yelled, his voice high with manic excitement. "This is it, Welton! I knew you had it in you! Show me your power!"

Then, with a violent thrust of his hand, Eddie sent Walther flying backward, slamming him into the brick wall with a deafening

crash. For a moment, there was silence. Walther's body crumpled to the ground, unconscious, his magic unable to maintain any control over the situation.

Eddie stood frozen, his breath heavy, his eyes wide. The world around him seemed to collapse back into place as if he had just snapped out of a trance. His heart pounded in his chest, and a sense of power washed over him, but it was quickly followed by confusion.

"You're a fucking coward, Walther, you should've —" Eddie yelled, but the words died in his throat as he turned to see Walther's limp form on the ground. The intensity of the moment faded, and Eddie's thoughts immediately shifted. His mind raced, trying to piece together what had just happened.

He stumbled toward Walther, his breath shallow. His hands shook as he knelt beside him, noticing the blood oozing from the back of Walther's head, staining the stone beneath him.

"Oh no, oh shit," Eddie muttered, his voice barely above a whisper. His heart dropped into his stomach as he reached out, shaking Walther's shoulders. "Walther, are you okay?"

A low, pained chuckle escaped Walther's lips as his eyes fluttered open. His voice was weak, but there was an unmistakable sense of satisfaction in it.

"That is..." Walther coughed, wincing as the blood dripped from the back of his head. "That's raw magical power, Welton. You've got it."

Eddie stared at him, his eyes wide. He hadn't expected Walther to be conscious so soon, let alone offer such a comment.

Walther tapped Eddie's shoulder weakly. "Well done," he said, though his voice was strained, clearly feeling the weight of the blow he had just taken.

Eddie just sat there, frozen, his mind still reeling from the surge of power. Had he really done that? Had he really unleashed something like that without even realizing it?

And what did it mean for him now?



The air in the Edenfield Infirmary was heavy with the smell of herbs and the soft hum of magic in the air. The sterile white walls and polished stone floors gave the place an almost otherworldly calm, despite the bruising, burns, and blood that clung to Eddie and Walther. Healers moved between the two of them, their hands glowing with healing magic that worked swiftly to mend the damage. Eddie's burns and the scorch marks from Walther's lightning faded faster than he thought possible, while Walther's fractured skull began knitting back together with remarkable speed.

Eddie sat on one of the beds, his body still feeling the aftereffects of the duel – the ache in his bones, the rawness of the burn marks still faintly tingling. He had tried to focus on the healing process,

but his thoughts kept drifting back to the chaos of the duel, the wild surge of magic he hadn't been able to control. And, most of all, to the look of shock in Walther's eyes when he'd thrown him across the rooftop.

"I'm... sorry," Eddie said quietly, his voice almost lost in the room. He looked at Walther, who was lying in the bed opposite him, a healing cloth pressed to his head. "I didn't mean for it to go that far. I didn't know what happened. I..."

Walther chuckled weakly, though there was a hint of respect in his eyes despite the discomfort. "It's okay, Welton," he replied, his voice rough but amused. "Had you not done that, I'd be a fried duck by now, wouldn't I?" He gave Eddie a crooked smile, his eyes flicking toward the healers who were still working, though his tone softened as he continued. "It's your power. Don't apologize for it. You should own it."

Eddie's gaze flickered, unsure. The feeling of having unleashed something so uncontrollable, so raw, still haunted him. "But I didn't even mean to do it like that. It just... happened."

"Exactly," Walther said, leaning back a little, his fingers tracing the edge of the healing bandage around his head. "That's the thing, Welton. Magic's not just about control—it's about letting it come out when it's meant to. You didn't control it, sure, but you tapped into something. That raw power? That's something only someone like you can wield." His eyes were sharp, filled with a strange kind of understanding. "Don't run from it. Embrace it. Own it."

The door to the infirmary slammed open with a creak as Madeleine stormed in, her face flushed with a mixture of anger and concern. Her usually composed demeanor was nowhere to be seen, replaced by an unmistakable distress as her eyes darted between Eddie and Walther, both still recovering from the effects of their duel.

“Honestly, both of you!” Madeleine’s voice was sharp, her hands thrown up in frustration as she took in the sight of her two classmates in various stages of healing. “What were you thinking? A duel—on the rooftop, no less! Are you trying to get yourselves killed?”

Eddie winced at her words, the weight of his actions hitting him all over again. Walther, on the other hand, merely raised an eyebrow, clearly unbothered by her scolding. He gave her a lazy wave, as if the duel were little more than a passing inconvenience.

Madeleine’s gaze hardened as she focused on Eddie, her worry clearly turning into exasperation. “Eddie, you —” She stopped herself, breathing in deeply as if trying to hold back the storm of words threatening to spill out. “You know better than this. You’ve just been settling in here, and now you’re already throwing yourself into dangerous fights!”

Eddie opened his mouth to speak, but Madeleine’s sharp eyes silenced him instantly. She turned back to Walther, who was still reclining on the bed, looking unscathed despite his earlier injuries.

“And you!” she snapped. “What the hell were you thinking, pushing Eddie to the point where he —” She broke off, eyes flicking to Eddie’s still-burned hands. She softened a little, taking

a deep breath. "What happened to your sense of sportsmanship? You could've seriously hurt each other."

Walther raised his hands in mock defense, still grinning despite the rebuke. "Hey, don't look at me, Miss," he said with an exaggerated shrug. "It wasn't my fault Eddie decided to push himself. I was just giving him a little... motivation." His grin widened at his own words, clearly enjoying the tension in the room.

Madeleine's eyes narrowed, but she couldn't help a frustrated sigh as she turned back to Eddie. She could see the guilt in his eyes, the regret that had set in the moment the fight had escalated. He looked so much smaller, so much less certain than he had earlier, before the surge of raw power had taken him by surprise.

Walther sat up slowly, the lingering effects of the healing magic dulling the sharpest of his pains. He glanced over at Eddie, who was still recovering from his own injuries, though his attention was clearly elsewhere, lost in thought. Walther had always been the type to take his time recovering, never one to sit still for long. But right now, his mind was elsewhere, thinking about the conversation that had just transpired in the hallway outside the infirmary. The words Madeleine had shared with him earlier were still fresh in his mind.

"Madeleine," Walther murmured quietly, just loud enough for her to hear as she paused by the door. His voice, usually laced with sarcasm, was now oddly serious. "You were right."

Madeleine stiffened, her hand on the doorframe tightening slightly. Her gaze flickered toward him, and for a moment, there

was an almost imperceptible shift in her expression. She didn't respond immediately, as if waiting for him to elaborate, but Walther didn't offer more. He simply gave her that same look — cool, detached, and unreadable.

The air in the room shifted. Madeleine's eyes narrowed slightly, her posture tensing. She turned to face Walther fully, her brow furrowing. "Right about what?" she asked, her voice quieter than usual, but still carrying an edge.

Walther didn't answer right away. He had something else in mind. Something unsaid, a lingering truth hanging between them that he was slowly beginning to realize. And yet, when he looked at her now, he could sense the weight of his words. Whatever it was they were dancing around, it was deeper than he had expected.

But then, before he could say another word, Madeleine's expression crumpled. Her lips trembled, and her eyes welled up, the usual composure she carried with such grace dissolving in an instant. She turned away quickly, but not before a single tear slipped down her cheek.

It was so unexpected — so unlike the Madeleine Eddie knew — that it was almost impossible to comprehend. She wasn't the kind of person to break so easily. But there it was, the quiet, rawness of her vulnerability coming through in a way none of them had seen before.

Eddie, still perched on his bed and nursing his own injuries, felt a sharp pang of confusion, the kind of discomfort that only came when someone you thought you understood suddenly became a

stranger. “Madeleine?” he said softly, almost as if speaking her name could somehow fix whatever was happening.

But Madeleine didn’t respond to him. She was too busy trying to regain her composure, wiping at her eyes with a trembling hand. The silence between them felt suffocating now, and for the first time since he’d met her, Eddie couldn’t read her at all.

There were no words, no explanation. Madeleine just stood there, struggling to breathe, as if something deeper, something unspoken, had broken inside her. Walther watched her quietly, his expression unreadable, but Eddie could see the flicker of regret there—just a momentary flash—as if Walther too was unsure of what he had just done.

Eddie swallowed hard, his heart aching for the girl he had come to admire, who had always been so strong, so calm. This wasn’t the Madeleine he knew.

“Madeleine...?” Eddie asked again, his voice now more tentative. This time, his question wasn’t just for her; it was for himself too. He didn’t know what was happening, but he couldn’t just sit in the silence, not when it was suffocating her.

Madeleine finally turned toward him, her face flushed and damp from her tears, her usual calm shattered. She shook her head quickly, trying to brush it off, but it was clear she couldn’t hide the storm of emotions raging just beneath the surface.

“I—I’m fine,” she stammered, her voice quivering for the first time Eddie had ever heard. She quickly wiped her tears away,

but they were still there, lingering in her eyes, refusing to be forgotten.

Walther didn't say another word, and for a long moment, neither did Eddie. It was a silence thick with unspoken things, with questions that neither of them knew how to ask. Whatever had happened, whatever Walther had meant with his simple words — Eddie had no idea what was really going on. But seeing Madeleine like this, seeing her so vulnerable, it made him wonder if the calm exterior she always wore was nothing but a shield.

Madeleine took a shaky breath, still refusing to meet either of their eyes fully, and her voice, when she spoke, was hoarse. "I need some time. Just... leave me alone for a while."

With that, she quickly turned and left the room, the door clicking shut softly behind her, leaving Eddie and Walther in an awkward silence. Eddie couldn't shake the feeling that something had just shifted between them all — something important, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He only knew that whatever had caused Madeleine to break, it had to be something deeper than just a duel.

And Walther, despite the casualness of his usual demeanor, remained still, his gaze lingering on the door that Madeleine had exited through. A small, almost imperceptible frown tugged at his lips, but he said nothing.

Eddie, still unsure of what had just transpired, glanced over at Walther. "What the hell did you do? Go apologize to her!"

Walther just sighed, shaking his head slowly, as if unsure whether he even wanted to explain. "Some things are better left unsaid," he muttered, his voice carrying a weight that Eddie couldn't quite place.

And with that, the two of them sat in the uneasy silence, the truth just out of reach, hanging between them like a shadow neither could shake.

ACT II pt 2 | Chapter 4



The soft, golden light of the desk lamp pooled across the wooden floorboards, casting faint shadows over the chalk-drawn ritual circle. Ashley leaned forward, her brow furrowed in concentration as she added the finishing touches to the intricate runes. Around her, notes and scrapped parchment lay scattered, their inked diagrams and crossed-out calculations a testament to the hours they'd already spent preparing.

Eddie sat cross-legged on the floor, a mug of black coffee nestled between his hands. His silver hair fell in messy tufts over his face, but his jade green eyes gleamed with determination. He glanced at the rune patterns, his mind racing to double-check Ashley's work.

"You've memorized the flow charts for the harmonization pathways, right?" Will asked, sprawled on his stomach nearby, a half-empty can of energy drink beside him. His guitar, a bard's trusty companion, leaned against the wall, unused but ready if inspiration struck.

"I've got them," Eddie said with a firm nod. He set his coffee aside, pulling a fresh sheet of parchment toward him. With quick, deliberate strokes, he scribbled a new set of notes, cross-referencing them against one of Ashley's diagrams.

Ashley, kneeling in the circle's center, paused to roll her shoulders and flex her fingers. Her steaming tea, untouched for

the past hour, sat beside a small stack of rune papers marked with smudged chalk dust. "Are you sure you want to do this, Ed?" she asked, her voice laced with concern as she glanced up at him.

"I'm sure," Eddie replied without hesitation. His tone left no room for argument.

Ashley exchanged a glance with Will. "Alright," she said finally, brushing her hair out of her face and gripping her chalk firmly. "Then let's make sure this circle is flawless. We only get one shot at harmonization."

The three of them worked in synchronized chaos, each focused on their tasks but remaining keenly aware of the others. Eddie reviewed the stabilization patterns, muttering to himself as he adjusted calculations. Will practiced humming a resonance tune, his bardic instincts invaluable for balancing the mana harmonics. Meanwhile, Ashley inspected every line and rune in the circle, her fingers smudging here and there as she corrected imperfections.

The room buzzed with a quiet intensity. Outside, the night was still, the faint hum of the magical wards around the dormitory faintly audible in the silence. Inside, the comforting scents of lavender candles mingled with the earthy aroma of chalk and parchment.

"Alright, that's the last sigil," Ashley announced, sitting back on her heels and wiping her hands on her skirt. Her cheeks were dusted with chalk, her eyes bright with focus.

“Looks good to me,” Eddie said, sliding his notes aside and leaning in to inspect her work. He could feel the faint pull of magic emanating from the circle—a gentle hum that resonated in his chest.

Will took a swig of his energy drink, then clapped Eddie on the shoulder. “No pressure, mate, but if this doesn’t work, you might spontaneously combust or something.”

“Thanks, Will. Really calming,” Eddie replied dryly, though his lips twitched into a small smile.

Despite the stress of their looming finals, the room carried a strange sense of warmth, a reminder that they weren’t alone in this. Friends, teammates, and a shared purpose—this was the heart of their efforts.

Ashley reached out, placing her hand on Eddie’s. “You’ve got this,” she said, her voice steady but kind. “Just follow the flow, and trust the circle.”

Eddie nodded, taking a deep breath. “Alright. Let’s do this.”

Eddie sat cross-legged within the ritual circle, his wand poised toward a glowing sigil etched on the floor. Ashley knelt to his left, her staff gently humming with energy, its carved wooden surface catching the flickering candlelight. Will sat to Eddie’s right, his guitar resting on his lap as he strummed a soft, resonant chord that wove into the magic around them.

The air in the room buzzed with anticipation as the sigil began to glow brighter. At its center, a cluster of minerals shimmered

faintly, their surfaces catching the light as the harmonization began to take form. Eddie focused on the flow of his mana, channeling it into the sigil with as much precision as he could muster.

“Steady...” Ashley whispered, her voice taut with concentration as she guided the energy from her staff into the circle.

Will, sensing the tension, played a deliberate progression of chords, his bardic magic weaving through the room like an invisible thread. “Almost there,” he said, his tone laced with encouragement.

The sigil’s light pulsed, a faint hum filling the space as the minerals at its center began to shimmer more intensely. But then, without warning, the glow flickered. A sharp fizzling sound broke through the tension, and the light snuffed out entirely. The minerals dulled, leaving the room bathed only in the dim light of the desk lamp and candles.

The three of them stared at the failed sigil in stunned silence.

Eddie groaned, letting his wand drop to the floor as he buried his face in his hands. “It didn’t work,” he muttered, his voice muffled and heavy with frustration.

Ashley let out a long sigh, sitting back on her heels and rubbing her eyes. “What went wrong this time?” she murmured, glancing at the notes scattered around them. “We triple-checked everything.”

Will flopped onto his back, strumming a lazy, dissonant chord on his guitar. "Maybe the circle hates us," he said, his tone dry but tinged with exhaustion. "Or maybe it's cursed. Did someone anger a rune goddess or something?"

Despite their fatigue, a small chuckle escaped Ashley's lips. "If it's cursed, it's probably your fault, Will."

Eddie lifted his head, his jade-green eyes filled with frustration. "We're not going to make it at this rate," he said quietly. His shoulders sagged, the weight of the looming finals pressing down on him.

Ashley frowned, leaning over to nudge him gently with her staff. "Hey. None of that defeatist talk," she said firmly. "We're going to figure this out. We just need to rethink the flow ratios."

Will sat up, propping his guitar against the wall. "She's right, Ed," he said, his voice softening. "We've come this far, haven't we? We'll crack it eventually."

Eddie shook his head, though a small, reluctant smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "You two are insufferable, you know that?"

"Absolutely," Ashley replied with a grin, reaching for another sheet of rune paper. "Now let's get back to it. Third time's the charm, right?"

"More like the twentieth," Will quipped, grabbing his can of energy drink and raising it like a toast.

Eddie sighed but picked up his wand again, a flicker of determination reigniting in his eyes. "Alright," he said. "Let's try it again."

As the night wore on, their failures continued to pile up, each fizzled sigil or sputtered rune drawing groans and exasperated sighs. But every time one of them wavered, the others would pull them back up – Ashley with her calm logic, Will with his relentless humor, and Eddie with his stubborn determination.

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As the first rays of dawn spilled through the thin curtains, Ashley's dorm room bore the marks of a night-long siege of study and determination. Notes and diagrams lay scattered across the floor, teetering stacks of magical research papers balanced precariously on the desk, and the faint, waxy aroma of burnt-out lavender candles lingered in the air.

Eddie lay sprawled on the wooden floor, his wand clutched loosely in one hand and a crumpled page of notes in the other. His silver hair was a mess, and faint smudges of ink marred his cheek. Will knelt beside Ashley at the center of the room, both of them still wide-eyed with exhaustion but focused as they labored over the final sigil.

Ashley hovered over her rune inscriptions, her hand steady despite the fatigue pulling at her every motion. Her voice was soft but focused as she murmured to herself, making the last adjustments to the chalked lines. Will leaned over her shoulder, pointing out details and double-checking against Eddie's scrawled notes.

“Make sure the flow here connects back,” Will said, his finger tracing one of the curved lines. “Eddie wrote that it needs to reinforce the whole loop for stability.”

Ashley nodded, making a quick correction and blowing a stray lock of hair from her face. “I’ve got it. Thanks, Will.”

After a few more careful strokes of chalk, Ashley leaned back on her heels and let out a long sigh. “That’s it,” she said, her voice laced with a mix of relief and nervous anticipation.

Will sat back and rubbed his neck, glancing over at Eddie. “Let’s wake him,” he said.

Crawling across the floor, he gave Eddie’s shoulder a gentle shake. “Hey, Sleeping Beauty. Time to rise and shine.”

Eddie jolted awake, blinking groggily as his jade-green eyes darted around the room. “What? Huh? Did I – ?” He looked down at his notes as if trying to remember what he was doing before sleep claimed him.

Will chuckled, helping him sit up. “You passed out mid-theory, Professor. But Ashley’s ready. We’re giving this another shot.”

Eddie rubbed his face, trying to shake off the haze of sleep. “Alright,” he said, his voice hoarse but resolute. “Let’s do it.”

The three of them gathered around the completed sigil, its chalked lines glowing faintly in the soft light of dawn. Ashley stood at the edge of the circle, her long staff in hand, its tip catching the morning light. Will crouched nearby, ready to

channel his music into the spell if needed, while Eddie knelt on the floor, his gaze fixed on the inscription they had labored over all night.

Ashley took a deep breath, gripping her staff tightly. "Alright," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the soft birdsong filtering through the window. "Moment of truth."

She raised her staff and tapped the center of the rune circle.

The room fell silent as the three of them positioned themselves around the rune circle one last time. The drawn lines of chalk, scuffed from hours of effort, still held the intricate sigils that seemed to breathe faintly with latent power. At the center sat the components of their ritual – water in a small dish, a smooth stone, and a single, unassuming seed.

Eddie adjusted his wand, his fingers trembling from exhaustion but steady in their purpose. Ashley tightened her grip on her staff, her lips murmuring a soft incantation as she attuned herself to the spell's rhythm. Will rested his fingers lightly on the strings of his lute, his normally playful demeanor replaced by a rare, quiet focus.

"Ready?" Ashley asked softly, her voice nearly drowned out by the weight of the moment.

Eddie nodded. "Let's make it count."

Will strummed a single chord, the sound resonating in the air like a ripple across still water. Eddie pointed his wand, drawing

energy into the circle, while Ashley tapped the center of the rune with her staff.

The room seemed to inhale.

A soft glow emanated from the circle, spreading outward like the first light of dawn. The stone shimmered, its surface radiating a gentle warmth. The water began to ripple, as though stirred by an unseen breeze, before tiny droplets rose into the air, suspended in delicate arcs around the seed.

Then, as if the world paused to watch, the seed quivered.

The three of them held their breaths as a faint green tendril unfurled from the seed, curling upward with a fragile yet purposeful grace. The tendril touched the glowing stone, and the stone responded, its glow intensifying as veins of light spread across its surface. The water droplets danced, spiraling around the growing stem and feeding it with liquid light.

It was as though life itself was awakening.

The stem grew stronger, thicker, and from it bloomed a flower unlike anything Eddie, Ashley, or Will had ever seen. Its petals were translucent yet iridescent, shifting in hues of gold, violet, and emerald as though capturing every color of the sunrise. A faint hum filled the air, soft and melodic, resonating in their very bones — a sound that felt alive.

“You gotta be kidding me,” Will murmured, his voice hoarse from hours of talking and lack of sleep.

"Did we just...?" Eddie trailed off, his wide, jade-green eyes fixed on the impossible flower before him.

"I think..." Ashley's voice was barely above a whisper, her hands trembling slightly as she gripped her staff. "I think we completed it."

The three of them sat frozen in a sort of trance, the exhaustion of the night forgotten as they stared at the flower. Its glow bathed their faces in soft, shifting light, as if it were a miracle born of their collective effort.

And then it hit them.

"YEAAAAAH!"

Their voices erupted in unison, shattering the stillness of the moment. Will leapt to his feet, whooping as he grabbed Ashley into a bear hug. She laughed, spinning around with him, her staff clattering to the floor. Eddie, still kneeling, finally broke into a wide grin and stumbled to his feet, joining the impromptu celebration.

The three of them huddled together in a tight embrace, laughing and shouting, their voices carrying the unrestrained joy of triumph.

"We did it!" Eddie exclaimed, his voice cracking with excitement.

"I can't believe it!" Ashley said, her face lit with a jubilant smile.

Will grinned, his arm slung over Eddie's shoulder. "Forget the finals. We're legends now!"

They laughed together, the flower glowing quietly in the center of the rune, a testament to their determination and friendship.

Eddie, Will, and Ashley collapsed onto Ashley's bed in a heap of tangled limbs and laughter, their tired smiles refusing to fade. Eddie sprawled across the foot of the bed, his silver hair sticking out in all directions, his green eyes half-lidded but shining with contentment. Will slouched at the head of the bed, propped up by a pile of mismatched pillows, his lute abandoned nearby. Ashley lay in the middle, her dark hair fanned out around her, her fingers idly tracing the faint lines of chalk still smudged on her hands.

"Do you think Professor Rheagan will even believe us?" Eddie murmured, his voice heavy with fatigue but laced with amusement.

"Believe us? He'll frame that flower and hang it in the Hall of Legends," Will replied with a grin, though his eyes were already drifting shut.

Ashley laughed softly, turning her head to look at them both. "Let's just hope we can still function when the finals roll around. We're going to need sleep first, or I might accidentally turn a seed into a rock next time."

A small spread of snacks and treats sat untouched on the bedside table, their celebratory feast forgotten in the whirlwind of the ritual's success. Empty coffee cups, an assortment of energy drink

cans, and discarded papers littered the floor — a chaotic monument to their determination and teamwork.

For a moment, the three of them lay there in a comfortable silence, the only sounds being the faint hum of the rune's remnants and their quiet breathing. The shared accomplishment settled over them like a warm blanket, soothing the exhaustion that weighed down their bodies.

"I still can't believe we did it," Eddie mumbled, his voice muffled by the pillow he had pulled under his head.

Will chuckled softly. "That's because you're too tired to process it. We're geniuses, Ed. Give it a day, and it'll hit you."

Ashley smiled, her eyelids fluttering closed as she nestled deeper into the bed. "Or... just give it a nap."

"You know," Eddie began, staring at the ceiling with half-closed eyes, "We really should thank Madeleine for helping me with my chaotic magic. If it weren't for her, I probably would've set us all on fire during the Harmonisation Ritual."

Will chuckled, resting his head against a pillow. "True. But while we're at it, we should also thank Walther. He's the one who pushed you to figure out what you're really capable of."

Ashley snorted, rolling onto her side to look at them. "Oh, so we're doing a gratitude roll call now? Alright, you two geniuses better thank me too. I'm the one who had to worry about all your shenanigans. Especially *you*, Eddie." She pointed an accusing finger at him, her eyes narrowed in mock disapproval. "Between

your chaotic duels and landing in the infirmary, I've practically aged a year in stress."

Eddie and Will both burst out laughing, their tired voices mingling with hers. "Fair enough," Eddie admitted, raising his hands in surrender. "Thank you, Ashley, for being the only responsible one."

"You're welcome," she said smugly, though her smile gave her away.

The room filled with laughter that carried a mix of weariness and joy, the kind of laughter that only comes after overcoming something monumental. As it faded into chuckles and soft murmurs, the three of them finally allowed their exhaustion to pull them under.

One by one, they began to drift off, the adrenaline of their triumph finally giving way to the pull of sleep. Ashley pulled the covers over all three of them, her hand brushing Eddie's shoulder in a silent gesture of solidarity before she settled back into the pillows.

As they lay there, the rare flower still glowing softly in the corner of the room, the air carried a sense of peace and fulfillment. They had faced challenges together, pushed through their limits, and achieved something extraordinary.

And as the three friends succumbed to well-earned rest, they did so with pride in their hearts and dreams of what they could accomplish next – together.



The next morning, the stone halls of Edenfield buzzed with life as Eddie, Will, and Ashley made their way toward Professor Rheagan's class in the grand Vulcrum Lecture Hall. The halls, carved from weathered stone and adorned with intricate flourishes, whispered of centuries of scholarship. Sunlight streamed in through high, arched windows, illuminating moss-covered crevices and casting geometric patterns on the polished floors.

The trio strode through this scene of academic tradition with an unmistakable air of confidence. Will, leading the group, practically radiated swagger, his electric guitar slung casually over his back. "I'm telling you," he said, gesturing animatedly, "when Rheagan sees what we pulled off, he's going to write a song about *us*. 'The Harmonisation Trio,' has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"

Eddie rolled his eyes but couldn't suppress a grin. His unkempt silver hair stuck up in every direction, a testament to the all-nighters they'd pulled. Despite his disheveled appearance, there was a lightness in his step — a quiet confidence born from knowing they had truly nailed something remarkable.

Ashley walked beside them, her usual practicality tempered by a rare smirk of satisfaction. "You both look like you've crawled out

of the swamp,” she teased, nudging Eddie with her elbow. “I’m surprised they let you in without a mandatory bath.”

Eddie chuckled, adjusting his satchel. “Hey, I might look like I’ve been through hell, but at least I’m confident hell didn’t win.”

The trio’s voices mixed with the distant hum of the bustling courtyard outside. Students hurried past them, their robes flowing, but none carried themselves with the quiet triumph of three friends who had faced impossible odds – and won.

“Let’s just hope Professor Rheagan’s in a good mood,” Ashley muttered, though her smile betrayed her excitement.

The stone halls of Edenfield University exuded an air of quiet solemnity, their weathered surfaces worn smooth by centuries of time. Moss clung to the cracks in the stone, offering a soft contrast to the towering facades that reached up like ancient sentinels watching over the lives that passed beneath them.

Eddie, Will, and Ashley walked together towards the Vulcrum Lecture Hall, the echoes of their footsteps mingling with the soft murmur of students filling the courtyard. The sun filtered through the high windows, casting a warm glow over the grand stone architecture. Will’s electric guitar bag swung against his back as he hummed along, his usual swagger in full display. Though Eddie and Will hadn’t seen a shower in days, their confidence was unmistakable. They had conquered the Harmonisation Ritual – nothing could take that from them now.

As they passed through the courtyard, a familiar voice broke through the calm.

"Look at here," Christine's voice oozed with smugness. Perched atop the low stone wall with her two companions, Geralt and Dominic, she surveyed the three of them with a predator's gaze. Her posture was immaculate, exuding both power and disdain. "The Nepotistic Alchemist, the bard, and the filthy witch. Having fun in Edenfield so far?"

Her eyes gleamed with that quiet yet undeniable air of authority, and even though she stood high above them on the stone wall, it was clear she felt untouchable.

Eddie, now feeling emboldened by his recent success, couldn't help but throw back a challenge. "Yeah, so much fun." He shot her a teasing grin, the smirk playing on his lips as he added, "Didn't know jealousy was part of the curriculum here. But hey, if you're offering free lessons, we're all ears."

Christine's smirk faltered, her eyes narrowing as she gracefully stepped down from the wall and approached the group. "Maybe you should stick to your little poor villages and leave the real magic to those who are worthy to handle it."

Eddie didn't flinch. "At least our villages were using practical learned magic." His voice was sharp, cutting. "I'd rather struggle learning this kind of magic than coast through with daddy's gold. At least our achievements will be our own, not handed to us on a silver platter."

Ashley, trailing behind Eddie, felt her heart skip a beat. She wasn't sure if she should be proud or worried – Eddie's quick wit had a way of making the situation ten times worse. Will, on the other hand, was grinning like a cat that had just found a

particularly plump mouse. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the verbal sparring; this was better than any show.

Christine's composure finally cracked, and the venom in her words made the air around them practically sizzle. "You'll see, Welton. When it comes to the final exams, we'll leave you and your sorry excuses for a basic Harmonisation Ritual in the dust."

Eddie stepped closer, his stance unshakable. "We'll see, Christine. But remember – it's not the wand that makes the wizard, it's this." He tapped his temple, his finger pressing into his head for emphasis. "And from where I'm standing, you're running on empty."

Christine's eyes flared with fury. Her grip tightened on her staff, which began to glow a brilliant shade of blue – an unmistakable sign that she was ready to strike. But before she could take action, Eddie didn't flinch. He simply walked past her, heading toward the lecture hall with an air of casual indifference.

"Anyway," Eddie called back over his shoulder with a final jab, "I'll see you later during the finals presentation. Hope for the best for you and your grand 'Elven' rune."

Christine stood there, seething in silence, her hands still gripped around her staff. But she didn't move – her temper had reached its limit, and any further escalation would have been beneath her.

As Eddie, Will, and Ashley disappeared through the grand wooden doors of the lecture hall, the tension in the courtyard seemed to dissolve. The three of them exchanged a look – part

disbelief, part satisfaction. The brief encounter with Christine had been intense, but the playful defiance had felt invigorating.

“Whew, that was close,” Ashley said under her breath, still processing the exchange.

Will chuckled, slinging his guitar bag back over his shoulder. “Close? We totally nailed it. Christine’s not gonna know what hit her come finals.”

Eddie just smiled, his mind still buzzing from the confrontation. “Yeah, but I think we’ve made an enemy for life. Ah well, no one said this university thing would be easy.”

With that, the trio entered the lecture hall, their spirits lifted and their resolve even stronger, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

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The lecture hall was quiet, save for the occasional rustle of papers and the soft murmur of students settling into their seats. The stone walls, lined with ancient banners and the faint smell of old books, created a cool, serene atmosphere.

Eddie, Will, and Ashley found their seats towards the middle of the hall, each in a state of exhaustion after their sleepless night.

Ashley had her head resting on her hand, eyes half-closed, occasionally stifling a yawn as she tried to stay alert. She was still riding the high of their successful ritual but could feel the weight

of sleepiness creeping in. Her mind wasn't fully with her, and her thoughts wandered in a haze.

Will, ever the restless soul, had leaned back in his seat, his guitar bag resting on the floor beside him. His eyes were closed, and soon enough, his head drooped forward as he dozed off, the faintest snore escaping his lips.

Eddie, meanwhile, was staring blankly ahead, his mind drifting elsewhere. The events of the past few days were swirling in his thoughts – everything from the Harmonisation Ritual to his heated exchange with Christine. He couldn't shake the weight of the upcoming exam and the pressure that loomed over him. His gaze was distant, the world around him becoming a blur as he lost himself in his own thoughts.

Then, a deep, booming voice broke the silence and startled everyone awake.

"Good morning, students!" Professor Rheagan's voice echoed throughout the hall, commanding attention with its warm, deep resonance. His presence filled the space, and the familiar sight of the elderly professor in his long robes caused the students to sit up straighter.

Beside him stood the imposing figure of Wizard Aelfric, the Chancellor of Edenfield University. His sharp eyes scanned the room, exuding an aura of power and experience. His robes were immaculate, and his presence alone seemed to carry the weight of centuries.

Will's head jerked up as the booming voice of Professor Rheagan pierced his dreams, jolting him awake. He rubbed his eyes, still disoriented from his nap, and quickly straightened in his seat. Beside him, Eddie snapped out of his daydreaming, blinking rapidly as his attention was pulled back to the lecture hall.

Professor Rheagan gave a hearty chuckle, nodding towards the students. "I see some of you are a bit tired," he said with a knowing smile. "Well, it's been a long road to get here. But congratulations to all of you who have made it this far. Today marks the final step in your journey through the foundational magic course."

Eddie and Ashley shared a brief glance, the exhaustion still heavy in their eyes, but there was a spark of determination in both of them. Will wiped a yawn from his mouth, still trying to fully wake up.

Professor Rheagan paused for a moment, allowing the students to process the gravity of the day. Then, he gestured to Aelfric, standing tall next to him.

"I'm pleased to announce that we are also joined by none other than Wizard Aelfric himself, the Chancellor of Edenfield University. He has graciously agreed to observe the finals today," Professor Rheagan continued, his voice tinged with pride. "I'm sure he's eager to see how you all handle the challenges ahead."

The room fell silent for a moment as students exchanged nervous glances. Aelfric's reputation preceded him. To have him present for their exams was both an honor and an intimidating prospect.

Ashley, still fighting off sleep, couldn't help but sit up straighter at the mention of Aelfric's name. Will, now fully awake, gave a small smirk, clearly impressed by the unexpected turn of events. Eddie, however, felt his heart skip a beat. This was no longer just about passing a test—it was about performing in front of the very heart of Edenfield's magic establishment.

"Don't let the pressure get to you," Professor Rheagan said with a wink, his voice softening. "This is your time to shine."

Eddie took a deep breath, adjusting in his seat as the finality of the moment sank in. He exchanged a glance with Will and Ashley, the weight of the upcoming challenge making them all stand a little taller, despite their exhaustion.

With Aelfric watching, and their final exams on the horizon, they knew that this would be a day they wouldn't soon forget.

The room had quieted to a tense stillness as Wizard Aelfric stood at the front, his presence overwhelming. Every pair of eyes in the lecture hall was fixed on him. The Chancellor, a figure of authority and immense power, was about to speak, and there was a palpable sense of anticipation in the air.

Aelfric's gaze swept across the room, his sharp eyes lingering on each student, taking in their nervous energy. He was a man who had seen countless generations of students face challenges like this, and his calm, unshakable demeanor was a stark contrast to the anxiety that swirled in the air.

"First-year students," Aelfric began, his voice deep and resonant, "today you stand on the precipice of something greater than

what any classroom or lecture can provide. Today, you will show the world what you are capable of – your skills, your knowledge, your determination. And more importantly, you will show yourself.”

The words hung in the air, settling over the students like a warm blanket, though the anxiety in the room remained. The students exchanged nervous glances, their hearts pounding in their chests.

“But,” Aelfric continued, his gaze shifting to the group of Master Mages seated at the front, their quills poised and ready to write. “You need not be afraid. Do not let the pressure of this moment overwhelm you. Do not let the Master Mages intimidate you.”

He gestured toward the group of solemn figures, their sharp eyes constantly scanning and judging the students’ every move. The Mages sat with their books open, scribbling notes in perfect synchronicity, their pens never pausing as they observed.

“Do not let their presence cause you to falter,” Aelfric’s voice took on a reassuring tone. “They are here to watch, to guide you through this process. But remember – this is not about them. This is about you.”

The room was silent now, save for the soft scratching of the Mages’ quills as they continued to write. Eddie felt the weight of the gaze of those Mages upon him, but Aelfric’s words helped loosen the tension in his chest.

“You are not here to perform for them, nor are you here to meet their expectations,” Aelfric continued, his gaze now focused on each individual student. “You are here to perform for yourselves.

This is your ritual, your moment. So, perform as if they are not there – write your magic as though the Master Mages are mere spectators, and their reports are not even worth your attention.”

There was a slight chuckle from the students at this, the tension in the room easing as they processed Aelfric’s words. Eddie felt his shoulders relax a little. It was as if the Master Mages, once towering and intimidating, had now become little more than background figures in the greater scheme of things.

“The Master Mages will write, and they will judge. But it is you who will do the magic,” Aelfric said, his voice now steady and warm. “So, do not worry. Do not panic. Just focus on what you’ve learned. Trust in your training, and let the magic flow from within you.”

He paused, and for a moment, there was no sound in the room at all. Aelfric’s gaze softened, and he gave the students a slight, encouraging nod.

“You are ready,” he said simply. “Now go, and show us what you can do.”

The words were like a spark, igniting a surge of confidence in the students. The pressure seemed to lift, if only slightly, and the weight of the final exam was no longer an insurmountable wall. It was just another step in the journey.

Aelfric’s eyes moved over the crowd one last time, his voice echoing in the silent hall as he spoke his final words for the moment.

“Good luck, first-years. Make it count.”

With that, he stepped back, and the room seemed to collectively exhale. The students, including Eddie, Will, and Ashley, sat up straighter, ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.

They weren’t alone. Not with the reassurance of the Chancellor’s words and the support of their peers. They could do this.

The hum of quiet conversations died down as Professor Rheagan, with his usual composed demeanor, leaned in and whispered something to the Master Mages seated at the front of the hall. They nodded in unison, readying their quills and notes, their eyes scanning the room. The students, now on edge with anticipation, could feel the weight of the moment pressing in, the start of the exam looming large.

Rheagan straightened, his voice cutting through the silence.

“Who would like to go first?” he asked, his tone casual yet laced with the subtle authority that commanded attention. He looked out over the room, his eyes sweeping across the students.

It was no surprise when Christine, always eager to showcase her abilities, raised her hand without hesitation, followed by her two companions, Geralt and Dominic. They had always been the first to volunteer in every class, always confident in their skills, always prepared.

Christine stood with the poise of someone who was used to commanding attention, her staff held firmly in hand, her posture regal. She walked forward with an air of grace, as if the very act

of taking her place at the center of the room was a performance in itself.

Her harmonization ritual was nothing short of mesmerizing. As she began, the magic she wove into the air seemed to dance with effortless elegance, like an ancient, flowing river. The water, stone, and seed came together in a perfect, synchronized dance — nothing rushed, nothing forced. Every element harmonized so fluidly, so beautifully, that it was like watching the magic breathe on its own. The stone pulsed with life as it absorbed the energy, and the seed unfurled slowly, delicately, blossoming into a flower so ethereal, it seemed to shimmer with an inner light.

Christine's ritual was the very picture of elven sophistication. The magic had an elegance to it, refined and deeply rooted in tradition, as though it had been perfected over centuries.

Professor Rheagan, ever the traditionalist, leaned forward, a pleased smile tugging at his lips as he watched. His praise was immediate and heartfelt.

"Very good, Christine," he said, his voice warm with approval. "Traditional, well-executed. A perfect demonstration of what we've taught you. Elegance and precision, always the mark of a true practitioner."

The students murmured in appreciation, some nodding to each other, clearly impressed by the seamless execution. The Master Mages scribbled in their books, their expressions inscrutable as they took note of every detail.

But despite the praise and the admiring glances, Wizard Aelfric, standing beside Professor Rheagan, remained stoic. His gaze was unwavering, his face unreadable as he observed the ritual. There was no shift in his expression, no sign of approval or criticism. He was simply watching, observing with the quiet intensity of someone who had seen it all before.

Christine finished with a flourish, the flower now fully bloomed before her. She stood for a moment, basking in the glow of her success. Her eyes briefly flickered toward Eddie, Will, and Ashley, a subtle smirk tugging at the corner of her lips as if daring them to follow that.

Professor Rheagan clapped his hands lightly, his approval evident.

“Excellent, Christine. A display of control and finesse. Well done.”

The rest of the room seemed to exhale collectively, as if they had all been holding their breath, awaiting the outcome. But Aelfric’s gaze, as always, remained impassive.

Christine returned to her seat, and the air of quiet expectation fell once more. The stage was set, and now it was time for the next student to step up, but there was no denying that Christine had left an impression. Would anyone else be able to match her?

The room fell into a brief, heavy silence after Christine’s flawless performance, the students seemingly lost in their thoughts or battling their own nerves. The Master Mages scribbled in their books, some nodding at the display of magic, others perhaps too absorbed in their assessments to show any outward emotion. The

weight of expectation hung thick in the air, but no one else seemed eager to step forward.

Professor Rheagan, always the facilitator, glanced out over the room, waiting for someone to volunteer. His gaze lingered over the students, but nobody raised their hands. He cleared his throat gently, the sound breaking the silence like the soft chime of a bell.

“Anyone? Who’s next?” he asked, his tone as casual as ever, though there was an undercurrent of patience worn thin.

No one spoke up. The tension stretched longer, and a few students shuffled nervously, avoiding eye contact.

Christine, unable to hide her annoyance, scoffed audibly, her voice laced with disdain. “What’s the matter? You all too scared to go? Pathetic.”

Her words, sharp and dismissive, only seemed to tighten the tension further. The students shifted uncomfortably in their seats, each one secretly hoping that someone else would step forward.

Will, still groggy and fighting to keep his eyes open, muttered in a hushed tone to Eddie and Ashley. “We should just go last... I mean, I can barely keep my eyes open. Maybe if we go last, I can get a little more sleep before the big moment.” His voice was laced with the weariness that came from the all-nighter they’d pulled, his head barely staying up as he looked at Eddie, then at Ashley.

Eddie, who had been spacing out, his mind drifting elsewhere, blinked back to attention. “I don’t know... I think we shouldn’t

rush it," he said, stretching his arms. "Maybe if nobody volunteers, then we go. But if someone else steps up, we should wait." He didn't want to jump the gun too early; there was something about the moment that felt... fragile. It wasn't just about the ritual anymore, it was about timing, about showing confidence without rushing into it.

Ashley, on the other hand, had had enough of the drawn-out suspense. She glanced around at the group, the impatience bubbling up inside her. The waiting, the tension – it was all too much. She was ready for this to end, one way or another.

Without a second thought, her hand shot up into the air, startling both Eddie and Will.

"I'll go," she said, her voice resolute. The moment her hand was raised, Eddie and Will looked at her in surprise. She hadn't even hesitated, just threw herself into the thick of it.

Eddie's eyes widened. "Wait, you – what?"

Will, blinking in confusion, mumbled, "Uh, Ashley... you're really doing this now?"

Ashley's gaze was unwavering, her eyes focused on the front of the room as she stood. "I'm done waiting. It's just... let's get this over with."

She was already walking forward before Eddie could protest further, her movements deliberate, her decision final. Eddie glanced at Will, who was still half asleep and clearly not expecting this turn of events. Will yawned and rubbed his eyes,

still processing the fact that Ashley had volunteered without any of their input.

Professor Rheagan, who had been silently observing the room, smiled warmly as he saw Ashley step forward. "Ah, Miss Mayfair. Stepping up, are we? Very well. The stage is yours."

The other students watched as Ashley made her way to the center, her confidence radiating as she moved. Eddie and Will exchanged looks, both unsure whether to feel impressed or worried. They had no idea what Ashley was going to do, but they knew one thing: this was definitely going to be a performance to remember.

With a final, deep breath, Ashley readied herself, the weight of the ritual ahead pressing down on her — but she wasn't backing down now.

The air in the lecture hall felt thick with anticipation, the usual hum of whispers and shuffling footsteps replaced by an eerie silence as the three of them made their way toward the front. Each step toward the rune-covered floor seemed to amplify the tension, but it was far from solemn. Instead, the only sound that echoed through the room was the bickering of Eddie, Will, and Ashley.

"Seriously, Ashley, why now?" Eddie's voice cut through the stillness, his eyes wide with disbelief. "You couldn't just wait? We could've gone last! There's no reason to rush into it now."

Will, still half-asleep and clearly not enjoying the situation, chimed in with a yawn. "Yeah, we were fine with taking the last

spot. But no, you just had to throw your hand up like that. Now we have to do this in front of *everyone*."

Ashley, clearly not in the mood to entertain their complaints, just shook her head as they continued their chatter. "I couldn't stand the waiting, alright? The suspense was killing me. Let's just get it over with."

Professor Rheagan and Wizard Aelfric exchanged glances as they watched the trio argue in the middle of the room. The Master Mages, with their serious expressions and pens poised over their books, were barely reacting to the exchange – though their eyes were sharp, observing every moment of it with quiet interest. The spectacle of the three students, arguing like they were still in the dormitory, was not lost on them.

Will shot a glance at the Master Mages, realizing how out of place their antics were. "Great, we're getting judged by *them* and we're still arguing," he muttered under his breath, slouching slightly as he followed Ashley.

Eddie sighed, his irritation softening as he looked around the lecture hall. It was now or never. "Alright, alright. But you better not screw this up, Ash," he muttered.

Ashley, completely unfazed, stopped once they reached the marked floor. She turned to Professor Rheagan, her voice firm. "Professor, we might need a few minutes to prepare," she said, though her tone carried none of the uncertainty she might have felt.

Professor Rheagan nodded with a faint smile, clearly accustomed to this kind of situation. "Take your time," he said. "You have all the time you need."

Without hesitation, Will and Eddie dug into their bags, pulling out small pieces of witch chalk that Ashley had handed them. They worked in tandem, with Eddie marking the edge of the circle while Will drew the complex runes on the matte floor. The runes glowed faintly as their hands moved with practiced ease, each stroke precise and deliberate, as if they had done this a hundred times before. It was clear to anyone watching that they were well-rehearsed, despite the chaos of their earlier exchange.

"Yeah, yeah, take your time," Christine muttered from the side, crossing her arms with a scoff. She watched them closely, her eyes narrowing. "Outdated. So traditional," she remarked, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Dominic, one of her groupmates, leaned in, his eyes scanning the ritual circle as if trying to make sense of it. "Wait a second," he murmured. "That's not just a witch circle. Those runes... they're Dwarven."

Christine turned to him sharply. "Dwarven? Are you sure?"

Dominic nodded, his eyes still on the floor. "Yeah. Those are definitely Dwarven runes... and look," he pointed at a few of the runes that Eddie and Will had etched into the circle, "they've got an alchemical approach to them. The whole structure's not just about summoning energy – it's about transforming it. That's... that's not what I was expecting."

Christine frowned, clearly taken aback by the unexpected depth of their ritual. "You think this will work?" she sneered. "What, you're going to *combine* Dwarven magic with witchcraft and Alchemy?"

Geralt, who had been standing off to the side, simply shrugged and looked at Christine. "We're here to watch, not argue."

Christine huffed, clearly still uncertain, but she kept her mouth shut. The tension between the groups was palpable, but all eyes were now on Eddie, Will, and Ashley.

The trio finished their work, their ritual circle now complete, the lines glowing faintly with power. The air around them felt charged, and the subtle hum of magic could be felt beneath their feet. The Master Mages, though seemingly unaffected, were now watching more intently. Even Wizard Aelfric, the ever-immovable figure, leaned in slightly, observing with an unreadable expression.

Eddie, his hand resting lightly on the edge of the ritual circle, looked up at Professor Rheagan. "We're ready," he said, his voice calm, though there was an edge of nervousness buried beneath it.

Professor Rheagan gave them a nod, his eyes filled with a quiet approval. "Very well. Proceed when ready."

Ashley took a deep breath, positioning herself at the center of the circle, her expression focused. Will stood next to her, a faint smirk on his face as he surveyed the room. Eddie, feeling the weight of the moment, followed suit, stepping into position as well.

The stage was set. The ritual had begun.

The silence in the lecture hall was thick with anticipation, broken only by the sound of Will's chord, which resonated through the room like a quiet earthquake, setting the stage for something greater. Eddie, his heart racing, adjusted his grip on his wand. His fingers, though exhausted from the strain of the past weeks, were still steady, their purpose unwavering. Next to him, Ashley's fingers tightened around the familiar staff, her lips moving in quiet rhythm with the spell, the incantation barely audible but carrying weight in the air. Will, usually the carefree spirit, stood unusually still. His usual playful energy was replaced by an almost meditative calm, as his fingers hovered over the strings of his lute.

"Ready?" Ashley's voice was soft, her eyes meeting Eddie's with a mixture of determination and nervousness. The weight of the moment hung heavy in the air, an invisible tension that wrapped around them like a cloak.

Eddie nodded, his expression serious. "Let's make it count." He could feel the weight of the moment – the expectations of the Master Mages, the pressure of their ritual, but above all, the thrill of it. This was their chance, and he wasn't about to let it slip away.

Will strummed a single, clear chord, the sound filling the space and vibrating in their bones. It was the signal. Eddie pointed his wand forward, his focus razor-sharp as he pulled energy into the circle, channeling it with all the care and precision he could muster. Ashley, just behind him, tapped the center of the rune with her staff, grounding herself in the magic as it swirled around them.

The room, which had been so still moments ago, seemed to inhale, holding its breath as the ritual began. The air shimmered with power, a soft, almost imperceptible glow beginning to pulse from the ritual circle. It spread slowly, cautiously, as though it was feeling its way through the world. The stone beneath their feet shimmered faintly, the surface warming with the rising magic, and soon, the water that had been perfectly still in the ritual circle began to ripple. The droplets lifted, defying gravity, swirling in delicate arcs around the seed that sat at the center of the circle.

Then, the seed quivered, a soft tremor running through it. The three of them froze, their eyes locked on the small, fragile seed in the center. The air felt charged, as if the world was waiting. And then, in a moment that seemed to stretch into eternity, a faint green tendril unfurled from the seed. It spiraled upward with a slow, deliberate grace, fragile yet full of purpose, reaching toward the glowing stone beneath it.

The stone beneath them responded, its glow intensifying, veins of light spreading outward across the surface like the roots of a tree finding their path. The water droplets danced, following the rhythm of the growing tendril, spiraling and twisting around it, feeding it with liquid light. It was as though life itself had been summoned from the earth and water, weaving together to create something new.

The tendril grew stronger, thickening as it reached upward. The three of them held their breath in unison as the stem stretched higher, twisting and turning with an elegant fluidity. The flower that blossomed from it was like nothing any of them had ever seen. Its petals were translucent, catching the light and shifting in hues of gold, violet, and emerald, as though they captured the

very essence of the sunrise itself. The colors seemed to pulse and shift, ever-changing, as if alive.

A soft hum filled the air, reverberating through their bones, a sound so gentle yet so powerful. It was a melody – alive and pure. The sound surrounded them, as if the flower itself was singing. And as it did, the grass and moss beneath their feet began to spread, creeping across the stone surface, climbing up the edges of the rune circle, spilling out onto the stone floors of the lecture hall, even reaching the seats of the front row. It was as though the very earth was responding to the magic, as if the ritual had breathed life into everything around them.

Professor Rheagan, usually so composed, stood frozen, his eyes wide in awe. He had seen many rituals in his time, but this one... this was different. Mesmerized, his gaze never left the flower, the tendril, the pulse of the magic that seemed to reach out to him, drawing him in. It was unlike anything he had ever seen, and for a brief moment, his calm demeanor wavered. The Master Mages, who had been scribbling feverishly in their books just moments before, had stopped entirely. Their quills hung in the air, forgotten, as they too watched in wonder.

And then there was Wizard Aelfric.

His usual stoic expression softened, the corners of his lips turning up slightly as he watched the ritual unfold. His eyes – usually so calculating, so impossible to read – were wide with interest. This group... they had done something unexpected. Something extraordinary.

“This is...” he began, his voice slow, filled with thought, “a very interesting approach to the problem.”

His gaze shifted from the flower, the ritual circle, to the students standing before him. Eddie, Will, and Ashley were too absorbed in the magic they were weaving to notice, but Aelfric’s interest was palpable. “I would like to see how this goes,” he murmured, his tone almost appreciative, though still retaining the distance of a scholar. His fingers tapped lightly against the armrest of his seat, as though pondering what to say next.

In that moment, it was clear that whatever had just happened in the ritual circle was not just a display of raw magical talent. It was something deeper, more layered, something that had caught the attention of the most powerful figures in the room.

As the last shimmer of light faded from the ritual circle, Eddie, Will, and Ashley slowly opened their eyes, their hearts still racing from the intensity of the ritual. Their gazes locked onto the flower that had blossomed before them, a second rare bloom emerging from the stone—a flower even more dazzling than the first. It was as though the ritual had given birth to something entirely new, something that hadn’t been seen before. The petals shimmered with colors even more vibrant, a mix of soft pinks, fiery oranges, and deep blues that seemed to pulse with a life of their own. But that was not all.

The stone beneath them, which had been bare and cold only moments ago, was now covered in thick, verdant grasses and delicate moss. It spread across the floor of the Vulcrum Lecture Hall, its rich green color stark against the dull gray stone. The moss even crawled along the edges of the seats in the front row,

as though nature itself had taken root, responding to the life they had just created.

For a moment, everything was still. The air was thick with magic and wonder, and the entire hall seemed to hold its breath.

Professor Rheagan blinked, his lips slightly parted in surprise. It wasn't often that he was taken off guard, but this... this was extraordinary. He had expected a solid performance, perhaps even a traditional one, but this? This was something else entirely. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips, though his professional composure held.

Wizard Aelfric's gaze, however, was fixed entirely on the result. His usually stoic demeanor had softened, his eyes gleaming with unspoken intrigue. His mouth opened, but for a moment, he said nothing, simply watching the scene unfold before him. Finally, he spoke, his voice filled with measured admiration.

"Well done," he said, nodding. "You may return to your seats."

Their names seemed to linger in the air even after the words had been spoken. Eddie, Will, and Ashley exchanged a glance, their exhaustion momentarily forgotten in the wake of their success. The gravity of what they had just accomplished settled in their chests, and with it, a wave of pride. Slowly, they turned and made their way back through the lecture hall, their feet light despite the weight of what they had just done.

As they passed by Christine's seat, Eddie noticed her, her usually sharp and confident gaze now wide with disbelief. Her eyes flicked from the glowing flower to the moss that had overtaken

the stone floor and back to the three of them. She looked like she had seen a ghost, her lips parted slightly, her brow furrowed in confusion.

"How the hell did that piece of jumbled mess work?" Christine muttered under her breath, just loud enough for them to hear. She stared at the flower, then at the moss, as though trying to unravel some impossible puzzle in her mind. "That shouldn't have worked," she said again, her tone full of bafflement and frustration.

Eddie, Will, and Ashley didn't respond. There was no need. The results spoke for themselves.

As they made their way back to their seats, the Master Mages at their desks were scribbling in their books, their quills pausing every now and then to glance up at the unusual display. Even from the back of the hall, it was clear that their interest had been piqued. Their expressions were a mix of curiosity and deep contemplation. Whatever they had expected from this year's finals, this performance had certainly exceeded it.

As Eddie sat back down, he felt the weight of their eyes, the intensity of their judgment, but also something more. A sense of accomplishment. For the first time, he realized just how far he had come since stepping into Edenfield, how much he had grown. But more than that, he realized that this was just the beginning. What they had done today was only a glimpse of the possibilities that lay ahead.

ACT II pt 2 | Chapter 5



The evening was alive with the sounds of laughter and chatter as Eddie, Will, and Ashley entered the Weathering Dragon, their usual hangout spot at Edenfield. The familiar warmth of the pub embraced them instantly, the scent of freshly baked bread and hearty stews mingling with the unmistakable fragrance of brewing ale. The fire crackled in the hearth, its golden glow casting flickering shadows across the room.

Will, a little too eager to let go of the day's tension, immediately headed toward the bar. He waved at Henry, who was behind the counter as usual, and ordered a round of the finest ale, grinning at the thought of indulging in the one thing he could always count on to unwind.

"Give me something strong tonight, Henry. The finals are over," Will declared, a twinkle of mischief in his eyes. "And I'm celebrating big!"

Henry chuckled, shaking his head as he set to work on the order. "Celebrating, huh? Well, I'll see you in the morning, my friend," he teased.

Meanwhile, Eddie and Ashley found a spot at one of the long wooden tables, settling in amidst the warm glow and cozy ambiance. Eddie, despite his exhaustion, was in high spirits. The

pressure of the finals had melted away, and he allowed himself to relax for the first time in what felt like forever.

As Will came back with a frothy mug of ale, Eddie and Ashley exchanged a glance, a silent agreement between them. Though neither of them were much for alcohol, they had other ways of indulging in the finer things that the pub offered. Tonight, they weren't just students scraping by on their scholarships. Tonight, they were going to treat themselves.

The rich aroma of sizzling steaks from the kitchen made Eddie's stomach growl. He had been dreaming of this moment – he and Ashley were about to savor a meal they'd never be able to afford on a regular night. The juicy steak, the tender potatoes, and the crisp vegetables were something they'd only ever seen on the menu, their eyes lingering on the prices with wistful glances. But tonight was different. Tonight, they'd give in to their cravings.

"I'll take the steak, medium-rare, with the rosemary potatoes," Eddie said to the barmaid who had come to take their orders, his voice almost reverent.

Ashley, who had been eyeing the menu with the same intense curiosity, nodded. "Same for me, please. And make it two ales, but don't make them strong," she added, though the warmth of the drink was still a welcome addition.

Will, already halfway through his mug, raised it in a playful toast. "Here's to surviving the finals!" He grinned, swishing the ale around in his mug.

Eddie clinked his mug with Will's, while Ashley just gave a half-smile, shaking her head at Will's antics. It was a rare moment for them all—a brief escape from the grind of their studies, the pressure of their scholarships, and the looming uncertainty of what came next. Tonight, it was just them, and they were going to savor every bite, every sip.

As they ate, the pub around them continued to hum with life. Laughter rang out from a group of students near the fire, their voices high with excitement. The lute played softly in the background, a gentle melody that accompanied the chatter and clinking of mugs.

"You know," Eddie said, breaking the comfortable silence as he cut into his steak, "I could really get used to this. A little more success and a little less worrying about where the next meal's coming from, and we could really enjoy Edenfield."

Will, who was already on his second mug of ale, laughed heartily. "Speak for yourself. I don't know if I'll ever get tired of celebrating like this."

Ashley smiled softly, her fingers tapping the edge of her glass. "I'm just glad the finals are over. Now we can finally breathe."

The three of them shared a quiet moment, savoring the meal and the company. In the back of the pub, the wooden dragon carved above the bar seemed to loom over them, watching with the silent wisdom of generations past. The warmth of the fire, the laughter of the students, and the gentle strumming of the lute created the perfect backdrop for their evening of celebration.

Even though they were far from home, this pub, this community, felt like a place where they truly belonged. It was a small victory in the larger, more daunting world of Edenfield University, but it was theirs to claim – one meal, one drink, and one laugh at a time.

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The evening had settled into a comfortable quiet, the hum of conversation and laughter filling the air as the trio of friends relaxed in the corner of the Weathering Dragon. Eddie, still sober and enjoying the warmth of the pub, sat back on a wooden bench while Will, his face flushed from the alcohol, slouched next to him, still gripping his empty mug loosely.

The food had been enough to take the edge off the stress of finals, but Eddie couldn't help but reflect on the day's events – specifically, Madeleine. She had played a crucial role in his success, in his understanding of both his alchemy and himself.

"You know," Eddie started, his voice thoughtful, "I think I owe so much of today to Madeleine. If it wasn't for her... well, I don't think I would have done as well as I did."

Will, already half-drunk, smirked and raised an eyebrow. "What's this now? Eddie's got a soft spot for someone?" he teased, his voice a little slurred. "Are you telling me you've got a thing for her or something?"

Eddie chuckled, glancing over at his friend. The teasing didn't faze him – it was typical Will. But the more Eddie thought about it, the more he realized how true Will's teasing actually was. He had grown fond of Madeleine. She had shown him kindness

when he was at his lowest, and her warmth had been a constant through all the chaos.

“Maybe I do,” Eddie said with a smile, his voice soft. “She’s... kind, and warm. I’ve never met anyone like her. I like her company. She’s been a big help in helping me understand... well, myself.”

Will, already drifting off into a nap, didn’t respond. His head lolled forward, and with a soft thud, his face planted on the table, snoring softly.

Eddie let out a small laugh at the sight of Will, the image of him passed out mid-conversation never failing to amuse him. He was about to say something more when Ashley returned with her non-alcoholic drink, her eyes scanning the table.

“What’s going on? What were you two talking about?” she asked, taking a seat beside them, her eyes dancing with curiosity.

Eddie glanced at Will, now a lump of limp sleep at the table, and then back to Ashley. “I was just saying... I think we should thank Madeleine for all the help she’s given me. If it wasn’t for her, I don’t think we’d have done so well today.”

Ashley nodded thoughtfully, sipping from her drink. “I think that’s a great idea. She deserves a little appreciation. And it’s not like it’s too late. We could go visit her.”

Eddie smiled. “That’s exactly what I was thinking.”

Ashley's face lit up at the idea, and without hesitation, she raised her voice toward the bar. "Hey, Henry!" she called out, causing the barman to look over from behind the counter. "Do you know where Madeleine lives? We want to go thank her."

Henry paused for a moment, considering the question. "Madeleine, eh?" He scratched his chin, a smile spreading across his face. "Well, last I heard, she's got an apartment up in the northern district. A bit of a trek from here, but nothing too crazy. It's past the marketplace, if you know where that is."

Ashley exchanged a glance with Eddie, her expression lighting up. "Perfect," she said, her voice full of purpose. "Let's make a quick visit then. It'll be nice to surprise her."

Eddie agreed, nodding thoughtfully. "It's not far, we can do it. She's probably still studying or winding down from the day. A surprise might be just what she needs."

Will, still snoozing on the table, muttered something incoherent, his breath deep and steady, completely unaware of the plans forming around him.

"Let's get going then," Eddie said, standing up, wiping his hands on his pants. "We'll wake Will up when we're outside. It'll be good to stretch our legs after sitting through that long day."

The three of them stood up, gathering their belongings and exchanging lighthearted goodbyes with the familiar faces in the pub. Henry waved them off with a wink, wishing them good luck on their little nighttime adventure.

With the cold air of the evening settling in around them, they made their way toward the northern district, the moonlight reflecting off the cobbled streets. The journey would take a little while, but it was the perfect opportunity for them to continue their celebration in a quiet, meaningful way. As they walked, Eddie couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement — it wasn't just about thanking Madeleine, it was also about acknowledging the small victories they'd achieved together.

It was the kind of night that promised more than just a fleeting celebration. Tonight, they'd strengthen the bonds that would carry them forward into the unknown future of their time at Edenfield.



The night bus trundled along the cobblestone streets of Edenfield, its wheels clattering softly in the stillness of the evening. The soft hum of magic resonating through its mechanisms gave the ride a smoothness that belied its outwardly rustic appearance. Inside, the lanterns cast a gentle, flickering light, illuminating the small interior where a handful of passengers sat quietly, lost in their thoughts or conversations.

Eddie and Ashley sat side by side near the middle of the bus, the wooden seat creaking softly beneath them as they swayed gently with the vehicle's movement. The handlebars above their heads swung slightly, following the rhythm of the bus's journey. Will, sprawled across the seat behind them, snored lightly, his head tilted back against the window. Every so often, his lips would

part in an unintelligible mumble, and Ashley couldn't help but smirk as she glanced back at him.

"Still out like a light," she murmured, her tone amused.

Eddie chuckled softly, his gaze fixed on the view outside. The bus had just crossed the bridge that separated the southern and northern districts of Edenfield. The transformation was striking – the low, suburban charm of the university's vicinity gave way to towering stone edifices adorned with intricate carvings. Streetlamps glowed brighter here, casting the grand buildings in a warm amber light, their shadows stretching elegantly across the polished stone streets.

"It's different here," Eddie said quietly, his voice filled with a mix of curiosity and awe.

Ashley followed his gaze, nodding. "Yeah. The northern district is something else. You can feel the history here, can't you? The closer you get to the palace, the grander everything becomes."

Eddie leaned forward slightly, his green eyes reflecting the golden light of the passing streetlamps. The buildings were more imposing here, each one telling its own story with ornate gargoyles perched on ledges and massive windows framed by columns. It was easy to imagine the kings of old walking these streets, their retinues trailing behind them.

"Do you think the Mayor actually lives in the palace?" Eddie asked, breaking the silence.

Ashley shrugged, resting her chin on her hand. "Probably. I mean, if you were in charge of the city and had a palace at your disposal, wouldn't you want to live there? Seems like a waste if they didn't." She glanced at Eddie, a sly smile tugging at her lips. "Not that we'll ever find out. People like us don't exactly get invitations to the Mayor's office."

Eddie laughed softly, shaking his head. "Yeah, I think we're more 'southern district tavern' types than 'northern district palace' types."

The bus slowed as it passed by a small plaza where a fountain gurgled softly in the moonlight, its waters shimmering like liquid silver. Beyond it, a tall spire rose into the sky, the clock at its peak illuminated against the night. Eddie's gaze lingered on the fountain for a moment before shifting to the rain-slick streets outside. The quiet patter of rain against the bus windows matched the rhythm of his thoughts, pulling him inward.

His mind wandered to Madeleine. During the final preparations for their exams, she had seemed distant, her usual warmth replaced by something quieter, heavier. He thought of the moment in the infirmary, when Walther had said to her, "*You were right.*" The words played over and over in his mind. Right about what? And why had that simple phrase seemed to cut Madeleine so deeply? Whatever it was, it had driven a wedge between them — her smiles became fewer, her words more guarded. And then, just like that, she had started avoiding him altogether.

Eddie sighed softly, his green eyes clouded with uncertainty. He wondered if their visit tonight would even make a difference, or if Madeleine would simply push him further away.

"Eddie," Ashley's voice pulled him back, gentle yet firm. She was watching him, her head tilted slightly, her expression no longer playful but thoughtful. "You've got that look again. The one where you're thinking too much."

Eddie raised an eyebrow, trying to deflect. "Thinking isn't a bad thing, you know."

"No, but you overthink," Ashley said, though her teasing edge was softer this time. "What were you thinking this time, Eddie? The finals are over – there's nothing to overthink about."

For a moment, he hesitated, unsure if he wanted to voice the thoughts swirling in his head. But the words spilled out anyway. "Madeleine," he said quietly. "She's been...distant. During the finals prep, she barely spoke to me. I keep thinking about that day in the infirmary – what Walther said to her. 'You were right.' What did that mean? Why did it upset her so much?"

Ashley didn't reply immediately. She turned her gaze to the rain-speckled window, her reflection distorted by the water streaking down the glass. When she looked back at him, her smile was somber, her tone serious. "Eddie," she said softly, "You like her, don't you?"

The rain outside intensified, the rhythmic patter a low hum that filled the silence between them. The bus trudged along through the slick streets, its warm lantern light contrasting with the cold,

wet world outside. Ashley's question hung in the air, and Eddie felt the weight of it pressing down on him. There was no teasing in her voice, no attempt to lighten the mood. She was serious, and it demanded a serious answer.

Eddie looked away, his jade-green eyes fixed on the rain-blurred view of the northern district. The spires of Edenfield Palace were just visible through the haze, a distant silhouette against the stormy sky. "Yeah," he admitted at last, his voice steady but quiet. "I think so."

Ashley didn't respond right away. She simply nodded, her gaze softening as she looked at him. The bus continued its steady trek through the rain, the passengers lulled into a contemplative silence by the dim light and the persistent rhythm of the journey. Eddie didn't know what to expect from Madeleine when they saw her tonight—or if she would even want to see them. But for now, he let the silence stretch, a quiet acknowledgment of his own feelings.

Eddie couldn't help but smile, leaning back against the seat. He let the conversation drift as the bus continued its journey, the sights of the northern district passing by like scenes from a storybook. The thought of Madeleine and their impromptu visit loomed in his mind, a mix of nervousness and excitement bubbling beneath the surface.

Behind them, Will let out a particularly loud snore, startling a couple of passengers seated nearby. Ashley stifled a laugh, shaking her head. "He's going to regret this in the morning."

Eddie glanced back at his friend, a small, fond smile playing on his lips. "Yeah, but that's a problem for tomorrow."

The bus turned a corner, and up ahead, the glow of the northern district's central square came into view. The spires of Edenfield Palace loomed in the distance, their majestic silhouettes cutting against the starry sky. The sense of anticipation grew stronger as the bus continued onward, carrying them closer to their destination and, perhaps, a memorable conclusion to an already extraordinary day.

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The rain was relentless, turning the cobblestone streets into glistening ribbons that reflected the warm glow of the streetlamps. Eddie clutched his small pocket journal tightly, shielding it from the rain as he squinted at the hastily scrawled address. Drops of water streaked down his forehead, but he didn't seem to notice.

"This way," he called, pointing to a side street flanked by tall, elegant stone buildings. "I think."

Ashley laughed as she darted from one awning to the next, her cloak swishing behind her. "You *think*? Eddie, you've been staring at that thing for ten minutes."

"It's not an exact science, all right?" Eddie shot back, grinning despite himself. The rain was cold, but their shared adventure added a warmth to the night that kept them moving.

Will, trailing behind and holding his coat over his head, finally caught up, his boots splashing through shallow puddles. "I'm just saying," he said, his voice tinged with mock exasperation, "if Henry's memory is as hazy as the hangover I'm getting over, we're going to be wandering around here all night."

"Oh, come on, Will," Ashley teased, spinning briefly in the rain as if to emphasize her point. "You don't get to complain when you're not the one navigating."

Eddie smirked, flipping his wet journal closed and tucking it back into his coat pocket. "Besides, it's not every day you get to explore the northern district. Even in the rain."

Ashley gasped dramatically, stretching her arms out as she stepped into the middle of the street. "The grandeur! The elegance! The—ugh, the puddles." She looked down, realizing she'd splashed straight into a particularly deep one, soaking her boots.

Will chuckled, his earlier grumbling forgotten as he looked around. "All right, I'll admit it's not bad. Kind of a change from the cozy university vibe. But are we close? Please tell me we're close."

Eddie opened his journal again, stepping beneath a narrow overhang to read. The paper was slightly damp, the ink smudged, but still legible. "Henry said it's an apartment complex... there!" He pointed to a tall building with ivy climbing its weathered stone facade. "Number 14, third floor."

Ashley and Will exchanged glances, then grinned mischievously at Eddie. "Last one there's paying for dessert!" Ashley shouted, taking off toward the building.

"Hey!" Eddie protested, breaking into a jog to keep up.

Will groaned but followed, muttering, "Why do I always get dragged into these things?"

They weaved through the rain-soaked street, splashing through puddles and laughing as their cloaks billowed behind them. Despite the chill and the wet, the moment was filled with a sense of camaraderie and carefree joy – like they were defying the storm itself. By the time they reached the stoop of Madeleine's apartment, all three were soaked but breathless with laughter.

Eddie leaned against the doorframe, catching his breath. "Well," he said between chuckles, "at least we found it. And nobody twisted an ankle."

Ashley wrung out the edge of her cloak, her eyes sparkling with mirth. "I don't know what's better – finding Madeleine's place or watching you try to keep up."

Will flopped dramatically against the wall, panting. "I'm calling it now. I'm never running in the rain again."

The three of them shared another laugh before Eddie stepped forward, his hand poised to knock on the heavy wooden door. The sound echoed faintly in the rain-drenched silence, and for a brief moment, the lightheartedness of their search gave way to anticipation.

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The exterior of Madeleine's apartment building loomed before them, a testament to the elegance of the northern district. Its stone facade was intricately carved with floral and geometric patterns, each detail lending the building an air of quiet grandeur. Tall windows lined the front, their frames painted a deep emerald green that gleamed faintly even in the rain. A brass plaque near the door bore the name of the residence in flowing script:

Alderstone Heights.

Eddie, Will, and Ashley exchanged glances before stepping inside. The warmth of the lobby enveloped them, a stark contrast to the chill outside. The interior was just as magnificent as the exterior – polished marble floors, a sweeping staircase with a wrought-iron banister, and a crystal chandelier casting soft light across the space. Behind a mahogany desk at the far end of the lobby sat a sharply dressed receptionist, an older man with graying hair and a meticulous demeanor.

As the trio approached, the receptionist looked up from a ledger, his brow arching slightly in curiosity. "Good evening," he greeted, his voice even and polite. "May I help you?"

"We're looking for someone," Eddie said, stepping forward. "Madeleine Daedallia."

The receptionist straightened slightly, his gaze sweeping over the trio. "And who might you be?" he asked. "If you don't mind, I'll need to know how you're acquainted with Miss Daedallia."

"We're her friends," Ashley chimed in with a smile. "From Edenfield University."

The receptionist's expression softened slightly at the mention of the university. "Ah, students, then." He reached for a small notepad. "I'll need your names, just for the record."

Eddie quickly obliged. "I'm Eddie Welton, and this is William Chester," He trailed off as Will raised a hand in greeting. "And Ashley Mayfair."

The receptionist jotted their names down before looking up again, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. "Do you, by chance, know someone by the name of Walther?"

Will's eyebrows shot up. "Yeah, I do," he said. "He's our friend too. We were dorm mates."

The receptionist chuckled, setting his pen down. "Well, it seems like quite the university celebration tonight. Mr. Walther was here earlier, also asking to see Miss Daedallia. He mentioned he was a friend from the university as well." There was a hint of nostalgia in his tone as he added, "Ah, youth. It takes me back to my own days of camaraderie and last-minute visits."

Eddie, Will, and Ashley exchanged glances, their expressions ranging from surprise to unease. Eddie managed a polite smile. "Thanks for letting us know. Can you tell us which floor and room she's in?"

The receptionist nodded, flipping through a ledger before providing the details. "Third floor, apartment 17. If you take the lift, it'll be on your left as you exit."

The three of them thanked him before heading toward the lift, their footsteps echoing faintly in the grand lobby.

As the lift doors closed behind them, Ashley was the first to speak. "Is it just me, or is it a little strange that Walther's here too?" Her voice was quiet, tinged with suspicion.

Eddie nodded. "It is. Madeleine's been distant lately, and Walther... he doesn't strike me as the type to just drop by unannounced."

Will leaned casually against the wall, his arms crossed. "You're both reading too much into this. Walther and Madeleine are classmates, right? They could be working on a group project. Finals week and all that."

Ashley folded her arms, unconvinced. "Still, it feels off. Something about the way Madeleine's been acting..."

Before she could finish, Will smirked and nudged Eddie with his elbow. "Or maybe Eddie's just jealous. You worried Walther's got more to do with Madeleine than a group project?"

Eddie groaned, punching Will's arm lightly. "Knock it off, Will."

"Ow!" Will clutched his arm dramatically. "Abuse! I'm filing a complaint with the university!"

Ashley chuckled at their antics, the tension in the air dissipating slightly. "All right, children," she teased. "Let's stay focused. We're here to thank Madeleine, not start a soap opera."

Eddie, Will, and Ashley stood before the ornate elevator, its polished brass doors gleaming under the lobby's soft lighting. The panel beside it bore a series of numbered buttons and a small speaker grille. All three stared at it like it was some sort of magical artifact.

"Do I press it?" Eddie asked, his finger hovering over the buttons. "What are these numbers for?"

"Maybe... the floor numbers?" Will guessed, squinting at the panel. "But there's way too many for just floors. Look, there's a speaker here too. Do you think it talks back?"

Ashley, who was equally baffled but determined not to show it, tilted her head. "It's probably some fancy city thing. Let's not mess with it until we know what we're doing."

As if summoned by fate, a butler passed by, his white gloves pristine and his steps measured. Ashley flagged him down. "Excuse me! Could you help us? We've, uh... never used one of these before."

The butler paused, looking at the trio with mild amusement. "Ah, of course. You must not be from the northern district."

"We're from the southern side," Will said, scratching the back of his head. "Elevators aren't really... a thing there."

The butler offered a patient smile. "This is a secured elevator system. To use it, you'll need to input both the floor number and the apartment number of the person you're visiting. The occupant will then answer through the intercom and allow you access if they're expecting you."

Ashley's eyes widened. "That's... really secure."

"It is," the butler agreed. "Most residences here prioritize safety. Would you like me to assist you?"

"No, no! We can handle it," Ashley said quickly, giving him a grateful nod. "Thanks for explaining."

The butler tipped his head politely and walked away, leaving the three to puzzle it out.

Eddie pulled out his notebook and read aloud. "Okay, third floor, apartment 17."

Will squinted at the buttons. "So we press... three, then one, then seven?"

"Probably," Ashley said, though she didn't sound entirely confident. "Try it."

Eddie pressed the buttons cautiously. The speaker crackled to life, startling all three of them.

"Hello?" came a muffled, feminine voice.

"Oh! Uh, hi!" Eddie stammered, leaning toward the intercom as if it were a person. "It's Eddie! From the university. We're here with Will and Ashley."

There was a pause before the voice responded, slightly more clearly. "Eddie? What are you doing here?"

Eddie glanced at Will and Ashley, unsure what to say. Ashley nudged him and whispered, "Tell her we came to thank her."

"Right!" Eddie cleared his throat. "We just wanted to, uh, thank you for all your help during finals."

Another pause. "...Give me a moment."

The intercom clicked off, and the elevator doors opened with a soft chime. The three of them stepped inside, the plush interior of the elevator feeling almost regal. The walls were lined with polished wood, and a small chandelier hung overhead.

"Whoa," Will said, running his hand along the railing. "This is fancier than the whole dorm building."

"Look at this carpet," Ashley added, nudging Eddie. "I think this thing's more comfortable than our beds."

Eddie chuckled, pressing the button for the third floor. "No wonder Madeleine's so composed all the time. Living here, how could you not be?"

Will leaned against the wall, smirking. "Fancy place, fancy people. You sure you don't feel a little out of place, Eddie?"

Eddie shot him a mock glare. "Says the guy drooling over the elevator."

Ashley laughed, shaking her head. "I can't believe we needed instructions to use an elevator. They're probably laughing at us down there."

"Let them laugh," Will declared, grinning. "This thing's magic. We'll figure it out eventually."

As the elevator ascended, its soft hum providing a backdrop to their conversation, Ashley held up a neatly wrapped basket brimming with pastries. "So, what do you think? These are Madeleine's favorites. She's going to love them."

Will snorted, crossing his arms and nodding toward his bag. "Pastries? Come on, Ash. That's like saying, 'Hey, I didn't know what to get you, so here's food.' I, on the other hand, got her something practical." He pulled out a small, carefully packed set of sculpting tools. "She's into alchemical sculpting, right? These are top-notch tools. Way more meaningful than a snack."

Ashley narrowed her eyes, planting her hands on her hips. "A snack? These are artisanal pastries! Handpicked by yours truly. You can't sculpt your way to happiness, but you *can* eat your way there."

Eddie chuckled from the corner, holding up his gift — a tin of Eden Flower Tea. "You're both wrong. Madeleine always gets this tea at the cafeteria. It's comforting and familiar. She'll appreciate it more than tools she might already have or pastries she could buy herself."

Will rolled his eyes. "Tea? Really, Eddie? You're going to give her *café tea*? That's what people drink when they're stressed, not what they celebrate with. You've got to think bigger!"

Ashley chimed in, a smirk tugging at her lips. "Yeah, Eddie. Tea's sweet and all, but it's not exactly memorable. You're giving her homework vibes, like, 'Here's some tea for those late-night study sessions.' At least my pastries have personality!"

"Personality?" Eddie shot back, raising an eyebrow. "You're literally bribing her taste buds. And Will, your tools are practical, sure, but you're basically saying, 'Here, get back to work.' My tea is thoughtful."

Will grinned mischievously. "Okay, Mr. Thoughtful. What's she going to think when you hand her *a beverage*? 'Oh wow, Eddie knows I get tired easily?'" Great message."

Ashley burst out laughing. "Oh, stop it! You both sound ridiculous. The pastries are clearly the winner here. They're personal and delicious."

Eddie shook his head, though he was smiling. "You're both impossible. Maybe we should've pooled our money and gotten her something together."

Will scoffed. "Nah, this is better. Three gifts are better than one. It's like a competition — she'll decide who knows her best."

Ashley snorted. "As if this is a contest. We all know I'm winning this."

“Dream on,” Will replied, leaning back against the elevator wall with a smirk. “She’s going to love my tools. They’re useful and thoughtful. Yours are just carbs.”

“And tea is just leaves,” Ashley quipped, shooting Eddie a playful grin.

Eddie sighed dramatically. “Why do I even bother? You two are hopeless.”

The elevator dinged, signaling their arrival at the third floor. As the doors slid open, they stepped out, still bickering over whose gift would win Madeleine’s heart. Despite their banter, there was a shared warmth between them, their playful argument only deepening their bond.



The elevator doors slid open with a soft chime, and Eddie, Will, and Ashley stepped out into the quiet hallway, their playful banter still going strong.

“I’m just saying,” Will continued, gesturing dramatically, “if she doesn’t love my sculpting tools, then clearly her taste is broken.”

Ashley rolled her eyes. “Right, because nothing says heartfelt like, ‘Here’s something to remind you of work.’ At least my pastries will make her smile.”

“And my tea —” Eddie began, but his words faltered mid-sentence as he caught sight of something down the hall.

Three figures in black hooded cloaks stood a short distance away, their backs turned toward the trio. The hallway’s dim lighting only added to their ominous appearance, the fabric of their cloaks shifting slightly as if caught in a breeze that didn’t exist. One of the figures, taller than the others, held a small satchel, while the others appeared to exchange whispered words, their voices too low to catch.

The group instinctively slowed their steps, the air around them suddenly feeling heavier.

“Uh... is that normal?” Ashley whispered, breaking the uneasy silence. Her eyes flicked between the cloaked figures and her friends. “Do people here just... dress like that?”

Eddie and Will exchanged a glance. “Not a clue,” Will muttered, his earlier bravado tempered by the unease creeping into his tone.

Eddie shifted the tin of tea in his hands, his gaze lingering on the figures for a moment longer. “Let’s just... mind our own business,” he said, his voice firm but quiet. “Madeleine’s room isn’t far. Let’s go.”

“Agreed,” Ashley said, though her voice carried a note of tension. She pulled her coat tighter around her shoulders, as if to shield herself from the discomfort of the situation.

They walked in silence, their earlier levity forgotten. Eddie’s mind churned with questions. Who were these people? Why

were they here? He glanced back briefly but saw no change in the figures' posture — they seemed more focused on whatever conversation they were having than on the trio.

Still, unease gnawed at him. The Northern District was a grand, elegant part of the city, but it didn't feel as inviting as the bustling streets of the university district or the familiar simplicity of Weshaven. The grandeur here came with shadows, and tonight, those shadows seemed a little darker than usual.

Ashley broke the silence as they approached another corridor. "Maybe they're just performers or something," she said, her tone forced and nervous. "Some kind of... local theater group?"

"Yeah," Will said, trying to inject humor into his voice, though it came out strained. "And their play's called '*How to Make People Uncomfortable*.'"

Eddie didn't laugh. He glanced at the room numbers on the doors, focusing on finding Madeleine's apartment. The sooner they were inside, the better.

The hallway felt narrower than it should have been, the silence between Eddie, Will, and Ashley stretching like a taut string ready to snap. Their earlier laughter and banter had evaporated, leaving behind the oppressive weight of the cloaked figures' presence. The sound of their footsteps — soft taps against the polished stone floor — seemed unnaturally loud in the quiet.

Eddie kept his gaze fixed ahead, the scrap of paper with Madeleine's room number clutched tightly in his hand. "Just keep

walking," he muttered under his breath, his voice barely above a whisper. "We don't have business with them."

Will, uncharacteristically quiet, nodded, his hands shoved into his jacket pockets. Ashley, walking slightly behind them, cast glances over her shoulder, her brows furrowed. "I swear, they're not even trying to be subtle," she murmured, her voice tight. "Why would anyone dress like that in the middle of the night?"

"Doesn't matter," Eddie replied quickly. "They're not here for us. Just... play it cool."

But the air around them refused to cool. It buzzed with an unspoken tension, each step feeling heavier than the last. The three figures ahead walked slowly, deliberately, their movements synchronized in an unsettling way. The tallest one, the one with the satchel, glanced briefly over their shoulder, causing Eddie's heart to leap into his throat. He forced himself to keep his eyes forward, pretending to focus on the hallway numbers.

Ashley muttered something under her breath, too quiet for Eddie to hear, but the nervous edge in her tone was unmistakable. Will, for once, didn't have a joke or a quip to ease the mood. Instead, he stayed close to Eddie, his hands flexing at his sides as if unsure whether to relax or prepare for something worse.

Finally, they reached Madeleine's room at the end of the hallway. Eddie recognized the door immediately – its polished surface bore a brass plaque engraved with her room number. Relief began to creep into his chest, the first real reprieve since stepping off the elevator. All they had to do was knock, and they'd be inside. Safe.

Eddie raised his hand, ready to rap on the door.

But as his knuckles hovered just inches from the wood, the faint shuffle of footsteps stopped behind him.

His breath caught. Slowly, almost unwillingly, Eddie turned his head to look.

The three cloaked figures had also stopped – right in front of Madeleine's door.

It was as if time itself paused, the only sound the faint hum of the hallway's lighting. Eddie's heart pounded in his ears, drowning out all rational thought.

The silence between them was suffocating, thick with the unspoken threat hanging in the air. Eddie's heart raced, the pounding in his chest growing louder than the hushed whispers of the others. He stood frozen in front of the door, every muscle tense, every instinct screaming for him to move, to do something, but his feet remained rooted to the floor. Will and Ashley stood beside him, equally alert, but he could see the unease in their eyes.

The tallest figure broke the silence with a low, almost mocking voice. "Ah," he said, the word dragging on with a chill in his tone, "What do we have here?"

Eddie's jaw tightened. His throat felt dry, but he forced himself to speak, trying to keep his voice steady. "What do you want?" His words came out clipped, though a hint of fear lingered behind them.

The tallest figure smiled, the expression barely discernible under the shadow of his hood. It wasn't a smile of warmth—it was cold, calculating. "We have no business with you, young man." His tone was smooth, like polished marble, but the undertone carried a weight that made Eddie's stomach twist. "However, we do have business with Miss Daedallia."

The female figure moved subtly, a flicker of motion under her cloak, her hand reaching for something—likely a dagger. Eddie's breath caught in his throat, and his eyes flickered to her hand, but before she could unsheath it, the tallest one raised a hand in a slow, deliberate gesture. It was an almost imperceptible motion, but the command was clear. She paused, her fingers lingering on the hilt before retracting her hand.

"No need for such measures," the tallest one continued, his voice never rising, never losing its eerie calm. "This need not turn ugly."

Eddie's pulse quickened, his mind racing. The dread creeping up his spine became a solid weight in his chest. His instinct was to back away, to flee, but he couldn't. Not with Madeleine behind that door, not when these people clearly had something to do with her. "What is your business with her?" Eddie pressed, his voice wavering slightly, despite his efforts to sound firm.

The figure didn't answer. Instead, his gaze locked onto Eddie, calculating, appraising. "Step aside," he said coldly, his tone carrying the weight of an order. "This is not a conversation for you to be a part of."

Eddie stood his ground, shaking his head slightly. "I'm not moving." The words felt like a vow more than a refusal, and even though his hands were clammy with fear, he forced himself to meet the figure's gaze.

Will shifted behind him, his fingers twitching near his guitar, his knuckles white around the strap. Ashley, too, was tense, her hand hovering over the staff tucked behind her back, ready to pull it free. Neither of them said anything, but Eddie could feel their unspoken support – their readiness to act if it came to that.

The figures before them – silent, calculating – began to reach beneath their cloaks. Their movements were smooth, deliberate. Eddie's eyes darted between them, his thoughts a swirl of chaos. He knew they weren't just reaching for random items – whatever they were about to pull out, it was meant for him, for them. Will was already stepping forward, the strap of his guitar bag sliding from his shoulder, the energy in his stance ready to snap into action.

The tallest figure's voice cut through the tension like a knife. "Do not test us. Step aside, or we will make you."

Eddie's chest tightened, but he didn't move. He couldn't.

"You're not taking her," he said quietly, but there was an edge to his voice now. A fire kindled in him, fed by his fear and the realization that these figures were dangerous. "We're not letting you anywhere near her."

A long pause followed, the air thick with a tension that threatened to snap. Will, his guitar now gripped in both hands,

prepared for whatever came next. Ashley had her staff half-drawn, her eyes flashing with resolve. And Eddie? He simply stood there, his heart racing, his hands clenched into fists at his sides, staring down the figures as they loomed in front of him.

The tallest figure's eyes narrowed, but he did not advance. Instead, he tilted his head slightly, as if considering Eddie's defiance. "You are making a grave mistake," he said, his voice cool but with a flicker of something more dangerous lurking beneath it. "This is not a path you want to walk."

Eddie's breath hitched, but his gaze never wavered. "I'm not moving," he repeated, his voice stronger now, despite the gnawing fear in his gut.

The tension in the hallway thickened, crackling like the air before a storm. Eddie stood frozen for a heartbeat, every muscle locked in place, but then a voice, so familiar yet foreign, cut through the silence.

"Step aside, Welton." The voice was calm, measured – almost too calm. "This doesn't need to end this way."

Eddie's heart skipped a beat. That voice. It sent a chill down his spine, even as his mind scrambled to place it. Slowly, he turned his head, his eyes locking onto the hooded figures.

"Walther?" Eddie's voice was barely a whisper, his breath catching in his throat.

The figure before them, the second hooded figure, slowly lowered their hood, and Eddie's heart sank. The straight white hair that fell around the figure's face was unmistakable.

Walther.

It was him.

The figure's sharp, angular features became clear, his once-familiar face now cloaked in a cold, unsettling expression. He looked different – his eyes were darker, almost hollow, and his presence exuded something dangerous, something Eddie had never seen in him before.

Will's eyes widened, disbelief spreading across his face.

"Walther?" he said, his voice tinged with confusion and growing concern. "What the hell are you doing here, man?" Will shuddered, this time his voice cracking slightly. The confusion, the fear, it all hit him like a ton of bricks. The Walther he knew – the dorm mate, the seemingly harmless second-year Alchemy student – was gone. In his place stood someone Eddie didn't recognize, someone who had crossed a line they never thought he would.

"Why are you doing this?" Eddie muttered under his breath, more to himself than anyone else.

Walther didn't respond immediately. His expression remained stone-cold, his eyes flicking briefly to the door behind Eddie, where Madeleine's apartment lay. Then he spoke again, his voice carrying that same cold detachment.

"You three need to step aside," Walther said, his voice quiet but firm. "You're meddling in matters far greater than just university business. If you don't move, I will be forced to make you."

The weight of his words hit Eddie like a slap, but it wasn't just the words—it was the finality in Walther's tone. The calmness in his voice made it clear this wasn't a threat made in haste. This was a command.

Eddie's heart pounded in his chest, the anger bubbling up like a storm threatening to break. He could feel Will and Ashley bracing beside him, just as ready as he was to fight if it came to that. But what Walther said next, the casual disregard for the possibility of violence, made Eddie snap.

"Stop acting like you give a shit about hurting us, Walther," Eddie shot back, his voice fierce, biting. He took a slow step forward, his hand instinctively reaching for the wand in his jacket's pocket. "You're a fucking traitor. And if you want to move me, make me."

His words were fueled by a mix of fury, betrayal, and the fear that had lodged itself deep in his gut. Walther had always been a classmate, a fellow Alchemy student, someone Eddie had trusted. And now, here he was, standing before them in the dark, aligned with forces that didn't just want Madeleine—they wanted something much more dangerous.

Will shifted beside him, his hand still hovering near his guitar case, ready for whatever came next. Ashley, too, seemed ready to spring into action, her staff now held loosely in her hand, eyes narrowed.

Walther's eyes flickered briefly to Will, to Eddie, to Ashley. His lips parted in what might have been the faintest of smirks, but there was no warmth in it. Just cold calculation.

"You really have no idea, do you, Welton?" Walther said, his tone almost pitying now. "This is bigger than anything you can understand."

Eddie's eyes locked with Walther's, his jaw set. He wasn't going to back down. Not now. "I don't give a shit what you're involved in," Eddie said through gritted teeth. "If you want to get to Madeleine, you'll have to go through me first."

For a moment, the two stood there, locked in a silent standoff, their stares like a battle of wills. The air hummed with a palpable tension, like the crackling before a lightning strike.

Walther's expression softened for the briefest of moments, but there was no warmth in it. "I never wanted it to come to this," he said, but his voice lacked the sincerity it once held. "But if you stand in my way, I will make you."



The tension exploded into action as the battle ensued in the narrow hallway, echoing with the swift movement of bodies and the crackling of magic. The tallest figure—still a looming, silent presence—stepped back, seemingly content to watch as the rest

of the hooded figures moved into action. The air grew thick with anticipation as Walther and the female figure lunged forward.

Walther was quick, his motions controlled and efficient. With a barely noticeable flick of his hand, he muttered an incantation under his breath. The magic surged from him, cutting through the air with an almost imperceptible hum. Sharp, razor-edged wind slashed toward Eddie, Will, and Ashley. It was a cutting spell – swift and silent, intended to carve through flesh and bone.

Will, however, reacted just as fast. His electric guitar was still slung across his back, but he didn't need to reach for it – his fingers danced across the neck, strumming a quick, powerful chord that resonated with magic. A shimmering barrier of vibrant energy flared to life in front of them, humming as it absorbed the slicing wind. The spell collided with the barrier, and though the force of it shook Will, the shield held firm, scattering the sharp edges harmlessly to the sides.

The female figure wasn't as interested in magic, but her weapon was no less dangerous. She lunged at Ashley, a dagger gleaming in the dim light, aiming for a lethal strike. Ashley faltered, just for a second, her instincts thrown off guard by the speed of the attack. But that moment was enough.

Before the dagger could reach her, Eddie's hand shot out, instinctively reaching for the knowledge he had spent months mastering. He whispered a quick incantation, his mind focused on a simple but effective alchemical solution. A burst of compressed air shot from his hand, a blast of force that sent the female figure stumbling back, her balance disrupted. The dagger slipped from her grasp, clattering to the ground with a sharp,

metallic ring. She skidded a few feet away, momentarily thrown off.

The hallway was now alive with a low hum of magic and tension, their every move a dance of attack and defense. Eddie, Will, and Ashley stood together, their backs against the wall, adrenaline surging through their veins. Walther's eyes flicked toward them, his expression unreadable behind the hood, but the glint of determination in his gaze was unmistakable.

The silence that followed was thick, almost suffocating, broken only by the faint hum of magic crackling in the air and the soft thrum of their hearts.

The female figure recovered quickly, her eyes narrowing as she scanned Ashley, then Eddie. She moved with purpose, her movements predatory, ready to strike again. Walther, too, was poised, his stance calm, yet dangerous.

Eddie felt his heart hammering in his chest, every instinct screaming at him to keep fighting, to protect his friends. But he also knew this wasn't just about magic or strength. It was about survival. And right now, he and his friends had to outwit these attackers, or they wouldn't make it through the night.

Eddie took a deep breath, focusing on the compressed air still swirling around his mind, ready to use it again if needed. Will's fingers twitched, preparing another defensive spell. And Ashley, though her breath was shallow from the near miss with the dagger, stood tall, ready to support her friends.

The fight was escalating quickly. The female figure lunged again, her movements swift and predatory, a blur of motion as she aimed for Ashley with the dagger. Walther, too, was relentless. His hands wove through the air as he cast more cutting spells, his intent to bring them down with precision. The air was thick with magic, crackling with every arcane surge.

Will's electric guitar thrummed with power, its enchanted resonance holding the line, keeping Eddie and Ashley protected behind a shimmering barrier. The shield pulsed with each strike, but the pressure was mounting. The attacks were relentless, and the air was thick with tension.

But Eddie's mind was working quickly. His eyes darted around, calculating. And then, he saw it: the window beside the female figure, offering him an opportunity. Without missing a beat, he barked at Ashley, "Open the window!"

Ashley hesitated only for a moment before she dashed forward, her staff raised. She thrust it toward the window, and with a sharp incantation, the window flung open with a creak.

Eddie didn't waste a second. He focused, drawing on the power of alchemy, and with a quick motion, he transmuted the rain above into sharp ice. A storm of razor-sharp icicles formed in an instant, floating in the air like deadly projectiles.

"Now!" Eddie shouted.

Ashley raised her staff, concentrating. With a fluid motion, she directed the ice into a concentrated barrage, launching the jagged icicles with pinpoint accuracy. They whizzed through the air like

a storm of frozen bullets, striking the female figure and Walther in rapid succession. Each hit was sharp and precise, piercing through their cloaks and striking with brutal force.

Walther staggered back, a pained grunt escaping his lips as ice pierced through his shoulder and leg. The female figure wasn't any luckier, an icicle embedding itself deep into her side. She gasped, her breath turning to mist in the cold air, and staggered to her knees, clutching her wound.

The hall was silent for a moment, save for the soft hiss of rain outside. The three of them stood in the aftermath of the storm, adrenaline coursing through their veins.

But the tallest figure — still standing, unfazed — smiled coldly. He stepped forward, his posture as calm and controlled as before. "Impressive," he said in a low, measured tone. "You've defeated both of my disciples."

Eddie, Will, and Ashley stood together, their hands tight around their weapons, ready to face whatever came next. Will's guitar still hummed with protective magic, his stance steady. Ashley's staff was raised, her expression focused. Eddie, his wand gripped tightly, felt the weight of the moment settle over him. This was the final test — the last obstacle.

The tall figure's gaze flicked between the three of them, and though his smile remained, it was as cold and calculating as ever.

But there was no going back now. They had already crossed the line. Eddie took a breath and squared his shoulders, ready for whatever this mysterious figure would throw at them next.

The final confrontation was at hand.

The tallest figure stepped forward, his calm demeanor shifting into something far more dangerous. His cold smile grew wider, more predatory, as he lifted one hand, fingers splayed like the claws of a beast. The air around them grew still, as if even the world itself was holding its breath.

“Enough games,” he said, his voice a low rumble that echoed in the hall.

With a snap of his fingers, the very air crackled with energy. Eddie, Will, and Ashley felt a strange charge in the air, a tingling sensation that prickled their skin like static before it became something far worse. The tall figure’s arm snapped forward, and in an instant, a massive bolt of pure, concentrated thunder shot from his outstretched hand.

The sound was deafening, a crack that split the air like a thunderclap at point-blank range. The blast hit them all at once, a violent surge of energy that felt as if it could tear them apart. Eddie’s body was lifted off the ground as the bolt coursed through him, searing his flesh, burning him from the inside out. He felt the electricity tear through his muscles, a sharp, painful convulsion before his entire body went limp, his muscles locking up.

Will screamed as the lightning struck him, the electric current coursing through his body, burning the skin on his arms and chest. His guitar rang out with an eerie, discordant note before the protective barrier around them flickered and shattered, the shielding magic overwhelmed by the sheer force of the attack.

Ashley cried out, her staff slipping from her fingers as the lightning hit her squarely in the chest. Her body spasmed violently, and she was thrown backward, crashing against the wall with a sickening thud. Her vision blurred as the current ravaged her, and she struggled to breathe, her limbs twitching from the residual power coursing through her.

The force of the thunderclap left them all reeling, unable to stand, unable to move. Their bodies were singed and burned, the air thick with the smell of charred flesh and ozone. Eddie's vision swam in and out of focus as he tried to steady himself, but the pain was overwhelming. He could barely hold onto consciousness as the world around him spun.

Will's voice was barely a whisper, hoarse and strained. "Eddie... Ashley..."

But his words were lost in the deafening roar of his own thoughts. His body felt like it was on fire, the burning heat of the thunderclap gnawing at his nerves. The pain, the shock, the exhaustion—they were too much. His eyelids grew heavy, his head lolling forward as darkness encroached at the edges of his vision.

Ashley lay slumped against the wall, her breathing ragged, her eyes fluttering closed. She tried to reach for her staff, but the strength simply wasn't there. Her body refused to obey her mind, her limbs limp and heavy. The storm of pain was too much for her to bear.

Eddie's hand twitched as he tried to raise his wand, but it fell from his grip, the world around him growing dim. The tall figure

loomed over them, his face still calm, his eyes cold as he watched their suffering.

“You thought you could fight this,” the figure said, his voice a whisper, almost bored. “You were never meant to win.”

The three of them were on the ground, their bodies barely able to respond, their minds fogging as the darkness took hold.

For a moment, it seemed as though the world had ended, leaving only the cold silence of the tall figure’s victory.

And then, just as the last of Eddie’s consciousness slipped away, a faint whisper of hope reached him – a faraway voice, a spark in the dark, calling out. But it was too late.

Everything went black.

-0-

The world around Eddie was a haze of smoke, fire, and pain. Every breath felt like it came from a distance, as if his body were no longer his own. The sharp scent of burnt flesh still clung to the air, the echo of the tall figure’s thunder spell lingering in the space like the last reverberation of a storm. Eddie’s eyelids flickered, too heavy to stay open, but he fought the darkness, the pull of unconsciousness, trying to claw his way back into the world.

He could barely focus, but through the haze, he saw movement. A figure – Madeleine. Her door had opened, the light from her

apartment spilling into the hallway. She stepped out, concern written across her face as she saw the chaos unfolding around her.

“Eddie? What’s going on? Are you alright —”

Her voice was cut off before she could finish. Eddie’s heart lurched as the tall figure, his movements as fluid as death itself, raised his wand in a swift, practiced motion. With a flick of his wrist, a spell shot forward, and Madeleine collapsed instantly, her body going limp in the air before she crumpled into the arms of the tall figure.

Eddie’s mind screamed, but his body refused to respond. His vision was spinning, the world around him distorted. He tried to call out her name, but his voice was weak, barely a rasp. The ground beneath him felt far too distant, like he was sinking into the abyss. But, somehow, he caught a glimpse of the tall figure — he was carrying Madeleine’s unconscious body.

The sounds of the world were muffled, distorted by the roar of blood in Eddie’s ears. Walther and the female figure were standing nearby, seemingly healed, their wounds from the earlier fight no longer visible.

“Do we take the boy too?” the female figure asked, her voice colder than the night air.

Eddie’s heart skipped a beat. *The boy?*

“Leave him,” Walther spat, his voice dripping with venom. “He’ll come for her. Let Lord Raven see the boy’s power himself. He will be pleased.”

The tall figure's smile was unsettling as he nodded, his eyes cold, detached. "Very well. Let's get going."

Eddie's heart was hammering in his chest, his thoughts a blur of panic and rage. He couldn't let them take Madeleine – he couldn't let them get away with this. Fighting against his body, which felt like lead, Eddie tried to push himself up. Every movement was a struggle, his limbs shaking, his head spinning, but he wouldn't give up. He couldn't. He had to –

Madeleine.

With what little strength he had left, Eddie crawled toward them, dragging himself inch by inch across the floor. His vision was swimming, but he could see the tall figure turning to leave, Madeleine's body limp in his arms. His breath came in ragged gasps as he called out her name, his voice raw with desperation.

"Madeleine...!"

His fingers scraped the floor as he reached out, trying to grab hold of anything that might stop them. He could hear his own voice, cracking with fury as he cursed Walther, the traitor, for what he'd done.

"You fucking traitor Walther! You'll pay for this!" Eddie screamed once more

Walther's eyes flicked toward him, and in an instant, his expression turned to one of cold amusement. He stepped forward, his eyes narrowing as he raised his hand. "Enough."

With a quick movement, Walther delivered a swift blow to the back of Eddie's head. The force was enough to send Eddie crashing back to the ground, the world going black once more.

The last thing he heard before he lost consciousness again was Walther's voice, distant and mocking, "Sleep well, Welton. You've made things far more interesting."

And then, there was nothing.

-0-

Eddie's vision was blurred, the world around him a hazy swirl of faces and shadows. He could feel the cool touch of hands trying to steady him, voices murmuring in concern, but he couldn't focus on any of it. The voices were distant, like they were coming from a faraway place, and none of them mattered. Not now.

His body was broken, his mind foggy with pain, but all that consumed him was one thought: *Madeleine*.

She was still out there. They had taken her. *They've taken her*.

He limped forward, ignoring the concerned whispers of the butlers and tenants around him. People tried to stop him, to offer help, but he pushed them away, his limbs moving on their own. He bumped into walls, the cold stone scraping against his skin, but he barely registered the impact. His only focus was the path ahead – the hall, the door, the streets beyond.

He didn't care about the others, even as Will and Ashley began to stir, groaning in pain behind him. He couldn't afford to look back.

He couldn't let them distract him. All that mattered was getting to her.

His pace quickened, the cobblestones beneath his boots slick with rain, but he barely noticed. The cold rain was soaking through his clothes, but it did nothing to slow him down. His heart was hammering in his chest, his breath ragged. He couldn't think straight. His mind was clouded with panic, with fear for Madeleine. The pain of his body – of the burns and the exhaustion – was secondary.

Finally, Eddie reached the front of the apartment complex, his eyes scanning the street. The world was wet, dark, the rain falling in sheets, but he couldn't stop himself. He searched desperately, frantic, his gaze darting from one corner to the next.

And then, through the downpour, he saw it.

An enclosed truck, parked just ahead. The back door was barely open, but even through the rain, Eddie caught a glimpse of something he recognized – a flash of red hair. His heart skipped a beat.

Madeleine.

Without thinking, he pushed forward, his legs aching, burning with every step. The truck began to move, slowly at first, but then it picked up speed, the wheels turning in the rain-soaked streets. Eddie's breath came in ragged gasps as he sprinted after it, the world around him blurring with every step.

He wasn't fast enough.

The truck was pulling away, the distance growing between them. Eddie's legs felt like they were made of lead, his body screaming in pain, but still he ran. He pushed himself harder, ignoring the exhaustion, the burning in his chest, the searing pain in his limbs. But no matter how fast he ran, he couldn't close the gap. The truck was too far ahead.

His feet slipped on the wet cobblestones, his body crashing to the ground with a sickening thud. The impact jarred through his skull, and for a moment, everything went dark. But then he could feel the cold rain, hear the distant rumble of thunder, and the truck continued to pull away.

His breath hitched, and tears, cold from the rain, mixed with the salt of his own. Eddie's heart shattered as he realized the truth.

Eddie's legs buckled beneath him, his body too exhausted to keep going. His feet, slick with the rain, slid out from under him. His breath hitched painfully in his chest as he crashed to the cold cobblestones, the hard impact rattling his skull. He barely felt it – the pain in his body, the cuts and burns from the earlier battle, seemed distant, muted. All he could feel, all he could think about, was the crushing weight of failure.

His hand scraped the wet stone, desperate to push himself up, to keep going, but his fingers felt like they were made of glass. His muscles screamed in protest, his body soaked in cold rain and searing pain, but it was nothing compared to the pain inside. His mind was on fire, the helplessness gnawing at him like a wild beast.

The truck was moving farther away, and Madeleine was still inside. She was gone. They had taken her.

Eddie's breath came in ragged, broken gasps, his chest tight with panic. He tried to scream, to call her name, but the words wouldn't come. His throat was raw, the tears stinging his eyes mixing with the cold rain that fell relentlessly, as if the world itself was punishing him.

His legs twitched, his hands trembling violently as he tried to push himself up again, but his body refused to obey. His vision blurred, not from the rain or the dizziness, but from the overwhelming, suffocating grief that twisted and tore through him. The truck, *her*, the one person he promised to protect – he had failed her.

His mind spiraled, each thought a jagged shard of self-loathing, each heartbeat a reminder of his failure. He slammed his fist against the ground, the wet stone slick and unforgiving beneath him. The feeling of helplessness spread like poison through his veins. His chest caved in with the weight of it.

He felt the tears fall – hot, bitter. They mixed with the rain, lost in the downpour, but they were there. He couldn't stop them. His breath broke in sobs, ragged and broken, his whole body shaking with the force of his anguish. The world around him felt impossibly large, cold, and empty, and he was so small. So helpless.

He had failed.

The truck was gone now. *Madeleine* was gone.

And Eddie, soaked to the bone, trembling in the rain, felt the last of his strength slip away. His body gave in, collapsing against the stones as his sobs turned into quiet, helpless breaths. The cold of the world seeped into him, and in that moment, Eddie felt as though everything had gone dark.

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The rain fell in sheets, an endless, mournful downpour, as Eddie lay there on the cobblestones, his body shaking with every sob, every breath ragged and broken. He barely noticed the figure approaching through the rain, the rhythmic tapping of her boots soft against the harsh sounds of the storm. The umbrella above her kept her dry, but the rest of her was almost ghostly, her figure shadowed and cloaked, the black fabric of her cloak hiding her face, making her seem distant, a part of the rain itself.

She stopped just in front of Eddie, and for a moment, all he could hear was the sound of the storm and his own desperate gasps. The umbrella's edge hovered just above his head, and he felt a warmth he didn't expect. It was like the air around her had shifted, and for the first time in what felt like forever, he was no longer alone.

"You need help," the lady's voice was soft, but insistent, carrying through the heavy rain. It wasn't commanding, but it felt like a lifeline, one that Eddie, in his disoriented state, wanted nothing to do with. He didn't care about help. He didn't care about anything. Not right now.

"I said leave me alone!" Eddie growled, his voice hoarse and bitter, still struggling to keep himself from falling apart

completely. He pushed himself away from her, but he didn't have the strength to rise. His eyes were bloodshot, red from crying, and when they met hers, they didn't soften.

But the lady didn't pull away. Instead, she stepped closer, kneeling down to be on his level. Her hand, gloved but warm, reached out, as if offering him something he didn't know he needed.

"You don't understand," he spat, his throat burning with the weight of his words. "You don't know shit about what's going on, so just go away."

The woman didn't back away. She took a step closer, tilting her umbrella to shield him from the rain. There was something in her eyes, something steady and unwavering. She wasn't deterred. Instead, her voice took on a slightly amused, yet offended tone.

"*How* could I not know you, Edward?" she asked, with a slight chuckle. "I've been your aunt since before you were born."

That stopped him.

The words reached through the fog of his pain. *Aunt?*

Eddie blinked, his vision clouded with confusion and tears. He lifted his gaze to the woman's face, trying to make sense of it all. The rain hit his face, stinging, but it couldn't hide the fact that something in the woman's posture was too familiar. There was a strange, almost imperceptible pull, like a thread tugging him back to his childhood, to memories he hadn't realized he'd forgotten.

She tilted her head slightly, and with a fluid motion, she pushed back the hood of her cloak, revealing sharp, pointed ears that gleamed in the dim light of the streetlamps. Her features – slightly angular, ethereal – had the unmistakable sharpness of an Elf, and in that moment, everything fell into place. The unmistakable glint of recognition washed over Eddie's face as his mind cleared, the pieces finally clicking into place.

His heart, still pounding with the weight of his failure, stilled for a moment. His eyes widened.

"...Catherine?" Eddie breathed, almost in disbelief. The name felt strange, but it was right. There was no mistaking her now.

The woman smiled softly, the corners of her lips curling as she saw the shock on Eddie's face. "Well, it's about time you recognized me," she said, her voice warm, though still with that playful undertone. "I see the years haven't exactly been kind to you."

Eddie's head spun. Catherine. His aunt. The Master Alchemist, who had *always* been just a distant name, a shadow in his family's stories. She had always been so far away, so unreachable – *until now*. And yet here she was, standing in front of him, her red coat vivid against the gray, rain-slicked world.

"Catherine..." he repeated, the name tasting strange on his tongue, unsure if he was dreaming or if this was truly happening.

"Yes, it's me," she said with a slight smile, a warmth in her voice that he had almost forgotten.

Eddie didn't have the energy to say anything else. His emotions, already raw, surged once more as he looked up at her, his face a mask of disbelief and confusion. How could she be here? How could *she* be the one to find him, after everything he had just gone through?

But Catherine simply reached out, gently placing her hand on his shoulder, offering him the kind of comfort he hadn't known he needed until now.

"Come with me, Eddie," she said softly, her voice like the calm in the eye of a storm.

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The inn was warm, filled with the low hum of laughter and clinking mugs, a sharp contrast to the storm raging outside. The hearth crackled, sending flickers of light dancing across the wooden beams, but for Eddie, the warmth was suffocating. He sat slumped in the chair, drenched from head to toe, water pooling beneath him. His hair clung to his forehead, and his clothes felt like lead against his bruised and battered skin. He barely noticed the curious stares of the inn's patrons, their murmurs blending into the dull roar in his mind.

Will and Ashley sat beside him, no better off. Will's usual carefree demeanor was gone; his eyes, shadowed with exhaustion, stared blankly at the table. Ashley fidgeted with her damp sleeves, her staff resting against her chair, her lips pressed into a thin line. None of them had spoken since Catherine ushered them inside.

Catherine, perched on the chair across from them, was unbothered by the stares or the gloom radiating from the trio. She leaned back slightly, her red coat hanging off her shoulders, her apple-red hair catching the light. Despite the gravity of the situation, she still managed a faint smirk, trying to bring some levity into the room.

Her bright red coat and sharp features made her stand out even among the colorful inn patrons, but her easy demeanor somehow

blended into the room's warmth. She tapped a finger lightly on the wooden table, leaning forward with an attempt at levity.

"Well," she began, her tone playful, "This is the most cheerful company I've had in decades. Honestly, Eddie, you've always been a barrel of laughs, but this? This is *new*."

Her words fell flat. Eddie didn't flinch, his expression unchanging. Will shifted slightly in his seat, but the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth didn't develop further. Even Ashley, who might have offered a polite smile, seemed too burdened by the events to respond. Catherine sighed theatrically, throwing up her hands.

"Really? Nothing? Not even a chuckle? Tough crowd," she muttered, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms. "Alright then, I'll skip the pleasantries. Someone better tell me what's got the three of you looking like ghosts."

The silence lingered for a moment before Ashley finally spoke, her voice quiet but steady. "We were visiting a friend – Madeleine," she explained, staring down at the table. "But... she was taken. Kidnapped."

Catherine's eyes sharpened, her playful demeanor fading. "By who?" she asked, her tone low and serious.

Ashley hesitated, searching for the right words. "They were in black cloaks. Hooded. There were three of them. Two of them attacked us, and... they overpowered us." Her hands clenched into fists as she spoke, her frustration evident. "They called Madeleine by name. It wasn't random. They were after her."

Catherine's brow furrowed as she leaned in closer. "Did they say anything about why? Or who they are?"

Ashley shook her head. "No, but... there's this." She reached into her bag, pulling out a small silver necklace and placing it on the table. The pendant was unmistakable: a grim skull resting in an outstretched hand. "One of them — the woman — had it on her. When she attacked me with her dagger, I managed to grab this before... before it all went wrong."

Catherine turned the pendant over in her hand, her sharp gaze analyzing every detail. The faint flicker of lamplight danced across the grim sigil: a skull cradled in a skeletal hand. Her brows furrowed, and a heavy silence hung in the air as she seemed to weigh her thoughts carefully. Finally, she exhaled, setting the pendant down on the table with an audible *clink*.

"This," she began, her voice low and grave, "isn't just any insignia. This is the mark of the Black Hand."

Ashley tilted her head, puzzled. "The Black Hand? Who are they?"

Catherine leaned back, her fingers interlocking as she regarded the three of them. "They're an underground organization — centuries old, possibly older. Assassins, spies, mercenaries... whatever you want to call them, they've been pulling strings from the shadows for longer than most can remember." Her voice softened, her tone heavy with the weight of her words. "I've crossed paths with them a few centuries ago. Trust me, they're not the sort you want to make enemies of."

Will straightened in his seat, concern flashing across his face. "How bad are we talking?"

Catherine gave him a pointed look. "The kind of bad that means they don't leave loose ends. Their operatives are trained from a young age to be precise, efficient, and utterly ruthless. They don't fail their missions. If you're lucky, you never even see them coming." She tapped the pendant with her fingertip. "This? This isn't just a necklace. It's proof of their presence — a rare slip-up."

Ashley swallowed hard. "So... we're dealing with assassins? That's who took Madeleine?"

Catherine nodded solemnly. "If this sigil is involved, yes. And the fact that you three managed to survive an encounter with them..." She paused, her expression a mix of disbelief and admiration. "That's no small feat. Not many in my very long existence can say they've faced the Black Hand and lived to tell the tale."

Eddie, who had been silent up to this point, finally raised his head. His eyes were still bloodshot, his voice rough. "Then why didn't they kill us? They had the chance. Walther..." His voice broke slightly, but he pushed through. "He could've finished me off. Why didn't he?"

Catherine tilted her head, her sharp mind visibly turning over the question. "That, I can't say for sure. But if I had to guess? They didn't see you as a threat — not yet, anyway." She shot Eddie a meaningful look. "Or maybe your weird friend Walther had his reasons for sparing you."

Will frowned, leaning forward. "But Madeleine... why her? What could they possibly want with her?"

Catherine's lips pressed into a thin line. "The Black Hand doesn't take people on a whim. If they've gone through the trouble of abducting Madeleine, then she's part of something much larger. Something that's likely been in motion for a long time."

Ashley's hands clenched into fists. "So what do we do? How do we stop them?"

Catherine's gaze softened as she looked at the three of them. "First, we thank whatever gods and goddesses you believe that you managed to snag this." She gestured to the pendant. "Whoever attacked you was likely a rookie. A veteran operative wouldn't have let you anywhere near something like this. The fact that you're alive and still have this pendant is nothing short of a miracle."

She leaned forward, her expression darkening. "Second, we tread carefully. The Black Hand doesn't take kindly to interference, and now that you've disrupted their plans, you can bet they'll be watching."

Eddie's hands trembled slightly as he stared at the pendant on the table. His voice was low, but there was a hard edge to it. "I don't care how dangerous they are. I'm going to find Madeleine, Where would they take her?"

Catherine, sitting with an uncharacteristically serious expression, looked down at the pendant in her hand. "Did they leave any clues? Anything at all?"

Eddie paused, the rain-drenched events replaying in his mind. His jaw clenched as he tried to recall every detail. "They... they said something. Walther told them to leave me behind because 'the boy will come for her.' And then he said..."

Eddie hesitated, the memory sharp and bitter.

"He said 'Lord Raven will be pleased.'"

The air in the room seemed to shift. Catherine, who had faced magical beasts and survived countless dangers in her long life, visibly stiffened. Her usual humor and ease dissolved, replaced by an uncharacteristic tension. Her grip on the pendant tightened, and for a moment, she said nothing, her face pale.

Eddie frowned, noticing her reaction. "Catherine? What is it? Are you okay?"

Even Will and Ashley, who had been quiet, looked at her with concern. Catherine, the unflappable Master Alchemist, was visibly unnerved.

Finally, she let out a slow, deliberate breath, her voice low. "Lord Raven..." she began, her words laced with dread. "He's not just anyone. He's the right hand of the Black Hand, their enforcer. If he's involved, this isn't just some rogue faction or a simple kidnapping."

Eddie's brow furrowed. "Why? What makes him so terrifying? You've faced dragons, ancient magic, everything. What's different about him?"

Catherine hesitated, her eyes darting to the pendant again, as though it held the answers she sought. "Lord Raven isn't just a name, Eddie. He's a title — a mantle passed down through generations of the Black Hand. Each Lord Raven is chosen for their absolute loyalty and unparalleled skill. The current one..." She trailed off, her voice dropping to a near whisper. "He's the one who orchestrated the Regicide."

Ashley's eyes widened. "The Regicide? You mean the downfall of the Edenfield Monarch?"

Catherine nodded grimly. "It was more than a downfall. The Edenfield royal family was wiped out in a single night — every heir, every cousin, every branch of the bloodline. All of it orchestrated by the Black Hand, with Lord Raven leading the charge. He didn't just plan it; he carried out much of it himself. No one survived."

Eddie's heart sank, a chill running through him. "But... why would someone like that want Madeleine? What could she possibly have to do with this?"

Catherine shook her head, her expression unreadable. "That's the question, isn't it? If the Black Hand and Lord Raven are involved, it means Madeleine is tied to something far larger than you realize. Something they've been planning for a long time."

Eddie leaned forward, his voice sharper now, tinged with desperation. "Catherine, you must have an idea. Where would they take her? You've dealt with them before."

Catherine, still holding the pendant, sighed heavily. She sat back in her chair, her eyes distant, as if reaching into memories she'd rather forget. "If Lord Raven is involved, and if they've taken her, there's only one place they'd go," she said grimly. "The Underground City beneath the Citadel of Archaea."

Eddie frowned. "The Underground City? What's that?"

"It's not a place most people even know exists," Catherine explained. "The Citadel of Archaea is the heart of Solivia's capital, the seat of its government, and the symbol of its might. But beneath it lies a buried remnant of the original citadel, the parts that were left behind when the new one was built. Over centuries, that forgotten ruin became a city of its own."

Ashley furrowed her brow. "A city underground? Who lives there?"

"Criminals," Catherine said bluntly. "Gangs, thieves, assassins. Every type of outlaw imaginable. It's a haven for those who don't want to live under Solivia's laws. The Solivian Police and Army barely touch it—it's too vast, too lawless, and they don't have the resources to enforce order down there. So, they've left it to the criminals."

Will, still pale and shaken, leaned forward. "And you're saying the Black Hand... their headquarters is there?"

Catherine nodded. "If they're carrying out an operation under Lord Raven's direct orders, that's where they'll take her. The Underground City is a labyrinth, and the Black Hand's

headquarters is at its core. It's the one place no outsider dares to go."

Ashley's voice broke through the tension. "Maybe we should report this to the police. If the Black Hand is as dangerous as you say, shouldn't the authorities handle it? The army, or —"

Catherine cut her off with a sharp laugh, though there was no humor in it. "You don't understand, my dear. The police? The army? They *fear* the Black Hand. Reporting this would be a waste of time. It'd sit on a dusty backlog in their office until it's forgotten — if it isn't already. The Underground is a no-go zone for them. No one enforces laws there. No one dares."

Ashley frowned, disbelief plain on her face. "Then what do we do? Just let them get away with it?"

Eddie's voice rang out with a quiet resolve. "We go there."

The room fell silent. Will and Ashley stared at Eddie as though he'd lost his mind. Even Catherine paused, her sharp eyes narrowing as she studied him.

Will finally broke the silence. "Eddie, mate, are you serious? Do you even hear yourself? This isn't just sneaking out to grab a midnight snack. You're talking about walking into a city full of killers."

Ashley crossed her arms, her voice rising. "He's right! You don't even know where to start. How could you possibly think this is a good idea?"

Eddie didn't waver. "I don't care how dangerous it is. I'm going."

Catherine sighed deeply, rubbing her temples as if a headache had just arrived. "Eddie, listen to me. I understand your anger. But the Underground isn't like anything you've faced before. It's chaos. A world of its own. You can't just walk in there and demand answers."

"Then guide us," Eddie said, his voice firm. "You said you've been there before, right?. Help us get through it."

Catherine blinked, startled by his boldness. "That was a long time ago, I need you to understand something: I've been to the Underground before. Back during the old king's rule, I was sent there with a party of paladins when the crown still foolishly believed it could bring order to that cesspool." Her voice turned cold, distant. "We barely made it out alive, and that was with trained warriors at my side. The king gave up on the Underground for a reason."

"But you've been there," Eddie pressed. "You know the way."

Catherine hesitated. She looked at him, her sharp gaze softening with something close to understanding. "You're as stubborn as your father was," she muttered. "I suppose there's no talking you out of this, is there?"

Eddie didn't flinch. "No."

Catherine exhaled, a long and weary sound. "Fine. I'll take you. But you need to understand — there are parts of the Underground

even I can't go to. Especially now. Elves aren't exactly welcome down there."

"Why not?" Ashley asked.

"The people down there don't just hate authority — they hate Elves. They see us as symbols of oppression, relics of the Empire that once enslaved their ancestors. There are places where my presence would make things worse for all of us, but if you insist, I will guide you through them."

Will raised a skeptical brow. "Wait, you're actually agreeing to this? Just like that?"

"Yes, I am." Catherine's gaze flicked between the three of them, her expression unreadable. Then, a sly smile crept across her face. "But if I do this, I want something in return."

The room fell silent. Eddie frowned, suspicion flaring. "What do you mean? What do you want?"

"Oh, nothing too dramatic," Catherine said airily, but her tone carried a strange weight, a sense of purpose that made all three of them uneasy. "Just a favor. Something I'll collect later."

Will narrowed his eyes. "That's... ominous."

Ashley leaned forward, her voice cautious. "What kind of favor?"

Catherine smiled, leaning back in her chair and twirling the pendant between her fingers. "Don't worry your pretty little heads about it. You'll find out when the time comes." Her sharp

teeth flashed in a grin that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Do we have a deal?"

Eddie hesitated but then nodded firmly. "We do."

"Good," Catherine said, her voice light but her smile mysterious. "Then let's prepare to descend into the shadows. You'll need all the help you can get."



The room was quiet, save for the soft rustling of the bed sheets as Catherine shifted in her sleep. She was sprawled across Eddie's bottom bunk, her bright red coat tucked haphazardly under her, and her head nestled against the pillow as if she belonged there. The hum of the dormitory outside didn't faze her, despite the oddity of the situation – an Elf, the Master Alchemist, and most importantly, Eddie's aunt, napping in their cramped dorm room.

Ashley stood in the doorway, staring at Catherine with her arms crossed, blinking in disbelief. "Really?" she said, her voice laced with a mixture of amusement and frustration.

Will, who was leaning against the opposite wall, let out a low whistle. "Did she really just want a free place to sleep?"

"Yeah," Eddie sighed, sitting on the edge of his bed, rubbing his face. "That is very Catherine of her."

Ashley looked at him with a smirk. "You didn't see that coming?"

"I should've," Eddie muttered. "She's been around long enough to know how to work people... but I guess this is a new level."

As the two of them exchanged amused glances, the door to their dorm room creaked open, and in stepped Jake and Jane, two of Eddie's more curious classmates. They froze mid-step when they saw Catherine still snoring away on the bottom bunk.

"HOLY SHIT, is that an elf? A real elf?" Jane exclaimed, eyes wide with disbelief. She tiptoed closer to get a better look, her mouth hanging open. "You sure her ears aren't just a costume or something?"

Jake, who was standing behind her, elbowed her. "Dude, that's definitely an elf. You can't fake pointy ears like that!"

Before Jane could argue further, Henry, another dorm mate, appeared in the doorway, rolling his eyes. "Oh, for the love of the gods, will you two keep it down?" He crossed his arms and looked at Jake and Jane with an exasperated sigh. "You're embarrassing yourselves. Go bother someone else."

Jake and Jane turned around sheepishly, glancing back at Catherine one last time. "You've gotta admit, this is wild," Jake muttered as they backed out of the room.

Henry stepped forward, now clearly intent on a more serious matter. "Anyway, Eddie," he said, nodding toward the trio, "I need to talk to you, Will, and Ashley. Important stuff. Can we have a word?"

Will gave Henry a curious look. "Sure, what's up?"

Henry glanced at Catherine briefly before rolling his eyes.
"Maybe not in front of the elf."

Eddie looked over at Catherine, still snoozing peacefully, blissfully unaware of the circus she'd caused. He sighed. "No point in waking her up. She's not going anywhere."

Ashley chuckled softly. "It's funny, isn't it? The most powerful alchemist in the world, and all she wanted was a nap and a free bed."

"Well," Eddie began, his lips curling into a half-smile, "I guess that's Catherine for you. Always knows how to get what she wants, even if it's just... peace and quiet for a change."

Will shook his head, the humor of the situation finally sinking in. "She's definitely a piece of work. What kind of Master Alchemist needs a nap in a college dorm?"

Eddie glanced at his bunkmate, who was still deep in her slumber, a soft snore escaping her. "You really want to know?" He grinned. "The kind who just blew all her money on something completely impractical and now needs a place to crash."

Ashley's face lit up in sudden realization, and she laughed. "She's broke, isn't she?"

"She's... incredibly resourceful," Eddie said, throwing a glance at Catherine as if to make sure she wouldn't suddenly wake up and punch him for revealing her secret. "But yeah, I guess if you ask Catherine what she wants... it's probably a bed, food, and a place

where she can steal some quiet time without being chased by angry royalty or criminals.”

As Henry and the others looked on, Eddie couldn't help but chuckle at the absurdity of it all. “I swear, I never saw that one coming. But maybe we can be the ones who make sure she gets her sleep. It's the least we can do for a family member who's literally saving our lives.”

And as Catherine continued to sleep, the mystery of her request — a mysterious favor — seemed far less menacing. In that moment, Eddie realized something: Catherine's true price was something as simple and relatable as a little comfort after an untold number of years spent doing everything but resting.

But that, Eddie thought, was just the way she liked it.

The rest of the story to come...