

Venlin

Crimson in the dark

1. Dream

The forest was burning again.

Not with flames that screamed and danced, but with a deeper, hungrier kind of fire, one that crawled beneath the bark, that fed on memory and bone. The trees bent in silence, their trunks glowing from the inside, as if hollowed out by centuries of grief. Ash floated like snow in the air, and yet the world was hushed, still, like it was waiting for something to break.

And in the center of it all, **he** stood.

Unmoving.... Unafraid....

He had golden eyes that shimmered like dying stars. Smoke curled around his silhouette, licking his boots, his fingertips, the hem of his dark coat. A jagged scar traced just below his collarbone, stark against skin too pale for someone alive. His chest rose with shallow, quiet breaths. He looked at her like she had broken his heart centuries ago... and he'd only just remembered how.

She tried to scream. To run. To reach for him.

But her voice never worked here. Her feet never moved.

"Estia," he said , softly, like a promise.

And then the ground cracked beneath her like ice. The trees groaned. The ash turned black. Something ancient and sharp yawned open beneath her, she fell, not down, but *inward*, spiraling through light and shadow and,

She awoke with a gasp

The ceiling above her spun as she sat bolt upright in bed, her breath ragged, her chest aching like she'd just been pulled from drowning. The moonlight, stretched thin through her curtains, painted

ghostly patterns across the wooden floor of her attic room.

Same dream. Same forest. Same boy.

Same ache in her bones that felt older than her own skin.

She let her eyes adjust to the soft dark, fingers trembling as they reached for the leather-bound journal beneath her pillow. Its cover was worn, the edges curled and smudged with ink from years of feverish scribbles and half-forgotten fragments. She opened to a blank page, but hesitated. She didn't know how to describe it anymore. Words failed to capture the *weight* of what she saw.

After a moment, she simply wrote:

"The fire doesn't burn me. But it burns everything else. He was there again. He always is."

She closed the book gently, running her fingers across the etched initials on the front, *E.V.* and let it rest against her chest.

Three years. For three years, the dreams had come, always on the full moon, like clockwork. Always the same boy with eyes like a forgotten sun. She'd stopped telling people about them after the second therapist.

Her aunt, the only family she had left, called them "stress dreams." But what kind of stress dream smelled like smoke? What kind of dream left ashes under your fingernails?

Estia slid out of bed and moved to the window. The glass was cold against her palm as she leaned on it, staring out at the edge of town, where the pine forest began, dark and swaying like it breathed.

She didn't know why, but she always looked there after the dreams. Like maybe, this time, something would be standing beneath the trees. Waiting.

The wind whispered through the open windowpane. She could almost swear it carried her name.

Estia...

“Stop it,” she muttered under her breath, pulling the curtain shut.

But she didn’t move from the window.

Because deep down, deeper than she liked to admit , a part of her **wanted** it to be real. The boy. The voice. The dream.

Not because she liked the idea of cursed memories or burning forests, but because when he said her name, it felt like it **meant** something. Like it had always meant something.

A knock tapped lightly on her door.

“Estia?” her aunt’s voice was soft, half-asleep. “It’s past six. School, remember?”

Estia pulled away from the window. “Coming,” she called.

She dressed in silence , hoodie, jeans, the necklace she never took off , and stepped toward her desk. Tucked beneath her stack of books was a folded piece of paper. She didn’t remember putting it there. Curious, she opened it slowly.

No signature. Just four words in a slanted, unfamiliar handwriting:

“The fire remembers you, and always will”

Her pulse quickened.

The paper smelled faintly of smoke.

2. Arrival

It had been exactly **seven hours** since she found the note.

Estia had folded it and tucked it between the pages of her journal like a pressed flower ,fragile, strange, important. All day it burned against her side, a constant weight in her bag that made her feel like she was carrying a secret too big for the real world.

Now, she sat at the very back of class, half-listening to the lecture on ancient civilizations while doodling flame patterns in the margins of her notebook. Outside, the sky was overcast ...not quite stormy, just *waiting*.

Like everything else lately.

“Estia Vale,” the teacher called out, not unkindly. “Perhaps you’d like to tell us which empire worshipped the goddess of the hearth?”

Estia blinked.

“Hestia?” she guessed.

The class chuckled. The teacher rolled her eyes. “Lucky guess.”

It wasn’t luck. It was instinct. That name , Hestia sounded too close. Too much like a version of herself she hadn’t met yet.

Before she could dwell on it, the door creaked open.

And the world *shifted*.

He stepped inside as if he’d done it a thousand times before , like he belonged here, in this moment, in this classroom, in this lifetime.

Tall. Dark boots. An oversized black coat still dripping from the rain. A mess of black hair that curled slightly at his temple. And eyes , **those eyes**, like the last light before everything goes dark.

Estia's chest went still.

He looked exactly like the boy in her dreams.

Exactly

Something cold slid down her spine. Her breath caught in her throat, she gripped the edge of the desk until her knuckles ached.

"Everyone," the teacher said, clearly annoyed by the interruption, "this is our new transfer student. Moved here from... somewhere."

The class laughed politely.

He didn't.

His gaze swept across the room like smoke. Casual. Detached. Disinterested.

Until it landed on *her*.

And stayed.

Estia couldn't move.

Something in her bones *remembered* him, even if her mind screamed that it wasn't possible. Her fingers trembled slightly. Not out of fear. Out of knowing.

The kind of knowing that didn't come from this life.

He took the only empty seat, the one diagonally in front of her. As he passed by, the air around her dipped colder, like he'd carried winter in his wake. She swore she could smell smoke. Pinewood. Ash.

Her thoughts spiraled:

Is this a coincidence? is he stalking me? or... was the dream real?

The rest of the day passed in fragments.

Whispers. Glances. Tension she couldn't name. Her world felt misaligned, like someone had rewritten the script overnight and handed her a role she didn't audition for.

At lunch, she sat alone at the far edge of the courtyard, notebook open but empty, pretending to read while her eyes flicked toward the shadows. He hadn't appeared again, not in the hallways, not in the cafeteria. But she could *feel* him nearby.

The pull was magnetic. Familiar. Dangerous.

When the final bell rang, Estia didn't go home.

Instead, her feet carried her toward the woods. The same ones from her dreams. She told herself it was just to clear her head. Just for air.

But that was a lie.

Deep down, she *wanted* to see him again.

The trees were quiet. No birds. No wind. Just the creak of old branches and the echo of her breath.

She reached the place where the pines grew thickest, the spot that always lingered in the background of her dreams. And then she saw it, something she hadn't noticed before:

A pendant.

Half-buried in the dirt, catching the dying light. A small oval locket with delicate silver etching, charred at the edges. She knelt, heart hammering, and picked it up with shaking fingers.

The moment her skin touched the metal,

Flash.

A forest on fire. A voice screaming her name, A kiss, desperate and final, A promise whispered in blood, And those eyes. Always, *those eyes*.

She gasped, stumbling back, the vision tearing through her like lightning.

When she opened her eyes, someone was standing behind her.

Too close.

Too silent.

She turned.

It was him.

His expression was unreadable. A slow wind curled through the trees, lifting strands of her hair. They stared at each other in silence.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he said softly. His voice , it was *his* voice. Exactly as it sounded in her dreams. Like thunder, wrapped in velvet.

Her lips parted. “I... who are you?”

He looked at her for a long moment. And then, just as quickly as he came,

He walked away.

Disappearing into the woods like a ghost that had finally remembered how to leave.

Estia stood frozen, heart in her throat.

Because on the ground where he’d been standing, the grass was scorched.

3. Fog letters

It rained that night.

Not a storm, just a slow, soaking kind of rain that blurred the world outside Estia's window into watercolors. She sat curled in her desk chair, legs tucked under her, staring at the pendant she'd found in the woods.

It was still warm.

She hadn't opened it yet. She didn't know why. Maybe she was afraid of what she'd find inside. Or afraid of how much she *wanted* there to be something.

Some kind of proof that she wasn't losing her mind.

She turned it over in her hands. Tiny silver vines coiled across the surface like ivy frozen mid-climb. In the center, nearly worn away, was a crest, a delicate crescent moon, wrapped in flame.

She'd seen that symbol before.

In her dreams.

Always burning on the boy's ring.

Estia's stomach turned. She stood abruptly, needing to breathe, needing to move. The air in her room felt heavy, like the rain had soaked through the walls.

She tugged on her hoodie and stepped outside.

The fog had rolled in thick over the town, swallowing streetlights and blurring edges. It wrapped around her ankles as she walked, soft and wet and whispering.

She didn't know where she was going. Her feet moved on their own.

And then, halfway down an alley behind the used bookstore, she stopped.

A **book** lay on the cobblestones. Soaked, but not ruined. Leather-bound. Familiar.

She knelt slowly, fingers brushing the cover. The same silver crest. Moon and fire.

The exact same symbol as the locket.

Her heart stopped.

She opened it.

It wasn't just a novel, it was a **journal**. Pages and pages of notes, sketches, and what looked like translations of ancient text. Symbols. Rituals. Names.

One page had been marked by a pressed flower, blackened now with age. Beneath it, in sharp ink, a name was scrawled:

“Adrial.”

Estia whispered it aloud, and her skin tingled.

She didn't know what it meant. But it *felt* like something, A memory buried deep, The name echoed inside her, not in her ears but her bones.

She turned the next page.

A passage was underlined:

“When flame and moon meet again, the bond awakens. The cycle begins anew. The curse unburned will bloom in ash.”

Below it, more handwriting, a different one, thinner, more urgent:

“She’s close. I saw her in the fire. She doesn’t remember me. Not yet.”

Estia stood there for a long time, book clutched to her chest, heart thudding like a warning bell.

The next day at school, he wasn't in class.

But the seat beside her was warm when she sat down.

After lunch, she went back to the alley. The fog was gone. The air was still.

And on the wall behind the bookstore, written faintly in charcoal across the brick:

“You’re not crazy. It’s happening again.”

There was no signature.

Just a handprint. Blackened. Like soot.

4. Memories of fog

It began differently this time.

There was no fire.

No burning forest. No ash in the air. Just the sound of **water** , slow, soft ripples echoing in a chamber of stone. Estia stood barefoot in a hallway made of obsidian mirrors. Each side reflected not just her, but **versions** of her. Some younger. Some older. One bleeding. One smiling with a mouth full of black teeth.

She turned to run, And slammed into herself.

Another version of her. Hair longer. Skin paler. Wearing a long, midnight gown laced with silver threads. Her eyes shimmered like the moon, too bright. Too knowing.

“You’re not ready yet,” the reflection whispered, “But you were born for this.”

The mirrors shattered. Estia screamed, And woke up gasping.

This time, her sheets were torn.

Like she’d thrashed in her sleep, like something had **fought** to keep her there.

By morning, the dream felt like smoke in her mouth.

But one thing stuck: the mirrors.

She grabbed the journal she found , the one with the silver crest, the moon and flame . and flipped through the pages again. Half of it was symbols she couldn’t understand. But something new caught her attention.

In the center of one page, in fine, faded script:

“To see yourself truly, you must enter what does not reflect.”

Cryptic. But familiar.

Her fingers moved over the ink like it might spark beneath her skin.

That day, during her free period, Estia found herself wandering again , this time inside the school.

There was an old hallway no one used anymore. It smelled of dust and something electric. She'd always ignored it.

But today... something **pulled** her.

At the very end of the corridor stood a door with no handle. Painted shut. Forgotten.

Estia pressed her fingers to it, uncertain why.

The moment her palm met the wood, her breath hitched.

Because for a second, just one fleeting heartbeat , her reflection **blinked back at her**.

She stumbled away, heart racing.

Then, behind her, a sound: **paper falling**.

On the floor lay a torn page. No one else around. Just her and the quiet.

She picked it up.

“She doesn’t know she’s the key, she doesn’t know she’s the gate.”

She didn’t go home after school.

She followed the dream.

It led her back to the woods. The same path. The same trees. But this time, it was **different**, like the shadows were leaning in, like the air knew her name.

She found it tucked behind a broken tree, a path that shouldn't be there: a narrow gap between roots that spiraled downward.

She didn't hesitate.

At the bottom, she found it, an underground ruin, overgrown and half-sunk in the earth. It looked like a chapel, or maybe a library, long lost to time.

Inside were **mirrors**.

Cracked ones. Tall ones. Some warped like melted glass.

And books, hundreds of them, most too damaged to read. But one stood on a pedestal in the center. Covered in dust. Waiting.

She opened it.

The Moonbound Chapter One: She Who Was Fractured

The chapter read like a prophecy. But the details . they mirrored her life too closely.

1. A girl born under a blood eclipse.
2. Dreams of fire and silence.
3. A name she doesn't know but always hears.
4. A boy cursed to find her and lose her, again and again.

And this line, underlined twice:

“She was once the mirror, until she became the flame.”

Estia staggered back from the book.

“Mirror...” she whispered.

That word again. Like it followed her.

That night, she returned to her room. To her journal.

She didn’t write, the words were **already there**.

Not in her handwriting.

Estia, Don’t be afraid. The mirror shows you what was lost. You were never meant to stay whole. You were meant to awaken.

He’s watching. He never stopped, Look into the mirror, not at it.

– A.

Her fingers trembled.

She flipped the page.

A drawing. Charcoal. Rough strokes.

Her face. But wrong. Her eyes were glowing. Her mouth open in a silent scream. And behind her, a **door** made of black glass, splitting down the center.

She stared at the image for what felt like hours.

And in the silence, her mirror ,the one in her room, cracked, a fine, jagged line straight through the middle.

Like something on the other side had finally noticed her.

She lit a candle before bed. She didn't know why, maybe instinct. Maybe fear.

The flame danced, steady.

Then flickered.

She leaned close, watching the smoke twist. It curled upward... then sideways. Like it moved on its own.

It formed letters.

A-D-R-I-A-L

Her breath caught.

She whispered the name like a sin.

“Adrial...”

And the candle went out.

5. Remembering

□ Some things come back slowly , like breath after drowning. □

The air felt wrong.

It had that *before-a-storm* feeling, charged, humming beneath the skin, like the world was holding its breath. Estia stepped outside anyway, hoodie zipped to her chin, journal tucked under her arm like armor.

She needed to find him.

She didn't know why. Or what she would say. But the name , **Adrial** had taken root in her chest and refused to let go.

The woods whispered as she passed through them. The fog was thicker than usual. Trees curved inward like they were watching. Or... **leaning closer** to listen.

She found herself back at the clearing.

The one where she'd found the locket. The one that didn't show up on maps. The ground was soft with moss, scattered with soot where fire had long since died.

He was already there.

Leaning against a tree like he belonged to it. Hands tucked in his pockets. Head down.

The way he turned when he heard her , not surprised, not alarmed, made her breath catch.

"You're following me," he said softly.

"You left a book in my world," she answered. "And my mirror shattered. So... I think we're a little past subtle."

A faint, ghost of a smile. “Fair enough.”

She stepped closer. Just a few feet between them now. His presence wrapped around her like smoke, not choking, but warm in a way that felt too dangerous to trust.

“What is this?” she asked.

He didn’t look at her. “What do you think it is?”

“I think it’s madness.”

“You’re not mad.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do.”

His voice was too calm. Too certain. And too familiar. Like she’d heard it every night in her dreams, long before she even knew dreams could lie.

“I know your name,” she said. “**Adrial.**”

He flinched.

So small, most wouldn’t notice , but she did.

“Is that really it?” she pressed.

Silence.

Then he met her eyes. And something shifted in the space between them , like a wire pulled taut. Her stomach fluttered. Not with attraction. Not just.

With *recognition*.

“I don’t know why I know you,” she said, “but I do. I dream about you. You say my name like,

like it meant something once.”

Adrial’s jaw tensed. “It did.”

Estia blinked. “What?”

He turned away.

She grabbed his arm. “No. Don’t do that. Don’t vanish again.”

When he looked at her, there was pain in his eyes. Not fresh, **ancient**. Like grief that had never been allowed to fade.

“You don’t remember,” he murmured.

Her grip loosened. “Remember what?”

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. His shoulders sank.

“You said I’m not ready,” she said. “But *what if I am*? What if I’ve been waiting for you too?”

Adrial shook his head, quiet. “You don’t know what you’re asking.”

Before she could speak again, a sharp *crack* echoed through the trees.

She turned , and saw **herself**.

Standing at the edge of the clearing. Staring.

Not a reflection. Not a hallucination.

Another *Estia*.

Same face. But... older. Or was it *emptier*? Her skin was cold glass. Her eyes, dead mirrors. No breath, no blink. Just... watching.

Estia stumbled back.

Adrial didn't react. Like he'd seen it before. Like it was *normal*.

"What *is* that?" she whispered.

"She's a fracture," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"It means something inside you broke a long time ago. And now the pieces are leaking through."

She looked again, but the figure was gone.

Nothing but mist.

"Tell me the truth," she said. "Just something. Anything. I'm done playing games with ghosts."

Adrial didn't move.

"I'm not your enemy," he said, finally.

"Then what *are* you?"

"A reminder."

"That's not an answer."

"No," he said quietly. "It's a warning."

They stood in silence, storm light flickering between them. Something buzzed in her fingertips, like her body remembered a kind of magic her mind didn't believe in yet.

"Every time I get close to you," she said, voice low, "I feel like I'm standing on the edge of something. Like I'm about to fall."

He took a step closer.

His voice was nearly a whisper. "That's because you already have."

She couldn't breathe.

He turned to leave.

"No," she said. "No. You don't get to keep walking away from me. Not this time."

He paused.

"I know you," she said. "I *feel* it. There's something you're not telling me and I think, I think I'm starting to remember it. The dream. The fire. The mirrors. Me screaming your name..."

A pause.

"...And you not saving me."

Adrial didn't answer. But she saw it, the way his hand clenched into a fist. The way his throat worked like he was swallowing something sharp.

She stepped forward. Reached for him.

But he moved away before she could touch him.

"You'll hate me when you remember," he said. "You always do."

Then he vanished into the mist.

Again.

That night, Estia stood in front of her new mirror.

The one she'd just replaced.

It looked whole.

Until she looked deeper.

And saw the girl again , the fracture. Reaching.

This time, Estia didn't back away.

She leaned closer.

And whispered, "I'm not afraid of you."

The mirror **cracked**.

And a **voice**, not hers, whispered back:

"You should be"

6. Ruin

“The veil between worlds is thinnest where pain sleeps.”

“You should be.”

The whisper echoed long after the mirror stilled.

Estia stood frozen, heart hammering against her ribs, breath fogging the air in front of her even though the room wasn't cold.

Her reflection had vanished again.

But the crack in the mirror remained, spiderwebbed glass curling outward like veins. Only this time, something else had appeared in the glass:

A symbol.

Faint, barely visible in the fractured center, **three small moons** orbiting a jagged line.

Her fingers lifted without thinking, hovering inches away. The glass hummed beneath her skin, like it wanted to pull her through.

But didn't.

Not yet.

That was the first thing she wrote in her journal that night:

It's getting thinner, whatever separates my world from... that. The mirror doesn't just show things anymore. It remembers. And it's watching me now. Like it's waiting, Adrial said I'd hate him when I remember. I think I already do. And I don't even know why.

She closed the journal, but didn't sleep.

She couldn't.

The mirror was still whispering. Not in words, in pressure. A low hum beneath her skin, like the tension before lightning. The space between here and there, it was unraveling.

At 3:13 a.m., her window **opened on its own**.

The wind didn't howl. It whispered her name.

Estia...

By 3:20 a.m., she was outside.

Hood up. Barefoot. She didn't remember deciding to leave, only that something was calling her. Not Adrial. Not the mirror.

Something older.

The path wound behind her aunt's house, through trees that shouldn't have been so silent. She didn't recognize the trail. But her feet moved like they did.

The woods parted, not violently, not even naturally. Just... *obediently*.

At the center of the clearing stood **an archway** made of stone and twisted vine. Carved across the arch were the same **three moons** from her mirror.

No door. Just air.

But through it, the world shimmered wrong, like heat rising from asphalt.

Estia knew she should run.

She stepped forward instead.

The world shifted sideways.

She didn't fall. She didn't pass out. One step, and everything changed.

Suddenly she stood in a vast plain under an alien sky , **not the mirror realm**, but something deeper. Rawer. (RAWRRR, alright no..)

The grass glowed faintly, pulsing with light like breath. The sky overhead was streaked with **three moons**: red, silver, violet , all watching.

There were no stars.

No sun.

Just her.

And the hum of memory waking up.

With every step she took, petals bloomed beneath her bare feet — and withered behind her, turning to ash. It didn't feel metaphorical.

It felt *intentional*.

Like this place recognized her.

She wasn't alone for long.

He stood beneath the red moon, silent.

Adrial.

Not the one from the woods. This version of him felt heavier. Dimmer. Older somehow. His coat fluttered without wind.

He didn't look surprised to see her.

“You crossed over,” he said, not a question.

“You didn’t tell me there was another place.”

“I didn’t think you’d find it so soon.”

“Why am I here?”

His jaw tensed. “Because it’s remembering you.”

She stepped forward. “*What is this place?*”

“The Veiled Plane.”

He looked at her, really looked at her , and for a moment, he wasn’t distant.

He was in pain.

“It’s where you died. The first time.”

The wind picked up , no, not wind. **Something else.** A pressure that bent the sky slightly sideways.

Estia staggered. “What are you talking about?”

Adrial didn’t move. “You were the gate. And someone used you to open it.”

“Open *what?*”

He didn’t answer.

Instead, he took something from his coat , a folded piece of parchment, scorched at the corners.

He held it out.

Estia stepped forward, took it. Her fingers trembled as she unfolded it.

It was a sketch , *her*. Dressed in something ancient and ethereal. Standing in the center of a crumbling city, **light pouring from her chest like a broken sun.**

Behind her, shadows spilling through a rift in the sky.

And in front of her... Adrial, bleeding.

On the bottom corner, in scratchy handwriting:

“I failed her. I broke the lock.”

She looked up, throat tight. “This is real?”

“Yes.”

“You’re saying I died. That I was used. As a, what, a weapon?”

“No,” he said softly. “As a keyhole.”

Before she could speak, the sky changed.

The moons **aligned.**

Light burst outward from the violet one, crackling down in a bolt of soundless lightning. The ground split. Wind howled , but it wasn’t wind.

Something was coming.

Adrial turned to her , sharp now, urgent.

“You can’t stay here. Not yet.”

“Why?”

“If you stay too long, the plane remembers *too much*. And it will try to keep you.”

She reached for him.

“I don’t want to forget again,”

His hand caught hers.

And then,

Estia gasped awake.

Back in her room.

But this time, **something was different.**

A thin trail of **violet petals** led from her door to the mirror.

And on her desk:

1. A page in her journal.
2. Her fingers stained with ash.
3. And a single pressed **white flower**, warm to the touch.

She picked up the journal.

The new entry wasn’t hers.

You crossed into the Veil, Estia. It remembers you now. The moons are aligning again, This time, you won’t die for someone else’s war.

– A.

7. Things we don't say

“Some people are born. Others are called back.”

Estia didn't sleep.

The violet petals were still there, leading to the cracked mirror. She didn't clean them up.

She just sat. Watching.

Waiting.

By sunrise, she knew what she had to do.

The house was quiet when she padded downstairs , the kind of quiet that follows dreams too loud to forget.

Her aunt was at the stove, humming. Coffee brewed. Rain tapped lightly against the windows.

So normal.

So *wrong*.

Estia watched her for a moment , soft grey hair tied in a loose braid, shawl draped over her shoulders, humming some old lullaby that didn't have words.

Did she know? Had she always known?

“Aunt Livia,” she said quietly.

Livia turned, smiling gently. “Morning, starlight”

The nickname didn't feel sweet today. It felt like a lock clicking into place.

“I need to talk to you.”

The smile faltered.

They sat at the small kitchen table. Mismatched chairs. A chipped teacup in front of her aunt. Estia didn't drink anything.

Just stared.

"You know something," Estia said. "About me. About what I am."

Livia didn't deny it.

"I've always known you were... different," she said slowly. "But I don't know everything. I wish I did."

Estia leaned in. "Tell me what you do know."

A pause. A sigh. Livia folded her hands, stared at the rain.

"You weren't born, Estia," Livia whispered. "Not like other children."

Estia's heart thudded.

"We found you. In the ruins, after the fire. I was younger. So much younger. I was with the others, the ones who ran when the sky split."

Estia blinked. "What are you talking about?"

"There was a night," Livia continued. "When the moon turned violet. When mirrors cracked across every house in town. And when it ended, you were there. Sleeping. Wrapped in black velvet. With that silver locket."

She nodded toward Estia's neck.

“You were barely breathing. But your heart... it didn’t beat like it should’ve. It pulsed. Like it remembered something old.”

“We took you in,” her aunt said. “Everyone was too afraid. They called you a witch. A ghost. A star child. But I called you mine.”

She smiled, a little broken.

“You never cried. Not even once. But when you were scared, the windows fogged. When you laughed, the lights flickered. And when you turned seven, you started waking up speaking in languages I’ve never heard before.”

Estia’s voice trembled. “And you never told me?”

“I didn’t want you to grow up afraid of yourself. Or... of who might come looking for you.”

Estia’s stomach turned. “Has anyone?”

A long pause.

Then, softly:

“Once. A man. He didn’t give his name. Said he was a traveler. Asked if a girl with ‘eyes that dream too loud’ lived here.”

Estia’s blood ran cold.

Adrial.

Livia rose from her chair.

She walked to the cabinet, pulled out a velvet box, and opened it.

Inside, wrapped in cloth, was a **shard of glass** , black as onyx, but reflective. Dimly. Wrongly.

“Your mother left this,” she whispered.

“My mother?”

“I don’t know her name. Only that she looked like you. But colder. And when she handed me this, she said: ‘Give it to her when the mirrors start to speak.’

Estia took it in shaking hands.

It felt alive.

And it whispered, softly:

“She’s almost awake.”

“I don’t know what you are, Estia,” Livia said. “But I don’t think you’re cursed.”

“Then what?”

“I think you’re a crack in the world. And through you... something is trying to return.”

Estia stared at the shard, the way it pulsed.

“How did you even know to keep this?”

Livia smiled again , sad this time. “Because I’ve had dreams too, of a girl with silver eyes standing in fire. And I always hoped she’d never become real.”

That night, Estia sat alone again.

The glass shard in one hand. The journal in the other.

She opened the journal.

A new page had appeared.

She told you part of the truth, You were never bor, You were called.

But now something else has heard that call too.

And it's not coming to love you, Estia.

It's coming to wear your skin.

Underneath the words:

A **drawing of her face**, But the eyes were **hollow**, and the mouth was stitched shut.

8. The fire and falling

“It begins with the first time he catches her. And the last time she doesn’t run.”

The glass shard hadn’t stopped humming since last night.

Estia tucked it into her coat pocket like it might stop pulsing if she kept it close. It didn’t.

That morning, the world felt... thinner.

The halls of the school seemed distant, the voices muffled. Her skin tingled. Her breath kept catching. Her fingers sparked when she reached for metal, little static jolts that shouldn’t have left her *cold*.

She stared at her hands under the desk during class.

One flickered. **Just for a second.** A faint shimmer of **violet blue light** rippled under her skin like veins remembering magic.

She clenched her fist. The shimmer disappeared.

No one else saw.

It rained during lunch. The sky was iron. The ground soaked and cold.

Estia wandered behind the old gym, where no one went anymore. The air here felt... **watchful.**

She wasn’t sure why she came. Maybe instinct. Maybe the shard in her coat pulling her closer.

There, behind the fence, was a small, rusted well. Covered long ago. Forgotten. The kind of place stories started with.

Something buzzed in her blood.

She stepped closer.

"Don't."

She froze.

A whisper. Not Adrial. Not a voice she knew. But inside her mind. Inside her *bones*.

"Who's there?" she whispered.

Silence.

And then the **ground gave out beneath her.**

The earth crumbled like paper under her feet.

She plunged through darkness , roots, rocks, soil swallowing her screams.

She didn't know how far she fell.

But when she landed, it hurt.

Hard stone. Cold. The world spinning. Her arm possibly broken. Blood in her mouth. Her breath sharp and shallow.

And overhead ,**nothing**. Just a hole far above, too high to climb, no light.

The walls of the pit shimmered faintly. Like glass. But not reflecting her.

Showing *other versions* of her again ,ones that burned, bled, smiled like gods.

She screamed for help.

No one answered.

Except the voice.

“Awaken.”

Her chest burned.

Something inside her , beneath her ribs , *opened*.

Not physically. Not a wound. Something... **older. Deeper.**

Her fingertips glowed faintly.

She reached upward. Her arm trembled. The glow brightened. Sparks fell from her palm like ash turning to light.

The **shard** in her coat pulsed violently.

The glassy walls **responded**.

One cracked.

A line of violet light spread across it like a spiderweb catching flame.

“You were made for this.”

Her body arched, back hitting stone. Her scream was light and wind and shadow. She couldn’t control it.

The magic collapsed into her chest.

And then, everything went dark.

She woke to **arms around her**.

Strong. Steady. Cold with rain.

Adrial.

His coat was soaked. His breathing ragged. His hands bloody. His eyes , wild.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” he muttered, voice low and sharp.

“You followed me,” she rasped.

“I felt it.”

He didn’t look at her. Not yet. He cradled her like something fragile — and maybe like he’d done this before. Too many times. In too many lives.

“I almost died.”

“You always almost die,” he said softly. “And every time, I’m the one who finds you. And every time I’m too late.”

Estia blinked through pain. “You weren’t this time.”

His eyes finally met hers.

They burned.

“No,” he said. “Not this time.”

He set her down gently in the clearing, out of the pit. His coat wrapped around her shoulders. Her hands still trembled , not from fear, but from what she’d done.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Your body remembers,” he whispered. “Even if your mind doesn’t.”

“You mean... the light?”

“That’s not light,” he said. “That’s what’s left of you. What you were before this life.”

She stared at her hands. "I thought I was just a key. A lock."

"You're the fire they were trying to control," Adrial said. "And they still are."

Her eyes met his. "You mean the thing that's coming?"

He didn't answer.

But his hand brushed her cheek.

And it wasn't gentle. It was desperate. Like he needed to touch her to believe she hadn't shattered.

"Why do you keep saving me?" she whispered.

He hesitated.

Then, softly:

"Because I don't know how to let you go."

For a heartbeat, neither of them moved.

She should've pulled away. Should've said something clever. Or cutting.

But she didn't.

Because for the first time, **she didn't want to.**

His forehead touched hers.

No kiss.

Not yet.

Just heat. Breathing. That terrible aching closeness of **almost.**

When she got home that night, her skin still hummed.

She peeled off the coat. Washed the blood off her arms.

And saw it.

A **mark**, faint and glowing just below her collarbone.

The **three moons**. Burned into her skin like a brand.

And beside it , a name in a language she couldn't read.

But when she stared at it long enough, it whispered:

Adrial.

9. The Flame That Remembers

She hadn't slept in three days.

The mark on her skin , the three moons burned below her collarbone , had stopped glowing, but not pulsing. Not quiet. Not once. It beat softly, like a second heart, like a warning. And every time she pressed her palm over it, she swore she could hear her name , not spoken aloud, but remembered.

Estia.

Like the world itself was whispering her back into place.

School had become unreal. People moved like paper puppets. Her shoes scuffed the hallway tiles and the sound echoed too loud, like she didn't belong to this place anymore. Like the walls rejected her.

She barely noticed when her fingertips sparked again ,just a flicker, a glow under her skin. It happened in the stairwell, when she brushed the railing. A pulse of heat. A shimmer of violet. She hid her hand in her sleeve.

It didn't scare her, Not anymore.

It made something in her... ache.

That evening, the rain came.

Not loud. Not storming. Just enough to make the windows weep and the leaves whisper. Estia sat at the edge of her bed, the shard of black glass resting on her palm. It was cool, but vibrated faintly , the way a string hums after it's been plucked.

She stared into it, waiting for her reflection.

Instead, she saw **his eyes** again.

Adrial.

Watching her from somewhere deep inside the shard. Or beyond it.

Her throat tightened. She didn't know what she expected him to say.

But the whisper wasn't his.

It came from the mirror. From her own voice. From nowhere.

"Where the sky first broke."

Her head snapped up.

That phrase. It meant something.

And then she felt it. That same tug in her bones. That low magnetic pull that had once led her to the Veiled Plane. It returned now . quiet, certain, unmistakable.

It didn't ask her to go. It **dared** her not to.

She walked alone through the woods, the hood of her coat drawn up against the cold drizzle. The trees breathed louder the deeper she went, their trunks slick with moss, their roots curling like fingers. The fog clung to her like memory. The path didn't look like the last time — but her body knew it.

The mark on her chest burned hotter with every step.

She didn't call for him.

Because she already knew.

He would be there.

Adrial stood beneath the ruined stone arch where the veil had once cracked open , the same place she first crossed into the other realm. His coat was soaked. His hair fell in dark strands over his face. He

looked like he hadn't moved in hours. Or days.

He didn't speak as she approached.

And neither did she.

The space between them was not silence, it was static. And the longer she stood in it, the more the air buzzed, like something in the world was stretching to make room for them both.

Estia didn't ask why he called her here.

She only asked, softly:

"Did you know I'd remember?"

Adrial looked at her like she was breaking his ribs just by standing there.

"I hoped you wouldn't," he said.

Her lips trembled. "But I am."

"I know."

She stepped closer. The fog curled around them, the air thick with wet leaves and the iron scent of rain. Her voice felt like it didn't belong to her.

"Was it always me?" she whispered. "Even before this life?"

His eyes flicked down, to the mark on her skin, faintly visible beneath her damp collar.

"You were never anyone else."

"Then who was I?"

Adrial moved like it hurt to close the space between them.

"You were the flame," he said. "You still are."

"And you?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

He only raised his hand, slow and hesitant — and touched the mark over her heart with the back of his fingers.

The moment he did, everything **broke open**.

Her knees buckled.

Not from pain, from memory. From fire. From the collapse of everything she didn't know she had forgotten.

She saw flashes: A woman with her face, cloaked in stars. A ruined temple carved into the spine of a mountain. Adrial on his knees in a pool of blood, whispering her name like it was the only word that ever mattered.

And then the worst one, **herself, burning**.

Not screaming. Just... **letting go**.

A sacrifice. A promise. A beginning.

Estia staggered backward. Her breathing ragged.

"You let me die," she said.

Adrial looked like he was dying now too. "I didn't want to," he whispered.

"Then why?"

"Because you asked me to."

The wind picked up. The fog churned.

She wanted to scream. She wanted to run.

But she also wanted to stay. To stay and hear the rest. To pull every terrible answer from him like

splinters.

Instead, she stood shaking under the ruined arch, her heart thunder and ashes.

“You keep saving me,” she whispered. “You say it like a curse.”

“It is,” he said. “But I’d do it again.”

“Why?”

“Because if I don’t, you become something else.”

“What else?”

Adrial stepped forward.

Close now. Too close.

His voice was a wound.

“You become *her* again.”

And she didn’t know if he meant the goddess. Or the weapon. Or the gate.

When she reached for him, it wasn’t to hurt.

It was to understand.

Their fingers brushed. Her power sparked.

And for a moment , one sacred, broken second , they were two souls caught in the echo of an unfinished story.

His lips hovered inches from hers. He didn’t move. Neither did she.

Because this wasn’t the kiss.

This was the **moment before**.

The moment the world holds its breath and dares you to shatter it.

And Estia whispered,

“Then don’t let me become her again.”

He closed his eyes.

“I won’t.”

10. Chapter 10

“Then don’t let me become her again.”

His breath brushed her skin.

“I won’t.”

But even as he said it, something shifted.

Not in him. Not in her. In the world.

The air grew heavier, like a thread pulled too tight. Trees fell quiet. Even the rain stopped striking the leaves.

And then , a sound.

Low, rhythmic.

A heartbeat.

But not hers.

Not Adrial’s.

The earth’s.

Estia tensed. Her fingers curled into his coat.

“What is that?” she whispered.

Adrial stepped back just slightly , not pulling away, but positioning himself between her and the unseen.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But it’s coming for you.”

She felt it before she saw it.

The three moons above shifted. Not visibly. But in *alignment*. They moved in a way moons should not move , like eyes focusing.

The mark on her chest pulsed.

Then again. Harder. And again ,**brighter**.

Her knees buckled.

She hit the ground on all fours, gasping, as **heat flooded her veins** , not fire, not magic, but *memory*.

She was on a mountaintop.

But not this one.

And it wasn't her.

And it *was*.

A crowd below. Chanting.

She stood at the edge of a stone altar, silver light in her palms, her body cloaked in night.

Adrial was below her. Shackled. Bleeding.

"You promised me," he said, voice distant.

And she ,*the other her* , smiled, and whispered:

"I lied."

The memory shattered like a dropped mirror.

She gasped awake in the clearing, Adrial gripping her shoulders, his eyes wild.

“What did you see?” he demanded.

She tried to speak, but the words weren’t hers.

They were **the past’s**.

“I wasn’t innocent,” she whispered.

His face turned to stone.

Power rippled off her skin like mist.

The ground around her smoked, the grass burned in crescents beneath her feet.

Adrial stared at her, not with fear, but with *knowing*.

“Your blood is remembering too fast,” he said.

“I can’t stop it.”

“You’re not supposed to.”

His hands hovered over hers, not quite touching.

She stared at his fingers, the same ones that once carved runes into her wrists in another life, sealing her away. The same hands that had held her like the world would end if he let go.

“You lied to me,” she said softly.

“Only about how much I care.”

Without warning the sky cracked.

Literally.

A jagged line of **dark light** split through the clouds like a wound, spilling violet fire across the heavens.

The mark on her chest burned like it was being re-written.

Estia screamed.

Adrial caught her, pulled her into him, shielding her from wind and magic both.

Behind them, trees bent backward.

And then, from the tear in the sky, a single feather drifted down —**black, twisted, burning at the edges.**

Not a bird's.

Not an angel's.

A warning.

Adrial's breath caught.

"They found us," he said. "They never stop watching once the moons turn."

"Who are they?"

He didn't answer.

He only whispered, "Run."

But she didn't run.

Because something else was here.

Not from the sky. Not from the woods. From her.

It stepped forward in her own skin . mirrored, warped, but unmistakable.

The Other Estia.

Eyes silver, expression hollow.

“I didn’t want this yet,” the Other said. “You weren’t supposed to wake until the second death.”

Adrial stepped in front of her. “She’s not yours.”

The Other tilted her head, like watching an insect trying to roar.

“She’s not yours either,” it said. “Not anymore.”

The clearing burned around them, magic spiraling into the air, sparks catching in Estia’s hair.

Adrial stood ready to fight.

But Estia, Estia stared at her other self.

Because in that moment, she knew.

The girl before her wasn’t some entity. Not a demon. Not a ghost.

It was her.

A version that had lived.

A version that had *chosen* power.

And when it spoke again, it spoke in Estia’s voice.

“We broke the world once to love him.”

“Will you do it again?”