

# Chapter 1

A distant hum, soft and steady. Rhythmic clicking on tile. Muffled voices tangled just beyond his grasp. Low drawl, a gentle cadence, a sharp interjection. Silk rustled. Glass clinked against a tray. The air was cool on his skin. Eddie's eyes blinked open. He was in a vibrant ward he didn't recognize, bathed in the warm, yellow light of stained-glass panels overhead.

His body felt heavy, like he was sinking into the plush mattress beneath him. He shifted slightly—and a sharp bolt of pain shot up his left leg. He hissed through his teeth and stilled, his breath catching. A dull, throbbing ache pulsed just above the knee. The leg was stiff, wrapped in layers of linen and propped up slightly under the blankets. He could smell the faint, herbal scent of salves clinging to the cloth. His brown wool jacket was gone, replaced by a loose hospital robe.

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

Voices filtered through the silk curtain beside him.

"...Come on, I'm just saying, there's no freakin' way it was some wasted dude with a pitchfork," came Ashley's voice, "He was, like, ten minutes from the East Gate. No way some random stumbles that close to campus without getting flagged."

A deeper voice joined in—measured, steady. "When I found him," said Henry, "There was someone nearby. Or something that looked like someone." A short pause, and then, firmer: "But it wasn't an actual person. Not really. Something about the way it moved... it wasn't right."

Ashley then turned to Madeleine, "Madeleine, you're the creature nerd here—what do you think? Something's off, right?"

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

Ashley let out a dry laugh. "Okay, well, that must've been one seriously pissed-off cat to make that wound."

“Hang on a minute,” Will said, voice low and serious, leaning forward like he was letting them in on something. “You reckon it was a creature? That’d track. I mean—think about it. If it was, the police’d have to log it, send word to the Council, all that red tape. But they didn’t. They buried it. I think they don’t want folks panicking. Wouldn’t be the first time they swept something under the rug—what with all those curfew notices and whispers about things prowling after dark.”

Ashley snorted. “Here we go—Detective Will’s back on the case. Next thing you know, you’ll be drawing red strings in your dorm room.”

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

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

“I saw it with my own eyes,” Henry said, his voice low and steady. “It looked like a man. Walked like one too. But something was off—uncanny. That’s not an animal attack. Whatever it was... it wasn’t just some beast.”

Another pause.

“But you really think they’d put that in the official report?” Will said, brows furrowed. “They’ve been brushing this under for months. First it’s missing pets—brushed off as strays. Then the whispers about Red Oak Lane, alleys folk avoid after sundown. Come on. Anyone with half a brain can see something’s not right.”

“—And now Edward.” Madeleine’s voice softened. “He could’ve died.”

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

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

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

“Eddie!” Ashley said, shaking her head with a grin, “Dude, you gotta stop getting yourself wrecked if you wanna survive first year. Like, seriously.”

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

“We were rather hoping you’d be the one to fill us in,” Will said, his brow slightly knit.

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

“—But like, no random dude’s just strollin’ around Edenfield with a pitchfork like it’s Halloween or something,” Ashley cut in.

Eddie pushed himself upright, ignoring the sharp protest from his side. “No,” he said, his voice raspy but firm. “It wasn’t a drunk. It wasn’t a pitchfork.” He looked from Will to Ashley. “Whatever the official report says, it’s a lie. I don’t know what it was, but I know it wasn’t that.”

Will stepped forward, his tone steady but earnest. “Eddie, you can trust us, mate. Whatever you remember—just say it. We’re not about to go blabbing it around.”

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

Eddie hesitated. The memory a blur in his mind, sharp and confusing. But one detail glared, undeniable.

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

The words had barely left his mouth when Madeleine stiffened.

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

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

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

“Did it use something to hurt you?”

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

"I was walking past the East Gate," Eddie continued, his eyes unfocused as he replayed the scene. "And I saw someone just... standing there. That was the first thing that was off. He was wearing a full suit, standing perfectly still under a gaslamp. Who does that at two in the morning?"

Will frowned. "A suit?"

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

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

A hush fell over the group.

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

Madeleine's hand covered her mouth.

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

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

Silence.

Just stunned stillness.

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

For a moment, no one moved.

Then Will leaned forward, brows furrowed. “Could it be a Ghoul? Or, like... some kind of Undead?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Henry sighed. “Ghouls don’t wander into cities. They stick to old battlefields or ancient ruins. There hasn’t been a proper Undead sighting in Solivia for centuries.”

Ashley rested her chin in her hand. “Well, what about vampires? Or, ooh—maybe a werewolf. Full moon’s just around the corner.”

“Ash, come on. There’s no vamps or werewolves in Edenfield. If there were, the Ministry would’ve locked the city down yesterday.”

Madeleine opened her mouth slightly, but hesitated—her brows pinched, clearly thinking.

Henry noticed. “Madeleine,” he said gently, “You’ve got something, don’t you?”

She glanced at Eddie, then back to the others. “Maybe,” she murmured. “I... I don’t know for sure, but...” Her voice dropped. “What Eddie described... the way it moved, how it looked almost human before it—shifted...”

“...It sounded like the behaviour of a Chimaera.”

The word lingered.

Silence fell. Will rubbed the back of his neck, eyes narrowed in thought. Henry crossed his arms, staring at the floor as if trying to piece together something unspoken.

“Whoa wait,” Ashley broke the quiet. “Hold up. What even is a Chimaera?”

Madeleine’s expression turned grave. “It’s not just one thing,” she said softly. “Chimaera is a classification. They’re creatures made through unnatural means. Most of them through a technique called Alchemical Grafting.”

Ashley blinked. “Grafting, like plants?”

“Kind of,” Madeleine said, her tone tight. “But instead of branches and vines, you’re stitching together flesh. Tendons. Bones. Sometimes even minds. It’s a practice skirting the edge of necromancy—closer to that than real alchemy.”

Henry’s brow furrowed. “And you’re sure that’s what this was?”

Madeleine hesitated for a moment, then took a slow breath, like she was bracing herself.

“Last semester, the Sanctuary received a creature,” she said, her voice lower now, almost like she was telling a ghost story around a fire. “It was found by a Paladin unit stationed just outside the city walls. Whatever it was, it was barely alive. Mangled. Scarred. And... wrong. Its body didn’t match any known species—nothing from the Catalogue of Mythical Creatures. Nothing from the Sanctuary’s archives. It had human teeth. Reptilian skin. Its lungs... clicked when it breathed.”

“Ew...” Ashley shivered. “Gross.”

“The researchers tried everything. Scans. Genetic matching. Even magical tracing,” Madeleine continued, her voice hushed. “But it didn’t belong to anything in our world. Eventually, they gave up. The only category that fit was Chimaera—a man-made thing, spliced from gods-know-what.”

Will leaned forward. “What happened to it?”

“It died,” she said, simply. “Didn’t survive a month. Screamed the entire last night it was alive. Then just... stopped.”

No one spoke.

The air in the infirmary had gone still again.

Madeleine finally turned to Henry, her voice more measured now. “I’m not saying I’m a hundred percent sure. But from what I saw... from what I tried to nurse last semester...” She paused, searching for the right words. “It really sounded like a Chimaera. The way it moved. The way Eddie described its body—those inconsistencies.” She shook her head slightly. “It’s only my theory. That’s all.”

Henry didn’t respond at first. His jaw tightened, and his eyes dropped to the floor as if something was beginning to click into place. Slowly, deliberately, he looked back up at her.

“...If that’s true,” he said, his voice low, like he didn’t want the words to be real, “then that means...”

“Someone succeeded in creating it,” Madeleine said quietly. “And if what Eddie saw was true...” Her gaze slid toward Eddie, then returned to Henry. “...Then not just once. But twice.”

But Madeleine wasn't smiling.

"We got to do something about this," Eddie said, his voice raspy but firm.

"Eddie..." Will started, his tone a clear warning, as if he knew exactly where this was heading.

"What?" Eddie pushed on, his gaze sweeping over them. "Don't you see? If what Madeleine's saying is true, then we have to do something. One of these... Chimaeras... maybe that's a coincidence. A single, twisted experiment that got loose. But two of them? That's not random. That's a pattern. Something bigger is happening."

Henry let out a short, harsh breath. "And what do you suggest we do, Edward? March down to the Edenfield Police Department and tell them we saw a Frankenstein monster in a business suit attacking people? Forget it," he said, shaking his head. "You've got more luck telling them aliens exist."

"So we do nothing?" Eddie shot back, pushing himself up further against the pillows, wincing as his side flared in protest. "We just sit here and wait? What happens when it attacks someone else? And they aren't as lucky as I was?"

"Eddie, stop!" Will interjected, his voice suddenly sharp with anger. "You can't do any more of your sneaking around! You've already been caught in the library after hours. The Student Council is onto you. You have one more strike, one more warning before you're expelled! In your first year!"

Eddie's argument died in his throat. He looked around the room, seeing the conflict on their faces now solidifying into a shared, reluctant agreement. He looked at Ashley, hoping for an ally, for her usual bravado to side with him. She just chewed on her lip, avoiding his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Ed," Ashley finally said, her voice quiet. "But I think Will's right. This is too dangerous."

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

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

The group broke from their huddle. Ashley stood first, flashing Eddie a crooked smile as she bumped his shoulder lightly. "Alright, dude. Rest up, yeah? And maybe

next time, don't go picking fights with nightmare fuel without giving us a heads-up."

Will followed, his tone brisk but warm. "Keep your head clear, Ed. Rest, but don't forget what happened."

Henry gave a brief nod, the hem of his coat brushing the polished floor. "Stay sharp, Edward. You're lucky to be alive."

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

As the others stepped out, she lingered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And beneath it, a simple line:

21st Norwood Street. Past the Campground.

Edenfield Mythical Creature Sanctuary.



## Chapter 2

The scratchy wool of the infirmary-issued blanket was doing little to soothe the restless energy thrumming through Eddie Welton. He lay propped against the headboard of his dorm bed, a prisoner in his own room. His left ankle, a throbbing, swollen lump beneath a fresh bandage, was a constant, unwelcome reminder of the creature—all teeth and shadows—that had darted out from the alley behind the Alchemist's Brew cafe. A single metal crutch leaned against his bedside cabinet, both a lifeline and a symbol of his confinement.

Across the room, Will was methodically checking the contents of his leather satchel. Textbooks, a roll of parchment, a case of glass vials that clinked softly. He was everything Eddie wasn't at the moment: composed, mobile, and annoyingly sensible.

"Alright, I've told Professor Rheagan you came down with a nasty fall from the common room stairs," Will said. He zipped his bag shut and picked up his wand from his desk—a slender rod of polished oak. "She sends her sympathies and expects you to be bedridden for at least two days. I'll get notes from her practical alchemy lecture for you." He turned, his gaze firm. "On the condition that you actually *stay* bedridden. No sneaking out, Eddie."

Eddie shifted, pushing himself up straighter against the headboard with a defiant wince. "What are you? My dad? Not even my dad is as strict as you!"

Will pinched the bridge of his nose, a familiar gesture of exasperation. "I'm not opposed to your usual brand of mayhem, Eddie, I know you want to go outside. But the Student Council gave us an official warning two weeks ago. One more warning, and they report us to the Faculty. You'll be finished."

"But..." Eddie said, tilting his head with a sly smirk that didn't quite hide the pain in his ankle. "What if they don't find out?"

"That doesn't matter, because I'm worried *if they do* find out!" Will countered, his voice rising with frustration. "Do you want to get expelled in your first year? Is that the goal?"

"No..." Eddie mumbled, looking away towards the window. "But I don't want to be bored, either."

"Honestly, Will." A light, musical voice cut in from the doorway. "Where could he possibly go?" Ashley leaned against the doorframe, "His ankle's busted. He can't exactly outrun a campus patrol, can he?"

Will sighed, running a hand through his already tidy hair. "You're forgetting who we're talking about, Ash. This is Eddie." He gestured vaguely towards the bed. "Trouble finds him because he goes out looking for it with a map and a packed lunch. My class is across campus, and yours isn't until this evening. I'm officially deputizing you to keep an eye on him because...."

As they spoke, Eddie tuned out the familiar back-and-forth. His world had narrowed to a single objective. His fingers twitched, inching over the rough texture of the blanket. His eyes darted from the crutch—just within reach if he stretched—to the open window, where a cool afternoon breeze rustled the ivy clinging to the old stone walls of the dormitory. Freedom.

"...it's not just about his ankle." Will continued, "The Student Council is already looking for an excuse to put him on probation after that incident in the lower labs. If he's caught wandering around campus when he's officially on medical leave, they'll have his head. He needs to lay low, properly."

Ashley listened, her expression shifting from amusement to a flicker of understanding. She opened her mouth to reply, but then her eyes drifted towards the bed behind Will. The grin returned, wider this time.

"...aaaaaand he's gone," she said lightly.

"What?" Will spun around.

The bed was empty. The blanket was thrown aside in a heap, and the crutch was gone. Will's eyes widened in disbelief before he rushed back into the room, his carefully maintained composure shattering. He scanned the empty space, then his gaze shot to the open window. He leaned out, his face a mask of horrified frustration.

Down below, Eddie was standing on the decorative brickwork that lined the building. Under his focused will, the bricks were behaving like a slow, silent elevator, lowering him gently from the second-story window to the grassy quad

below. The moment his feet—one good, one useless—touched the ground, the bricks seamlessly settled back into the wall as if nothing had happened.

“Edward!” Will bellowed, his voice echoing across the quad and earning a few curious glances from passing students. “Get yourself back in here, right now!”

Eddie, now upright with the help of his crutch, didn't break his stride. He shouted back over his shoulder, his voice full of unwavering determination, “I'll be back before curfew! Don't you worry!”

Will watched him hobble away towards the main campus path, a tiny, defiant figure on a mission. He gripped the windowsill, his knuckles white with annoyance.

From behind him, Ashley's voice was laced with wry satisfaction.

“Told ya you can't stop him.”

-O-

The university grounds were a familiar sea of activity. Streams of students flowed along the stone pathways, their satchels slung over their shoulders and their conversations a low hum that filled the crisp morning air. For them, it was just another day of lectures and library sessions. For Eddie, it was a covert operation.

He kept his head down, the rhythmic *thump-click... thump-click* of his crutch on the flagstones a stark contrast to the hurried footsteps of everyone around him. Technically, he wasn't skipping class. He was on sanctioned medical leave, a fact that gave him a sliver of confidence. Still, every glimpse of a campus patrol uniform made him tense up.

With his free hand, he reached into the lower-left pocket of his brown jacket. His fingers closed around a worn, folded piece of paper. He pulled it out, glancing down at the familiar, neat handwriting.

*Madeleine D.*

*0712 443 229 21st*

*Norwood Street. Past the Campground.*

*Edenfield Mythical Creature Sanctuary.*

He folded the paper carefully and slipped it back into his pocket. *She said she has something to show me.* The memory of their last conversation, a brief, hurried exchange after the incident, was the entire reason he was currently risking expulsion. He looked around, his determination warring with a sudden wave of anxiety. Should he just show up? Or would it be better to call first? The latter seemed less likely to get him chased off the property by a territorial hippogriff.

He spotted one of the university's old, dark-wood phone booths near the edge of the main quad. It looked like a relic from another era, but it was functional. He hobbled over, squeezed inside, and pulled the heavy door shut, muffling the campus noise to a distant murmur.

Taking a deep breath, he fished the paper back out and carefully dialed the number. The rotary clicks sounded unnaturally loud in the small space. He waited, his heart thumping against his ribs with each ring. He was so nervous he could feel his palms sweating.

"Hello?" A warm, clear voice came from the other end.

His heart lurched into his throat. He swallowed hard, trying to sound casual. "O-oh, hey... it's ummm... Edward... Eddie..." he stammered, hating how shaky he sounded.

A moment of silence, then recognition dawned in her voice. "Oh, Edward!" Madeleine said, her tone instantly friendly. "How are you? I heard what happened. I thought you were supposed to be resting today?"

"Well um, about that," Eddie chuckled, a nervous tremor in his laugh. "I got better." It wasn't a complete lie; he was, at least, vertical. "Oh and," he continued, rushing the words out before he lost his nerve, "last week you said you got something to show me at your sanctuary. Can I... go there? To check it out?"

"Oh, you want to go today?" Madeleine sounded pleased. "Yeah, sure! I'll be on shift until 5, I can give you a tour. The sanctuary is pretty hidden, so just board the E7 route bus. When you arrive at the final stop, just follow the path near the campgrounds and go past the griffin statue. You can't miss it."

"Oh, okay!" Eddie said, a wave of relief washing over him. "Um, see you then!"

He slammed the phone back into its cradle with a loud clatter and leaned his forehead against the cool glass of the booth door, breathing a deep sigh of relief. The hardest part, he hoped, was over. Now, he just had to get there.

The university bus stop was an organized chaos of students coming and going. Eddie navigated the throng, his focus narrowed to a single, repetitive mantra murmured under his breath.

*“E7 route... Norwood... past griffin statue...”*

The words were a lifeline, a tangible goal that kept him moving forward despite the throbbing protest from his ankle. Each step was a carefully managed negotiation between pain and determination. He kept his head down, hoping to blend into the sea of faces, to be just another student heading off campus.

“Hey, Eddie! What do you think you’re doing?!”

The voice cut through the noise, sharp and sickeningly familiar. Eddie’s head snapped up. About twenty yards away, standing near the entrance to the station, were Will and Ashley. Will looked furious, his satchel clutched in a white-knuckled grip. Ashley, beside him, had an expression that was half concern, half morbid curiosity.

*Crap.*

There was no time for an explanation, no room for another argument. He had to move. Now.

Ignoring the sharp complaint from his ankle, Eddie quickened his pace. It was a clumsy, lurching hobble, a far cry from his usual speed, but it was the best he could manage. He pushed off harder with his crutch, weaving through students who shot him annoyed looks.

“Eddie, get back here!” Will’s voice was closer now.

The chase was on. Will, uninjured and driven by sheer panic, tried to bull his way through the dense crowd. “Excuse me... sorry... let me through!” He was a swimmer fighting against a powerful current, his progress frustratingly slow as students, plugged into their own worlds with headphones and conversations, blocked his path.

Eddie, meanwhile, was using his injury almost as an advantage, his crutch and visible limp parting the crowd with a mix of sympathy and annoyance.

Will is closing the distance, he could feel the frantic energy of the pursuit at his back. His lungs burned. His ankle screamed with every jarring step. Just a little further.

Then he saw it. Pulling up to the designated stop with a hydraulic hiss was a large, blue-and-white bus. Emblazoned on its digital sign were the two characters he was praying for: E7.

A surge of hope, pure and potent, flooded through him. It was the adrenaline shot he needed. He abandoned any attempt to manage the pain and launched himself forward in a desperate, final sprint.

The bus doors swung open.

“Eddie!” Will bellowed, finally breaking through the last line of students. He was only an arm's length away now, his fingers outstretched, lunging for the sleeve of Eddie's brown jacket.

But he was a second too late.

Eddie's foot landed on the first step of the bus. He hauled himself aboard, nearly tripping, and scrambled away from the door just as Will's hand swiped through empty air. The doors hissed shut, sealing Eddie inside. He pressed his face against the cool glass, making brief, triumphant eye contact with his furious best friend before the bus rumbled to life and pulled away from the curb, carrying him towards Norwood.

Will stood on the pavement, chest heaving, watching the E7 bus disappear into the Edenfield traffic. He slowly lowered his hand, the frantic energy draining out of him, replaced by a cold, heavy dread. Ashley came to a stop beside him, hands tucked in her pockets.

“We're so finished, Ash,” Will said hopelessly, staring at the spot where the bus had been.

“Hey, I mean,” Ashley said, giving him a light, playful elbow in the ribs, “a trip down to the Faculty office wouldn't hurt, right? Think of it as a new experience.”

Will turned to look at her, his expression grim. “You're not helping.”

## Chapter 3

The bus groaned. It clanked beneath the floorboards like a piggy bank, accompanied by the rhythmic squeaking of the old suspension every time they hit a bump.

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

Overhead, the air conditioner wheezed out cool air in pitiful, uneven bursts. It clicked now and then, like it was trying to restart itself but kept giving up.

The whole vehicle smelled faintly of dust and dried grass.

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

It was a week after his admission to Edenfield Infirmary, the nurses decided to let him go, since he looked more fine than ever, (and with Ashley and Will visiting too often, it gets really rowdy) and so he decided to leave and take his weekend somewhere.

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

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

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

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

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

He could've ignored it.

Midterms were over. Will was back to his stacks of books. Ashley had thrown herself into her advocacy group again, fighting for student protections and probably brewing some conspiracy after everything that happened to him.

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

And yet, here he was.

*Why?*

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

Or maybe because of *her*.

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

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

Who was he kidding?

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

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

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

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

Norwood Campgrounds.

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



*21st Norwood Street, past the campground.*

*Right, this must be it.*

With a grunt, he pressed a hand to the metal frame of the seat in front of him and hoisted himself up. His angle protested instantly.

“Stupid... thing,” Eddie cursed at his own leg, “Should’ve waited a few more days.”

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

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

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

He turned the note over in his hand again.

"Past the campground, near the griffin statue." it said.

*Where?*

There was nothing here but locked-up cabins and trees that swallowed the light. After ten minutes of limping down a trail that led nowhere and getting confused looks from the few campers he saw, irritation began to prick under his skin. He came to a stop by a large oak, leaning heavily on his crutch. His leg throbbed, his shirt was sticking to his back, and he was starting to feel like an idiot. Maybe this was all just a test. Or worse, a joke.

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

*“Edward!”*

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

Again, “*Edward!*”

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

Madeleine.

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

“You made it!” she called, beaming.

Before he could respond, she closed the distance and moved to wrap her arms around him. She caught herself halfway, her eyes darting to his crutch and the way he held his body stiffly. Her wide smile softened into a look of immediate concern.

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

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

He waved it off, trying to catch his breath. “No, no, it’s fine—just... a bit too soon for a bear hug, y’know?”

Madeleine frowned, looking genuinely guilty. “You really should’ve waited a few more days. You didn’t have to come all this way. You didn’t sneak out of your dorm, right?”

“What can I say,” Eddie shrugged. “Couldn’t pass up a chance to meet the fire-breathing, death-dealing dragons you’ve kept here.”

He expected a laugh, but Madeleine just nodded thoughtfully toward the distant trees. “You’ll have to wait on the dragons, I’m afraid. The matriarch has a wing injury and we’re keeping the hatchling in the containment ward for observation.”

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

-O-

The path they followed are narrow. Between rows upon rows of towering pine trees and giant rocks. The sunlight filtering through in golden slants. The silence

of the woods was complete—except for the occasional chirping of birds, the rustle of leaves, and now and then, a distant, eerie wail from deeper in the forest.

“So...” Eddie opened, beginning to feel the silence, “How long have you been doing this? The Sanctuary thing.”

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

“You grew up around these kind of stuff?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What do you mean?” Madeleine asked back.

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

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

They walked in silence for a few more steps.

Eddie looked at her. "That's a lot of heart for an eight-year-old."

"I don't think it was heart." Madeleine smiled at him. "It was hope."

-O-

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

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

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

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

"What are you doing?" Eddie called.

Madeleine squinted at the ground, then up at the trunks. "Someone must've closed the gate."

"The what?"

"Did you bring a wand?"

"I umm... no, I don't have any."

She winced. "Right. Of course, sorry I forgot you're in Alchemy. I don't have mine either."

With a resigned sigh, Madeleine stepped up to one of the trees and began patting the bark, feeling around the grooves like someone searching for a hidden latch. After a few moments, she let out a soft "Ah-ha!" and pulled something free from a hollow in the bark.

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

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

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

At first, nothing happened.

Then, high above, something stirred.

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

And beneath that arch, the world changed.

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

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

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

## Chapter 4

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

He followed close behind Madeleine, taking in the view.

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

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

And the creatures.

There were creatures everywhere.

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

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

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

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

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

She nodded. “Eventually, yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

At the reception desk, instead of the usual student attendant, Madeleine nearly collided with Professor Gareth Hudson—tall, silver-haired, and impeccably dressed in a charcoal-gray waistcoat, his presence as polished as the alchemy vials he carried. A harried student trailed behind him, arms stacked with ledgers titled *Species Classification & Behavioral Anomalies*.

“Oh, I’m so sorry Professor, I was—“

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

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

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

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

“A tour?” Hudson’s eyebrow arched. “With *this* one?” He gestured to Eddie’s crutch, his tone light but edged with skepticism. “The Back Range is no place for

convalescents. Unless”—his voice dropped, almost playful—“you’ve discovered a therapeutic application for wyvern venom I haven’t?”

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

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

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

“I’m sure you will.” Hudson’s smile was razor-thin. “Mr. Jones has the key. Do remember to return it.” He paused, as if struck by a thought. “Ah, and Madeleine? The Student Council’s new security memo applies to *all* staff. Even you.” He adjusted his cuffs, then gestured to the waiting student. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, these reports won’t transcribe themselves.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Chapter 5

Eddie and Madeleine walked deeper into the Sanctuary, the mood began to shift. Near the front, sunlight still touched the fences and grassy paths, where Sanctuary members were leading tours for wide-eyed elementary-aged students in matching

cloaks. A small group clustered near a gentle, antlered beast with scales like polished stone, giggling as it bowed to let them pet its snout.

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

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

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

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

“He’s head of the Sanctuary’s research program. Has been for years.” Her voice was measured, the way she explained things to spooked animals—gentle but firm.

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

Eddie snorted. “Yeah, but does he actually *like* them? Or are they just... I don’t know, test subjects for him?”

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

Eddie raised an eyebrow. “You’re telling me *that man* has a hidden side we don’t know?”

“I’m telling you,” she said, turning to lead him down the path, “That no one is as it seems.”

As they walked deeper into the sanctuary, the cheerful sounds began to fade, replaced by the hush of thickening woods. The trees here grew denser, the canopy forming a living roof that swallowed the sun. The air turned cooler, stiller, and

more humid. Eddie noticed the path narrowing as vines and moss crept along the edges, and the sound of their footfalls became muffled on the leafy ground.

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

Eddie blinked. “As in... this forest is acting as its cage?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The air inside was cool and still, carrying the metallic tang of blood and the faint, sharp scent of ozone. The cheerful sounds of the front range were gone, replaced by a deep, resonant silence broken only by the sound of their own footsteps and the occasional low, guttural breath from behind the glass.

They walked past the first enclosure. A plaque of polished brass was bolted to the frame.

Calderan Wyvern – *Draco Minor Caldarea Status: Rehabilitating. Warning: Corrosive Spittle. Do not approach glass.*

Through the murky pane, Eddie could see a serpentine shape coiled in the shadows, its scales shimmering like oil on water. A low hiss, like steam from a cracked pipe, followed them as they passed.

The next plaque read:

Ridgeback Manticore – *Manticora Spina Status: Highly Aggressive. Warning: Auditory Lures in Use. Maintain Silence.*

A pair of intelligent, cruel eyes tracked them from the darkness within. Eddie felt a prickle on his skin, a primal instinct screaming at him that he was being sized up as prey. He quickened his pace, his crutch thudding heavily on the wooden boards.

They passed another—an Obsidian Basilisk, its petrifying gaze neutralized by the enchanted glass, according to the plaque. Then a cage that housed a creature so massive, all Eddie could see was a wall of thick, grey hide pressed against the window, rising and falling with each thunderous breath. Each enclosure held a monster from a nightmare, a creature of immense power, barely contained.

Finally, they reached the end of the walkway. The final enclosure was set apart from the others. It was smaller, starker, and reinforced with bands of cold, black iron etched with glowing containment runes. The air here was frigid, and a

profound silence emanated from it—not the quiet of a sleeping predator, but the absolute stillness of a tomb.

Madeleine stopped, her expression grim. She didn't have to point. Eddie's eyes were already fixed on the plaque. The lettering was simpler, less scientific. It was a label born of fear, not study.

The Spike Man – *Chimaera*

Eddie's breath caught. He remembered Madeleine's story—the creature found outside the city, mangled and wrong. He looked past the plaque, into the enclosure, expecting to see a taxidermied body, a skeleton, *something*.

There was nothing.

The enclosure was empty. A stark, sterile, stone-floored cell.

No, not sterile. Eddie leaned closer, his hand instinctively going to the glass, which was ice-cold to the touch. The stone walls, the floor, even the reinforced ceiling—they were utterly shredded. Thousands upon thousands of claw marks gouged the surfaces, overlapping in a chaotic frenzy. The marks were deep, frantic, etched with a desperation so palpable it seemed to echo in the silence. This wasn't just an enclosure; it was a torture chamber. This creature hadn't just lived here; it had spent every waking moment trying to tear its way out.

"I thought you said it died," Eddie whispered, his voice hoarse. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the sheer violence carved into the stone.

"It did," Madeleine said softly, her voice tight with a sorrow so deep it seemed to chill the air further. "It screamed for a whole night. And then it just... stopped. This is where we kept it."

Eddie stared into the empty, ravaged cell. The violence of the claw marks told a story of unimaginable pain. The silence pressed in on him, heavy with the ghost of that final scream.

"What... what did it look like?" he finally asked, his voice barely a whisper.

Madeleine let out a long, slow sigh, as if the question itself was a physical weight. She seemed reluctant, not wanting to revisit the memory, but she reached for the small leather satchel at her hip anyway. With deliberate movements, she unbuckled it and pulled out a thick, leather-bound journal. The cover was worn smooth at the edges from years of use.

She opened it, and Eddie saw pages filled with immaculate handwriting, detailed anatomical sketches, and carefully pressed specimens. As she flipped through, he caught glimpses of a gryphon's wing diagram, notes on the migratory patterns of hippogriffs, and a shimmering, translucent scale taped to a page labeled *Sea Serpent*. Each entry was a testament to a lifetime of fascination.

Then, she stopped. The page she landed on was different. It was chaotic.

Her usually neat handwriting was jagged, filled with more questions than answers. Lines were crossed out. Margins were filled with frantic queries: *Necromantic origin? Alchemical mutation? Inconsistent biology? Forced cross-breeding?* In the top corner, under "Classification," a list of names had been aggressively struck through—*Undead, Aberration, Revenant*—before she had finally, uncertainly, circled the word: *Chimaera*.

But it was the photograph that held Eddie's attention.

It was a stamped polaroid, slightly faded, showing the creature's corpse laid out on a steel table. It looked like a painfully thin man, so gaunt its ribs were starkly visible beneath pale, stretched skin. Its arms were unnaturally long, ending in sharp, black talons. And from its spine and the back of its skull erupted a dense crown of sharp, black spikes, like those of a monstrous hedgehog. It was a horrifying fusion of humanoid and something else entirely. The "Spike Man."

Madeleine's voice was quiet, tense. "Is this what attacked you?"

Eddie leaned closer, his eyes tracing the grotesque silhouette in the photograph. He remembered the thing in the courtyard—the way it moved on all fours, the unnatural length of its limbs, the face that wasn't right. He compared that memory to the tragic figure in the photo. They were both wrong, both twisted mockeries of life. But they weren't the same.

He took a slow, shaky breath, the chilling realization dawning on him.

"Yeah..." he said, his voice low and full of a new kind of dread. "It's pretty close."

The weight of his words hung in the frigid air between them. Not just one monster. An entirely different one. The implications settled, cold and sharp.

Madeleine snapped the journal shut, the sound echoing in the silent corridor. The strength that had held her upright seemed to drain away all at once. She took a

half-stumbling step back, her hand finding the wall for support before she sank onto a simple wooden bench not far from the enclosure, her shoulders slumping.

She buried her face in her hands for a moment, her breath trembling. When she looked up, her eyes were wide with a retroactive terror.

“Thank goodness you’re alive, Edward...” she said, her voice shaking. She glanced back at the scarred walls of the empty cell. “That thing... the Spike Man... the sounds it made, the way it threw itself against the walls... If what you fought was anything like that...” She trailed off, unable to finish the thought, “You’re really lucky.”

Eddie looked from the horrifying enclosure to Madeleine’s shaken form. The fear was a cold knot in his own stomach, but seeing hers fanned the embers of his anger into a steady flame.

“That’s why we have to do something about it,” he said, his voice firm. He took a step closer to the bench. “Madeleine, there are two of them that we know of. God knows how many more are out there. We can’t just wait for another one to show up.”

“But what can we do?” she countered, her voice laced with weary defeat. “I’ve been trying to find answers since this specimen arrived. I’ve spent months in the archives, cross-referencing restricted texts, running every alchemical trace I could think of. All it gave me was more questions. No history, no known point of origin... It’s a dead end, Eddie.”

He listened, his gaze fixed on the empty cell. A dead end. Maybe for a scientist.

“You’re looking at it from the wrong angle,” he said quietly.

She looked up, frowning. “What do you mean?”

“You’re treating it like a puzzle,” he explained, turning to face her fully.

“Something to be identified and classified. Something to be studied. You are asking *what* created them. But this isn’t a natural phenomenon, Madeleine. This is a crime.” He gestured toward the claw marks. “The question you should be asking is *who* created them.”

Madeleine went silent, her expression shifting from tired frustration to startled focus. The idea hung in the air, simple and yet paradigm-shifting. All her research,

all her expertise, was focused on the creature. She had never truly focused on the creator.

She stared at him for a long moment, a new, dangerous light dawning in her eyes.

“Are you suggesting,” she said slowly, her voice regaining its strength, “You’re going to search for the creator of this... thing?”

For a long moment, Eddie didn’t answer. The sheer audacity of it seemed to settle on him, pushing him down. His gaze dropped from Madeleine’s face to the scratched-up floor of the empty enclosure, then to the worn handle of his crutch.

He was just a student. A first-year with one strike away from expulsion. Will’s angry warning echoed in his mind, a stark reminder of how much he stood to lose. Every rational thought told him to walk away, to mind his own business, to forget he’d ever seen the things that stalked the campus after dark. Doubt clouded his features, making him look younger, more vulnerable.

He met Madeleine’s waiting gaze. The doubt in his own eyes hardened, replaced by a cold, clear certainty. His grip tightened on his crutch, not for support, but like he was holding a weapon.

“Yeah.” Eddie said, “*I will.*”

## Chapter 6

Madeleine sprinted down the stone corridors of the Alchemy Faculty building, her boots skidding against the flagstones as she careened around a corner. Her satchel slammed against her hip with every frantic step, but she didn’t dare slow to adjust it—not when the minute hand on her watch had already crept two minutes past the hour.

*Damn it, damn it, damn it—*

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

She hadn’t meant to lose track of time. But between her backlog of Herbology assignments and the notes she’d been scrawling—notes about The Spike Man,



about Eddie, about that *thing* that moved like a man but wasn't—the hour had bled away like ink in rain. Now her lungs burned, and the puzzle pieces she'd been trying to force together only grew sharper, more jagged in her mind.

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

*Focus.*

*One thing at a time.*

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

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

Professor Hudson wasn't here yet.

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

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

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

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

She swallowed, forcing a tired smile. "Something like that."

She didn't want to say more, especially not here—not with half the class listening

and Walther's perceptive gaze pressing gently but firmly.

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

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

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

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

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

The door groaned open.

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

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

No one breathed too loud.

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

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

Then—

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

The silence grew teeth.

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

Then—

“The application of alchemical grafting in medicinal botany.”

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

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

“Can anybody elaborate?”

Madeleine opened her mouth—

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

Silence.

Then—

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A beat of silence. The class held its breath.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A shadow fell over them.

“Is there a problem, Mrs. Daedallia?”

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

A beat. Two.

Then—

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

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

It was the polaroid she took—the detailed, haunting photo of the Chimaera.

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

“Where did you...?”

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

Madeleine swallowed, her secret suddenly feeling heavier than ever.

-0-

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

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

"Mrs. Daedallia."

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

"You care for a chat?"

It wasn't a question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Too close.

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

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

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

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

Madeleine blinked. "Who?"

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

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

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

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

The words hung in the air like frost.

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

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

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

Then—

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

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

Madeleine's breath caught.

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

She could lie. She *should* lie.

But Madeleine had never been good at that.

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

Silence.

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

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

Hudson chuckled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Madeleine tilted her head. "Previous career?"

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

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

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



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

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

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

Silence. Then—

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

*Military alchemist.* The words landed like a lit fuse.

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

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

## Chapter 7

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

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

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

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

Her gaze drifted out across the empty road, unfocused.

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

*Military alchemist.*

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

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

And his daughter.

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

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

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

Not what?

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

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

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

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

*How much do we really know about anyone?*

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

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

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

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

Still, something didn't sit right.

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

Two things clicked. Then three. Then four.

Madeleine's breath caught in her throat.

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

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

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

Could it be?

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

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

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

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

The hands clamped on Eddie's arms weren't painful, but they were firm, unyielding. A wall of muscle flanked him on either side, their matching Student Council armbands stark against their dark jackets. They marched him down the silent, echoing corridors of the Alchemy Faculty building, his recently healed ankle feeling fine but offering no chance of a successful escape. He'd been so close. A few more minutes with Hudson's files and he might have found something. Instead, he'd found them.

He tried for a disarming grin, a tactic that rarely worked but was better than silence.

"Come on, guys," Eddie said, his voice echoing slightly in the empty hall. "How do you know I was snooping around the professor's office? How do you know that maybe Professor Hudson didn't just send me to his office to fetch him the stuff he forgot?"

The council member on his right, a boy with a neck as thick as a tree trunk, didn't even look at him. "You are not his lecture assistant," he said, his voice a flat monotone. "You shouldn't have access to his office to begin with."

"Well, I know, I know," Eddie pressed on, trying to keep his tone light. "But what if I'm his favourite student? Shouldn't you think I have access then?"

"It doesn't matter," said the one on the left. "You broke curfew, and you were in a place where you don't belong."

The first one added the final nail to the coffin. "And also, you are Edward Welton." The way he said the name made it sound like a pre-existing condition. "This is your third warning. Your last warning." He steered Eddie toward the grand staircase leading to the administrative wing. "Victoria wants to see you."

Eddie let out a sigh, the fight draining out of him. Victoria Aynesworth, head of the Student Council and a stickler for rules so rigid they made Hudson look laid-back. This was bad.

"Oh, great," he muttered, then added with a layer of sarcasm thick enough to cut with a knife, "Can't wait to see her."

The two students marched him up the grand staircase and down a corridor lined with portraits of past university deans whose painted eyes seemed to follow him with stern disapproval. They stopped before a set of imposing double doors carved

from dark oak. One of the guards pushed a door open, revealing the Student Council room.

It looked less like an office and more like a judge's private chambers. A vaulted ceiling disappeared into shadows high above, the walls were lined with dark wood paneling, and the air was still and cold. A single, massive desk stood on a raised dais at the far end of the room, stark and empty. It didn't surprise Eddie in the slightest.

He was guided to a lone wooden chair positioned in the center of the floor and sat down, the guards retreating to stand impassively by the door. It was well past midnight; he hadn't expected anyone to be here, least of all the Council Head herself. He was wrong.

"Where did you find him this time?"

The voice was sharp, cutting through the silence from the shadowed corner of the room. It was Victoria.

"The Professor's room," the guard on the right reported, his voice flat. "He was caught going through Professor Gareth Hudson's personal files."

"And the two others?" Victoria's voice was coolly analytical. "Have you checked? He never goes alone."

"I was alone this time."

Eddie's voice cut across the room, firm and clear, startling the guard who had begun to answer. He didn't look at them; he stared directly into the shadows where she was hidden. "You don't have to worry about Will and Ashley. I went alone."

A beat of silence hung in the cavernous room. Then, the sound began—the sharp, deliberate clack of heels against the cold stone floor. A figure started to emerge from the darkness, moving with unhurried purpose. As she stepped into the faint light spilling from the hallway, her form was revealed.

She was dressed in a dark tweed blazer over a pristine collared shirt and a pleated skirt that fell exactly to her knees. Her blonde hair was pulled back in a severe, intricate braid, not a single strand out of place. She was posh, precise, and carried an air of authority that made the two brutes by the door seem like mere decoration.

She stopped a few feet in front of his chair, her gaze level and unnervingly direct.

“So,” she said, a faint, unreadable smile touching her lips. “Edward Welton, isn’t it? I’m glad we finally met.”

Victoria’s gaze was sharp, analytical, as if she were examining a particularly curious but troublesome specimen. One of the guards by the door stepped forward, his shadow falling over Eddie.

“Your phone and staff,” the guard said, his voice a low rumble. He gestured to a small, empty table across the room. “On the table. Now.”

Eddie’s jaw tightened. They were disarming him. It was a clear message: they knew he was more than just a common rule-breaker. With a defiant slowness, he reached into his jacket, pulled out the collapsible length of his alchemy staff and the sleek black rectangle of his phone, and walked them over to the designated table. The click of the staff settling on the polished wood sounded unnervingly final. He returned to his chair feeling distinctly more vulnerable.

As he sat, Victoria began to move, her heels making sharp, deliberate clicks on the stone floor as she started to circle him. In her hands, she held a clipboard, a single sheet of paper clipped neatly to its surface.

“You’ve become something of a celebrity this term, Welton,” she said, her voice a cool, even tone that offered no hint of her thoughts. “A recurring topic of discussion in our weekly disciplinary meetings.”

She paused behind him, forcing him to sit rigidly still, every nerve on edge.

“Let’s review, shall we?” she continued, the rustle of the paper unnaturally loud in the silence. “First, there was the incident in the main library after curfew. A simple warning.”

Her footsteps continued their measured circuit.

“Then, the unauthorized removal of a text from the restricted section. A second, more severe warning.” She stopped in his peripheral vision, tapping the paper with a perfectly manicured nail. “And now tonight. Breaking into a professor’s private office and going through his personal files.”

She completed her circle, coming to a stop in front of him once more. She lowered the clipboard, her gaze finally locking onto his.

“Looking at this record,” she said, her tone laced with a kind of detached curiosity, “a clear pattern of escalation... I find myself wondering, Welton. I wonder why I haven't simply forwarded this to the Faculty Dean and been done with it.”

The question hung in the air, a threat veiled as a musing. Eddie swallowed, his mind racing for an excuse, a plausible lie—anything.

“Look,” he started, trying to sound reasonable. “It was a simple mistake. Professor Hudson asked me to fetch a book from his office. He’d forgotten it.”

Victoria didn’t even blink. She flipped a page on her clipboard with a soft rustle. “Professor Hudson began a three-day personal leave this evening. An official notice was posted.” She looked up at him, her eyes cold and dissecting. “If you’re going to lie, Welton, you should at least study your subject before speaking.”

He felt his face flush, his excuse crumbling into dust. He opened his mouth to conjure something else, anything else, but she cut him off with a raised hand.

“Before you invent another fabrication,” she said, her tone shifting from condescending to severe, “let’s discuss a more serious matter. It’s come to my attention that you’ve been contacting local political groups within Edenfield, trying to acquire information.” She paused, letting the weight of the new accusation land. “This is strictly forbidden. Students are permitted to join university advocacy groups. Contact with external political bodies is prohibited to avoid conflicts of interest with the Crown. You know this.”

This time, Eddie didn’t lie. The truth came out, raw and urgent. “Because there is something happening in this city! Something wrong. And I am trying to find out what the hell is going on before something worse happens!”

-0-

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

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

She moved fast.

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

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

She slipped a coin into the slot.

Dialled the number from memory.

The ring buzzed against her ear. Once. Twice.

*C'mon, Eddie. Please pick up.*

-0-

"You know *nothing* about Edenfield!" Victoria's voice lost its icy control, sharpening with sudden, fierce anger. Her posh accent became clipped and brittle. "You are a first-year. An outsider. A foreigner from the 'Outside World' who waltzes in and presumes to understand the delicate balance of a city you have barely lived in."

She stepped closer, her knuckles white where she gripped her clipboard. "You have no idea what is happening here. You don't know that the King himself has us monitor student activity across all universities to keep people like you *safe*. You don't know that if I fail—if the Council fails to keep radical elements in line—the Royal Emissary takes over our duties."

Her voice was low and intense now, a furious torrent. "Is that what you want, Welton? The Student Council may be strict, but it is led by your peers. What happens when the King's direct rule makes the law? Do you think you would be more free then?"

As she lectured, her words washing over him, Eddie's focus began to drift. His eyes slid past her, toward the small table across the room where his phone lay.

It lit up.



The screen cast a faint blue glow on the polished wood. It began to buzz, the silent vibration a frantic, urgent pulse in the quiet room. From this distance, he could just make out the name on the screen.

*Madeleine.*

A spike of pure adrenaline shot through him, cold and sharp. His stomach dropped. Madeleine never called. Never. She texted, sent notes, left messages. A call meant something was wrong. Terribly wrong. Is she alright? Is she hurt?

*“Look at me when I’m speaking to you!”*

Victoria’s sharp command snapped his head back around. Her eyes were blazing. Outwardly, Eddie forced his expression into one of cowed submission, but inwardly, his mind was a whirlwind. Madeleine was in trouble. He could feel it. Whatever lecture Victoria was spewing, whatever threats she made about expulsion, it was all just noise now. He had to get out.

He remembered the ring. The cool, smooth jade Catherine had given him long ago, worn on a leather cord under his shirt. Not just a keepsake, but a conduit. A focus for his alchemy that didn't require a staff. He still had a way out.

As Victoria began to circle him again, her monologue resuming its sharp, clipped cadence, Eddie began his work. He kept his eyes fixed on her, nodding at what seemed like the right moments, but his right hand moved with slow, deliberate stealth beneath his jacket. His fingers brushed past his shirt, searching. There. The cool, familiar weight of the ring. He closed his fingers around it, focusing his will, picturing the dense, solid molecules of the stone floor.

“...and that is why we cannot tolerate this kind of reckless behavior,” Victoria concluded, stopping directly in front of him again, her posture radiating smug satisfaction. “Do you understand, Welton? The situation that you’re in?”

Eddie let a beat pass, then looked up, forcing a weak, defeated smile. He let go of the ring. “Um, yeah. I guess so.”

“Perfect,” Victoria said, mistaking his distraction for acquiescence. “Although this is your third warning, I will first speak to your dorm captain regarding your punishment. You will be confined to your dorm for three days to think about what you’ve done—”

She stopped mid-sentence, her brow furrowing in confusion. A strange pulling sensation arrested her movement.

“What the—” She looked down. Her polished leather shoes had sunk into the flagstones up to her ankles. It wasn’t mud; the stone itself seemed to have softened like clay, gripping her feet in an unyielding hold.

With a newfound calm, Eddie stood up and waltzed over to the table, collecting his smartphone and collapsible staff.

“Whoops, sorry folks,” he said cheerfully, not looking back at her. “That was a nice talk, Victoria, but I’m afraid someone is calling me, so I gotta go.”

“Hey!” she shouted, struggling to free her leg to no avail. She turned to her guards. “You two! Get him!”

The two brutes lunged forward, only to stop dead with grunts of surprise. They looked down to discover their own boots were similarly submerged, trapping them where they stood.

Eddie was already at the grand window, unlatching it and pushing it open. The cold night air rushed in. He looked back over his shoulder, a wide, sarcastic grin on his face, and gave them a little wave.

“You’ll pay for this, Welton!” Victoria screamed, her voice a mixture of fury and disbelief.

Eddie just jumped.

For a terrifying second, he fell, before he focused his will. The ornate stone bricks on the outer wall rippled. A section directly beneath his feet bulged outward, forming a small, solid platform that caught him gently. Like a silent elevator, it smoothly lowered him two stories to the frost-covered lawn below.

He landed without a sound and, without looking back, sprinted into the night.

## Chapter 8

The frantic pace lasted for two blocks, his footsteps echoing in the narrow alleyways between the old faculty halls. Only when he was sure he was out of immediate sight did his sprint slow to a brisk, panting walk. The high-stakes tension of the council room began to dissipate, replaced by the quiet hum of the Edenfield night. The only sounds were the cold wind whistling through the eaves of the buildings and the rhythmic chirp of crickets and cicadas hidden in the manicured campus shrubbery.

He ducked behind the thick trunk of an oak tree near the edge of the quad, his heart still hammering against his ribs. He pulled out his smartphone, the screen lighting up his face in the gloom. The first thing he checked was his call log. One missed call. From Madeleine. His stomach tightened again.

He swiped over to his photo gallery. The pictures were hasty, some blurry, but he'd gotten what he needed. He scrolled past photos of mundane university correspondence, budget sheets, and then, he found it. A clear shot of a personnel transfer document. His finger zoomed in on a specific line.

*Previous Occupation: Military Alchemist. Last Held Post: Instructor, Crownstead Military Academy.*

"Interesting..." Eddie whispered to himself, a grim satisfaction cutting through his anxiety. He wasn't just guessing anymore. He had proof.

It was then that his phone buzzed violently in his hand, the screen lighting up with her name again. He accepted it instantly.

"Hey, Madeleine, I think I found a lead to—"

There was a sharp breath of relief on the other end. "Eddie? Eddie? Hello? It's me."

"Madeleine?" His back straightened against the tree bark. "Are you... okay? You sound—"

"Listen," she cut in, voice taut and quick, like a pulled string. "I don't have time to explain. I need you tonight to discuss something."

Eddie blinked, confused by her tone. "Wait, what's happened? What's going on?"

"It's—" Her voice cut out for a second, dissolving into a faint crackle. "It's Professor Hudson. I think he knows—"

*Bzzzt.*

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

“Madeleine?” he called into the noise, his thumb hovering over the redial button.  
“Hello? Madeleine?”

Silence. Then a low mechanical whir. Then nothing. He glanced back in the direction of the faculty building and his blood ran cold. Two familiar, bulky silhouettes had emerged onto the lawn, moving under the lamplight, already searching. The Student Council members were free.

“Come on...” he muttered, pressing the phone harder to his ear.

Suddenly— *Click*.

“Hello?” he tried again, his breath held.

A gasp on the other end. “E-Eddie!”

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

“I think someone’s following me.”

His stomach dropped. “Where are you?”

There was a pause. A rustle of fabric. Then, distantly through the speaker, he heard the creak of a booth door opening. Her voice dropped to a terrified whisper.

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

The line cracked again, loud and sharp.

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

*Pop.*

The line went dead.

Eddie stood there, frozen, the soft dial tone humming against his ear like a dirge. The phone felt like a block of ice in his hand.

*Someone’s following me... he’s coming closer...*

He looked up from his phone, his eyes darting into the darkness of the campus. The two bulky silhouettes of the Student Council members were still there, fanning out across the lawn, but they felt distant now, like a problem from another

lifetime. Expulsion. Dorm confinement. None of it mattered. The methodical, institutional threat of Victoria Aynesworth was nothing compared to the raw, immediate terror in Madeleine's voice.

His mind raced, replaying her words. *My apartment... past the old fence... near the east ward sign.* The east ward. That was back the way he came. Back towards them.

He didn't hesitate.

Panic, worry, and a white-hot surge of determination erased every instinct for self-preservation. He shoved his phone into his pocket and broke from the cover of the trees, sprinting back onto the main path. He wasn't running from danger anymore. He was running towards his friend.

He saw them under the next gaslamp—Victoria pointing, directing her two guards. They saw him at the same moment. A look of triumph flashed across Victoria's face. Their quarry was cornered.

"Get him!" she bellowed, her voice echoing across the silent quad.

The two guards moved to intercept, forming a wall of muscle to block his path. But Eddie didn't slow down. He didn't try to change direction. He ran straight at them.

Just as the first guard reached for him, Eddie feinted left and then cut hard to the right, ducking under a clumsy, outstretched arm. He dodged past the second guard with a burst of desperate speed, his feet pounding on the stone path. He ran right past them, leaving them standing there, bewildered.

Even Victoria was stunned into silence for a moment, her mouth slightly agape. What the hell was this kid thinking? He had a clear path to escape, and yet he was running deeper into campus, straight through them.

Her shock lasted only a second before it hardened back into fury.

"Get him! Don't let him escape!" Victoria shouted, pointing in the direction Eddie was now heading. Recovering, the two guards turned and gave chase, their heavy footfalls thudding behind him as they pursued him into the night.

The lecture hall had emptied out ten minutes ago, but Will's pace was slow as he walked the stone path back toward the dorms. The sun had long since set, and the Edenfield campus was bathed in the cool, silver light of the moon and the warm, flickering glow of gaslamps. The wind was picking up, rustling through the old oak trees and making the long shadows of the spires dance and twist like living things.

He clutched the strap of his satchel, his mind miles away from his evening lecture on transmutational theory. It was on Eddie. Always on Eddie these days. He remembered their last conversation in the infirmary, the fight about him getting involved. Now, Eddie was distant, secretive, always buried in some restricted text or slipping away without a word. Will was worried. Worried about the Chimaeras, yes, but more worried about his best friend getting himself expelled. Or worse.

He was so lost in thought that he didn't hear the light, quick footsteps behind him.

Suddenly—*bam!*

A pair of arms wrapped around his chest from behind, and a familiar weight landed on his back. Will jumped, his heart lurching into his throat as he stumbled forward, nearly dropping his satchel.

"Hey there, mr. downer!" Ashley's cheerful voice chirped right next to his ear. She let go, jogging to walk beside him, a wide grin on her face. Her Witchcraft robes were still draped over her arm. "How'd class go?"

Will took a deep breath, trying to slow his racing pulse. "Ash, don't do that," he said, his voice more tired than angry. "Especially not at night. I'm glad it was you and not... I don't know, a Chimaera or something." He ran a hand through his hair. "The rumors about Eddie's attack are all over campus. No one feels safe walking alone after dark anymore."

Ashley's grin widened mischievously. She puffed out her chest and curled her hands into claws. "Maybe I *am* a Chimaera," she said, her voice a low growl. "A human-tiger hybrid, and I'm about to eat you! Waaaaaargh!"

She clearly expected him to quip back, to shove her playfully or roll his eyes. But he didn't. He just sighed and kept walking, his gaze fixed on the path ahead.

The silence that followed was immediate. Ashley's playful demeanor vanished in an instant. She was happy-go-lucky, but she was also deeply empathetic, and his lack of response was a louder signal than any argument. She fell into step beside him, her expression turning serious and analytical.

She let him walk for a few more paces before speaking, her voice gentle now.

“You’re still worried about Eddie, aren’t you?”

Will’s shoulders sagged slightly. He tried to brush it off with a shrug, but he couldn’t meet her perceptive gaze. After a few more steps in silence, he sighed, the sound swallowed by the night air.

“I guess... I was just feeling guilty about yesterday,” he admitted, his voice low. “I shouldn’t have been so harsh on him.”

Ashley tilted her head, her curiosity genuine. “What makes you change your mind? You were okay with sneaking into the library and taking that book from the restricted section before. Why not now?”

“Because,” Will said, stopping on the path and turning to face her fully. “I feel like this is something big. Bigger than us. I might not agree with how he’s been acting for the last few weeks, the secrecy and all that... but I feel like he’s actually onto something this time.”

“And that’s good, isn’t it?” Ashley said, her voice becoming light and hopeful again. “If he’s right, then he can prove it and this whole thing will be over.”

“No,” Will said, his expression grim. “It’s not good. Because if he’s right, he’s not up against the Student Council or the faculty anymore. If this is from the outside, then he’s probably up against someone far more powerful.”

The hope in Ashley’s eyes flickered and died, replaced by a shared understanding of the danger. They started walking again, the silence between them heavier now. The only sounds were Will’s steady footsteps on the stone and the occasional scuff of Ashley’s sneakers as she kicked a loose pebble along the path.

“He can’t do it alone,” Will finally said, the words heavy with a conclusion he’d been fighting for days.

“Then we shouldn’t let him be,” Ashley replied instantly, her voice sure and clear.

Will frowned in confusion. “What do you mean? We shouldn’t let him go?”

“No, dummy.” Ashley nudged him hard with her elbow, a spark of her usual mischief returning. “We shouldn’t let him go *alone*.”

The simple clarification landed in Will’s mind like a key turning in a lock. He stopped again, looking at her as the weight on his shoulders seemed to visibly lift.

A slow smile spread across his face, a genuine one this time, reaching his eyes. He let out a short, relieved chuckle. She was right. It was that simple. They were a team.

“You’re insufferable,” Will chuckled, shaking his head fondly as they started walking again, their steps now in sync.

A genuine smile lit Will’s face as they started walking again, the weight of his worry finally lifted. For the first time in weeks, it felt like they were back on the same page, a team again. The path ahead seemed a little brighter, the night air less oppressive.

Their comfortable silence was shattered by a sharp, commanding shout that cut through the night.

*“Stop him!”*

Will and Ashley both froze, heads snapping in the direction of the voice. It came from the direction of the main quad, near the faculty buildings.

“Is that...” Ashley began, squinting into the distance.

“Is that Eddie?” Will finished, his own voice tight with a dawning sense of dread.

As if on cue, a figure burst into view, sprinting past the gap between the Alchemy and Herbology halls. There was no mistaking the bellowing brown jacket and ripped jeans. It was Eddie. Seconds later, three more figures followed in hot pursuit: Victoria Aynesworth, her face a mask of cold fury, flanked by her two hulking Student Council guards.

Will stared, his newfound peace evaporating into pure exasperation.

*“Bollocks,”* he cursed under his breath. “What did he do this time?!”

But before he could even fully process the scene, Ashley was already moving. With her robes billowing behind her like a battle cloak in the wind, she broke into a dead sprint toward the chaos.

“Come on!” she shouted back at him, not even breaking stride. “We can still help him!”

Will stood rooted to the spot for a single, agonizing moment. Every rational part of his brain screamed at him to turn around, to go back to the dorm, to stay out of it.



This was it. This was the final warning. Getting involved now meant expulsion, no questions asked.

He looked from Ashley's retreating figure to the chase unfolding across the quad. He saw his best friend, alone, running from a fight he couldn't possibly win.

"Screw it," he muttered to himself.

He broke into a run, his satchel bouncing against his back as he sprinted to catch up.

"Hey, Ash! Wait up!"

## Chapter 9

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

But he didn't stop.

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

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

*Please be alright.*

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

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

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

Something was wrong. Deeply wrong.

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

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

And then he saw it.

The phone booth.

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

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

"Madeleine?" he called out, voice hoarse. "Madeleine!"

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

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

He inched forward.

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

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

He reached the booth.

Paused.

Looked inside.

And opened the door.

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

Nothing.

No sign of a struggle. No blood.

Only a single object lay on the ground.

Her wand.

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

Eddie stared.

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

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

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

She wouldn't have left this behind.

One of hers.

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

The wand trembled in his hands. He was so lost in the cold, hollow space that had opened up inside him that he didn't hear the footsteps approaching until they stopped right behind him.

"Well, well. Cornered at last."

The voice was sharp, cold, and laced with victory. Eddie didn't have to look up to know it was Victoria Aynesworth. He could feel the smug authority radiating from her.

"It's over, Welton," she said, her voice devoid of any sympathy for the scene she'd just walked into. "Go back to your dorm now, and this will end with a simple suspension. Continue to be a problem, and I will personally deliver your expulsion papers to the Dean's office tomorrow."

Eddie didn't move. He didn't speak. He just knelt there, staring at the wand, the world outside muted by the roaring in his ears.

Victoria's patience snapped. "Did you hear me?" she repeated, her voice louder now. When he still didn't respond, she made a sharp, decisive sound of disgust.

“Stun him,” she ordered her two guards with cold finality. “We can carry him back to his dorm. I’ll make the report tomorrow so he can pack his things.”

One of the bulky Student Council members nodded and began to reach for the wand tucked into his belt.

But just as his fingers closed around the handle, a sudden movement in a dark alleyway to their left caught Victoria’s eye. She spun around, her expression sharp with alarm.

“Who goes there?!”

Before anyone could answer, a bright blue transmutation circle flared to life in the alley’s mouth, bathing the street in an ethereal glow. A split second later, a powerful shockwave erupted from it, not with a bang, but with a deep, resonant *thump* that seemed to compress the very air.

Victoria and her two guards were thrown backward off their feet, yelps of surprise cut short as they sailed through the air. But they didn’t hit the ground. From the cracks between the cobblestones, thick, leafy vines erupted with impossible speed, weaving into a living net that caught them, then wrapped around their limbs, holding them suspended and unconscious a foot above the ground.

The sudden blast of magic shook Eddie from his stupor. He looked up, his eyes wide with confusion, searching the shadows for the source of the attack. Who else was here?

And then, a familiar, exasperated voice drifted from the alley.

“Really?” it said. “A shockwave? Were you trying to stun them or kill them?”

“Look, that’s why I asked you to conjure the vines, alright?” another familiar voice shot back, defensive. “See? They’re fine!” The figure of Will stepped out of the alley, followed closely by Ashley.

Will’s gaze immediately found Eddie, his bravado melting away into pure concern. “It doesn’t matter now. Eddie!” he said, rushing to his side. “Are you alright?”

Will’s question hung in the air, but Eddie barely heard it. His gaze was fixed on the empty phone booth, on the space where Madeleine had been. The reality of it crashed over him in a sickening wave.

“M-Madeleine,” he stammered, his voice cracking as he scrambled to his feet. “They’ve got Madeleine!” The words tore from his throat, culminating in a raw, guttural scream of pure anguish that echoed in the cold, empty street.

“H-hey, I know, I know,” Will said, grabbing Eddie’s arm to steady him as he swayed. Ashley moved to his other side, her presence a silent support. “We’ll get you back to the dorm, okay? We’ll figure it out there.”

“No!” Eddie thrashed, trying to pull away. His eyes were wild. “I need to find her! Now!”

“Look, I know, but you can’t just go running out there, it’s—” Will started, struggling to hold him back.

“Let go of me!” Eddie bellowed, shoving at him with all his strength.

“Listen to me!”

Will’s roar was so sudden, so uncharacteristically loud and forceful, that it shocked Eddie into stillness. He froze, breathing heavily, staring at his friend. He had never heard Will shout before. Ever.

Will’s chest was heaving, his own fear and frustration finally boiling over.

“I get it,” he said, his voice still shaking but firm now. “Something is terribly wrong, and you want to right that wrong. But you cannot do it alone! Not anymore!” He looked Eddie dead in the eyes. “You need to realize what you’re up against.”

His expression softened, the anger draining away, leaving only a deep, pleading concern. “You just need to let us help you, Eddie.”

The fight went out of Eddie all at once. He sank back to his knees, the adrenaline replaced by a crushing wave of despair. He looked down at the wand in his hands.

“It’s over,” he whispered, his voice hollow.

“There’s nothing we can do. They have her now.” His breath hitched, and the guilt he’d been holding back poured out.

“It’s my fault. I dragged her into this. I went to the Sanctuary... I should have just stayed back in the dorm like you said.” He finally looked at Will, his eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “It’s over, Will. There’s nothing we can do.”

Nobody spoke. The only sound was the wind rustling the ivy on the nearby wall. Eddie stared at him, confused, hanging on to his words.

Will leaned in closer, his voice dropping but gaining an intensity that felt ancient and wise.

*“It is not over, when you deem it is not over.”*

The world stopped. The words struck Eddie with the force of a physical blow, an echo from a past he thought he’d left behind. He stared at Will, bewildered. He had heard that phrase before, long, long ago, in another lifetime it seemed.

Will saw the flicker of recognition in his friend’s eyes and pressed on, his voice earnest. “You might feel hopeless right now, Eddie, but it’s far from over.” He gestured around them, at the night, at his friends. “You still have us. You still have time. You still have the information you risked everything for tonight. It is far, far from over. You just need to believe in yourself again.”

“And in us.” Ashley added, smiling at him.

Will looked at her, and then stood up, brushing the dust from his knees. He looked down at Eddie and offered his hand.

“Come on,” he said, a hint of his usual pragmatic urgency returning. “Let’s get going before anyone sees us stunning the head of the Student Council.”

Eddie sat there on the cold ground, looking from Will’s outstretched hand to Ashley’s steady face beside him. She gave him a small, encouraging nod. He was right. He couldn’t do it alone. He shouldn’t have to.

And those words... Catherine’s words. Even after a year, after everything that had happened, her teachings had found him here, at his lowest point, spoken by his best friend. The sheer, absurd irony of it all bubbled up inside him, and he let out a short, choked laugh. It was a morbid sound in the heavy silence, but it was a laugh nonetheless.

*“Damn you, Catherine,”* Eddie whispered to himself, a wry, bittersweet smile touching his lips. He looked up at Will. *“You never leave me alone, huh.”*

He grabbed his friend’s hand, and Will pulled him firmly to his feet.

Eddie stood, taking a deep breath, the crushing weight on his chest feeling just a little lighter. He looked at his friends, truly a part of their team again.

“Let’s go,” Will said, and they turned as one, breaking into a run back toward the safety of their dorm.

They ran in sync for a few paces before Ashley’s voice, full of genuine curiosity, cut through the rhythmic sound of their footsteps, “Hey, who’s Catherine?”

Eddie glanced over at her, the fond, mysterious smile returning to his face. “Eh,” he said, his voice light for the first time all night. “Nobody you should know about.”

“Hey, come on!” Ashley protested, jogging to keep up. “Why is everyone keeping secrets now?”

## Chapter 10 (BELOW UNCHANGED)

"Come on," Eddie snapped, his pace unwavering as he navigated the fractured pavement. "Every minute we waste here is another minute she's with him." His eyes, sharp and restless, scanned the peeling shop signs, dismissing everything that wasn't their target.

"Maybe if you slowed down for two seconds, you'd see that bloke with the knife tattoo sizing up your jacket," Ashley retorted, She kept her staff held tight against her side, a constant, worried presence. "This place is dodgy as, Eddie. We can't just go charging in."

"We don't have time for a scenic tour, Ash," he shot back, not breaking stride. "Victoria's lead is the only thing we've got. We need to move."

"And what good are we to Madeleine if we get jumped in an alley because you're too busy playing the hero to look where you're going?"

"Alright, alright, break it up, you two," Will cut in, stepping smoothly between them. His voice was a calm, mediating force. "He's not sizing you up, Eddie. He's the lookout for that illegal potions den." Will gestured with his chin towards a cellar door shrouded in shadow. "And Ash is right, you're walking like a target. Relax your shoulders."

Eddie shot him an irritated look, but subconsciously did as he was told.

"Look," Will continued, his American accent casual but his eyes missing nothing. "I get it. You're both right. We need to be fast, and we need to be smart. Lucky for you guys, I'm fluent in both." He gave them a half-smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "I know this turf. Food's cheap, information's cheaper if you know who to ask. Just follow my lead and try not to look like you're about to start a fight."

"I'm not looking for a fight," Eddie muttered, his focus already back on the street ahead. "Just answers."

"Cool. Then let's find some," Will said, pointing them toward a narrower street choked with shadows. "Victoria's file mentioned 'The Gilded Menagerie,' right? Super pretentious name. Sounds exactly like the kind of place a psycho would set up. Down this way, Blackwood Alley. It's quieter."

Eddie didn't hesitate, following Will into the gloom of the alleyway without a backward glance. Ashley took a deep breath and plunged in after them, keeping close. The alley was a world unto itself. Stalls fashioned from scrap wood and tarps were crammed into every available nook, their proprietors watching with hooded, assessing eyes. The air was thick with the smells of strange spices, alchemical reagents, and unwashed bodies.

Will was in his element. He approached a woman mending a net woven from glowing, silvery thread. "Evenin', Mara," he said with an easy nod. "Slow night?"

The woman grunted, not looking up from her work. "Always is when the Wardens are sniffing around."

"Tell me about it. Say, you ever hear of a place called 'The Gilded Menagerie'?"

Her fingers stilled for a fraction of a second. "Never." The word was flat and final.

"Right on. Stay safe," Will said, already moving on. He didn't press. He led Eddie and Ashley past a stall selling what looked suspiciously like dragon's teeth, and stopped near a kid leaning against a wall, trying to light a damp cigarette with a sputtering fire-rune drawn on his thumbnail.

"Yo," Will said. The kid looked up, wary. Will subtly held up a small coin between his thumb and forefinger. "Gilded Menagerie. Pet shop. You know it?"

The kid's eyes flickered to the coin, then down the alley. He gave a jerky nod toward the far end. "Keep going. 'Til you hit the dead end with the wall mural of the kraken. It's the only door with a brass handle." He snatched the coin from



Will's fingers and immediately turned his attention back to his cigarette, the conversation already over.

They followed his direction, the alley narrowing even further until it opened into a small, dead-end courtyard. A massive, faded mural of a kraken strangling a ship covered the entire back wall, its single painted eye seeming to watch them with ancient malevolence. And there, tucked away in the corner, was a single, unassuming storefront.

"There it is," Eddie breathed, pulling Will and Ashley behind a stack of damp, discarded pallets across the narrow, cobbled alley. The air, thick with the smell of coal smoke and wet brick, had a distinct chill that had nothing to do with the weather.

From their hiding spot, "The Gilded Menagerie" looked even more pathetic. The paint, once probably a cheerful yellow, had peeled and flaked away to reveal the dark, soot-stained brick beneath.

"Gilded? Looks more like rusted," Ashley whispered, her voice tight. "This whole setup is seriously dodgy."

"That's the point," Will murmured, his analytical gaze taking in the peeling paint and grimy windows. "It looks forgotten. Old news. Best way to get people to ignore you is to look like you're not worth looking at."

Eddie's knuckles were white where he gripped the splintery wood of the pallet. "I don't care what it looks like. Victoria's intel was solid. Madeleine's in there, we know it."

"Okay, but we're not just kicking the door down," Ashley insisted, putting a hand on his arm. "We need to see what we're walking into."

Nodding, Eddie took the lead. The three of them detached from the stack of pallets, melting into the deep shadows cast by the tall, narrow buildings. They used the slow passage of a man pushing a cart of scrap metal as moving cover before pressing themselves flat against the cold, damp brick beside the shop's large front window.

Heart pounding, Eddie cautiously peered through a clean patch on the glass.

The inside was just as gloomy as the exterior, filled with stacked cages and the low hum of an overworked air filter. A nervous-looking young man stood behind a

counter, nodding deferentially. But it was the person he was talking to that made Eddie's blood run cold.

*It can't be.*

But it was. Professor Gareth Hudson stood there, his posture as rigid and commanding as ever. And he wasn't alone. As Eddie's shocked gaze widened, he took in the two figures flanking him. They were built like brick walls, their faces hard, impassive stone. Dressed in practical boots and plain blue fatigue jackets, they weren't just muscle; they looked like handlers. Soldiers. Their eyes were cold and constantly moving.

Eddie stumbled back from the window, his breath catching in a choked gasp. He collided with Ashley, who grabbed his arm to steady him.

"Eddie, what is it? What did you see?" she whispered urgently.

He stared at her, his eyes wide with a terror that went beyond simple fear. His suspicion had been a theory, an idea. This was real. This was a man he knew, a man who graded his papers, standing twenty feet away with what looked like a death squad.

"Bloody hell," he finally managed to rasp, his voice tight with disbelief. "It's *him*. Hudson. He's in there. He's *right there*."

The weight he put on those words sent a chill through both Will and Ashley. This wasn't the grim satisfaction of a hunch paying off; this was the shock of finding the devil himself waiting for you at the front door.

Will pulled him further into the shadows, his expression grim. "Okay. Okay. New plan. Right now." He glanced at Ashley, who looked pale but resolute. "Front door is out. No way. We're not fighting that."

His gaze flicked down the narrow, trash-strewn ginnel between the pet shop and the pub next door. "There has to be a back way. A delivery entrance. Every shop in these alleys has one."

They circled the building, hugging the shadows where the damp brick met the slick, cobbled ground. The alley behind the pet shop was even more claustrophobic than the street out front—a narrow channel hemmed in by high walls, overflowing metal bins, and the sour smell of wet trash. A single, caged bulb cast a weak, yellow light over a heavy-set steel door. The back entrance.

Just as they took cover behind a large, dented dumpster, the steel door creaked open. A young, harried-looking employee stumbled out, dragging a heavy black rubbish bag. He didn't look around, his only goal to heave the bag into a bin before quickly retreating inside. The door swung shut with a heavy, final *thud*, the lock clicking into place with unnerving loudness in the quiet alley.

"That's our chance," Eddie whispered, his voice taut. "He won't be back for a while. Let's go."

The trio darted from behind the dumpster, their footsteps unnaturally loud on the wet ground. Eddie reached the door first, his focus absolute. "Okay, stand back. I'll corrode the lock mechanism. Standard steel shouldn't take more than a few seconds."

He placed his hand over the lock, a faint green transmutation circle glowing to life around his knuckles. The air hummed as he focused, preparing to disintegrate the metal at a molecular level. But the moment his energy touched the lock, a sharp blue glyph flared to life on the steel's surface, repelling the green light with a fizzing crackle. Eddie yanked his hand back as if burned.

"Damn it!" he swore, cradling his stinging fingers. "It's enchanted. Reinforced alloy. My alchemy can't get a purchase."

"Then let me," Ashley said, stepping forward. There was no panic in her voice, only grim resolve. "Some locks need a key. Others just need a better question."

She held her staff, the smooth, dark wood familiar in her hands. The silver crystal at its tip began to emit a soft, pulsing light. Closing her eyes for a second, she whispered something too low for the others to hear, her brow furrowed in concentration.

While she worked, Will acted as lookout. Anxious and needing a better vantage point, he clambered onto a sturdy-looking bin, craning his neck to peer through a high, grimy window that looked into the main shop.

Ashley touched the glowing crystal to the keyhole. Instead of a physical tool, shimmering tendrils of silver light flowed from the crystal and into the lock, feeling for the magical wards woven within the metal. The process was silent, demanding absolute focus.

"Guys, we need to hurry this up," Will hissed down from his perch.

"She's working on it!" Eddie snapped back in a harsh whisper, his eyes fixed on Ashley's strained face.

"No, I mean *hurry up*," Will repeated, his voice dropping with urgency. "Hudson's on the move. The clerk is leading him through a door behind the counter. They're heading for the back rooms."

The ticking clock was no longer abstract. It was the sound of footsteps approaching from the other side of the wall.

Ashley's breath hitched, a bead of sweat tracing a path down her temple. The silver light from her staff flared. There was a soft *chime* as the first ward broke, then another. The blue glyph on the lock flickered violently. She pushed harder, her knuckles white.

"Almost there..." she gritted out.

From inside, muffled but drawing nearer, they could hear the low murmur of Hudson's voice.

With a final, sharp *click* that was both magical and mechanical, the blue glyph died. The lock was open.

Ashley sagged against the door, exhausted but triumphant. "It's done."

Eddie didn't hesitate. He grabbed the handle, pulled the heavy door open just enough for them to slip through, and plunged them into the darkness within, pulling the door silently shut just as the sound of footsteps stopped right outside the interior entrance to the room they were now in.

## Chapter 11

The heavy steel door clicked shut behind them, plunging them into a wall of oppressive noise and stifling, humid air.

The room was a cavern of cages.

They were stacked from the damp concrete floor to the pipe-strewn ceiling, creating narrow, claustrophobic corridors. The air, thick with the musky stench of

uncleaned enclosures and something sharp and chemical beneath it, was filled with a chaotic symphony of suffering. Hissing, screeching, guttural growls, and the desperate scrabbling of claws on metal echoed from every direction, so loud it was hard to think. The light was dim, coming from bare, flickering bulbs that cast long, dancing shadows, making it impossible to tell what lurked in the deeper recesses of the cages.

Most of the creatures were unlike anything Eddie had ever seen in a textbook. A cat-sized lizard with iridescent, feathery wings beat itself against the bars of its cage. A creature that looked like a tangle of roots with dozens of glittering black eyes coiled in a corner. The sheer wrongness of the place, a hidden menagerie of twisted and terrified life, was staggering.

Ashley let out a soft, horrified gasp, her eyes wide with pity and disgust. "My God... what is all this?"

Eddie ignored her, his adrenaline overriding the sensory assault. He grabbed Will's arm, his voice a harsh whisper that was nearly swallowed by the cacophony. "Which way did they go?"

Will, looking pale but focused, pointed down a long, narrow hallway formed by two towering rows of cages. "Down there. They disappeared around the corner at the end. They didn't even look back."

"Then we don't either," Eddie said, his expression grim. "Stay quiet. Stay low."

He took the lead, moving with a practiced stealthiness, his feet making no sound on the grimy floor. Ashley followed, her staff held tight, trying her best not to look at the pleading, monstrous eyes that tracked them from the cages. Will brought up the rear, constantly glancing behind them, ensuring they weren't being followed.

They moved like ghosts through the maze of suffering. A large, ape-like creature with shadowy fur slammed a fist against its cage as they passed, the loud *CLANG* making them all freeze in place. They stood motionless for a full ten seconds, listening. Hearing nothing but the continued animalistic din, they pressed on.

Halfway down the hall, Eddie stopped dead. In a small cage at eye level sat a pathetic creature—a mangy fox with the legs of a spider grafted crudely onto its torso. It whimpered softly, a failed experiment cast aside. The sight of it, so close to the chimaera from his sketches, filled Eddie with a cold, righteous fury. This wasn't just a black market. It was a laboratory.

Will held up a hand, stopping them just before the corner. He peeked around it cautiously before pulling back. "There's a door at the end of this next stretch," he whispered, his eyes dark with tension. "A heavy one. There is a sound is coming from in there."

Moving as one, they crept down the final stretch of the corridor. The air was thick with humidity and the smell of ozone, mingling with the musky scent of the caged creatures.

As they neared the end, the voices became clearer. They could distinguish the low, authoritative rumble of Professor Hudson's, deferential tones of the young clerk from the shop front. They were on the other side of the door, their conversation muffled but a constant, menacing reminder of the danger.

The trio flattened themselves into a recess in the damp brick wall, right beside the source of the sound. The door was a solid slab of dark, rust-pitted steel, flush with the wall. Ashley ran a hand over its surface, searching for a seam or a lock.

"There's nothing," she breathed, barely a whisper. "No handle, no keyhole... I can't pick this lock."

Will examined the edges, his street-smarts looking for a physical mechanism. "She's right. It's completely smooth. It must be bolted from the inside."

"It's a one-way door," Eddie said, his voice grim as the realization dawned. He looked at the impenetrable slab of metal, then back at his friends, his expression hardening with resolve. "So we'll have to make our own way in."

While Will kept a nervous watch on the corridor behind them and Ashley stood guard with her staff, Eddie stepped up to the door. This was a job only he could do. He placed both palms flat against the cold steel, closing his eyes in concentration. He wasn't looking for a lock; he was feeling for the bolts. Four of them. Thick, heavy, and sunk deep within the door's internal mechanism.

"I have to corrode them from the outside," he murmured, his focus absolute.

"Without making a sound. If I push too hard, the metal could screech when it gives way."

A sharp, thin transmutation circle of green light materialized on the door's surface, connecting his hands. Unlike his failed attempt on the enchanted lock outside, this door felt mundane, just brutally thick. The green light intensified, humming with contained power. He directed all his energy toward the top-right

corner, where he'd felt the first bolt. The steel began to glow a faint cherry-red around the edges of the circle as its molecular structure started to break down.

The green light of Eddie's alchemy pulsed against the steel door, a silent, desperate battle against the thick metal. His face was slick with sweat, his jaw clenched in concentration. The air around the door grew warm, smelling of ozone and hot iron.

"It's working," he gritted out, "but it's slow."

A low, groaning sound began to emanate from the door, a deep metallic creak like a ship's hull under immense pressure. It was almost lost in the cacophony of the caged creatures, but to the trio, it was as loud as a scream.

"Eddie, easy," Ashley whispered, her eyes wide, "That noise..."

"I'm trying," he hissed back, "The bolts are thicker than they look."

On the other side of the door, the environment was starkly different. The corridor was clean, sterile, and brightly lit with fluorescent tubes that hummed overhead. Professor Gareth Hudson walked along a row of clean, reinforced enclosures, his polished shoes clicking on the white-tiled floor. One of his fatigue-jacketed men followed a few paces behind.

"The venom potency in this *Naga* specimen is remarkable," Hudson mused, tapping a finger on a data slate attached to a large, glass-fronted terrarium. Inside, a serpent with scales like iridescent jewels watched him with unblinking, intelligent eyes. "Far superior to the last batch. Ensure its diet remains unchanged."

He moved to the next enclosure, which held a creature resembling a large civet, but with shimmering, almost invisible fur. "And this *one*... its phasing ability is still unstable. We need to isolate the protein responsible. The military applications are too significant to ignore."

He paused, his head tilting slightly. "Did you hear that?"

The clerk stopped. "Hear what, sir? Just the animals in the back."

"No," Hudson said, his academic tone vanishing, replaced by sharp-edged command. "That was different. A structural groan."

The groaning from the door grew louder. A high-pitched *screech* of tortured metal made them all flinch. Eddie was putting every ounce of his energy into the final bolt.

Will, who had his ear pressed against the cold steel, suddenly went rigid. His eyes flew open, wide with panic.

"Eddie! He heard it! He's coming!" he hissed, his voice cracking with urgency. "I hear footsteps! He's coming to check the corridor!"

Panic seized Eddie. He had one bolt left. There was no time for finesse. He shoved a final, desperate wave of alchemical energy into the door. The green light flared violently.

Hudson strode purposefully down the sterile white hallway, his expression a mask of stern suspicion. "Stay here. I'll check the service corridor myself," he ordered his man.

His footsteps were brisk and measured as he approached the heavy steel door at the end of the hall—the very door the trio was fighting to open.

Professor Hudson rounded the corner into the grimy, cacophonous back-room corridor. He stopped, his sharp eyes scanning every detail. The rows of cages. The dripping pipes. The closed steel door. Everything looked exactly as it should.

He walked up to the service door and placed a hand on it. It was warm. Warmer than it should be. He narrowed his eyes, a flicker of deep suspicion crossing his face. But the corridor was empty. After a moment, he turned, his mind already moving on to other, more pressing security concerns.

On the other side of the door, Eddie, Will, and Ashley stood with their backs pressed against the cold steel, hearts hammering in their chests, trying not to make a sound. They were in.

## Chapter 12



The moment the heavy door clicked shut behind them, the chaotic din of the menagerie vanished, replaced by a low, sterile hum.

They were standing in a nightmare of white tile and stainless steel.

The room was large, cold, and unnervingly clean, the antithesis of the grimy corridor they had just escaped. The air smelled sharply of antiseptic and ozone. Harsh fluorescent lights on the ceiling banished all shadows, reflecting off the pristine, white-tiled walls and floor. Along one wall were cages, but these were different—sleek, dark, and reinforced, their occupants hidden in deep shadow. On steel counters, surgical implements and strange alchemical glassware were arranged with chilling precision.

And in the very center of the room, under the brightest of the lights, was a metal operating table. A figure was strapped to it, covered only by a thin, white sheet.

Ashley gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. Will's face went pale, his gaze locked on the table. A wave of cold dread washed over Eddie, colder than the sterile air in the room. This was it. The heart of the operation.

Leaving Will and Ashley to watch the door, Eddie moved forward alone, his footsteps echoing softly in the unnerving quiet. Each step felt heavy, his heart hammering against his ribs. He was terrified of what he would find. A stranger? A monster in mid-transformation?

He reached the table. His hand trembled as he gripped the corner of the sheet. He took a steadying breath and pulled it back.

It was Madeleine.

Her face was pale, almost translucent under the harsh light, and her hair was fanned out across the metal headrest. Dark leather straps bound her wrists, ankles, and chest to the table. An IV tube ran from a humming machine to a needle in her arm, dripping a liquid that pulsed with a faint, sickly yellow light. She was unconscious, but she was alive.

A choked sound, half-sob, half-gasp, escaped Eddie's lips. "Maddie..."

He reached out, his fingers brushing her cheek. It was cool to the touch.

"Madeleine, wake up," he whispered, his voice urgent but gentle. He gave her shoulder a soft shake. "Come on, wake up. It's me. It's Eddie."

Her eyelids fluttered. A low moan escaped her lips, and her head lolled to the side. After a moment, her eyes slowly opened, but they were glassy, unfocused.

"E-Eddie...?" Her voice was a faint, slurred whisper, thick with sedation. "Hurts... so tired..."

"I know. We're getting you out of here," he promised, his voice thick with emotion. He immediately turned his attention to the strap on her wrist. "Will! Ash! Get over here!"

They rushed to his side. The relief on their faces was immediately replaced by grim determination.

"The buckles are complex," Will noted, his nimble fingers already probing one of the restraints on her ankle.

"They're warded," Ashley added, her eyes narrowed as she saw the faint magical symbols etched into the leather. She held the crystal of her staff over the strap on Madeleine's other arm. "Stand back."

As Ashley chanted a soft counter-spell, the symbols flickered and died, and Will managed to undo the physical clasp. While they worked on the other restraints, Eddie carefully slid the IV needle from Madeleine's arm, pressing his thumb against the spot.

The last strap fell away. With a collective sigh of relief, Eddie and Will immediately moved to help Madeleine, sliding their arms under hers and lifting her gently from the cold metal table.

Her legs buckled the moment they touched the floor. She was a dead weight, leaning heavily on them, her head lolling as she tried to fight through the fog of the sedative.

"Easy, Mads, we've got you," Eddie murmured, his voice thick with relief. He and Will supported her, their faces grim with determination. Ashley, meanwhile, crept to the steel door, pressing her ear against it, listening.

"It's quiet for now," she whispered back to them. "Let's move before that changes."

"Come on, let's get out of here," Eddie said, beginning to guide Madeleine's unsteady steps toward the door they'd just breached.

They took one step. Two. Then Madeleine's feet dragged to a halt. Weak as she was, she planted her heels, resisting their movement with surprising force.

"No," she rasped, her voice thin but resolute. "Wait."

Eddie looked at her, his expression a mixture of confusion and impatience.

"Maddie, what are you doing? We have to go. *Now*."

"There are others," she said, shaking her head slowly, trying to clear it. She lifted a trembling hand and pointed towards another, smaller door at the far end of the sterile, white-tiled laboratory. "In there. I heard them screaming earlier."

The relief on Eddie's face curdled into disbelief. "What? We can't," he argued, his voice a harsh, desperate whisper. "We came for *you*. We barely made it in here. We have to get you out, that's the mission."

Madeleine pulled against his grip, her eyes, though still hazy, flashing with a familiar, stubborn fire. The caretaker of the Sanctuary, the protector of the vulnerable, was surfacing through the drugs.

"And leave them here?" she fought back, her voice gaining a sliver of strength from her conviction. "To be cut up and turned into... into those *things* out in the hall?" She looked him dead in the eye. "I'm not going anywhere. Not while they're still in here."

"Madeleine, be reasonable!" Eddie pleaded, his desperation mounting. "You can barely stand! We can come back with help!"

"There is no help!" she countered, her voice cracking. "The police won't listen, you know that! We are the only chance they have." She drew a shuddering breath, her entire body trembling with the effort. "I will not leave them to die. You can go if you want, but I'm not leaving this room unless it's with them."

Eddie stared at Madeleine, his mind racing, caught between the tactical imperative to escape and the undeniable truth in her eyes. He looked at Will and Ashley, and saw the same conflict reflected back at him. They had their friend back, but leaving others to that same fate—or worse—felt like a hollow victory. He let out a long, shuddering breath, the frustration draining out of him, replaced by a heavy, grim resolve.

"Damn it," he whispered. "You're right. Of course, you're right."

Madeleine gave him a weak but grateful nod. The silent argument was over. They were all in this together.

With Will supporting Madeleine, Eddie took the lead, crossing the sterile white room to the smaller door at the far end. It was a simple, windowless steel door, far less intimidating than the last one. He listened for a moment, hearing nothing but a faint, rhythmic dripping. Cautiously, he tried the handle. It was unlocked.

He pushed the door open a crack and peered inside. The breath caught in his throat.

The room beyond was not another lab. It was a dim, foul-smelling holding pen. And it was filled with cages. Cages stacked three high, lining every wall. But these cages didn't hold monstrous creatures; they held people. Men and women of all ages, dressed in simple grey tunics, their faces gaunt and listless. Some stared blankly at the walls, others were curled up asleep, their bodies thin and frail. Eddie did a quick, horrifying count. There had to be at least twenty of them.

He pulled back from the door, his face ashen. "My God," he choked out. "She was right. There are so many."

The scale of the operation, the sheer, depraved evil of it, hit them all like a physical blow. This was bigger than they could have imagined.

"We can't get them all out at once," Will said, his voice low and practical, immediately shifting into problem-solving mode. "We'd be spotted in a second."

"We need cover," Ashley said, her mind already racing through her repertoire of spells. "Something to hide the movement, the noise." She planted the butt of her staff on the tiled floor. "I can do it. A Mirror Veil. It's a high-level illusion. It will bend the light and sound around the doorway. To anyone looking down the hall from the main lab, this area will look empty and silent. But it's draining. I'll need to hold my focus the entire time."

"Good. That's our shield," Eddie said, latching onto the plan. "Will, you stay by the main entrance. You're our early warning. One knock if someone's coming, we hide. Two knocks, we run."

"Got it," Will affirmed, moving to his post.

Eddie looked at Madeleine. "The locks on these cages will be standard. I can get through them fast."

"And I'll get them ready," Madeleine said, a new strength in her voice. The weakness from the sedative was still there, her body still trembled, but her purpose was a fire that burned away the haze. She was no longer a victim to be saved; she was a rescuer.

With a nod, Ashley closed her eyes and began to chant softly. The air around the holding pen door shimmered, distorting like heat haze over a hot road. Will took his position, a silent sentinel.

Eddie and Madeleine slipped through the illusionary veil and into the holding pen. The smell of fear and despair was overpowering. As Eddie moved to the first cage, placing his hand over the lock, a green glow illuminating his determined face, Madeleine moved to the second.

She knelt down, her voice a soft, steady whisper to the terrified woman inside. "It's okay," she said, her own recent trauma lending her words an undeniable authenticity. "We're getting you out of here. My friends are opening the locks. When your door is open, stay silent and be ready to move."

A flicker of hope ignited in the woman's eyes.

*Hiss.* The first lock dissolved into dust under Eddie's touch.

A system was born in the heart of that sterile hell. A rhythm of hope against a backdrop of tension. As Eddie worked his silent, corrosive magic, Madeleine moved from cage to cage, her quiet words a balm, turning panicked victims into a silent, coordinated army, ready for a freedom they hadn't dared to dream of moments before.

## Chapter 12

The sterile white corridor became a place of silent miracles. From the shimmering, heat-haze curtain of Ashley's Mirror Veil, ghosts began to emerge. A gaunt, elderly *Bapak* with haunted eyes stepped out of what looked like thin air, his gaze wide with disbelief. Then a young woman, clutching the arm of her brother, both stumbling on weak legs. Will, a tense shadow by the main lab entrance, would watch the corridor, his face a mask of concentration, before giving a quick, low

wave of his hand—*Go, now*. The freed captives would then move, a silent, ghost-like procession, down the hall leading back to the cacophonous menagerie, their escape masked by the screeching of the captive creatures. Will was the conductor of this impossible orchestra, and Ashley, standing firm with her staff planted, was the magic holding the stage together.

The perspective shifts back to Eddie, who is now on the last three captives, his hope surging.

Inside the holding pen, a powerful, hopeful rhythm had taken hold. The oppressive stench of fear was still there, but now it was mingled with the electric, ozone scent of imminent freedom. Eddie moved to the next cage, his exhaustion forgotten, replaced by a surging, brilliant hope that warmed him from the inside out. *We're doing it*, he thought, a sense of profound awe washing over him. *We're actually doing it*.

He no longer needed to look at Madeleine. They were a single unit, moving with an unspoken understanding. As he placed his hand on the next lock, he could hear her soft, steady whisper to the person in the final cage, her voice a balm of reassurance.

The green light of his alchemy felt less like a weapon now and more like a key. *Hiss*. The lock dissolved into fine grey dust. The cage door creaked open. Madeleine was there instantly, helping a young man to his feet.

"You're okay," she murmured, giving his arm a firm, steadying squeeze. "Go to my friend at the end of the hall. He'll show you the way. Be quiet, and don't look back."

The young man looked from Madeleine's tired but fiercely compassionate face to Eddie's, his own eyes filling with tears of disbelief and gratitude. He nodded and shuffled out into the shimmering veil.

Two left.

The holding pen, once a gallery of despair, was now a hall of echoing emptiness. The vast space felt liberating. Eddie allowed himself a small, genuine smile, catching Madeleine's eye as he turned. She returned it, a fleeting, exhausted, but triumphant expression that spoke volumes. They were winning.

He moved to the second-to-last cage. The woman inside was already on her feet, her hands pressed together as if in prayer. The alchemy flowed from him effortlessly now, energized by their success. The final lock dissolved.

One more.

Victory was a breath away. He turned to the last cage, the sense of triumph so close, so tangible, he could almost taste it. One more person to free, and they would have pulled off the impossible.

"Hey! What's the meaning of this!"

The voice was a thunderclap in the sterile quiet. It echoed from the main laboratory corridor, sharp and authoritative. Eddie's smile vanished, his blood running cold. Hope shattered into a million pieces.

He spun around. Professor Gareth Hudson stood at the far end of the room, his face a mask of thunderous disbelief. His polished staff was held tight in one hand, its tip glowing with a faint, dangerous light. Beside him, his two fatigue-jacketed companions snapped into formation, raising military-grade magical staves and aiming them down the hall. Will and Ashley were nowhere to be seen, likely having ducked for cover the moment Hudson appeared.

Without a second thought, Eddie stepped in front of Madeleine, shielding her. "Back off!" he yelled, his voice raw with defiance. He threw his hand forward, and a complex, brilliant green transmutation circle flared to life in the air between them, aimed directly at his professor.

Hudson's companions reacted instantly, their staves shifting to aim squarely at Eddie's chest.

But Hudson himself just stared, his expression looking more confused than angry. "Welton? What in God's name are you doing here? Are you completely mad?"

"I know what you're doing!" Eddie shot back, his voice ringing with righteous fury. "This illegal Chimaera breeding! This whole sick experiment! It ends tonight!"

The accusation struck Hudson like a physical blow. His confusion instantly hardened into a rare, palpable anger. "Chimaeras?" he snarled, taking a threatening step forward. "Do you have any idea of the danger you are in? Of what you have stumbled into? You could have been killed!"

Eddie let out a bitter, incredulous laugh. "Oh, suddenly you care if someone dies? After all the people you've experimented on? After everything you've done to Madeleine?" He gestured wildly at the room around them. "How many have you killed for your precious research?!"

He gathered his energy, the transmutation circle spinning faster, brighter, ready to unleash a wave of corrosive force. But before he could, a hand grabbed his arm. It was Madeleine. Her grip was weak, but astonishingly firm.

"Eddie, stop!"

"Maddie, get back!" he yelled, trying to shake her off, his eyes never leaving Hudson. "I can handle him!"

"No! Eddie, listen to me!" she insisted, pulling on his arm with all her strength. She stumbled in front of him, breaking his line of sight. She put her hands on his chest, forcing him to look down at her, the person he had just risked everything to save. Her eyes were wide, not with fear of Hudson, but with a desperate, pleading urgency. "Please, you have to listen. You've got it wrong."

"What are you talking about? He's right there!" Eddie fought back, his rage blinding him.

"It wasn't Professor Hudson," Madeleine said, her voice quiet, but it cut through his fury like a blade of ice. The words hung in the sterile air, heavy and absolute.

The words slammed into Eddie with the force of a physical blow. The brilliant green transmutation circle flickered, sputtered, and died. His arm lowered, feeling impossibly heavy. The entire foundation of his righteous fury, the certainty that had fueled him through the alleys of Hallowmere, crumbled into dust. He stared at Professor Hudson, whose face was no longer just angry, but etched with a deep, familiar weariness—the same grief Eddie had seen the night he'd spoken of his lost daughter. He didn't understand the full story, not even close. But he saw the truth in Madeleine's eyes. And that was enough.

The standoff dissipated, leaving a vacuum of tense, unanswered questions. Hudson's companions cautiously lowered their staves, their eyes still locked on Eddie.

It was just a moment—a fragile, breathless pause in the heart of the enemy's lair.



The green light of Eddie's transmutation circle sputtered. He stared, utterly lost, from Madeleine's earnest, pleading face to Professor Hudson's. He didn't trust Hudson, not for a second, but his faith in Madeleine was absolute. With a shuddering breath, he let his hand fall to his side, the alchemical light winking out of existence. The standoff, born of his own furious conviction, dissipated into a tense, unspoken truce.

The quiet lasted only a moment.

One of Hudson's companions, a man with a sharp, hawkish face, suddenly swiveled, aiming his staff down a dark, previously unnoticed service corridor to their right.

"Audible, right!" he barked, the phrase sharp and professional.

Instantly, Hudson and his other man snapped their staves in the same direction, their postures shifting from wary to combat-ready. The tension slammed back into the room, but this time, they were all facing the same unseen threat.

Hudson aimed his own polished silver staff into the oppressive darkness of the hallway. "Who goes there?" he commanded, his voice booming with military authority. No answer came back but the faint, unnerving echo of his own words.

The three men stood ready, a silent, disciplined unit preparing for an attack. Hudson turned his head slightly, his eyes locking onto Eddie.

"Welton. Get your friends and get out of here. Now," he ordered, his voice low and deadly serious. "Let the adults handle this."

Eddie shook his head, stepping protectively in front of the holding pen door. "We can't. There's one more captive in there. We're not leaving her."

"Don't be a fool!" Hudson snarled, his focus split between the dark corridor and the stubborn student. "This isn't a classroom exercise! That is an order!"

"I'm not leaving anyone behind!" Eddie shot back. He turned, ready to go back for the final captive.

Before he could take a step, a hand like an iron clamp seized his arm. It was Hudson. "It is not time to play games, Welton!" he growled, his face inches from Eddie's. "This is dangerous territory!"

It was then that a streak of sickly purple light erupted from the dark hallway.

Hudson instinctively let go, shoving Eddie aside as he raised his own staff to fire back a bolt of brilliant, concussive energy. "Reid, cover!" he roared, and the lab exploded into a cacophony of magical blasts and shattering tiles.

The firefight was the only opening Eddie needed. He scrambled back, grabbing Madeleine's hand. "Come on!"

He pulled her towards the relative safety of the holding pen doorway, but the retreat was a gauntlet. A sickly purple curse sizzled past Madeleine's head, striking the wall and making the damp brick hiss. A moment later, a concussive blast from one of Hudson's men shattered the doorframe, sending splinters and plaster flying. Eddie tackled Madeleine, pulling her down as a fireball erupted where they had just been standing.

They scrambled through the doorway and back into the dim, foul-smelling room. The battle raged behind them, a chaotic symphony of explosions and shouted commands.

They rushed to the last cage, located right next to the door. It was part of Will's contingency plan, meticulously thought out in the seconds they had: *'the last ones closest to the exit, in case time runs out.'*

The last captive, a boy no older than fifteen, was curled in the back of the cage, shaking uncontrollably. As Madeleine fumbled with the simple metal latch, the boy didn't move. He looked past her, his eyes wide with a terror that had nothing to do with the firefight outside.

"No! No, please!" he cried, pointing with a trembling finger deeper into the holding pen. "He's back there! In the dark!"

"It's alright, we're here to help you," Madeleine said soothingly, trying to coax him out. But the boy just shook his head frantically, pressing himself further into the corner. "Don't make me go that way! He's there!"

The boy's genuine panic made Eddie's blood run cold. He turned, his eyes piercing the gloom at the far end of the long, narrow room. It looked empty, just shadows and rows of vacant cages.

A brilliant streak of thunder ripped through the darkness, cracking the air with a deafening roar. Eddie instinctively shoved Madeleine and the boy's cage aside as the lightning bolt struck the floor where he'd been standing, leaving a starburst of blackened, smoking tile. Another followed instantly.

Dodging back, Eddie slammed his palm against the bars of an empty iron cage beside him. A transmutation circle flared, not with the green of corrosion, but with the bright, sharp light of formation.

The iron bars groaned, twisted, and fused together under his command. In seconds, they had warped into the form of a massive, metallic serpent. With a final push of will, Eddie sent it lunging down the dark corridor, an alchemical attack dog seeking its prey.

There was a choked cry of surprise from the shadows, the clatter of a staff hitting the concrete floor, and the heavy, grinding crash of the iron serpent slamming into its target. The figure was thrown from the darkness into a patch of dim light, their hood falling back from the force of the impact.

Eddie's breath caught in his throat. His fury, his fear, everything froze into a single, horrifying point of clarity.

It was Walther Schroder.

His calm, academic face was twisted into a mask of pure fury, a trickle of blood running from his temple where the serpent had struck him. They stared at each other for a long, silent moment, the chaos of the battle outside fading into a distant hum. The friend who had helped him study. The ally who had seen the sketch. The traitor.

A cold, dangerous calm settled over Eddie. He didn't take his eyes off Walther.

"Madeleine," he said, his voice flat and hard as steel. "Take the boy. Get to Will and Ashley."

"Eddie-" Madeleine started to object, her eyes darting between him and Walther.

"Go! I got this!" he commanded, his voice leaving no room for argument.

She saw the look on his face, the promise of a fight that was now deeply, irrevocably personal. There was no time. Nodding once, her face a mask of terror and trust, she wrenched open the cage door and pulled the last captive out, half-carrying him toward the chaotic light of the main lab.

The door swung shut, leaving Eddie and Walther alone in the grim gallery of empty cages.

## Chapter 13

The heavy door to the lab swung shut, muffling the chaotic sounds of the firefight. In its place, a tense, echoing silence descended upon the holding pen, broken only by the electric *flicker-buzz* of a single, dying fluorescent light that swung gently overhead, casting long, dancing shadows.

The cages stood empty, their doors hanging open like silent, screaming mouths.

At opposite ends of the long corridor, Eddie and Walther faced each other. Walther, his face smudged with dirt and a trickle of blood from his temple, stood cloaked in black, the very image of the faceless goons now fighting Professor Hudson. The sight was so wrong, so utterly unbelievable, that for a moment, Eddie's mind refused to accept it.

Walther broke the silence, his voice laced with a cold, academic disappointment that was far more chilling than any shout. "All that work," he said, casually brushing a speck of dust from his cloak. "All those promising experimental subjects. You just let them walk away, Eddie."

The clinical, detached words snapped Eddie's shock into raw fury. "They weren't 'subjects,' you sick bastard!" he roared, his voice echoing off the tiled walls. "They were people! Their faces are on the 'Missing' posters all over campus! They're the factory workers who didn't come home, the tourists who vanished! They were people!"

Walther actually scoffed, a look of genuine pity on his face. "They *were* subjects. We only took the unworthy dregs of Edenfield. The university dropouts, the drunks in the alleys, the homeless. People society had already thrown away. We were giving them a purpose."

"A purpose?" Eddie felt sick. "And what about Madeleine? She was your classmate! Was she 'unworthy' too?"

For the first time, a flicker of real anger crossed Walther's face. "Madeleine," he scoffed, his voice dripping with contempt, "The princess who refuses to take her father's throne."

Eddie stared, uncomprehending.

"You didn't know?" Walther gave a cruel, knowing smile. "You didn't really think her name was 'Daedallia,' did you? Her father is Count Edgar the Third of the Northern Holdings. Her 'rebellion,' her choice to come here and play caretaker to broken animals instead of assuming her duties, was actively preventing the consolidation of Northern influence. She was single-handedly sabotaging 'The Grand Plan' just by breathing."

Eddie had heard enough. He didn't know what the 'Grand Plan' was, and he didn't care. All he saw was the monster standing in his friend's skin, twisting reason into an excuse for atrocity.

"You sicken me," he said, his voice dropping to a low, dangerous snarl.

He didn't wait for a reply. The rage and betrayal inside him ignited. A brilliant, violent green transmutation circle flared to life around his outstretched hand, bathing the grim corridor in its emerald light. There would be no more talk, no more explanations.

"You're not walking out of here," Eddie vowed, and prepared to fight.

===== BATTLE SCENE HERE =====

Eddie basically loses at first, and then at the end he beats up Walther

===== Battle Scene Ends =====

The metallic serpent dissolved back into lifeless iron bars, clattering to the floor. Walther lay in a heap amidst the debris, clutching his shoulder, his breath coming in ragged gasps. Eddie stood over him, exhausted but victorious, the green glow of his alchemy fading from his hands. The distant sounds of the firefight in the lab were muffled, a world away from the ringing silence in the holding pen.

He had won.

A weak chuckle escaped Walther's lips, bubbling up into a crazed, maniacal laugh that echoed eerily off the empty cages. "You think... you think this changes anything?" he coughed, a wild, feverish light in his eyes. "You can't stop The Grand Plan, Eddie. It's too late! Its foundations were laid decades ago. Nothing... *nothing* can stop what's coming!"

Fueled by his fanaticism, Walther pushed himself up against a cage, a triumphant, unhinged smirk twisting his face. "Armies, Eddie!" he declared, his voice growing stronger, more passionate. "Armies of soldiers, each with the strength of a thousand men! A system that will finally purge the weakness from our society and bring prosperity and glory back to Solivia!"

He threw his arms wide, his shadow dancing in the flickering light. "No more will we be just another nation! Once more, the Empire of Solivia will rise from its ashes to rule the Archaean Archipelago, from Isgardia to the Eastern Dunes, just as we were always meant to be!"

As his grand monologue reached its crescendo, he fumbled inside his torn cloak, his movements jerky and desperate. He produced a large syringe filled with a viscous, pulsing purple liquid.

Before Eddie could react, Walther jammed the needle into his own thigh, ramming the plunger down with a final, triumphant glare.

The effect was instantaneous and horrific.

Walther dropped the syringe and let out a deafening, inhuman roar of pure agony. His muscles began to spasm violently, bulging and tearing through the fabric of his black cloak. Veins bulged on his neck and arms, glowing with the same sickly purple light as the liquid. The sickening sound of cracking and elongating bone filled the narrow corridor as his body warped and twisted, his features distorting beyond recognition.

Eddie stumbled back, his exhaustion vanishing, replaced by a wave of sheer, primal horror. The man he knew was gone. In his place, a hulking, roaring beast was rising, no longer Walther Schroder, but a monster born of his own twisted ambition.

===== Battle Phase 2 =====

Eddie got his ass beat bruh

===== Battle End =====

The fight was a blur of brutality. The monstrous form of Walther was too fast, too strong. Eddie's alchemy, usually a precise instrument, was like throwing pebbles against a fortress. A single, contemptuous swipe from a clawed hand sent him flying. Before he could recover, a powerful kick connected with his chest, the force of it shattering his hastily formed alchemical shield and sending him crashing backward through a flimsy, rotten wooden door he hadn't even known was there.

He tumbled down a long flight of stone stairs, his body hitting the sharp edges with jarring, painful thuds, before landing in a heap on a dark, cold stone floor. A deep groan escaped his lips. Pain flared in his ribs, his back, his head. His body refused to move.

*Where am I?* he wondered, his vision swimming in the oppressive darkness. The air was cold and smelled of damp earth and decay.

Heavy, deliberate footsteps—the clacking of warped claws on stone—started down the stairs. A moment later, a switch was flipped, and harsh, bare bulbs flickered to life overhead, revealing the full horror of the room.

It was a basement. And it was full of cages. But the moaning creatures inside were not animals. Their limbs were stitched together, their bodies a horrifying amalgam of human parts and animal anatomy. The sight hit Eddie like a physical blow, throwing him back to that terrifying night on campus. This was the dumping ground for the project's failures.

A deep, monstrous laugh echoed from the stairs. "Such a shame, Eddie," Walther's distorted voice boomed. "You had so much potential. You would have made a powerful ally for The Cause."

Walther reached the bottom of the stairs and turned to a large, rusted lever on the wall. With a final, triumphant grin, he yanked it down.

A blaring alarm sounded, and with a simultaneous, deafening *CLANG*, the locks on every cage sprang open. The human-chimaera amalgamates spilled out, a shambling, moaning horde of pathetic and terrifying monsters, all turning their vacant, hungry eyes towards him.

Eddie lay helpless on the floor, his body broken, his energy gone. The creatures closed in, their grotesque forms shuffling slowly, inexorably closer. *So this is how it ends*, he thought, a wave of cold despair washing over him. *Forgotten in a*

*basement, torn apart by monsters made by a man I once called a friend.* He closed his eyes, accepting his fate.

Just as the hot breath of the first creature washed over his face, a brilliant, concussive blast of golden light erupted from the top of the stairs. The monstrous form of Walther roared in pain and surprise as the spell slammed into his back. He stumbled forward, lost his footing, and tumbled gracelessly down the flight of stairs, landing in a huge, unmoving heap just feet from Eddie.

Eddie's eyes snapped open.

Silhouetted at the top of the stairs stood Madeleine, her face grim and determined, her staff still glowing from the spell she had just unleashed. Behind her stood Professor Hudson, his silver staff radiating immense power, and flanking him were two figures in the gleaming, polished steel of the Paladin Guard. The cavalry had arrived.

As the chimaeras began to refocus on Eddie, Hudson stepped forward. "Welton, stay down!" he commanded. He raised his staff high, and from it erupted a massive, fiery dragon-like apparition. The fire dragon swooped down into the basement, crashing onto the floor in a circle around Eddie, its body a wall of protective flame that incinerated the closest monsters and drove the rest back with terrifying force.

While the Paladins charged down the stairs, their own weapons glowing, to engage the remaining chimaeras, Madeleine rushed to Eddie's side. The ceiling above them lit up in strobing flashes of gold and crimson as spells fired, illuminating the grim, desperate scene below.

She knelt in the dirt beside him, her hand gently touching his cheek. "Eddie? Eddie, can you hear me?"

He was awake, just barely. His vision was a smear of light and shadow, the sounds of the battle a distant, roaring echo in his ears. He saw Madeleine's face swim into focus above him, her features etched with worry. Then another face appeared beside hers—Will, his usual smirk gone, replaced by raw concern.

"Come on, mate," Will's voice cut through the haze. "Up you get. Show's over."

Madeleine and Will hooked their arms under his, lifting him from the cold stone floor. The pain was immense, but it was a distant, secondary sensation. He was



numb, floating. They supported him on either side, a human crutch, and began the slow, arduous journey back up the stairs.

The world was a blur. The sharp, concussive sounds of the firefight were muffled, as if he were underwater. Flashes of light were all he could see of the battle. As they emerged back into the laboratory, the scene had been utterly transformed. The once sterile, hostile room was now a hive of controlled, official activity. Figures in the crisp navy blue of the Edenfield Police moved purposefully. Paladins in gleaming white armour stood guard. Medics in white robes were tending to the freed captives, wrapping them in warm blankets and murmuring words of comfort.

Through his swimming vision, Eddie saw the faces of the people he had helped free—scared, yes, but safe. They were being cared for. They were out. A small, faint smile touched his lips. It was worth it.

"Eddie? Hey, stay with us." Ashley's voice, sharp and clear, tried to pull him back. She was walking backward in front of them, her eyes locked on his.

"Just a bit further, Eddie," Madeleine urged, her grip tightening on his arm.

"Don't you dare pass out on us now, buddy," Will added, his attempt at humour undercut by the strain in his voice. "The paperwork would be a nightmare."

He tried to respond, to tell them he was okay, but the words wouldn't form. The edges of his vision began to darken, the bright lights of the lab blurring into indistinct, shimmering halos. The voices of his friends grew distant, echoing as if from the end of a long tunnel.

The last thing he saw was Madeleine's worried face, her mouth moving, before the light, the sound, and the world faded entirely to black.

## Chapter 14

A low, rhythmic beeping and the gentle hum of an air conditioner struggling against the tropical heat were the first things to pierce the darkness. Eddie stirred, a deep groan escaping his lips as a dull, comprehensive ache settled into his bones. He blinked, once, twice, trying to force the world into focus.

The light was bright, filtering in through the slatted blinds of a large window, painting stripes across a clean, tiled floor. This wasn't his dorm room. The sterile smell of antiseptic confirmed it. A hospital.

It took a while for his eyes to adjust, and then he noticed a figure standing by the window, hands clasped behind his back, looking out over the bustling city below. The silhouette was sharp, familiar, and impeccably dressed.

"Professor?" Eddie asked, his voice a dry, raspy whisper.

Professor Gareth Hudson turned his head, his silver hair catching the morning light. "Finally awake, have you?" His tone was as cold and precise as ever, though perhaps this time, the sharpest edges had been blunted by a hint of warmth. "You took some beating yesterday. You're lucky you're even back alive."

Guilt, heavy and immediate, settled in Eddie's stomach. He struggled to push himself into a sitting position, the movement sending a fresh wave of pain through his ribs. "I... I suppose I owe you an apology, Professor."

"Hm?" Hudson turned fully to face him, one eyebrow raised in feigned curiosity. "What for?"

Eddie looked down at the thin hospital blanket covering his lap, unable to meet the man's intense gaze. "For assuming that you... for thinking you were the one who kidnapped Madeleine," he said, the words tasting like ash. "I know I misjudged. Badly."

A moment of silence passed. Then, to Eddie's utter astonishment, Professor Hudson laughed. It wasn't a loud laugh, but a dry, rare chuckle that seemed to surprise even him.

"The only time I have ever 'kidnapped' Mrs. Daedallia, Welton, is when I've required her assistance at the Sanctuary to study a particularly stubborn species of moon orchid," he said, a faint, wry smirk touching his lips. "Otherwise, yes. It was a foolish misjudgment on your end."

Eddie managed a weak chuckle, the effort sending a dull ache through his ribs. It felt important to acknowledge the Professor's attempt at humour, a small gesture to bridge the gap his accusations had created. The faint smile faded as his expression turned serious again. "Can I ask you something, Professor?"

"If this is to clear more of your 'misjudgments,' then go ahead," Hudson replied, his tone returning to its usual dryness. "You're free to speak, Welton."

"What were you doing back there?" Eddie asked, his voice quiet but direct, referring to the chaos of the previous night. "At the pet shop. It couldn't be that you were also aware of Madeleine's disappearance, could it?"

Professor Hudson didn't answer right away. He turned from the bed and walked back to the window, his posture rigid as he stared out at the sprawling, sun-baked city. For a moment, the sharp, authoritative lines of his face seemed to soften, collapsing inward under the weight of an unseen, profound burden. A flicker of raw grief, so quick Eddie almost missed it, crossed his features before being locked away again behind a mask of stoicism.

"Something is brewing in this country, Edward Welton," Professor Hudson said at last, his voice low, his gaze still fixed on the horizon.

"A sickness, slowly spreading, infecting anyone to whom it made contact with. And your friend, Mr. Schroder, was a symptom of it." He turned his head slightly, his eyes finding Eddie's in the reflection on the glass. "You need to choose your allies more carefully in the future. Sometimes the best ally is not the kindest. And sometimes, the sweetest and most caring of individuals have the potential of stabbing one in the back."

Eddie sat there in silence, the truth of Hudson's words a heavy weight in the quiet room.

Hudson then turned fully, his expression unreadable. "Take your other friends, for example. Mr. Chester and Ms. Mayfair." He paused. "I've heard the rumors, of course. The three of you in the restricted section of the library after midnight. An act that can, and should, grant anyone involved an immediate expulsion from Edenfield."

He took a step closer to the bed. "The organization we dismantled last night... they are not just rogue academics, Welton. They are human traffickers, kidnappers, extortionists. The most dangerous elements in this city. A dragon's den. And yet, when you decided to walk into it, Mr. Chester and Ms. Mayfair followed you without question."

Hudson looked down at Eddie, his gaze intense, a flicker of something that might have been respect in his cold eyes.

"You have great allies, Mr. Welton. Cultivate their trust, and they will protect you for as long as they can. As you will also do for them."

Eddie sat there in the quiet, the weight of Professor Hudson's words settling upon him. He thought of Walther's cold smirk and Will's steady presence, of the conspiracy brewing in the shadows and the unshakable loyalty of the friends who had walked into hell with him.

His reflection was interrupted by a commotion down the polished linoleum hall. A woman's voice, sharp and insistent, with a familiar Kiwi accent, was growing louder.

"I don't care if visiting hours are technically over! He's our friend! We just need to see if he's awake!"

That was definitely Ashley. Her voice was followed by the calmer, placating American tones of Will trying to mediate with a nurse. "Ash, easy... *Ma'am*, we'll just be five minutes, I promise. We brought snacks."

A rare, genuine smile touched Professor Hudson's lips. As if on cue, he straightened his overcoat, his business concluded. "Well, it seems my time is up. Goodbye, Mr. Welton. And good luck." He walked towards the door, pausing just before he left.

"And for the record," he added, his tone returning to its usual deadpan seriousness, "final terms are in two weeks. 'Dismantling a rogue trafficking organization' will not earn you an automatic pass." He let that sink in for a moment. "However... I suppose I could be persuaded to add three points to your final test scores. For... 'exceptional field research'."

For Professor Hudson, it was the most generous offer he'd likely made all year.

He swept out of the room just as Will and Ashley finally won their battle with the nursing staff. They rushed in, their faces etched with a frantic worry that melted into visible relief upon seeing him awake.

"Eddie! You're awake!" Ashley breathed, her usual composure frayed at the edges.

Will followed her in, looking equally exhausted but managing a weak grin. "Dude. You look like hell."

Eddie let out a raspy chuckle, the sound catching in his sore throat. "Relax. You know, I've had worse."

"Will, don't say that!" Ashley scolded, lightly smacking his arm before turning her worried gaze back to Eddie. "How are you feeling, really?"

"Like I got kicked through a door and fell down a flight of stairs," Eddie admitted, a wry smile touching his lips. "But I'll live."

As Ashley started meticulously arranging the pastries from the box onto a hospital tray and Will cracked open a cold bottle for him, Eddie just watched them. He watched the easy, familiar way they moved around each other, the unspoken rhythm of their friendship filling the sterile room with a warmth that no amount of tropical sun outside ever could. A profound sense of gratitude, so strong it almost hurt, washed over him.

He remembered, then, how utterly impossible it all was. Will and Ashley had been his closest friends, his only real friends, since he'd arrived in Edenfield. They had come just as far from their homes as he had, from worlds he couldn't even imagine. He had never seen the endless, sprawling maze of London, the city that had shaped Will's sharp wit and unshakeable confidence. He had never felt the humid, subtropical heat of a Brisbane summer that lived in Ashley's pragmatic, sunny disposition. He was just a boy from a dying town in Oregon, a place that smelled of wet pine and quiet desperation.

But here, by some sheer, miraculous chance of fate, the three of them had been drawn from completely different corners of the world to this mystical city in the heart of Solivia. A boy from America, a boy from England, and a girl from Australia. They had met, and in the strange, magical air of Edenfield, they had become best friends, a family forged not by blood, but by choice.

## Chapter 15

The waves lapped gently against the stone edge of the harbour. A breeze moved through the masts and ropes, soft and salt-sweet, carrying the scent of seaweed and smoke. Eddie sat on the bench, hands tucked into his coat pockets, watching the tide shift. He didn't need to be anywhere. Not right now.

Will and Ashley were gone. He could still picture the way Will clapped his back—too hard, grinning like nothing had changed—and Ashley's hug, brief but tight.

She'd wiped her eyes when she pulled away. Then they were walking down the pier, their silhouettes fading into the crowd, like a page turning.

Now it was just Eddie. Alone, but not lonely.

The past year felt like it belonged to someone else. Or maybe it had only ever been waiting for him to catch up.

He stared out at the boats, the slow glint of sunlight on the water, the glimmer of distant towers beyond the curve of the harbour. Edenfield. It didn't feel foreign anymore.

There was a quiet inside him. Not the numb kind. Not the kind that came with doubt or fear. A settled quiet, like dust finally falling after a storm. He didn't feel like he had all the answers. But he wasn't chasing them anymore. He was here.

The bench creaked slightly as he shifted. His fingers brushed something in his coat pocket—a smooth, misshapen stone. He pulled it out and turned it in his palm. One of his first failed transmutations, or what he used to think was a failure. The thing was ugly, uneven, half-glass, half-char. But in the light, it caught a warm, amber glow. Almost like it had decided what it wanted to be, after all.

The wind brushed through his hair, cool and clean, carrying with it the hush of the coming evening. The sky above Bright Harbour had begun to soften into violet, the first stars timidly blinking awake. Eddie closed his eyes for a moment, letting the breeze wash over him. The salt. The hush. The steady pulse of waves against stone.

Then—

*clack. clack. clack.*

Footsteps. Sharp, deliberate. Boots on cobblestone.

He opened his eyes but didn't turn right away.

"Is this seat occupied?" the voice asked—dry, slightly amused, with the same precise cadence he remembered.

Eddie glanced to his right.

Short red hair, windswept but neat. A sharp jawline. And just above the collar of her coat, the distinct point of an Elven ear catching the light.

She didn't smile, not really. But there was a softness around her eyes that hadn't been there the last time he saw her.

"No," Eddie said, shifting slightly to the side. "Suit yourself."

She sat without a word, folding her coat neatly beneath her as if the bench were a chair in a grand hall. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

They just looked out at the water, two silhouettes beneath the gathering stars.

Catherine shifted slightly, one boot crossing over the other.

"So," she said, her voice quieter now, "how's Edenfield treating you?"

Eddie leaned back on the bench, head tilting as he watched a distant fishing boat drift along the bay. He thought for a moment.

"It's been... an experience," he said finally. "I've never been far from home before. Let alone to a place this—different. Edenfield has its own rhythm, its own language. Even the air feels like it belongs to a different world."

He paused. "I think... just being here changed me. The way I think. The way I see people. Myself."

Catherine didn't answer right away. But when she did, her voice held the calm weight of someone who'd long made peace with discomfort.

"That's the nature of Alchemy," she said. "You don't know what you're truly made of until you're broken down to your most essential essence." She paused, her gaze still on the water. "But being broken down hurts. No one likes it. We pretend we do, but—truth is, sometimes we just want to snap. Just to escape the pressure of change."

Eddie didn't respond. He sat with that. The words worked their way inside him like a gentle current.

And then, quietly, he spoke.

"It's not over if you deem it's not over."

Catherine turned her head. For once, surprise flickered across her face.

A moment passed.

Then she smiled—not her usual wry smirk, but something smaller. Warmer.

She echoed it softly.

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

They sat in silence for a while. The sea moved slowly before them, as if the whole world had exhaled.

Then, without looking at him, Catherine spoke.

“So... are you going back to Oregon?”

Eddie nodded. “Yeah. It’s summer break, after all.”

He paused, then added, “Kind of feeling homesick. Thought I wouldn’t, but... I do.”

She hummed softly in response. It wasn’t judgmental—just acknowledgement.

“What about you?” Eddie asked, glancing sideways. “Where are *you* going?”

Catherine’s lips twitched, just a hint of mischief in the corner of her mouth. She rested her arms on her knees, still watching the harbour.

“Everywhere,” she said. “So... that’s where I’m going.”

Eddie let out a quiet laugh through his nose. That was the most Catherine answer possible.

She didn’t elaborate, and he didn’t push. The wind picked up slightly, and a gull called overhead. Somewhere far off, bells chimed across the city.