

EVERY LIGHT IN EVERY WINDOW, EVERY TOOTH IN EVERY MOUTH

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“Come back. Even as a shadow, even as a dream.”
— Euripides (trans. Anne Carson)

26. THIS WILL NOT LAST

WHEN THE NIGHTS start getting colder, Lena stays over more often. Tommy doesn't ask why, and she doesn't explain. He tells himself it's because his apartment is closer to the diner, or it might be the creeping loneliness that comes with the cold winds and early sunsets. He wants to believe it's more than that, that they're chasing something good rather than trying to outrun the bad.

The place isn't much—cracks in the wall, a low ceiling—but it's his. He worked hard for this roof, even if it's just the underside of someone else's floor. Part of him worries she notices the flaws every time she walks in. Still, she comes back, and that's enough for him.

He doesn't have much to offer in the way of comforts. There are no cedar-scented candles or luxurious throw blankets. There's just orange juice he rations like liquid gold and a fridge marked with his raspberry jam thumbprints. It's not like he lives in squalor, but he feels a little ashamed of the mess, even though she never mentions it. Instead, she folds his hoodie when he leaves it on a chair, and he tries to remember to cook her eggs a little longer than his. They fall into rhythms he didn't think he could have with someone—small exchanges that feel steady, almost like proof of something lasting.

Some nights he stays quiet for hours, pretending to read or strum-

ming pop ballads on his guitar. He wants her to see he has more than silence inside him, but most of the time, the words knot up. Other times, he manages to talk. He's still guarded, but he can feel himself wanting to let her in, and that feels both dangerous and good.

One night he burns his hand—a rookie mistake, he calls it. When she runs it under cool water, her hand circles his wrist, and he doesn't move. Neither of them says anything, but the warmth lingers longer than the sting. Another night, he lies on his back on the mattress, staring at the stained plaster ceiling as though it were a sky he could disappear into. He feels her watching him, and for once he feels like maybe he deserves the peace that settles in his chest.

He knows she doesn't see everything. She doesn't know about the pills, the drowsiness that drags him under some evenings, the way he slips away from himself. But sometimes he catches her looking at him like he's solid, and for a moment, he almost believes her. He wonders what she sees when she looks—whether it's him, or just the broken edges she recognizes.

One evening, snow falls thick outside the window. The TV is on but muted. She clicks it off and curls against him under the blanket. They talk about nothing important—the snow, the sameness of his weeks—until she asks, "You ever wonder what it all means?"

He stays silent long enough that she shifts, uncomfortable. Finally, he says, "Sometimes. I don't think I'd like the answer."

She pulls the blanket away and reaches for her bag. As she pulls out a worn box, she says, "You want to ask the cards?"

"You carry a tarot deck around with you?" His voice sounds surprised, but really it's something closer to admiration. Of course she does.

"Always," she says, setting the worn deck between them.

"You don't have to believe in it," she tells him. "Just ask something real."

He doesn't answer. Just watches her shuffle. What he doesn't say: What if wanting to change isn't the same as being able to?

She lays the cards out, slow and careful. The edges are bent, the

ink rubbed down from years of use. They look like they've been asked too many questions, and he feels stupid for thinking they might actually answer his.

"The Moon," she says. "It's about confusion. Not just being lied to, but lying to yourself. When everything feels foggy, like you're walking through a dream. When you're surviving, but not really sure why."

He stares at the card, a knot forming in his chest. Isn't that just life? Do any of us really know what we're holding on to? He's about to say something, but she flips another card.

"The Tower. It's what happens when the lie can no longer hold. The collapse. When something you thought was solid turns out to be hollow."

He's been waiting for that collapse most of his life. Maybe not consciously, but he's always felt like something important is perched on the edge, waiting to fall, waiting to shatter.

"And Judgment," she says, flipping the last card. "It isn't punishment. It's when everything you tried to bury shows back up, and you have to decide what to do about it. Are you going to change, or let things stay the same?"

He lets out a breath that tastes bitter. "Is it even worth it? To change, I mean. Doesn't matter what you do, you're still made of the same stuff. You're still you."

She gathers the cards slowly, careful not to break the moment. "That's up to you," she says. "They're not predictions, they're invitations. To be honest. To change. Or to be ready for what's coming."

He almost laughs, though it catches in his throat. "What if I'm already on the other side and it still sucks?"

She doesn't answer as she stacks the cards like photographs from a life that doesn't belong to him, then turns off the lamp. In the dark, he hears himself say, softer than he means to:

"I think I already know who I am. That's the problem."

Beside him, Lena shifts closer. He can feel her breath against his shoulder, warm and steady, as snow presses against the glass outside.