

# ACT II

## THE EDENFIELD CHORNICLES

*Book 1 [ACT II]*

*Draft III*

*[Drafted in 21<sup>st</sup> of November, 2024]*

*Zaydan Akbar*

## **The Edenfield chornicles**

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*This is a story about a stressed out university student,*

*For stressed out university students,*

*And sincerely, by a stressed out university student.*

*Enjoy.*

*- Zaydan*

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## ACT II | Chapter 1



Eddie was lost in a restless sleep, the gentle sway of the train carriage rocking him in and out of hazy dreams. His cheek rested against the cold glass of the window, his silver hair tousled and gleaming faintly in the dim compartment. The steady chugging of the train was like a lullaby, but even in sleep, his heart stirred with anticipation.

A soft knock broke through the rhythm of the train's hum.

"Sir? We'll be arriving at Edenfield Station shortly," came a polite but firm voice from the other side of the door.

Eddie blinked awake, the remnants of his dreams slipping away like morning mist. Rubbing his eyes, he sat up, his jacket wrinkled from the nap. There was a moment of disorientation, a lingering sense of unreality that always came when waking in unfamiliar places. But then, it clicked.

Edenfield.

He pulled back the heavy velvet curtain of his compartment, and for the first time, his jade green eyes caught sight of the world outside. What met his gaze wasn't the grandeur of the city just yet—no towering spires or ancient walls—but the outskirts, a sprawling countryside that still whispered of a place far older, far richer in magic than his quiet seaside hometown of Weshaven.

The landscape outside was painted in soft hues of twilight, a dusky violet sky fading into deep blues. Hills rolled endlessly into the distance, dotted with clusters of trees that seemed to glow faintly in the waning light. Scattered farmhouses, far more

elaborate than anything he'd ever seen in Weshaven, stood tall with ivy curling around their stone chimneys. Even this far from the heart of Edenfield, the air seemed to shimmer with possibility.

Eddie leaned forward, pressing his forehead to the cool glass, his breath fogging a small circle on the window. His heart thudded quietly in his chest, a mix of nervousness and something else—something that felt like wonder. He'd heard stories about Edenfield, about its old-world magic and its grand university, but now, on the brink of seeing it with his own eyes, it felt more like stepping into a legend.

The quiet excitement stirred in him like a flickering flame, small but insistent, warming his veins. It was a feeling he couldn't quite name, a thrill that seemed to come from deep inside him, as if he was meant to be here, as if something awaited him. The outskirts were still far removed from the bustling heart of the city, but to Eddie, they were a gateway to a world beyond anything he had known.

Weshaven, with its sleepy harbors and familiar shores, felt like a distant memory now, a place that belonged to another life. Here, the air seemed different, charged with a faint hum of magic that made his fingertips tingle.

As the train rolled ever closer to the city, Eddie sat back in his seat, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. He could feel the weight of the unknown settling in his chest, but it wasn't heavy. It was exhilarating.

Edenfield was waiting.

-o-

Eddie stepped down from the train, the platform beneath his feet humming with the clatter of activity. The air was thick with the hiss of steam, mingling with the distant scent of coal and the faint

tang of sea breeze, but it was the sheer grandeur of Edenfield Central Station that stole his breath.

He clutched the invitation letter from Edenfield University in his hand, its edges worn from nervous fidgeting during the long journey. The parchment felt almost sacred, a tether to his future, and now he stood on the brink of that future. His bright jade eyes widened as he took in the station's imposing structure—the towering iron and glass canopy stretching high above like the ribs of a mythical beast, casting intricate shadows on the stone floor below.

The arched roof gleamed in the late afternoon light, each pane of glass reflecting the sky's fading colors. The wrought-iron beams above curled and twisted like ancient vines, telling their own silent story of the station's place in Edenfield's rich history. Eddie's heart raced as he looked around, his gaze caught by the massive clock tower that loomed over the platforms, its gilded hands moving with a steady, enchanted precision. The deep chime of the bell reverberated through the station, grounding him in the moment.

This was Edenfield. The city he had only heard about in distant whispers and stories. And now, he was here.

The station bustled with life, a sea of people swirling around him, each with their own purpose. Students in crisp robes, professors with weathered satchels, porters and conductors moving with effortless grace as they directed the flow of passengers. Eddie found himself swept along in the current, his feet carrying him forward as he tried to take it all in—the flickering golden letters on the enchanted information board, the polished brass fixtures of the kiosk in the center of the hall, the stained glass windows high above, each pane glowing with scenes of Edenfield's storied past.

His hand tightened around the letter. *Emma Somers*, he repeated to himself, trying to focus through the sea of faces. *She's supposed to be waiting for me here.*

But how was he supposed to find one person in all of this? Everywhere he looked, there were more people—more robes, more chatter, more trains hissing as they arrived and departed. A few passengers, weighed down by heavy trunks, reminded him just how little he had brought with him. Just a single suitcase slung over his shoulder, its leather strap worn and frayed.

*What if she's already left?* The thought slipped into his mind before he could stop it, twisting into a knot of anxiety in his chest. *What if she couldn't find me? What if I missed her?*

His eyes scanned the crowd again, moving quickly over faces and figures. Scholars in long robes, conductors with crisp uniforms, groups of students already in lively conversation. There was so much happening at once, it was dizzying.

*Okay, calm down.* He took a breath, steadying himself. *You've got the letter. You're supposed to be here. She'll find you.*

He stepped to the side, moving out of the steady stream of passengers as they poured off the platform. His heart raced as he scanned the station's grand ticketing hall, his pulse almost too loud in his ears. Above him, the grand clock ticked away steadily, as if mocking his growing impatience.

Eddie glanced at the letter again, though he had already memorized the details. "*Emma Somers, agent of Edenfield University,*" it read. She would be waiting for him at the station to guide him to the university. That much was clear. *But where?* He stuffed the letter back into his jacket pocket and looked around once more, his eyes flicking from person to person.



He spotted a tall woman with short-cropped hair, holding a sign for another new arrival, but it wasn't for him. Another group of students clustered near the ticket kiosk, laughing about something in their journey. He pushed through the throng, dodging a porter who hurried past, a cart full of trunks trailing behind him.

The grandeur of the station was momentarily lost on him as a growing worry took hold. *What if I'm not where I'm supposed to be? What if she's been waiting somewhere else, and I'm just standing here like a fool?*

But then, something pulled him back—a glint of sunlight through the glass, the soft chime of the clock overhead, the sense that the station, no matter how overwhelming, was still a place of beginnings. And this, right here, was the start of his own. *You'll find her*, he reassured himself. *And even if you don't, you're in Edenfield now. You've made it this far.*

His fingers brushed over the edge of the letter again, a reminder of why he was here. No matter the uncertainty, the nervous flutters in his stomach, this was where he was meant to be.

Taking a deep breath, Eddie straightened up, squared his shoulders, and continued weaving through the crowd, determined to find Emma Somers—or let her find him.

Amid the sea of passengers, a voice cut through the din.

"Eddie Welton?"

Eddie spun around, his heart skipping a beat. A woman stood just a few paces away, tall and composed, with sharp eyes that seemed to miss nothing. She wore a deep green cloak over a fitted traveling jacket, the hem swishing as she moved toward him. Her auburn hair was pulled back neatly, and in her hand,

she held a folded piece of parchment—his name, “E. Welton,” written on it in elegant script.

"Emma Somers?" Eddie blurted, relief flooding his chest as he recognized her from the description in his letter.

"That's me," she replied with a nod, her expression softening into a small smile. "I've been looking for you. Welcome to Edenfield."

"Thank you," Eddie managed, though his voice cracked slightly. He tucked his letter back into his pocket as she motioned for him to follow.

Without another word, Emma turned and began to make her way through the throng of people, her steps confident and sure. Eddie hurried after her, weaving through the bustling crowds. He stole glances at her from the corner of his eye, wondering how someone could seem so at ease in such a vast and overwhelming place.

They passed through the grand ticketing hall, the warm light of the chandeliers casting golden pools on the marble floor. Eddie's gaze kept darting upward, taking in every detail—the intricate stained glass windows, the vaulted ceilings, the sheer size of it all. The constant hum of voices, the rhythmic clatter of the trains arriving and departing, it was like being inside a living, breathing machine. He felt small, and yet alive in a way he hadn't expected.

"You've never been to a place like this before, have you?" Emma asked, glancing back at him as they walked.

Eddie swallowed, shaking his head. "No, never," he admitted. "I mean— Weshaven is just a small town by the coast... it's beautiful there, i never thought i would see something like this."

Emma gave a knowing smile. "Edenfield can be a bit overwhelming at first, especially for someone from a quieter place. But you'll get used to it."

"I hope so," Eddie murmured, his eyes sweeping across the station again. They were passing the massive clock now, its steady tick-tock seeming louder in the quiet space between his thoughts. "I've never seen anything this big before. It's... it's like it's alive. Everything's moving so fast, but... it all fits together somehow."

Emma chuckled softly at that. "That's a good way to think about it. Edenfield is a city of motion, always moving forward, always evolving. But there's an order to it, even if it doesn't seem like it at first. You'll see."

They stepped through a set of iron-framed doors and into the open air beyond the station. The street outside was just as bustling as inside—carriages and cabs lined the cobblestone road, drivers calling out for fares, while students and travelers moved purposefully toward their next destination.

Eddie slowed for a moment, staring up at the spires of the city rising in the distance, barely visible through the mist. They pierced the sky like ancient sentinels, their dark stone facades casting long shadows in the fading afternoon light.

Emma paused as she noticed Eddie had stopped. "Quite the change from Weshaven, isn't it?"

Eddie nodded, his throat tight as he tried to find the words. "It's... it's incredible. I've never seen anything like it. Everything in Weshaven is... small, quiet. The biggest building is my dad's Alchemy tower, and even that feels like nothing compared to this."

"There's a lot to take in here," Emma said, her tone gentle. "Edenfield's not just a city. It's a place of learning, of discovery. And that's what you'll be doing while you're here. It might feel overwhelming now, but you're here for a reason, Eddie."

Eddie blinked, his gaze still locked on the spires of the university in the distance. *Discovery*. The word seemed to settle in his chest, alongside the nervousness and excitement that had been brewing since the train ride. He looked down at the letter in his pocket, feeling the weight of it again, but this time it felt different. Less like a burden, more like a promise.

"I hope I can live up to it," he said quietly, more to himself than to her.

Emma gave him a reassuring nod. "You will. The city has a way of revealing your strengths—sometimes in ways you don't expect."

As they continued down the bustling street, Emma leading the way, Eddie took one last glance back at the station. The towering structure behind him felt like the first step into something bigger than anything he could have imagined. He was no longer just Eddie Welton from Weshaven. He was a student of Edenfield now, and whatever this city had in store for him, he was ready to face it.

As they walked further away from the station, Emma glanced at Eddie and broke the silence with a more casual tone.

"You're going to be spending quite a bit of time in those buildings," she said, nodding toward the distant spires of Edenfield University.

Eddie followed her gaze, his stomach fluttering at the thought. "Four years, right?"

Emma nodded. "That's right. Four years under the Faculty of Alchemy. It's one of the oldest and most prestigious faculties in the university. Some of the greatest alchemists of our time—and many before it—studied there. People still talk about the breakthroughs that happened within its walls."

Eddie's pulse quickened at the thought. The idea of walking the same halls where legendary figures in alchemy had once stood seemed both exhilarating and daunting. He clutched his letter a little tighter, feeling its importance settle into his bones.

"And," Emma continued, her voice taking on a more serious note, "that includes your aunt, Catherine Angelina."

At the mention of her name, Eddie looked over, unsure of what to say. His Aunt Catherine had always been a distant figure in his life, someone whose reputation as a Master Alchemist often overshadowed the fact that she was family. When she'd recommended him to Edenfield, it had felt like his entire life had shifted.

Emma seemed to catch the change in his expression. "She's well-respected. A legend, really. And when she recommended you, I'll admit... I had my doubts."

Eddie blinked in surprise. "Doubts? Why?"

"To be honest, I thought she was showing favoritism." Emma's tone was blunt, but not unkind. "It's not every day a Master Alchemist vouches for her nephew. I wanted to be sure you earned your place. So, I made your entrance test... a little more challenging than usual."

Eddie's heart sank slightly. He hadn't realized it at the time, but now, knowing that the test had been more difficult than normal made him wonder if he'd just gotten lucky. He chewed on the inside of his cheek, unsure of how to respond.

But Emma gave him a reassuring smile. "You passed, Eddie. And you didn't just scrape by. You handled it with skill and knowledge far beyond what I expected. Whatever doubts I had, they're gone now. You earned your spot, fair and square."

A flush of pride warmed Eddie's cheeks, though it was tempered by the weight of her words. "Why did you do that?" he asked softly.

"I needed to be sure," Emma replied, her tone softening. "Catherine's a remarkable alchemist, and I can see now that she wasn't just being biased. She chose the right person to recommend. I see why she believed in you."

Eddie's heart pounded, a mix of pride and nervousness. His aunt's shadow had always loomed large, but hearing Emma's words made it feel a little less intimidating. For the first time, he felt like maybe he wasn't just Catherine Angelina's nephew—he was Eddie Welton, a student worthy of studying alchemy at Edenfield.

"And you're not just any student," Emma continued, her smile widening slightly. "You're part of the Sage's Scholarship Program. That's no small achievement."

Eddie's eyes widened. "The Sage's Scholarship..."

"Yes. The program only accepts a select few, and it's designed to help guide the most promising minds in magical study. Your aunt ensured you were considered for it, but you secured your place with your own talent. Keep that in mind when the challenges come. You belong here."

Eddie nodded slowly, trying to process it all. The weight of his aunt's reputation, the scholarship, the faculty—it was a lot to take in, but Emma's words bolstered his confidence.

As they walked on, Eddie's gaze lingered on the distant silhouette of the university. A sense of purpose, stronger than ever before, surged within him. He had a lot to prove, but he was ready.



The massive city before Eddie felt almost too big for his senses to handle. The buildings stretched impossibly high, with rooftops that seemed to touch the clouds. The streets were alive with a pace he wasn't used to—clattering wagons, shimmering carriages, pedestrians darting from corner to corner, all against the backdrop of magical lights and the hum of invisible forces.

Eddie had expected some sense of order, but what he found instead was a controlled chaos that left him wide-eyed.

Emma led the way, her pace swift and sure, like someone who'd navigated the city a thousand times before. Eddie, on the other hand, felt out of place with every step.

As they walked, Eddie glanced around, trying to take everything in at once. He was just about to ask about the strange contraption moving down the street when Emma suddenly stopped and pointed toward a towering, double-decker bus gleaming with magical symbols. The giant vehicle had windows that shimmered with a faint light, and steam huffed from its pipes like an animal coming to life.

"What in the world is that?" Eddie asked, his eyes wide.

Emma grinned, noticing the look on his face. "That? That's a bus, Eddie."

"A... bus?" Eddie repeated, brows furrowing. "Looks like a giant hulking metal."

"Well, technically, it is," Emma said, walking toward it with confidence. "It's an automotive automaton, created to travel

along the roads and carry as much passenger as it can. It's part carriage, part magic."

Eddie tilted his head. "An automaton? But it doesn't look like any sort of... clockwork thing I've seen before."

Emma raised an eyebrow as she stood in front of the bus, watching Eddie's confusion. "That's because it's a modern one. This isn't powered by gears and steam, like old machines. It runs on a combination of engines and fuel. Doesn't need horses or a driver to steer it—just the good old dwarven technology in its core."

Eddie leaned in closer, inspecting the magical symbols etched into the metal. "So, it's like... trams, but they are on roads?"

"Exactly," Emma replied with a nod. "It moves by itself, follows a set route, and stops when you tell it to. You don't need to worry about the driver. He just makes sure it's running smoothly."

Eddie took a step back, trying to wrap his head around the idea. "That is very impressive."

"It is for first time viewers." Emma gestured for Eddie to follow her. "Come on, hop on. I'll show you how it works."

Eddie hesitated for a moment, then followed her, still amazed. "In Weshaven, we only have trams and horse-drawn carriages. Nothing like this."

Emma chuckled. "Well, you're in Edenfield now. A lot of things are different. You'll get used to it." She said as she got into the bus, "Here we go," Emma said, gesturing for Eddie to follow her up the steps.

Eddie froze. He had never seen a bus before. In Weshaven, they only had trams and horse-drawn carriages. Those were simple: you climbed in, told the driver your destination, and handed



them a few coins. But this thing — this *bus* — looked like something out of a dream.

As Emma stepped confidently onto the lower deck, Eddie hesitated, staring up at the bus's strange structure. He stepped forward, his worn leather shoes clunking on the cobblestones as he approached the steps.

The bus driver, a burly man with an expression as stony as a cliff face, glared at him. Eddie paused.

"Ticket?" the driver growled.

Eddie blinked, caught off guard. He fumbled for the pouch of coins at his belt, looking at the fare machine beside the door, which seemed impossibly complex to him.

"Uh, I'm just... just heading to the university," Eddie said awkwardly, holding out a handful of small coins. He was still trying to figure out how the whole thing worked. In Weshaven, you just handed the driver a few coppers, but this was a different world. He didn't know the rules yet.

The driver's frown deepened. "What's this? Are you trying to bribe me?" He crossed his arms, his voice rising with indignation. "I'm not some... some backwoods crook!"

Eddie's face flushed red. "No! I'm not bribing —" He looked to Emma for help, utterly bewildered.

Emma sighed, stepping forward with a slightly amused expression. "Sorry about that," she said smoothly, placing her hand on Eddie's shoulder. "He's from Weshaven — never seen a bus before."

The driver grunted, his expression softening. "First-timer?"

"Yeah, sorry for the confusion," Emma continued, her tone calm but firm. She reached into her purse and pulled out a gold coin,

placing it in a small, glowing slot on the fare machine beside the door. The machine hummed softly, and a small light blinked green.

"See? Just like that," Emma said, turning to Eddie with a smile. "No coins to the driver. The fare is automatically taken by the machine."

Eddie blinked. The coin vanished into the machine with a satisfying *clink*.

"Ah," he said slowly, now feeling completely out of his depth. "Right. Got it." He quickly scrambled up the steps after Emma, grateful that the bus didn't feel like it was about to tip over at any moment.

As they ascended to the top deck, Eddie's heart was still racing. He tried to act like he belonged, sitting next to Emma, but he felt the eyes of the other passengers on him. Some glanced curiously at him, while others stared with mild confusion.

"This is normal, right?" Eddie asked in a low voice.

Emma chuckled softly, leaning back in her seat. "Yeah. Don't worry about it. You'll get used to it, the city, and the little things like this. It's just... different, that's all."

Eddie nodded, but his mind was still whirling with everything he had just encountered. The magic here was so intricate, so woven into the fabric of the world, that it was hard to even know what was "normal." He still wasn't sure what he was even *supposed* to know.

Every few moments, a magical advertisement floated by, flickering with vivid images—selling everything from enchanted robes to a service promising to transmute your average kitchen appliance to enchanted one.

The bus rumbled steadily down the streets of Edenfield, and Eddie sat back, eyes wide, taking in the city as it unfolded before him like a living tapestry. The tall spires of churches and castles rose above the streets, their silhouettes standing proudly against the gray sky. The ancient stone buildings seemed to have grown from the very earth itself, their gothic architecture twisting upward with a kind of organic majesty. Some were imposing, with turrets and archways crowned by gargoyles, while others were humbler but no less rich in history. Everything about Edenfield spoke of time, of a city that had watched centuries pass by, yet never seemed to age.

The scent of rain-soaked stone mixed with the distant tang of ocean salt in the air, and the steady rhythm of the bus carried them deeper into the heart of the city. Eddie leaned closer to the window, trying to catch as much of the city's rhythm as he could.

"Impressive, huh?" Emma said, noticing his awe. "It takes a while to get used to. But soon, it'll feel like home."

Eddie nodded, still speechless, his gaze fixed on the skyline that stretched into the horizon. The winding streets seemed to pulse with life, each one bustling with people from all walks of life—street vendors selling their wares, musicians filling the air with melodies, and the occasional passerby in fine robes or rugged work clothes.

"That," Emma said, pointing toward the distant hill, "is Edenfield Palace. It's a bit of a local legend, actually."

Eddie's eyes followed her finger to the ancient palace, sitting atop a rocky hill like a silent guardian. It looked both grand and imposing, but there was something serene about it too, as though it had watched over the city for longer than anyone could remember.

“You see that? That’s where the story starts,” Emma continued, her voice taking on a more reflective tone. “The old legend says that the city of Edenfield wasn’t always called that. A long time ago, there was nothing here but a vast field full of Eden flowers.”

“Eden flowers?” Eddie repeated, still looking out the window. He’d never heard of such a thing, but from the way Emma spoke, it sounded important.

Emma nodded. “Yeah, they were beautiful – golden blooms that covered the hills, spreading out for miles. It was said that no one could grow them outside this land, and they had magical properties, though no one knows exactly what. They say the King of this land, a long time ago, was hunting nearby and stumbled upon the field. He was so taken by the beauty of it that he decided to build his palace right there, in the middle of the flowers.”

Eddie raised an eyebrow. “The king built his palace... on a field of flowers?”

“Yep,” Emma confirmed. “The king, in his excitement, declared the place a ‘City of the Field of Eden’ – he was a bit of a romantic, I guess. Over time, as the city grew, people started calling it ‘Eden Fields,’ and then it just became Edenfield.”

Eddie’s curiosity deepened. “So the whole city was named after flowers?”

“Exactly,” Emma said with a small laugh. “It’s a symbol of the city’s deep connection to the land. Even though the flowers are long gone, the name stuck. And the palace? It’s still the heart of the city, even if it’s far removed from the everyday hustle and bustle.”

Eddie leaned back against the seat, trying to absorb the weight of the city’s history, the way it seemed to be rooted in something

older, something more mystical than he was used to. Everywhere he looked, the streets seemed to whisper tales of the past, waiting for him to uncover them.

"The city's not just about the past, though," Emma continued, as the bus turned a corner, revealing another part of the city. "It's a place of constant reinvention. The old and new live side by side. See those street vendors? Some of them are selling magical charms, others are hawking enchanted food. People here mix the old ways with the new, weaving it all together in ways you wouldn't see in Weshaven. Everything's got a story, Eddie. You just have to listen."

Eddie glanced over at her, impressed by her familiarity with the city. "And you're a local, huh?" he asked, grinning.

Emma smiled. "Born and raised. I know this place like the back of my hand. It's a city of contradictions. But it's home. You'll see."

As the bus rumbled along the cobbled streets, Eddie's eyes were fixed on the horizon. The sprawling campus of Edenfield University came into view, its ancient stone spires rising like sentinels against the sky. Ahead, the large stone sign of Edenfield Campus stood tall, its letters etched with the intricate designs of long-forgotten crafts, now weathered with time. The bus roared past it, and Emma, sitting beside him, began to speak with a reverence that matched the grand surroundings.

"Edenfield University was founded by one of the Nine Sages of Enlightenment," she explained, her voice steady but filled with awe. "It was them who opened the gates to magical education, right here in Edenfield. They didn't just teach magic; they shaped it. Their experiments with magic, crafting spells, and their explorations of the arcane realm laid the foundation for everything we study today."

Eddie's gaze wandered, taking in the vastness of the campus—the towering spires and ivy-clad stone buildings that seemed to hum with centuries of knowledge. The ancient walls, their surface etched with the marks of time, stood as testaments to the wisdom accumulated within. The city around them was a blend of old and new, with cobbled streets winding between these stone monoliths, and students in dark robes strolling purposefully through the courtyards, their faces a mixture of determination and quiet contemplation.

"The Sages," Emma continued, "They experimented with everything—from transmuting objects to calling upon powers from the arcane. Over time, their work gave birth to the magical disciplines we know today: Alchemy, Conjunction, Witchcraft, and Bardry—just to name a few. The Sage Institute, which funded your scholarship, has always been committed to providing students from rural areas, like Weshaven, the opportunity to learn here."

The sounds of laughter and lively chatter echoed in the air as they passed through the heart of the campus. Groups of students gathered around the fountains, exchanging ideas or reading scrolls. Sunlight filtered through the tall, ancient oaks that lined the walkways, casting dappled shadows on the stone beneath their feet. The quiet hum of academia filled the air, and Eddie could almost hear the whispers of long-dead scholars, still present in the walls of the university.

Emma pointed to a nearby building, its dome rising majestically into the sky. "That's the Vulcrum Halls, the centerpiece of the university," she said. "It's been standing for centuries and is home to some of the most advanced research on magic. And the archives..." She paused, glancing at Eddie with a knowing smile. "It's a place where the greatest minds have left their mark, and

where you will soon be studying, learning, and creating your own legacy.”

As they neared the river, the gentle flow of the Vulcan River caught Eddie’s attention. The waters mirrored the stone spires above, creating a picture of harmony between the old and the new. He felt a surge of anticipation, mingled with a hint of trepidation. This was where he would begin his journey, a place steeped in magic, history, and endless possibility.

Eddie felt a sense of awe settle over him. The place he had only heard about in stories, the university that had been the birthplace of so much knowledge and power, was now his reality. And yet, there was something beyond the grandeur of the buildings, something alive in the very air, that made him feel as though he was about to step into a story far greater than his own.



The bus came to a stop with a soft lurch, its wheels squeaking slightly as it rolled to a halt at the main entrance of Edenfield University. Eddie’s heart pounded in his chest as he peered out of the window, his wide eyes taking in the grandiosity of the campus. The stone buildings, tall and weathered by centuries of history, loomed overhead, casting long shadows over the cobbled streets. A breeze stirred the ivy on the walls, adding to the timeless feeling that hung in the air.

Emma, already standing, gathered her things and made her way to the door. Eddie, still trying to process the sheer magnitude of the place, fumbled with his bag before following suit. As the bus doors opened with a soft hiss, the fresh scent of the campus—damp earth and ancient stone—hit him. He stepped down onto

the solid cobblestone path, his boots clicking softly against the stones.

Before he could stop himself, Eddie turned back toward the bus driver, who was already preparing to pull away. "Thanks for the ride!" he said, a wide, grateful smile spreading across his face.

The driver, an older man with a weathered face, paused for a moment, his eyes narrowing slightly in surprise. A flicker of confusion crossed his face, but he gave a half-hearted nod, not quite sure how to respond.

Eddie stood frozen for a beat, the awkwardness of the moment settling in. In Weshaven, it was customary to thank the driver for a safe journey. But in Edenfield, it seemed the gesture wasn't quite the norm. He felt the weight of the silence stretch between them, unsure of whether he had made some kind of cultural blunder.

Emma, noticing the brief tension, gave a small, polite smile and patted Eddie on the shoulder. "You'll get used to it," she said in a low voice, her tone light, almost amused. "They don't do that here."

Eddie scratched the back of his head, a bit embarrassed, but smiled sheepishly. "Well uhh, sorry?"

"It's alright!" Emma chuckled, "The driver didn't get much thanks anyway, I think you made him happy."

With the bus pulling away behind them, Eddie took a deep breath, finally allowing himself to absorb the magnitude of where he was. The air seemed different here—heavier with the weight of history, yet full of promise. The university stretched out before him, its towering spires and ancient walls a blend of the old and new, each corner a reminder that this place had been the birthplace of so much magic and knowledge.



Eddie closed his eyes for a moment, inhaling the crisp air, the scent of books, stone, and something else—a faint trace of magic, lingering in the breeze. His chest swelled with both excitement and nervousness. This was it. He was standing on the campus of Edenfield University. The place he had dreamed of for so long. The place where his life was about to change.

Opening his eyes, he glanced at Emma, who was already leading the way toward the heart of the campus. "Well," he said, trying to mask the fluttering in his stomach with a grin, "Guess we'd better get started."

As Emma and Eddie stepped through the arched entrance of Edenfield University, the bustling campus came alive around them. The lawn sprawled out like a vibrant green carpet, the centerpiece of the university, encircled by the impressive facades of the four faculty buildings. Each structure seemed to have its own story, standing proudly as a testament to the rich heritage of magical education.

Eddie's eyes widened in awe, taking in the scene. Students lounged on blankets under the large oak tree at the center of the lawn, some buried in books, while others engaged in animated discussions. A group of first-years nearby dashed around, playing a game of magical tag, their laughter ringing through the air like music.

"This is incredible," Eddie breathed, his heart racing with a mix of excitement and nervousness. He'd never seen so many students together, each one brimming with energy and ambition.

As they walked, Eddie's gaze darted between the buildings, captivated by the unique architecture. To the north, the Faculty of Alchemy loomed majestically, its stone walls adorned with intricate carvings of swirling potions and mythical creatures. He could almost catch a whiff of herbs and mysterious concoctions

wafting through the air, making his stomach rumble in anticipation of his new studies.

"Is that the Faculty of Alchemy?" he asked, pointing.

"Yes! That's where you'll be taking most of your classes. It's a bit of a wonderland in there, with all the labs and experiments going on. You'll love it," Emma replied with a smile, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

They passed the Faculty of Conjuration, its deep blues and purples shimmering like the twilight sky. He caught sight of students practicing conjuring spells, their laughter blending with the soft rustle of leaves from the nearby trees. Each moment in this vibrant environment felt like stepping into a dream.

"Emma, I've never seen anything like this," Eddie said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Back in Weshaven, everything is so... simple."

"Edenfield is a different world," she said, her voice warm and encouraging. "You're here for a reason, Eddie. Embrace it."

"Wow," Eddie breathed, taking in the sight. The campus felt alive, vibrant in a way that made his heart race with excitement. He had never seen anything like it.

Emma smiled at his reaction. "Welcome to Edenfield University. It's a bit overwhelming at first, but you'll find your rhythm soon enough."

Eddie's gaze wandered over the scene, his mind racing with thoughts of all the possibilities that lay ahead. "What are we doing first?"

"I want to get you settled into your dorm," Emma replied, steering him toward a pathway lined with flowering trees. "You'll be staying in Dorm 7. It's just a short walk from here, but first, I'd like to introduce you to your Dorm Captain, Henry

Winters. He'll be your go-to person for anything you need in the dorm."

"Dorm Captain?" Eddie asked, intrigued. He had heard murmurs about upperclassmen taking on such roles, but he had never really understood what it meant.

Emma chuckled softly. "It's a sort of leadership role. Henry will help you get acquainted with dorm life, and he'll be the one to ensure everything runs smoothly for the students in your dorm. He's a good guy."

As they walked, Eddie couldn't help but feel a mix of anticipation and nerves. He was about to embark on a journey that would shape his future, and the thought both thrilled and terrified him. "What's he like?"

"Henry's a very stern person," Emma said, her eyes glinting with amusement. "He's smart, friendly, and knows just about everyone on campus. Plus, he has a knack for making even the most stressful situations feel manageable. You'll be in good hands."

They rounded a corner, and Eddie caught sight of a large stone building with ivy climbing up its walls. It looked ancient yet inviting, the warm afternoon sun casting a golden hue over the campus. His heart raced as he envisioned his new life here—a place where he would learn, grow, and hopefully prove himself worthy of the legacy of alchemy.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm glow over the campus, Emma led Eddie toward the Weathering Dragon Pub. The charming exterior, with its old stone and timber façade entwined with ivy, seemed to beckon them inside. When they pushed open the heavy oak door, the inviting warmth washed over them, pulling Eddie into the heart of student life.

Inside, the atmosphere buzzed with laughter and lively chatter. Students gathered at long tables, some deep in study while others shared stories of their day. The soft strumming of a lute drifted through the air, adding a melodic backdrop to the comforting aromas of hearty stews and freshly baked bread. Flickering candlelight danced across the polished wooden tables, casting playful shadows around the room.

"Ah, there he is," Emma said, spotting Henry seated at the bar, a mug of dark ale in hand. She waved him over, and he quickly rose to greet them, his muscular build contrasted by a gentle demeanor.

"Emma! It's good to see you," he said, his deep voice warm and inviting. Then he turned to Eddie, studying him with a friendly curiosity. "And you must be the new alchemy student. Eddie, right?"

"Yeah, that's me," Eddie replied, feeling a bit shy under Henry's attentive gaze.

"Welcome to Edenfield! We don't get many alchemy students these days. Glad to see one of you around," Henry said, his eyes glinting with genuine enthusiasm. "What do you think of the campus so far?"

Eddie glanced around, excitement bubbling within him. "It's amazing! I've never seen anything like it. The pub is incredible." He gestured to the vibrant scene, the walls adorned with portraits of past scholars, and the dragon carved above the bar, watching over everyone like an old friend.

Henry chuckled, leaning against the bar. "The Weathering Dragon is a favorite spot for a reason. Great food, good company, and the best place to unwind after classes."

Emma stepped in, her tone businesslike yet warm. "Henry, do you have time to show Eddie around the campus? I have another student waiting for me at the station, and it'd be great for Eddie to get acquainted with his new home."

"Absolutely! I could use a break from this place anyway," Henry replied, glancing around the lively pub with a hint of longing. "Plus, I'd be happy to show you the ins and outs of dorm life and introduce you to some other students."

Eddie's heart soared at the prospect. "That would be awesome! Thank you!"

Emma smiled, clearly pleased. "Great! I'll let you two get started. Just remember, Eddie, if you need anything, don't hesitate to ask Henry."

"Got it," Eddie replied, feeling a mix of gratitude and excitement. Emma waved goodbye and slipped back into the bustling crowd, leaving Eddie and Henry standing side by side.

"Shall we?" Henry asked, motioning toward the door. "I'll give you the grand tour of the campus. You'll want to know where all the best spots are."

"Lead the way!" Eddie said, his nerves replaced with eagerness as he stepped out into the evening air.

As they walked, Henry began sharing stories about the university, his voice rich with passion. "You'll love it here. The campus is pretty old—there are some buildings over a hundred years old! I'm studying Automaton Engineering, which ties into the ancient dwarven technologies. They were incredible artisans, you know. You'll find that everyone here has their own fascinating path."

"Wow, that sounds amazing," Eddie replied, genuinely intrigued. "I've only ever heard tales about dwarven inventions back home."

"You'll learn a lot in your time here," Henry assured him. "And don't worry, you'll fit right in. Just remember to keep an open mind, especially in alchemy. It's all about discovery."

As they strolled across the campus, Eddie felt a sense of belonging starting to settle in. This place, with its rich history and vibrant energy, was the beginning of something truly special.

As they stepped out of the bustling Weathering Dragon, Henry led Eddie to the car park, where a sturdy but charming vehicle waited. Its paint was a deep emerald green, slightly worn but well-loved, with a few scratches that hinted at adventures past. Eddie couldn't help but admire it as Henry opened the door for him.

"Hop in," Henry said with a grin, sliding into the driver's seat. The interior was cozy, filled with the warm scent of leather and hints of the wild herbs Henry often collected for his studies.

As they pulled away from the pub and onto the cobblestone streets of Edenfield, Eddie gazed out the window, marveling at the ancient buildings passing by, their gothic architecture towering high above him. He turned to Henry, curiosity bubbling inside him. "So, what's the dorm like?"

Henry chuckled, his hands steady on the wheel. "Oh, Dorm 7 is pretty lovely in its own right. It used to be a family home. The house belonged to a lady named Mrs. Henderson. She raised seven kids there, and once they all grew up and moved out, she decided to relocate to the suburbs with her husband. Now, she rents the house as a dorm for students like you and me."

"That's interesting! It must have a lot of character," Eddie replied, picturing a warm, inviting place filled with memories of laughter and family life.

"It does!" Henry said, nodding. "It's got that cozy charm that you don't find in the newer buildings. There are creaky floorboards, a big garden out back, and a living room with a fireplace where we often gather. But Mrs. Henderson's only rented it to us on the condition that we keep things in order."

Eddie raised an eyebrow. "Why's that?"

Henry glanced at him with a grin. "Well, let's just say that students, especially when they're in party mode, can get a little unruly, especially in Dorm 7. That's why I'm here—Emma and Mrs. Henderson both trust me to keep the peace."

"What do you mean by 'unruly'?" Eddie asked, curiosity piqued.

"Oh, you'll see," Henry said with a playful grin. "But don't worry; I'm here to keep everyone in line. The last thing we need is a party spiraling out of control! We have a good mix of students in there. Jake and Jane, the twins studying Conjuraton, are pretty great. They love to play pranks, but they also know how to study hard."

Eddie nodded, intrigued. "Twins, huh? What are they like?"

"Fun-loving, always getting into something. And then there's Walther, my classmate from Automaton Engineering. He's a bit more serious, but he's a good guy—knows his stuff. You'll probably find him tinkering with gadgets in his free time."

"Sounds like a lively crowd," Eddie said, imagining the different personalities blending together.

Henry continued, "There are some first-years, too. One just arrived this morning—William Chester. He's also in the Conjuraton Faculty, planning to study at the Bards College. He's a bit nervous, but he'll fit right in."

"I can see why they made you the Dorm Captain," Eddie said, a grin spreading across his face. "You seem pretty level-headed!"

Henry laughed, the sound booming with warmth. "Thanks! I try to keep things manageable, but it's not always easy. We've had a few wild nights, but I like to think it's part of the experience. Just remember, it's all about balance – study hard, play hard."

Eddie nodded, feeling a rush of excitement. "I'm ready for it. I want to make the most of my time here."

As they drove through the winding streets, Henry pointed out landmarks and shared stories about the various buildings that housed different faculties. "Over there is the Faculty of Natural Sciences, and on the left, that's the library where you'll find just about every book you could dream of. Edenfield has some of the oldest texts on alchemy – you'll love it."

As they drove closer to the dorm, the conversation flowed easily, punctuated by laughter and shared stories. Eddie felt a growing sense of belonging, eager to embrace the new experiences that awaited him in this vibrant community.

Soon, Henry turned down a quiet street lined with trees, and in the distance, Eddie could see a charming house nestled among the foliage. It was a two-story structure with a welcoming front porch and flower boxes brimming with colorful blooms, embodying the warmth of a home.

"There it is!" Henry announced, pulling up in front of the house. "Dorm 7, your new home."

Eddie's heart raced as he stepped out of the car, the reality of his new life settling in around him like a warm embrace. He was ready for whatever adventures awaited within these walls.





As Eddie swung open the door to the common area, he was greeted by a scene that looked like a tornado had ripped through the place. The moment he stepped inside, his eyes widened at the spectacle before him. A lanky boy with medium-length blond hair and a red beanie was sprinting after another student, his face a mix of anger and determination. “You think this is funny?” the blond shouted, his blue eyes glinting with the thrill of the chase.

The other student, with an infuriating grin plastered on his face, danced around a battered couch, clearly enjoying the chaos. He was tall and wiry, with long, tousled brown hair that bounced with every movement. “Come on! Admit it, you’re just mad you fell for it!” he laughed, dodging another wild swing from the blond.

On the floor, a girl was rolling around in stitches, her long brunette hair falling over her face as she gasped for breath between fits of laughter. Her hazel eyes sparkled with glee as she watched the chaos unfold. “This is the best fucking show ever!” she exclaimed, her laughter amplifying the madness around her.

A tall, silver haired student stood nearby, clutching a stack of papers like a shield against the onslaught of insanity. His silver hair gleamed in the warm light, and despite his calm demeanor, he raised an eyebrow at the absurdity. Sitting on the sofa was another boy, his wavy silver hair framing his angular face, sharp green eyes narrowed as he muttered, “You guys are impossible! Can’t you keep it down for two seconds?”

Eddie stood in the doorway, wide-eyed and grinning, feeling an unexpected rush of warmth at the sight. This was chaos, yes, but it was chaos filled with laughter and life—a welcoming embrace into the vibrant community he had longed for.

Henry cleared his throat, and the room gradually fell silent as the chaos began to subside. "Alright, everyone, listen up!" He raised a hand, his deep voice cutting through the playful banter. "I'd like to introduce you to our newest resident, Eddie. He'll be staying with us in Dorm 7."

Eddie felt the eyes of his new roommates on him, each expression varying from curiosity to mischief. "Hi, everyone," he said, waving slightly, his cheeks warming under their scrutiny.

The blond boy with the red beanie stepped forward, grinning widely. "I'm Will!" he said, extending a hand. His grip was firm and friendly, and Eddie couldn't help but smile back at his enthusiasm.

"Jake," the tall, wiry boy chimed in, his long brunette hair falling over his forehead as he nodded in Eddie's direction. "And this is my twin sister, Jane." She flashed a bright smile, her hazel eyes sparkling with amusement as she adjusted her hair.

The silver-haired boy, who had been quietly observing from the couch, finally spoke up, his voice soft yet steady. "Walther," he introduced himself, offering a slight nod. There was an air of calmness about him that contrasted sharply with the chaos around them.

Henry crossed his arms, looking at Will with mock sternness. "Now please get along with Eddie, Will. And Jake, let's tone down the pranks, alright? We don't want to scare off the new guys, do we?" His tone was light, but there was an underlying seriousness that hinted at his role as dorm captain.

Will chuckled, nudging Eddie playfully. "Don't worry, mate. I'm not that bad. Just a bit of fun!" He gestured toward the chaos they had just witnessed. "But I promise to keep it down... for now."

"Yeah, right," Jake chimed in, smirking. "Just wait until you see what we've got planned for the next party." He waggled his eyebrows conspiratorially.

Henry rolled his eyes, clearly used to their antics. "Let's just focus on settling in first. Will, show Eddie to your room, will you?"

"Sure thing!" Will replied enthusiastically, motioning for Eddie to follow him. "C'mon, let's check out our new digs."

As they made their way down the hallway, Eddie felt a mix of excitement and nervousness. This was his new home, and despite the chaos, he felt a sense of belonging beginning to form among the eclectic group. With each step, he hoped that the wild energy of Dorm 7 would soon feel like his own.

As they climbed the creaking wooden stairs to the second floor, Eddie glanced around the hallway, taking in the warm atmosphere of Dorm 7. The faded hardwood floors and colorful decorations gave it a cozy, lived-in feel. Will was already chatting animatedly beside him, balancing a stack of Eddie's books in one arm.

"So, what exactly happened back there?" Eddie asked, "It looked like you were in a full-on chase with Jake."

Will let out a chuckle, shaking his head. "Oh man, you have no idea. Jake and Jane are always pulling pranks on each other and on the newbies. You'll definitely get your fair share of their nonsense before long."

Eddie raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "What kind of pranks are we talking about?"

"Like today, for example," Will said, gesturing animatedly as they walked. "I was practicing some bardic spells with my guitar, you know, trying to get my sound just right. But then I noticed the strings were sounding kinda weird. Turns out, Jake swapped

'em out for some thin rubber bands and enchanted 'em to look like real strings."

Eddie burst out laughing. "Seriously? That's so sneaky!"

"Right? So, there I am, strumming away, and *SNAP!* The string breaks and smacks me right in the head!" Will threw his head back, laughing at the memory. "Now I gotta find a new string for my guitar. What an asshole," he added, grinning widely.

Eddie couldn't help but join in the laughter, picturing Will's surprised expression. "That's wild! I guess you have to keep your guard up around here, huh?"

"Always! You never know when Jake's gonna strike next," Will said, leaning against the wall and grinning mischievously. "Just keep your eyes peeled, mate. It's all in good fun, but they can really catch you off guard."

Eddie nodded, feeling a mix of excitement and trepidation about what lay ahead. "I'll be ready, then. Just don't let them prank me too hard on my first day."

Will clapped him on the shoulder, his tone light and reassuring. "You'll be fine! Just roll with it and don't take anything too seriously. That's how we survive around here, you're a first year too right?" Will asked, glancing over at Eddie with an eager smile. "What are you studying?"

"Yeah, I'm starting in Alchemy," Eddie replied, a mix of excitement and nervousness bubbling up inside him. "What about you?"

"Bards College," Will said, puffing out his chest with pride. "I've always wanted to be a bard! The induction ceremony for the new students is in a few days. You ready for that?"

Eddie chuckled, shaking his head. "Not at all. I've got no idea what to expect."

"Same here," Will admitted, a grin spreading across his face. "I'm probably going to embarrass myself in front of everyone."

"Hey, at least we'll be in it together!" Eddie shot back, his eyes sparkling with humor. "I guess I'll just try not to blow anything up during the ceremony."

Will laughed heartily, the sound echoing off the walls. "Good plan! Just remember, if things go south, we can always blame it on the chaos of being first years."

As they reached the door to their room, Will nudged Eddie playfully with his elbow. "Trust me, it'll be fine. We're all in the same boat—just a bunch of clueless kids trying to figure things out."

Eddie nodded, feeling a little more at ease. "Thanks, Will. I'm glad to have someone to go through this with."

"Anytime, mate," Will replied as he swung open the door, revealing a cozy space that would be their new home. "Now let's get your stuff sorted before I start misplacing your books!"

Eddie swung open the door to **Room 3**, the warm scent of lavender enveloping him instantly. He stepped inside and glanced around, taking in the cozy, lived-in charm that made the space feel welcoming. A sturdy wooden bunk bed dominated the room, the upper bunk adorned with a cascade of colorful blankets that gave it a playful touch. Beneath the bed, a patchwork quilt covered the lower bunk, which served as a cozy reading nook with a stack of well-loved novels piled beside a small bedside lamp.

"Well, here we are," Will said, sitting at the desk with his feet propped up casually. His gaze flicked toward the mess of clothes spilling out of his luggage on the floor. "Welcome to my humble abode!"

Will plopped down on the desk, leaning back in his chair with a curious look. "So, why'd you choose Alchemy?" he asked, his tone casual but genuinely interested.

Eddie settled onto the bottom bunk, his gaze drifting over the inviting patchwork quilt. "Well, I've always known Alchemy. My dad's an alchemist," he replied, a hint of pride creeping into his voice. "I grew up around it, really. It would be nice to continue the family business—Welton's Apothecary. It's kind of in my blood, you know?"

Will nodded appreciatively, a grin spreading across his face. "That's pretty cool, man. My old man's a blacksmith, and when I told him I wanted to pursue Bardry, he nearly flipped. People around him were all, 'What use is that?'" Will rolled his eyes, but there was a spark of determination in his voice. "I knew I could prove them all wrong, though. Getting into the Sage's Scholarship Program was my way of saying, 'See? I can do this!' Eventually, he came around and agreed to let me go for it."

"That's awesome, man," Eddie said, feeling a newfound respect for Will. "It takes guts to follow what you love, especially when everyone else is telling you it's a bad idea."

"Thanks," Will replied, grinning. "And hey, if I can do it, so can you. Your alchemy sounds pretty damn interesting! I can't wait to see what you come up with."

Eddie smiled back, feeling a surge of camaraderie. "Yeah, I hope so. It's just nice to finally be here, you know? Starting fresh."

As the sunlight streamed through the window, casting a warm glow over the room, Eddie felt a sense of belonging settle in. Despite the chaos that seemed to define Dorm 7, he was ready to embrace whatever adventures lay ahead.

Just as Eddie was starting to settle in, the door to the adjacent room swung open, and out popped the grinning faces of Jake and Jane, the mischievous twins. "Well, well, well! What do we have here?" Jake said, leaning casually against the doorframe.

"Two first years, ready to be initiated!" Jane added, her eyes sparkling with playful mischief. "You guys excited for the Induction Ceremony tomorrow?"

"Excited? More like terrified!" Eddie replied, his brow furrowing in mock worry. "What's it really going to be like?"

Jane giggled, leaning closer as if sharing a juicy secret. "Oh, you know, just the usual—torture! They'll cut your nails and brand you like cattle! It's a rite of passage!"

"Shut up, Jane," Will groaned, rolling his eyes. "Cut their shit, what's it really like?"

Before Jane could respond with another playful jab, Walther stepped into the common area, his silver hair catching the soft light as he enters. "It's nothing like that," he said, his voice calm and steady. "It'll just be a speech by the Chancellor of the university. That's all."

"Aww man, Walther, you're no fun!" groaned the twins in unison, their exaggerated disappointment filling the room.

Will chuckled, shooting a look of mock seriousness at Eddie. "See? We're totally safe! Just a boring speech about how we're supposed to behave and stuff."

"Great," Eddie replied, feeling a wave of relief wash over him. "I thought I was going to end up as a human pincushion or something."

Jake smirked. "Not yet! You'll have to survive a few more pranks before we'll consider that."

"Just wait until you see the upperclassmen," Jane chimed in, leaning against the doorframe with a sly smile. "They'll have you doing their chores before you even know what hit you!"

"Chores?" Eddie echoed, his eyes widening. "What kind of chores?"

"Just the usual—fetching coffee, cleaning up after their parties," Will interjected, shaking his head with a grin. "And you'll probably have to carry their books too."

Walther rolled his eyes, unable to suppress a smile at the twins' antics. "You guys are terrible."

Eddie laughed, feeling a sense of camaraderie with the lively group. Despite the playful banter, he felt more welcomed into this chaotic family of dorm mates. "Well, as long as I don't end up branded, I think I'll manage."

"Just stick with us," Will said, clapping Eddie on the shoulder. "We'll make sure to keep things entertaining!"

As the playful banter between the twins and Will settled, Walther stepped forward, extending a hand to Eddie with a polite smile. "I'm Walther Moore, second year Alchemy. You must be the new Alchemy student Henry was talking about?"

Eddie accepted the handshake, feeling the firm grip of the older student. "Yeah, that's me. Eddie Welton."

"Nice to meet you, Eddie. If you ever need help with your Alchemy classes, don't hesitate to ask," Walther offered, his tone earnest.

"Thanks, I appreciate it," Eddie replied, feeling grateful for the support.

Walther tilted his head slightly. "So, are you from Lunaria?"



Eddie furrowed his brow, confusion crossing his face. "What's Lunaria?"

The silence that followed was palpable as Walther blinked, momentarily caught off guard. "Uh, it's... well, never mind. Where are you from?"

"I'm from Weshaven," Eddie said, a hint of pride in his voice. "It's a coastal town."

"Ah, Weshaven," Walther nodded, looking thoughtful. "Most of the Sage Scholarship students are from across the country. Will here is from a mountainous country called Isgardia," he gestured to Will, who nodded in acknowledgment. "The twins are from Argantheia, and Henry is from the Alamirian Dunes. And I'm from Lunaria."

Eddie's curiosity piqued. "What's it like in Lunaria?"

"It's known for its beautiful landscapes and a unique culture. Most Lunarians are born with white hair," Walther explained, a hint of pride in his voice. "It's pretty distinctive."

"White hair, huh?" Eddie said, touching his own silver locks thoughtfully. "So, does that mean I might have Lunarian descendants or something?"

"Possibly," Walther replied, intrigued. "It could explain your hair color. It's not common to see silver hair unless there's Lunarian blood in the mix."

"Interesting..." Eddie mused, feeling a sense of connection to the conversation. The more he learned about his new peers, the more he felt like he belonged in this chaotic, vibrant dorm.

"Just remember," Will chimed in, "if anyone gives you trouble about your hair, just tell them it's Lunarian heritage and watch their faces drop!"

Eddie laughed, feeling lighter than he had in a while. "I'll keep that in mind."

Walther leaned against the wall, crossing his arms as he continued to explain, "Edenfield is a big city, much larger than Weshaven. There are way more people here. The Lunarians, or at least those who look like us, have a bit of a bad reputation in the city."

Eddie raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Bad reputation? Why's that?"

Walther hesitated for a moment, choosing his words carefully. "Well, a few decades ago, the Prince of Solivia was assassinated by a Lunarian assassin. Ever since then, there's been a certain... bias against Lunarians. People tend to associate our kind with that incident. It's not fair, of course, but it's how things are."

Eddie listened intently, a knot forming in his stomach as he absorbed the information. "So, people think all Lunarians are like that?"

"Exactly," Walther nodded. "They tend to stereotype us as assassins, rogues, pickpockets, and thieves. But that's not true for everyone. Just because a few individuals made poor choices doesn't mean we all are."

Eddie sighed, feeling the weight of the expectations placed upon him. "That's rough."

Walther chuckled lightly, trying to ease the tension. "I mean, we aren't like that, are we?" He flashed a grin, attempting to lighten the mood. "Just be careful out there, alright, Eddie?"

Before Eddie could respond, Jake piped up, his grin wide and mischievous. "If anyone messes with you, we'll just assassinate them with our pranks!"

Jane chimed in, her laughter infectious. "Yeah! They won't know what hit them!"

As the conversation wound down, Walther, Jake, and Jane exchanged glances, the playful energy still crackling in the air.

"Alright, we should probably let you two get settled before you freak out about tomorrow," Walther said, pushing himself off the wall. He walked toward the door, pausing to look back at Eddie and Will. "Good luck at the induction ceremony, guys. Just remember to breathe and try not to embarrass yourselves too much."

Jake smirked, leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed. "Yeah, don't screw it up! We'll be watching, ready to roast you if you trip over your own feet."

Jane giggled, nodding enthusiastically. "And if you need any tips on how to dodge pranks, you know where to find us!"

Eddie chuckled, feeling a swell of gratitude for their lightheartedness. "Thanks, guys. I'll do my best not to embarrass myself," he replied, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

"Good luck!" the twins echoed in unison, their voices a cheerful chorus as they stepped out into the hallway.

Walther followed, glancing back with a smile. "And if you need anything at all, just ask. We've got your back."

With that, they left, the door swinging shut behind them. Eddie turned to Will, feeling a sense of camaraderie settling in as they both prepared for the challenges that lay ahead.

"Well, I guess we're officially part of this crazy dorm now," Will said, grinning.

"Yeah," Eddie replied, a smile creeping onto his face. "Crazy but fun."

## ACT II | Chapter 2



Days blurred, and Eddie had now settled into dorm life. It felt like living with family—though not quite like Weshaven. This was a family of teenagers and young adults, each with their own quirks and moments of irresponsibility, with Henry acting as the reluctant father figure, though he too had his moments of carelessness.

Eddie stood in his room, ready with his bag packed and his university cloak draped over his usual brown jacket. He looked at himself in the mirror, his newly issued maroon cloak of the Faculty of Alchemy hanging from his shoulders. The Alchemy faculty badge gleamed on his chest, catching the light. It reminded him so much of the badge his Aunt Catherine wore—the same design, though somehow, it felt different. Eddie knew he wasn't her equal yet, but a quiet pride swelled in him all the same.

Catherine, a Master Alchemist, had been a guiding presence in his life since he was a child. Her wisdom, knowledge, and encouragement had fueled his passion for alchemy. As he stood there, the memory of her teaching him how to mix his first potion played in his mind, and he wondered what she would think of him now, about to embark on his journey at Edenfield.

He straightened the badge on his cloak, took a deep breath, and smiled faintly at the reflection. Even though his path was just beginning, it felt like a significant step toward something greater.

Eddie turned away from the mirror, facing the room. Will was still sprawled across his bunk, fast asleep, snoring softly under a

mess of blankets. Eddie sighed. He'd tried shaking him awake, calling his name—nothing worked.

“Come on, Will. You’ve got to wake up.”

Still no response.

Desperate, Eddie’s eyes landed on a small vase of water sitting by the window, its contents used to nourish the plants scattered across the room. Eddie picked it up, eyeing the clear liquid, and then glanced back at Will, still dead to the world. With a grin tugging at the corner of his mouth, Eddie tipped the vase over Will’s head, the water splashing down onto the slumbering bard.

Will shot up with a yell, clutching his drenched hair. “For fuck’s sake, Edward!” he groaned, blinking in confusion and sniffing the air. “Oh, great. That vase has rotten veggies as fertilizer! I smell like shit now!”

Eddie couldn’t help but laugh, but he cut it short when he saw Will’s furious expression. “Hey, I tried waking you up! You weren’t moving. And we’ve got ten minutes until the induction ceremony starts!”

Will’s face shifted from anger to sudden realization. “Shit!” Without another word, he scrambled out of bed, grabbing his towel and bolting for the dorm’s bathroom. On his way out, he bumped into Jake, who was lounging by the doorway, watching the whole thing unfold.

“Woah there!” Jake exclaimed, dodging Will. “Running late already?”

Will didn’t even stop to respond, rushing down the hall. Eddie grinned, shaking his head. Some things never changed.

As Eddie and Will stepped off the tram, the sights and sounds of Edenfield washed over them. The university loomed ahead, a breathtaking silhouette etched against the backdrop of the

Solvian portside countryside. Iconic spires and towers rose high into the sky, their historic stone façades softened by the vibrant greenery of sprawling gardens and towering trees. A sense of awe settled over Eddie, contrasting sharply with the flurry of anxieties that had plagued him earlier. This wasn't just a university; it was a living, breathing entity, steeped in history and magic—a place where he could finally unravel the mysteries of alchemy and perhaps discover the secrets of his own past.

"Seriously, Eddie, I can't believe you spilled that vase all over me!" Will said, his voice breaking Eddie's reverie. "What were you thinking?"

Eddie chuckled, trying to suppress his amusement. "I thought you needed a wake-up call! You were out cold."

Will huffed, adjusting his towel draped over his shoulder as they walked. "There are better ways to wake someone up than turning them into a compost heap!"

Eddie shrugged, a playful grin spreading across his face. "You have to admit it was a good way to get you moving. And you looked pretty funny."

Will rolled his eyes but couldn't suppress a reluctant smile. "I don't know about funny. I smelled like I'd just rolled in a trash heap. That's how you want to start your first day?"

"Better than sleeping through it," Eddie replied, glancing at the Vulcan River, which snaked through the heart of Edenfield, shimmering like silver under the morning sun. Punts and rowing boats glided gracefully on the tranquil waters, their occupants mere specks against the backdrop of ancient willow trees dipping their branches into the cool embrace of the river.

"I guess," Will admitted, his expression softening as they approached the university grounds. "But next time, maybe just shake me harder or something?"

"Deal!" Eddie said, a mix of excitement and nervousness bubbling inside him. The lush meadows lining the riverbanks created a serene beauty that helped calm his jitters.

As they drew closer to the majestic buildings of Edenfield University, Eddie felt a sense of purpose swell within him. Today marked the beginning of a new chapter, and despite the earlier chaos, he was ready to embrace whatever awaited him.

"Where are we heading, anyway?" Eddie asked, his eyes scanning the bustling campus as they walked.

Will looked thoughtful for a moment. "We're going to the Vulcan Lecture Hall. It should be the biggest one since the Chancellor himself, Wizard Aelfric, is going to address us."

Eddie's curiosity piqued at the mention of Aelfric. He had heard whispers of the legendary wizard—the stories of his wisdom and mastery of magic spread like wildfire among students and townsfolk alike. "Really? I've heard of Aelfric before. What's he like?"

Will shrugged, a grin creeping onto his face. "No clue, but I'm sure he's impressive. Just look at this place!" He gestured around them as they walked, the distant metallic groans of the tram contrasting sharply with the gentle murmur of the river nearby.

As they followed the flow of students toward the university courtyard, pockets of green spaces unfolded before them. Manicured lawns stretched out like emerald carpets beneath the shade of ancient, gnarled trees. Students adorned in crimson cloaks added vibrant splashes of color to the scene, sprawling on

the grass—some engrossed in books, while others engaged in animated discussions, their laughter echoing in the air.

“Do you know where the Vulcan Lecture Hall is?” Eddie asked, a hint of uncertainty creeping into his voice.

“Not a clue,” Will admitted, but his confidence returned quickly.

“But it’s the biggest lecture hall. I’m sure we’ll find it somehow!”

In the distance, a glimpse of the Backs—a series of meadows bordering the river—promised stunning vistas of college gardens overflowing with colorful blooms. Life here seemed to be a vibrant tapestry woven with threads of academic pursuits, extracurricular activities, and social gatherings.

Students hurried past them, a flurry of backpacks and bicycles weaving through the network of narrow streets as they rushed to their first lectures or tutorials. The hum of activity from the nearby city center—a symphony of bustling cafes and quaint shops—hinted at the lively atmosphere that awaited beyond the university gates.

A sense of exhilaration bubbled within Eddie. This wasn't just a university; it was a world teeming with possibilities. Here, amidst the whispers of history and the promise of magic, he could finally embark on his journey to unravel the mysteries of alchemy and, perhaps, discover the secrets of the world. With a newfound determination, he quickened his pace, eager to delve deeper into this captivating world and claim his place within its vibrant tapestry.

As Eddie and Will navigated the sprawling campus, their initial excitement began to curdle into a different kind of emotion—frustration. Will’s confident declaration of finding the biggest lecture hall now felt like searching for a needle in a haystack. Each massive building loomed above them, an impressive yet



bewildering collection of stone and ivy, and Eddie couldn't help but feel lost amidst their grandeur.

"It should be that one," Will pointed to a towering structure in the distance. "No, wait, maybe that one? Or that?" He squinted at yet another building, his expression shifting from determination to sheer bewilderment. "Damn it, Eddie! How are we supposed to know?"

Eddie, his crimson cloak billowing behind him like a frustrated flag, realized with a jolt that he was hopelessly lost. The university, for all its splendor, felt like a labyrinth, its majestic buildings seemingly conspiring to disorient him. He had been so certain that navigating the campus would be simple, yet the towering spires and arched windows now felt like a maze designed to confound.

In a moment of desperation, he approached a group of students lounging in the manicured courtyard, their laughter ringing through the air. "Excuse me," he stammered, trying to mask the mounting anxiety in his voice. "Could you point me in the direction of the Vulcan Lecture Hall?"

The students exchanged confused glances. One, a tall young man with spectacles perched on his nose, scratched his head. "Vulcan Hall, huh? Haven't heard of that one. Are you sure you're in the right place?"

Disappointment gnawed at Eddie. This wasn't how he had envisioned his first day. He recalled the parting words of Henry: *"It's easy to get lost in Edenfield, remember."* A wave of self-reproach washed over him for not heeding the warning more carefully.

As he bounced from one unhelpful student to another, each encounter chipped away at his initial enthusiasm, replacing it

with a gnawing sense of frustration. "I should've just taken notes on the campus map," he muttered, scolding himself.

Will sighed beside him, running a hand through his messy blond hair. "This is ridiculous," he grumbled. "How is it that we managed to get lost looking for the biggest lecture hall?"

Eventually, they found themselves standing in front of a large campus map mounted on a wooden stand, its surface littered with colorful pointers marking various buildings and facilities. But as they stared at the dizzying array of information, Eddie felt a fresh wave of despair wash over him. "Great," he said, his voice tinged with irritation. "This isn't helping. We don't even know where we are right now."

"Maybe we should just start wandering until we find it?" Will suggested, a hint of frustration creeping into his tone.

"Yeah, because that worked so well for us so far," Eddie replied, crossing his arms. They both stood there, feeling increasingly overwhelmed and uncertain, wondering if they would ever find the elusive Vulcan Lecture Hall.

"Damn it," cursed Will, his frustration palpable. "We have no choice. I'm grabbing my wand." He unstrapped his guitar bag and opened it with determination, his brow furrowed.

"Your guitar? What are you going to do with it?" Eddie asked, bewildered by Will's sudden shift in focus.

Will flashed a cheeky grin. "I'm a bard, you idiot! This is my wand." He pulled out his electric guitar, the polished body gleaming in the sunlight.

With a confident flick of his wrist, Will plugged his guitar into a portable amp, the sound bursting forth like a firework. As he strummed a powerful chord, Eddie's confusion morphed into

awe. This wasn't just music; it was an incantation. Will wasn't merely playing a tune; he was weaving magic into the air.

Will's fingers danced across the strings, his face alight with passion. Eddie felt a pulse of energy radiating from the guitar, each note resonating with the very fabric of the world around them. It was unlike any form of magic Eddie had encountered in his studies—this was alive, electric, and visceral.

"Wait a minute," Eddie said, realization striking him like a bolt of lightning. "You're using your music to cast a spell?"

"Exactly!" Will replied, his eyes sparkling. "This is a Clairvoyance spell. Just listen!" He immersed himself in the music, each strum sending ripples of sound that seemed to probe the depths of their surroundings. The melody became a searching force, curling around trees and dancing through the air as if seeking a path.

Eddie watched, captivated, as Will poured his soul into the performance. The melody swelled, creating an atmosphere thick with anticipation. He could feel the magic crackling in the air, a vivid tapestry woven from sound and intention. It was a side of magic he had never witnessed—a blend of art and power that was both exhilarating and mysterious.

Finally, with a triumphant flourish, Will lowered his guitar, a wide grin splitting his face. "I know where it is!" he declared, shoving his guitar back into its case with the satisfaction of a magician revealing their final trick.

"It's that way," he said, pointing toward a meandering path that twisted through a grove of trees, sunlight filtering through the leaves in dappled patterns.

"What are we waiting for?" Eddie exclaimed, adrenaline surging through him. The initial anxiety had evaporated, replaced by a

thrilling eagerness to explore this world of magic and music. "Let's go!"

Without another thought, they plunged down the path, the promise of the Vulcan Lecture Hall—and the wonders it held—driving their steps forward.



With a newfound sense of camaraderie, the two freshmen launched themselves into a mad dash across the university grounds. Crimson cloaks billowed behind them like banners of rebellion, satchels bouncing rhythmically against their sides as laughter mingled with the hurried thrum of their footsteps. They weaved through clusters of students, their haste drawing curious glances but no reprimands, the energy of the campus buzzing around them like a live wire.

The scenery blurred as they ran, vibrant gardens and towering trees flashing past until, finally, a magnificent structure emerged from the leafy embrace. Vulcrum Hall loomed before them, a grand theatre with an imposing facade adorned with intricate carvings and gargoyles that seemed to come alive under the warm sunlight. It was a breathtaking sight, one that filled Eddie with both awe and urgency.

As they approached the massive oak doors, a small crowd of students in identical black cloaks had gathered, their faces animated with chatter. Just as Eddie and Will reached the throng, the doors began to creak shut, the sound echoing ominously in the air.

Panic surged through Eddie, and his heart raced. *No way* were they going to be late on their first day, not after all that trouble! With a burst of adrenaline, he propelled himself forward, Will hot on his heels, calling out, "Wait! Don't leave us behind!"

Reaching the doorway just as it threatened to close completely, Eddie flung out a hand, jamming it between the heavy oak panels. The wood resisted for a moment, but he gritted his teeth and pushed with all his might. "Come on, Will!" he grunted, feeling the strain in his muscles.

With a mighty shove, he managed to push the door open just enough for him and Will to squeeze through, tumbling into the dimly lit hall like a pair of wayward adventurers.

They landed in a heap at the foot of a grand staircase, the doors slamming shut behind them with a resounding thud that echoed through the hall, plunging them into near darkness. A collective gasp rose from the assembled students, their eyes wide with astonishment as they turned to behold the two newcomers sprawled on the polished marble floor.

"Nice entrance, boys!" shouted a student from the back, laughter rippling through the crowd. Will, still half on the ground, flashed a sheepish grin and raised a hand in mock salute. "Just testing the acoustics!"

Eddie scrambled to his feet, cheeks burning as he took in the grandeur of the hall. Golden chandeliers hung from the ceiling like constellations, casting a warm glow on the ornate decorations that adorned the walls. Rows of students filled the seats, their murmurs fading into silence as they regarded Eddie and Will with a mix of amusement and curiosity.

Just then, a girl with straight blond hair, seated near the front, called out in a mocking tone, "I see we have some latecomers."

Her eyes sparkled with mischief as she added, "Showing a bit of disrespect already, are we?"

Will bristled, his brows furrowing. "The Chancellor hasn't even arrived yet! We're not late!" he shot back, crossing his arms defiantly.

The girl rolled her eyes, a smirk still on her face, but the momentary tension dissipated as the two friends exchanged grins.

"Come on, let's find a seat before we become the main event," Will said, nudging Eddie as they picked themselves up and moved through the aisles, still buzzing with the energy of their unexpected entrance.

As Eddie and Will made their way through the heavy wooden doors of the Vulcrum Lecture Hall, a sense of reverence washes over them. The hallowed space exudes an air of scholarly significance, its high ceilings and towering windows suffusing the room with natural light. Rows of wooden benches, polished by years of use, stretch out before them, each one a testament to the countless students who have passed through these doors in pursuit of knowledge.

The lecture hall is a masterpiece of architectural grandeur, with soaring arches and intricate stonework that speak to centuries of academic tradition. The walls are adorned with portraits of esteemed scholars and benefactors, their watchful eyes bearing witness to the intellectual pursuits that unfold within these hallowed halls. Above, a vaulted ceiling adorned with ornate plasterwork adds to the sense of grandeur, while stained glass windows cast kaleidoscopic patterns of light upon the polished wooden floors.

Will chuckled, the sound barely audible over the nervous murmurs that filled the hall. "Close call indeed, Ed," he said,

wiping a bead of sweat from his brow. "Though, gotta admit, that entrance was awesome!"

Eddie rolled his eyes, a flicker of a smile tugging at his lips. "Let's just hope Professor Whoever doesn't hold it against us," he muttered, scanning the rows of students for a place to sit.

The tiered benches, polished smooth by years of eager bottoms, offered a clear view of the entire hall. Each seat seemed occupied, a sea of crimson cloaks punctuated by the occasional flash of silver—older students, perhaps? Eddie spotted a single empty seat near the back, next to a girl with brunette hair that seemed to defy gravity in an unruly mess of curls. He nudged Will toward it, hoping this wouldn't be another social faux pas.

As they settled in, Eddie took a moment to truly appreciate the lecture hall. Gone was the sterile classroom he'd envisioned. This was a place steeped in history and magic. The warm glow emanating from the stained-glass windows cast a kaleidoscope of colors across the polished wood floor, each shard a portal to a world unseen. The intricate designs depicted legendary figures of the past, their expressions frozen in time, capturing moments of great discovery and triumph.

At the front of the room, a raised platform held the lectern, a throne of knowledge awaiting its occupant. A large chalkboard stood sentinel beside it, ready to be filled with cryptic symbols and alchemical equations. The air crackled with a tangible energy, a blend of excitement and anticipation that sent shivers down Eddie's spine.

He exchanged a glance with Will, who looked equally captivated. "Can you believe we're actually here?" Will whispered, his eyes wide as he took in the grandeur.

As they sat there, a lone footstep echoed through the vast stage, sending a ripple of nervous anticipation through the sea of new students. A spotlight snapped on, revealing the imposing figure of Wizard Aelfric, his robes shimmering with deep indigo hues that seemed to shift and swirl like the night sky. A hush fell over the crowd so sudden and profound it felt like a physical thing, a thick silence pressing down on their ears.

Will, ever the restless one, leaned over to Eddie and whispered, "That's him – The Wizard Aelfric, the man himself."

Eddie's eyes widened as he took in the figure before them. "That's him? The one they call...?"

"Yeah," Will continued, his voice barely above a murmur, "They say he's a Magna Facorem, some kind of super-important dude. A legend in his own right."

The weight of Aelfric's presence filled the hall, and Eddie felt a thrill run through him. This wasn't just any wizard; this was the Chancellor of Edenfield University, a master of arcane knowledge. The air seemed to shimmer around Aelfric, charged with an energy that hinted at the vast depths of magic he wielded.

A smirk played on Will's lips. "But honestly," he added, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, "I think he's full of hot air." Before Eddie could respond, Will dissolved into a fit of silent giggles, his shoulders shaking uncontrollably.

The girl next to them, her brow furrowed in disapproval, shot Will a withering look. "Shhh," she hissed, her voice low but sharp as a knife. "That's rude! You shouldn't talk like that about someone, especially when they're about to speak."

Will's bravado faltered for a moment under her stern gaze. He mumbled an apology, the amusement fading from his eyes. Eddie caught the girl's intense expression, a mixture of



indignation and concern, and felt an unexpected urge to defend his friend.

Just then, a hush fell over the entire hall as a magical apparatus at the front of the stage flared to life, its shimmering surface pulsating like a heartbeat. The device, adorned with intricate runes, amplified Aelfric's voice, filling every corner of the vast space with a rich, resonant tone that seemed to resonate deep within Eddie's chest.

It began with a low hum that resonated through the hall, building anticipation like a rising curtain. Then, the man himself stepped into the spotlight. He was an anomaly—a figure that defied categorization. Clad in a simple grey suit, his attire spoke of a modern businessman. Yet, his long hair, meticulously brushed back, and his neatly trimmed beard hinted at a more traditional persona. He was a wizard who had somehow adapted to city life, a unique blend of old and new. His appearance was sharp and professional, yet undeniably imbued with a touch of magic—a paradox made perfect.

A hush fell over the lecture hall, thick and expectant. The man cleared his throat, and silence deepened further.

"Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished faculty," he began, his voice ringing out with a quiet power, "and most importantly, our esteemed new students."

He paused, letting the weight of his words settle. A bead of sweat trickled down Eddie's temple, his heart pounding in his chest. Even Will seemed momentarily subdued, the amusement wiped from his face. It was as if the entire room held its breath, drawn into the spellbinding presence of the Headmaster.

"Welcome to Edenfield University!" Aelfric boomed, his voice amplified by the magical apparatus. The hall erupted in a

thunderous cheer, the sound washing over Eddie like a wave of warmth and excitement. He clapped his hands with unbridled enthusiasm, a wide grin splitting his face. Will, caught up in the infectious energy, joined the cheers, his voice hoarse with excitement.

As the applause subsided, a charged silence hung heavy in the air, electrified with possibility. Eddie's gaze locked onto Aelfric, who was now leaning slightly forward, his eyes gleaming with a spark of mischief.

The Wizard continued, his voice resonating with warmth. "It is with great pleasure and excitement that I stand before you today to extend a warm and heartfelt welcome to our newest members of the Edenfield community."

A collective gasp rippled through the hall. Eddie's breath hitched; this was it, the moment he'd been waiting for. The Headmaster paused, letting the significance of his words sink in. Each heartbeat echoed in Eddie's ears, anticipation hanging heavy in the air.

"Whether you have traveled from the scorching Dunes of Alamiria," Aelfric's voice soared, painting vivid pictures of faraway lands, "or the treacherous Mountains of Isgardia," he continued, his tone rich with the promise of adventure. The mention of these exotic places stirred a sense of wanderlust within Eddie, igniting a fire in his imagination.

"Or the windswept Plains of Argantheia," Aelfric boomed, a hint of pride lacing his voice, drawing the audience deeper into the spell he cast with his words. Eddie could almost see the vast landscapes unfurling before him, the sun setting over golden fields, the horizon stretching into infinity.

"Or the unforgiving Tundra of Haldowic," the Headmaster went on, his voice growing more solemn, "or the ancient Forests of Glyndorith and Lunaria." The reverence in Aelfric's tone evoked a sense of wonder, and Eddie found himself envisioning hidden glades filled with magic, ancient trees whispering secrets to those who dared to listen.

"And whether you're joining us from just around our humble home here in Solivia," he concluded, his gaze sweeping across the diverse student body, "know that you are now part of a legacy that spans centuries—a legacy of learning, innovation, and excellence."

"As you embark on this journey of discovery," the Headmaster continued, his voice taking on a more serious tone, "it is important to remember that you are not simply here to receive an education, but to immerse yourselves in a culture of intellectual curiosity, critical thinking, and academic rigor. Edenfield is more than just a collection of buildings and classrooms; it is a vibrant ecosystem of ideas and perspectives, where the boundaries of knowledge are constantly pushed and redefined."

His gaze swept across the sea of faces, his eyes locking with each student in turn. "Here, you will be challenged, you will be inspired, and you will grow in ways you never thought possible. Embrace the discomfort, for it is often in the crucible of challenge that true learning takes place."

A murmur of agreement rippled through the hall. Even Will seemed to be hanging on the Headmaster's every word, a newfound respect flickering in his eyes.

A murmur of agreement rippled through the hall, a shared understanding settling among the students. Eddie felt a swell of anticipation in his chest. The idea of embracing discomfort resonated deeply; it reminded him of the long hours spent in his

aunt's workshop, struggling to perfect the intricate processes of alchemy. Every failure had brought him closer to mastery.

"To our new students, I say this: seize every opportunity that comes your way," the Headmaster boomed, his voice filled with encouragement. "Immerse yourselves in the rich tapestry of academic and extracurricular activities that Edenfield has to offer. Engage with your peers, your professors, and the wider community. Challenge yourselves to think creatively, critically, and collaboratively. And above all, never stop asking questions, for it is through questioning that we truly learn and grow."

"To our returning students," the Headmaster continued, his gaze shifting towards the familiar faces scattered throughout the hall, "I urge you to embrace your roles as mentors and guides to those who are just beginning their Edenfield journey. Share your knowledge, your experiences, and your insights with your fellow students. Be patient, be supportive, and be compassionate. Remember that you were once in their shoes, and that your guidance can make all the difference in their transition to university life."

A ripple of understanding and responsibility passed through the hall. Returning students exchanged nods and smiles, a silent pledge forming between them.

"As we embark on this new academic year together," the Headmaster's voice rose, his words imbued with a sense of unity, "let us recommit ourselves to the principles of excellence, integrity, and inclusivity that have guided Edenfield University for centuries. Let us embrace the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead with courage, determination, and humility. And let us never forget the privilege and responsibility that comes with being part of this esteemed institution."

His voice boomed through the hall, resonating with a power that seemed to shake the very foundations of the building. A hush fell over the crowd, a palpable sense of anticipation hanging in the air.

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"In closing," the Headmaster softened his tone, a smile gracing his lips, "I would like to once again extend my warmest welcome to our new students. Your journey at Edenfield begins today, and we are honored to be a part of it. May your time here be filled with discovery, growth, and joy, and may you leave this university with hearts and minds forever enriched by the transformative power of education."

He paused for a beat, letting his words sink in. Every eye in the hall was fixed on him, a mixture of excitement and anticipation radiating from the students.

"Welcome to Edenfield University," he concluded, his voice ringing out with finality, "and may your academic journey be nothing short of extraordinary."

A beat of silence followed, thick with emotion. Then, as if a dam had broken, the hall erupted in thunderous applause. Cheers and whistles filled the air, a wave of excitement washing over the students. Eddie, his heart pounding with anticipation, couldn't wait to begin his journey at Edenfield. Even Will, a spark of curiosity ignited in his eyes, seemed genuinely excited for what lay ahead. The future at Edenfield shimmered with infinite possibilities, a vibrant tapestry woven from the threads of knowledge, friendship, and the boundless potential of young minds.

The Headmaster stood there, a warm smile on his face, basking in the energy of the crowd. Finally, after a moment, he raised his hand for silence. The applause slowly subsided, replaced by a hush of eager anticipation.

"Thank you," he said simply, his voice filled with genuine gratitude.

Then, with a final nod, he turned and walked off the stage, disappearing backstage. The opening ceremony of the new academic year had come to a close, but for the students of Edenfield, a new chapter, filled with the promise of adventure and discovery, had just begun.

The next few hours, however, blurred into a monotonous drone. Lectures on dorm regulations, student health services, and the dreaded fire safety protocols washed over Eddie. His mind, however, was far from the lecture hall. It was already lost in the fantastical world of Alchemy – bubbling cauldrons, swirling potions, the thrill of unlocking the secrets of the universe through the manipulation of elements.

Eddie's thoughts drifted as the lecturer's voice droned on, the words morphing into an indistinct hum. He found himself tracing invisible patterns on the polished wood of his desk,

envisioning the intricate designs of alchemical symbols that danced just beyond his reach. Each tick of the clock on the wall felt like a reminder of the time slipping away, time that could be spent unraveling the mysteries of alchemy rather than listening to the mundane details of campus life.

Suddenly, a voice broke through his daydream. "Eddie!" Will whispered, jabbing him in the ribs. "Did you catch any of that?"

Eddie blinked, momentarily startled. "Huh? No, not really," he admitted, shaking his head. "I was too busy imagining what it's like to brew a potion that grants eternal youth."

Will snorted, his eyes sparkling with mischief. "Good luck getting the Professor to teach you that one! But seriously, we should probably pay attention. I heard the dorm regulations can be brutal. Apparently, they have a zero-tolerance policy on magical mischief!"

Eddie groaned, rolling his eyes. "Regulations are boring. I'd rather be elbow-deep in a cauldron than stuck here listening to this."

Will chuckled, but Eddie's impatience bubbled beneath the surface. He glanced around the lecture hall, taking in the sea of new faces, many of whom appeared just as disinterested as he felt. A few students were doodling in their notebooks, while others exchanged whispered conversations, all while the lecturer droned on about health services and the importance of staying hydrated during study sessions.

The thought of "hydration" made Eddie scoff internally. What he needed was to quench his thirst for knowledge, to dive headfirst into alchemical practices, not sit through another minute of orientation nonsense.

As if sensing his mounting frustration, the next lecturer took the stage. A bright-eyed young woman with a cascade of fiery red hair launched into a detailed explanation of the curriculum. Eddie perked up momentarily, a flicker of hope igniting in his chest.

Then came the bombshell. "...and all first-year students, regardless of major, will be following the same curriculum for the first three terms. This includes the mandatory Sage's Academy Programme, a comprehensive foundation in general magical basics."

A collective groan rippled through the lecture hall. Eddie felt a wave of disappointment crash over him. Three whole terms? Three terms of basic spells and potion-brewing fundamentals before he could even delve into the intricacies of Alchemy? It felt like an eternity. Disheartened sighs filled the air, mirroring Eddie's own dejection. He slumped back in his chair, the vibrant tapestry of his academic dreams momentarily muted by the drudgery of mandatory courses.

The young woman's words hung heavy in the air, a dampener on the already subdued mood. Eddie, his frustration bubbling over, leaned toward Will and whispered, "What? I'm here to learn Alchemy! Why do I have to waste time with magical basics?!"

Will chimed in, his voice echoing with bravado, "Yeah! We all learned that crap in Major Academy! Get on with it and teach us something new!"

A few scattered chuckles rippled through the hall, but the lecturer remained unfazed, her bright demeanor unwavering. "I assure you, this foundational knowledge is essential for your success," she said, her tone matter-of-fact. "You may think you know it all, but trust me, you'll be surprised by what you can learn."



Eddie sighed, slumping back in his seat. The air felt thick with a collective sense of disillusionment. He glanced around the hall, noticing the mix of reactions. Some students were nodding, seeming to understand the importance of the basics, while others mirrored his own exasperation.

Will leaned closer, an eyebrow raised. "Do you think we can just, I don't know, skip to the good stuff? Like, find a loophole or something?"

Eddie chuckled softly, but his heart wasn't in it. "If only it were that easy. This place probably has more rules than Weshaven's fishing regulations."

"Hey, we could make a game out of it! 'How to dodge boring lectures 101!'" Will whispered, his eyes gleaming with mischief.

Eddie couldn't help but grin at his friend's playful spirit. "Maybe we should start taking bets on how long we can keep our sanity in this place."

A sharp voice sliced through the air. Eddie turned to his right to see the petite girl with the witch hat glaring at Will. Her face, framed by short, fiery hair, was a mask of indignation. In her lap, a large purple cloak and a long, cylindrical case – a conjurer's tools – lay forgotten.

"Not everyone has the privilege of attending a Major Academy, you know?" she snapped. "Everyone deserves a chance to learn the basics!"

Eddie flinched. Her words struck a chord deep within him. He too, lacked the privilege of a Major Academy education. Shame burned in his stomach as Will, oblivious, continued his argument.

"Yeah, they can learn it on their own terms!" Will countered. "This mandatory program just adds unnecessary time to our university years!"

The lecture hall droned on with its dull, monotonous lecture about university curriculums, but the air in Eddie and Will's row was thick with tension. An unstoppable force had met an immovable object, and the outcome promised to be explosive. Eddie watched, a knot of apprehension tightening in his gut, as the girl with the fiery hair leaned forward, her cloak swirling around her like flames in a gust of wind.

"Easy there, hotshot," she said, her voice laced with sarcasm. "Maybe with a little less arrogance and a little more understanding, you might actually learn something from those 'basics.' Who knows, you might even discover a talent you never knew you had."

Will's face flushed crimson, a stark contrast to his usual bravado. He sputtered, searching for a retort, but none came. The silence stretched, a taut wire ready to snap. The lecturer, sensing the escalating tension, intervened.

"Now, now, let's keep the discussion respectful," the lecturer said, her tone firm but gentle. "This is a place for learning, not a battleground."

Eddie felt the heat of embarrassment wash over him. "Great, now we're in trouble," he thought, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. But the fiery-haired girl wasn't done.

"Respect is a two-way street!" she shot back, her voice unwavering. "It's about time people stop treating the basics like some kind of joke. We're all here to learn, whether we've had a head start or not!"

Will, recovering slightly, leaned back, crossing his arms defiantly. "Fine, but I just don't see why we should be forced into a one-size-fits-all program. If I wanted to learn the basics again, I could've just stayed at home!"

The girl's eyes narrowed, and Eddie sensed a spark of challenge ignite between them. "Maybe you should try it for once, instead of thinking you're above it all," she replied sharply. "You might find it's not about starting from scratch; it's about building a foundation."

The tension crackled, and Eddie held his breath, anticipating Will's next move. Would he back down, or would he dig in deeper?

"Building a foundation?" Will scoffed, unable to hide his disdain. "Or just wasting my time? I want to dive into real magic, not play with toys!"

"You think alchemy is all about flashy spells?" she shot back, her voice rising with passion. "It's about understanding the fundamentals! Without that foundation, you're just throwing ingredients into a pot and hoping for a miracle!"

Will's brows knitted together, frustration etched on his face. Eddie could feel the weight of the moment pressing down, the air thick with the battle of wills. He didn't want to take sides, but he couldn't help feeling a strange admiration for the girl's fierce spirit.

"Alright, settle down everyone," The lecturer said firmly, her voice cutting through the charged atmosphere. "While I understand this curriculum might not be ideal for everyone, it's a necessary foundation. We can discuss concerns further during office hours. Now, let's move on to..."

Her voice faded into the background as Eddie slumped back in his chair. The initial excitement of starting university had been dampened by the mandatory program. He stole a glance at the girl beside him, her face set in a determined expression. Maybe

she was right. Maybe there was something to be learned from these 'basics' after all.

The rest of the lecture passed in a blur of details about textbooks and course schedules. Eddie barely registered a word, his mind now focused on a different kind of challenge – navigating the complexities of university life, both academic and social. A spark of curiosity flickered within him, ignited by the fiery-haired girl's words. Perhaps this mandatory program wouldn't be a complete waste of time after all.

As the final words of the opening lecture faded, a collective sigh of relief rippled through the students. Eddie, stiff from hours spent crammed in a chair, stretched his back and joined the throng exiting the imposing Vulcrum Lecture Hall. Stepping out, he was greeted by a sight that instantly banished any lingering frustration.

The golden hour was upon them, bathing everything in a warm, orange glow. The setting sun cast long shadows across the grounds of Edenfield University, painting the majestic buildings in a soft, ethereal light. But Eddie's attention was quickly captured by the vibrant scene before him.

Right outside the lecture hall, a cluster of tents glowed invitingly, adorned with strings of orange fairy lights. Music, a catchy mix of modern pop and something vaguely spell-like, drifted through the air. This must be the "Afterparty" they'd mentioned during orientation. A wave of excitement washed over Eddie.

Around the tents, older students from various magical faculties mingled, their uniforms a kaleidoscope of vibrant colors representing their specialized studies. Alchemy, Conjunction, Enchantment – just the names alone sent a thrill through Eddie. These were the people who had already walked the path he was

about to embark on, the veterans who could offer guidance and share their experiences.

The older students wore welcoming smiles, their faces radiating a sense of camaraderie. Some held trays stacked with what looked like delectable pastries, while others pointed towards tables overflowing with exotic fruits. An undeniable air of excitement and anticipation hung heavy in the air.

His heart raced as he took in the scene before him. Students were milling about, laughter and chatter mixing with the lively music, creating an infectious energy that swept over the courtyard. Colorful banners flapped gently in the evening breeze, each one representing different student clubs and organizations eager to recruit new members.

Eddie nudged Will, who had been staring blankly at the entrance, still caught up in the earlier argument. "Hey! Look at this! We have to check it out!"

Will blinked, finally breaking out of his stupor. "You think there'll be free food?" he asked, a grin slowly spreading across his face.

"Food and magic, I bet!" Eddie replied, his excitement bubbling over. "Let's go!"

As they stepped toward the festive tents, the aroma of baked goods and sweet treats wafted through the air, drawing them closer. A group of upperclassmen stood behind a long table, cheerfully handing out pastries decorated with intricate designs that shimmered with a hint of magic. Eddie's stomach rumbled in agreement.

"Get in line!" Will urged, already moving toward the table.

Eddie's gaze drifted beyond the treats to a nearby stage where a band composed of students strummed enchanted instruments.

The melodies danced through the air, sparking joy in everyone around. Eddie felt a warmth spreading through him; the earlier gloom had evaporated, replaced by the intoxicating allure of possibility.

As they grabbed their pastries, Eddie noticed the fiery-haired girl from the lecture standing with a group of students nearby. She was animatedly discussing something, her hands gesturing excitedly, her earlier indignation replaced by a spark of enthusiasm. He caught her eye, and she smiled, a flicker of camaraderie passing between them.

"Let's sit over there," Eddie suggested to Will, nodding toward a group of chairs set in a semi-circle around a small fire pit. The glow of the flames flickered invitingly, drawing them in.

"Sure," Will said, clearly still recovering from the earlier debate but buoyed by the atmosphere.

They settled into the chairs, pastries in hand, and took in the surroundings. The sense of community was palpable, laughter ringing out as new friendships began to form. Eddie felt the knot of apprehension in his stomach loosen.

"Okay, maybe this isn't so bad after all," he admitted, a smile creeping onto his face as he watched students engage in animated conversations, the initial barriers of introductions dissolving in the warm glow of the Afterparty.

"See?" Will said, taking a big bite of his pastry, crumbs flying. "Told you the first day would have its perks!"

Eddie chuckled, his earlier frustrations forgotten. "Yeah, but I'm still going to crush those basics," he declared, determination lighting up his eyes.

"Sure, just don't crush the free food!" Will replied, grinning.

With the golden hour fading and the magic of Edenfield University surrounding them, Eddie felt a spark of excitement for the journey ahead, ready to embrace whatever challenges awaited him in both academia and friendship.

Eddie's eyes darted between Will and the approaching girl, his heart racing slightly at the sudden tension. The girl stood there, hands on her hips, her petite frame radiating an air of confidence. The brim of her witch hat tilted slightly to the side, accentuating her sharp features and the fire in her emerald-green eyes. Her short, fiery hair seemed to flicker like flames in the warm glow of the fire pit, contrasting beautifully with the deep purple of her cloak, which swirled around her like a shadow.

Eddie glanced around at the Afterparty, the vibrant energy enveloping them, and felt an overwhelming sense of gratitude. This was just the beginning, and he was ready to embrace it all.

## ACT II | Chapter 3



The early light of morning crept through the window, casting long shadows across the kitchen of **Dorm 7**. The house, still half-asleep, held a quiet serenity, with only the occasional creak of the old wooden floors echoing through the hall. Eddie sat alone at the dining table, the warmth of the rustic wood beneath his arms providing a faint comfort as he stared at the simple breakfast he had made himself: toast with eggs, his usual.

The smell of the meal, warm and familiar, almost made him forget where he was for a moment. The cozy scent of lavender hung in the air from the candles he had lit last night, mingling with the faint aroma of toast. It should have been peaceful, but Eddie could barely taste it. His mind was elsewhere, caught up in the torrent of thoughts and doubts that had woken him up far earlier than anyone else in the dorm.

His fingers traced the edge of his wand, now resting beside his plate. It had been with him since his days at the Academy, through all the trials and errors, the successes and failures. The polished wood was worn smooth by years of use, but the memories it carried with it weren't so kind. Magic had always come to him easily, or so it seemed at first. But it was never as smooth as the others made it look. His magic never obeyed him the way it should. It was a flicker of something that could have been, but never quite was.

Eddie stared at the wand, the silence around him amplifying the hum of his own thoughts. *Am I really ready for this?*



His first class at Edenfield University – the Magical Foundation class – was only a few hours away, and the weight of it pressed heavily on his chest. It wasn't the first time he'd had to perform magic in front of others, but this was different. Here, in this grand city with its towering spires of stone and dusted magic, he was surrounded by the best and brightest. The weight of their expectations – and his own – seemed to hang in the air, thick and suffocating.

He exhaled slowly, pushing the toast around on his plate. *What if I mess up?*

He had always been told he was gifted, but the more he practiced, the more it felt like that gift was slipping through his fingers. Sure, he'd impressed his professors at the Academy with a few basic spells, but could he do this at Edenfield? Could he show the world that he was more than just the guy who fumbled his way through magic?

He picked up the wand, feeling its familiar weight in his hand, but there was no sense of reassurance. It didn't feel like the tool of a future Alchemist. It felt like a relic of an uncertain past. *I've been at this for years... and it still doesn't feel right.*

Eddie's mind drifted back to his training with his aunt Catherine. She was harsh but patient, insistent on the seriousness of Alchemy. *Alchemy's not just about science, she had told him. It's a form of magic, a magic rooted in the real world. You can't fake your way through it.* But Eddie's magic had always been more... whimsical, erratic. No matter how much he studied the theory, it was the execution that always tripped him up.

He turned the wand over in his hand, watching the light catch on the polished surface. *Maybe I'm not cut out for this. Maybe I should have gone into potion making like Dad.*

The thought was fleeting but sharp, a reminder of the path his father had chosen instead of the one Catherine had set out for him. Robert Welton, his father, had been an Alchemist once – until Catherine’s harsh criticism had driven him to abandon the craft, retreating into the world of Potion Mastery instead. Eddie couldn’t help but wonder if Catherine had been too hard on him, too. *Would I be better off if I just took a different path?*

He shook his head, as if to clear the thought. He wasn’t his father. But still, the doubts crept in, gnawing at him. His father had chosen the easy way out. But what if Eddie didn’t have the strength to stick with the hard path either?

With a sigh, Eddie dropped the wand back onto the table, letting it rest beside his cold breakfast. The room was quiet – too quiet. He could hear his own breathing, a soft reminder that, for all his worrying, there was nothing to be done until he showed up at that class. It was the first step, no matter how small or insignificant it felt.

*Maybe Will’s right.* The thought lingered, unspoken, but familiar. *Maybe I just need to... show up. Maybe that’s all it takes.*

Eddie took a slow bite of his toast, chewing thoughtfully as he stared at the window, watching the sunlight grow brighter as the minutes ticked by. His reflection stared back at him in the glass – tired, unsure, but still there. *I don’t know if I’ll ever get it right. But maybe, just maybe, that’s part of the journey.*

He wasn’t sure where the journey would lead, or if he was ready for what was ahead. But as he stared at his wand once more, a soft breath escaped him, and for the first time that morning, he felt a flicker of hope – a small, barely perceptible spark.

The soft thud of footsteps on the creaky floor signaled Will’s arrival. Eddie turned, barely lifting his gaze from the now-empty

toast plate, as Will's door swung open. A tired yawn escaped Will's mouth as he stepped into the kitchen, guitar bag slung over his shoulder.

"Hey, man!" Will greeted, stretching his arms wide and letting out another exaggerated yawn. "Making breakfast without me? You're cruel!" he joked, a mischievous glint in his eyes as he plopped down into one of the chairs at the table.

Eddie couldn't help but roll his eyes, though a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "You've gotta get up early if you want a proper breakfast. Maybe next time, I'll leave you a scrap or two." He took another bite of his toast, pretending to be unfazed by Will's mock drama.

Will raised an eyebrow, the guitar bag resting beside him. "Right, right. I guess I'll just starve while you live your best dorm chef life. What's on the menu for today, anyway? Eggs and existential dread?"

"Something like that," Eddie muttered, his mind still half elsewhere, but the light banter with Will was enough to push aside his worries, for now.

Will kicked back in his chair, crossing his arms and staring at the ceiling as he leaned back. "So, first day of classes, huh?" he asked, his tone shifting into one of playful curiosity. "You nervous?"

"Yeah, a bit," Eddie admitted, leaning forward, his elbows resting on the table. "I mean, it's just... the first class. But it's the first time I'll be really doing magic in front of people. What if I screw up?"

Will snorted. "Come on, man. It's just a class. Don't worry, Henry told me it's gonna be super chill. The first class is all about the basics." He gave a dramatic sigh, like he'd just revealed some

great wisdom. "We're gonna talk about Manas and, like... the foundational concepts of magic."

Eddie blinked at him, not sure if he should be relieved or more nervous. "Manas, huh? Never heard of it."

"Yeah, you know," Will continued, now getting into his usual sarcastic stride, "it's the essence of magic and how it flows through everything. Totally not a big deal. They'll probably just have us sit in a circle and talk about the metaphysical nature of it, like some kind of mystical support group."

Eddie chuckled despite himself. "Sounds like a real party."

"You know it," Will said, flashing a grin. "Maybe we'll have a meditative circle. All I know is that Henry said they're not gonna throw any crazy spells at us. So, no summoning the moon or anything. I'm still waiting on that one."

Eddie laughed, the tension in his shoulders loosening. "Good. I'm still trying to figure out how to light a candle without setting the whole dorm on fire."

"Well, if you need help with that," Will said, raising a finger as if offering a grand solution, "I can probably help with the fire part. Just don't ask me to make a sandwich. I'll burn that too."

"Deal," Eddie replied with a smirk. "Just try not to play the guitar during class, alright? I don't think 'Summoning the Bardic Spirit' is on the syllabus."

Will raised his hands in mock surrender. "No promises. But hey, maybe I'll use the guitar for some magic, who knows?"

Eddie shook his head, chuckling again, though his mind still lingered on the uncertainty of what the class would really be like. Will's antics were a welcome distraction, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something – something big – was about to begin.

"Well, I'm still not sure what to expect," Eddie said, his tone softening. "But I guess I'll figure it out soon enough."

Will gave him a slap on the back, grinning widely. "That's the spirit! You'll crush it, Eddie. Now, let's finish up that breakfast, and then we can go and make some magic of our own."

Eddie smiled at the optimism, feeling a little lighter despite his lingering nerves. "Alright, alright, just don't eat all my eggs."

"No promises." As the last crumbs of toast disappeared, Will leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "So, have you made up your mind yet? About which club to join, I mean," he asked, propping his feet up on the chair opposite him with a grin.

Eddie furrowed his brow, wiping his hands on a napkin as he stared down at the last empty plate. "Clubs, huh?" He had been so wrapped up in his thoughts about the first class, he hadn't given much consideration to the extracurriculars. "Nah, not yet. I've been too focused on... well, everything else." He gave a half shrug, clearly uncertain. "I mean, I wasn't really looking for anything specific. Did you?"

Will chuckled, leaning forward with a smug grin. "Well, you know, I've heard a thing or two. Jake told me that today, after class, there's gonna be this big Club Exhibition thing. All the after-class clubs will be showing off what they do, trying to pull in new members." He leaned back again, tapping his fingers on the table like he was already imagining the crowds. "You should definitely check it out. I mean, it's a good chance to try something new."

Eddie nodded slowly, the idea sinking in. "That sounds pretty interesting... but I still don't know which club I'd even want to join."

Will smirked, clearly not at a loss for ideas. "Well, let me save you some time, Eddie," he said with exaggerated confidence. "I've already made up my mind."

Eddie raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite himself. "Oh really? Which one?"

"The one and only Walther's Band," Will replied smoothly, as if it was the most obvious choice in the world. "You know, the one that's looking for a new vocalist and guitarist." He looked over at Eddie with a mischievous gleam in his eyes. "Lucky for them, I can fill both spots."

Eddie couldn't suppress a laugh. "You? A guitarist too? I thought you were all about the vocals, man."

Will shrugged, casually flipping his hair back as if he were the picture of cool. "I mean, who's to say I'm not a prodigy at both, huh? Plus, I've been jamming out for years. Walther's lucky to have someone with my... talents." He winked, clearly relishing the idea of his self-proclaimed musical greatness.

Eddie rolled his eyes but couldn't help a smile. "Yeah, I'm sure they're just dying for someone who can play three chords on a guitar." He smirked, leaning back in his chair. "But hey, good luck with that, I guess. I'm sure Walther will be thrilled."

Will chuckled, clearly unfazed. "Oh, I'm sure he'll be floored by my genius. But seriously, you should come with me. You'll see how fun it is. The band's got a good vibe, and I'm telling you, the whole 'musical genius' thing is going to pay off." He winked again, the playful arrogance never leaving his voice.

Eddie shook his head, amused. "Maybe I'll check it out, but I don't know if I'll be joining the band. Not sure if I'm cut out for that."

"Well, you never know," Will said with a grin, getting to his feet and grabbing his guitar bag from the chair. "Maybe you'll surprise yourself. But hey, if you don't want to get up on stage, there's always room for a band photographer, right?"

Eddie laughed again. "Right, I'm sure Walther needs a photographer more than he needs an actual guitarist." He stood up too, stretching his arms as he grabbed his alchemy notebook. "Well, I'll definitely check it out after class. Maybe I'll find something that's more... my speed."

Will slung the guitar bag over his shoulder, flashing a confident smile. "You do that. But just remember — when Walther's Band is selling out arenas, you'll know who to thank."

Eddie just shook his head, chuckling as Will walked out of the kitchen, already dreaming about his new "career" as a double-threat musician.



Eddie and Will made their way to the Vulcan Lecture Hall, the conversation between them a mix of banter and debate. Will, ever the enthusiast, was pushing Eddie hard to join the band, while Eddie remained noncommittal, his mind drifting elsewhere.

"I'm telling you, Eddie," Will said, dragging his guitar bag as they walked, "you should totally come check out Walther's Band. It's got the perfect vibe for you. I mean, who wouldn't want to be in a band with me, right?"

Eddie shook his head, holding the straps of his alchemy kit tight over his shoulder. "You're forgetting one thing, Will," he replied flatly. "I'm musically illiterate. I've never even touched a guitar."

Will's eyebrows shot up. "You can learn! I'm sure you've got the talent for it." He grinned mischievously. "Besides, you'd make a great star on stage, maybe even better than me!"

Eddie snorted. "Yeah, right. You're in the spotlight already. I'm just trying to figure out how to survive a full semester without making a fool of myself in class." He rubbed the back of his neck, a bit uneasy. "Actually, I was thinking about the Duelling Club, maybe. But the last thing I want is to get blasted by some over-enthusiastic first-year with a fireball spell. Not really my thing."

Will smirked. "Come on, man. You don't have to get blasted for real. You'll learn a lot in there. You're tough—"

"No," Eddie interrupted, his voice growing a bit more serious.

"I'm not. Trust me, I'm no duelist."

Will gave him a look, clearly not convinced. "Fine, fine. But come on, you can't seriously be thinking of skipping out on clubs altogether, can you?"

Eddie let out a breath, his gaze drifting over the crowd of students already pouring into the lecture hall. "I'm telling you, Will, most Alchemy students don't join clubs. We're too busy. There's no time for anything extra with all the lectures and practicals we have. You're the only one I know who's got the time for nonsense like that."

"Hey, not all of us have to live by our textbooks, Eddie," Will shot back, a smirk on his face. "But whatever, I'll let you sulk in peace. Just don't come crying to me when you're bored out of your mind in a few weeks."



Before Eddie could reply, their conversation was abruptly interrupted by a voice—a mocking, condescending tone that cut through the air like a blade.

“Well, well, well...” the voice said. Eddie and Will both turned to see a girl standing in their path. She wore an elegant robe underneath a blue Conjunction Cloak, the fabric shifting in the air as she moved. Her eyes gleamed with amusement, her lips curled into a smirk. “I heard the Sage’s Institute picked up some more poor people from the boonies lately.”

Will’s eyes narrowed. He took a step forward, his hand instinctively curling into a fist. “Who the hell are you?” he demanded, his voice cold.

The girl lifted an eyebrow, almost entertained by the sudden challenge. “Christine Fiori,” she said with a flourish, her voice dripping with disdain. “I’m sure you’ve heard of me.”

Eddie’s brow furrowed in confusion. The name didn’t ring any bells, and he couldn’t tell if Christine was trying to get a rise out of them or if she was genuinely that smug.

Will, however, seemed to recognize the name instantly. His eyes widened, and he let out a low whistle. “Ahh, so *that* Christine Fiori. The daughter of Giordano Fiori, the famous Spellcraftsman?” His tone was tinged with a mixture of awe and irritation. “Well, it’s nice to meet you... I guess.”

Christine smirked even wider, leaning in with a feigned look of curiosity. “Oh, I’ve heard some interesting rumors lately. You know, there’s this *special* scholarship program here at Edenfield. One that’s designed to bring in students from, shall we say, less privileged backgrounds.” She tilted her head to the side, her gaze scanning both Eddie and Will. “I heard someone from the Alchemy Faculty got in that way, latching onto the name of

someone important. Like... Master Alchemist Catherina, perhaps? How *interesting*..."

Eddie felt his face flush with a mix of frustration and embarrassment. He could feel the mockery in her voice like a weight pressing down on him. "You don't know what you're talking about," he muttered, but his words didn't seem to have any impact.

Christine continued, feigning innocence. "Oh, really? I wonder who it could be. Someone who's been mentored by Catherina herself. A student of the Alchemy Faculty, but who could that be?" Her smile widened as she locked eyes with Eddie. "It's such a mystery."

Before Eddie could muster a response, the tension in the air grew palpable, and for a moment, neither he nor Will spoke.

Suddenly, a petite figure pushed through the gap between them with purpose, bumping into Christine as if it was completely deliberate. Christine's eyes narrowed in annoyance, but the figure didn't seem to care.

"Excuse me," came a soft voice, barely audible over the tense air. The girl now standing between them shot Christine a sideways glance, her expression calm, almost detached.

"Let them through, will you?" she said with a quiet authority, her voice laced with a sharp edge. "You're wasting everyone's time."

Christine blinked in surprise as the girl stood her ground. "And you are?"

"None of your business," the girl replied coolly, unfazed. "And I think I'll let these two go, if you don't mind." She gave a quick glance toward Eddie and Will, clearly signaling them to move on.

Christine, apparently unwilling to let the encounter go, called out after her. "You're just a filthy witch. Go back to your forest before

someone notices you're missing from your little hut," she sneered as Ashley walked off toward a seat, her eyes never leaving Christine's. The air around her seemed to crackle with quiet tension.

Ashley didn't flinch, walking away as though she hadn't heard a word. But as she passed Eddie and Will, she shot them both a quick, almost mischievous glance.

Christine, clearly not satisfied with just insulting Ashley, wasn't done. As she began striding away, she tossed one last parting shot. "And you!" she snapped at Eddie, her tone dripping with mockery. "Look at that silver hair. I didn't know grandpas were allowed in school, especially not ones that smell like fish." Her eyes flicked briefly to Will. "And you, a street beggar from the mountains? Good luck getting by."

Will, now clearly seething, took a step forward. "Hey, you —" But before he could take another step, Eddie grabbed his arm, holding him back. "Forget it," Eddie said, his voice low. "Let's just find a seat."

Will shot him a glare, still tense, his fists clenched. But he said nothing more. Both of them knew there was no point in engaging with someone like Christine. It was best to move on. Even if the words stung.

The two of them silently made their way into the hall, the weight of Christine's insults still hanging heavy in the air.

The Vulcrum Lecture Hall buzzed with the low hum of students settling into their seats, the large hall echoing with scattered conversations. Eddie scanned the room, trying to find a place for him and Will. His gaze flickered across the rows of desks, noting the clusters of students already forming, some with friendly chatter, others with serious expressions as they prepared for class.

Will, still stewing from his earlier exchange with Christine, was clearly not in the mood for any socializing. He kept his gaze fixed ahead, ignoring the occasional wave from other students and muttering under his breath. Eddie, on the other hand, was trying to keep his focus on the task at hand: finding a seat before the class officially began.

His eyes caught sight of Ashley Mayfair sitting alone in a row toward the back of the hall. She was engrossed in what looked like a small journal, scribbling notes or doodling, her posture calm and unbothered. Her earlier quip at Christine's expense had already put Eddie's mind at ease about her; she didn't seem to be bothered by anything. Her quiet confidence was something he admired, even if it wasn't his style.

"Hey, Will," Eddie started, his voice low as he glanced toward Ashley's seat. "What about that one? She's got an empty seat next to her. We could join her."

Will shot him a look, his frown deepening. "What, you want to sit with her? After what happened during the ceremony?" He scoffed, clearly not amused. "She's a witch, Eddie. I don't know what your deal is, but I'm not sitting next to her."

Eddie raised an eyebrow, his tone level. "Come on, Will. She's not bad. She helped us out with Christine just now."

Will snorted. "That's just because she's got something to prove. You heard what she said about me." He glared across the room as if the mere thought of Ashley's words had left a sour taste in his mouth. "I'm not sitting with her."

Eddie sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. He hadn't expected Will to let go of the tension that easily, but he hadn't anticipated this much stubbornness either. The last thing he wanted was to argue about seating arrangements before class even started.

"Alright, alright," Eddie said with a resigned shrug, glancing around for another spot. He could feel Will's mood weighing on him, but it was clear there was no point in pushing the issue. "I'll just find somewhere else."

After a few moments of searching, Eddie spotted an empty desk in the middle of the hall, not too far from the front, but far enough to give them some space. It wasn't ideal, but it would do. He motioned for Will to follow. "Let's just sit here. We don't have to make a big deal out of it."

Will grunted, still clearly irritated but unwilling to argue further. With a heavy sigh, he followed Eddie to the seat in the middle of the hall. They sat down, the tension still lingering between them, though neither said much as they settled in.

Eddie glanced around, noting how many students had already gathered. Some were chatting eagerly with their friends, others quietly preparing their notes. The lecture hall had the usual first-day energy – nervous excitement mixed with the undercurrent of anxious anticipation.

As Eddie placed his books on the desk, he felt a sense of quiet settling over him. The day had already been full of unexpected moments – the awkward confrontation with Christine, the lingering tension with Will – and now here he was, seated for his first official class at Edenfield.

Looking over at Will, Eddie could see the faint frustration still lingering in his friend's expression. He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could, the doors at the front of the hall swung open, and the chatter in the room quieted.

Eddie's stomach tightened with nerves. *This is it*, he thought, watching as Professor Rheagan made his way to the front of the room. *The first class.*



The chatter in the lecture hall dwindled to silence as the doors at the front creaked open. Professor Rheagan strode in, his presence commanding yet unhurried. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with a long, graying beard that reached nearly to his belt. His robes were simple but well-worn, marked with faint scorch marks and frayed edges – testaments to a life lived amidst magic and industry. He carried a wooden staff that tapped softly against the stone floor with each measured step.

He paused at the podium, his eyes scanning the sea of faces before him. The room felt heavy with anticipation, as though the walls themselves leaned in to hear his words. He rested both hands on the podium, leaning forward slightly.

“Good morning,” he said, his voice deep and resonant, like the low rumble of distant thunder. His tone carried a calm authority that silenced even the faintest whispers.

“I am Professor Rheagan,” he began, his slow cadence giving weight to every word. “I’m a retired Spellcraftsman. Spent decades crafting spells for the southern iron miners – spells to stabilize shafts, displace rock, and, occasionally, patch up the foolhardy.” His eyes twinkled with a subtle humor as a ripple of quiet chuckles spread through the room.

“But,” he continued, his voice softening, “as the years caught up with me, my knees began to creak louder than my spells. So, when Edenfield came knocking, asking me to pass on what I’ve learned to you lot, I thought – ‘Why not?’” He spread his arms in

a small, shrugging gesture, a faint grin playing at the corners of his mouth.

The students chuckled again, the atmosphere in the room relaxing slightly. Eddie found himself smiling despite the knots of nerves still twisting in his stomach.

Professor Rheagan straightened, his expression shifting to something more serious, though the warmth in his eyes remained. "Today, we begin our study of *Manas*," he announced, his voice filling the hall. "The mind's connection to the physical and arcane realms."

He tapped the podium lightly with his staff. "Manas is the bridge between thought and action, between the mundane and the magical. It's the spark that turns intent into reality. And as aspiring spellcasters, it will be both your greatest tool and your greatest challenge."

The professor paused, letting the weight of his words settle over the room. His gaze swept across the students, lingering just long enough to make each of them feel seen.

"Some of you," he continued, his tone softening again, "may already think you understand Manas. Maybe you've cast a few spells, dabbled in alchemy, or bent a few spoons for fun." His smile returned briefly, and a few students chuckled. "But understanding Manas is not just about casting spells. It's about discipline, focus, and — most importantly — knowing your limits."

Eddie felt a prick of self-consciousness at those words, his mind drifting to the many times his magic had gone awry back at the Sage's Institute. He shifted in his seat, glancing at his wand resting on the desk.

Professor Rheagan continued. "Magic is not just power — it's responsibility. And in this class, we'll explore not only what you

*can* do but what you *should* do. We'll cover the fundamentals, build a foundation that will carry you through your studies here at Edenfield and beyond. Because, as my old mining crew used to say, a strong shaft keeps the mountain from falling on your head."

This earned a few hearty laughs, and the mood in the room lightened once more.

"Now," he said, his tone shifting to a more instructive cadence, "before we dive into the theory, I'd like to hear from you. What do *you* think Manas is? Don't worry — there's no wrong answer here. This is about understanding where you're starting from."

Professor Rheagan leaned on his staff, his eyes scanning the room expectantly. Eddie felt his chest tighten slightly. *Should I say something?* he wondered. But before he could decide, a few hands tentatively went up, and the professor pointed to a confident-looking girl in the front row.

"Manas," she said, her voice clear and precise, "is the energy that allows us to connect with the arcane realm and shape it with our will."

Professor Rheagan nodded. "A good answer. It is indeed the energy of connection. But there's more to it than just energy. Anyone else?"

As other students began to offer their thoughts, Eddie let out a small breath of relief. For now, he could sit back and listen — but he couldn't shake the feeling that sooner or later, he'd have to find his own voice in this room.

The room dimmed slightly as Professor Rheagan tapped the glowing crystal on the podium. A low hum resonated through the hall, gentle yet commanding, as the crystal began to expand, releasing a shimmering, ethereal light. Before the students' eyes,



the light coalesced into the image of a human figure – a swirling, translucent form composed of intricate patterns of energy.

Gasps of awe rippled through the class. Eddie leaned forward, his jade-green eyes wide as he studied the projection. The figure hovered just above the podium, a living diagram glowing softly, its every movement reflecting the currents of invisible forces.

“Students,” Professor Rheagan began, his voice calm but charged with reverence, “today, we delve into one of the most profound and misunderstood concepts of magic – the essence of our minds: *Manas*.”

He stepped to the side, gesturing towards the projection. The figure began to shift, glowing lines emerging from the head and chest, branching out like streams into an infinite expanse of light and darkness. These streams seemed to connect to another form in the background – a vast, shimmering plane representing the Arcane Realm.

“*Manas*,” he continued, his voice deepening, “is the bridge between the soul and the material world. Between thought and action. Between the *spiritual* and the *arcane*.”

The image shifted again, the streams of light now pulsing rhythmically, as if carrying energy back and forth between the figure and the Arcane Realm. “The word *Manas* originates from the ancient root meaning ‘to think.’ It is through the mind, through *Manas*, that we connect to the energies surrounding us – the energies that define our world and the realms beyond.”

Eddie felt his breath catch as the diagram zoomed in, revealing complex, glowing threads within the figure’s head and heart. Each thread shimmered with vibrant color, intertwining to form patterns that pulsed in time with the streams of light.

“Look here,” Rheagan said, pointing with the tip of his staff. The projection highlighted one of the threads. “This is where the magic begins. The *catalyst* of your intent – when a thought becomes an action, a spark ignites within these threads, weaving itself into the flow of *Manas*.”

He paced slowly, his staff clicking lightly against the floor. “You see, magic is not simply about waving a wand or reciting incantations. It is an intimate conversation between your will and the universe. And the language you speak is *Manas*.”

Will leaned over to Eddie, whispering, “I was hoping for something more... I don’t know, *action-packed*.”

Eddie smirked, whispering back, “Did you expect him to summon the moon in the first ten minutes?”

Professor Rheagan shot a quick glance in their direction, his eyes twinkling knowingly. Will straightened up immediately, trying to look attentive.

Professor Rheagan began pacing slowly across the front of the lecture hall, his staff gently tapping the stone floor. He made eye contact with several students as he spoke, his deep, deliberate voice filling the room.

“*Manas*,” he began, “is both **sensory** and **motor** in nature. It is through *Manas* that we receive information – *sensory inputs* – from the world around us. The breeze against your skin, the sound of my voice, the glow of this crystal... all of these are experiences mediated by your *Manas*.”

He stopped mid-stride, turning towards the projection that had flickered back to life. The glowing human figure now displayed thin, luminous strands extending outward, connecting to swirling orbs that represented sensory inputs.

"But," he continued, raising a hand and gesturing at the diagram, "it is not merely a passive receiver. *Manas* also allows us to process these inputs—to analyze, to imagine, to plan. And finally, it enables us to act. This is the **motor** function of *Manas*: the transformation of thought into action, the translation of intent into reality."

Eddie leaned forward slightly, fascinated by the shifting strands of light in the diagram. The interplay between the glowing orbs and the figure's luminous core seemed almost alive, like a dance of energy responding to unseen commands.

The professor's voice took on a more dynamic tone as he tapped his staff lightly in the air. A faint shimmer appeared at its tip, and a small object—a simple ballpoint pen—lifted off his desk at the front of the room. It floated upward, defying gravity, and began to hover in front of the class.

"This pen," Professor Rheagan said, gesturing toward it, "is merely a tool. But through *Manas*, I direct my will, my thoughts, my volition... and cause it to float."

The pen moved in a slow circle, its movements precise and deliberate, as if guided by invisible strings. Rheagan's hand remained steady, but Eddie could feel the invisible force of his intent shaping every motion.

"What is most fascinating," the professor continued, "is that this movement, this action, originates not from the physical body, but from the **subtler layers** of existence."

The diagram shifted again, zooming into the glowing core of the human figure. Threads of light radiated from the center, pulsing faintly as they connected outward to the Arcane Realm.

The shimmering diagram of the human mind shifted again, expanding into three distinct layers, each glowing with a

different hue. Professor Rheagan stepped closer to the projection, his staff raised as he indicated the outermost layer, which pulsed with a soft, golden light.

“This,” he said, his voice steady and resonant, “is the first component of *Manas* — **Gnosio**, or *Cognition*. It is the process through which we perceive the surrounding **Manas Energy** — the currents that flow unseen through our world.”

He paused, letting the students absorb the words, before continuing. “This energy is ever-present, much like the air you breathe. Though invisible to most, it is constantly in motion, flowing through every living being, every tree, every stone, and even the spaces between.”

He waved his staff with a fluid motion, and a spark of light shot into the air, swirling in a mesmerizing, intricate pattern above the class. The light formed a flowing spiral, intertwining with other faint, invisible currents that became momentarily visible as they interacted.

“The mind,” Professor Rheagan said, gesturing to the glowing projection, “acts as the *receiver* of this energy. Think of it as a fine-tuned instrument, capable of detecting the subtlest shifts in these arcane flows. Through **Gnosio**, we take in the raw, unfiltered essence of magic — its rhythm, its texture, its presence.”

He moved to the podium, tapping the crystal once more. The projection responded by zooming in on the golden layer, showing tiny filaments extending outward from the human figure, connecting to the swirling orbs of energy that represented the Arcane Realm.

“Now, understand this,” he said, his tone taking on a note of emphasis. “*Gnosio* is not merely the act of seeing or hearing or touching. It is the ability to sense that which lies beyond the

physical—energies that cannot be seen with the eye, nor heard with the ear. These are impressions that touch the very fabric of your mind.”

He raised his hand again, and the swirling spark in the air coalesced into a faint, glowing orb, which hovered just above his palm. “What you see here is a simple manifestation of *Manas Energy*—a spark taken from the ambient flow of magic around us. Through **Gnosio**, your mind interprets this spark, turning it from an abstract force into a recognizable form. Without this sensory connection, the energies of the Arcane Realm would remain inaccessible to us.”

Eddie watched in awe as the glowing orb pulsed gently, its radiance casting faint shadows on the stone walls. He could almost feel the energy that Professor Rheagan described—a subtle hum that seemed to resonate within the room, faint but undeniable.

The professor turned his attention back to the class, lowering his hand and letting the orb dissolve into a wisp of light. “Consider *Gnosio* as the gateway,” he said. “It is where magic begins, through the *sensation* of energy. Your ability to perceive, to attune yourself to the flow of *Manas Energy*, will determine how deeply you can connect to the Arcane Realm.”

The shimmering diagram shifted again, the golden glow of **Gnosio** fading as the next layer began to pulse with a vibrant azure hue. Professor Rheagan moved toward the projection, his staff glowing faintly at the tip as he gestured to the new layer.

“Next,” he began, his deep voice resonating through the hall, “we have **Skepsio**, or *Deliberation*. If **Gnosio** is the reception of magical energy, then **Skepsio** is what you do with it. This is where your will is tested.”

The professor stepped back, giving the students a clear view of the intricate patterns now forming within the azure layer of the diagram. Lines crisscrossed and spiraled, weaving a web of light that pulsed with a rhythmic intensity.

“Once you have received the *Manas Energy* through **Gnosio**,” Professor Rheagan continued, “your mind must deliberate — *process* what it has received. This is not a passive act. It is a conscious, deliberate shaping of the energy, informed by reasoning, intention, and discipline.”

He raised his staff, and with a flick of his wrist, a series of glowing symbols formed in the air. They floated between him and the students, their shapes shifting subtly as if alive.

“Through **Skepsio**, we encode our intent into the energy around us. These symbols you see are a representation of that encoding. Each line, each curve, represents a decision — a choice you’ve made in shaping the flow of magic.”

Eddie leaned forward, entranced by the floating symbols. He’d never thought of magic in such deliberate terms. For him, it had always felt like instinct — a natural reaction to his surroundings. But now, seeing the complexity of **Skepsio**, he began to understand how much intention and thought were required.

Professor Rheagan continued, his voice calm but commanding. “This is the part of your mind where you form the magical *request* to the Arcane Realm — a decision to move, to transform, to alter reality in subtle or profound ways. Without **Skepsio**, magic remains raw and unshaped. It is through deliberation that we refine it, bending it to our will.”

He paused, letting his words sink in. Then, with a flick of his staff, the glowing symbols coalesced into a single, intricate pattern that hovered in the air like a luminous snowflake. “Consider this,” he said, gesturing to the pattern. “Every spell you cast, every charm

you weave, begins as this — a deliberate act of creation within your mind. The more refined your **Skepsio**, the more precise and powerful your magic will be.”

Eddie glanced over at Will, who was staring at the symbols with an expression of mild confusion. Eddie couldn’t help but wonder if this level of intricacy was what set accomplished spellcasters apart from the rest. He’d always relied on his instincts, trusting his connection to alchemical principles. But now, it seemed clear that mastery required something deeper — a conscious shaping of the energies he’d so often taken for granted.

Professor Rheagan smiled faintly, as if sensing the students’ thoughts. “For many of you,” he said, “this may seem daunting. Perhaps you’ve thought of magic as instinctual, a reflex rather than a deliberation. And there is some truth in that. But to master the arcane arts, you must move beyond instinct. You must *think* — to analyze, to reason, to choose with purpose.”

The azure glow of the diagram intensified briefly, then settled into a steady pulse. “Remember this,” Rheagan concluded. “**Skepsio** is not just about logic. It is about intention. Your magic will always reflect the clarity of your thoughts and the strength of your will.”

He lowered his staff, allowing the symbols to dissolve into faint wisps of light. Turning back to the class, he asked, “Are there any among you who feel that magic has always been more instinct than thought? Perhaps you wonder if you’ve truly *deliberated* when you’ve cast a spell?”

Eddie hesitated, feeling as though the question was directed at him. His jade green eyes flicked toward the professor, then back to the projection. For the first time, he began to question the way he had approached his craft. Was it possible that he had been

relying too much on instinct, ignoring the deliberate shaping of his own will?

The room was silent, the students deep in thought. After a moment, Professor Rheagan gave a small nod, as if satisfied with their introspection. He tapped the crystal on the podium once more, and the diagram shifted again, the azure layer dimming as the next component began to glow with a fiery, crimson hue.

"Now," Rheagan said, his voice deepening, "we move to the final component of *Manas*. **Thelissio**."

The diagram's fiery, crimson hue expanded, swirling with dynamic energy as Professor Rheagan stepped toward the podium. His calm demeanor carried the weight of significance as he raised his staff, gesturing to the outermost layer of the projected mind.

"And finally," he began, his voice resonating with quiet authority, "we reach **Thelissio**, or *Volition*. This, students, is the most powerful and defining component of the mind. Once the energy has been sensed through **Gnosio** and shaped through **Skepsio**, it is time for **volition** — the force of your will — to direct the surge of **Manas** into **magical energy**."

As he spoke, the glowing symbols from the earlier projection began to shift. They spiraled outward, faster and faster, forming a radiant vortex of light that seemed to pulse with life. A hum filled the room, subtle but unmistakable, as if the energy itself were responding to Professor Rheagan's words.

"This," he continued, his tone both reverent and commanding, "is the release, the surge — the *action* of magic. Through **Thelissio**, you direct the flow of energy in a focused burst, transforming your intention into reality. It is no longer a thought, no longer an idea, but a force set into motion."



To illustrate his point, he lifted his staff and pointed it toward an empty desk in the corner of the room. With a subtle flick, the tip of the staff glowed brightly, and the desk began to rise, suspended in midair. The students murmured, captivated by the display.

“This levitation,” Professor Rheagan explained, “is not simply a result of raw power. It is the culmination of the entire process of Manas. The **Gnosio** allowed me to sense the energy needed. The **Skepsio** enabled me to shape my intent into a specific form. And now, through **Thelissio**, that intent manifests as an action. It is volition that gives magic its strength.”

Eddie’s eyes followed the floating desk, marveling at how effortlessly it moved under the professor’s control. His mind buzzed with questions. Was his own volition strong enough? Had his magic ever truly been focused in this way? He’d always thought of his alchemy as a craft of precision and science, but now he wondered if he’d underestimated the role of sheer willpower in his work.

The desk lowered gently back to the floor, and Professor Rheagan turned to address the class. “**Thelissio** is the fire in the furnace, the final push that drives the mechanism of magic. But be warned: volition without control can lead to chaos. It is the most difficult component to master, for it requires not just strength, but balance. Too little volition, and your magic fizzles out. Too much, and it may spiral beyond your control.”

He paused, letting the words sink in. “Many of you will find that your struggles with magic lie not in the sensing or shaping of energy, but in this final step – the execution. You must learn to channel your will with precision, to focus your intent without hesitation or doubt. Magic, at its core, is an act of *conviction*.”

Without **Thelissio**, even the most brilliant spells are nothing more than dreams.”

Will leaned closer to Eddie, muttering under his breath, “Sounds like he's saying we have to be stubborn enough to make magic work.”

Eddie suppressed a grin, but inwardly, he agreed. There was a raw determination in the professor's words that resonated deeply. He thought of his struggles back in Weshaven, how often he'd second-guessed his own abilities. Perhaps this was what he'd been missing — a stronger resolve to see his intentions through.

Professor Rheagan lowered his staff, and the swirling projection dimmed slightly, the crimson hue fading to a soft glow. “Now,” he said, his deep voice filling the room, “I want you all to consider this: How strong is your **volition**? How much of your mind is fully committed when you cast a spell, brew a potion, or shape an incantation? It is not enough to simply go through the motions. Magic demands your whole self — your thoughts, your will, your conviction.”

The students sat in contemplative silence, the weight of the lesson settling over them. Eddie clenched his fists slightly, determination flickering in his jade-green eyes. For the first time, he felt a spark of understanding about what it would take to truly master his craft.



Professor Rheagan's staff came down onto the stone floor with a sharp *crack*, echoing through the vaulted Vulcrum Halls. The sound demanded attention, and the murmurs among the

students fell silent. The professor's deep, deliberate voice carried effortlessly through the room.

"Questions?" he asked, sweeping his gaze across the assembled students. The silence that followed was thick, expectant.

After a moment, Professor Rheagan nodded. "Very well. If there are no questions, let us move on. It is time for your first exercise—a practical exploration of the concepts we've discussed today. Many of you," his eyes lingered on a few students with elaborate robes or instruments, "are here because this is a **Foundational Course**, a requirement for mages of all disciplines. Conjurers, Alchemists, Bards, Sorcerers—you each bring different tools and philosophies. I do not care what methods you use for this exercise; I care only that you succeed."

He stepped back, gesturing with his staff. Along one side of the hall, small pedestals rose from the ground, each bearing a simple object—a crystal, a piece of bark, a small flower, and other unassuming materials. "This is what we call the **Harmonisation Exercise**. Your task is to choose one of these objects and align its energy with the ambient magical field of this hall."

Professor Rheagan began pacing as he explained further. "You may choose to calm a plant, fill a stone with warmth, or awaken the dormant properties of a crystal. The goal is to sense the object's subtle magical signature and attune it to the arcane frequency of the environment. This is not a test of power—it is a test of **understanding**, of connection."

Eddie's curiosity sparked as he observed the array of objects. The challenge seemed deceptively simple, yet the weight of the professor's tone suggested otherwise.

He stopped and turned to face them, his piercing gaze sweeping the room. "You will each choose an object from the selection

before you. Your task is to align its natural energy with the environment around you. This could mean calming a plant, filling a stone with warmth, or awakening the dormant properties of a crystal for a brief moment.”

Another flick of his staff caused the objects to slowly float toward the students, spreading across the room like a constellation of potential.

“Remember,” Professor Rheagan said, his voice steady, “this is not a test of power or speed. It is a test of your ability to connect with the world around you. Each of these objects has its own subtle magical signature, and your goal is to harmonize it with the surrounding energy field. This requires three distinct steps: **Gnosio, Skepsio, and Thelissio.**”

He raised his staff again, and the diagram of the mind reappeared in the air, its layers glowing softly. “First, you must **sense** the object’s magical essence. This is **Gnosio** – the act of perception. Close your eyes if you must. Feel the object’s aura, its pulse. What is it trying to tell you?”

Eddie picked up a small crystal from the floating selection. Its surface was smooth and cool to the touch, but as he held it, he thought he felt a faint vibration, like a heartbeat buried deep within the stone.

“Second,” Professor Rheagan continued, pointing to the second layer, “you must deliberate. This is **Skepsio** – the act of decision. Once you understand the object’s nature, consider how to guide its energy. Should it resonate with the environment? Should it be warmed, calmed, or awakened? Your intention must be precise.”

Eddie furrowed his brow, trying to focus on the crystal’s rhythm. It felt sluggish, almost drowsy, as though it were waiting for

something. He wondered if it wanted to be awakened, its potential brought to the surface.

“And finally,” Professor Rheagan said, indicating the outermost layer of the diagram, “you must act. This is **Thelissio** – the act of will. Channel your Manas, direct your intent, and allow the energies to flow. But remember: magic is not brute force. It is harmony.”

With a final gesture, the diagram faded, and Professor Rheagan addressed the class once more. “I expect you to approach this exercise with sensitivity and focus. There is no right or wrong outcome – only what you learn from the attempt. Reflect on what the object reveals to you, and let that guide your actions.”

The objects settled gently onto the desks before each student. Eddie glanced at Will, who was examining a small flower with an expression of mild confusion. Other students seemed similarly engrossed, their brows furrowed in concentration.

“I expect you to turn in the result of your exercise with a reflection paper,” Professor Rheagan said, a faint smile playing on his lips. “Take this opportunity to understand the interplay between yourself, the material world, and the Arcane Realm. I wish you the best of luck.”

He tapped his staff once more against the floor, the sound resonating with finality. “Class dismissed.”



The afternoon sun bathed Edenfield University’s sprawling courtyard in a golden light, casting long shadows of the towering

spires and arches that framed the Vulcrum Hall. Eddie walked alongside Will, the soft rustle of fallen leaves beneath their boots the only sound for a while.

Eddie held the small crystal from Professor Rheagan's class in his hand, turning it over and over, the sunlight glinting off its smooth surface. His jade-green eyes narrowed as he focused on the faint pulse he thought he could feel earlier. Was it really there, or was it just his imagination?

"Maybe I have to warm it up," Eddie muttered to himself. He tightened his grip around the crystal, half-expecting it to glow or hum. Nothing.

"What are you mumbling about?" Will asked, snapping Eddie out of his thoughts.

Eddie glanced up. Will was walking with an easy, careless stride, hands tucked into his pockets and a lopsided grin on his face. He clearly hadn't been paying attention in class – probably hadn't even realized they were supposed to practice with the objects.

"This," Eddie said, holding up the crystal. "We're supposed to activate it or... harmonize it with the environment or something. Didn't you listen?"

Will laughed. "Hah, listen? Mate, I'm a Bard. I'll just serenade it later if I have to. Right now, though, we've got more important things to do."

"More important than not failing our first exercise?" Eddie asked, raising an eyebrow.

Will waved off the concern with a dramatic flourish. "Pfft, Professor Rheagan's exercises are just to humble us, right? We're not meant to ace them. But –" He leaned closer to Eddie with a conspiratorial grin, " – do you know what *is* worth our time? The Clubs Exhibition!"

Eddie blinked. "Clubs Exhibition?"

"Yeah, it's happening on the east lawn today," Will said, practically bouncing on his heels. "Every student club in the whole university is setting up booths. Free food, free drinks, free magic demonstrations! Plus, they're all trying to recruit new members, so it's the best time to scope out the scene."

Eddie hesitated, his gaze drifting back to the crystal in his hand. He felt like he should be doing something with it, *figuring it out*. But the thought of wandering around aimlessly while Will chattered on wasn't particularly appealing either.

"You'll love it," Will pressed. "There's something for everyone — Alchemy enthusiasts, Bardic performers, even obscure stuff like Magical Gardening. And, hey, it's your first year. You've gotta live a little, right?"

Eddie sighed, slipping the crystal into his pocket. He could always experiment with it later, maybe when he had some quiet time. "Fine," he said. "Lead the way."

Will grinned triumphantly and threw an arm around Eddie's shoulders. "That's the spirit! Stick with me, and I'll show you the coolest clubs. Who knows, maybe you'll find your *people*."

As they headed toward the east lawn, Eddie couldn't help but glance back toward the Vulcrum Hall, his thoughts lingering on the Harmonization Exercise. He wasn't sure how or when, but he was determined to figure out the crystal's secret. Still, the promise of the Clubs Exhibition stirred a small flicker of excitement. Maybe this detour wouldn't be such a waste of time after all.

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Eddie's eyes widened as he stepped into the heart of the Eastern Courtyard, the bustling epicenter of the Club Exhibition. The air

was thick with energy, a kind of chaotic hum that seemed to vibrate beneath his feet. It was like a grand bazaar, but with a sense of magic and mystery woven into every interaction. As Eddie walked further in, he was reminded of the fish market in Weshaven – the same thrumming buzz of voices and the frantic energy of people trying to make their mark – but here, the sellers weren't rugged fishermen, but eager, wide-eyed students, all calling out invitations with fervor.

"Join the Alchemical Sculpting Club!" a boisterous voice boomed nearby, and Eddie caught sight of a booth decorated with swirls of bright green and gold. A young student, eyes wide with excitement, waved a banner above his head, his arms practically dancing with the motion of his words.

"Conjure your future with the Conjuration Society – come make magic with us!" another voice rang out, equally urgent, as a young woman clad in vibrant robes waved a series of magical runes in the air.

Eddie's gaze drifted over the colorful stands, his steps faltering as he tried to take it all in. There were students everywhere – dressed in every kind of magical garb imaginable, some in robes, others in casual clothes with a few telling accessories – a wand here, a staff there, a few enchanted brooches that glimmered under the sunlight. It was overwhelming. He wasn't used to this kind of *energy*.

In Weshaven, markets were full of the earthy scents of the sea and the tang of salt on the air. This was something entirely different, a kaleidoscope of color, sound, and movement that almost felt like it was *alive*. The sound of voices shouted at him from every direction.

"Learn the secrets of the Arcane Realm with the Arcane Studies Society!"



“Create wonders with the Automatons Club!”

At the heart of it all, Eddie saw a tall booth with golden streamers fluttering in the wind, decorated with symbols of the unknown. It was the Arcane Studies Society, promising “untold knowledge from beyond the Veil.” Nearby, a table was cluttered with gears and cogs, and a life-size automaton stood proudly beside its booth, its glass eyes gleaming with a strange intelligence. Eddie couldn’t help but be drawn to it, even as the calls from other booths tried to pull him in every direction.

“What are you waiting for, Ed?” Will’s voice cut through the buzz, pulling Eddie’s attention to his friend, who was grinning widely, hands already reaching for a nearby booth.

“I’m going to check out the Bards,” Will said, giving Eddie a slap on the back. “You coming?”

Eddie’s eyes flickered to the nearby stage where a group of Bards was performing, the soft strains of a lively tune floating through the air. Will’s grin was infectious, and Eddie almost nodded, but then he looked down at his hand, where the small crystal from Professor Rheagan’s class was still tucked securely in his pocket.

“I’ll catch up,” Eddie said, watching Will jog off to join a crowd near the stage.

As Will disappeared into the throng of students, Eddie was left standing at the edge of the courtyard, his pulse racing from the overwhelming sights and sounds around him. The sheer number of options was dizzying. There was the Transmuter’s Atelier, with a young woman calling out to potential members, inviting them to sculpt objects with nothing but alchemical magic. There was a booth dedicated to the Witchcraft Circle, its representative mysteriously pulling a piece of enchanted parchment from thin air as she spoke. And then there was the Illusion Club, with its

shy member passing out pamphlets that shimmered with an ethereal, shifting glow.

Eddie stood still for a moment, feeling a bit lost amidst the sea of eager students. It was easy to get swept up in the frenzy of it all, to feel as though he should know exactly where to go, what to do, but he didn't. Not yet.

It was then that he noticed a booth not too far away from him. The Transmuter's Atelier. He hadn't been able to get a good look at it before, but now that he was closer, the banner above it caught his eye. *Alchemical Sculpting: Transform the world with your hands*. The woman calling out from behind the table looked energetic, almost familiar, with a glint in her eye that spoke of someone who truly believed in what she was offering.

Eddie's curiosity piqued, he began to make his way toward the booth, dodging and weaving through the bustling crowd, feeling a spark of something unfamiliar – a quiet excitement.

The crystal still weighed heavily in his pocket, a reminder of the mystery he'd left behind, but for now, there was something new to discover. Maybe this *was* the right place to star

"Alchemy, huh?" a voice called out from his left.

Eddie turned to see a young woman with short, fiery auburn hair leaning eagerly over a booth draped in deep blue fabric. Intricate sculptures of metal and glass glittered on the table before her – a soaring phoenix, a twisting vine encased in crystal, and a miniature castle carved from what looked like solid emerald.

The woman's sharp green eyes zeroed in on Eddie's cloak with a kind of reverence. "I can't believe it. An actual Alchemy student!"

Eddie blinked. "Uh, yeah, I guess."

She dashed around the table, nearly tripping over a loose banner in her haste. "I'm Rachel Fairweather, president of *The*

*Transmuter's Atelier.*" She gestured dramatically at the sculptures. "We're the only club on campus dedicated to the art of alchemical sculpting – turning base materials into masterpieces through magical transformations!"

Eddie tilted his head, curiosity piqued. "That's... actually pretty impressive." He leaned closer to inspect the phoenix. Its metal feathers shimmered like molten gold under the sunlight, each detail impossibly precise.

Rachel caught his interest and pounced. "We need someone like you! Alchemy students are rare enough, but getting one to join a club? It's like finding powdered dragon's tooth. You *have* to join!"

Eddie raised his hands defensively. "Wait, hold on. I've barely started my first classes. I'm not even sure I'm good at alchemy yet."

Rachel clasped her hands together as if in prayer, her voice taking on an imploring tone. "Please! Most Alchemy students are too busy burying themselves in their labs to bother with clubs. But look at you! You're here. You're interested. And you're wearing the cloak – it's destiny!"

"I don't think wearing a cloak counts as destiny," Eddie said, though he couldn't help but smirk.

"I'll make it worth your while," Rachel promised, leaning in conspiratorially. "You'll get to work on real projects, create something amazing, and –" she lowered her voice, "– we've got snacks at every meeting."

Eddie glanced at the phoenix sculpture again. The idea of creating something like that stirred something in him – wonder, excitement, and maybe even a bit of pride. Still, he hesitated. "I don't know. My schedule's already pretty full."

Rachel clasped his arm, her eyes blazing with determination. "Look, listen. You've got the talent, I've got the passion, and together we could make something legendary. Please, just give us one meeting. If you hate it, I'll never bother you again."

Eddie sighed, but a grin tugged at his lips. "Fine. One meeting."

Rachel whooped, pumping her fist in the air. "Yes! You won't regret this!"

As Eddie walked away, the faint sound of her excitement still echoing behind him, he couldn't help but feel he'd just signed up for more than he bargained for.



Eddie stepped into the Workshop of the Transmuter's Atelier, and his breath caught for a moment. It was a curious, mismatched space, tucked away in an old, repurposed storage room that seemed to have once belonged to the Conjunction Lab. The air was thick with the scent of dust and old incense, as if the room had been waiting to come alive again with new ideas.

The walls were lined with shelves – some wooden, others cobbled together from old crates – and each was sagging under the weight of various half-finished sculptures, strange ingredients, and the tools of alchemy. Glass cabinets gleamed with vials of liquid in every imaginable shade, their faint, internal glow pulsing like a heartbeat. Scattered across the workbenches were open boxes of powdery substances and metal shavings, some of which looked like they could become anything – from the beginnings of a piece of delicate jewelry to a chaotic pile of twisted metal. The space was wild but inviting, a perfect reflection of the club itself.

Eddie's eyes were drawn to a massive stone hearth along one wall. Above it, an iron cauldron hung suspended over a small, flickering flame that seemed almost alive, dancing with an energy that Eddie could feel even at a distance. A large, unfinished sculpture in one corner of the room caught his attention – a half-transformed bust of a creature caught between animal and human form. Its rough, unfinished features spoke to the creative chaos of the space, like something grander waiting to take shape. Despite the disarray, the place had a certain warmth to it. There was a comfort in the clutter, a sense that every tool, every piece of material, had its purpose in the grand design of things.

Rachel was moving about the workshop with purpose, gesturing to a group of students gathered around a workbench. It was clear that she was in her element, her energy fueling the creative chaos of the room.

Eddie, still feeling the buzz of excitement and uncertainty from his earlier decision, glanced around the room for a place to settle. He noticed an empty desk – a hastily crafted one, with mismatched legs and a crooked surface – next to a girl with red hair and freckles. She was already busy scribbling something in a notebook, her brow furrowed in concentration. Eddie hesitated for a moment, but then, feeling a strange familiarity about her, he made his way over and sat down.

“Hey,” he said, trying to start a conversation as he pulled his chair closer. “You’ve been in the club for long?”

The girl looked up from her notes, her green eyes meeting his. For a split second, Eddie had the feeling he had seen her somewhere before, but the thought vanished as quickly as it came. She smiled shyly, a slight blush coloring her freckled cheeks. “No, actually,” she said softly, almost hesitantly. “I just joined today.”

Eddie chuckled, feeling a little less awkward now. "Dragged in too, aren't we?"

She laughed lightly, her hands nervously folding around her notebook. "Yeah, I guess you could say that." There was a warmth to her, though, a kind of quiet sincerity that put Eddie at ease.

He offered a smile and extended his hand. "I'm Eddie."

"Madeleine," she replied, shaking his hand with a soft grip. There was a quiet, calming presence about her that Eddie found comforting, though he still couldn't place where he might've seen her before.

"Nice to meet you, Madeleine." He settled into his chair, glancing around at the busy workshop. "I guess we're both new here."

Madeleine nodded, her expression thoughtful. "Yeah. It's a bit overwhelming, isn't it?" She gestured toward the chaotic benches and the half-finished sculptures around them. "But I think I'll like it here. It feels... different from the rest of the university."

Eddie agreed, his eyes lingering on the half-transformed bust in the corner. "Yeah, it definitely has a... certain charm." He paused, looking back at her. "So, what brought you to the club?"

She hesitated for a moment before answering, her voice barely above a whisper. "I've always liked the idea of creating something... with my hands, I guess. Something that's mine. I wasn't sure if I was ready for something like this, but... it seemed right."

Eddie nodded, understanding more than he expected. "I get that," he said quietly. "Alchemy's like that, I think — making something out of nothing, or... changing it into something else."

Madeleine's eyes lit up a little at his words, as if she'd found a kindred spirit in him. "Exactly."

Eddie smiled. Maybe he hadn't been wrong about the feeling of familiarity – there was something about her energy, the way she spoke about alchemy, that felt comforting. Despite his earlier hesitation, he was beginning to feel that maybe, just maybe, he had found the right place.

As they continued to settle into the room, the hum of magic and the buzz of creativity surrounded them. It was chaotic, yes, but it was also a space full of potential. And Eddie had a sense that this might be the start of something truly exciting.

The low hum of conversation and the clinking of tools in the workshop filled the air as Eddie and Madeleine settled into their seats, the warmth of the room making the conversation feel almost cozy amidst the chaos.

"So, what's your major?" Madeleine asked, her voice still a little shy, but curious. She glanced at the mess of sculptures and alchemical tools scattered around them, as if trying to make sense of it all.

Eddie leaned back in his chair, brushing a hand through his messy silver hair. "Alchemy," he said with a small smile, proud despite himself. "I'm majoring in Alchemy."

Madeleine blinked, clearly confused. "Alchemy?" she asked, her brow furrowing. "Which major?"

Eddie hesitated, suddenly realizing there was a bit of confusion. Alchemy could refer to the Faculty, but his major was Alchemy itself. He leaned forward slightly, trying to explain. "Uh, no, my major is just... plain ol' Alchemy. Not any specific branch. Like, the basic stuff, y'know?"

Madeleine's eyes widened, and her voice took on a note of admiration. "So, pure Alchemy then?" she said, her tone impressed. "That's very impressive! I'm also from the Faculty of

Alchemy, but I'm in the Herbalism Major. I study medicines and potions and that kind of thing. We'll be in the same building!"

Eddie's face lit up at the news. He was glad to hear that he wasn't the only one from his faculty. "Oh, nice! That's cool. I don't meet a lot of people from the Alchemy Faculty – most of the people I've met so far are from Conjuraton." He shrugged, the weight of the situation still settling on his shoulders. "Guess that's what happens when Conjuraton's the most popular."

Madeleine chuckled softly, nodding in agreement. "Yeah, I've heard that too. But we'll have a lot in common. Same building, same lectures... maybe we can study together sometime?"

Eddie smiled, feeling a little more at ease now that he had someone from his own faculty to talk to. "Actually, that sounds great. My parents made potions too, so if you ever run into any difficulties with your studies, you can always ask me. Maybe I can help out."

Madeleine's eyes brightened, and she seemed genuinely pleased by the offer. "Oh, that would be so helpful! Thank you, Eddie." There was a warmth in her voice that made Eddie feel even more like he belonged here in this chaotic workshop.

Before either of them could say more, Rachel's voice rang out, cutting through the chatter of the room. "Alright, everyone!" she called, her voice carrying a mix of excitement and authority. "Gather round! I've got an announcement!"

Eddie and Madeleine turned toward Rachel, who had stood up in the center of the room, her eyes gleaming with anticipation. The energy in the room shifted as everyone fell quiet, eager to hear what their president had to say.



## ACT II | Chapter 4



The Vulcrum Lecture Hall buzzed with quiet energy as students settled into their desks. The late-morning sunlight streamed through tall, arched windows, illuminating the rows of alchemical tools, enchanted objects, and scribbled notes scattered across the tables. Conversations filled the air, punctuated by the occasional clink of glass or hum of a spell in progress. The lecture hall, with its high vaulted ceiling and rows of wooden desks arranged in neat tiers, carried an air of age and tradition, its walls adorned with faded tapestries of arcane symbols and formulas.

Eddie sat at his desk, hunched over a piece of glass in his hands—a simple, unremarkable crystal that hadn’t changed since the day it was handed to him. He turned it over in his palms, the faint sunlight reflecting in its transparent surface, but it remained stubbornly inert, a reminder of his failure to complete the assignment. Around him, other students worked on their objects: floating rocks glimmered with faint magical auras, seeds hummed softly as tiny roots sprouted and curled, and crystals pulsed with a faint, rhythmic light that seemed to breathe.

Eddie’s stomach churned as he glanced at his classmates’ progress. They’d all figured it out—imbuing their objects with the magical harmonization required for the assignment. His crystal, however, might as well have been a paperweight. The deadline loomed like a storm cloud, and Eddie couldn’t shake the feeling that he was the only one still struggling.

Across the room, Christine loudly demonstrated her assignment to a small group, her floating rock swirling with tiny arcs of

lightning. Her voice carried easily, a sharp reminder of her confidence.

Eddie's gaze drifted back to his crystal. He clenched his fists under the desk. *Why can't I do it?* Weeks of effort, experiments, and studying hadn't helped. He felt the weight of failure pressing against his chest, growing heavier with every laugh or whispered word around him.

Next to him, Will was casually balancing his assigned feather on the tip of his finger. The feather glowed faintly, surrounded by a soft shimmer that shifted colors in lazy waves. Will's grin was infuriatingly carefree as he tilted his hand, letting the feather hover for a moment before catching it again.

Eddie sighed and slumped in his seat, his voice low with frustration. "How do you make it look so easy?"

Will glanced at Eddie, his grin faltering slightly when he noticed the untouched crystal in Eddie's hands. "Oh, come on, mate," he said, lowering his feather onto the desk. "It's not that bad. You've still got time to figure it out."

"Not really," Eddie muttered, his jade green eyes fixed on the lifeless crystal. "Class starts in a few minutes, and Professor Rheagan's going to want to see what we've done. Everyone else has something to show. I've got... nothing."

Will frowned, his carefree demeanor replaced with genuine concern. He leaned over slightly, lowering his voice. "You're overthinking it, Eddie. Harmonization's more about feeling than anything else. You've got the spark, I've seen you do stuff in the workshop. You just need to trust yourself."

Eddie gave a hollow chuckle, running a hand through his unruly silver hair. "Easy for you to say. You've already got yours done. It's literally floating in front of me."

Will leaned back, tossing the feather lightly in the air again, though his tone remained encouraging. "Alright, sure, but it's not like I didn't struggle at first. I just messed around with it until it clicked. You've got a knack for this, Eddie. Stop beating yourself up."

Eddie appreciated the sentiment, but the words did little to ease the knot of anxiety tightening in his chest. He glanced around the room again, at the enchanted objects radiating soft glows and gentle hums, and then back at his own static, unresponsive crystal. A sinking feeling settled over him — no amount of encouragement could change the fact that he hadn't done the work.

The lecture hall door creaked open, and the quiet conversations hushed almost instantly. Professor Rheagan entered, his long, dark blue robes sweeping the floor as he walked to the front of the room. His deep, resonant voice carried a quiet authority, though his expression was warm, almost fatherly. He set his books down on the lectern and surveyed the class with a measured gaze.

"Good morning, students," he began, his voice calm and deliberate. "I trust you've all had a productive week preparing your Harmonization assignments. Today, we'll be reviewing your progress, Let me see the fruits of your labor! I can practically feel the magic in the air. Today is a celebration of your efforts!"

Eddie's heart sank.

The room visibly brightened at his presence. Professor Rheagan had a way of making even the most anxious students feel like their work mattered. His bubbling excitement filled the hall, and a few chuckles rippled through the crowd as he gestured theatrically at the objects on the desks.

Eddie, however, wasn't laughing. His knuckles whitened as he gripped his unresponsive crystal, his heart hammering against his ribs. He forced himself to keep his breathing steady, but every word from the professor made the lump in his throat grow larger.

Professor Rheagan wandered the rows, stopping at Christine's desk. Her project – a glowing orb encased in delicate, swirling tendrils of translucent crystal – caught the room's attention immediately. The orb pulsed faintly, as though it had a heartbeat, and the tendrils shifted in mesmerizing patterns that made it seem alive.

"My, my!" Professor Rheagan exclaimed, leaning in to inspect the orb with an expression of sheer wonder. "Christine, is that... an ethereal mimicry? By the gods, it's almost like it has a soul! Magnificent work!"

Christine, seated with an air of practiced humility, allowed a modest smile to tug at her lips. She tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear and shrugged. "It's just an illusion, Professor," she said lightly. "I wanted to push the boundaries of the assignment."

The students murmured among themselves, a mixture of awe and envy rippling through the room. Even Eddie couldn't help but stare. The craftsmanship was impeccable, and the way the orb seemed to breathe was unnervingly lifelike.

"Illusion or not," Rheagan said, his voice full of admiration, "this is precisely the kind of creativity that transforms ordinary magic into art. Well done, Christine, well done!" He gave a slow clap, and a few other students joined in.

Rheagan continued down the rows, stopping to admire the works of other students. A stone polished to a smooth sheen radiated a faint warmth, a seedling sprouted with magical light tracing its delicate leaves, and a cluster of crystals seemed to sing softly

when touched. Each time, the professor's words were filled with encouragement and praise.

Eddie's tension grew with every compliment. Everyone else had something to show, and not just something — they had achieved works of magic that were remarkable, even to Professor Rheagan. Eddie could almost feel the weight of his lifeless crystal mocking him from the desk.

Will leaned over and whispered, "Don't sweat it, Eddie. Just tell him you're stuck. Rheagan's nice, he'll understand."

But Eddie didn't look at Will. His eyes were fixed on Professor Rheagan as the man moved closer and closer, his enthusiasm undiminished. Eddie's heart sank further into his chest, knowing his turn was coming.

Professor Rheagan clapped his hands together, his booming voice cutting through the chatter that had erupted after his rounds of praise. "Wonderful, wonderful work, my dear students! Each of you has brought something unique and magical to the table today. But..."

He paused, his gaze sweeping across the room, his expression softening slightly. "I can see that not everyone has managed to complete the assignment. And that's perfectly fine — learning magic is as much about the journey as it is the destination."

Eddie felt his stomach drop as Rheagan's eyes landed briefly on him.

"Let's address those challenges, shall we? You, my dear," Rheagan gestured to a girl near the front row, "Miss Oakley, if I'm not mistaken. Would you join me here for a moment?"

Sarah, a petite girl with light brown hair tied in a nervous braid, hesitated before rising from her seat. Her hands fidgeted with the

hem of her sleeves as she walked to the front of the hall, her face a mixture of dread and resignation.

When she reached the desk, Rheagan gave her an encouraging smile. "Now, Miss Oakley, I know it can be intimidating to share your struggles, but remember, this classroom is a place for growth, not judgment. What seems to be the trouble?"

Sarah swallowed hard, her voice trembling slightly as she answered. "I... I come from a non-magical background, Professor. My family – well, they don't practice magic, and this is all so new to me. I tried, really, I did. But every time I focused on the crystal, nothing happened. I couldn't even make it glow, let alone imbue it with anything."

The room fell silent, the other students listening intently. A few exchanged glances, and Eddie felt a pang of sympathy.

Rheagan nodded thoughtfully, stroking his beard. "Ah, I see. You're not alone, Miss Oakley. Many students here come from similar beginnings. Magic, after all, is not just a skill – it's a language, one that takes time to learn and grow comfortable with. Tell me, what did you *feel* when you were working with the crystal?"

Sarah blinked, her cheeks flushing. "Um... frustrated, mostly. I didn't know if I was doing it right, and I guess I got too nervous to concentrate."

Rheagan nodded thoughtfully, his expression kind. "A perfectly valid struggle, my dear. Magic isn't something we're born knowing – it's something we learn. And as your teacher, it's my privilege to help you along the way."

He rummaged through a small box on his desk and produced a plain, pale bean. It was unremarkable in appearance, but his tone carried weight as he held it up. "Here, Harmonizing with a stone

is indeed a challenging first step. Let us try something simpler. This bean is brimming with life already —you just need to coax it to the surface."

Sarah hesitated but took the bean with trembling hands.

"Close your eyes," Rheagan said gently, stepping closer. "Feel its potential. Imagine it sprouting, reaching toward the sunlight. Magic isn't about forcing — it's about guiding, harmonizing with what already exists."

The room watched in silence as Sarah closed her eyes. A faint glow emanated from her palms as she focused, her brow furrowing in concentration. For a moment, nothing happened. Eddie felt a pang of empathy for her; the pressure was unbearable.

But then, a spark of green burst from the bean. A tiny sprout pushed through its surface, its leaves unfolding like a shy greeting.

The hall erupted into applause, the sound filling the room like a celebratory cheer.

Sarah opened her eyes, disbelief and joy written across her face. "I did it!" she whispered, clutching the tiny sprout as if it were a treasure.

"Yes, you did!" Rheagan said, his voice booming with pride. "And that is the first step toward mastery. You should be proud, Miss Oakley."

Sarah smiled, her face aglow with newfound confidence as she returned to her seat, greeted by pats on the back and words of encouragement from her classmates.

Eddie clapped as loudly as anyone, a genuine smile on his face. For a moment, he forgot his own unfinished crystal, caught up in

the warmth of the moment. Sarah's success felt like a small victory for everyone.

Professor Rheagan's eyes swept across the room, his gaze finally settling on Eddie. His usual warm expression softened into one of understanding but also expectation. "Mister Edward Welton," he said gently, gesturing toward his desk. "Would you come forward, please?"

Eddie froze in his seat, his stomach twisting into knots. He glanced at the crystal on his desk, still as lifeless as it had been since he first received it. There was no hiding it now. With a resigned sigh, he stood, clutching the dull shard in his hand.

The walk to the front of the Vulcrum Lecture Hall felt like crossing an endless battlefield. His boots thudded against the stone steps, the sound echoing in the cavernous space. As he approached the desk, the lecture hall loomed above him, the rows of tiered seats rising like the walls of an arena.

From the front, the class looked impossibly high, rows upon rows of students sitting above him. Eddie couldn't help but think of them as judges in a grand court, each one silently assessing his failure. Their eyes felt piercing, like a thousand spotlights trained on him, each one waiting to see him flounder.

When he reached the desk, he hesitated. His throat tightened as he placed the inert crystal down, its dull, glassy surface catching the light but holding none of the brilliance seen in the other students' projects.

Professor Rheagan's calm voice broke the tense silence. "Now, Mr. Welton, tell me," he said, leaning slightly forward, "what has held you back from completing this task?"



Eddie swallowed hard. His voice wavered as he answered. "I—I don't know, sir. I tried everything I could think of, but nothing worked. It's like... the crystal won't respond to me."

Rheagan nodded, his expression unreadable but kind. "A common challenge, Mr. Welton. Sometimes, the difficulty lies not in the magic itself, but in our approach. Harmonization requires not only focus but also understanding — of the object, and of ourselves."

Eddie shifted uncomfortably, acutely aware of every pair of eyes on him. His hands fidgeted at his sides.

The professor picked up the crystal and turned it over in his hands, inspecting it thoughtfully. "You're an Alchemy student, yes? Your gift lies in transformation — taking something and revealing its potential. Tell me, Mr. Welton, what does this crystal mean to you?"

Eddie blinked. The question caught him off guard. "Mean to me?" he echoed.

"Yes," Rheagan said with a nod. "Every object has its nature, but it also takes on meaning from its wielder. Why this crystal? What do you see in it?"

Eddie hesitated, his mind scrambling for an answer. His palms were clammy, and his voice felt small. "It's... just a crystal. I don't see anything in it. I—I don't know what to see."

A few murmurs rippled through the room, but Rheagan held up a hand, silencing them. "And therein lies the first lesson. Magic isn't about forcing something to happen — it's about seeing what already exists and guiding it into becoming. Transformation begins with perspective."

The professor placed the crystal back in Eddie's hands and stepped back, his gaze steady. "Let us try together. Close your

eyes. Breathe. Forget the audience, forget the task. What do you feel?"

Eddie shut his eyes, his hands tightening around the crystal. At first, there was only the uncomfortable awareness of his classmates watching him, the weight of their expectations pressing down on him. But as the seconds ticked by, he tried to follow the professor's advice.

The crystal was cool in his palm, smooth and solid. It felt like a small, inert piece of the earth, something ancient and patient. He focused on that thought, imagining the millennia it had existed before it found its way into his hands.

"Good," Rheagan said softly. "Now, what do you wish to bring out of it? What does it wish to become?"

Eddie's brow furrowed. He didn't know. But as he concentrated, he felt a faint flicker — like a distant spark buried deep within the crystal. It was fragile, almost imperceptible, but it was there.

"I think..." Eddie whispered, his voice trembling. "I think it wants to shine."

Rheagan smiled. "Then help it find its light, Eddie."

The air in the lecture hall was heavy with silence, save for the faint rustle of students shifting in their seats. Eddie could feel every eye in the room on him, their gazes piercing like needles. His palms were sweaty, and his heart thudded in his chest.

He pointed the wand at the crystal, its tip trembling slightly. Closing his eyes, Eddie tried to block out the oppressive atmosphere of the room. He focused on the lessons from the past weeks, recalling Professor Rheagan's words about harmonization: *"Feel the object's essence. Guide it, don't force it."*

His mind raced as he visualized the spark within the crystal, imagining it bursting to life. *Come on*, he thought desperately. *You can do this.*

With a whispered incantation, Eddie poured his will into the spell.

The wand's tip glimmered faintly, and the crystal trembled on the desk. A barely perceptible nudge—it wobbled ever so slightly but remained unchanged.

Nothing.

A muffled chuckle broke the silence, followed by a ripple of laughter from Christine's row. She leaned back in her seat, smirking as she whispered something to her neighbor, her voice just loud enough to carry. Eddie didn't need to hear the words to know they were mocking.

Even Will, sitting near the back, stifled a chuckle. His expression quickly shifted to one of pity, but the damage was done. Eddie's stomach twisted.

Professor Rheagan raised a hand, and the room immediately fell silent. His warm smile never faltered. "A subtle shift, Eddie. That is a start," he said, his voice steady and encouraging. "Many students struggle to find even that much movement. Now, tell me—what were you thinking as you cast the spell?"

Eddie lowered his wand, his cheeks flushed. He stared at the crystal, unable to meet the professor's eyes. "I... I was trying to make it glow. I imagined it lighting up, but nothing happened."

Rheagan nodded thoughtfully. "You are focusing on the end result, but perhaps not enough on the process. Harmonization isn't just about what you want—it's about finding balance between your will and the object's nature."

Professor Rheagan's warm smile softened further as he regarded Eddie's nervous posture. He placed a hand on Eddie's shoulder, his touch light yet reassuring. "It's all right, Eddie. Every wizard's journey starts with a first step, and sometimes, we have to take smaller steps before we can run."

Eddie looked down, his cheeks still burning. He tried to muster a weak smile but failed.

Rheagan gently took the crystal from Eddie's hand. "This task — harmonizing a crystal — can be tricky. Quartz, for all its simplicity, is stubborn. It requires not only precision but also an understanding that takes time to develop."

Turning to his desk, Rheagan reached into a small wooden box and retrieved a smooth, brown acorn. It looked ordinary, its surface matte with a faint sheen from natural oils. "Let's try this instead," the professor said, holding it up for Eddie to see. "This acorn already carries life within it. All it needs is a little encouragement. Your task is simple: help it sprout."

He placed the acorn gently into Eddie's hand.

Eddie felt a mix of relief and humiliation. On one hand, the task was clearly easier than activating a crystal, and he felt a glimmer of hope that he might not fail completely. But on the other hand, the gesture made it clear that Professor Rheagan thought he wasn't capable of handling the original assignment.

As the class watched in silence, Eddie caught the unmistakable sound of Christine stifling a laugh. "An acorn," she whispered to the girl next to her, loud enough for Eddie to hear. "What's next? A dandelion seed?" Her row erupted into quiet snickers.

Eddie's grip tightened around the acorn, his jaw clenched. He stole a glance at Will, who gave him an encouraging nod. Still,

the damage was done. The whispers and chuckles had struck a nerve.

Eddie's pride churned within him, making his chest feel tight. He was an Alchemist – someone who worked with transformations and the essence of matter itself. How could he struggle so much with basic magical harmonization? The thought of Christine and the others mocking him, of Will pitying him, made his stomach twist.

"Take your time," Rheagan said, his voice calm and unbothered by the murmurs in the room. "Feel the acorn's potential. Remember, it already has the will to grow. Your task is not to create something new but to guide what is already there."

Eddie took a deep breath, the professor's words a small anchor in the storm of his emotions. He placed the acorn on the desk and pointed his wand at it. His resolve wavered as his thoughts screamed at him: *You're better than this! You should be able to do this without such help!*

Closing his eyes, Eddie forced himself to focus. He tried to feel the acorn in his mind – its potential, as Professor Rheagan described. He imagined roots unfurling from within, a tiny sprout breaking free from its shell.

The room was still, the murmurs gone, as everyone watched Eddie's second attempt.

The weight of the lecture hall pressed down on Eddie, an oppressive silence hanging in the air after the professor's praise. The small spark of accomplishment he had felt earlier quickly dimmed as the seeds of doubt took root. His mind was clouded with the sting of his own pride and humiliation. He wasn't supposed to be here, not in front of everyone. Not with all of them watching.

His fingers tightened around his wand. His breath was shallow, each inhale feeling like it was too much. *I'm an Alchemist*, Eddie thought, the words almost a mantra. *I shouldn't be struggling. I shouldn't need help. I should be able to handle this.*

His thoughts spiraled, faster and faster. Every laugh, every whisper, every look of pity from Christine's row, from Will, from Rachel – it all rushed through him like a storm. The acorn sat there before him, so simple, so small, and yet it was a symbol of everything he couldn't seem to control. His magic. His failure.

With a deep, shaky breath, Eddie pointed his wand at the acorn again. His hand trembled, but the pressure inside him – an overwhelming force of emotion – was building, gnawing at him. It was as if the frustration, the humiliation, and the insecurity were all bubbling up inside him, demanding release.

The acorn wobbled, trembling beneath the intense surge of magic Eddie poured into it. The ground beneath his feet hummed with energy. His chest tightened. It wasn't enough. It needed to be more.

*"Sprout."* Eddie's voice cracked as he whispered the spell, but something in his words was more than just the incantation. His anger, his hurt, his frustration – all of it poured into the spell. The acorn shook violently, its shell cracking open at the speed of thought, sprouting impossibly fast. The green tendrils shot upward, turning from a delicate sprout to a massive, thick trunk in mere seconds. The bark of the tree grew rough and knotted, its branches sprawling outward like arms reaching to the heavens.

A thunderous *crack* echoed through the Vulcrum Lecture Hall as the oak tree's growth burst through the ceiling, shattering the stained glass windows above. The tree's roots ripped through the stone floor as it continued to grow, its massive branches casting shadows over the students below. The once-bright sunlight was

obscured, leaving the entire hall in darkness save for the glowing edges of the oak's foliage.

The entire class stared in stunned silence, their eyes wide with disbelief. The oak tree's trunk was so thick it seemed to tower above the very rafters of the lecture hall. What Eddie had done should not have been possible. A simple acorn imbued with so much magic that it transformed into a centuries-old oak, its roots and branches now tangled with the room's rafters and floating debris.

Professor Rheagan stood motionless at the front of the hall, his face a mask of both awe and horror. He had expected Eddie's magic to result in a simple sprout – a modest task that fit the boy's current abilities. But this? This was something else entirely.

The professor took a long breath, clearly trying to maintain his composure. "Mr. Welton..." he said softly, his voice trembling slightly. "Please, return to your seat."

Eddie's heart pounded in his chest as the enormity of what he had just done washed over him. The tree loomed like a living thing, its thick trunk and sprawling branches casting a shadow over his classmates. *What have I done?* The thought echoed over and over in his mind.

He stumbled back to his desk, his legs unsteady beneath him. He could hear Christine's muttered gasp of disbelief, followed by a nervous chuckle from Will. The whispers had begun again.

Professor Rheagan, regaining some semblance of control, turned to his Lecture Assistants, older students clad in deep blue cloaks. "Quickly," he ordered. "Shrink the tree. We need to clear this space to finish the lecture."

The assistants, visibly startled but professional, began to move with purpose. One by one, they raised their wands, directing

magic at the massive oak. Slowly, the tree began to shrink, its immense size collapsing upon itself as the magic took hold. With each passing second, the enormous trunk shrank in scale, the branches folding back in on themselves like an illusion unraveling.

The tree, now reduced to a manageable size, sat awkwardly in the corner of the lecture hall. The damage was done. The air still held a strange, buzzing energy, and the remnants of broken glass littered the floor. Eddie couldn't bring himself to look at anyone, his face flushed with a mixture of embarrassment and shame.

Professor Rheagan cleared his throat, his voice regaining some warmth, though still carrying a hint of concern. "Thank you, Eddie. That will be all for today. I believe we've learned the... value of restraint."

The professor gave a nervous chuckle, trying to lighten the mood, but Eddie could barely hear it over the pounding of his own heart.

The professor's words felt distant, as if they were coming from another world, one that Eddie couldn't seem to reach. His heart was still racing from the magic he had unleashed, and the weight of the lecture hall's eyes upon him seemed unbearable.

He just wanted to disappear.



As Eddie made his way back to his desk, every step felt like it was being magnified by the silence that followed him. The stares from his classmates pierced him, each gaze heavy with a mix of fear, awe, and confusion. It was as if they were looking at



something that didn't belong — something they couldn't understand.

His stomach twisted into knots, the familiar feeling of being an outsider creeping back in. *It's Major Academy all over again*, Eddie thought bitterly, sinking into his seat. *They see my magic as something to be feared, not something to be understood.*

The whispers started again. He could hear the students muttering amongst themselves, their words a jumble of disbelief, admiration, and, he couldn't help but notice, a hint of wariness. His magic, once a source of wonder, had become something dangerous — something uncontrollable.

Eddie buried his face in his hands, trying to block out the noise. The weight of the moment was too much. He should have controlled it. He should have... *Why can't I just be like them?* he thought, clenching his fists beneath the desk. The guilt was suffocating. *Why do I have to make everything go wrong?*

Then, a sharp slap on his back jolted him out of his thoughts, causing him to wince.

"Holy shit, Ed!" Will's voice rang out with laughter, his tone a mixture of disbelief and genuine admiration. "Couldn't do magic, my ass! You're a monster! Look at that thing! Nobody's gonna mess with you after they saw that piece of work!" Will slapped him on the back again, a wide grin plastered on his face.

For a moment, Eddie felt a flicker of something — *relief*— but it quickly disappeared. The words should have felt like a compliment. They *should* have felt like validation, but all he could think about was the chaos he had just unleashed. The oak tree had been beautiful in its own way, but it was also a reminder of how little control Eddie had over his own abilities. The tree was a

reflection of everything he feared about his magic – too much power, too little restraint.

He forced a smile in return, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Thanks," he muttered, trying to sound more confident than he felt. The weight of the guilt still pressed down on him, making it hard to breathe.

Will didn't seem to notice, or perhaps he was just too caught up in the spectacle to care. His grin never faltered as he continued, clearly impressed. "Dude, that was insane. I mean, sure, it was a little *big*... but that's some next-level stuff. You're like a walking disaster machine, Ed. In a good way!" He laughed, slapping Eddie on the shoulder again.

Eddie couldn't help but chuckle, though it felt hollow. *A walking disaster machine*. That's exactly what it felt like. Everything he touched seemed to explode in a way he couldn't control. He glanced at the tree, now shrunk to a fraction of its original size, sitting awkwardly in the corner of the room like a forgotten relic.

But then Will's words lingered in his mind. *In a good way?*

A flicker of something – maybe pride, or maybe just the desperate need for affirmation – flickered in Eddie's chest. He wasn't sure. It was hard to tell anymore.

"Yeah," Eddie said softly, glancing around at his classmates, their eyes still fixed on him with a strange combination of awe and fear. "Maybe a little too much magic for a single acorn..."

Will laughed again, though Eddie could sense a hint of discomfort in his voice this time, as if the magnitude of Eddie's power was finally settling in. But he didn't say anything else. He just looked at Eddie, his grin still there, but now laced with an unspoken understanding. Eddie wasn't sure what that meant, but

for the first time since the explosion of the oak tree, he felt... something. Not relief, but perhaps a little less alone.

It wasn't much, but it was enough for now.

Professor Rheagan tapped his staff on the ground, the soft thud echoing through the hall, instantly drawing the students' attention back to him. The dimmed lighting of the Vulcrum Lecture Hall seemed to have shifted without notice, casting long shadows across the room. The contrast between the sunlight pouring in through the shattered glass above and the new shadows dancing on the walls made the entire hall feel almost eerie, like something out of a dream.

Behind the professor, Eddie couldn't help but glance at the lecture assistants – older students who had been sent to deal with the giant oak tree Eddie had unintentionally created. They were huddled together in a quiet corner, exchanging confused glances, unsure of how to shrink the massive tree. The sight only deepened Eddie's guilt, the reminder that his magic had thrown the lecture into chaos. He slouched a bit in his seat, wishing he could melt into the shadows himself.

Will, on the other hand, seemed highly entertained by the situation. His eyes sparkled with mischief, and he couldn't hide a small grin as he watched the assistants try – and fail – to find a solution. Eddie gave him a sidelong glance, but Will just nudged him and whispered, "This is gold, Ed. Pure comedy."

Professor Rheagan cleared his throat, regaining the students' attention. The warmth that had previously filled the room was now replaced by a more serious air, though his usual twinkle remained in his eyes.

"You have all done fantastic work so far," Professor Rheagan began, his voice rich and soothing. "Each of you has displayed

creativity and unique approaches to this task, and I couldn't be more pleased with your efforts."

The students nodded appreciatively, though the tension in the air lingered from Eddie's mishap. Still, the praise seemed to lift everyone's spirits.

The professor gave a small smile, clearly amused by the students' reactions. "But now," he continued, his voice dropping slightly for emphasis, "I have something new for you. Something that will require you to combine your skills, your knowledge, and most importantly – your ability to collaborate."

A murmur ran through the room.

"This will be your final project for the semester," Professor Rheagan announced, his voice now carrying a hint of mischief. "A group project."

A collective groan rippled through the class, loud and unified. Eddie couldn't help but wince at the sound, but he felt a pang of curiosity. He hadn't expected this. Will, still amused by the earlier scene, let out an exaggerated sigh and leaned back in his chair, clearly unbothered.

Professor Rheagan chuckled at their groans, clearly enjoying the reaction. "I know, I know. But hear me out. This task will give you the chance to work together, and perhaps most importantly, you'll see how the combined efforts of different minds can create something extraordinary."

Eddie wasn't so sure about working in a group. After all, his previous experiences with teamwork had never been smooth, especially with his tendency to take on too much responsibility himself. But something about the professor's words made him feel a little more optimistic. Maybe this would be different. Maybe.

Will seemed more relaxed, shrugging. "Alright, sounds interesting enough," he muttered to Eddie. "I can't wait to see who I get paired with. Might actually be fun."

Eddie nodded absently, already wondering what the project would involve. It was going to be a challenge for sure, but perhaps—just maybe—it could be the opportunity to show everyone that he could control his magic, that he wasn't just a walking disaster.

Professor Rheagan's eyes twinkled as he surveyed the students. "The groups will be assigned at random," he said, his voice taking on a teasing note. "So prepare yourselves. And remember, this is a chance to learn from one another."

The room filled with a buzz of excitement mixed with trepidation as the students leaned forward in their seats, eager to hear more. The task, whatever it was, had just taken a new turn.

The low murmur of students gradually quieted as Professor Rheagan tapped his staff once more, signaling the beginning of the next phase of the class. His eyes sparkled with a mix of excitement and anticipation as he leaned forward slightly, making the entire room feel like it was on the edge of something important.

"Now," Professor Rheagan began, his voice steady yet filled with that usual undercurrent of enthusiasm, "For your final project, you'll be working together in groups to complete a very special exercise called *The Harmonization Ritual*."

He paused, letting the words settle over the class. A few students exchanged curious glances, while others appeared a bit wary. Eddie, still trying to shake off the lingering embarrassment of his earlier mistake, felt a bit uneasy. But there was something about the professor's tone that made him lean in just a little.

Professor Rheagan gestured toward the front of the room, where a large wooden table stood, covered in various items – small crystals, vials of water, stones, and plants. “This project is about learning to harmonize multiple objects into a single magical resonance. It’s not just about one person’s power; it’s about how you, as a group, can combine your strengths and create something greater than the sum of its parts.”

The professor’s eyes twinkled as he saw the puzzled looks on some of the students’ faces. “Let me break it down for you. Each group will receive four objects: a plant, a crystal, a stone, and a vial of water. Each of these objects carries its own unique magical signature – one that reflects its inherent properties. Your task is to harmonize those energies into a single, cohesive force.”

He paused for dramatic effect, his voice lowering slightly, “When done correctly, the objects will interact to create a visible magical effect. It could be a faint glow from the crystal, a soothing sound from the plant, or perhaps a slight breeze or a warm sensation in the air. The goal is to get all four objects to resonate together in perfect harmony.”

Eddie shifted in his seat, the idea of manipulating all four objects simultaneously seeming both daunting and exciting. He glanced at Will, who looked intrigued but not overly concerned.

Professor Rheagan’s gaze swept the room, then returned to his notes. “But of course, this won’t be easy. Each of you will take responsibility for one object. The plant, the crystal, the stone, and the water. You’ll need to sense the unique energy of your assigned object and work together to make sure each energy complements the others.”

A few students were taking notes, while others exchanged more hushed whispers. The professor continued, outlining the task in more detail.

“Here’s how it works:”

“Each group member will begin by sensing the energy of their assigned object. This is a key part of the task. You need to understand how the object resonates – what kind of energy it holds. The plant may feel soothing or nurturing, while the crystal could feel sharp and vibrant. The stone may give off a stable, grounding energy, and the water, well, it may feel fluid and malleable. You’ll share your findings with the group, discussing how these energies might interact. Do they complement each other? Do they clash? This is where you must deliberate and find a collective understanding.”

The students exchanged glances, some already eager to jump into the process.

“Once you’ve sensed the energies, you’ll move on to alignment. This step requires careful deliberation. Should one object’s energy dominate while the others adjust to it? Should you amplify a single shared quality, like tranquility or warmth? As a group, you’ll need to decide on a strategy. Each student will align their object independently at first, but the goal is to adjust your techniques to fit the overall plan. Every action you take individually must contribute to the collective success of the group.”

Eddie’s mind raced. He could see how this would require a great deal of communication, compromise, and trust. He wasn’t sure how well he worked in groups, but he had to admit this challenge was intriguing.

“Finally, once the objects are aligned, you’ll move into the most delicate step – combining your energies. At this stage, every group member will channel their *Manas* simultaneously, synchronizing their efforts to merge the energies into a cohesive whole. Timing, intent, and coordination will be key. If even one

of you overpowers your object's energy, the ritual could destabilize. One student might focus on calming the energy of a chaotic crystal, while another amplifies the grounding nature of the stone. Together, you'll create a balanced, magical interaction. And when you succeed, that's when the magic happens."

Professor Rheagan paused for a moment, allowing the weight of his words to settle. "When successful, the objects will produce a clear magical effect: perhaps the crystal will glow faintly, the plant will release a soothing aroma, the stone will radiate warmth, or the water will ripple gently. But if you fail to balance the energies, well... things could get unpredictable. The crystal could crack, the plant might wilt, and the water could evaporate in strange ways."

Eddie's mind started to spin. It sounded complicated, but it also felt like a chance to redeem himself. Perhaps he could contribute something unique with his knowledge of Alchemy. He wasn't sure how he'd handle the group dynamics, but he knew this project could be a huge opportunity to show what he was capable of.

Professor Rheagan smiled warmly at the class, seeing the apprehension in some students' faces and the excitement in others. "This project is designed to push you to work together. It's about division of responsibility and collaboration. You will each be responsible for your object, but your success will depend on how well you communicate, collaborate, and synchronize your efforts."

He gestured to the group assignments, which would be made shortly. "You will also encounter natural tension. Different magical styles will create conflict, and that's okay. Christine, for example, might rush ahead and try to impose her will on the objects, but that's where Ashley's careful approach will balance



things out. Eddie, your unexpected insights – though a bit chaotic at times – could provide the key to stabilizing things.”

Eddie’s heart skipped a beat as Professor Rheagan’s eyes briefly lingered on him, then turned back to the class. “Remember, each of you has something valuable to contribute. It’s about finding harmony between your differences.”

The professor nodded, his smile growing wider. “Now, groups will be assigned at random. So, get ready to work with your fellow students. And when you do, remember that this project is about more than just completing the task – it’s about learning to blend your individual skills into something greater. I look forward to seeing what you all create.”

With a final tap of his staff, Professor Rheagan signaled the end of his explanation, and the room buzzed with anticipation. The students began murmuring excitedly, eager to find out which group they would be in and what their role would be in this magical challenge.

Eddie’s palms were sweating as he looked around the room. This project was going to be more than just a challenge; it would test him in ways he hadn’t expected.



Professor Rheagan's voice cut through the murmur of excitement that filled the room. "Alright, now that you all understand the task, it's time to get organized. I'd like you to form into groups of three. Each group will be responsible for one set of objects, so

choose wisely. Once you've formed your groups, submit your group name and student numbers to my assistants at the front."

As he spoke, his eyes twinkled with amusement as he motioned toward his lecture assistants, who were still standing at the front, looking thoroughly confused. One assistant, a lanky student with glasses, was holding his hands awkwardly by his sides, trying and failing to shrink the giant oak tree Eddie had summoned earlier. The tree loomed in the corner of the room, its oversized branches blocking the light, casting strange shadows across the hall.

Eddie couldn't help but smirk at the sight. The lecture assistants were well-intentioned but had clearly been thrown off by the sheer size of the oak. He felt a pang of guilt but quickly brushed it aside—he hadn't meant for the tree to become so... monumental.

Professor Rheagan didn't seem bothered by the delay. He merely gave a small chuckle, waving his hand toward the assistants.

"Don't worry about them. You have time to form your groups and get organized. Go ahead and take a look around, see who you might want to partner up with."

With that, the students began to stir, slowly standing and gathering in small clusters. Eddie felt a mix of anticipation and nervousness. This was the moment he'd been waiting for—the chance to work with others, to prove himself as a competent mage, not just the newcomer with a lot to learn.

Will, who had been hanging back, immediately clapped Eddie on the back. "Alright, Ed! You're with me. Let's show them what we've got, huh?" Will grinned, clearly undeterred by the complicated task ahead.

Eddie gave him a small, uncertain smile. "Yeah... but we still need one more person, right?"

Will's grin widened. "You bet! Let's go find someone who knows their stuff. I'm not about to get stuck with someone who can't keep up."

Eddie nodded, his gaze shifting across the room, scanning the sea of students. There were several familiar faces, but none he felt particularly comfortable approaching just yet. He couldn't help but feel a little out of place among the more seasoned students — he had only just arrived at Edenfield, after all. But he pushed the feeling aside. This was his chance to learn, and to be a part of something bigger than himself.

As Eddie started to move, he caught sight of Christine, who was already making her way toward a pair of students near the front. Her confidence was unmistakable as she flashed a quick smile at a couple of her classmates and began to speak animatedly about the task ahead. Eddie wasn't sure he was ready to work with someone so assertive, but he also knew she was talented — no doubt about it.

Eddie nudged Will, a slight frown on his face as he watched him scan the lecture hall. "Hey, you've got any idea on who our third member will be?"

Will grinned confidently, his eyes scanning the room. "Oh, I've got some ideas," he said, already standing up and brushing off his jacket. "I'll introduce you to them! They're an awesome bunch!"

Without another word, Will strode off with his usual confidence, weaving through clusters of students. His easygoing demeanor and charming smile made him a natural at gathering attention. He waved at a few of his friends, exchanging jovial greetings, and enthusiastically extended his invitation to join their project.

But one by one, his attempts to recruit someone hit a wall. Several students were already busy with their own groups, while others hesitated, offering polite but firm refusals. Will's smile faltered, though his good-natured energy remained intact. He was used to being the center of attention, and it was rare for him to be turned down.

Still, the seconds ticked by, and Will's usual enthusiasm started to wane as the group he was hoping for began to dwindle. Each time he turned someone down, Eddie could see the charm in Will's eyes dimming just a little more, replaced with frustration that he couldn't quite hide. He moved from one group to another, always cheerful, but the charm was starting to feel forced.

After a few more failed attempts, Will finally gave up. His shoulders slumped slightly as he walked back to Eddie, hands in his pockets, a rueful grin on his face.

"I take that back," he said with a sigh, his voice laced with a bit of disappointment. "I have no idea who our third member is going to be." He threw his hands up in mock surrender. "It's like everyone's already paired up! What's your suggestion?"

Eddie leaned in, a smirk playing on his lips. "My suggestion?" he said with a hint of hope. He'd been trying to think of a way to make their project work, and it seemed like forming a solid team might be the answer. He glanced over toward Ashley, who stood quietly near the back of the room, deep in thought. "We get Ashley."

Will froze mid-step, his eyes widening as he whipped his head toward Eddie. "Ashley?!" he hissed, voice hushed in disbelief. "Ashley Mayfair? That witch girl from Conjuraton?"

Eddie nodded, unfazed by Will's dramatic reaction. "Yeah, her."

"No!" Will's voice was firm, almost scornful. He took a step back, his face set in stubborn disapproval. "I'm not working with her."

Eddie blinked in surprise, unsure of where this sudden hostility was coming from. "What do you mean, no?" he protested, his tone a little sharper than he intended. "She doesn't seem like she's in a group yet!"

"Oh, that's because *no one* wants to work with her!" Will's voice dropped a notch, a hint of frustration creeping into his words.

"I've been with her since Orientation Week, and let me tell you, she's a piece of work! She's all idealistic and rule-abiding, always trying to make everything 'perfect.' No way I'm teaming up with her."

Eddie raised an eyebrow, taken aback by the venom in Will's voice. "Come on, Will, she's good with magic," he countered, trying to keep his tone calm despite the mounting tension. "She could definitely make up for my lack of magic. What do you say?"

Will scoffed, his arms crossing tightly over his chest. "Good with magic? Sure, if you like people who treat every spell like it's some sacred ritual. She's not practical, Eddie. She's *all* about theory and ideals. No way she's gonna fit in with us."

Eddie could feel his patience thinning, but he wasn't ready to give up yet. "Come on, Will, we can't just do this alone. Your magic is strong, but even you know that you need balance. And she's —"

"Balance?!" Will interrupted, raising his voice just enough to make a few heads turn. He lowered it quickly, but the frustration was still there. "We don't need balance, Eddie. We've got what we need already. You've got the brains, and I've got the muscle. Who needs a stick-in-the-mud like her slowing us down?"

Eddie bit his lip, trying not to let the words get to him. He'd seen this side of Will before – always the confident, cocky one who thought he could do everything on his own. But the project required more than just magic; it required cooperation, and Will was starting to forget that.

He sighed and nudged Will with his elbow. "Look, I'm telling you. She's *good* at magic. And she might have a different approach, but maybe that's what we need. I don't know about you, but I'm not ready to risk failing this project just because you can't stand working with someone who doesn't think like you."

Will shot Eddie an exasperated look, his expression softening but still clearly skeptical. "You really think she'll be useful?"

Eddie shrugged. "I think it's worth a shot."

Will threw Eddie a sharp glare, his eyes narrowing with defiance as he muttered under his breath, "Fine. Let's get started then. But if this doesn't work out, Eddie, I'm holding you responsible for this." His voice was laced with reluctant agreement, the tone leaving no question that he wasn't fully on board with the idea.

Eddie, however, was undeterred. A grin spread across his face as he gave Will a thumbs-up. "Great!" he said with enthusiasm, though his gaze flicked to Will one last time. "Trust me, you won't regret it!" With that, he stood and made his way toward Ashley, the adrenaline of the task ahead beginning to pulse in his veins.

Ashley sat alone at the back of the lecture hall, seemingly lost in her own world. She was doodling on her scroll, her focus entirely on the swirling, abstract patterns she was sketching, her quill moving effortlessly across the paper. The room hummed with conversation and movement, but she seemed unaware of it all, as if the world had faded into the background.

Eddie paused for a moment, watching her. He cleared his throat, suddenly feeling the weight of the task ahead. He took a step forward and tried to catch her attention. "Um, hey Mayfair? Can I talk to you for a moment?"

Ashley didn't immediately respond, her quill continuing to move across the scroll as if she hadn't heard him. Eddie took another step, raising his voice just slightly. "Hey, Mayfair?"

Finally, Ashley looked up, her eyes widening just a little in surprise. It was clear she hadn't expected anyone to approach her, especially during a lecture. "Oh, hey Welton," she said, her voice warm but tinged with a hint of curiosity. "What's up?"

Eddie fidgeted for a moment, trying to steady his nerves. This wasn't exactly the easiest thing to ask, but he knew it was the best option. "Well, you see, I know this might seem a bit out of the blue, but... would you be interested in partnering with Will and me for the Harmonisation Ritual project?"

Ashley blinked, clearly caught off guard by the request. She raised an eyebrow, a spark of curiosity in her eyes. "Really? I mean, I didn't expect you guys to ask me. Why me?"

Eddie shifted uncomfortably, trying to find the right words. He hadn't exactly thought this through—he was just hoping she'd say yes. "Well, to be honest, we've been having a bit of trouble finding a third partner, and I couldn't help but notice how good you are when it comes to magic," he said, glancing down at the acorn on her desk. It had sprouted, and Eddie noticed how it seemed to be looping in a small, continuous circle, a magical flourish that was clearly a product of Ashley's focus and skill. "Especially looking at your current work," he added with a nod toward her project. "I think your magical prowess could really complement ours, and... well, we could use all the help we can get."

Ashley looked down at the acorn, then back up at Eddie. She studied him for a moment, her expression thoughtful. "Hmm," she said, her tone reflective. "I mean, I could help, of course. I do have experience with magic, but..."

Eddie quickly stepped in, eager to sell the idea. "We're not asking for just *help*," he said with a reassuring smile. "We need someone who knows what they're doing – someone who can really bring something extra to the table. You've got the skills, Ashley. We could make a great team."

Ashley paused, her gaze drifting from the acorn back to Eddie. She seemed lost in thought for a moment, as if weighing the offer carefully. After a beat, she looked up at him, her expression thoughtful. "I see. Well, I appreciate the vote of confidence, Edward. It's just... I'm not sure if I'd be much help. I'm not exactly the most outgoing person like you and Will, and I'm still trying to wrap my head around some of the material."

Eddie chuckled softly, a reassuring smile spreading across his face. "Trust me, Ashley, we're all in the same boat here. Especially Will. None of us have all the answers, but that's why we're a team!"

Ashley gave him a small, hesitant smile in return, her eyes brightening just slightly. She nodded, her shoulders relaxing a bit. "Alright, count me in. Let's do this."

Eddie's smile widened, and without missing a beat, he extended his hand to her. "Deal. Welcome to the team, Ashley. We're lucky to have you."

Ashley hesitated for just a moment before she reached out and shook his hand, the simple gesture marking the beginning of their collaboration. The energy in the room felt lighter, and Eddie couldn't help but feel a flicker of hope. They had their team, and



with Ashley on board, he was more confident than ever that they could pull off the Harmonisation Ritual.

As Eddie and Ashley approach their seats, Will looks up from his notes, his expression shifting quickly from surprise to skepticism. His eyes flicker between Eddie and Ashley, a clear sign that he's still not entirely on board with the arrangement.

"Hey Will," Eddie says, trying to sound upbeat, "meet Ashley. She's agreed to join our group for the Harmonisation Ritual project. I suppose you guys have met before."

Will's expression hardens slightly as he glances at Ashley, the tension palpable. He forces a smile, but it's tight, like it's being held together by sheer willpower. "Ah, yeah, we've crossed paths a few times."

Ashley mirrors his forced smile, her tone equally stiff. "Yeah, a few times."

Eddie can feel the air growing heavier as the uncomfortable silence stretches on. He clears his throat, trying to steer things back to neutral ground. "Well, great! Now that we're all here, we can start discussing our plan for the project."

But before any further conversation could take place, the bell rings, signaling the end of class. The sudden noise breaks the tension momentarily, and the three of them gather their materials in an awkward silence.

Eddie leads the way, walking toward the exit with Will and Ashley in tow, each of them seemingly lost in their own thoughts. As they exit the Vulcrum Lecture Hall, Eddie takes the form paper from his bag and approaches the lecture assistant. With a brief nod, he submits the paper, where their names are now written under the project.

"Edward Welton – Alchemy William Chester – Bardry Ashley Mayfair – Witchery"

Eddie feels a small sense of accomplishment as he hands in the form, but the uncertainty still hangs in the air. Their group was officially formed, but the road ahead wasn't going to be easy – not with the lingering grudge between Will and Ashley. Eddie just hoped they could find a way to make it work.



The final bell rings, and the clatter of chairs and the murmur of departing students fill the air, signaling the end of another day of classes at Edenfield University. As the rush of footsteps fades, the university lawn transforms into a sanctuary of activity. The once quiet space is now alive with students eager to unwind, their voices a cheerful hum that adds to the atmosphere of relaxation and recreation.

The towering oak tree, still evident from Eddie's earlier misfire during the Harmonisation lesson, looms above the Vulcrum Lecture Hall. Its vast branches pierce the glass roof, a reminder of Eddie's unfortunate lack of magical control. The tree stands as an awkward symbol of their fledgling group's future – one that Eddie hopes won't be as chaotic.

Bathed in the warmth of the afternoon sun, the university lawn glows with a golden hue. Long shadows stretch across the lush green grass, and the air carries the refreshing scent of freshly cut turf, mingling with the sweet fragrance of blooming flowers that dot the landscape. The atmosphere is serene yet brimming with

life, a perfect space for students to relax after a day of intellectual exertion.

Throughout the lawn, scattered groups of students chat and laugh in the warm sunlight. Some lounge on blankets, engrossed in animated conversations or impromptu study sessions. Others are more playful, tossing frisbees or kicking soccer balls in friendly games. In between these pockets of activity, solitary figures wander, lost in thought or simply enjoying the moment, as if the world around them had slowed just enough to allow space for reflection.

Eddie, with Ashley and Will in tow, leads them toward a quieter corner of the lawn. It's far enough from the bustle to provide a semblance of privacy but still within view of the lecture hall, a place where they can lay out their project materials and begin to formulate a plan. He unfurls a blanket with a flick of his wrist, settling down with a relaxed sigh as he lays out their project notes in front of them.

Will follows reluctantly, the familiar scowl on his face. He glances at the blanket, his disinterest evident, and then shoots a quick look at Ashley. The tension from their earlier interactions still clings to him like a weight, but he says nothing as he sits down beside Eddie, a few inches away from Ashley.

Eddie notices Will's discomfort and gives him a sidelong glance, but he chooses to remain focused on the task at hand. He starts flipping through their notes, sorting through the details of the Harmonisation Ritual, while attempting to ignore the undercurrent of animosity between Will and Ashley.

Ashley, though quieter, takes a seat, folding her legs underneath her. She doesn't immediately say anything, but her eyes flicker over the notes as Eddie organizes them, her fingers absently

tracing the edge of the paper. She, too, seems uncertain, but she's determined to make this work, if only for the sake of the project.

Eddie clears his throat, breaking the silence, and tries to steer the conversation away from the tension. "Alright, so let's figure this out. The goal here is to perform a successful Harmonisation Ritual, and we need to combine our strengths."

He looks at Ashley first, hoping her presence will bring some clarity. "Ashley, you're the witch here – what are your thoughts on the theory behind the ritual?"

Ashley blinks, taken aback by the question, but then nods. "Well, the theory behind it is essentially balancing energies – mixing two different sources without causing a backlash. The tricky part is making sure that the elements we're using actually *harmonize* with each other."

Will grumbles, clearly not in the mood for theory-heavy talk.

"Great, sounds like we're going to be playing with fire," he mutters under his breath, half-sarcastic. "What's next, then?"

Eddie clears his throat, trying to break through the tension that lingers between Will and Ashley. It's clear they both have strong opinions about how to approach their project, and Eddie is starting to feel the weight of trying to manage the situation without letting it derail. He turns to them both, trying to steer the conversation back to the task at hand.

"Alright, look, how about we start by brainstorming the first step of the Harmonisation Ritual?" Eddie suggests, glancing from Ashley to Will. "We'll need to narrow down what kind of ritual we want to work with. Ashley, you come from a Witch background, right? Maybe you know something about rituals we can build on?"

Ashley, who had been quietly listening to the exchange, nods thoughtfully, her fingers still tracing patterns in the grass as she considers the question. After a beat, she speaks softly but with a calm, assertive confidence.

"Well, in my experience, Harmonisation Rituals are often used to bind energies together – usually by connecting two creatures or elements and aligning their energies," she begins. "But since we're all coming at this from different angles, maybe we should start with something simple and controlled."

Her eyes light up as an idea forms. "How about we summon a pixie?" she suggests, looking between Eddie and Will. "It's a small, manageable arcane creature, and we could use the Summoning Rune to bring it into our circle. Then, we could use the Sending Rune to return it back to the Arcane Realm after the ritual is complete."

Will snorts, his arms crossed over his chest, his brow furrowed in skepticism. "Why would you want to send the pixie back? It's just a pixie."

Ashley's eyes narrow slightly as she responds, her tone firm.

"Pixies are considered Arcane Creatures, Will. Of course we'll send them back. This isn't their realm. They don't belong here."

Will rolls his eyes, clearly unimpressed by her reasoning. "Yeah, but Pixies don't have consciousness, Ashley. Would they care if they're in any realm?" he challenges, his voice tinged with a mixture of impatience and disbelief. "I say we focus on just summoning the pixie and leave the whole sending-back thing out of it. What's the point?"

Ashley shakes her head, her voice rising with frustration. "No! We *will* send it back! It's about respect for the creature and the

balance of the ritual. We can't just summon it and leave it stranded here!"

The air between them crackles with tension as their voices begin to rise. The debate has escalated quickly, and Eddie feels his stomach tighten as he watches the conflict unfold. He didn't expect things to get so heated, especially not so early into the project. But with each word, it's becoming more apparent that Will and Ashley are on opposite sides of the moral fence — and he's stuck right in the middle.

"Guys, guys," Eddie interjects, his voice wavering slightly as he attempts to get their attention. "Can we just... try to find a middle ground here?"

Will shoots Eddie a sharp look, clearly frustrated. "I don't see why we need to waste time sending it back if it doesn't even care. It's not like it's going to feel anything."

Ashley's eyes flash with determination. "That's not the point, Will. It's about the principle of it. Summoning is about understanding the creatures you're working with, and *sending them back* is part of maintaining that balance!"

Eddie rubs the back of his neck, trying to think of something that might calm them both down. He knows this project could be their chance to work together as a team — but only if they can figure out a way to work out their differences.

"Alright," Eddie says, raising his hands in a gesture of peace. "What if we do it Ashley's way for now, with the sending-back part included, and see how it goes? We can always adjust the ritual later if we need to. But let's focus on the ritual itself first, and then we'll figure out the specifics."

Will shoots him a look of disbelief but doesn't argue further, clearly irritated. He mumbles something under his breath but

eventually relents, his arms uncrossing as he leans back on the blanket.

"Fine," he mutters, his voice grudging. "But I still don't get why we need to send a *pixie* back. It's ridiculous."

As the afternoon sun continues to bathe the lawn in its golden light, the air is filled with the chatter of other students, but the small patch of grass where Eddie and Ashley sit is quieter now. Will has left abruptly, muttering something about band practice as he stood up and walked off without another word. Eddie watches him go, a little relieved but also unsure of how to proceed now that it's just him and Ashley.

Eddie shifts his weight on the blanket, clearing his throat awkwardly. "So," he begins, trying to keep the conversation going now that they're alone. "What's your history with Will? I know you guys met before, but I didn't realize you had a bit of a rough past."

Ashley sighs, running a hand through her hair, clearly exasperated by the topic but also resigned to it. She glances up at the sky for a moment, as though searching for the right words. "Yeah, it all started on the second day of Orientation Week, really. We got paired up for a project, and I just... didn't like his brash and straightforward way of doing things," she admits, her tone laced with frustration. "He never thought twice about the consequences of his actions. It was like he thought the ends always justified the means, no matter who got hurt."

Eddie chuckles, a little nervously. "Yeah... that sounds like Will. He doesn't really think things through sometimes."

Ashley gives him a small smile, appreciating the understanding. But then she tilts her head slightly, her curiosity piqued. "So

what about you, Eddie? I've been hearing a lot about Will, but I don't really know much about you yet."

Eddie pauses for a moment, taken aback by the question. It's strange, but in a way, Ashley's directness makes it easier to answer. "Well, like I told you yesterday... Will's the one who let me crash in his room at the dorm until I could figure out what to do," he says with a shrug, as if it's no big deal. "I didn't have anywhere to stay when I first arrived in Edenfield, and he offered. I didn't really have a choice, but it worked out. He's... surprisingly considerate when it comes to helping out."

Ashley's eyes widen a bit, clearly surprised by the revelation. "Oh, wow," she says, her voice softer now, "Never thought he'd be that considerate. Guess I owe him an apology for judging him so quickly."

Eddie smiles, shaking his head. "You don't have to apologize. Will can be a bit rough around the edges, but... I think deep down, he means well."

Ashley considers this for a moment, her expression thoughtful. "Yeah, maybe you're right." She exhales slowly, leaning back on the blanket as she gazes up at the sky. "I guess I just have a tendency to be a bit... idealistic sometimes. I expect people to have the same sense of responsibility that I do. But I suppose not everyone works that way."

Eddie nods, understanding what she means. "Yeah, I get it. But we're all learning, right? We're still figuring things out."

For a while, neither of them speaks, the silence comfortable for the first time in a long while. Eddie glances around at the bustling university lawn, watching the other students as they go about their business. It feels like a strange but welcome pause in the midst of the whirlwind that is university life.



As the sun begins to dip lower in the sky, casting long shadows across the university lawn, Ashley and Eddie continue their conversation, the air between them lighter than before. Ashley is studying Eddie with a thoughtful expression, sensing there's something more to his outburst earlier in class. She hesitates for a moment, but then gently asks, "Hey, about what happened in class... with your magic. You seemed... off. What was that about?"

Eddie stiffens slightly at the question, his eyes darting away. He swallows, clearly uncomfortable with the topic. "I... I don't really want to talk about it," he says, his voice quieter now. "It's something I'm not proud of. I've always struggled with my magic, especially ever since I was at Major Academy."

Ashley doesn't press, allowing him a moment to collect his thoughts. He shifts uncomfortably on the blanket, looking away toward the distant trees before continuing.

"I guess... that's the same reason I was expelled from Major Academy," Eddie adds after a pause, his tone heavy with the weight of the memory. "I couldn't control it. I broke too many rules, and after that, I vowed never to touch magic again. But... well, I kind of broke my own promise. I guess that's why I'm here now."

Ashley listens in silence, her heart heavy with empathy. She sees the vulnerability in Eddie, the unspoken burden he carries, and she can't help but feel a sense of understanding. "I get it," she says softly. "People don't always understand what it's like to struggle with something that's supposed to come naturally. But... you're not the only one who's been judged."

Eddie glances at her, confused, but Ashley simply smiles, a knowing look in her eyes.

"People think all witches are monsters," she continues, her voice tinged with quiet conviction. "Especially with the reputation we have. Witches are seen as dark, dangerous, unpredictable. But not all of us are bad, you know? I'm just trying to find my way, just like anyone else."

Eddie watches her, surprised but comforted by her words. He doesn't say anything at first, simply taking in the sincerity in her eyes. Then, to his surprise, Ashley's smile widens, and her gaze shifts upward, focusing on something above them.

"Ah, there he is," she says, her voice lightening as she stands up. Eddie watches her, puzzled, and then follows her gaze.

A black figure flutters through the air and lands gracefully on a nearby branch. It's a crow, dark and sleek, its beady eyes gleaming with curiosity.

Ashley's smile softens, and she walks toward the tree, holding her arms out slightly. "This is Morley," she says, her voice warm with affection. "He's my pet crow. I know he can be a bit... rude, but he's a good companion."

The crow caws loudly in response, flapping its wings as if in greeting, and Ashley laughs softly, shaking her head. "See? Told you he can be a little impolite."

Eddie watches the exchange, intrigued. Ashley begins to speak to the crow, her words light and animated, though Eddie can't hear what Morley's replying. The conversation between them is soft and unintelligible to him, but it's clear that the bond between Ashley and her crow is one of deep understanding.

"Morley, stop it," Ashley chides gently, though there's no anger in her voice. "You know better than that."

Eddie watches them, a small smile creeping onto his face. There's something calming about their interaction, something genuine in

the way Ashley speaks to the crow as if it were another person. It reminds him of the ease he felt when talking to her earlier, when their connection first began to form.

For a moment, he feels at peace. A weight that had been pressing down on him lifts ever so slightly, and he finds himself grateful for the unexpected camaraderie he's found in Ashley. Despite their differences, they share a sense of understanding, a shared vulnerability that makes them more alike than either of them expected.

"Morley's not so bad," Eddie says, his voice light, his smile more natural now. "Seems like he's got a lot to say."

Ashley chuckles, turning back to him. "He's got plenty of opinions, but most of the time, I can't understand him. He's got a mind of his own."

She returns to sit next to Eddie, still smiling, but there's a softness in her expression now. "But, you know, sometimes it helps to have someone — something — to talk to when things get hard. I'm sure you've got your own way of coping with things."

Eddie nods, his smile lingering as he looks at the crow. "Yeah, I think I'm starting to understand what you mean."

The two sit there for a while, the sounds of the bustling campus fading into the background as they enjoy the quiet of the moment. Though neither of them says anything more, a mutual understanding has begun to take root. In that brief silence, it's clear that they've found something valuable in each other's company.



The rain pattered softly against the small, high windows of the Transmuter's Atelier, its rhythmic drumming mingling with the faint echoes of Will's band practicing somewhere in the distance. The muffled strains of their music added an oddly fitting backdrop to the chaotic charm of the workshop.

Eddie sat hunched over his sculpting seat, his brow furrowed in concentration — or at least in an attempt at it. Before him, a rough block of stone resisted his half-hearted attempts to coax it into something meaningful. The sculpting chisel, infused with a faint alchemical glow, trembled slightly in his hand. He tapped it against the stone, but the motion lacked conviction, the energy sparking off in uneven bursts.

Directly in his line of sight was the human head model — a masterpiece carved by a long-gone club member. Its precision and grace seemed to mock his current efforts, the angular planes of the face speaking to a skill he could barely fathom achieving. Around him, the other members of the Atelier fared no better, their tools clinking against their materials with a mix of frustration and determination.

The workshop itself buzzed with quiet energy, the kind that came not from success, but from stubborn persistence. Shelves of half-finished projects loomed over them like an audience of silent critics. The faint glow of alchemical vials on the shelves added a dreamlike quality to the dimly lit space, their light casting shifting shadows on the soot-streaked walls.

Rachel, standing at a cluttered workbench in the corner, was giving an enthusiastic pep talk to a fellow member struggling with transmuting clay into a marble-like texture. Her gestures

were as animated as the flickering hearth flame behind her, but Eddie barely registered the scene.

Something weighed heavily on his mind, pulling him away from the task at hand. His strokes with the chisel became slower, more distracted, until finally, he set the tool down with a sigh, leaning back in his chair. His eyes drifted toward the rain streaking down the workshop window, blurring the outside world.

The sound of laughter from Rachel's corner drew his attention briefly, her presence a bright contrast to his mood. She moved with ease in the chaos of the room, her energy infectious. But Eddie couldn't seem to shake the knot tightening in his chest.

He looked back at the block of stone in front of him. It seemed almost mocking in its stubbornness, its unshaped form a reminder of his own uncertainties. Eddie picked up the chisel again, gripping it tighter this time, and closed his eyes for a moment.

### **Focus.**

He took a deep breath, channeling the basics he had learned about alchemical resonance. Slowly, he pressed the chisel to the stone, murmuring a soft incantation under his breath. A faint glow began to pulse from his hand, spreading through the tool and into the stone. This time, the stone responded – softening slightly, as though ready to yield to his will.

For a moment, Eddie thought he might actually be getting somewhere. But then, the glow faltered, flickering like a dying ember, and the stone returned to its inert state. He let out a frustrated sigh, setting the chisel down again.

"Eddie?"

The voice startled him, soft but clear, cutting through the quiet hum of activity in the room. He looked up to see Madeleine, the

club's most meticulous member, sitting a few seats away. Her own sculpture – a pair of delicate hands clasped together – was already taking graceful shape under her careful work.

"You doing okay?" she asked, setting her chisel down and turning her full attention to him. Her dark, thoughtful eyes flicked toward his sculpture. "You look... distracted. And, well... it shows."

Eddie glanced at his work and grimaced. The features of the stone head were undeniably off – the nose skewed too far to one side, the eyes misaligned, the lips uneven and pursed. It was a far cry from the elegant model head perched at the front of the workshop.

"Yeah," he muttered, rubbing the back of his neck. "I guess I'm just... not in the zone tonight."

Madeleine tilted her head, studying him with quiet concern. "It's more than that, isn't it?"

Eddie hesitated, his fingers tightening around the handle of his chisel. "It's nothing, really," he said, trying to wave her off. "Just... got a lot on my mind."

Madeleine didn't look convinced. She leaned in slightly, lowering her voice. "You know, the Atelier isn't just about sculpting. Rachel likes to call it a space for expression. Sometimes, what's going on in here –" she tapped her temple, " – finds its way into what we're working on."

Eddie gave her a sidelong glance. "So you're saying my off-kilter sculpture is, what, a reflection of my off-kilter brain?"

Madeleine smiled then chuckled faintly. "Something like that. But it's not a bad thing. It just means there's something you might need to untangle." She paused, then added, "Want to talk about it?"

For a moment, Eddie didn't reply. He stared at the lopsided features of his sculpture, the rain tapping against the windows, the muffled sounds of Will's band practice threading through the air.

"I guess I've been... second-guessing a lot lately," he admitted finally. "About being here. About whether I even belong at this university."

Madeleine's expression softened, but she didn't interrupt.

"I wasn't supposed to use magic anymore," Eddie continued, his voice quieter now. "I promised myself after what happened at my old academy. But then I got here, and everything's about magic. And now it's like... I don't know. Like I'm unraveling something I can't stop."

He gestured vaguely toward the workshop, the shelves cluttered with glowing vials and half-finished projects. "This place, it's amazing. But at the same time, it's overwhelming. I keep feeling like I'm one mistake away from messing everything up again."

Madeleine nodded slowly, her fingers lightly drumming against the edge of her workbench. "You're not alone in that," she said after a moment. "Honestly, I think everyone here has felt like that at some point. This place... it pushes you. But that's not a bad thing. It's how you grow."

Eddie looked at her, surprised by the quiet conviction in her tone.

"Your sculpture?" she added, motioning toward the uneven stone head. "Yeah, it's a little wonky. But that's okay. It's a work in progress—just like you."

A small, reluctant smile tugged at Eddie's lips. "That's... surprisingly wise."

Madeleine laughed softly, picking up her chisel again. "Don't get used to it. I'm just saying, give yourself some credit. You're here for a reason."

Eddie glanced at his sculpture one more time, the crooked features somehow looking less like failures and more like potential. He adjusted his grip on his chisel, the faint hum of alchemical energy coursing through it.

"Thanks, Madeleine," he said, his voice steadier now.

She grinned. "Anytime. Now, let's see if you can get that jawline to stop looking like it's sliding off the face."

Eddie chuckled, the tension in his chest easing just a little as he turned back to his work, the rain outside continuing its steady serenade.

Eddie's hands stilled for a moment over his stone sculpture, his chisel hovering in midair as his thoughts drifted. The rain outside had softened to a gentle patter, and the hum of the Atelier's quiet energy seemed to wrap around him like a blanket. He glanced around at the cluttered shelves, the half-finished projects, and the faint glow from the alchemical tools scattered across the room.

Madeleine, sitting a few spaces over at her own workbench, didn't look up from her delicate sculpture, but her voice was soft and understanding.

"So, what's been weighing on you?" she asked, sensing the shift in his mood. "You've been quiet tonight."

"I don't know how I'm going to manage this," he muttered, breaking the silence.

Madeleine glanced up from her sculpture of clasped hands, her chisel poised mid-air. "Manage what?"



Eddie hesitated, then set down his tools, leaning back in his chair. "The final project. I just found out my pairings, and..." He trailed off, rubbing his temple. "Let's just say I'm not feeling great about it."

Madeleine tilted her head curiously. "Who'd you get paired with?" she asked, her hands returning to her sculpture, the soft scrape of stone under her chisel punctuating her words.

"Will Chester and Ashley Mayfair," Eddie said, his tone a mix of frustration and resignation.

Finally, Madeleine spoke, her voice calm and reassuring. "It's going to be okay, Eddie. Trust me." Madeleine said as she continued on her sculpture, then stops, she ponders for a moment

"William Chester and Ashley Mayfair?" Madeleine repeated, raising an eyebrow. "Oh, I think I've heard of them."

"You have?" Eddie blinked, surprised.

"Of course," Madeleine said with a small laugh. "Will's in *The Weathered Golem*, isn't he? Plays gigs at the university pub all the time. And Ashley? She's in the debate club, always advocating for better understanding between magical groups – witches, alchemists, sorcerers. She's got quite the reputation for speaking her mind."

Eddie stared at her, caught off guard. "You know, it's funny. I never thought about it like that. I guess... maybe I don't know them as well as I thought I did."

Eddie let her words sink in before groaning. "Still, they're like water and oil. They can't even agree on summoning a pixie without it turning into an argument. How am I supposed to work with them on something as big as this? My whole future at this university depends on this project, and if I mess it up..." He trailed off, his hands tightening into fists. "I just – my lack of

control with magic is already a problem. What if this is the thing that gets me kicked out?"

Madeleine glanced at him, her expression thoughtful. Then she smiled, setting down her chisel. "Eddie, you're an alchemist, aren't you?"

He frowned, not sure where she was going with this. "Yeah...?"

Madeleine smiled, her eyes twinkling with a spark of wisdom. "Then you should know this – alchemy is all about mixing the most unlikely substances and finding the right way to make them work together. You've got Will and Ashley – two completely different elements. But when you fuse them, when you find that perfect balance, it's like creating a philosopher's stone. It's the magnum opus of alchemy."

Eddie stared at her, stunned by her words. He hadn't really thought about it that way. "You think... they could actually work together?"

Madeleine nodded firmly. "Absolutely. Will and Ashley are like the prima materia – raw, unrefined. But if they can figure out how to blend their strengths, they'll create something amazing. Something no one expected. And, Eddie..." She paused, looking directly at him. "I believe in them. And I believe in you. You're the one who can make it happen. All it takes is a little faith in your ability to mix the impossible."

Eddie felt a warmth spreading through him, a renewed sense of hope he hadn't realized he was missing. He looked at her, his chest tight with gratitude.

"Thanks, Madeleine. I... I really needed to hear that."

She gave him a knowing smile, winking as she picked up her chisel again. "From one Alchemist to another."

Eddie sat back, his mind buzzing with possibilities. Maybe, just maybe, the project wasn't doomed after all. Maybe this odd trio – himself, Will, and Ashley – could create something greater than the sum of their parts. He felt a spark of determination ignite inside him as he returned to his work, his hands moving with renewed purpose.

## ACT II | Chapter 5



The lawn of Edenfield University stretched out in soft green waves, dappled with the fading light of the late afternoon sun. Students milled about in small groups, chatting or working on their own projects, the atmosphere humming with the energy of creativity and looming deadlines. Eddie sat cross-legged on the cool grass, his notes on alchemical codexes spread out in front of him. To his left sat Will, casually plucking at the strings of a battered lute, and to his right, Ashley, arms crossed and brows furrowed with impatience.

Ashley broke the silence first, her tone sharp. “Hey, when are we going to actually start the project? Or are we just waiting for it to magically finish itself?”

Will didn’t even look up, strumming a lazy chord. “We can do it on Friday.”

Ashley’s expression darkened. “*Friday?* Will, the deadline is *Saturday*. That’s barely enough time to pull anything together!”

Eddie cleared his throat, feeling the tension in the air tighten. “Will,” he interjected gently but firmly, “are you sure about that? We’ve only got a day left after Friday. What if something goes wrong?”

Will shrugged, finally glancing up from his lute. "Relax. I work better under pressure. Besides, I've got band practice for the rest of the day. I'll be free after that."

Ashley threw up her hands in exasperation. "Band practice? *Again?* We're supposed to be working on a major project, and you're prioritizing your pub gigs over this?"

Will shot her a glare. "It's not just 'pub gigs,' Ashley. It's called *commitment*. Something you might not understand."

Ashley scoffed, leaning forward. "Oh, I understand commitment just fine, thank you very much. I commit to things that actually matter. Unlike you, I'm not wasting time playing glorified background music."

Eddie winced as the argument spiraled, his gaze darting between the two. He held up his hands, hoping to restore some semblance of peace. "Guys, come on. We don't have time for this. If we don't figure something out, we're all going to fail. *All of us.*"

Ashley, still sitting cross-legged on the grass, crossed her arms and glared at Eddie and Will, her frustration palpable. "Fine," she said, her tone as sharp as a blade. "If you two won't take this seriously, then meet me at Dorm 9 after the last class today. No excuses."

Will raised an eyebrow. "Today? I already told you, I've got practice."

Ashley leaned forward, her eyes narrowing dangerously. "I don't care if you have practice, Will. If you don't show up, I'll work on

the project alone. And if I do, your names won't be on the final report."

Eddie's eyes widened. "You wouldn't do that."

"Try me," Ashley retorted, her voice cold.

Will blinked, looking genuinely taken aback. He opened his mouth to argue but then stopped, as if realizing she might actually follow through.

Eddie, sensing another clash coming, quickly stepped in. "Alright, Ashley. We'll be there. Right, Will?" He turned to his roommate with a nudge, trying to convey a silent plea for cooperation.

Will groaned, throwing his hands up. "Fine. Fine! I'll come. Happy now?"

Ashley smirked, clearly satisfied. "I'll see you both at Dorm 9. Don't make me regret giving you another chance." She stood, dusting off her skirt, and walked away without another word, leaving the two boys on the lawn.

Will flopped back onto the grass with an exaggerated sigh, staring up at the sky. "She's intense, man. Like, scary intense."

Eddie chuckled nervously, gathering his scattered notes. "She's just passionate. And honestly? She's got a point. We've been putting this off too long."

Will rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah. Passionate. Sure. Just don't expect me to enjoy this whole group bonding thing."

Eddie stood, offering his friend a hand. "Come on, let's at least try. Maybe it won't be so bad."

Will let out a dramatic groan but took Eddie's hand and got to his feet. "You're way too optimistic, you know that?"

Eddie shrugged, slinging his bag over his shoulder. "Someone has to be."

As they walked off toward their next class, Eddie couldn't shake the feeling that tonight might actually be the first step toward something good – or at least, less chaotic.

-o-

Eddie and Will trudged down the cobblestone path toward Dorm 9, the evening sky painted with hues of fading orange and purple. Will had been grumbling the entire way, his voice low enough not to draw attention but just loud enough for Eddie to hear.

"You do realize Dorm 9 is an all-girls dorm, right?" Will muttered, glancing sideways at Eddie. "What are we even thinking, walking in there? This is a bad idea."

Eddie shrugged, adjusting his bag on his shoulder. "Ashley's expecting us. She'll be there to let us in."

"Yeah, sure," Will said, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "And what happens if she's late or decides to ditch us? You want to be the guy standing outside a girls' dorm, looking like a creep? Not me, mate. I've got a reputation to think about."

"Well thankfully i don't" Eddie snickered, "It's just you the oh all famous band vocalist in Edenfield."

"Oh, go jump in the river, Welton." Will countered

Will wasn't buying it. His gaze darted nervously over his shoulder as they neared the dorm. "If anyone sees me here, I'm never hearing the end of it. Band practice isn't gonna save me from *this* level of humiliation."

When they finally arrived, Dorm 9 stood in stark contrast to the chaos of Dorm 7. Nestled amidst a canopy of trees and flowering shrubs, the building looked more like a cozy manor than a university dormitory. Its brick facade was partially covered in climbing ivy, the leaves swaying gently in the evening breeze. Flowering vines draped over the windows, and a neatly trimmed hedge framed the walkway leading up to the entrance.

Large windows glowed softly with the warm light of lamps inside, and delicate lace curtains framed each one, adding a sense of refinement. Hanging baskets overflowing with vibrant flowers adorned the front porch, their colors vivid even in the dim light. The polished wooden front door bore an intricate pattern of carvings, with a brass rose-shaped knocker gleaming in the twilight. A small sign hung neatly to the side, its delicate script reading: *Welcome Home*.

Will let out a low whistle, visibly impressed despite himself. "Okay, I'll admit it. This place looks... civilized. What kind of alternate universe dorm is this?"



Eddie chuckled. "Tidy, isn't it? Imagine what the inside looks like."

"I don't need to imagine," Will muttered. "I'm already jealous. Why can't our dorm look like this instead of a war zone?"

"Oh, Henry will have a lot to talk if you tell him this." Eddie chuckled

Eddie stepped up to the door and knocked, the brass knocker making a sharp, satisfying sound against the wood. They both stood in awkward silence, waiting.

Will shuffled uncomfortably, casting furtive glances over his shoulder at the empty pathway behind them. "If someone sees me standing here, I'm blaming you, Eddie."

The door creaked open slowly, revealing not Ashley but a girl in a bathrobe, her hair wrapped in a towel, clearly fresh from a shower. She leaned lazily against the doorframe, her gaze shifting from Eddie's face to his feet and back up again, as if sizing him up.

"What'd you want?" she asked, her tone a mix of curiosity and mild annoyance.

Eddie froze for a moment, feeling the heat rise to his face. "I, uh..." he stammered, fumbling with his words. "Is Ashley here?"

The girl raised an eyebrow, her lips curling into a smirk. "Ashley?" she repeated, drawing the word out. "Ashley Mayfair from Conjuraton, first year?"

"Yeah," Eddie said quickly, nodding. "Her. Is she here?"

The girl's smirk widened. "Hang on a sec," she said, closing the door most of the way but not before yelling over her shoulder, "Ashley! Your boyfriend is here looking for you!"

Eddie felt his heart sink, his hand instantly flying to his face in a mortified attempt to shield himself from the invisible audience he imagined laughing at him. "Yep," he muttered under his breath. "My reputation is finished."

Next to him, Will crossed his arms and shook his head in exasperation. "See? I told you this was a bad idea," he said.

From behind the door came a muffled, exasperated voice. "He's not my boyfriend, geez, Clara! Just because I have friends who are boys doesn't mean they're my partner! Ugh!"

The door swung open abruptly, revealing a familiar figure — Ashley Mayfair. She stood there, her short auburn hair with blonde tips damp and clinging to her face, evidence that she, too, had just finished a shower. Her tan skin glistened faintly in the light of the dorm hallway, and she regarded Eddie and Will with a casual, slightly amused expression.

"Oh hey, Welton, Chester," she said, gesturing for them to come inside. "Hopefully Clara didn't give you too much trouble."

Eddie forced a smile, though his shoulders sagged with the weight of the ordeal. "Don't worry about it," he replied, lying through his teeth.

Will, standing beside him, muttered, "She absolutely did," under his breath, earning a quick nudge from Eddie.

Ashley smirked, catching Will's comment but choosing to let it slide. "So, where are we going to do the assignment?" Eddie asked, eager to move past the awkward encounter.

Ashley stepped aside to let them into the dorm, shrugging as she answered. "There's a lounge on the third floor. It's quiet, and we won't get interrupted there. Let's head up."

Eddie and Will exchanged glances. Will, still visibly uneasy about being in an all-girls dorm, whispered, "If I survive this without dying of embarrassment, it'll be a miracle."

Ashley rolled her eyes at the pair of them. "Oh, please. No one cares that you're here. Let's just get this done, alright?" She spun on her heel and started leading the way, her confidence leaving no room for argument.

Reluctantly, Eddie and Will followed, their earlier nerves slowly giving way to a grudging acceptance of the task ahead.

The lounge of Dorm 9 was a world apart from the chaotic mess Eddie and Will were used to in Dorm 7. The space radiated warmth and refinement, with plush chairs and sofas arranged in cozy clusters. A soft floral scent lingered in the air, mingling with the faint aroma of tea and freshly polished wood. Lamps with intricate, lacy shades cast a gentle golden glow, and the bookshelves lining the walls were neatly arranged with everything from thick textbooks to novels in pristine condition.

Even the carpet beneath their feet was soft and spotless, a luxurious deep green that complemented the room's decor.

Despite the inviting ambiance, Eddie and Will couldn't shake their discomfort. They sat stiffly on a plush loveseat, feeling out of place in the predominantly female space. Eddie shifted nervously, fiddling with the strap of his messenger bag as his cheeks flushed. He glanced around, noticing most of the people in the lounge were girls, chatting softly in groups or engrossed in their books. The few boys wandering about were clearly boyfriends of the residents, which only made Eddie more self-conscious. Clara's earlier comment echoed in his mind, and his face burned anew.

Will leaned back awkwardly, his arms crossed as he scanned the room. "This place is... uh... different," he muttered under his breath, avoiding eye contact with anyone who might look their way.

"Yeah," Eddie replied, nodding a little too enthusiastically. "It's... neat. And clean."

"Way too clean," Will said, almost accusingly, as though the tidiness was an affront to his sensibilities. "Do they even live here? Where's the laundry on the floor? The plates of half-eaten food? The smell of wet socks?"

Eddie snorted despite himself, then quickly stifled it, worried about drawing attention. "Maybe they actually clean up after themselves," he said, glancing toward a coffee table that had been arranged with military precision. A single vase with fresh flowers

sat in the middle, flanked by coasters perfectly aligned with the edges of the table.

Will shook his head, incredulous. "This doesn't feel like a dorm. It's like a fancy waiting room. I bet they've got rules about everything – 'No talking above a whisper,' 'No feet on the furniture,' 'No fun allowed.'"

"Shh!" Eddie hissed, nudging him with an elbow. A group of girls sitting nearby glanced their way, their curiosity evident. Eddie quickly looked down, his ears burning.

"Relax, Welton," Will said with a grin. "You're already branded as Ashley's boyfriend. Might as well own it."

Eddie groaned, and giving Will a very rude gesture that should not be done in an all-girls dorm. "You can go fuck yourself with that sort of statement, Chester."

Before Will could respond, the soft clinking of china heralded Ashley's return. She approached with a tray balanced expertly in her hands, laden with steaming cups of tea and a small plate of biscuits. Her textbooks and notes were tucked under one arm.

"Here we go," Ashley said briskly, setting the tray down on the coffee table with a flourish. "Tea and biscuits, because I'm not about to have you two sulk your way through this meeting. Now, let's get started before I regret inviting you here."

Eddie and Will exchanged a glance, their earlier awkwardness temporarily set aside. As Ashley settled into a nearby armchair,

flipping open her notes with practiced ease, Eddie felt a flicker of relief. Maybe, just maybe, this project wouldn't be a total disaster.

Ashley sat cross-legged in the armchair, a cup of tea balanced on her knee, her brightly colored jumper and shorts a striking contrast to the moody, all-black attire she usually wore to campus. The cheery hues somehow made her seem more approachable, even as her sharp focus on the notes in front of her kept the atmosphere serious. Eddie and Will sat across from her on the loveseat, their cups untouched on the table as they listened.

"Alright, so let's get to it. Where were we?" she said, flipping through her notes.

Will leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Right, about the pixies. I still don't see why we'd waste our time on them. They're tiny pests, and they're more trouble than they're worth."

Ashley arched an eyebrow, clearly unimpressed by his skepticism. "They're not pests – they're highly intelligent creatures. And in this case, they're essential. Eddie's, uh... 'surges' of uncontrollable magical resolve are a problem. We need a middle-man to help channel that energy in a controlled way, and pixies happen to be very skilled at siphoning and guiding magical currents. Think of them as, I don't know, magical translators."

Eddie, who had been quietly sipping his tea, perked up at this. "That actually sounds... brilliant," he said, setting his cup down. "If they can help bypass my condition, it might make everything we're trying to do way more stable." He frowned, though, as a

thought occurred to him. "But there's a problem. There aren't any magical forests in Edenfield. Back in Weshaven, sure, they were everywhere. But here? Pixies don't just pop up in city gardens."

Ashley nodded, as though she had been waiting for this point. "Exactly. That's why we're not going to go looking for one. We're going to summon one — from the Arcane Realm."

Eddie blinked in surprise, and even Will straightened, staring at Ashley as though she'd grown a second head.

"Summon one?" Eddie repeated.

"Yes," Ashley said confidently, leaning back in her chair. "We'll bring a pixie here temporarily, let it help us stabilize the spellwork, and then return it safely to its realm. It's perfectly doable. I've read the methods, and I know how to construct the bindings so it won't be trapped or harmed. It's a win-win."

"A win-win?" Will interrupted, his voice sharp with disapproval. "Ashley, summoning anything from the Arcane Realm is a bad idea. Those creatures might be small, but they're not stupid. They don't like being pulled into our world, even for a short while. You think a pixie's going to just help us out of the goodness of its heart and then happily hop back home?"

Ashley gave him an annoyed look. "If we follow the proper protocols and treat it with respect, there shouldn't be a problem."

"Shouldn't be a problem," Will repeated mockingly. "You're messing with realms and creatures we don't fully understand. One mistake, and it's not going to be a pixie we're dealing with —

it's going to be something way worse. And when that happens, I'm not sticking around to clean up the mess."

Eddie glanced between the two of them, feeling caught in the middle. Ashley's plan did sound risky, but it also made sense. The thought of summoning a pixie felt like playing with fire, but at the same time, it was an opportunity to finally make progress.

"Look," Eddie said, trying to diffuse the tension, "maybe we should at least hear Ashley out. If she's read the methods and knows what she's doing — "

Will cut him off, jabbing a finger in Eddie's direction. "And if she doesn't? What then? We'll be expelled — or worse. I'm not risking my neck because you two can't think of a safer solution."

Ashley sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of her nose. "This is why we never get anything done," she muttered under her breath. "Fine. If you've got a better idea, Chester, I'm all ears."

Will leaned forward, gesturing animatedly with his hands as he spoke. "Look, summoning a pixie is reckless. There's no need to gamble with the Arcane Realm when we can use runework instead. It's old, reliable, and most importantly, safe. We use it to establish the **Skepsio** stage of the spell — the core intent — without relying on unpredictable creatures."

Eddie, despite himself, found the logic appealing. "That... actually makes sense," he admitted, tilting his head thoughtfully. "Runework does act as a bridge between magical intent and material execution. And as an Alchemist, I've used runes before to stabilize transformations."



Will snapped his fingers, grinning. "Exactly! You should be all over this, Welton. Alchemy and runework go hand in hand. A properly etched rune communicates the magic precisely, leaving no room for misinterpretation. It's the perfect tool for this project."

Ashley, sitting cross-legged on the couch, gave a small scoff. "Perfect? That's a bit of an overstatement, don't you think? Sure, runes are stable, but they're also rigid. You're talking about translating a magical concept into a one-size-fits-all formula. Summoning a pixie is more dynamic. They adapt – they understand nuance in a way a rune can't."

Will turned to her, his grin fading into a smirk. "Nuance? That's just code for 'unpredictable,' Mayfair. You'd trust some otherworldly sprite over a method that's been proven by centuries of Dwarven craftsmanship?"

"It's not about trust, Chester. It's about the fact that runes aren't always the right tool for the job," Ashley shot back, her voice growing sharper. "We're working with volatile magic, which requires adaptability. A pixie could respond in real-time to Eddie's surges. A rune? It's static. Once it's etched, it can't adjust to unforeseen variables."

"And that's why you design the runes carefully, *beforehand*," Will retorted. "If you think ahead, there *are* no unforeseen variables."

Ashley threw her hands up in frustration. "Oh, because you're so perfect, right? Nothing could possibly go wrong with your foolproof plan."

"I didn't say that," Will replied, his tone smug enough to imply it.

"Didn't have to," Ashley muttered, crossing her arms.

Eddie, sensing the tension escalating, tried to step in. "Okay, look, both approaches have their merits — "

But his words were drowned out as Will and Ashley continued to argue, their voices rising over each other.

"Runes are efficient — "

"Runes are inflexible — "

"They're safer — "

"They're outdated — "

"Fine!" Ashley finally snapped, slamming her hands on the table.

"Let's do it your way then, Chester. Clearly, you've got everything figured out. Why even bother asking me in the first place?"

Her tone was laced with frustration and sarcasm, and the room fell into an awkward silence. Will leaned back, a satisfied look on his face, while Eddie shifted uncomfortably in his seat, glancing between the two.

"Alright then," Will said, breaking the silence. "I'll draft some runes and show you both."

Ashley didn't reply, instead glaring at him before turning her attention to her tea. Eddie sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. This was going to be harder than he thought.

The warm glow of the lamps in Dorm 9's lounge offered little comfort as the hours dragged on. Eddie, Will, and Ashley sat hunched over the table, their faces illuminated by scattered candles and the dim light of the rune diagram they'd painstakingly etched onto parchment. Books on runic theory, alchemical transformations, and magical harmonics were piled around them, creating a fortress of knowledge that had yet to yield results.

Eddie groaned, rubbing his temples as he leaned back in his chair. Exhaustion weighed heavily on his shoulders, and his jade-green eyes felt gritty from staring too long at the intricate lines and sigils. "Alright," he muttered, "one last check before we activate. Everything's aligned according to the diagram, right?"

Ashley glanced at the objects arranged in a triangle on the table: a sprig of sage, a shard of quartz, and a vial of saltwater. She looked skeptical but nodded. "Sure, everything's 'aligned,' as you put it. But this still feels like overkill."

Will rolled his eyes. "It's not overkill. It's precision. If you'd actually studied rune theory, you'd know that every element has to harmonize perfectly to channel the magic. Alright, Welton, ready?"

Eddie hesitated for a moment, then gave a reluctant nod. "Yeah, let's try it."

Will and Ashley placed their hands on the edge of the parchment, while Eddie took the center. Together, they channeled their magic into the rune.

For a moment, the lines of the rune flickered, faintly glowing in a silvery hue. Eddie felt a spark of hope — then a loud *pop* broke the silence. The glow sputtered out, and the parchment emitted a pathetic puff of smoke. The objects on the table remained as they were, lifeless and unaltered.

"Seriously?" Will groaned, throwing his hands up. "What the hell happened?"

Ashley crossed her arms, her face a mix of frustration and smugness. "Gee, I don't know, maybe the problem is *you*, Chester. You've been barking orders all night and didn't listen to anyone else's input."

Will shot her a glare. "My input was the only thing keeping this from being a total disaster. If you'd actually followed the steps —"

"Oh, don't even," Ashley interrupted, leaning forward. "This whole 'runework' idea was yours, remember? If we'd just gone with summoning a pixie, we'd have something to show for it by now."

"Yeah, sure, because dealing with an unpredictable arcane creature *definitely* wouldn't have gone wrong," Will retorted, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Face it, Mayfair, you don't know the first thing about working as a team."

Ashley's eyes narrowed. "And you're such a model team player? Newsflash, Chester, no one likes working with someone who thinks they're always right."

Eddie, who had been quietly staring at the now-useless parchment, sighed heavily and held up his hands. "Alright, *enough!* Both of you!" His voice cracked slightly, but it was enough to silence them.

He leaned forward, his tone softer but firm. "Look, we're all frustrated, and this didn't work out the way we wanted. But arguing isn't going to help us right now. We still have a chance to salvage this."

Will frowned. "How? We're out of time to try again."

"We don't need to try again," Eddie said, gesturing to the books and notes scattered around them. "We've got enough data from this attempt to write a solid report. We explain the process, the logic behind the rune, and why it didn't work. If we present it well, Professor Rheagan might still give us a passing grade for sound reasoning and effort."

Ashley raised an eyebrow. "You really think he'll go for that?"

"He might," Eddie replied, though his voice carried a hint of uncertainty. "This is a *Foundational* course, after all. It's about learning the theory, not just the results."

Ashley sighed, running a hand through her damp hair. "Fine. I'll help write the report. But next time, Chester? You're not calling all the shots."

Will muttered something under his breath but didn't argue further. Instead, he picked up a quill and began jotting notes.

Eddie felt the tension in the room ease slightly, though it didn't disappear entirely. As he began organizing their findings, he couldn't help but think how much harder this would have been without Madeleine's words of encouragement. Mixing unjoinable materials to create something greater... it was proving to be a challenge. But maybe, just maybe, they could pull it off.

## ACT II | Chapter 6



The grand Vulcrum Lecture Hall, with its soaring ceilings and intricate stained-glass windows, was usually a place of inspiration for Eddie. Today, however, it felt like the walls were closing in, the vibrant murals depicting legendary magical discoveries doing little to soothe his nerves. Eddie, Will, and Ashley sat together near the middle rows, their report paper resting between them on the desk.

Eddie rubbed his eyes, fighting the urge to yawn. The sleepless night had taken its toll, and every fiber of his being ached for rest. Glancing to his right, he saw Ashley tapping her quill against the desk, her lips pursed in frustration. Will, on Eddie's left, leaned back in his chair, his arms crossed and his eyes half-closed, as if he were trying to appear more relaxed than he really felt.

"How's the energy holding up?" Eddie whispered, his voice barely audible over the low murmur of students filling the hall.

Ashley shot him a glare. "I've had three cups of tea, and I'm still ready to keel over," she muttered. "This better be worth it."

Will snorted softly, not opening his eyes. "Yeah, because who doesn't love baring their soul to Professor Rheagan and a hundred other students after zero sleep?"

Eddie sighed, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. Days of practice ran through his mind, the words of their presentation blending together in a foggy haze. "It'll be fine," he murmured, mostly to himself. "We've got the logic. We've got the data. Rheagan values effort more than perfection, right?"

"Maybe," Ashley said, her voice tinged with doubt. "But is it enough? We're not just competing against our expectations here; we're competing against people who probably slept last night."

Eddie glanced around the lecture hall, noticing the polished demeanor of some of their peers. Groups huddled together, murmuring quietly as they reviewed last-minute details. Unlike Eddie's group, some of these students looked confident — prepared. Eddie felt a pang of inadequacy twist in his chest.

"I don't think we should be comparing ourselves," he said quietly, though his words lacked conviction. "We did our best. That has to count for something."

Ashley leaned her chin on her hand, staring down at the parchment in front of them. "Let's just hope Rheagan sees it that way."

Will finally sat up, ruffling his hair in frustration. "Well, we've done the work. All that's left is to get through it without embarrassing ourselves. Or, more specifically, me."

Eddie rolled his eyes, but he couldn't suppress a small grin. Despite the exhaustion and nerves, there was something oddly grounding about Will's dry humor.



Professor Rheagan entered the hall then, his slow, deliberate movements commanding attention. The chatter died down as he stepped up to the podium, his deep voice resonating through the room.

"Good morning, students," he began, his eyes scanning the room. "I hope you've all brought your courage along with your papers. Today, we'll see not only what you've learned but how well you've adapted to challenge and failure. Remember, in magic – and in life – failure is often the best teacher."

Eddie's heart skipped a beat as Rheagan's words seemed to strike directly at their predicament. He looked at Ashley and Will, who shared his nervous expression.

"Well," Ashley whispered, sitting up straighter, "guess we'll find out if he really means that."

Eddie clenched his fists under the desk, steeling himself. Their group would be called soon enough. All they could do now was give it their all and hope for the best.

The room was thick with the tension of waiting, and Professor Rheagan's calm voice seemed to stretch the silence even longer. Eddie shifted uneasily in his seat, exchanging a glance with Will and Ashley. The idea of presenting first was something none of them wanted to entertain, and it seemed like their classmates were in agreement, all of them avoiding eye contact with the professor.

Professor Rheagan, unfazed by the lingering hesitation, spoke again. "It's alright. A bonus point will be awarded to the group

who presents first," he said, his voice carrying over the murmurs in the hall.

The students remained silent, staring down at their notes, or pretending to do so, as if by avoiding attention, they could will themselves out of the situation.

Eddie sighed, running his fingers through his hair, already feeling the weight of the presentation pressing down on him. It wasn't just about the work — it was about how they were going to present it. They had done the work, yes, but there was always that nagging doubt in the back of his mind.

Professor Rheagan's gaze swept across the hall, clearly patient but waiting for someone to step up. "Alright then, I will pick at random," he said, raising a hand toward the chalkboard where he had scribbled the names of each group.

Before he could even finish his sentence, a lone student's hand shot up, breaking the silence.

"Me, Professor!" came the confident voice, cutting through the stillness like a knife.

Eddie's head snapped up. Standing near the front, with her hand raised high, was none other than Christine, her blond hair perfectly styled, and a smirk on her face that seemed plastered there as if she were born to stand in front of an audience.

Eddie couldn't help but wince. Of course, it was her. Christine, the embodiment of overconfidence, whose magical abilities were

as flashy as her attitude, had no qualms about presenting. She had probably been waiting for this moment all semester.

Christine's gaze flicked across the room, her eyes briefly meeting Eddie's with a look of barely-veiled superiority. "Don't worry, I'm sure you'll do just fine after me," she called out sweetly, before turning back to Professor Rheagan.

Professor Rheagan, though seemingly unbothered by Christine's eagerness, nodded approvingly. "Very well, Miss Christine. You're up."

As Christine sauntered to the front of the room, her smirk never fading, Eddie felt a tight knot in his stomach. He could already imagine how the presentation would unfold – slick, polished, and probably with a few extra flourishes meant to show off her skill and knowledge.

Will leaned toward Eddie, his voice barely a whisper. "Well, at least now we know what we're up against. If we screw this up, we'll have a front-row seat to watch her gloat."

Eddie gave him a tired, half-hearted smile. "Guess we better not screw it up, then."

As Christine began her presentation, Eddie tried not to let his nerves get the best of him. He just hoped they could hold it together long enough to make their own presentation without being overshadowed by her showmanship.

Christine's footsteps echoed sharply as she moved toward the front of the room, a confident stride that made it clear she was

accustomed to being in the spotlight. Behind her, Dominic and Geralt flanked her, their presence commanding in both stature and intellect. Both were well-built, their solid frames making them look like they could outlast a full day of training in the gym without breaking a sweat. Their sharp eyes, however, spoke of something more: a deadly combination of brawn and brains that kept their group firmly at the top in every class.

Eddie, Will, and Ashley exchanged glances. There was a competitive awe in their eyes as they watched Christine's group. The other students leaned forward in their seats, already knowing that this group would present something beyond the ordinary.

Christine wasted no time, launching into her presentation. "Runes," she began, her voice smooth and assured, "are the very foundation of magic in many cultures. Through symbols and their inherent meanings, we channel the forces of nature itself, bridging the gap between our world and the arcane."

Eddie couldn't help but nod. He was familiar with this part – he had studied runic theory in his Alchemy class. The basics of rune casting were simple enough: each rune was a representation of a specific magical intent or element, and when drawn or inscribed in the proper way, it could manipulate or amplify that force. He knew it well, and it was the kind of content any first-year student could rattle off.

Christine, however, was determined to make sure everyone knew she was going beyond just basics. She turned slightly, adjusting the presentation board to reveal an intricate diagram, full of symbols and elaborate geometric shapes. "But the real magic," she

said, her voice dropping to a tone of mystery, "lies in the ancient arts of elven enchantment."

The room went quiet, the shift in energy palpable. Even Dominic and Geralt stood a little taller at the mention of elves – something clearly beyond their usual repertoire.

Christine continued, her eyes now gleaming as she pointed to a section of the board where a series of swirling, flowing lines of runes were inscribed. "The elven people are masters of intricate enchantment and have developed their own brand of runecraft, one far more complex than anything we see in the common realms today. Elven runes are not just symbols – they are keys to unlocking the deepest layers of the world's magic."

Eddie's heart skipped a beat. He'd heard of elven enchantments before, but this was different. He had never learned about them in such detail. The complexities of elven rune magic, something so ancient and profound, were well beyond what Catherine had ever shared with him, and she was an elf herself. It was as though Christine were unveiling a lost piece of history, one that Eddie had never even suspected existed.

She continued her explanation, the runes on the board shifting as if they were alive, twisting and weaving themselves into new patterns. "Elven enchantments are often tied to the elements of nature itself – light, shadow, the stars, the ocean. The runes serve as both conduit and barrier, protecting sacred knowledge and amplifying the power of the caster."

Eddie's jaw nearly dropped. This was far beyond basic runework. Elven enchantments were an entire field of study that could rival

the best of magical disciplines. It was clear from Christine's smug expression that she knew exactly how impressive this was, and she was relishing in the attention she was receiving.

She paused to look over the class, clearly satisfied with the ripple of awe that passed through the room. Dominic and Geralt stood at the ready, their stoic expressions betraying none of the same excitement, but their silent support was unmistakable.

Eddie glanced over at Will and Ashley, both of whom appeared equally stunned. Will's eyes were narrowed, no doubt processing the information and wondering just how much of this he could apply to their own project. Ashley, on the other hand, was visibly intrigued – though perhaps a bit jealous of the smooth confidence that Christine exuded.

Eddie's mind raced. This was new, exciting, and utterly intimidating. He had never imagined that such a profound aspect of magic existed. Elven runes, something only hinted at in history books, now lay exposed before them, and Eddie was left wondering just how far Christine and her team had gone to master this ancient art.

The tension in the room deepened as Christine finished her segment with a flourish, giving the class a moment to absorb the weight of her words.

"Any questions?" she asked, her smirk widening at the hesitant silence.

Eddie swallowed, feeling a mix of awe and frustration. He had a deep respect for the elves, having grown up with Catherine, but

this level of mastery – he couldn't help but feel both humbled and inspired by it.

The applause filled the lecture hall, the sound of students clapping reverberating in Eddie's ears. The room was alive with admiration as Christine's presentation came to a close. Even Professor Rheagan, usually reserved in his praise, offered an approving nod.

"Well done, Ms. St. Clair, Dominic, and Geralt," he said, his voice thick with approval. "You've demonstrated an impressive understanding of elven enchantments and their application in runic theory. You've certainly set a high standard for the rest of the class."

Christine's lips curled into an even wider smirk as she rolled up the scroll containing her rune. The trio exchanged a few quiet words, their satisfaction evident in the confident way they carried themselves as they walked back to their seats. It wasn't just the success of their rune – it was the way they had executed the presentation itself, the way they commanded the room with ease. Eddie couldn't deny the smoothness with which they'd performed, and he felt a pang of frustration rise in his chest.

Eddie, Will, and Ashley exchanged a brief, silent glance. The weight of their own project suddenly felt much heavier.

"We're screwed," Will muttered under his breath, his face slightly pale.

Eddie's thoughts echoed Will's. *How the hell do we top that off?* They had worked hard on their rune, but it had fizzled out in

front of the class – nothing like the polished, flawless enchantment Christine and her team had presented. The competitive fire in Eddie’s chest started to burn brighter, not because he wanted to best Christine, but because he didn’t want to fail in front of everyone. The thought of presenting their incomplete work next felt daunting.

“Yeah, I don’t know how we can match that,” Ashley said, her voice low but edged with the same frustration Eddie felt.

Their assignment was *fine* – they had worked hard on it, and Eddie had tried his best with the runes, but compared to Christine’s performance, their project felt small. It felt... *unfinished*.

Will shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "I mean, we could always try pulling some elven enchantments of our own," he joked, though there was no humor in his voice.

Ashley shot him a look. "I'm not sure *summoning a pixie* is going to match that, Chester."

Eddie rubbed his eyes, trying to focus. "We’ve still got this. Maybe we didn’t get the summoning part right, but we can still present what we know. We’ve got solid reasoning behind what we did – it just didn’t work this time. We just need to show that we understand why."

But as the lecture hall filled with more discussions of Christine’s success, Eddie couldn’t help but feel the weight of the comparison crushing down on him. *Will and Ashley are right... How do we present our failed rune now?*



As Christine settled back into her seat, her smug grin still lingering, Eddie fought to push the panic down. He glanced over at Will, whose normally confident demeanor seemed a little less certain than usual, and then at Ashley, who was staring at the podium with a mixture of concentration and frustration.

They had to come up with something – and quickly. The clock was ticking, and Christine's perfect presentation had just set a bar that felt unreachable.

Eddie stood at the podium, his heart hammering in his chest. The familiar surroundings of the Vulcrum lecture hall, once a place of comfort and excitement, now felt like an oppressive labyrinth closing in around him. His eyes scanned the room, landing on his peers, Professor Rheagan, and the few students whose glances were laced with curiosity, skepticism, and that dreaded expectation.

He cleared his throat, trying to steady himself, but the words seemed to get caught in his throat.

"Uh, so... we... um, we've been working on a, uh, rune combination... it's, uh... it's a mix of Dwarven, uh, runic layouts, and, uh... witch inscriptions," Eddie stammered, his mind racing, but his tongue stumbling over the words. "And, uh... trying to combine them, it's like, um, trying to make fish... fish... um... belong in cow sheds, or something like that? It doesn't – doesn't really work together."

A bead of sweat dripped down Eddie's forehead as he shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other. His mind felt like it was spinning in circles, desperately searching for words that would

make sense, but every explanation only seemed to make the rune more incomprehensible.

"Right, so, yeah, uh... we —"

He felt the pressure rise as the silence dragged on, the lack of any immediate feedback from the class gnawing at him. It felt like he was failing, like everyone in the room could see it. The stares grew heavier, and even Professor Rheagan's usual calm expression seemed a little too focused.

Then, unexpectedly, Ashley placed her hand on the podium and smoothly stepped forward, her presence commanding attention like it always did. The moment she began speaking, Eddie could feel the relief wash over him. She was a natural.

"Right," Ashley began, her voice clear, confident, and captivating, the slight lilt of her accent adding a layer of warmth. "So what Eddie's trying to say, in a more *straightforward* way, is that we tried combining two very different magical practices — Dwarven runic designs and witch inscriptions. Now, these are two distinct magical structures that don't exactly align in terms of their elemental resonance. The idea is that we were trying to find harmony where there is none."

She paced slightly, making sure to keep her audience engaged. "It's a bit like trying to merge fire and water — they're opposites. You can get some interesting effects, but it doesn't work in a traditional sense." Ashley paused, letting her words sink in. She was good at this, Eddie realized. Really good.

“The reason we attempted this combination is because,” she continued, “we were aiming for a different result – something that could, at the very least, be useful if not immediately perfect. You see, the issue wasn’t with the theory – it was the actual process of integrating both runes without fully understanding how they interact. There’s no clear precedent for this kind of runic fusion, and as you can see from the result, it... fizzled.”

Eddie watched as she effortlessly explained the theory behind their work, making the complex concepts feel approachable. She brought clarity to the entire situation, using analogies and simple language that everyone could follow. It was like she was born to present, Eddie thought, her confidence lighting up the room. She was actively engaging with the audience, making it feel like a conversation rather than a lecture.

Will followed suit. With a smile, he stepped forward next, his natural charisma taking over. “Yeah, what she said,” Will added with a grin. “Basically, we tried to take something super complex and, well, made a bit of a mess, but what we did learn –” he chuckled, flashing the class a wink, “– is that not all experiments are a failure, as long as you can take away something useful from them.”

Eddie felt a spark of realization. Will and Ashley were in their element, effortlessly turning what could have been a disastrous presentation into something engaging and lighthearted. Will was cracking jokes, drawing laughs, and even though they were talking about something as technical as runes, the room felt like they were all part of an inside joke.

Eddie couldn't help but smile, despite the nerves still gnawing at him. His friends were amazing. Even without a perfect rune, they were making the presentation shine. They were making *them* shine.

As Will wrapped up the presentation, the room seemed to breathe a collective sigh of relief. There had been no awkwardness, no uncertainty. Just clarity and confidence. They'd turned what could have been a simple explanation into an interactive experience, and the whole class seemed to respond to it.

"Thank you," Will finished with a broad grin. "And, uh, if you've got any questions, shoot. We'll try to explain this mess of magic a little more clearly if you need it."

The lecture hall erupted into applause, the warm sound of appreciation echoing across the room. Eddie's chest swelled with pride, not just for the success of their presentation, but for the way Will and Ashley had turned it around. They were the real stars of the show.

Professor Rheagan, ever the composed academic, nodded in approval, his gaze steady. "Impressive work, Ms. Mayfair, Mr. Chester. You've taken a complex issue and explained it with both clarity and confidence. A unique approach to an unfamiliar challenge."

Eddie felt the weight lift off his shoulders. He hadn't nailed the presentation, but he had been part of a team that made it work. He glanced over at Will and Ashley, both of them grinning widely.

"Next time," Eddie said, allowing himself a laugh, "I think I'll leave the presenting to you two."

Will slapped him on the back. "Don't worry, mate. We'll make a public speaker out of you yet."

Ashley gave him a wink. "Just don't freeze up on us next time. You did fine."

Eddie smiled. Yeah, maybe next time would be easier. But for now, he could rest easy knowing they'd survived their first big presentation at Edenfield University.

As Eddie returned to his seat beside Will and Ashley, his heart felt heavy, the weight of Professor Rheagan's words still ringing in his ears.

"An example of what *not* to do when attempting rune fusion," Professor Rheagan had said, his voice unwavering and sharp, cutting through the lecture hall with a cool precision. "The layout is too erratic. The witch inscriptions don't sync with the Dwarven runes in any meaningful way. This is... a mess, students. And frankly, it's not even close to what you could have achieved with more diligence and focus."

Eddie could feel his cheeks burn with embarrassment as he stared down at his shoes. The words were like daggers, each one sharper than the last, and the sting of disappointment was almost unbearable. He had known it was going to be bad, but this? This felt like a public execution of their work, laid bare for everyone to see.

And of course, Christine's group was smirking. She leaned forward in her seat, flashing Eddie and the others a look of satisfaction, her smug grin plastered on her face as she exchanged whispered words with her teammates, Dominic and Geralt. The sight of it made Eddie's stomach churn. He didn't know if it was the jealousy or the frustration that hurt more, but in that moment, it felt like he was nothing more than a fool in front of his peers.

Will sat beside him, fidgeting slightly but trying to keep a stoic expression. Ashley, however, was having none of it. She was visibly angry, her cheeks flushed a deep red with both frustration and embarrassment. Her hands were tightly clenched in her lap, her fingers tapping furiously against her knee as she glared straight ahead, not even looking at Eddie or Will.

"Professor Rheagan's right, you know," Ashley muttered under her breath, her voice tight with irritation. "We — I — could have done better, but noooo, we had to go and make a spectacle of ourselves, didn't we?"

Eddie flinched at her harsh tone. He knew she wasn't mad at him, but the frustration in her voice hit him harder than he expected. She had worked so hard to make the rune work, only for it to end up like this — flawed, failing, and ultimately condemned in front of everyone.

Will gave him a sidelong glance, his face a mixture of concern and resignation. "Hey, don't take it too personally. It was a tough one to pull off, and you know that. We'll make it up on the next assignment."

But Eddie couldn't shake the feeling of failure. Will's words barely offered any comfort, especially when he could hear Christine's group still whispering in the background, their laughter barely disguised as Professor Rheagan continued to critique their work.

Professor Rheagan was wrapping up his analysis of their presentation, clearly ready to move on, but Eddie couldn't help but feel like the judgment still hung in the air like an oppressive cloud. The lecture hall felt colder now, more distant, as if everyone's eyes were on him and his friends, their failures exposed for all to see.

As the next group began their presentation, Eddie couldn't bring himself to look up. He kept his gaze fixed on his desk, wishing for the ground to swallow him whole.

Ashley shifted uncomfortably in her seat beside him. "I knew it was going to be hard, but this?" she hissed. "This is... humiliating."

Eddie nodded, but didn't say anything. He could feel her pain, the sting of rejection, the bitterness of being judged in front of everyone. It was a reminder that not every experiment had a happy ending. Not every effort was rewarded, no matter how much heart they'd put into it.

After a long pause, Will leaned forward, breaking the silence. "Hey, look... we're still here, right? We've still got a chance. One bad rune doesn't define us. And next time? We'll *nail* it."

Ashley didn't respond, but Eddie could tell she was listening. His words weren't much, but they were all he could offer right now. They couldn't change the past, but maybe—just maybe—they could learn from it and make sure the next time would be better.

He hoped that when the time came, they would.



After the class ended, the three of them filed out of the lecture hall, the air still heavy with the lingering judgment of Professor Rheagan's critiques. Eddie and Will stood outside the lecture hall, their shoulders slumped, both unsure of what to say next. They could hear the clatter of students moving on to their next classes, some chatting animatedly, others seemingly unaffected by the pressure of their assignments. But for Eddie and Will, it felt like the weight of the world was pressing down on them.

Ashley, without a word, had dashed off toward the bathroom, her footsteps echoing in the corridor as she hurried away. Eddie and Will exchanged a brief glance, the awkward silence between them almost palpable.

"She'll be fine, right?" Will muttered, breaking the silence as he leaned against the stone wall of the hallway. He was trying to sound casual, but his voice betrayed the tension in his words.



Eddie nodded, though his heart wasn't in it. "Yeah. Just... she's mad, I guess."

Will let out a long sigh, his gaze drifting to the floor. "We're all mad. That presentation was a disaster. I'm sure she's pissed at us."

Eddie ran a hand through his messy silver hair, his thoughts spiraling. "We knew it was gonna be tough... but I didn't think it'd go *this* badly." His words felt hollow, like they didn't quite capture the weight of the disappointment they were all feeling.

"You're right," Will said, exhaling sharply, "It's just... I thought we had a shot at it, y'know? We've been working on this for *weeks*, and we just... bungled it. We've got a lousy project, lousy grade, and no way to fix it now." His eyes flicked to Eddie, his face darkening. "Especially you. The scholarship and all... Man, I don't know how you're holding it together."

Eddie's stomach twisted at the mention of his scholarship. He had worked so hard to get to Edenfield, his dream school. But now, with two assignments that were likely to get failing grades, his future there felt precarious. The pressure was mounting. Every moment, every misstep felt like a crack in the foundation he had built for himself. What would happen if he lost his scholarship? He couldn't afford to stay without it, and the idea of returning home to Weshaven, feeling like a failure, was unbearable.

"I don't know," Eddie admitted, voice barely above a whisper. "I thought I could do this. I thought I could handle the pressure. But... I don't know how to fix it."

Will's eyes softened, a flicker of sympathy crossing his face. "Hey, we've got time, right? I mean, there's still a chance to turn it around. We just have to... figure it out. Maybe we need to change how we're approaching this class. Hell, maybe Professor Rheagan will go easier on us next time if we show we're trying." He tried to sound optimistic, but even Eddie could hear the uncertainty in his voice.

Eddie shook his head, feeling a deep frustration bubble up inside him. "It's not enough. Not with the way things are going. We're barely scraping by. It's like we can't catch a break." He let out a frustrated breath, his chest tight.

Will paused for a moment, then placed a hand on Eddie's shoulder. "Listen, I get it. You've got a lot on the line. But if anyone can get through this, it's you. You're an Alchemy student, Eddie. You're smart. You'll figure it out." He gave him a small, reassuring grin. "Plus, you've got me and Ashley in your corner. We'll help you out, yeah? We're a team."

Eddie appreciated the effort, but the weight of his worries didn't lift. "I don't know if that's enough, Will. It just feels like everything's falling apart."

They were barely a few steps down the hall when a voice called out from behind them, sharp and unmistakable.

"Well, well, if it isn't the Alchemist's *star pupil* and his lackluster crew," Christine's voice dripped with sarcasm as she approached, her group trailing behind her. Dominic and Geralt flanked her, both of them looking smug, but not as brazen as Christine.

Eddie tensed, and Will immediately put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't do it, Eddie," Will murmured under his breath, but Eddie didn't have the strength to push back. He knew this was coming. Christine had been waiting for this moment ever since their presentation.

Christine stopped in front of them, her eyes flicking to the rolled-up project notes in Eddie's hand. She sneered, her lips curling in disgust. "What's this?" she asked, raising an eyebrow. "Your *pathetic* attempt at a rune? Honestly, I've seen more impressive scribbles from first years." Her eyes glinted as she continued, savoring the words. "I thought someone like you – accepted to Edenfield thanks to *connections* with a Master Alchemist – might actually put some effort into a project."

Eddie's stomach twisted at the mention of the rumor. He had never wanted it to get out, but somehow it had. His scholarship had always been a point of contention, with some believing he had used his father's name to secure a spot at Edenfield. Christine, it seemed, had latched onto that rumor with all the malicious glee she could muster.

"Perhaps you should've tried a little harder, huh, Eddie?" Christine continued, stepping closer and poking the rolled parchment with her finger, as if trying to physically push him into embarrassment. "Maybe then you wouldn't have ended up with that *disaster* of a rune on your hands."

She glanced over at Will. "And you," she added with a mocking chuckle, "don't think I didn't see you trying to talk your way through it. You're just as bad as him."

Eddie felt his blood start to heat, but he forced himself to stay calm. Will stepped forward, trying to defuse the situation. "Look, Christine, we've already got the point. We messed up. You don't need to rub it in."

But Christine wasn't done. She wasn't interested in just *rubbing it in*. She was here to push Eddie's buttons, to undermine everything he had worked for. She leaned in closer, her eyes narrowing with delight. "Is that how it happened, Eddie?" she taunted. "You didn't mess up. No, no, no, that wasn't an accident at the Oak Tree, was it? You *wanted* to show off, didn't you?"

The Oak Tree incident — Eddie's slip-up with his magic — was the topic of much gossip around campus. He hadn't meant to show off. It had been a *terrible accident* brought on by his condition, a surge of power that he couldn't control. But no one cared about that. They only saw the spectacle, the moment when Eddie *tried* to use magic in front of a crowd.

Christine's voice dropped into an almost conspiratorial tone, her smirk widening. "Trying to impress everyone with your little magic trick? What a joke."

The word "joke" hit Eddie like a slap to the face. He clenched his fists, but Will grabbed his arm, holding him back. "Don't give her what she wants," Will said, his voice low but steady.

Christine, sensing her victory, straightened up and turned to her two companions. "Honestly, it's pathetic. A kid with no real control over his own magic thinking he's something special." She raised an eyebrow at Eddie. "Tell me, Eddie, do you even know how to use your magic properly, or is that all just *accidental* too?"

Eddie's heart hammered in his chest, anger bubbling up, but he couldn't let her get the satisfaction of seeing him lose control. Not here. Not now.

But Christine was already moving in for the kill. "Tell you what, Eddie. How about a little magical duel?" Her eyes sparkled with malicious glee. "I'll show you just how out of your depth you are. You're not even worthy of being in this class, let alone being accepted to Edenfield." She turned to Dominic and Geralt, giving them a smug smile. "I'm sure they'll have a great time watching their little hero fall flat on his face."

Eddie's mind raced. A duel? It would be humiliating. Everyone knew about his condition, about the way his magic spiraled out of control when he tried to push it too hard. It would be the perfect setup for Christine. And worse, she knew it.

Will stepped forward, his voice firm but calm. "Christine, this is ridiculous. Eddie's not here to play your games. We've already got enough going on with this class. This duel won't prove anything."

Christine flicked her hair back, utterly unfazed. "Oh, it will prove something, Will. It'll prove just how *out of his league* Eddie really is. But if he's too scared to face me, well, that's fine too. I'll just keep watching him crumble."

She laughed softly, her voice dripping with satisfaction as she took a step back, clearly waiting for Eddie's reaction.

Eddie stood there, heart pounding, the pressure of the situation mounting. Was this how it was going to go? Would he let

Christine humiliate him, or could he somehow find a way out of this?

Eddie's hand trembled as he reached for the wand tucked in his jacket pocket, the cold metal pressing against his palm like a constant reminder of the power he could never fully control. His mind raced, drowning in memories of the Major Academy incident. The moment everything went wrong – the surge of magic, the uncontrollable blast, and the sickening realization that he had scarred someone for life. The look on Davies' face, the way he recoiled, the terror in his eyes – it haunted Eddie still, every day.

This time, though, it wasn't just a random accident. It was Christine. A smug, arrogant face filled with contempt, and a challenge that Eddie knew could lead to disaster. She was egging him on, pushing him to the point where he either had to fight or back down. But what would happen if he lost control again? What if the magic surged, uncontrollable, and he hurt her – worse, killed her? His breath hitched at the thought, his muscles locking in place.

*What if I hurt her?* The thought spiraled through his mind. It wasn't just about winning. It was about his own fear of failing again, of letting that same darkness of magic take over. He stiffened, his body freezing up as he imagined the destruction he might cause. The possibility of losing control and the aftermath of that loss gripped him tightly.

His wand remained in his hand, but his arm hung heavy, his fingers unable to grip it properly. The idea of using it – of unleashing magic – seemed like too much. His heart pounded in

his chest, each beat like a drum, louder and louder. He could already feel the panic creeping up his throat.

Then, Christine spoke, her voice high and mocking, slicing through the fog of his thoughts.

"Look, everyone!" she laughed, pointing at him as if he were a spectacle. "The Oak boy is scared!" Her tone was thick with derision, and she emphasized the word *scared* like it was a personal victory.

The laughter that followed felt like nails on a chalkboard. Eddie's cheeks burned with shame, but more than that – fear. Fear of the truth. Fear of the fact that he was terrified of losing control, of not being able to keep his magic in check.

The crowd around them murmured, students gathering to watch, eager for the spectacle that was about to unfold. Will stood beside Eddie, his face tense, but his posture solid. Will was clearly trying to gauge the situation, figuring out whether he could do anything to defuse it.

Eddie's eyes flickered to Christine, who stood there with her arms crossed, a grin on her face as she basked in the humiliation she was putting him through. She wasn't just challenging him to a duel – she was attempting to break him, to show everyone that he was nothing but a *fraud*.

He couldn't let that happen. He *had* to fight back. But what if he hurt her? What if he lost control?

The room seemed to grow smaller, the air suffocating. He could almost feel the weight of everyone's eyes on him, waiting for him to make a move. He was trapped in a cycle of fear, unable to break free.

"You're really pathetic, Eddie," Christine sneered, stepping closer, pressing her advantage. "I thought someone with your connections would be better than this. But all I see is a frightened boy with a fancy scholarship."

The words stung like venom, but they also made something snap inside Eddie. He couldn't take it anymore. His hands clenched around the wand. If she wanted a fight, she'd get one. But would it be the fight he could control, or the one that controlled him?

Christine's fingers twitched, her polished brass-plated staff glinting in the sunlight. The crystal at its core shimmered with dark, radiant energy, a clear indication that she was ready to unleash her magic. The crowd around them seemed to hold its breath, waiting for the sparks to fly.

Eddie's grip on his wand tightened, his chest still heavy with uncertainty, but before he could react, a voice cut through the tension.

"I wouldn't do that, Christine."

The words were calm, yet firm – more confident than Eddie felt in that moment. He turned, surprised to see Ashley stepping forward from behind him. Her posture was straight, her eyes narrowing as she faced Christine with an air of quiet defiance.



The students around them murmured, clearly shocked. Ashley had been quiet throughout the confrontation, but now, she was stepping up in a way Eddie hadn't expected. Her usual hesitance had vanished, replaced by a calm determination. She was ready for this fight, and it wasn't going to be on Eddie's behalf.

Christine looked taken aback, her smirk faltering for a split second, before it twisted into something more disdainful. "Oh? And what is *this*? The witch thinks she can intervene in a duel between sorcerers?"

Ashley didn't flinch at Christine's mockery. Instead, she raised her chin slightly, her hands at her sides as if preparing to summon her own magic. "This isn't your battle to win, Christine," she said, her voice laced with an unspoken challenge. "You're so eager to prove your superiority, but it's not going to happen today."

The crowd around them grew quieter, sensing the shift in energy. This wasn't just a magical duel between Eddie and Christine anymore; it was a witch versus a sorceress — two powerful magical traditions on display.

Christine's eyes narrowed, and she gave a soft, derisive laugh. "A witch?" She scoffed, twirling her staff idly. "What could you possibly do, Ashley? Your little charms and potions can't compare to my power."

Ashley's eyes didn't waver. "You don't understand anything about magic, Christine. It's not about power; it's about control." She lifted her hand slightly, palm facing Christine. "You think

your staff makes you stronger, but a sorcerer with no control is a threat to themselves as much as anyone else."

Will, still standing beside Eddie, shifted uneasily. He knew that Ashley had a way with words, but he hadn't expected her to step into the fray so boldly. Eddie, still reeling from his own internal turmoil, looked at her with a mixture of admiration and surprise. She was standing up for him, for all of them, and for something bigger than just this confrontation.

The air crackled with tension as Ashley and Christine stood face to face, the crowd around them parting to form a makeshift arena. The soft murmurs of the students grew louder, a mixture of excitement and disbelief. This wasn't just a clash of magic – it was a spectacle. The space between the two women felt charged, like the calm before a storm.

Ashley's grip tightened around her staff, its smooth, carved wood gleaming in the sunlight. A wave of shimmering energy surged from the source stone at the top of her staff, casting a faint golden glow over her. The crowd gasped in awe at the sudden shift in energy. The power radiating from her felt almost tangible – an ancient force, both gentle and unyielding.

Christine faltered for a moment, her arrogance slipping as she took in the strength of Ashley's presence. She had underestimated her opponent, thinking her only a witch with small charms and potions. But this was no ordinary confrontation.

Christine scoffed, her eyes narrowing in frustration. "What are you going to do, witch? Cast some flowers at me?" She sneered, her fingers tightening around her staff, ready to counter.

Ashley didn't respond with words – she spoke with magic instead.

With a swift movement, Ashley raised her staff high. The crowd held their breath. The earth beneath her feet seemed to respond, as if it had awakened to her call. She slammed the base of the staff onto the ground with a force that vibrated through the air.

A wave of earthy energy erupted from the staff, swirling around her like a vortex of life. Leaves whirled in the wind, and small pebbles lifted off the ground, spinning in a spiral of power. The earth seemed to pulse with her command – alive and vibrant. The energy surged outward, rippling through the space between them, aimed directly at Christine.

Christine, never one to back down from a challenge, flicked her fingers, her long nails gleaming. A necklace of enchanted silver stones around her neck pulsed with energy as she muttered a quick incantation.

A bolt of lightning shot from her outstretched hand, crackling with electric blue energy. It shot toward Ashley, a jagged streak of raw power, threatening to strike her down.

But Ashley was ready. With a flick of her wrist, she shifted her stance, and the earth beneath her responded again. A shield of roots and vines erupted from the ground, twisting and growing rapidly. The bolt of lightning collided with the shield, sending a burst of sparks flying, but the vines held strong, crackling with energy as the lightning struggled to penetrate.

The crowd stood in stunned silence, every eye locked on the two magical combatants, the tension crackling in the air like the calm before a thunderstorm. Ashley and Christine were locked in a fierce battle, their energy clashing like titans, each trying to overpower the other.

Christine's eyes blazed with fury as she focused all her energy into her staff. The crystal core glowed brighter, its power intensifying with every second. She thrust her arm forward, releasing a series of crackling magical bolts, their sharp, jagged paths cutting through the air like lightning strikes from a storm.

But Ashley was ready. Her eyes flickered with concentration as she raised her staff high, twirling it in the air with a fluid motion. Each twist redirected the incoming bolts, deflecting them away from her, leaving arcs of brilliant light behind. The air seemed to hum as Ashley's magic surged around her, countering the intensity of Christine's blasts with calm, controlled precision.

A breath escaped Ashley's lips as she muttered an incantation under her breath, tapping into the deepest well of her connection with the earth. The ground trembled beneath her, the soil shifting, as if responding to her call.

Roots erupted from the earth, long, twisting tendrils snaking toward Christine's legs like creeping vines. They moved with unnatural speed, wrapping around her ankles and pulling at her feet. Christine's eyes widened as she leapt back, narrowly avoiding being ensnared. She gritted her teeth, her necklace glowing brighter still as she gathered more power.

Christine wasn't about to be caught off guard. She raised her staff, focusing her magic, and with a sharp motion, released a barrage of magical bolts, each one crackling with raw power. They flew at Ashley in a relentless stream, each one aimed to overwhelm her defenses.

Ashley's eyes flicked toward the approaching bolts, her heart pounding in her chest. There was no time to hesitate. She lifted her staff high, drawing the energy from the earth into herself. The ground beneath her feet vibrated, and with a swift motion, she slammed the staff down onto the earth, a wave of force emanating from the base.

A massive, shimmering barrier of woven branches and stone rose in front of Ashley, each root and vine twisting into place like the strongest of shields. The magical bolts slammed into the barrier, sending out sparks and bursts of energy, but the shield held firm, deflecting the onslaught. The sound of the clash rang out like thunder, the force of the attack shaking the very air around them.

Christine snarled, her frustration mounting as her attacks seemed to falter against Ashley's steady defense. "You think this will stop me, witch?" she hissed, her voice dripping with venom. She raised her staff once more, this time channeling all her power into one massive strike. The crystal at the top of her staff glowed with an almost blinding light, and the air around them seemed to hum with anticipation.

But Ashley, unfazed, locked eyes with Christine. Her own staff began to glow with an earthy radiance, the tip sparking with golden light as she prepared to counter the oncoming storm.

As Christine launched her final, devastating blast – a crackling orb of pure energy – Ashley slammed her staff into the ground with unrelenting force. The earth beneath them shook, and from deep within the soil, a massive surge of energy shot up. Roots, vines, and rocks erupted from the ground, forming an impenetrable barrier that consumed the attack, the magical orb dissipating in a flash of light.

The explosion of power sent a shockwave through the crowd, a gust of wind and debris forcing them to stumble back. For a brief moment, the world seemed to stand still, everything suspended in the aftermath of the clash.

The tense silence hung in the air like a storm cloud as the magical duel came to a sudden halt. The crowd, still in awe, watched as Ashley and Christine stood facing each other, their energies crackling in the air, the aftermath of their spells swirling around them like smoke.

But then, a stern, commanding voice broke through the tension.

“Enough.”

Professor Rheagan emerged from the Lecture Hall, his robes flowing behind him as he stepped into the scene. His deep voice carried a weight of authority, and with a simple gesture, he raised his hand, and both Ashley’s and Christine’s spells immediately dissipated, vanishing like smoke. The shimmering energy around Ashley’s staff fizzled out, and Christine’s lightning bolts crackled one last time before vanishing into thin air.

Ashley, her breath slightly ragged from the intensity of the duel, lowered her staff. The calm energy she had summoned faded, leaving her standing firm, but with her heart still racing. Christine, her expression dark and furious, held her polished staff tightly, her necklace now dimmed, no longer glowing with the same fierce power it had before.

Professor Rheagan stepped forward, his face a mask of disappointment. His voice was quiet but firm, each word weighted with authority. "This is not the way we conduct ourselves at Edenfield University. Reckless behavior such as this will not be tolerated."

Ashley and Christine stood in silence, the weight of his words sinking in.

Rheagan continued, his gaze sweeping across the group. "Dueling on campus grounds is strictly forbidden, and you both know that. If this happens again, there will be consequences far more severe than simply a reprimand."

Christine, still fuming from the defeat, couldn't help herself. With a final, venomous glance at Ashley, she sneered. "Filthy witch," she spat, her words dripping with disdain.

The words stung, but Ashley felt a surge of anger rise in her chest. Before she could react, she felt a hand on her shoulder – Will, holding her back. His grip was firm, his expression just as tense, but there was a calmness to his presence that helped ground her.

Christine, not waiting for any response, turned on her heel and stormed off, flanked by Dominic and Geralt. The trio's footsteps

echoed as they walked away, their voices fading as they disappeared into the distance.

Ashley clenched her fists, her knuckles turning white as she fought to keep her temper in check. She wanted to rush after them, wanted to shout at Christine, but before she could move, Professor Rheagan fixed his gaze on her and Eddie with a look that silenced them both. It wasn't a shout, but the intensity of his stare was enough to still their movements.

"You will not act on impulse," he said in a low, measured tone, his disappointment clear. "You both will learn the consequences of breaking the rules the hard way if this behavior continues. Is that understood?"

Eddie, his stomach in knots from the whole ordeal, nodded quickly, his eyes wide with uncertainty. Will gave a slight, tight nod as well.

Rheagan turned his attention to Christine and her group, his voice still stern. "Geralt, Dominic, with Christine. Go. And don't let me see you causing further trouble."

Without a word, the three of them walked off, their heads held high, their expressions smug as if they had won some battle.

Then, Professor Rheagan turned to Ashley, Eddie, and Will. "As for you three, you are dismissed. I suggest you think on your actions today. This is not how we settle disputes here."

There was a heavy pause before he added, "Consider this a warning. Do not test my patience again."



The professor turned on his heel and walked back into the Lecture Hall, leaving the three of them standing in the aftermath of the duel.

Ashley took a deep breath, finally letting go of her clenched fists. She looked over at Eddie, who still looked shell-shocked from the whole encounter.



As Eddie took a deep breath, the weight of the chaotic duel finally seemed to lift from his chest. He felt grateful for Ashley's timely intervention, relieved that Christine's mocking hadn't gone any further, and that he wasn't left to face the duel alone. It had been a close call, and though the consequences were still fresh in his mind, he was thankful to have his friends by his side.

But before he could voice his thanks, Will exploded in frustration.

"Ashley!" he snapped, throwing his hands up in the air. "What the hell were you thinking? You could've gotten all of us in serious trouble! That was reckless! You didn't even think —"

Ashley flinched at his tone, her breath catching in her throat. Eddie, caught between the two of them, looked back and forth, unsure how to intervene. But before he could, something in Ashley seemed to crack.

Instead of the usual sharp retort or defensive stance, Ashley stood there, her posture rigid. Her eyes flickered with emotion as she took a step back, and then, to Eddie's surprise, her eyes welled up with tears.

"I... I didn't want to disappoint you guys," she whispered, the words barely escaping her lips. Her voice trembled. "But I... I can't just stand by and let people... let people walk all over us."

Will, seeing her break down like this, faltered in his next words, but he didn't stop. "What's going on, Ashley? This isn't like you —"

But she cut him off, her voice suddenly breaking with the weight of everything she hadn't said before.

"I'm on a scholarship, Will," she admitted, her eyes glistening. "I need to do well in this course. If I don't, I lose everything. Not just my place here, but my family's hopes, everything."

She paused, taking a shaky breath. Her hands clenched and unclenched, her body tense with a mix of fear and exhaustion. "I'm from Wintershire, a tiny town up in the mountains of Haldowic. It's... it's a place where people like me don't get opportunities. My family — my whole community — they believe in me. They believe in this. If I fail, I fail them. And I can't do that."

Will was quiet now, his anger dissipating as Ashley's words sank in. Eddie could feel the shift, the vulnerability that had emerged from Ashley, something he'd never seen from her before. Her usual confident demeanor seemed fragile now, shattered under

the weight of the pressures she carried, the weight of everything that was on the line for her.

Ashley wiped at her eyes quickly, her voice barely a whisper. "I'm here not just for me. I'm here for them. For my family. For my whole community. I can't go back... not like this. I don't know what I'll do if I don't make it."

Will, who had been standing rigid with frustration, now took a step forward. He hesitated, then, slowly, he reached out. "Ashley..."

There was a long, heavy pause, the silence thick between them. Finally, Will reached out and wrapped his arms around her in a simple, supportive embrace. It was a gesture of comfort, of understanding, and for the first time, Will's anger faded into something softer — empathy.

"I get it now," he said quietly. "I'm sorry... I should've listened. You're not in this alone."

Ashley, caught off guard by his sudden show of support, stiffened at first. But then, she relaxed into his embrace, her shoulders trembling as she fought to control the tears that were threatening to fall. She nodded silently, grateful for his warmth, for his unexpected kindness.

Eddie stood off to the side, unsure of what to do, but he couldn't help but watch the two of them. Will, usually the carefree and jokey one, was standing there, offering genuine comfort. It struck Eddie how different Will seemed now — he wasn't just the guy

who'd been quick to criticize; he was the friend who was learning, slowly, how to be there when it mattered.

"I've been so caught up in everything," Will murmured, pulling back slightly to look at Ashley. "I didn't realize... what you're really up against. But maybe... maybe combining our ideas could actually work. We don't have to do this alone, right? We can figure it out together."

Ashley, still sniffing, nodded, her voice steadier now, though still shaky. "Together. Yeah, I... I'd really like that."

Will's gaze softened as he looked at her, a thoughtful expression replacing his earlier frustration. "Okay then. We'll figure it out together. No more rushing off, no more... no more jumping in without thinking."

Eddie let out a small sigh of relief, the tension easing between them. He wasn't sure what would happen next, but one thing was clear — despite everything, despite their differences, they were in this together. They would face whatever came next as a team.

Eddie couldn't help himself. As he stood there watching the scene unfold, with Will and Ashley sharing their unexpected moment of empathy, a playful grin spread across his face. The tension had finally broken, and the three of them were standing there — together.

Without thinking, Eddie suddenly lunged forward, throwing his arms around both of them. "Hey, why didn't you guys invite me

to the hug?" he teased, his voice light with amusement. "Are you having a moment or something?"

Ashley and Will froze for a split second, startled by Eddie's sudden interruption. Will was the first to recover, blinking in surprise before his face turned a deep shade of red. "Eddie!" he sputtered, shoving him lightly in the chest. "What the hell are you doing? You're not part of this!"

Ashley, meanwhile, couldn't help but laugh, even though her face flushed with embarrassment. "Seriously, Eddie?" she said, still blushing. "I don't need you to turn this into some... group hug moment."

Eddie grinned even wider, squeezing them both tighter. "What? I thought I was included in the 'together' part. You guys were all deep and emotional, but someone had to ruin it, right?"

Ashley pushed him off with a playful shove, though her hands lingered for a moment as if to steady herself. "You're impossible!" she shot back, rolling her eyes, though the smile tugging at her lips betrayed her.

Will, still red, crossed his arms, but the corner of his mouth twitched. "Yeah, yeah," he muttered. "You're a real joke, Eddie."

"Not a joke, just a *necessary interruption* to save you both from drowning in all the feels," Eddie grinned, ruffling Will's hair, making his embarrassment even worse. "There, there. Now we're all *even*."

“Ugh, you're insufferable,” Will groaned, but it was clear the tension had melted away, and he wasn't really mad. “Alright, fine. I guess we'll let you join... next time.”

Ashley, now able to tease back, added with a smirk, “Yeah, but *next time* don't crash our emotional moment, alright?”

Eddie laughed, the awkwardness of the situation fading. “Yeah, yeah. No promises.”

But as they stood there, laughing together, Eddie realized something — it wasn't just about the small moments of victory or the struggles of magic. It was these moments of pure, silly, messy friendship that made everything worth it.

## ACT II | Chapter 7



The soft morning light filtered through the dormitory window as Eddie groggily stirred from his sleep. His body felt heavy, still exhausted from the events of the previous day – both the emotional rollercoaster and the physical strain of his presentation. He squinted at the clock on his bedside table, groaning as he noticed the time. It was early – too early – and the last thing he wanted was to be up before the sun had properly risen.

Just as he was about to pull the covers back over his head, a voice called out from below.

"Eddie, wake up!" Henry's voice rang through the room. Eddie groaned again, rolling over to bury his face in his pillow, but Henry wasn't giving up. "You've got a letter! It's from the Sage's Institute! They said it's for you, from someone named Emma Somers."

Eddie's eyes shot open at the mention of the name. *Emma Somers* – his scholarship agent. What could she want with him? The thought left him feeling a little more alert, but his mind still foggy with sleep.

"Right. I'm up," Eddie muttered, rubbing his face. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and let out a long yawn as he sluggishly stood up. His body protested the movement, but he

forced himself to push through it. Grabbing his jacket from the back of his chair, he tossed it on over his sleep-worn clothes.

The sounds of the building still felt muffled, as if the whole world hadn't quite woken up yet. He heard Henry's footsteps pacing around downstairs, likely preparing for his morning exercise routine. Eddie took a slow breath, trying to shake off the remnants of sleep, then padded down the stairs, each step echoing through the quiet hall.

When Eddie finally made his way into the kitchen, he found Henry already well into his morning workout, doing stretches by the counter, his eyes focused on the clock.

"About time you woke up," Henry said with a grin, though there was no teasing in his tone—just a tired but friendly acknowledgment. "The letter's right here." He gestured to a folded envelope sitting on the counter, the inked name "Eddie Welton" clearly visible on the front.

Eddie reached for it, his fingers brushing the paper with a sense of urgency that surprised him. The anticipation was already making his mind race—what could Emma have written to him? He opened the letter, unfolding it carefully as if the contents inside might change everything. As he read the first few lines, the tension in his chest only grew.

"Looks like Emma's got some news for me..." Eddie muttered under his breath.

Eddie's hand trembled slightly as he held the letter, the words on the page feeling like they were weighing him down. The letter,



written in formal, precise handwriting, seemed to read through him, hitting harder than he expected.

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*Dear Edward Welton,*

*I hope this letter finds you well. I've recently received a report regarding an incident on the Edenfield campus involving a duel. I must remind you that such reckless behavior is not only dangerous but also against the rules. While I'm pleased that no one was injured during the confrontation, I want to make it clear that any further acts of defiance could result in disciplinary action, including expulsion from the university. I trust this will serve as a lesson on the consequences of reckless actions.*

*Moreover, I must address your performance in your Magical Foundation course. I regret to inform you that your current standing in the class is unsatisfactory, which is not ideal, especially given the nature of your scholarship. As you know, your performance directly impacts your standing within the program, and if these grades continue, I will be forced to reconsider your eligibility for the scholarship.*

*That said, there is still time for improvement. The final exams are the determining factor, and I suggest you focus all your efforts on them. If you can demonstrate progress and understanding in the final assessments, I will happily continue to support your scholarship.*

*I wish you the best of luck and trust you will take this opportunity seriously.*

*Regards, Emma Somers*  
*Scholarship Agent, Sage's Institute*

Eddie felt the letter slip from his hands for a moment, his stomach sinking as he tried to absorb the full weight of her words. The letter wasn't just a reminder; it felt like a warning, and for the first time, he could really feel the full responsibility of his scholarship pressing down on him.

He stared blankly at the letter, the implications starting to settle into his chest. *Expulsion?* He couldn't afford that. The scholarship was everything to him. It was his ticket to a future, to a life that wasn't tied to Weshaven. It was all he had – and he might lose it, all because of a stupid duel.

Eddie took a shaky breath, his mind racing through everything that had happened: the chaos with Christine, the duel, the presentation failure, and now this – Emma's words haunting him with each passing moment. He clenched his fists at his sides, trying to calm his nerves. *What did she expect from me? I've been struggling this whole time.*

His gaze moved to Henry, who was still stretching nearby, oblivious to the gravity of the letter in Eddie's hand. Eddie couldn't bear to show his frustration just yet. He needed to process everything, to figure out how to fix this mess before it was too late. But right now, the weight of Emma's message was too much.

Finally, Eddie let out a slow breath, folding the letter carefully and tucking it into his jacket pocket. "Guess I've got a lot of work to do," he muttered to himself.

Henry raised an eyebrow. “Everything alright?”

Eddie gave him a half-hearted smile, though it didn’t reach his eyes. “Yeah, just... a little more pressure now, that’s all.”

With a last, lingering glance at the letter, Eddie turned to face the day ahead. His scholarship, his future — he couldn’t afford to lose it.



In the quiet, dimly lit room, the remnants of the earlier excitement had long faded. The pizza, now cold and forgotten, sat untouched on the table as the weight of failure settled in. Eddie glanced at Will and Ashley, their faces a mirror of his own frustration and disappointment. Ashley sat on the edge of her bed, a blanket wrapped around her like armor, while an ice pack rested on her forehead. The bruises from their duel the day before were still fresh, though her physical pain seemed insignificant compared to the weight of their situation.

The desk in front of them, once cluttered with ambitious notes and ideas, now felt like a battlefield littered with the crumpled remnants of their failed project. The drafts of the summoning rune they had worked so tirelessly on sat in a pile, mocking them with their incompleteness. The three of them had thrown everything into that project — long hours, sleepless nights, and all their hopes for redemption — and yet, it hadn’t been enough.

Eddie shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his gaze dropping to the letter that still burned in his pocket. *Emma's letter* – a stark reminder of just how precarious his place at Edenfield was.

"I suppose you guys also received the same letter from Emma Somers?" Eddie's voice broke the silence, barely more than a whisper. He didn't need to elaborate; the heavy sighs from both Will and Ashley told him all he needed to know.

Will, leaning back against the wall, nodded gravely, his eyes unfocused. "Yeah, I did. Same thing – she's pissed. Doesn't want us making a habit of dueling on campus... or getting bad grades."

Ashley, her hands folded in her lap, kept her gaze fixed on the floor, her expression unreadable. "I'm sorry. I know it was impulsive of me, but I... I couldn't just stand by and let her humiliate Eddie." Her voice wavered, though she quickly regained her composure. "I know the consequences, though. I screwed up."

Eddie watched her closely, his stomach twisting. He knew Ashley had acted out of defense, but now she seemed to be carrying the weight of it all. She wasn't the only one feeling the pressure. "We all screwed up. I shouldn't have let things escalate," Eddie admitted, his voice tinged with guilt. "Now we're all in the same boat. Emma's ready to pull the scholarship if we don't turn this around."

Will stood up from his leaning position, running a hand through his messy hair. "So, what the hell do we do now? We can't just keep ignoring this. If we don't pull off something big in the finals, we're done."

Eddie sat on the edge of Ashley's bed, the weight of everything bearing down on him. The letter from Emma Somers felt like it was burning a hole in his pocket. He had already been wrestling with the crushing realization that everything he'd worked for — the scholarship, the chance to stay at Edenfield — was hanging by a thread. But the thought of losing it, of letting down his family, his friends, made him feel utterly paralyzed.

His group — Ashley, Will — had always been there, in some form, but in this moment, they felt more like strangers caught in the same storm. He was alone in this mess, wasn't he?

But then, as his gaze flickered between them, something shifted. No, he realized. *I'm not alone. We're all in this together.*

"I need your help," Eddie blurted out suddenly, his voice rough as though he had been holding back the words for far too long. He looked between Will and Ashley, his heart hammering in his chest. "I don't know if I can do this on my own, but I can't just let it all fall apart."

Ashley, who had been quietly staring at the floor, looked up at Eddie, her tired eyes reflecting the same exhaustion he felt. Will, his arms crossed, shifted his weight uneasily. They were both clearly uncertain, unsure of how to help him, but they could sense the desperation in Eddie's voice.

Eddie swallowed hard, willing himself to keep his composure. "I can't lose this. I can't lose everything. I've already messed up so much, and... and I just don't know what to do anymore. You two — you're my friends. I need you to help me get back on track. Please."

The words felt heavy, almost foreign, leaving his mouth as a reminder of just how far he had fallen. For so long, Eddie had prided himself on being independent – on being the one who could solve his own problems. But in this moment, with everything falling apart around him, he realized that maybe that approach wasn't going to cut it.

There was a silence that settled over the room, and for a brief moment, Eddie wondered if he had overstepped. If asking for help had somehow broken their unspoken bond.

But then Will stepped forward, his expression softened. "You really think we'd let you go down like this, Eddie?" His voice was calmer now, more understanding than it had been in days. "You're not in this alone. We're all in the same boat here."

Ashley, too, nodded, the corners of her mouth tugging into a small, reassuring smile. "You're right. We've all screwed up in one way or another. But we're in this together, and we'll figure it out." She met Eddie's eyes, her voice steady now. "No matter what happens, we've got each other's backs."

Eddie felt a warmth spread through him – a kind of relief he hadn't realized he needed. They weren't just helping him because it was the right thing to do. They were helping him because they genuinely cared about him. And in turn, Eddie realized that he cared about them, too.

He had thought he was screwed. That he had no hope left. But now, as he looked at Will and Ashley, he saw something different. They were just as screwed as he was, but that realization

somehow made him feel less alone. They were in this together. All of them.

And suddenly, it felt like they could face whatever came next, together.

Will shot Eddie a small, teasing grin. "Just don't get us into any more duels with sorceresses, alright?"

Ashley rolled her eyes, but there was no bitterness behind it. "You're lucky we're not dragging you to the infirmary after that stunt."

They both shared a laugh, and Eddie couldn't help but smile, despite everything that had gone wrong. They were fighting less now. He could see it, feel it – something had changed. They were closer than before. They weren't just a group of people thrown together by circumstance anymore. They were a team.

Eddie let out a breath, the tension finally starting to ease. "Alright, let's do this," he said, his voice more determined now. "We'll pull it together, we'll get through this. I believe in all of you."

The bond between them had solidified, not through some grand gesture, but in the quiet, unspoken understanding that they were all equally in this mess together – and that they would face it together.

With that resolve, Eddie felt a spark of hope, brighter than it had been in days. For the first time in a while, he believed in their success, in his friends, and in himself. It wasn't about being the

best or the smartest anymore. It was about showing up for each other, no matter the odds.

"You know... there *might* be a way for you to bypass the Resolve stage of magical casting," she said, her tone a bit hesitant, as if weighing the risk of what she was about to suggest. Eddie's attention snapped to her immediately, a mix of confusion and hope bubbling in his chest.

The tension in the room had started to melt away, replaced by the hum of newfound hope. Eddie, feeling the weight of his worries lift for the first time in days, was still processing the support his friends had shown him. But now, Ashley's words ignited something else inside him – an idea, a spark of possibility.

He looked at her intently as she spoke, his mind racing. "Wait, what did you just say? You mean, there's a way for me to bypass the Thelissio stage? A way to stabilize my magic?"

Ashley's eyes had brightened with excitement as she continued, her voice low but filled with a strange urgency. "Yes, there's a technique that could work for you, but it's... it's not safe. It's considered black magic. The kind of thing the university would never condone."

Eddie's heart skipped. Could it really be that simple? Could he finally be able to control his magic like other students? He felt the room narrow, the weight of Ashley's words pressing in on him. "Black magic?" he repeated slowly, trying to wrap his head around it. "But... that means it's dangerous, right?"



Ashley nodded gravely. "Yes. It involves calling on an Arcane Entity — essentially, an otherworldly force that helps channel the magic. It could stabilize your casting, but it's risky. You could lose control, or worse..." She trailed off, a shadow crossing her face. "Not to mention that kind of magic is banned for a reason. If we get caught, it could mean serious consequences. Even expulsion."

Eddie's pulse quickened. He didn't care about the consequences. All that mattered was being able to *cast* — to finally be normal, to be the kind of magician he dreamed of being. "But if it works... could I finally do magic like everyone else? Without the instability, without the accidents?"

Ashley looked conflicted, but her expression softened. "It's possible. But it's a dangerous road, Eddie. You have to decide if it's worth the risk. And you need to be careful. If you use it, there's no going back."

Eddie's mind was spinning. He had felt like an outsider for so long, constantly battling with his magical instability. Now, this — this could be the answer. His hands were shaking slightly with the weight of what she was suggesting. The idea of bypassing Thelissio altogether was tantalizing, and for a brief moment, he wondered if this could be his chance to finally prove himself.

"Where do we find this... technique?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Ashley hesitated before speaking. "There's a book in the Edenfield Archives. It's called the *Salem Codex*. It's a restricted text, one of the few that holds the knowledge of this technique.

But... it's forbidden. The codex contains powerful, dangerous magic – black magic, like I said – and the kind of stuff that gets students expelled just for trying to look at it.”

She paused, her gaze shifting to Will. Eddie’s own eyes followed, sensing the unspoken tension. She expected Will to argue, to shoot down the idea before it even began. It was risky. It was dangerous. It was exactly the kind of thing that Will would typically call reckless.

But then Will did something unexpected. His eyes glinted with mischief, and a smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. "What are we waiting for?" he said, his voice light with a hint of excitement. "Let’s go get them."

Eddie blinked, stunned. Will, the one who’d always been the voice of reason, the one who’d had no problem calling out Eddie for his impulsive actions, was now onboard? He could hardly believe it. Will didn’t just approve of this – he was *enthusiastic* about it.

“You’re not serious,” Ashley said, her eyes narrowing at Will’s smirk. “This is black magic. This could get us all expelled – or worse!”

Will shrugged, unconcerned. “So? What are we doing here if we’re just going to sit around feeling sorry for ourselves?” He turned his gaze to Eddie, locking eyes with him. “We’re already in trouble, Eddie. Might as well go big, right?”

Eddie stared at Will, his mind racing. Will, of all people, was willing to help him risk it all. The strange energy in the room

shifted. The decision was made, even though it felt reckless and terrifying.

Ashley looked between the two of them, her hesitation slowly melting away as she nodded, the weight of the choice now fully sinking in. "Okay," she murmured. "We do this. But we do it carefully. We get the *Salem Codex*, we figure out how to stabilize your magic, and we stay *under the radar*. We can't afford to screw up again."

Eddie's heart raced as he felt something shift inside him – a strange blend of excitement and fear. He had no idea what they were getting themselves into, but for the first time in a long while, he felt like he wasn't alone. Will and Ashley were with him, all in. Together, they were going to do something *crazy*, but maybe – just maybe – it was the only way forward.

"Let's do it," Eddie said, finally, his voice steady with determination. "We're going to get that book."

And with that, they stood, ready to face whatever dangers lay ahead in their quest to unlock the forbidden knowledge that could change Eddie's future forever.

## ACT II | Chapter 8



Inside the cozy confines of Ashley's dorm room, the air crackled with a tension that was both thrilling and unnerving. Huddled around the desk, bathed in the soft glow of a desk lamp, Eddie, Will, and Ashley plotted their daring escapade. The weight of their plan, a heist into the forbidden depths of the library's restricted section, pressed down on them, urging them to speak in hushed tones.

Ashley, ever the planner, took the lead. "Alright, listen up," she began, her voice barely a whisper. "The library's a no-go after 10 pm. They lock the whole place down tight." She gestured to a crudely drawn map of the library sprawled across a sheet of paper. "But," she continued, a hint of mischief dancing in her eyes, "I have some intel. Remember that time I fell asleep in the library and they accidentally locked me in?"

Will and Eddie exchanged bewildered glances.

"Yeah," Ashley chuckled, "not my proudest moment. Anyway, I managed to escape through a broken window on the second floor, near the back by the woods. Now, it's a gamble, but hopefully, they haven't gotten around to fixing it yet."

Eddie raised an eyebrow. "That's your plan? Sneaking in through a broken window in the dead of night?"

Ashley shrugged. "Desperate times call for desperate measures, Eddie. We're out of options. Besides, the window leads right to a conveniently placed willow tree – perfect for climbing down."

Will, ever the optimist, grinned. "I like it! A little infiltration, a touch of parkour – sounds like an adventure to me!"

Eddie, still unconvinced, rubbed a hand over his face. "This is crazy. We could get expelled for this, you know."

"We know," Ashley said, her voice firm despite a tremor of apprehension. "But what choice do we have? We can't submit a failing project, and there's no guarantee Professor Gilmore will believe our sabotage story."

A heavy silence descended upon the room. The weight of their audacious plan settled upon them. Yet, amidst the fear and uncertainty, a flicker of determination ignited in their eyes. They were in this together, bound by a shared purpose, a desperate gamble to salvage their project and rewrite their fate.

"Alright," Eddie finally said, a steely glint replacing his earlier apprehension. "Let's do this. But Ashley," he added, his voice low and serious, "are you sure you're up for this? You're still recovering from the duel with Christine."

Ashley met his gaze with a resolute nod. "I'm in. Besides, who else can climb down a tree like a squirrel in the dead of night?"

A wry smile played on Will's lips. "Alright then, team. Operation Codex Salem is a go. Let's grab some sleep, because tonight, we become librarians... of a very different sort."

With renewed determination, they turned their attention to the final preparations. Ashley rummaged through her backpack, pulling out a coil of thick rope and a set of lockpicks – remnants of her past life, she'd claimed. Eddie produced a roll of dark cloth, perfect for creating makeshift masks. Will, ever the resourceful one, had procured a small flashlight from who-knows-where.

As they donned their disguises, the room took on the air of a rebel hideout. The once-cozy space now buzzed with a quiet energy, a shared purpose thrumming beneath the surface.

Finally, with a silent nod of agreement, Ashley extinguished the lamp. Plunged into darkness, the weight of the night pressed down on them. Yet, they weren't afraid. In the quiet companionship of their shared secret, they found a different kind of courage – the courage of friendship, of shared defiance.

They crept out of the dorm room, their footsteps muffled by the thick night air. The moon, veiled by wispy clouds, cast an ethereal glow upon their path, guiding them towards the forbidden halls of knowledge. Tonight, they were not students, not friends – tonight, they were three adventurers, embarking on a quest into the unknown, united by their thirst for knowledge and their unwavering determination to succeed.

Earlier that night, they'd slipped out of Dorm 7 under the cloak of darkness. The streets of Edenfield were deserted, an eerie quiet that felt both unsettling and strangely exhilarating. No carriages rattled by, no horses whinnied – just the hushed whisper of the wind and the occasional rustle of unseen creatures in the night.

They reached the university's brick wall, a formidable barrier separating the familiar comfort of their dorm from the unknown adventure that awaited. Will, ever the scout, took the lead. With a practiced agility honed from years of youthful pranks, he scaled the wall, his dark form disappearing into the night. After a tense moment of waiting, a prearranged signal – two owl hoots – confirmed the coast was clear.

Eddie and Ashley followed suit, their movements less graceful but equally determined. Landing on the other side with a soft thud, they found themselves on the university grounds. The silence here was even more profound, broken only by the occasional hoot of an owl and the distant howl of a lone wolf. A crisp scent of snow hung in the air, a reminder of the approaching winter.

Before them stood the library, a majestic edifice bathed in the soft glow of the moon. Its intricate stonework, adorned with grotesque gargoyles and delicate tracery, seemed to whisper forgotten lore. Each weathered stone felt like a silent guardian, bearing witness to centuries of scholars and sorcerers who had walked these hallowed halls in their pursuit of knowledge.

Eddie, captivated by the sight, felt a thrill course through him. Unlike Will and Ashley, who were veterans of the academic world, he'd never set foot in a library before. The building exuded a potent mix of danger and fascination, a place that held secrets both beautiful and terrible. The Edenfield Archive, its very name resonated with power and forbidden knowledge. It loomed before them, a colossal structure with a heavy oak door and arched windows adorned with intricate carvings – statues of gargoyles and legendary sages keeping silent watch. The sheer

size and grandeur of the building filled Eddie with a newfound respect for the quest they had undertaken.

The playful banter between Will and Ashley served as a welcome distraction from the palpable tension that had settled in their group as they neared the library. Their footsteps softened in the dark, but the sound of their laughter filled the air with a surprising lightness.

Will nudged Ashley with a mischievous grin. "Hey, Ashley, why do you always wear that witch outfit whenever you sneak out at night?"

Ashley adjusted the brim of her black witch hat, giving it a little more tilt as she responded with a sly smirk. "Oh, this? It's a witch's traditional garb, Will. Helps with stealth, you know? Blends in with the shadows and all that."

Will raised an eyebrow, clearly amused. "Sure, sure. But honestly, it looks a little... conspicuous. Like a giant walking bat."

Ashley gasped in mock offense, her voice rising in playful indignation. "A giant walking bat? I'll have you know, this is a highly respected attire, Will. If anything, it's *mysterious*."

Will chuckled, shaking his head. "Well, it's definitely got something going for it. But don't get me wrong, I'm pretty sure if I was trying to sneak into a secret library at night, I wouldn't exactly go for the 'just stepped out of a coven' look."

Ashley raised her chin, a teasing glint in her eyes. "Well, at least it works! Look at you – bright red beanie, blue jacket with faded



jeans, and enough colorful pins on your backpack to rival a jester's costume. You're practically begging to get caught!"

Will snickered, giving his usual flamboyant shrug. "Hey, at least I'll get captured in style."

Before Ashley could deliver another sharp retort, Eddie, who had been quietly watching their exchange, couldn't hold back a grin. He cleared his throat, acting the part of the peacekeeper. "Alright, alright, let's save the fashion critique for later. We're sneaking into a library, not a runway show."

Ashley rolled her eyes but gave Eddie a knowing look. "You're no fun, Eddie. Alright, no more distractions."

Just then, Eddie spotted something in the distance, his voice lowering. "Ashley, is that the broken window you were talking about?"

Ashley squinted into the night, her eyes narrowing as she focused on the second-story window of the library. There it was — faintly lit by the moon's glow, the rusty lock still dangling awkwardly in place, just as she remembered.

"Yeah, that's it," she replied, her tone more serious now, the playful edge gone. "It's old and barely working, but it's the perfect way in. The only problem is we're going to have to climb."

Will raised an eyebrow. "Climbing? You've got to be kidding me."

Ashley smirked again, her usual confidence returning. "Do you have a better idea? The front door's locked tighter than the Chancellor's vault."

Eddie gave Will a questioning glance, but Will only gave a quick shrug. "I suppose if we're going to be breaking and entering, it might as well be in style. Let's go."

With that, they crept closer, positioning themselves under the broken window. Eddie glanced around to ensure they weren't being watched. The moonlight glinted off the stone walls of the library, casting eerie shadows across the courtyard.

"We're doing this," Eddie whispered, barely able to contain a mixture of exhilaration and nerves.

Ashley then pointed towards a section of the library bathed in a deeper shadow. There, silhouetted against the moonlit sky, stood a majestic willow tree. Its long, wispy branches swayed gently in the night breeze, like the outstretched arms of a silent guardian. Nestled amongst the leaves, a faint sliver of darkness – the broken window, their point of entry.

The willow tree stood as their silent accomplice, its branches cascading downwards in a curtain of verdant green. The leaves, though thinned by the touch of autumn, whispered secrets in the wind as they brushed against the rough stone walls of the library. Each branch, adorned with the remnants of fallen foliage, formed a natural canopy, offering a perfect haven for their covert operation.

"Yep, that's the one," Ashley confirmed, her voice barely a whisper. "Let's go!"

With renewed purpose fueling their every move, they approached the willow tree, its branches hanging like a curtain of shadows against the night sky. The tree stood as both their challenge and their ally — its sturdy trunk offering a route up to the forbidden library, but its knotted branches demanding careful navigation.

Eddie, ever the city boy, eyed the trunk with a mix of curiosity and trepidation. He wasn't used to climbing trees, but this was no time for hesitation. With a grunt of determination, he hoisted himself up, gripping the rough bark with surprising strength. Will, who was already several branches ahead, reached back and offered him a hand, helping Eddie pull himself higher.

Ashley, however, made the climb look effortless. With the confidence of someone who had probably scaled this very tree more times than she could count, she navigated the branches like a second skin, the black witch's cloak flowing behind her like an extension of the night itself.

Eddie, struggling to match her speed, found himself fumbling with his footing a few times. Each misstep sent a jolt of panic through him, and a startled yelp escaped his lips as he nearly lost his balance. But Will's strong hand was always there, steadying him before he could tumble back to the ground.

"I swear, you're going to get us caught with all that noise," Ashley muttered, though there was a hint of amusement in her voice as she glanced back at him.

Eddie shot her an apologetic look. "I'm not exactly a monkey, you know."

With a final push, they reached the main branch closest to the window. The tree's thick branches creaked under their weight, but they held firm. Ashley glanced around cautiously, then signaled for them to stop. This was the critical moment.

She carefully reached out, her fingers brushing the cool stone of the library's outer wall. Her eyes scanned the window frame, looking for any signs of weakness. A silent breath of relief escaped her lips as she found the gap – the broken lock was still as she remembered, untouched by time or repair.

A tense stillness settled over them. The only sounds were the rustling leaves above and the occasional distant hoot of an owl, watching over them like an unblinking sentinel. With careful precision, Ashley nudged the window, her fingers making contact with the worn frame. The old wood groaned in protest, but it was a sound that only they could hear, swallowed by the night.

A small, triumphant grin tugged at Ashley's lips as the window slowly creaked open. The lock, as if recognizing their need, gave way without further resistance. The air on the other side was cool and still – welcoming.

"Alright," she whispered, her voice barely audible, "we're in."

She carefully widened the window, creating just enough space for the three of them to slip through. The smell of old books and dust wafted toward them as the night air carried the scent of

adventure. With a steadying breath, Ashley squeezed through first, her body vanishing into the darkness of the library like a shadow.

Eddie followed closely behind, his heart pounding against his ribs. The thrill of the heist, the rush of breaking the rules, mixed with the weight of their mission. Each step brought him deeper into the forbidden halls of knowledge. He could feel the cool stone beneath his fingers as he climbed through, his body aching from the exertion but his determination driving him forward.

Will, last to go, took one last lingering look at the moonlit grounds, then pulled the window shut with a soft, almost imperceptible thud. The world outside felt distant now, like a dream fading away, and the library – dark, vast, and full of secrets – was all that remained.

The trio stood in the shadows of the library, breathless, their faces set with resolve. The mission had begun. And they were in this together.

The silence inside the library was absolute, broken only by the soft crunch of their footsteps on the dusty floor and the occasional flurry of snowflakes swirling in through the cracks in the aging windowpanes. The air hung heavy with the scent of old paper and forgotten lore. They had breached the threshold, leaving the familiar behind and venturing into the unknown depths of the restricted section. Their quest for the Elven Enchantment had begun.

The library swallowed them whole. Dimly lit by a solitary chandelier and the occasional sliver of moonlight filtering

through dusty curtains, the second floor unfolded before them like a forgotten dream. This was no ordinary library; it was a place steeped in history and arcane knowledge, a sanctuary of wisdom that had stood for centuries. Towering shelves crammed with ancient tomes and flickering scrolls lined the walls, each one a whispered promise of forgotten lore and potent magic.

The air hung heavy, thick with the scent of aged parchment and the exotic tang of rare spell components. With each hushed step, they disturbed swirls of dust motes that danced in the spectral moonlight, catching the faint hum of magic that seemed to permeate the very walls. Runes and sigils, etched into the stone floor and walls with an unknown hand, pulsed with a subtle energy, whispering secrets of the arcane only to those who knew how to listen.

Reaching the center of the library, their gaze fell upon a sight that momentarily stole their breath. Suspended high above, a grand chandelier cast a mesmerizing dance of light and shadow across the room. Its intricate design, a masterpiece of craftsmanship, was adorned with symbols of magic and mysticism. Each crystal prism, catching the moonlight, refracted it into a kaleidoscope of colors, bathing the room in an ethereal glow. It was a breathtaking sight, a testament to the artistry and power that resided within these hallowed halls.

But their awe was fleeting. The weight of their mission pressed down on them, urging them forward. Steeling their nerves, they ventured deeper into the library, the silence broken only by the soft whisper of their footsteps and the ever-present hum of magic. They were on a quest for knowledge forbidden, a desperate gamble to salvage their project and rewrite their fate. The path

ahead was shrouded in uncertainty, but they were determined to see it through, no matter the cost.

A tense whisper hung in the air as Ashley spoke, her voice barely audible. "Now we find the Restricted Section."

Eddie, frustration lacing his tone, shot back, "What? You mean to tell me you don't even know where it is?"

Ashley shook her head, a hint of defensiveness creeping into her voice. "The staff section of the library is completely off-limits to students, remember? I might have a list of restricted books professors can access, but the location itself..." she trailed off, a worried frown etching itself onto her face.

A heavy sigh escaped Eddie's lips. "This is hopeless," he muttered, the weight of their precarious situation settling upon him.

Will, ever the optimist, interjected with a determined glint in his eyes. "Come on, guys. We're already in, halfway across the finish line. We can't back out now, can we?"

With a renewed sense of purpose, they continued their trek through the labyrinthine halls. Their footsteps echoed softly against the polished stone floor, the only sound in the vast, cavernous space. Finally, they stumbled upon a grand staircase that spiraled downwards, leading to the first floor of the library.

As they began their descent, a subtle shift in the atmosphere sent shivers down their spines. The air crackled with a barely perceptible energy, a lingering echo of the potent magic that resonated on the upper floors. Shadows danced on the walls,

morphing into fleeting glimpses of arcane symbols and fantastical creatures conjured from forgotten lore. It was as if the library itself was subtly warning them, reminding them of the forbidden knowledge they sought and the potential consequences of trespassing on such sacred ground.

A grand chandelier, suspended from the ceiling above the staircase, cast a soft, ethereal glow that bathed the descent in an almost mystical light. The radiant glow illuminated the steps below, their edges highlighted with intricate patterns of light and shadow that danced playfully across the walls and floor. These flickering patterns seemed to guide their way like a beacon in the darkness, urging them ever downwards towards their uncertain goal.

The staircase itself was a masterpiece. Its sweeping curves and elegant balustrades, crafted from polished mahogany, whispered of an age of opulence and artistry. Carved into the cool stone walls were intricate reliefs depicting scenes of fantastical creatures locked in magical combat, scholars hunched over ancient tomes, and libraries overflowing with knowledge. Each relief stood as a silent testament to the rich history that permeated the very foundation of the library.

Reaching the bottom of the staircase, they found themselves in a vast, echoing hall. The first floor branched out into a seemingly endless labyrinth of hallways, each leading to different rooms veiled in shadow. Ashley instantly recognized the empty entrance table where she normally checked out her books. A pang of guilt flickered across her face, a stark reminder of the rules they were breaking.



Determined to press on, they ventured down one of the office hallways, their footsteps echoing hollowly on the polished stone floor. Ashley, her eyes scanning the walls intently, led the way. They were searching for a specific room, one marked with the ominous words "Access Only." In her mind, this was the most likely location for the restricted section, a hidden vault of forbidden knowledge guarded by secrecy and spells.

A tense silence settled upon them as Will, ever the voice of reason, leaned in towards Ashley and whispered, "Where's the staff room supposed to be?"

Ashley, her brow furrowed in concentration, shook her head silently. "I don't know exactly," she mouthed back. "We'll just have to keep searching."

"This is a colossal waste of time, Ash!" Will hissed under his breath. "You should've checked the library map before —"

But before he could finish his complaint, Ashley clamped a hand over his mouth, her eyes wide with alarm. She shot a quick glance at Eddie, whose confused frown mirrored her own. He had stopped dead in his tracks, sensing something was wrong but unsure what.

A hush fell over the group as Ashley raised a finger to her lips, then pressed her palm to her ear. Unlike Will, whose hearing had been dulled by years of loud music, and Eddie, who was simply surprised, Ashley possessed a natural sensitivity to sound. And her sharp ears had picked up something they hadn't — the unmistakable sound of footsteps. Not their own, but two sets of

approaching steps, echoing through the stone corridors with a distinct hardness, like the clatter of heavy boots.

She felt her heartbeat quicken as the footsteps grew louder, nearer. They were coming fast, heavy, and purposeful. The unmistakable cadence of someone with authority.

"Hide!" Ashley mouthed urgently, her eyes scanning the room for an escape. The library shelves loomed like silent sentinels around them, but there was nowhere near enough cover. The narrow hallway they stood in was exposed, an open invitation to anyone who might come looking.

In the dim light, Ashley's gaze darted to a narrow alcove at the far side of the corridor, a stone recess that might offer just enough concealment if they were quick.

Will gave her a look, eyes wide with panic, but he followed her lead, pulling Eddie toward the alcove with a frantic tug. Eddie was still frozen, caught in the tension, but Will hissed low, urging him to move.

They pressed themselves into the small, shadowed corner, the stone cool against their backs. Ashley's breath was shallow, every muscle tense as she strained to hear the approaching footsteps. The sound grew louder, then closer, until they could almost feel the vibration in the air.

Will muttered under his breath, his fingers gripping the edge of a dusty bookshelf, trying not to let the fear creep into his voice. "I don't like this. This is not what I signed up for."

Ashley's eyes never left the hallway, her hand still pressed to her mouth, signaling silence. She prayed they would pass by without noticing. But the footsteps didn't stop.

They were getting closer, the heavy tread of boots now almost within reach, the air thick with anticipation.

The group held their breath, motionless, hearts racing in their chests as they waited for whatever might come next.

The flickering light from the distant chandelier barely reached their hiding place, plunging them into an inky darkness. They held their breaths, their senses on high alert. Then, a faint glow flickered into existence, growing brighter as it neared their makeshift hideout. It was a lantern, its warm light illuminating the dusty floor and the base of the surrounding bookshelves.

Two figures emerged from the shadows, their faces obscured by the lantern's limited reach. They spoke in hushed tones, their voices barely audible, but the urgency in their whispers sent shivers down the spines of the hidden trio.

Relief washed over them in a wave, albeit a cautious one. They weren't alone in the library after all. But who were these late-night visitors, and what were they doing in the restricted section? Eddie couldn't help but marvel at Ashley's keen hearing – it had just saved them from a potentially disastrous encounter.

As they strained to listen, a familiar voice cut through the hushed tones. It was Claire Andersen, Ashley's dormmate and part-time librarian! Confusion clouded Eddie's mind. Since when did the

library have a night shift? More importantly, who was Claire talking to?

"What books are you looking for again?" Claire's voice, laced with a hint of exasperation, echoed through the hall. "It's awfully late, you know. Normally I wouldn't allow this."

A sigh, followed by a young woman's voice, answered her. "I need those books for my practice tomorrow, Claire. I was swamped at the Dragon Conservatory and completely forgot to study about the anatomical implications of centauric healing magic."

Ashley seemed to sense Eddie's confusion and leaned in closer, her breath shallow but steady as she whispered, "Claire works at the library on the side, but this... this is new." Her voice held the faintest hint of suspicion. "She never stays this late."

Eddie nodded, his mind racing to piece together the puzzle. Who was the young woman Claire was with, and why was she looking for books in the restricted section? The mention of centauric healing magic sparked something in Eddie's memory, a tale from his time back home of powerful, forbidden magic known to change the course of both life and death. Was this connected?

Ashley's eyes flicked toward Eddie, reading his thoughts with a practiced ease. "We need to be careful," she whispered urgently. "If they're looking for something dangerous... we might be in over our heads."

Will, ever the optimist but sensing the rising tension, whispered back, "We've already come this far. We can't turn back now."

Eddie's heart lurched. Dragon Conservatory? Healing magic? The voice, though muffled, sent a jolt of recognition through him. It sounded... awfully familiar.

"Fine then," Claire conceded, "but remember, reference books are off-limits for borrowing. You'll have to study them here."

Gratitude filled the young woman's voice. "Thank you, Claire! You're a lifesaver!"

Eddie's mind raced. *A lifesaver...* He couldn't shake the feeling that this wasn't the first time he had heard that voice, but where from? He racked his brain, trying to place it, but the more he thought about it, the more elusive it became. That voice was definitely familiar – but it was impossible to pinpoint from where.

The sound of retreating footsteps and Claire's gentle shushing filled the air for a moment before fading away completely. Ashley, seizing the opportunity, emerged from her hiding spot, a newfound determination in her eyes.

"Looks like we have another dead end," Will muttered, frustration tingeing his voice. "Maybe this whole 'Access Only' room doesn't exist."

Ashley ignored him, already moving towards the next hallway. They continued their search, weaving through labyrinthine corridors lined with towering shelves. Each hallway looked identical to the last, a maze of dusty tomes and forgotten knowledge. Disappointment gnawed at Eddie. They'd been at it for what felt like hours, and the 'Access Only' room remained elusive.

Finally, they reached the end of the last hallway. A dead end. Despair threatened to engulf them. Had their daring plan come to this – a fruitless search and a potential expulsion waiting for them in the morning?

A flicker of hope ignited in Will's eyes. "Alright, this is it," he declared, his voice firm despite the tremor of nerves. "This is our last shot. If this hallway is empty, we call it quits, no arguments. We regroup and come up with a new plan."

Eddie and Ashley exchanged a silent nod, their hearts pounding in unison. They followed Will down the hallway, its walls lined with framed sections of frosted glass that hinted at the offices within. Beyond the glass, desks and chairs sat abandoned, bathed in the cool moonlight filtering through the blinds. This was definitely the staff area, a place forbidden to students.

Ashley, ever the resourceful one, cast a quick 'Light' charm, illuminating a nearby sign. Its inscription confirmed their suspicions: "Staff Section – Personnel Only." They were on the right track.

A surge of excitement coursed through them as they reached the end of the hallway. There, nestled discreetly among its identical counterparts, stood a single door unlike the others. A heavy oak door, its surface polished to a deep shine, bore a brass plaque engraved with the words "Restricted Section – Access Only."

"Here it is!" Ashley exclaimed, her voice barely a whisper as she pointed towards the door.

Will stepped forward, his short wand clutched tightly in his hand. "Restricted Section," he read aloud, his voice echoing in the silence. "Access Only. Is this it, Ash?"

Ashley approached the door, a nervous flutter in her stomach. "Yeah, this is the one," she confirmed. "Can you unlock it?"

Will met her gaze, a confident glint in his eyes. "I know a couple of basic unlocking charms. It might take a shot, but I can try." He pulled out his wand, its smooth surface reassuringly warm in his hand. With a flick of his wrist, he traced a circle in the air, a trail of orange sparks dancing in its wake.

"Hold on," Will cautioned. "This charm can get pretty bright. I'll need something to cover it."

Ashley, quick to react, whipped off her large, black cloak. With practiced ease, she draped it over Will, creating a makeshift shield against the impending light show.

"Ashley, keep an eye out for anyone coming, okay?" Will instructed. "And Eddie, remember that illusion rune I used on you back at the Ancient Bridge?"

"Yeah?" Eddie responded, a flicker of understanding dawning on him.

"Good," Will said, focusing his concentration on the intricate spell he was about to weave. "Use that rune to create an invisible barrier a few feet away from the door. We don't want anyone stumbling upon us mid-attempt."

Eddie nodded, a determined glint in his eyes. He retreated a few steps down the hallway, retrieved a rune paper from his pocket, and with practiced movements, drew the symbol Will had mentioned. A faint shimmer filled the air, a testament to the invisibility barrier Eddie had successfully cast.

With everything in place, Will took a deep breath. Ashley stood guard, her senses on high alert. The silence stretched, thick with anticipation, as Will whispered the unlocking charm under his breath. The tip of his wand pulsed with a vibrant orange light, the magical energy crackling against the cloak's fabric.

Panic clawed at Eddie's throat, squeezing tighter with each passing second. His heart pounded in his chest as he glanced at Will, who was focused intently on the door, and then at Ashley, her posture tense as she kept watch. His mind screamed at him — the fear, the inadequacy. He wasn't like them. He couldn't perform magic as well as Will or Ashley, and yet, he found himself standing here, about to step into the unknown.

But then, a flicker of memory sparked within him — *that night*. The surge of unexplainable power that had erupted from within him, pushing the attacker away with a force he couldn't understand, but one that had felt right. That memory, like a fragile ember, ignited hope within him — a spark of possibility.

His hand trembled as he reached beneath his jacket, fingers brushing against the cool wood of his wand. He held his breath for a moment, unsure if he could repeat what had happened that night, if that raw power was still inside him. It was a long shot, a desperate gamble, but it was all he had. He had to try.



With a surge of determination that mirrored Will's earlier focus, Eddie gripped the wand firmly. The same wand he'd used that fateful night. He closed his eyes, the weight of the moment settling deep within him. He pictured the barrier rune – the same symbol he'd drawn before – willing it to form, to respond to his desperate plea. He could feel the tremor of magic beneath his skin, could almost taste it in the air around him. But despite all his focus, despite every ounce of concentration he could muster, there was no response.

Frustration surged through him, a hot, burning wave of failure. *It's not working.* He opened his eyes, defeated, the sting of disappointment settling in his gut.

Just then, Ashley's frantic gestures caught his eye. She was moving quickly, her hands a blur of rapid movements. Her face, usually so calm and composed, was now etched with urgency. Her pre-arranged sign language – a system they'd developed in case of emergencies – was being executed with precision.

"How's the illusion rune?" her hands asked, her expression etched with worry.

Eddie mirrored her movements, his own face a mask of despair. "Working on it," his reply signed back weakly. Then, with a tremor in his hands, he signed the most dreaded question, "Unlocking?"

Ashley's response was swift and grim. She formed a hand into a fist, then slammed it repeatedly against her palm – 'Busted.' Her next series of gestures painted a clear picture – Will's attempt had

failed, the locking runes were far more complex than he'd anticipated.

The weight of their predicament settled heavily upon them. Their carefully laid plan was falling apart, their hopes dashed against the unyielding door. Despair threatened to consume them, but a flicker of defiance sparked in Eddie's eyes. He wouldn't give up yet. Not without a fight.

Panic surged through Eddie's veins like a tidal wave. He whipped his head around, scanning the hallway just as the tell-tale glow of the lantern grew closer. Footsteps, two sets of them, echoed down the corridor, their rhythm quickening with each passing moment.

His gaze darted to Ashley and Will, their faces etched with a mixture of frustration and desperation. He cursed himself. Ashley, with her keen hearing and magical prowess, should have been the one on lookout duty. But the lure of success, the sight of Will's determined effort, had momentarily distracted them all.

The murmur of voices reached them, growing clearer with each agonizing step.

"Did you open the window earlier, Claire?" The voice belonged to the young woman who had borrowed the centaur healing book. "I swear I closed it before, but snow's getting in! This weather's a nightmare, it'll ruin the parchment."

"The wind picked up something fierce tonight," the other girl, Claire, replied, her voice tinged with annoyance. "Where did we leave that griffin anatomy book again?"

The sound of their voices grew louder, echoing in the hallway with every step. *They're almost here*, Eddie thought, his pulse in his ears. The sickening realization of how close they were to discovery froze him in place. The urge to bolt, to sprint away into the dark, winding corridors of the library, screamed in his mind. But as his eyes flicked to Will and Ashley, his feet remained rooted to the ground. Will, in the midst of his struggle with the door's lock, was too consumed to notice. And Ashley, who'd always been the most alert, seemed entirely focused on the task at hand.

The sharp click of the door's lock sliding open rang through the hallway like a gunshot. Will's triumphant gasp followed immediately, and then Ashley's voice, raw with relief, pierced the tense silence. Eddie's heart hammered in his chest as he whipped around, his eyes darting to the door. There it was – the oak door, once firmly shut, now cracked open, a sliver of shadow beckoning them forward. Will and Ashley, their faces radiant with success, took a step toward the entrance, eager to step into the unknown and see what lay beyond.

Eddie's pulse was still racing when he suddenly felt the hair on the back of his neck stand up, a chill sweeping through him that had nothing to do with the temperature. Before they could fully celebrate, before they could even exhale, a voice sliced through the stillness, sharp and accusatory.

"Hey!"

Eddie's stomach twisted into knots as dread flooded his veins. His eyes snapped toward the sound, his body going rigid. Standing at the far end of the hallway, bathed in the soft glow of

a lantern, was the girl he'd overheard earlier – the one with the centauric healing book. Her expression was one of disbelief, and her gaze, wide with shock, locked straight onto him.

His heart sank like a stone. *No*. How had they been so careless? He'd been so caught up in the frantic race against time, so blinded by their desperate need to succeed, that he'd forgotten the most basic rule of hiding – *don't move, don't breathe, don't make a sound*. And now, they were caught, exposed.

The question that hung in the air, heavy with accusation, felt like a noose tightening around his throat.

"What are you doing here?"

Eddie's mind spun, his feet rooted to the floor. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words died before they could leave his lips. It was then that he saw her more clearly – standing in the lantern's glow, her fair skin almost glowing in the dim light, eyes wide with shock. Her fiery red hair cascaded down her back, the strands tied loosely, framing her face in a way that made his heart stutter. It was familiar, so familiar that a shiver ran down his spine.

And then, just like that, recognition slammed into him like a freight train. *No way...*

Her eyes, the same vibrant green as his own, were wide in surprise, but there was something else there too – something deeper, something Eddie couldn't quite place. His breath caught as the name left her lips, a whisper that felt like a forgotten song,

a melody buried beneath years of separation and forgotten memories.

"Edward?"

The world seemed to slow. His mind reeled as memories surged back in a flood — sunlight streaming through the trees of his old town, laughter ringing in the air, the warmth of friendship shared under the canopy of summer. *Madeleine?*

He blinked, his breath hitching. The girl — the one standing before him, with eyes so familiar, yet so foreign now — was someone from his past. But how? How had she ended up here, of all places? The question slammed into him like a brick wall, but before he could process it further, a harsh cry broke through the fragile moment of recognition, snapping him back to the present.

From behind him, a voice cried out in panic, cutting through the tension like a knife.

"M-Madeleine? What are you doing here?" Eddie's voice broke, a sudden wave of disbelief and shock flooding him. He knew that name, but how could she be here, in this place, of all places?

Madeleine's eyes flickered with confusion, her gaze shifting between Eddie and the doorway. Her lips parted slightly, as though searching for the right words. And for a moment, there was a quiet stillness in the air, an eerie pause where everything seemed to hang in the balance. Would she answer? Or had their meeting — after all these years — been nothing more than a cruel twist of fate, destined to fall apart before it had even begun?

The moment stretched on, the silence deafening.

Eddie's mind reeled. Who was she? How did she know his name? But before he could delve deeper into the well of his past, a harsh cry from behind shattered the fragile moment of recognition.

"RUN!" Will's voice sliced through the tension, raw and desperate, snapping Eddie back into the present. The weight of their situation crashed over him like a tidal wave. *They were caught. Exposed.* There was no time to question the red-haired girl – no time to dwell on the past. Survival was all that mattered now.

Adrenaline coursed through his veins, replacing the shock with an instinctual drive to escape. Eddie didn't need Will's shout twice. His legs moved before his mind caught up, his body reacting with the kind of speed and power that only panic could fuel.

His eyes met Ashley's for a fleeting moment. Her expression mirrored his own – a mix of raw terror and sharp determination, both of them caught between the past and the immediate need to escape. There was no more room for hesitation.

The oak door, which had seemed so close just seconds ago, now felt like it was miles away. The hallway stretched before them, a narrow, dimly lit corridor that seemed to lengthen with every breath they took. Behind them, the lantern light grew brighter – too bright, too close.

Eddie's heart pounded in his chest as he turned and sprinted down the hallway, the sound of his footfalls reverberating off the

cold stone walls. His breath came in ragged gasps, his legs pumping faster than he thought possible. But it wasn't just his feet moving faster; it was his entire body, propelled by fear, by the sheer will to survive.

Then came the voice—the shout that fueled the fire of panic in Eddie's chest.

"Madeleine! We've got intruders!"

The words were like a smack to the face. *Madeleine*. The name jolted through him like a forgotten spark, an ember catching fire in the back of his mind. A flash of memories, old and hazy, flickered in the corners of his thoughts. But there was no time. There was no time to pause and analyze what *Madeleine* meant. There was no time to unravel the knot that had formed in his chest.

Behind him, Claire's footsteps grew louder, more frantic, her voice tinged with alarm. The distant hum of a lantern swirled in the air, and Eddie could feel the other girl—Madeleine—closing in. The heat of pursuit was on them, hot on their heels.

Eddie's thoughts blurred, his focus narrowing to a singular goal: escape. He surged past Madeleine without a second glance, his pulse roaring in his ears. *Sorry*, he thought, though he couldn't spare her a moment's attention. His legs moved faster than his heart could beat, and yet it wasn't fast enough.

The distant echo of Claire's voice called again, louder now, commanding. "Madeleine, they're getting away!"

"Just keep running!" Will's shout rang out beside him, and for a moment, Eddie could hear the frantic pounding of his friend's footsteps close behind. The two of them, Ashley and Will, were with him, but in that moment, they were all alone in the storm of panic.

Eddie's breath caught as he risked a glance behind him. The lantern light was getting closer – way too close. His mind screamed for him to move faster, to do anything, but the fear of getting caught was like a weight pressing on his chest, pushing the air from his lungs.

Ahead, the hallway curved, but the sound of footsteps wasn't far behind. They were closing in. The door – *the door* – was still too far ahead. They weren't going to make it.

But as his legs burned with the effort to run faster, a surge of defiance ripped through him. *They would make it. They had to.*

"There's two in the staff room! You get the other one!" Claire's voice cracked through the air, laced with urgency and authority. The sharp bark of her orders made Eddie's skin crawl, urging him to move faster.

"Got it!" Madeleine's reply was defiant, a roar of determination that seemed to vibrate through the stone walls. But Eddie didn't hear it fully. His focus was solely on escape, the pounding of his heart drowning out everything but the frantic rhythm of his feet.

*Madeleine* – the name echoed in his mind like a broken record. *Is that the same Madeleine?* The one who'd helped him during the



turbulent days at Transmuter's Atelier? *What is she doing here? Why is she... chasing us?*

His chest tightened, confusion battling with his instinct for survival. He bolted down the hallway, his body moving on its own, driven by the knowledge that they couldn't afford to be caught. The escape route was their only chance.

At the other end of the hall, Will and Ashley were already heading for the staff room's side door, their movements swift and coordinated. The faintest of glances passed between them – a silent understanding that they were in this together. But Eddie knew they couldn't afford to wait for a plan. Claire was close, and they couldn't risk being trapped.

Eddie's breath was ragged as he turned and sprinted toward the opposite end of the hallway. His legs burned with every step, the adrenaline pushing him forward despite the exhaustion creeping up on him. The seconds felt like minutes, and he wasn't sure how much longer he could keep this pace.

The heavy footsteps of Claire, still echoing from behind, reminded him of how close they were to being caught. But he couldn't stop now. He had to get to the stairs. He had to get to safety.

In a blur of motion, Eddie threw himself up the staircase, his feet pounding against the steps two at a time. The library – its grandeur and quiet elegance – whizzed past in a haze of mahogany railings and dusty portraits. Time seemed to distort as the world around him blurred, his only focus the heightening sound of his pursuers below.

Each footfall sent a shockwave through his body, but he kept going, his legs fueled by the surge of terror and determination. But the footsteps from below were relentless, each echo a reminder that they were being hunted.

Eddie's lungs burned, but he didn't dare stop. He reached the second floor, his eyes scanning frantically for an exit, a place to hide, anything that could give them a chance to lose their pursuers. There was no time to think, no time to plan. Only *run*.

Reaching the second floor, Eddie's lungs felt like they were on fire, each breath ragged and desperate. His legs screamed in protest, the exhaustion gnawing at him with every step, but there was no time to stop. Every muscle in his body burned, but the urgency pushed him forward. His eyes locked onto the window at the end of the hall—a small sliver of hope, a potential escape. The night air beyond that window was the only thing that kept him going.

His frantic footfalls echoed through the silent halls, a rhythmic drumbeat of panic, as he sprinted past rows of old portraits and dimly lit sconces. The polished hardwood floor beneath him seemed to stretch endlessly, each corner he turned bringing him closer to that faint glimmer of freedom.

But the seconds felt like an eternity, the weight of the pursuers behind him growing ever closer with every thudding step that rang through the building. He could hear the unmistakable sound of footsteps gaining on him. The soft, distant call came almost too late.

"Hey, wait up!" Madeleine's voice broke through the stillness, sharp and determined. Eddie could hear the wind whip through her fiery hair as she chased him, her voice carrying an edge of frustration.

But Eddie didn't stop. He was a blur of silver hair and frenzied movement, his every thought consumed by the window ahead. The sound of her pursuit only fueled his desperation, the space between them narrowing by the second.

He darted past row upon row of ancient tomes, their leather bindings glowing faintly in the dim light. The books seemed to stir, their pages rustling with a quiet disapproval that almost felt alive. Eddie could almost hear them whispering forgotten secrets, murmuring warnings as they brushed against each other, disturbed by his frantic passage. The eerie sound sent a chill down his spine, an unsettling sensation creeping over him.

But he couldn't afford to pay it any mind. He pushed the strange feeling aside, his focus solely on the window – the last glimmer of safety.

Finally, the window – his salvation. Framed by a halo of snow-dusted moonlight, it shimmered like a beacon of freedom, calling him forward. Eddie's heart raced, fueled by a surge of adrenaline that shot through his veins, numbing the pain in his legs and lungs. The cold night air was a shock to his system, biting and sharp, but it was the relief he desperately craved. He could almost taste the sweet taste of freedom.

But fate, cruel and unyielding, had other plans.

As Eddie surged toward the window, his foot caught on something beneath the worn carpet – an unseen lump that sent him sprawling forward in a graceless heap. His body twisted as he tumbled, the world spinning out of control, until his head met the edge of a bookshelf with a sickening thud. Pain exploded in his skull, a blinding flash of agony that threatened to swallow him whole.

The impact knocked the wind from his lungs, and the world around him became a blur of darkness. Ancient tomes – dusty, brittle relics of a forgotten past – tumbled down in an avalanche, cascading over him like a heavy, suffocating blanket. Leather and paper rained down, engulfing him in a storm of forgotten knowledge. He barely had the strength to move, his limbs pinned beneath the weight of the books, the darkness creeping closer as consciousness slipped further away.

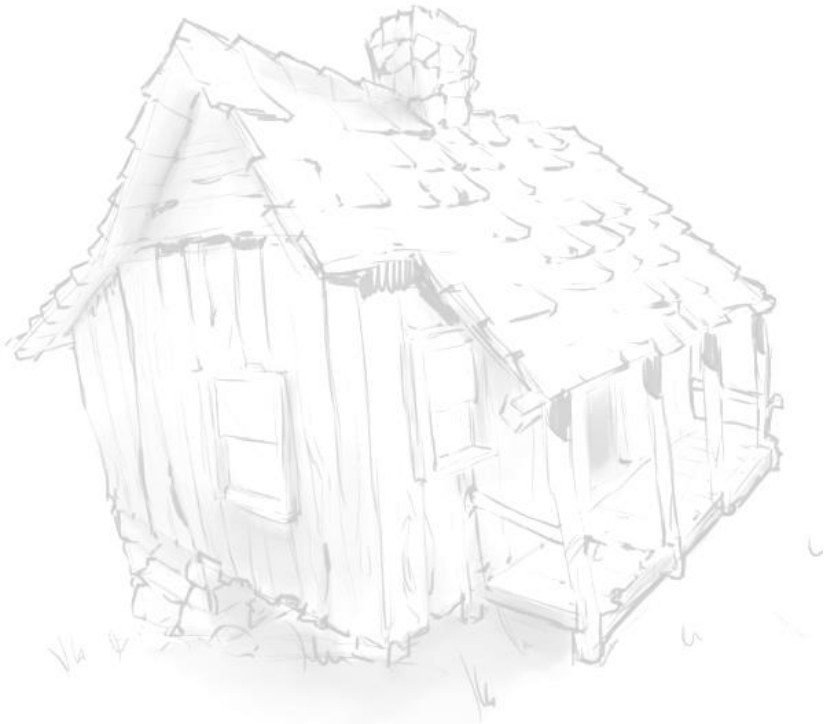
Just as his vision began to fade to black, a flicker of red hair entered his blurry line of sight. Madeleine. The name whispered in his mind like a distant echo, but his thoughts were clouded, slow. Had she come to finish what she'd started? To stop him from escaping?

But then, something caught him off guard – a flicker of concern in her emerald eyes. It was brief, but unmistakable, a flash of emotion that contradicted the harshness in her voice.

For a moment, his heart skipped. Was it possible? Had she come to help him?

But the weight of the books, the fading of his vision, and the growing silence in his head drowned out all thought. As the last

of the library's whispers echoed in his ears, the world slipped away entirely, plunging him into darkness.



Eddie's consciousness returned like the slow ebb of a tide, each wave pulling him further from the deep darkness. His first sensation was warmth – a soothing, tingling heat radiating from his forehead. A cloth, damp and fragrant, rested lightly over his eyes. The scent was earthy and medicinal, carrying notes of herbs he couldn't quite place. His head still throbbed faintly, but the sharp edge of pain had dulled, replaced by a comforting sensation of healing energy that seemed to pulse in time with his heartbeat.

He stirred, trying to take stock of his surroundings. The surface beneath him was soft, not the cold, unforgiving floor he remembered from before his fall. He reached out tentatively and felt the texture of a well-worn sofa beneath his fingertips. His body felt heavy, like it was wrapped in layers of fog, but there was no denying the comfort of the couch's embrace.

Carefully, he pushed the cloth from his eyes, squinting as light flooded his vision. The dim, moonlit library was gone, replaced by a much brighter scene. The towering shelves that lined the room were bathed in a golden glow, their rows of books illuminated by elegant sconces along the walls. Above him, a massive chandelier sparkled, its dozens of crystals refracting the light into faint rainbows that danced across the high ceiling.

He blinked rapidly, his eyes adjusting to the brightness. This wasn't the chaotic, shadowy place he'd been chased through moments – or was it hours? – ago. The scene now felt oddly serene, even welcoming. It was as though the library had transformed into a sanctuary while he had been unconscious.

Eddie shifted, propping himself up on one elbow. His muscles protested the movement, and his head swam for a moment, but he managed to stay upright. He took a deep breath, the herbal aroma of the cloth still lingering in the air.

The healing properties of the cloth intrigued him. Its faint green hue and the faint shimmer of alchemical energy suggested it had been treated with herbs and enchantments — a combination of traditional healing and alchemical refinement. Someone had tended to him, but who?

He scanned the room, his jade eyes sharp with curiosity and wariness. The warmth and safety of the environment were at odds with the lingering tension in his chest. Was he truly safe? Or was this an illusion of comfort, a temporary reprieve before the questions — or consequences — began?

As he struggled to fully orient himself, faint murmurs reached his ears from somewhere nearby. Voices, just out of sight. His heart raced as he tried to place them. Were they friend or foe? And where were Will and Ashley?

The memories of the chase, the window, and Madeleine's emerald eyes came flooding back. He rubbed his temples, trying to make sense of it all. **How did I end up here?**

Eddie leaned back against the sofa, his breathing shallow as he strained to catch the conversation drifting from the far corner of the room. The voices were low but clear enough in the library's stillness. He recognized Will's voice first, his usual confidence now tinged with worry.

"It's not just about the finals," Will murmured, his tone unusually somber. "He's brilliant, smarter than the rest of us combined, but... that outburst the other night? It's not the first time it's happened."

Ashley's voice cut in, sharper, edged with frustration that barely masked her concern. "We've tried to get him to talk about it, to train, to learn some control, but he brushes it off like it's nothing. 'I'll figure it out,' he says. But we've seen what happens when he doesn't." She paused, her voice breaking slightly. "Will, the way he—he doesn't even know how dangerous it is."

Madeleine's reply was softer, her voice like a calming stream against their rising tide of emotions. "Dangerous how?" she asked, her words measured, carrying no judgment, only curiosity and concern.

Will sighed heavily. "When he's under stress—real stress—it's like something inside him snaps. Magic he didn't even know he could do just... erupts. We've seen him turn just a tiny acorn into a fully grown oak tree, i am talking about in mere seconds. And the scary part is, Eddie doesn't remember any of it afterward. Not really."

Ashley picked up, her voice quieter now. "He thinks it's a fluke, some freak accident every time. But it's not. It's him, it's his magic, and it's going to keep happening unless he learns to control it. And finals?" She let out a shaky laugh, more bitter than amused. "Finals are going to push him to his limit. If he loses control during an exam—if there's an outburst in front of the professors..."



Madeleine's voice interrupted gently. "You're worried for him." It wasn't a question, just a simple observation, but it carried a weight that made Eddie's chest tighten.

"Of course we are," Will said quickly, his voice thick. "He's our friend. But what do we do? He won't listen to us, and we can't exactly march him into Professor Rheagan's office and say, 'Hey, can you fix Eddie?' It doesn't work like that."

A pause followed, heavy with unspoken fears. Then Madeleine spoke again, her voice soft but firm. "You care about him. That's clear. And it sounds like Eddie's been carrying a lot more than he lets on. Maybe he doesn't know how to talk about it – or maybe he's scared."

Eddie's breath hitched. He gripped the edge of the sofa, the familiar shame of his struggles rising like bile in his throat. He wanted to shout at them, to tell them he wasn't a problem to be solved, that he could handle it – whatever "it" was. But deep down, he knew they weren't wrong.

Madeleine continued, her tone soothing yet resolute. "I'll talk to him when he wakes up. He needs to hear this from someone who isn't afraid to tell him the truth. Someone who understands."

Eddie's pulse quickened. Madeleine *understood*? What did she mean? He felt exposed, his secret struggles laid bare in a way he hadn't anticipated. But alongside the panic, a small, fragile part of him felt something else. Relief. For the first time, someone wasn't just seeing his brilliance or his failures – they were seeing *him*.

Eddie shifted on the sofa, wincing as he sat upright. His head throbbed faintly, but the soothing tingling from the herbal cloth Madeleine had applied dulled most of the pain. Blinking against the warm light of the chandelier, he took in his surroundings. The library, which had felt ominous and foreboding during the chase, now seemed serene and welcoming. Shelves of books cast soft shadows, the polished wood glinting under the glow of enchanted lamps.

Across from him, Will, Ashley, and Madeleine sat on another sofa, their voices low and relaxed. Claire was at the reception desk, diligently sorting library records, her earlier alarm replaced by a calm focus. It was a far cry from the chaos Eddie last remembered.

“What happened?” Eddie croaked, his voice rough. He coughed to clear his throat, drawing the trio's attention.

Madeleine sighed, crossing her arms but offering him a faint smile. “You tripped on a carpet,” she said, shaking her head, “and managed to knock yourself out by hitting a bookshelf. It was quite the scene.” Her tone was light, but her emerald eyes held a mix of amusement and exasperation. “You’re lucky I’ve been studying Herbology in Alchemy. I whipped up a quick poultice to get you back on your feet. Otherwise, you’d probably still be seeing stars.”

Eddie flushed, the shame of his clumsiness compounding his already bruised pride. “Thanks,” he muttered, looking away.

Madeleine leaned forward, her tone softening but serious. “But Eddie, what were you *thinking*? What you and your friends were doing was risky and, frankly, pretty stupid.” She gestured to Will

and Ashley, who both shifted uncomfortably. "The restricted section of the Edenfield Archives isn't just off-limits because of rules. Those books are dangerous, and there's a reason they're kept there. I never thought you'd go through with something like this."

Eddie looked down at his hands, his expression shadowed by guilt. He wasn't used to being chastised, least of all by someone like Madeleine. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper. "I... I didn't think about the consequences."

Madeleine studied him for a moment, then sighed. "It's alright. I mean, I'm hardly in a position to judge." Her lips curved into a wry smile. "Claire and I were sneaking around after hours too, trying to grab a last-minute book before the library closed. So, I talked to her." She glanced toward Claire, who gave a reluctant nod from the desk. "She's agreed to let your antics slide... but on one condition."

Eddie's heart sank. "What's the condition?" he asked hesitantly.

"You don't tell *anyone* about Claire or me sneaking in here. Not a word," Madeleine said, her smile widening into something playful. "Deal?"

Will, sensing the tension breaking, grinned. "Deal. Thanks, Madeleine."

Ashley elbowed him. "Yeah, seriously. Thank you. And Claire," she called out toward the desk, earning a small wave of acknowledgment from the librarian.

Eddie managed a faint smile of gratitude, but before he could say more, Madeleine continued. "Since we're sharing secrets, I guess it's only fair you know why I'm sneaking around too." She leaned back on the sofa, her expression softening into something wistful. "I'm learning about Centauric healing magic. It's part of my independent study in Alchemy. There's this incredible Chimaera Sanctuary I want to volunteer at as a healer."

"Chimaeras?" Ashley's eyes lit up with excitement. "Those are the magical creatures with lion, goat, and snake features, right? That's so cool!"

Madeleine nodded, her smile growing. "They're fascinating, and they need specialized care. Magical creatures are my passion. I've been reading everything I can about their anatomy and healing techniques." Her voice carried a note of conviction that made Eddie glance up.

"You want to work with them?" he asked, his earlier shame giving way to genuine curiosity.

"More than anything," Madeleine replied, her gaze distant, as if she could already see herself at the sanctuary. "Helping them recover, making a difference—it's what I've always wanted to do."

Eddie felt a pang of admiration. Madeleine's determination and clarity of purpose were a stark contrast to his own chaotic journey. He wasn't sure what he wanted, let alone how to achieve it.

"Well," Madeleine said, standing and brushing off her robes, "I think we've all had enough excitement for one night. But next

time you decide to break into a restricted section, maybe *don't*?" Her teasing tone brought a small laugh from Will and Ashley, and even Eddie couldn't help but smile slightly.

Eddie sat quietly, the warmth of the poultice fading as his thoughts churned. Finally, he broke the silence. His voice was low, almost hesitant. "So, Madeleine, you've heard everything..." His jade-green eyes met hers, and there was a weight in them that made her sit up straighter. "That I'm a monster."

Will and Ashley froze, their faces flushing with guilt. They exchanged uneasy glances, the unspoken realization that Eddie had overheard their earlier conversation hitting them hard.

"Eddie, we didn't mean—" Will started, but Madeleine raised a hand, cutting him off gently. She leaned forward, her gaze steady and calm.

"You're not a monster, Eddie," she said firmly. "I don't think that at all."

He blinked, surprise flickering across his face. "You don't?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "There's a reason you work the way you do. It's not incompetence or recklessness—it's something different. And that doesn't make you less capable."

Eddie frowned, his doubt evident. "So, you're saying I just... work in a different way?" His voice wavered, as if he was afraid to hope. "That I'm not... broken?"

Madeleine offered him a soft smile. "Exactly. Some of the greatest minds I know think differently, and it's their difference that makes them extraordinary. I believe you might be one of those people."

Her words hung in the air, a balm to the raw wound Eddie had been carrying. He wanted to believe her, but years of self-doubt made it hard to fully accept. Before he could respond, Madeleine turned toward Claire, who was meticulously tidying up the borrowing notes at the reception desk.

"Claireee," Madeleine called, her voice carrying across the room. "You're researching Human-Arcane relations, right? Have you ever come across anything about conditions like Eddie's?"

Claire paused mid-motion, the quill in her hand hovering over a parchment. She glanced up, her brows knitting in thought.

"Hmm. A condition where someone struggles with controlling their magical output?" She tapped the quill against her lip, her expression turning serious. "I might have come across something... Let me check."

Without another word, Claire set the quill down and disappeared into the back room. The sound of her footsteps echoed faintly as she navigated the shelves, her sharp eyes scanning the spines of countless volumes. After a few minutes, she returned, cradling a thick, leather-bound book. The gilded title, *Arcane Anomalies and Adaptations*, gleamed under the library's warm light.

Claire approached the sofa, setting the book on the table in front of them. "This might have what you're looking for. It's an older text, but I remember reading about magical irregularities in here."

She flipped through the pages with practiced precision, the dry rustle of parchment filling the room.

Madeleine leaned over to get a better look, her fiery hair brushing Eddie's arm. "Let's see..." she murmured, scanning the pages as Claire stopped at a section labeled *Dysarcaenia*.

"Here," Claire said, pointing to a paragraph. "It describes a condition where individuals experience unpredictable bursts of magical energy due to difficulty regulating their arcane channels. It can happen for a variety of reasons – some are born with it, others develop it from overexposure to unstable magic."

Eddie leaned closer, his heart pounding as he read the words. The description felt eerily familiar, like someone had written it about him specifically. "So... this is real?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"It's real," Claire confirmed. "And it's not as uncommon as you might think. The book even mentions techniques and treatments that have helped others manage it."

Will and Ashley exchanged relieved glances, while Madeleine gave Eddie a nudge. "See? You're not broken, Eddie. You just need to understand how you work and find the right tools to help you."

Eddie sat back on the sofa, the weight of the revelation still settling over him. The idea that his struggles had a name and, perhaps, a solution was a lot to take in. He glanced at Madeleine, who was still poring over the book alongside Claire, her fiery hair catching the soft glow of the chandelier.

Madeleine suddenly closed the book with a decisive thump and turned to him, her emerald eyes full of resolve. “Eddie,” she said softly, “I’ve been watching you struggle with this for a while.”

He blinked, caught off guard. “You have?”

She nodded. “Back at the Transmuter’s Atelier, I saw it. How your transformations would sometimes go awry, or how you’d hesitate right before casting. I didn’t say anything then because I thought maybe it was just a rough patch, but... seeing you tonight, it’s clear this has been a bigger issue for you.”

Eddie swallowed hard, the vulnerability in her tone making his chest tighten. “I... I didn’t want anyone to know,” he admitted. “I thought if I worked harder, studied more, I could fix it myself.”

Madeleine leaned forward, her voice soft but insistent. “But you don’t have to fix it alone. I want to help you.”

His eyes widened. “Why would you want to do that?”

She smiled, a small, warm curve of her lips that held no pity, only sincerity. “Maybe it’s my nursing side. I can’t help wanting to lend a hand when someone’s hurting. But it’s more than that, Eddie. You’re brilliant—one of the smartest people I’ve met. You’ve got so much potential, and it pains me to see you held back by something you can’t control.”

Eddie hesitated, torn between gratitude and uncertainty. “I don’t even know if it can be helped. What if this is just... who I am?”



"Then we work with it," Madeleine said firmly. "You heard what Claire read. There are techniques, methods. Maybe it won't be easy, and maybe it won't be perfect, but we can figure out what works for *you*."

Eddie looked at Madeleine. Her expression was open and unyielding, a quiet determination radiating from her. "You really mean it?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"I do," Madeleine said. "And not just for tonight. I'll help you figure this out for as long as it takes."

Something in her tone, so steady and sure, made Eddie's resolve waver. He felt a lump rise in his throat, but he pushed it down, nodding instead. "Okay. I... I'd like that."

Madeleine's smile widened, and for the first time in what felt like ages, Eddie felt a small, cautious flicker of hope.

Eddie's heart sank a little at Madeleine's words. "Wait, what? You'll help me, but on one condition?" he asked, trying to mask his trepidation.

Madeleine leaned back in her seat, her smile a mixture of mischief and sincerity. "Yes. We'll meet every Saturday, right next to the Alchemy Faculty in the park. I'll help you practice, work on controlling your outbursts, and – hopefully – get you to a place where you're not always on the edge of chaos." She paused, letting her words settle in before adding with a knowing grin, "No skipping, Eddie."

Eddie sighed, his shoulders slumping slightly as the weight of another commitment hit him. His schedule was already a tangled mess of lectures, assignments, and club meetings, and now he had to add another thing to the pile. He'd barely managed to keep up with everything as it was.

"I don't know, Madeleine. My schedule's already packed. I don't know if I can squeeze in another thing." The words felt like a complaint before he could stop them, but the thought of trying to fit one more thing in felt impossible.

Madeleine's smile didn't fade; instead, she looked at him with a kind of quiet understanding. "I know it's a lot, Eddie. Believe me, I *get* it. I'm a second-year in Herbology under the Alchemy Faculty. I know how tightly packed our schedules can get." She leaned forward, her eyes sparkling with a mix of empathy and humor. "But," she winked, "from one alchemist to another, I promise I'll make it worth your while."

Eddie couldn't help but chuckle softly at her confidence. "So you're saying I'm stuck with this now, huh?"

Madeleine's grin widened. "Yep. But think of it this way: one extra hour each week with someone who knows what it's like. You might even find it a bit of a relief. And, hey, we're not just going to sit and talk about theory. You'll get real practice."

Eddie looked around at his friends – Will, still nodding thoughtfully, and Ashley, who gave him a small, encouraging smile. For a moment, he considered the option. He *did* need help, and Madeleine was offering it so willingly. It was a chance he

didn't want to waste, even if it meant one more challenge to fit into his overloaded life.

"Alright," Eddie said finally, sighing but with a spark of determination in his eyes. "I'll do it. Saturday at the park. But don't expect me to get it right away."

Madeleine's eyes gleamed with a mix of satisfaction and encouragement. "That's the spirit. We'll take it slow. One step at a time." She gave him a warm, reassuring smile. "I've got your back, Eddie."

Eddie nodded, feeling an unfamiliar sense of support starting to take root. As much as he dreaded another commitment, a part of him was relieved. He wasn't going to face this alone anymore.

It was past midnight when they finally left the library. The cold night air hit Eddie's face as he stepped out into the courtyard, the moonlight casting a soft glow over the stone pathways. Will, Ashley, and Claire were ahead, walking with their usual chatter, their footsteps echoing through the empty halls. But Eddie and Madeleine lagged behind, both carrying books — Eddie clutching his on *Magical Anomalies*, while Madeleine balanced hers on *Chimaera Anatomy* and *Centauroic Healing Techniques*.

The soft sound of Claire locking the library doors echoed behind them as the final clang of the heavy lock echoed through the quiet night. Claire gave them all one last wave before heading toward the main gate, her pace brisk, ready to get some rest after a long night's work.

Eddie glanced at Madeleine, adjusting the weight of his books in his arms. "You know," he began, breaking the silence between them, "You seem to have so many different interests – alchemy, magical creatures, healing. It's impressive that you can juggle all of them. I mean, you're a second-year, right? How do you even keep it all straight?"

Madeleine smiled, the kind of smile that suggested she was used to being impressed but didn't let it go to her head. "I guess you could say I've always been a bit of a...jack of all trades," she replied with a shrug. "You kind of have to be, with all the opportunities at Edenfield. Sometimes it's about finding the overlap between your passions, you know? That's what keeps it interesting."

Eddie gave a quiet laugh, a bit in awe of her ability to juggle so many interests while still being so focused. "It's pretty impressive, honestly. I can barely manage my own coursework, let alone all of that."

Madeleine's eyes sparkled with a playful glint. "You'll get the hang of it. Once you've figured out what works for you, everything falls into place. But..." She hesitated for a moment, then shifted her gaze toward Eddie. "I've been meaning to ask you something."

Eddie glanced up from his books, intrigued. "What is it?"

Madeleine slowed her pace just a bit as they walked side by side. "You know, I joined the Transmuter's Atelier because you reminded me of someone I knew when I was a kid. Someone I've always wondered about."

Eddie's eyebrows shot up. "Really? Me? Who?"

Madeleine chuckled softly, her tone teasing. "Yeah, you. There's just something about you, Eddie. The way you look at the world, your focus, your energy... It made me wonder if you were *the* person I thought you were." She shrugged lightly. "I just wanted to make sure."

Eddie blinked, suddenly curious. "Wait, you mean, is your childhood friend named Edward Welton? White hair, green eyes, that kind of thing?" He couldn't help the teasing grin that tugged at his lips.

Madeleine gave a sly smile back. "Well, yes, he was called Edward. But no Welton in the name. And yes, he had white hair, but he *definitely* wouldn't be raiding a library at night trying to break into the restricted section." Her voice dropped into a playful mock-serious tone, her eyes glinting with amusement.

Eddie burst into laughter, the sound of it carrying through the empty courtyard. "You're right. your friend might has more sense than i do."

Madeleine's grin softened into something warmer. "You're nothing like my old friend, Eddie. But sometimes... I think you remind me of him in ways that I didn't expect."

Eddie felt his chest tighten, a mixture of curiosity and unease blooming inside him. "So why did you want to help me with all this?" he asked, his voice quieter now, as they continued walking through the cold, starry night. "I mean, you barely know me, and

I can't imagine it's easy to try to help someone like me with this *condition* I have."

Madeleine's expression softened, and she didn't immediately answer. Instead, she turned her gaze forward, looking ahead into the dark streets of Edenfield. After a moment, she answered, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Just a feeling," she said simply. "Just that."

Eddie glanced at her, surprised at how little she said, yet how heavy the words felt. He stopped for a moment, considering her cryptic response. "Just a feeling, huh?" he repeated, his voice thoughtful. "I guess sometimes that's enough to do something, right?"

Madeleine's smile was small but genuine. "Sometimes it is. You don't need a grand reason, Eddie. You just need to trust it."

The two of them walked in silence for a while, the distant sound of Will and Ashley's voices filling the quiet air as they moved ahead. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence, but one that was filled with a new kind of understanding between them — a sense of shared purpose, even if unspoken.

As they neared the edge of the campus, where the streets of Edenfield stretched out before them, Eddie couldn't help but feel like something was shifting. He wasn't sure what exactly it was — whether it was Madeleine's cryptic words or her unexpected kindness — but it was there, something growing in him that he couldn't quite explain.

"I'll see you Saturday," Madeleine said, breaking his thoughts as they reached the main gates. "We'll figure this out. One step at a time."

Eddie nodded, a small but sincere smile crossing his face. "Yeah. Saturday."

And with that, the two of them parted ways, the night air quiet around them, as the journey ahead seemed just a little less daunting.

## **ACT II | Chapter 9**



The story continues....