# Chapter 7E

The Edenfield Police Department felt nothing like the rest of campus.

Gone were the whimsical arches, the enchanted sconces, the scent of parchment and old spellbooks. Here, the walls were flat stone and the light was sterile, humming faintly overhead from charmed crystals embedded in the ceiling. The waiting room was too large and far too empty, its rows of bolted-down iron chairs left mostly unoccupied, their surfaces cold and uninviting.

A steaming cup of tea would’ve felt absurd here. Even a fire rune would’ve died out from shame.

Eddie sat forward in his chair, elbows on knees, hands clasped so tightly his knuckles had gone white. Across from him, Will tapped his foot, the soft *tick-tick-tick* filling the silence like a clock running out. Ashley sat between them, shoulders drawn in, her staff across her lap like a protective ward.

Two Paladins flanked the stone archway into the main precinct—tall, gleaming figures in full white steel, faces hidden behind opaque visors. They didn’t move. They didn’t speak. Just stood as if carved from the same walls they guarded, radiant symbols faintly glowing from the glyphwork etched into their armor.

Besides them, there was no one else.

Except Victoria.

She sat apart—one row down, two seats to the left. A deliberate distance. She had her coat draped across her lap, hands folded atop it with eerie stillness. Her blazer still looked pristine. But the shadow under her eyes betrayed something closer to human.

No one had said anything since they arrived.

The air was heavy with grief unspoken. Questions without answers. The kind of silence you didn’t want to break, because it might just shatter you with it.

Eddie stared at the floor. A hairline crack ran through one of the stone tiles.

He couldn’t stop thinking it looked like the ones inside him.

A voice crackled through the intercom on the far wall.  
“Edward Welton?”

Eddie’s head snapped up.

He rose slowly, the missing person paperwork clutched tightly in his grip. It was still warm from his hands—creased and smudged from where he’d rewritten parts of it, over and over again, as if clearer words could change reality.

Will gave him a nod. Ashley didn’t speak, but her eyes followed him until he reached the desk.

The reception counter loomed under flickering crystallight. Behind the reinforced glass sat a tired-looking officer in navy-blue robes, his badge dulled and his eyes glazed with bureaucratic fatigue. Without looking up, he extended a hand through the opening.

Eddie passed the form through.

The officer glanced over the details, flipped a few pages, then sighed and reached for a stamp. A dull *thud* echoed as red ink met parchment.

“We’ve logged the case,” the man said flatly. “Estimated processing time is one month.”

“A month? But… she is missing today.”

“We’ve got over three hundred active missing persons reports,” the officer said, finally looking at him. “You’ll be contacted when a field detective is assigned.”

“That’s too long,” Eddie said, his voice rising. “She was taken. This isn’t someone who wandered off. This is different. They’re making Chimaeras. They're experimenting on people—”

“Chimaeras?” The man scoffed. “Right. And maybe dragons are nesting in the west tower again.”

“Look, I’m serious,” Eddie said, stepping closer to the glass. “We saw one. Someone’s continuing the research. They’ve got her.”

The officer’s tone flattened. “The creation of Chimaeras has been outlawed for four hundred years. No confirmed sightings in three centuries. Every known text on the process has been destroyed or locked away in Council vaults. They don’t exist anymore, kid.”

“But they do,” Eddie said, louder now. “I’ve seen one. Madeleine’s missing. Her wand was left behind. There were signs of a struggle. We don’t have a month. She doesn’t have a month—”

“Look,” the man snapped, tapping the form with one ink-stained finger. “I’m telling you what I tell every family that comes through this door: sit tight and wait your turn. We don’t have the manpower to chase fairy tales. You want help? Get in line.”

Eddie stood there, chest heaving, a bitter heat rising in his throat.

The officer let out a tired huff and leaned back in his chair. “Is there anything else,” he asked, voice thick with boredom, “or are you just going to stand there?”

Eddie stared at him for a beat longer—jaw clenched, knuckles white at his sides—then turned without a word.

His footsteps echoed down the polished stone floor as he walked back into the waiting room. The two paladins guarding the doors didn’t flinch. They stood motionless in their gleaming armor, visors down, like statues of judgment watching over a tomb.

Ashley and Will looked up from their seats, expectant—but Eddie didn’t meet their eyes.

Victoria spoke before anyone else could.

“You won’t get anywhere with them,” she said quietly. “Not with the police. Not with a case like this.”

Eddie didn’t respond. Not right away.

He just walked past her.

Through the heavy oak doors. Down the pale marble steps of the Edenfield Police Department.

And into the cold, sleepless city night.

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Eddie sat slumped against the cold stone wall just outside the police department, legs drawn up, arms limp at his sides. The sharp night wind tugged at his jacket, but he didn’t move. Didn’t shiver. Didn’t speak. His eyes stared ahead, glassy and hollow, reflecting nothing but streetlight and the faraway haze of passing carriages.

He looked like someone who’d already buried what mattered.

The heavy doors creaked open behind him.

Ashley stepped out first, followed by Will. Their footsteps slowed when they saw him on the ground.

Ashley’s brow furrowed. She looked down at him, voice tight. “That’s it?”

Eddie didn’t move.

“You’re just going to sit here?” she pressed, sharper now. “Let them do nothing? Let her be gone?”

Will glanced between them, uneasy, but stayed quiet.

Eddie didn’t move. “The police said it themselves. They’re overwhelmed. Missing people all over the place. If even they can’t help... what chance do we have?”

Will lingered behind her, unusually silent.

“She’s gone, Ashley.” Eddie said, letting his head fall back against the stone wall, eyes closing. “It’s over,”

Ashley stared at him—then dropped to a crouch in front of him, eyes fierce and unwavering. Her staff was still clutched tight in one hand like a torch not yet snuffed.

“No,” she said. “It’s not over.”

“What?” Eddie asked back, “What did you just said?”

“I said, it is not over.”

“Come on,” Eddie said. His voice was low and hoarse, but angry now. “Don’t give me that nonsense. Don’t you see that we’re standing inside a building full of knights and mages trained to uphold the law. *Do you see justice served in that building?*”

Ashley’s mouth parted slightly, but he didn’t stop.

“You think if we just *try hard enough* we’ll find her?” His voice cracked. “That we can just charge off into the night and save her like some a hero?”

Will stayed behind them, his expression unreadable.

“You’re not being realistic. You're talking like someone who thinks justice always wins if you just *want it hard enough*. *When you scream enough.* But justice doesn’t come because we *believe* in it. It comes with power, with reach—and we don’t have any of that. We’re just bunch of fucking kids. So let it go, Ashley. We’re not going anywhere with this, It’s over.”

Ashley leaned closer, the wind tousling her wavy brunette hair with blond fades, eyes burning with quiet defiance.

“If you give up. If *we* give up. Then we’ve lost. We will *lose* Madeleine.” Her voice caught—just for a moment—but she didn’t look away. “But we haven’t yet.”

“That’s what they want us to do,” she continued, voice burning now. “Wait. Fade. Let the fire go out. But we don’t have to. We don’t have to wait for permission to fight for her.”

Eddie looked at her, something fragile flickering in his eyes.

“You said there’s no hope,” she continued. “But there is. There’s still *us.* We saw what happened. We know who took her. That’s more than enough to start.”

“You don’t know what’s out there, Ashley.” Eddie said, “If they can create a Chimaera, god knows what else can they do… and you think we can go against something like that?”

She stood, her voice steady and resolute when she said:

*“It’s not over if you deem it is not over.”*

The words hit Eddie like a pulse through the chest. He’d heard them once before—different place, different pain.

He hadn’t expected to hear them again.

Not halfway across the continent. In a city so far removed from the corner of the world. And most of all.

He hadn’t expected to hear them from *Ashley*.

Those words. *Her words* had pushed him to stand when he wanted to fall and stay on the ground a few years ago.

And now, in some strange, fractured way, she was still pushing him. Not in flesh and voice, but through Ashley, of all people.

Through the echo of a creed he’d thought was buried.

A laugh escaped Eddie’s throat—more morbid than amused. It was ironic.

He looked at Ashley—her eyes steady, her resolve burning—and in that moment, the old promise rang out louder than the despair threatening to drown him.

*Damn you, Catherine.* Eddie thought. *You never leave me alone, huh.*

He tried to rise, muscles stiff and heavy, like dragging himself out of quicksand.

Will and Ashley didn’t hesitate—they each reached out a hand to steady him.

Eddie grasped them, letting their strength pull him upright.

He wiped a hand over his face, eyes searching Ashley’s with a flicker of reluctant hope.

“So,” he said, voice rough but steadying, “What’s the plan? If you’re the one who’s not giving up, I’m betting you’ve got a few tricks left up your sleeve.”

Ashley’s gaze sharpened, determination flaring.

“We’re going to need help moving this faster,” she said quietly, then looked over toward Victoria, who was standing nearby, arms crossed but watching intently.

“Then we need a help from her,” Ashley said, “Her father’s the police chief. Maybe he can push things along, make sure Madeleine’s case doesn’t get buried.”

Eddie’s eyebrows lifted. “Victoria?”

Victoria folded her arms tighter, eyes cold. “Huh? Why would I? My father’s never around. He’s more interested in his own world than anything happening here. In fact, why would I want to do it for any of you?”

Will stepped forward, cutting through the tension like a blade. “Come on, cut the crap.”

He didn’t bother softening his tone.

“I don’t care how much you hate us. But there’s one thing I know for sure—you cared about Madeleine, I see that you are close friends to some sense. Maybe you hate how things went down with us, maybe you hate us, and you don’t trust any of us, but you love Madeleine. Just like we do… Like we all do.”

His voice cracked with urgency, raw and unyielding.

“So put aside whatever disdain you have for us, for whatever grudge you’re holding onto. Help us get her back. Don’t do it for us, do it for her.”

The words hung heavy in the cold air, a desperate plea—and maybe the only chance they had.

Victoria’s eyes flickered, something unreadable breaking through the walls she kept up.

# Chapter 8E

The familiar bustle of Edenfield University pulsed around Eddie, but it barely registered. His eyes were sharp, fixed, alive with fury and purpose. In his hands, a thick stack of “Missing Person” flyers, each one bearing Madeleine’s smile, her name, and the date she vanished.

She was still out there. He could feel it in his bones. And he wasn’t going to let her stay missing.

Will walked beside him, quieter, eyes scanning the crowd as if Madeleine might emerge from it any second. But it was Eddie who moved like a storm waiting to break—his stride clipped, his jaw clenched, his every motion carried with it the weight of a vow.

With every poster he plastered to a pole, a wall, a gate, it was more than paper and tape—it was a promise. Madeleine was not forgotten. She would not become just another name in a file cabinet collecting dust in the police archives.

People stared as they passed—some with curiosity, some with pity, some with guilt. Eddie didn’t care. Let them look. Let them see the fire in his eyes.

He pressed another flyer onto a weathered campus bulletin board, smoothing it flat with his palm. Her face stared back at him—smiling, bright, alive.

Eddie sank onto a weathered bench just outside the library, the sun dipping low behind the university spires, casting long amber shadows across the cobblestones. Beside him sat a half-empty bucket of glue, its rim crusted with dried paste, and a battered cardboard box overflowing with freshly printed missing person posters—the ones he’d run off from the old Book Pirates printer, still smudged with ink in some corners.

His fingers were sticky, his shirt clung to his back, and his shoulders ached from hours of postering. But he didn’t stop moving until there was nowhere left to go. Only then did he sit.

A moment later, Will returned, handing him a can of something cold and fizzy before dropping onto the bench beside him. The drink hissed softly as Eddie popped it open, the first real sound of relief either of them had heard all day.

The breeze picked up, brushing through the trees above, carrying with it the scent of fresh grass and the distant hum of campus life—normal, detached, as if the world hadn’t just shifted beneath their feet.

Eddie took a sip, the chill biting his throat, grounding him for a second. He stared straight ahead, silent, the posters fluttering faintly beside his feet. Madeleine’s face smiled up at him from every one.

Will popped open his can, the fizz breaking the silence like a sigh. He took a sip, then leaned back, stretching his legs out in front of him as he eyed the fluttering posters.

“You really think Victoria’s going to go through with it?” he asked, not looking at Eddie.

Eddie didn’t answer right away. He rolled the cold can between his palms, then gave Will a sidelong glance. “You tell me,” he said, dryly. “You’re the one who told her.”

Will let out a short chuckle, bouncing off Eddie’s jab. “Fair enough.”

They lapsed into quiet again. A leaf scraped across the stone path in front of them.

“But seriously though,” Will said, turning a little more toward him. “What do you actually think?”

Eddie exhaled, long and low. “I think…” He hesitated, then shrugged. “I think she won’t.” He tapped the can against his knee. “She will pull away. She’s the type who keeps her hands clean.”

Will didn’t reply right away.

Eddie tilted his head, eyeing him. “So why’d you trust her?”

Will stared at the posters for a long moment. Then he said, quietly, “Because I believe in second chances.”

“Really?” Eddie chuckled, “Second chances?” He gave Will a look, half-curious, half incredulous. “I always figured you more the type to throw a punch and move on. Didn’t peg you for the forgiving kind.”

Will shrugged, but there was no flippancy in it. “If you believe it’s not over if you deem it’s not over…” he said, nodding toward Eddie, “Why can’t that apply to people too?”

Eddie looked at him, “What do you mean?”

“She’s not untrustworthy,” Will continued, “Not unless I say so. Not until she proves it.”

He leaned forward, elbows on knees, eyes on the distance.

“If I gave up on people every time they screwed up, I’d have no one left. And I bet you wouldn’t either.”

Eddie said nothing for a moment. The wind tugged at the edges of the poster stack beside his feet. Madeleine’s face stared up at him—bright, kind, unknowing.

“Fair enough,” he muttered.

Eddie and Will sat silently for a few minutes, the kind of silence that didn’t need to be broken. The kind that hummed with exhaustion and quiet resolve. The late sun painted long amber streaks over the stone paths, and the paper stack at Eddie’s feet rustled faintly in the breeze.

“Eddie!”

A voice, distant.

“Will!”

Another followed.

Both heads turned, jarred from their reverie.

Across the lawn, a small silhouette darted into view—cloak billowing, hair catching the sunlight in a flare of brunette and blonde. Ashley. She looked impossibly small from that distance, like the news itself was dragging her forward. Her pace was uneven, frantic, as she sprinted across the lawn, her figure growing sharper with every step. The sound of her boots striking pavement echoed like heartbeats.

She stopped front of them, chest heaving, strands of hair stuck to her flushed face. Her black jacket hung half-off one shoulder, twisted and lopsided from the run, as if she'd barely managed to throw it on.

“Ed—Will—” she gasped, trying to catch her breath. “Meeting at the library… tonight.”

The two stared at her, startled, adrenaline surging anew.

Ashley leaned forward, palms on her knees, trying to speak between gulps of air.

“Victoria…” she finally said, lifting her gaze to meet theirs. “She found a lead into Madeleine’s kidnapping.”

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They settled into their usual spots in the Grand Library’s back alcove. Eddie perched on the edge of the long oak table, Alchemy textbook open to a half-finished diagram, notebook balanced on his knee. Will flopped into the chair beside him, elbow propped on the table. Ashley drifted down a nearby aisle, rifling through tomes on witchcraft lore. And, behind the reception desk, Claire kept her head buried in a stack of reference scrolls, though Eddie could see the tension stiffen her shoulders whenever she thought no one was watching.

Will broke the silence. “Seriously, you’re off chasing kidnappers, sneaking into Chimaera dens, and *still* thinking about Alchemy?” He waved at Eddie’s open textbook and the neat rows of notes piling up. “Finals aren’t for another few months—have a little fun.”

Eddie didn’t look up. He tapped a pencil against the page. “Finals *are* in a few months,” he said evenly. “If I survive whatever hellhole we’re about to break into, at least I won’t have to scramble through half a semester’s worth of material at the last minute.”

Will whistled, slapping the table with mock horror. “I’m so glad I stuck with Bardry. I’d be dead by lecture two if I’d taken Alchemy.”

Eddie glanced up at him, grin sharp. “Given how you treat your coursework—showing up late, doodling song lyrics in your margins—you wouldn’t survive a week in Rheagan’s lab.”

Will threw his head back in laughter. “Hey, those lyrics are going to change the world one day!”

Hearing a knock on the door, Claire stood up, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

“Victoria’s here,” she announced,

Claire then rose from her stool at the reception desk. She strode to the heavy wooden door, produced a small brass key, and slid the lock open with a practiced click.

The door swung inward, and Victoria stepped into the lamplit hush of the library, flanked by two of her closest allies on the Student Council—each in similarly tailored blazers and perfectly pleated skirts. Their polished shoes tapped softly on the marble floor as they entered.

Victoria’s gaze swept the long oak table where Eddie, Will, and Ashley waited.

“Operating hours are over by now,” she said crisply, arms crossed beneath her blazer. “By Council regulations, the library is closed after dusk. Claire, what are you doing? You can’t break the rules just because you feel like it.”

Claire met her squarely. “According to the library’s charter,” she replied firmly, “it remains open whenever the key holder is present. And as the current volunteer librarian, I decide its hours. My availability extends past dusk—so I’m opening the library.”

Victoria opened her mouth to retort—something about Council oversight and disciplinary procedures—but before she could speak, one of her silent companions stepped forward.

“Actually, Victoria,” the girl said calmly, “this library falls under the University’s Public Service Mandate, not the Student Council’s jurisdiction. Council rules don’t apply here.”

Victoria’s eyes snapped to her friend, and for a moment, her carefully cultivated composure faltered. She drew in a breath, lips pressing into a thin line.

“Fine,” she said at last, voice quiet but laced with bitterness. “Do as you will.”

She turned, smoothed the front of her blazer, and took a seat at the far end of the long table—just close enough to the group to listen, but far enough to keep her distance. Her two friends fell in beside her, and the library’s hush settled around them once more, the rules upheld and the real work about to begin.

Ashley leaned forward, voice low and urgent. “Is it true you actually found a lead on Madeleine’s disappearance?”

Victoria said nothing. Instead, she ordered her silent council companions. The girl gave a slight bow, then rose and reached into her sleek leather satchel. She produced three official-looking folders—embossed with the crest of a well-known private investigation firm—and laid them carefully on the table.

The folders clicked open as Victoria drew them forward. Their contents—handwritten notes, hastily sketched maps, and transcribed witness statements—spilled into view.

Victoria’s tone was cool but purposeful. “I didn’t wait for the police. I engaged a private investigator—someone with the resources to move faster than the precinct ever could.” She tapped one dossier. “Their latest lead points to a pet shop in the Hallowmere district. Owner’s name is Gareth Hudson.” She then turned to Eddie, “your Alchemy lecturer.”

Eddie’s pen clattered against the table. “Blythe? As in Professor Blythe, the one teaching States Transformation Basics?” He glanced at Claire, then back at Victoria. “He’s obsessed with mythical creatures. I ran into him months ago at the Sanctuary.”

She paused, letting the weight of that information sink in. “It’s not conclusive. But it’s the best lead we have.”

Will exchanged a look with Eddie. Ashley’s hand drifted to the edge of the paperwork—fingers hovering as if she could sense Madeleine’s presence in the lines and smudges.

Ashley glanced at Victoria, brow furrowed. “And your father? Have you managed to reach him with this?”

Victoria rubbed the bridge of her nose, her impeccable composure faltering for the first time. “I’ve tried,” she said, voice tight. “I sent him the dossiers first thing this morning. I called his aide twice.” She paused, folding and unfolding her hands. “But there’s no guarantee he’ll act on it. He’s… distracted by higher-profile cases, political pressure, things I can’t influence.”

Eddie frowned. “So we’ve got a lead, but no official backing?”

Victoria met his gaze, jaw set. “For now. His office won’t commit until they have more concrete proof—financial records, witness affidavits, physical evidence. My involvement only gets the file a few floors higher.”

They exchanged a quick, knowing look around the table—Eddie’s fingers brushed the edge of the dossier, Will’s eyes flicked to the maps and witness statements, Ashley’s hand hovered over the sketch of Blythe’s shop. Everything they needed was right there.

Victoria’s voice cut through the moment. “Whatever you do from here on, you’re on your own. I’m not getting any further involved—I’ve done my part.”

Eddie met her gaze. It was the first time he’d seen any warmth in her expression. “Thank you, Victoria,” he said quietly. “I’m… sorry I doubted you before.”

She looked at him, surprised on his sudden positive response, “Whatever,” then turned back to the files without another word.

Eddie shifted, moving to stand at the head of the table. He caught Will’s and Ashley’s eyes in turn. A spark of urgency lit in them both.

“What are we waiting for?”

# Chapter 9E

"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 10E

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 11E

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 12E

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.

Then the world exploded in a flash of violent crimson light.

A streak of spell-fire erupted from the main corridor, silent and impossibly fast. It struck one of Hudson’s companions squarely in the chest. The man cried out, a name—*"Jacobs!"*—torn from Hudson's throat as the man collapsed, his fatigue jacket smoking.

Instinct, honed by years of training Eddie couldn't possibly comprehend, took over. Hudson didn't hesitate. He lunged, dragging his downed man behind a heavy steel counter. His other companion reacted simultaneously, dropping to one knee and returning fire. A bolt of pure, concussive force erupted from the tip of his staff with a sound like a gunshot, tearing down the hallway toward their unseen assailants.

Eddie shoved Madeleine behind him, instinctively dodging as the firefight erupted. But before he could even raise his own defense, he saw a silhouette in the hall next to him—a different one. He had no time to react. An invisible force, like a solid wall of pressure, slammed into him. He was lifted off his feet and thrown violently across the room. The impact with the hard-tiled wall was a sickening crunch, forcing the air from his lungs before he crumpled to the floor.

His body screamed in protest, a symphony of aches and sharp, stabbing pains. Through a swimming, blurry haze, he pushed himself up onto his elbows.

That's when he saw them.

Figures in long, black cloaks were pouring from the hallway now, moving with a silent, coordinated menace. They flanked the entrance, their faces hidden in shadow. One figure, however, stepped forward, moving with a calm, unhurried grace that was terrifying in its confidence.

As the figure came to a stop in the center of the room, they slowly lowered their hood.

A wave of cold, nauseating horror washed over Eddie, eclipsing the pain. He knew that face. He knew that detached, analytical calm. The friend he had trusted. The man he had defended.

It was Walther Schroder.