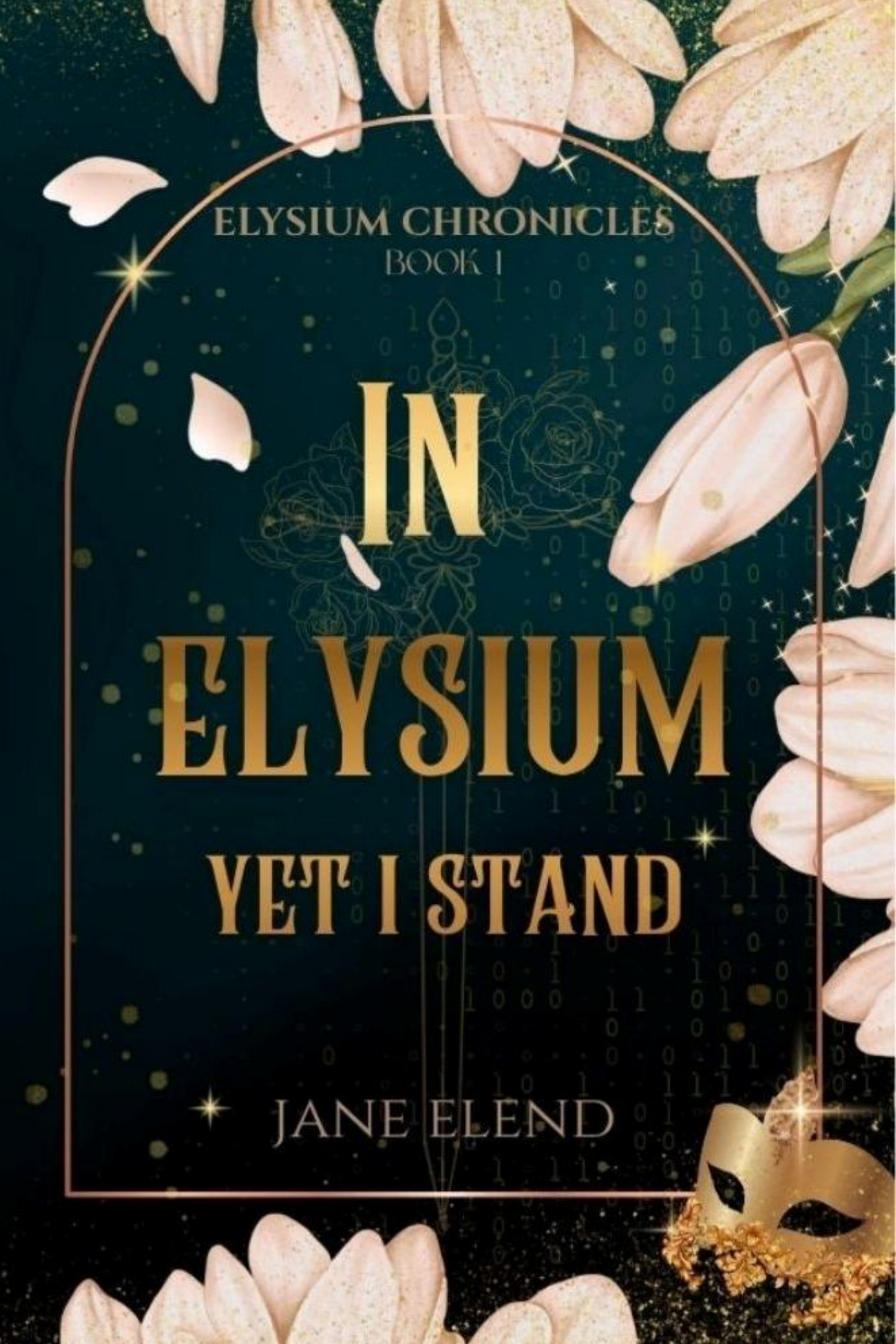
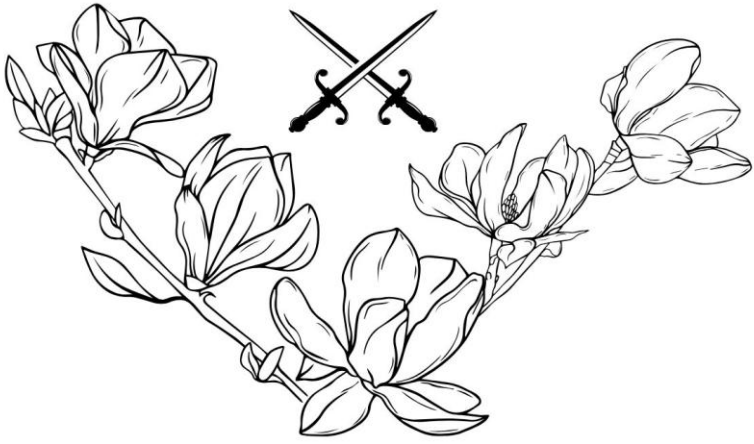

ELYSIUM CHRONICLES
BOOK 1
IN
ELYSIUM
YET I STAND
JANE ELEND

In Elysium, Yet I Stand



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media and incidents either are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictionally.

Warning: this book is intended for adults and contains sexual scenes, violence, and strong language.

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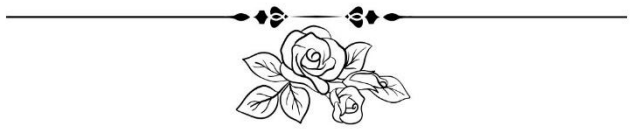
Trigger Warning:

This story explores themes that may be distressing to some readers. It contains depictions of mental health struggles, including anxiety, depression, and prolonged emotional distress. There are references to emotional manipulation, gaslighting, and controlling behaviour within relationships, as well as situations that reflect survival responses and psychological trauma.

The narrative also includes scenes and implications of sexual harassment and assault. While not always described in explicit terms, these moments may be intense and emotionally charged.

Reader discretion is advised. Please take care of yourself while engaging with this story and step away if needed.

Death is no finale, just a change in tune; a fading note that lingers into a new refrain…



DISCLAIMER

This novel is an original work of fiction, inspired by the atmosphere and emotions that music can awaken in us all. It is not affiliated with any artist, band, or intellectual property. The story, world, and characters are wholly my own creation, born from the echoes of feeling rather than borrowed from any existing blueprint.

Thank you for being a part of this journey.

With gratitude,
Jane

FROM THE AUTHOR:

This story is many things.

Elysium was born from those quiet, aching hours… the ones where life feels too heavy, loud and cruel. It was carved from the edges of my own shadows, from the scars left behind by love, loss, fear, and hope.

To the Elowens out there… may you find sanctuary in stories. May you learn to create not just despite your struggles, but because of them. Let your words be rebellion. Let your dreams be your armour.

To the Grails… May you gather the strength to rise, even when your hands shake. May you fight for yourself like no one else ever has.

To the Avennas… light-bringers who battle their own inner darkness, you do not have to sever the parts of you that ache. Let this be your reminder: true power begins when we stop running from ourselves.

This book is my thank-you to the storytellers who saved me, and my offering to those still searching. Whether you're here to escape reality or to better understand your place in it, may you walk Elysium and see yourself in its echoes. May you find courage in the cracks. And may you always, always come home to yourself.

J.

ALSO FROM THE AUTHOR

Before we begin, a quick note for the future one-star detectives of Goodreads.

Yes. The band in this story is inspired by excisting musicians. Shocking, I know.

This is not a hidden conspiracy, a secret code, or a literary mystery waiting to be cracked. It's called inspiration. Artists do it all the time.

So if your big review was going to be "This is obviously about…," congratulations. You've successfully discovered the thing I never tried to hide. You're very observant.

Now that we've cleared that up, feel free to read the book, or dramatically dislike it on the internet. Either works.

J.

LAST ONE, I PROMISE

To the man whose work quietly sparked the creation of Grail. This is not a love letter, a claim, or an attempt to step into your world. It's simply a note of quiet admiration from one creator to another.

Somewhere along the way, your craft slipped through the cracks of my imagination and lit a small fire there.

I write a small series of reflections called Corner of Thoughts, where I often end up dissecting your craft more than I probably should. For that, I suppose I owe you a quiet apology. They were written because sometimes the language in your work reaches places people struggle to describe in themselves. If I can put those emotions into words for someone else, even one reader who feels a little less alone after reading, then I suppose I've done my job. I am a writer, after all.

My dream did not begin with two hundred people on YouTube, or with anyone paying attention at all. It started much earlier, buried in self-published stories that almost nobody reads. Small pages, quiet corners of the internet, characters living their lives where only a handful of people ever notice them.

Wherever life has taken you beyond the stage and the voice, I hope it continues to bring you the same inspiration you unknowingly passed on.

J.

OOPS…

To the people who may recognise parts of themselves in some characters.

This story is not a courtroom, and these pages are not a verdict. The characters were never meant to put anyone on trial or turn real people into villains.

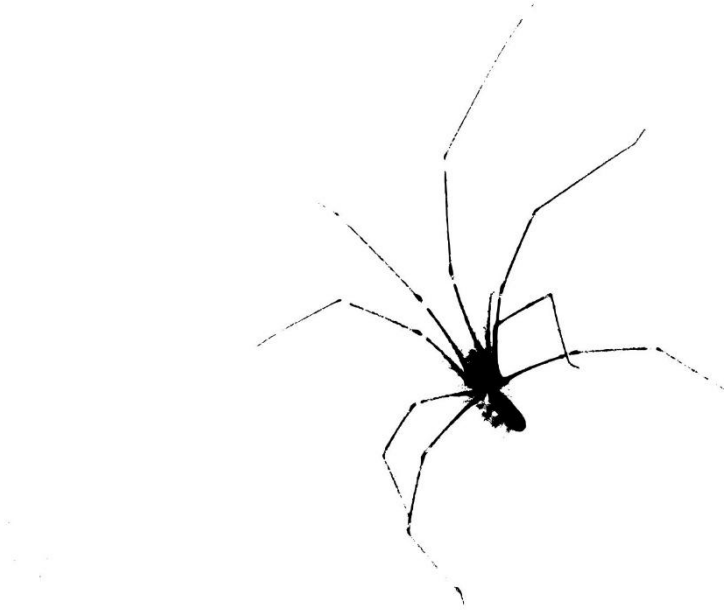
Writing has always been my way of understanding things that once hurt me, confused me, or changed me. Some of that reflection naturally found its way into these characters. That is simply the nature of storytelling.

What you choose to see in them is entirely up to you. You can read it as a chance for reflection, or revenge, or you can read it as me turning you into the villain.

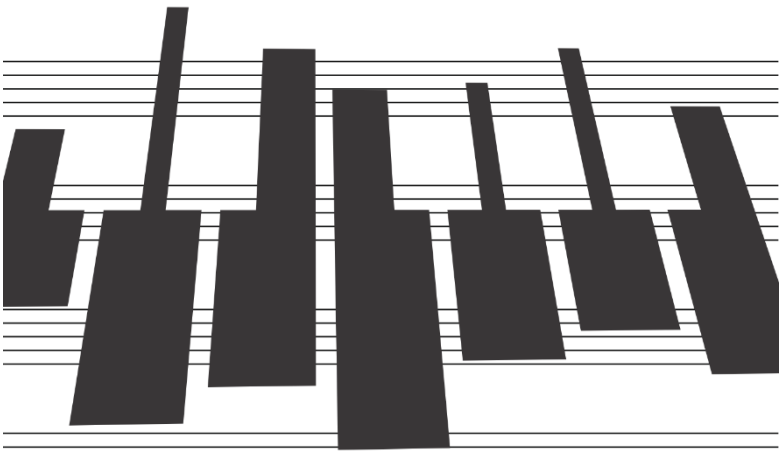
Or you can use it as an opportunity to self reflect.

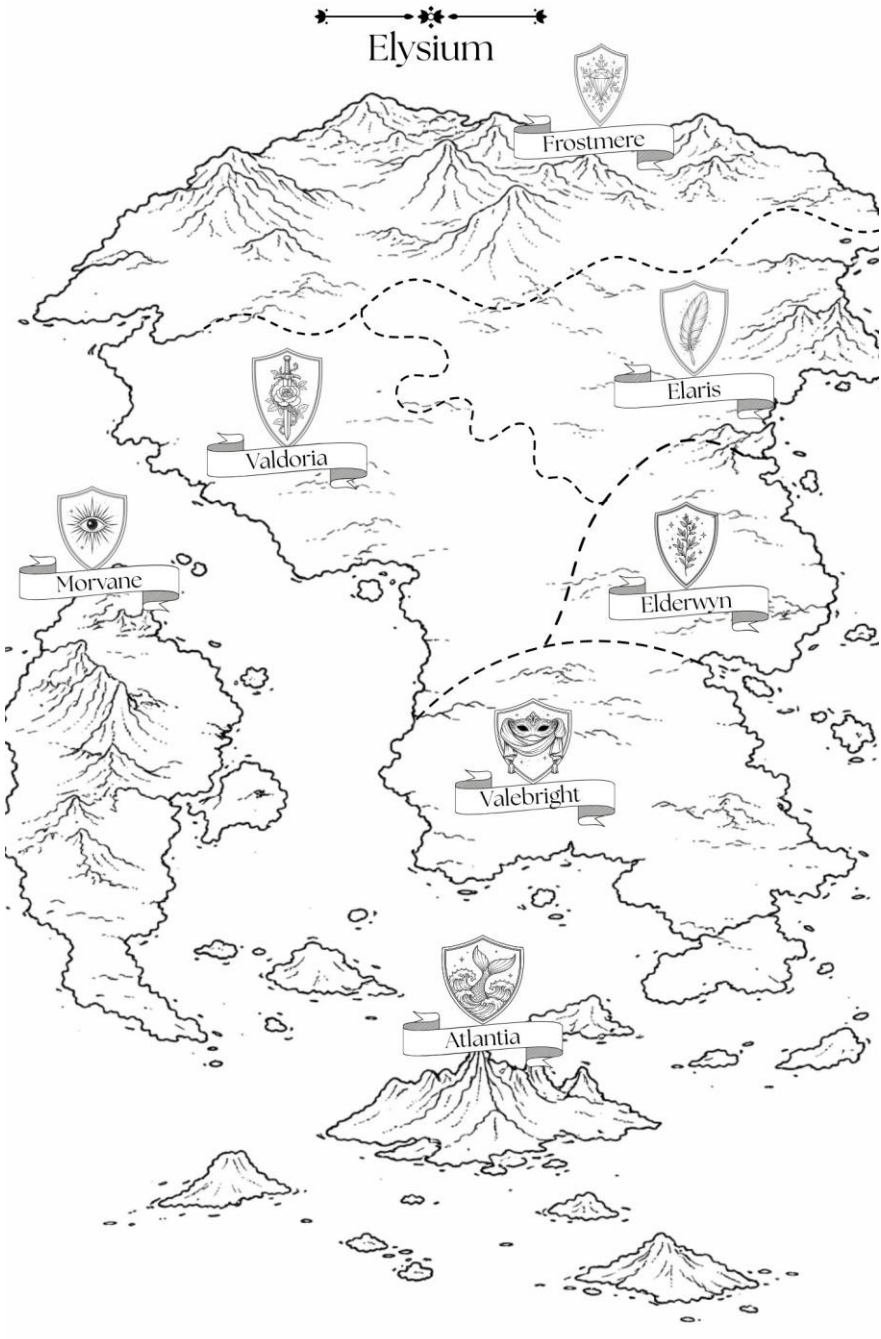
Whatever meaning you take from it belongs to you.

J.



In Elysio, tamen ego sto




Elysium
Frostmere
Elaris
Valdoria
Morvane
Elderwyn
Valebright
Atlantia

PROLOGUE

The night pulsed with the low hum of unfinished music, as if something holy still echoed through the walls. The final piano chord lingered in the air: soft and suspended like a breath that had forgotten how to exhale.

He sat on the floor, his back resting against the couch, arms draped loosely over his knees as though they were the last threads keeping him from unravelling. The silence between two people in the room was heavy, measured and familiar.

She sat by the window at first, fingertips curled around the rim of a chipped mug that had long since gone cold. She didn't interrupt and just watched him from a distance, listening to the silence between them.

"Do you ever feel like it's already over?" he asked suddenly, voice low and flat, like something hollowed out. "And you're the only one who didn't get the memo?"

She turned toward him, but didn't speak right away.

"I used to feel the fire when I created," he continued, staring past the edge of the coffee table. "Now it's like I'm stuck playing a role I never meant to write. The world still claps, but it all sounds... far away. I don't even know who they're clapping for anymore."

She stood slowly and crossed the room in silence. Then, without asking permission, she slid down beside him onto the floor. Her shoulder brushed his. Just to anchor.

"I think I know what you mean," she said after a while, her voice laced with something half-buried. "Sometimes I look at the things I've written… the ones I poured myself into… and they're just sitting there, gathering dust. Forgotten."

He glanced at her, barely. "And the ones that did well?"

She gave a quiet, breathy laugh. "Stereotypes. Clean arcs, even. Hollow things dressed up as something profound. I wrote those because they sold, because they were safe. And people loved them. But they weren't really mine."

He didn't answer. But he was listening.

"I keep wondering," she murmured, eyes fixed on the darkness beyond the window, "what happens if I climb all the way to the top, only to find there's nothing there? Just more noise, more pressure. A hundred versions of me that I never wanted to become."

He nodded slowly. "What if the diamond days are behind us?"

"Then we make new ones," she said without hesitation. "Maybe not as bright, maybe not even as clear. But more honest and perhaps… more us."

He looked down at his hands, calloused and still. "I've been thinking lately that maybe my Elysium has already fallen. That whatever beauty I was chasing… maybe I missed it. Maybe I blinked, and it was gone."

She didn't argue.

"Even in Elysium," she said softly, "everything ends."

The words hovered between them.

"But that doesn't mean you're done," she continued. "When the song fades, you don't have to fade with it. You get up and keep walking. Not toward some golden, untouchable dream. Just… forward. Even if you're limping."

His voice, barely audible now: "Toward what?"

"A new rhythm. Or a new song. A different kind of story. Maybe even a better one. Something real, maybe even something imperfect. But… perhaps that's where the beauty lives."

He tilted his head back, eyes closed, exhaling through his nose like her words were something meaningful. "But what if no one's listening anymore?"

"Then play for yourself," she said. "Write for yourself. The world doesn't always know what's worth loving. But you do."

He let the silence settle again.

"And if I still feel lost?" he asked.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "Then let it be a beginning," she whispered. "Even if you don't know what it's the beginning of."

They stayed there like that, quiet and frayed, breathing the same slow breath. The room held them the way a weary soul holds a final note… gently and reverently, without rushing to resolve it. Outside, the world turned. And somewhere, in some shadowed corner of the soul, a new chord waited to be played.

CHAPTER ONE

The aroma of freshly ground coffee drifted through the café like a familiar spell, wrapping itself around the lingering scent of autumn rain that clung to the thick coats of people seeking brief shelter. London, in early September, sat suspended in that tender, volatile shift between summer's final warmth and autumn's first bite. Outside, the city pulsed relentlessly: buses grinding along wet asphalt, footsteps muffled by mist-laced cobblestones, sirens echoing softly against a sky bruised with ash and smoke.

The window seat held Elowen like a familiar. Her hands wrapped around a cup of Earl Grey, the bergamot steam rising in delicate spirals that curled and vanished like unfinished thoughts. She was supposed to be working, supposed to be building worlds. Her laptop stared back at her, a blinking cursor pulsing against a blank page beneath a title that offered more pressure than promise.

The world moved around her in soft dissonance: chatter, clinking porcelain, the hum of city-laced comfort. But Elowen's thoughts remained still and unmoving… an incomplete labyrinth of scattered code and stubborn ideas. *In Elysium: Sequel* sat dormant, still

caught between inspiration and inertia. A sequel to her magnum opus, it remained nothing more than a concept. The original RPG game based on her story still hovered in its beta state, hidden from the world and played only by a chosen few, including her. And yet… Elowen, the writer, artist and architect of myths, found herself adrift. Caught in the very dream she once ruled.

Avenna, her in-game avatar, had once been her anchor. A spiritual warrior forged from both wounds and wonder, a celestial healer born of stardust and trauma. Avenna had emerged in the aftermath of Elowen's life choices and drama, and in her, Elowen had found focus and balance.

Elysium had been a sanctuary stitched from heartbreak and imagination. A twilight realm where starlight danced across sacred waters, and the shattered remains of forgotten gods stood silhouetted against an obsidian sky. Every temple, every gust of wind, every whispered prophecy had been crafted with intention. But now… Now she sat in a quiet London café, wrapped in grey light, her own sanctuary feeling distant and unreachable.

Elowen sighed. Her fingers tapped restlessly against the wooden tabletop, already cluttered with notebooks, loose pages, and sticky notes that had once felt important. Outside, the rain returned… soft at first, then insistent, tapping against the glass in frantic patterns. The fading daylight merged with the flickering protest of a dying streetlamp, casting dappled gold across the slick pavement.

Life moved outside, fast and without apology. Elowen remained still. Watching and listening, letting the soft murmur of the café blur the edges of her thoughts. And then, without warning, a memory rose. So sharp and sudden, as if summoned by the rain itself. It came with the weight of something she'd never truly let go.

She remembered the first day of her freedom. It was summer, a year ago. The once-perfect line of the horizon had begun to swallow the sun, slowly and deliberately, spilling molten hues across the evening sky like a wound turned beautiful. The heavens, so deep, endless and blue, bled into the warm, rose-gold glow of day's final breath. She could still smell the briny perfume of the sea, still feel the silk-thread breeze slipping between her ribs, folding into her lungs like something sacred. The tide had lapped against her bare feet, the foamy edges of the water teasing her ankles, retreating just far enough to whisper: *Come. Chase me. Come be free.*

Elowen had risen from the warm, forgiving cradle of the sand, her green summer dress clinging to her thighs as she stepped forward. The waves kissed her knees, salt kissed her skin, and the sky and sea bled together until there was no longer a line between them. Just an endless, painted canvas in pink and gold.

Elowen had walked until the shoreline disappeared behind her, until the world she came from no longer existed. The horizon consumed her vision, wrapped her in possibility. And then, she let go. Floating and drifting, cradled by the ocean's breath, the water

folding around her like arms. Her eyes fluttered shut. And the world, the pain, the noise, the names and the ache… fell away.

Silence. The first time she had ever heard it. No voices, no claws of memory dragging her down, no screams echoing through the corridors of her chest. Just silence. Blessed and still. Her heartbeat synced with the lull of the tide, and for the first time, her soul no longer fought to stay afloat. It drifted, unburdened, in a rose-gold cradle of peace. It had felt like dying. Or maybe, like living for the first time.

She remembered smiling. Yet, that freedom was temporary.

Elowen tensed, her breath catching quietly in her throat as she blinked herself back into the present. The café came into focus once more: the soft clatter of cups, the low murmur of conversation, the rain still breaking itself across the glass. But something inside her had shifted. Just a subtle tremor, like the tug of a tide beneath still water. That memory… that version of her was real, raw, and unfiltered. Painful in a way she didn't have words for.

Across the room, an acoustic guitar strummed softly, its tone floating through the air like breath. The café filled with the kind of music that wove through the noise. A thread of sound moving around the voices, slipping between the clinks of ceramic and the rustle of jackets. The melody reached Elowen slowly, almost reluctantly, because her thoughts were still loud. But

eventually it wrapped around her like a pull rather than a push. The sound resonated through her chest.

Her gaze drifted to the far corner of the room, where Edison bulbs spilt honey-coloured light in uneven pools. There, half-veiled in shadow, sat the musician. Noah. His hair was the colour of honey stirred into soil: not quite brown, not quite gold, but that in-between shade where stories like to begin. It slipped from beneath the hood of his chunky jumper as his long fingers moved across the strings with effortless grace, like he'd done this a thousand lifetimes ago and never stopped. The music didn't demand attention. It simply existed, filling the spaces between conversation, between people's breathing and thoughts.

Elowen closed her eyes. And in that moment, just one heartbeat, something shifted. Her restless fingers, which had been tapping against her cup without rhythm, stilled. Her shoulders dropped slightly. The storm inside her head pulled back, waves settling into quiet foam. Outside, London's rhythm continued, indifferent and infinite. But within the café, time slowed. The air shifted, the music touched something old inside her. Lit a small fire she hadn't felt in months, or maybe longer.

Then came another memory. But this one struck her like thunder. It howled, ripping through bone, crashing through memory like a scream no one had answered. Something long repressed broke loose, rattling through her chest and echoing in her spine. The kind of memory that demands to be felt.

Elowen remembered how every dream she'd ever

held had been stolen before it had a chance to bloom. Piece by piece, people around her took her power, her voice and her radiance. Not in one dramatic blow, but gradually, like shadows creeping in, silencing light before it could become brilliance. But she hadn't surrendered. No. She had burned with rage and defiance. Her fists clenched through sleepless nights. Her voice, once swallowed, became a scream hurled at the sky. And in the silence of that collapse, she had whispered through bloodied teeth, *You shattered the wrong girl*.

Elowen never needed wings to fly. She carved her path through blistered feet and ruptured dreams. She did it stubbornly and relentlessly. She limped, crawled, tore herself through days built to break her. And still… she rose. People told her to bury the past, to let go. As if forgetting was the same as healing. But Elowen knew better. The past was a weapon. It was her proof of survival, her legacy. Her blood marked the pavement of her future; every step she took was a rebellion. Every breath, a refusal to vanish. The trauma she endured forged her.

But the fractures never really left. The sharp, splintering ache of what had been broken still echoed within her. She carried it in the quiet moments and in the shadows of her smile. Elowen lived in a constant balancing act, rebuilding herself while pretending she had never fallen apart. She wrapped her pain in layers of silence, distractions, and forced poise. She wore composure like armour and called it peace. Until, inevitably, it cracked again. And in the crumbling quiet,

she couldn't help but wonder how she'd gotten here, how her own life had begun to feel more like a cage than a story.

The truth was bitter. Elowen had fought this war alone from the beginning. The people around her had never heard the sharpness buried in her silence. They had never seen the battles etched into her stillness. Her suffering was invisible to those who mistook her quiet for calm. Beneath her skin, she carried a weight no one else ever noticed. Burdens no one asked about, wars no one witnessed.

The guitar's final note lingered like evaporating mist, dissolving gently into the room. Elowen opened her eyes slowly, the world unfolding around her in soft layers. She gathered her things with deliberate care, hesitant to disrupt the fragile atmosphere the music had left behind. Her gaze drifted once more to the corner. Noah hadn't moved. His posture remained slightly folded forward, hoodie bunched around his shoulders as he lowered his head toward the strings, like a priest bowing in quiet prayer. He existed in a frequency most people wouldn't notice unless they knew how to look. Despite the cocoon of that thick hoodie, he seemed slim, tall in a way that felt almost awkward. The chair was too small for him; his long legs stretched wide, claiming more space than the rest of him seemed willing to. Elowen's gaze, as always, went to his hands… she believed hands were more honest than faces, more revealing than eyes. And his were beautiful. Those long

fingers curved in a way that felt just shy of human, like they'd been shaped by the music itself, bent toward strings and chords and the quiet worship of sound. The whole silhouette radiated that rare paradox: silent yet magnetic, unassuming yet impossible to look away from.

She smiled because Noah reminded her of someone. Someone she had admired for years, someone whose persistence had carved a path through the impossible. Someone she kept as a compass for her own stubborn hope. Someone who had once made her believe dreams could, in fact, come true.

Elowen didn't linger. As she stepped outside, London greeted her with its usual mosaic of sound and scent… earthy wet stone blending with gasoline, a cool breeze curling against her exposed skin. The streetlights had just begun their ritual, bursting to life in warm amber, casting long, wavering shadows across the slick pavement. Buses hissed at the curbs, and people passed her in streams: heels tapping, conversations rising and fading, voices layered in a symphony of accents, each hurrying toward something unnamed.

She pulled her coat tighter across her chest, tucking her hands deep into the pockets to shield her knuckles from the cold. London transformed in these hours, its intensity softening into something gentler. The usual chaos dimmed to a hush. These were the moments Elowen treasured. The space between noise and stillness, the world outside began to reflect her inner one.

By the time she reached her terraced house, the sky had folded into a blanket of heavy grey, swallowing

the stars and weaving thick shadows across rooftops. Her key turned quietly in the lock, the door clicked shut behind her, and she exhaled as though she had been holding her breath since she left. Warmth wrapped around her the moment she stepped inside. Amber light from a single lamp reflected off golden accents nestled within the deep teal limewashed walls. Lofted shelves brimmed with hanging plants whose leaves drooped like tired thoughts. Suncatchers in the window caught the streetlamp's glow, scattering fractured rainbows onto the hardwood floor, while small crystal clusters glimmered from shadowed corners, humming with unseen energy.

A soft nudge against her ankle broke the silence. Elowen smiled and bent down, gently scratching under Mischief's chin. The sleek black cat purred in lazy approval, blinking once before trotting with regal indifference to her preferred window perch.

The desk remained in its usual organised chaos: sketchbooks stacked beside half-open notebooks filled with slanted handwriting and ink stains; sticky notes clung to the edge of her monitor like evidence of forgotten thoughts. She shrugged off her coat, tossed it over her chair, and moved with silent familiarity through the space she'd built like armour. The kettle hissed to life, filling the kitchen with its soft bubbling hum. She reached for her favourite mug: a black cauldron with a 'Witchy Brew' written on it, and watched as boiling water flowed over loose jasmine tea. The leaves danced briefly in spirals before settling.

Solitude had always been her truest companion.

Not loneliness, never that, but chosen solitude. Elowen had always preferred her own company. She could not find the world compelling enough to warrant her attention for long. Conversations wore her down, and expectations suffocated her. People, no matter how kind, left her raw and scraped thin. Her mind, too intricate and too sensitive, couldn't help but splinter beneath the constant hum of surface-level interaction. People called her cold, strange, and distant. A freak, even. They didn't understand that she wasn't rebelling… she simply existed differently. She wasn't interested in small talk or normality; her refusal to submit to societal rituals made others uncomfortable. So she learned to perform and to mask. She grew skilled at mimicking apathy, at presenting the illusion of not caring.

The memories of her early years stayed sharp, pressed like dried leaves between the pages of her mind. The grey-toned streets, the identical buildings… all facades hiding their own quiet tragedies. Her family had not been cruel. But absence, she knew, could scar just as deeply as abuse. They hadn't hit her or shouted, and they were quite loving and caring in between their daily drama… but they hadn't seen her either. Misunderstanding had been its own kind of suffocation. Her mother tried… she did, bless her soul. But Elowen had always broken rules that others clung to. She dismantled expectations with curiosity. She was a creature of instinct and intellect, shaped by neither rebellion nor compliance. She moved according to her own compass, crafted from intuition and logic alike. That

distance, between who she was and what the world expected, had shaped everything. People drained her. But silence? Silence poured her full again.

She settled into her seat with the familiar weight of her drink in hand, then slipped on her headphones, their soft grip sealing her away from the world. The PC stirred to life beneath her fingers, the low hum of its awakening filling the room like the first breath before a ritual. The screen of her monitor flickered once, then steadied.

A few clicks, and just like that, she crossed over. Her other reality opened before her, waiting. The loading screen shimmered into view, a field of starlit glitter sweeping slowly across a velvet-black sky. Each glint pulsed softly like distant constellations, drawing her gaze inward. Through her headphones, the gentle swell of piano began: soft and hauntingly clear, spilling around her like silk wrapping itself over skin.

Avenna's world awaited. The edges of the real world softened, and her breath came easier. Here, in this space she'd built from fragments of longing and stardust, Elowen could finally breathe again.

◇

"There was once a world of magic. A utopia, Paradise, Heaven. A realm where the celestial and the mortal walked side by side, where rivers shimmered like molten silver, and trees whispered ancient secrets to the wind. It was called Elysium, a land spun from the threads of dreams, untouched

by decay.

But nothing remains untouched forever.

As time passed, mortals grew restless. They became consumed by greed, by hunger for power and dominion over one another. Conflict erupted across the land… between kingdoms, and between belief and ambition. The gods watched as Elysium, once their masterpiece, twisted beneath mortal desire. And so they made a choice. They abandoned it.

The heavens split like silk, and the gods ascended into Aether, a sanctuary of their own creation, hidden beyond mortal reach. Elysium was no longer immortal, no longer Heaven. And yet… it remained ethereal. Some divinities chose to stay behind. Some mortals still clung to what remained, building homes from the wreckage of paradise. Aether became a legend. It was said that the gods now watched from above, and that those deemed worthy would be blessed with ascension in the afterlife, drawn into Aether to live among the divine. The rest? Their souls scattered across the cosmic realm, drifting endlessly through the Universe. Some would be summoned again, called to serve in other realms. Others would simply… dissolve, like forgotten stars.

But then, a disaster happened. Something no scroll recorded in full. A mysterious event tore through Aether. Chaos unfolded behind the veil. A Darkness was born, and a god was exiled, cast down: the god of music and healing.

The moon cracked. Its flawless sphere shattered like porcelain dropped from heaven, spilling ink-black shadows and stardust into the sky. What seeped from its broken heart was darkness… alive, writhing, a sentient void unfurling in slow waves across the land. The heavens dimmed, as if

recoiling in dread. And the darkness had a name. Morphea. Her touch corrupted all it grazed. Cities became hollow husks, their streets swallowed by silence. Rivers ran thick with despair. And the people… oh, the people. Some clung to hope, their hearts trembling. Others surrendered, their souls hollowed out and reshaped into vessels of her will.

The gods abandoned Elysium, scattered and silent, hiding above the clouds, unreachable and indifferent. And utopia was no longer heaven. Death became a frequent visitor, lingering in the corners of sacred halls and sighing between unanswered prayers. And now, even in Elysium… she existed.

Elysium stands at the edge of ruin. Even the greatest warriors falter beneath the weight of shadow. But one final hope remains. A last summoning and a flicker in the endless night. And if it succeeds...

It may yet tip the scales."

The screen dissolved into black, the final words burning slowly into the void:

Loading…
Connecting to Elysium…

And then… light. A soft golden glow unfurled across the screen, banishing the last traces of shadow as the game world exhaled its first breath. Elysium opened before her, vast and untouched, starlit rivers winding through celestial ruins that pulsed with quiet, ancient magic.

Elowen exhaled with it. The soft light of the

monitor cast fleeting shadows across her face, dancing against the dark teal walls of her sanctuary. Her fingers hovered above the keyboard, still tense from long hours of frustration… ideas unfinished, pages blank, inspiration withering beneath the noise of the day. But here… here, her thoughts never stuttered, and her soul never stumbled. In Elysium, her spirit moved freely. Here, she was not Elowen Starfield. She was Avenna. She had sculpted Elysium to be flawless: harmony, beauty and obedience to order. The same words her mother once used…

Joanna Starfield, her mother, was the kind of woman who lit rooms like fire and shattered expectations like glass. She had been stunning, magnetic, and untouchable. To the world, she was a marvel; to her daughter, she was a storm. People admired her, envied her, circled her like moths near a flame. Some loved her, some feared her. She was a beauty carved with precision, and cleverness cloaked in charm. A blade disguised as grace. Men fell for her, women compared themselves to her. And Elowen, small, soft, and dim beside that brilliance, had learned to survive inside the narrow frame of her mother's approval.

Elowen knew the world had raised her mother to be perfect or perish. Joanna's own mother had taught her that survival meant being compliant and untouchable in equal measure… a tightrope act of beauty and restraint. Love, in Joanna's childhood home, had always been conditional, earned through performance and polished edges. It was never admitted, but could be percieived

though behaviour. So Joanna learned early how to curate herself for the gaze of others, how to silence her own hunger for softness and how to treat vulnerability as weakness. Those lessons burrowed deep, becoming the architecture of who she was and were passed through generations.

By the time Joanna had grown, the mask had fused to her face. She wielded her charm like a weapon, her approval like currency and her disappointment like a guillotine. To strangers, she was elegance incarnate; to Elowen, she was a constant negotiation, a presence that could lift you with a single word or crush you under the weight of her silence. Narcissism wasn't something Joanna possessed; it was simply the armour she had inherited, reforged, and worn so long it felt like skin. When she looked at Elowen, it was through eyes shaped by generations of women who had been told they were never enough unless they were everything. And though she loved her daughter deeply, fiercely, even… Joanna's love could be overwhelming in its intensity. She could be selfless, endlessly giving, the kind of mother who would tear herself apart to protect or provide for her child. Yet in her determination to do what she believed was best, she often pressed too hard, crossing invisible boundaries she didn't see and mistaking control for care. Her devotion, though genuine, came tangled with expectations and boundaries blurred beyond recognition, leaving Elowen both grateful for the shelter it offered and quietly suffocated beneath its weight.

"Walk properly. You're a girl, after all." A curse,

offered like motherly concern.

Elowen had grown beneath that gaze, shaped by the performance of love. Her posture had been corrected, her voice softened, her opinions clipped and rearranged to fit the shape of the ideal daughter. But Joanna was only a branch. She had been shaped, too, by Marianne, Elowen's grandmother. Cold lips, careful eyes, expectations passed through generations like heirlooms made of glass and guilt. Don't speak too loudly. Don't eat too much. Be soft. Be pleasing. Be grateful. Centuries of feminine restraint braided into bloodlines like a sickness. Disguised as etiquette, masked as virtue.

Outside the screen, the room remained still. Elowen sat motionless, bathed in the soft glow of a fictional world. Within the silence, history stirred. The world Elowen was born into had never truly belonged to her. It belonged to men, built for their comfort, shaped for their control. And women, from the moment they could walk, were trained to be grateful guests in their own lives. At least, that's what Elowen believed at first. In her memories, women bore the burden of family, of appearance, of restraint, and smiled through it all. They endured pain and were told it was noble.

Elowen's mother had taught her well: "Men love with their eyes. Never let them see you undone." So, even as a grown woman, Elowen still painted her face each morning out of fear. Fear of being dismissed, disregarded, or disrespected. She told herself it was her choice. But the truth was older than her, older than

Joanna. Older than the world she escaped to in Elysium.

The game finished loading. A gilded chamber bloomed into existence around her, bathed in golden light, walls lined with ancient tomes bound in worn leather, and shelves of glowing vials casting flickers of colour like living stained glass. Herbs hung from the ceiling in bundles of lavender and sage, slowly drying, their fragrance mingling with the metallic tinge of old, sacred magic. Crystals hovered mid-air, suspended by invisible forces and humming gently with latent energy. And at the centre of it all stood Avenna. Her long, silken, wheat-coloured hair spilt over her shoulders in cascading waves. Celestial robes draped her frame, embroidered in sigils of white and gold, each thread carefully woven with meaning. A golden, ornate blind mask veiled the top half of her face, yet she moved with perfect precision, navigating the space as if she saw something beyond what eyes could perceive.

Elowen stared at her creation with pride. Avenna was no longer just a character. She was a manifestation. The embodiment of what Elowen had always longed to be: respected, powerful and untouchable. She had already completed the first major quest of the game, officially gaining the title 'Priestess'. In reality, Elowen was just another forgotten soul lost in the noise of the world. A woman behind a keyboard, clinging to purpose. But here? In Elysium, she mattered. Here, she wasn't invisible.

Elysium hadn't always been Elysium. Once, it didn't have a name at all, just a pulse in her mind, a

shapeless, magical place that existed somewhere between dream and day. It was an idea without edges, a story still incomplete and raw, fragments scattered like half-forgotten constellations. Continuous edits, changes and erasures. The draft would stay untouched for months, then came alive with sudden inspiration before disappearing into the shadows yet again.

Then came Eternal Slumber… A mysterious, profound and emotionally raw music band, wrapping around her soul like velvet. Their music slipped into that quiet place and lit it from within, and in that light her sanctuary finally found its name. Elysium.

With a name came gravity, and with gravity came form. The world she had carried in her head for years began to take root in the margins of her manuscript, spilling into sketches and notes until it became something she could touch. At first, it was only meant to be a novel. But paper wasn't enough. She didn't just want to tell the story; she wanted to live and experience it.

During her probation at a new job with an indie gaming company, she hesitantly pitched the idea to the developers, expecting it to be brushed aside. To her shock, they were hooked. And now, after countless sleepless nights spent immersed in Elden Ring, Dragon Age, Witcher, and Skyrim, she was finally stepping into a world of her own making. Elysium was a breathing, evolving realm. The joy came in fragments: forging weapons, collecting herbs, exploring sacred ruins and fractured temples. It came in puzzle-solving, in decision-making, in the branching threads of dialogue that shaped

destinies one choice at a time. And soon she'd be able to join the other players and continue the main quest. Her quest, the one she had built from bone and story and stars.

She drew in a breath, chest rising and falling with the weight of memory. Joanna Starfield belonged to a school of parenting where the world remained carved in stone. There were two kinds of parents like her. The first: those who unwittingly raised sons to flee responsibility. Mothers who spent their lives cooking, cleaning, sacrificing... only to pass that burden to the next woman who'd love him. And yet, if that same son showed feelings or emotions? Suddenly, the conversation became one of gender and shame. Emotions were for the weak, for women. Sensitivity, a flaw. Vulnerability? A sickness to be cured. And so boys grew into men who were emotionally starved, narcissistic, angry, and unreachable. They didn't know how to process their own feelings and invalidated others. Mental health issues were non-existent for them, something to be ashamed of and hidden.

The second kind of parent wielded shame like a tool, discouraging any spark of individuality, belittling passions that couldn't be monetised, and hobbies that didn't fit a checklist. Children raised under this gaze learned that conformity was safety. That imagination was not a tool for wealth and abundance. That difference was dangerous. These children grew into adults with quiet panic behind their eyes. They lived in grey offices, stared at glowing screens, and whispered about therapy like it was a confession. Their minds never stopped spinning,

their inner child starved beneath the weight of 'normal'.

Elowen had been born into both camps. And when it came to mental health, the most fragile, most intimate truth of all, it was treated like a stain best scrubbed away. And her desire to make creativity her career was dismissed as something unreliable and unsafe. Family insisted on Elowen's creativity to remain a hobby while studying, and a prosperous, well-paid career would have to be a priority. Unfortunately for Joanna, her daughter could not be contained. Elowen did not break into silence. She broke into stories.

Back in the game, Avenna stood waiting: still, steady, surrounded by floating crystals and the slow drift of incense curling through the air like ancient breath. Elowen's fingers hovered above the keyboard. She hadn't forgotten the past, not even here. But Elysium had given her something the real world never could… a space where she had rewritten the rules. That's why it meant so much. It was magic and warmth and the thrill of adventure. It didn't reject her, it didn't ask for more than she could give. It simply let her exist, without explanation and without fear. She exhaled softly and shook off the thoughts. It was time to begin the next chapter. Her fingers clicked forward, and the transition was seamless. The room faded, and her world became Elysium.

CHAPTER TWO

Avenna felt the enchanted chamber's gentle glow wrap around her like a familiar friend while its warmth caressed her skin softly. The candlelight produced rhythmic shadows that danced slowly across the stone walls, creating moving silhouettes. The air carried the scent of burning sage that felt earthly and grounding, blending with lavender hints, dried rose petals, and a slight touch of iron… reminiscent of forgotten spells. The levitating crystals emitted a gentle hum, resonating like a magical lullaby from ancient times. Their slow, deliberate rotation cast moving halos of light across the ceiling, each flicker evoking the paths of constellations that once guided the earliest priestesses. The sacred halls of Elaris, the holy city, existed beyond the constraints of time, anchored in ritual and memory.

These walls had been her training ground for months, years if she counted the time spent dreaming. Here she had learned to bend the celestial balance, to draw power from calm and focused stillness, though calm had never come freely. The High Priestess demanded it with the same cold certainty with which winter demands bare trees. Every movement had been

corrected, every hesitation punished with another hour of prayer, another ritual and another reminder that weakness was a failure not only of skill but of faith. Avenna had bled on these stones, knelt on them until her legs trembled, meditated in their silence while the Priestess' voice carved itself into her bones. Discipline, devotion and perfection. Words that sounded holy but felt heavy enough to bruise. She had healed beneath their altars, risen from trial after trial with shaking hands and a straighter spine, told again and again that pain was proof she was becoming worthy. And somewhere between obedience and defiance, between reverence and quiet resentment, she had changed. Now, at last, she was ready.

Soft echoes of a knock reached the chamber, no louder than a moth's wing brushing glass, but in this sacred space, silence heard everything. Avenna turned to face the door, her white and gold cloak trailing behind her with a sound like wind through silk as illuminated sigils shimmered along the hem like shards of morning light. She lifted her fingers in a gesture shaped like a prayer, and the great door creaked open by unseen force.

A figure stood at the threshold. Small and frail. Time bowed his spine, and a message burdened his hands. Dressed in deep teal robes with frayed edges, his cowl hid much of his face, casting him in shadow. He clutched a scroll wound in golden thread, his fingers trembling as though the weight of the message was too much for one mortal to carry. He bowed low, so deeply his joints audibly protested. His voice rasped like wind scraping stone.

"Priestess Avenna. A message from the royal city of Valdoria. The king has summoned you to the palace."

Avenna moved with seamless confidence, her presence quiet but commanding, as though the space shifted in time with her breath. She extended one hand, palm open. The scroll was placed gently into it. It was light in weight, but the moment it touched her skin, she felt it… dense with consequence, laced with urgency. She broke the wax seal and unfurled the parchment. It sighed softly, as if releasing a secret that had waited too long.

To the Priestess of Elaris, Avenna.

The darkness stirs. Valdoria's walls remain standing, but the shadows creep ever closer. We are gathering those who may yet hold the strength to resist.

Come at once. The fate of Elysium may yet depend on you.

The Crown of Valdoria.

Her breath caught, and she closed her eyes. There it was: the pull… ancient and unmistakable. That strange pressure behind her eyes, that whisper beneath her skin and the moon's distant wail echoing through her veins. The light dimmed too early now, the wind moaned through the spires like a warning meant only for those who could still listen. Peace had ended. Ever since Darkness had fallen over Elysium, the temples had grown quieter with each passing season. Priests and priestesses who once filled the halls like a chorus of living constellations were gone, swallowed by war, shadow, and

whatever rot had begun seeping through the world. Those who remained carried their magic like a dwindling flame, fragile and precious. And Avenna… Avenna had become one of the brightest among them. The High Priestess had said it just before passing. Strength was not a praise, but more of an expectation. So when the call from the capital finally came, it did not surprise Avenna. If anything, she had been waiting for it, feeling it gathering in the air like a storm that had already chosen her name.

"It is time," she whispered, not to the messenger, but to the chamber itself. To the floating crystals. To the spirits still echoing in the stone. To the part of her that would remain behind. Then, louder, her voice clear, steady, anchored by purpose: "Tell the king I will come at once."

The messenger bowed again, his teal robes brushing the stone as he vanished into the twisting halls of Elaris like a shadow fading at dawn. Avenna stood unmoving, the scroll pressed gently to her heart, and allowed herself one final breath of silence. She knew what was coming. There would be no returning to stillness. She was leaving the sanctuary of Elaris, the city of spiritual warriors, where crimson-leafed trees whispered in the wind and magnolia blooms draped temple courtyards like spilt silk. Here, marble columns rose like ancient sentinels, their dark stone veined with silver, framed by trees whose twisted trunks had watched centuries pass. Beyond the sanctuary walls, mist curled through the air, softening the edges of distant bridges

and tiered arcades that arched across the valley like the bones of a sleeping giant. The air carried the faint perfume of blossoms and the quiet hum of something holy, as if the very stones had learned to breathe in rhythm with prayer. This had been her cocoon… its colours, its stillness, its quiet devotion, wrapping her in the kind of beauty that made the outside world feel impossibly far away. But ahead lay Valdoria, a realm of blades and blood. A place where kings fought shadows with steel. A land already cracking beneath Morphea's teeth.

She raised her hands. Light answered her. A slow golden glow bloomed between her palms, dancing like restrained fire. It curled against her skin with warmth and power. This was her magic, her weapon. She turned once more to the chamber, the glowing crystals, the tomes of wisdom, the fragrant incense drifting like ghosts in the air… and exhaled. Then Avenna stepped forward. Out of safety and out of the sanctuary. And into the uncertain storm of Elysium's future.

◇

Avenna rode her white stallion through Valdoria's bustling centre, where the air swirled with the blended aromas of fresh bread, burning incense, and the metallic tang of forged iron. The city buzzed with life, disciplined. Here, everything moved with intent. Every breath, every step, every smile bore the polish of performance, as though the entire city lived in a silent, unending

competition to maintain perfection. Its vibrant harmony was born from expectation, a seamless weaving of ancestral legacy and modern pressure that sculpted a beauty as suffocating as it was breathtaking. The stone paths beneath her had been worn smooth by generations of soldiers, nobles, and scholars: feet that marched more often than they wandered, creating grooves from repetition.

Above, crystalline spires jutted into the sky like raised blades, piercing the clouds with ambition. Teal banners, once symbols of unity, now snapped sharply in the breeze, their embroidery flawless, their celestial sigils standing at attention like soldiers themselves. The city spoke through symbols and through sound. Merchants barked their offers like orders, voices clipped with urgency. Musicians played structured symphonies with mechanical precision, every note a calculation. Even the storytellers recited tales of sacrifice, of duty, of fallen heroes and of the consequences of failure.

People smiled, yes, but always with one eye flickering upward toward the guards stationed on high-polished balconies. They spoke of loyalty to the crown with unshakable pride, but that pride came brittle-edged, like a prayer uttered too often and too carefully. Everyone loved Valdoria, or so they insisted. But beneath the polished gold and stone, something darker simmered. The tension was invisible, but omnipresent. It pulsed through the marble, coiled through the gold-lined streets like an invisible leash. Mistakes here were recorded. Failures were not forgiven. And the longer you remained,

the heavier your breath became, as though the very air was weighing your worth, measuring you silently with unseen scales.

It was a controlled fire. And there was something pure about it. The moment one passed through its gates, the shoulders straightened, the back stiffened, the heartbeat quieted. Valdoria demanded posture, composure, and control. Once, this city had been the heart of Elysium. A place where music and laughter bloomed on every corner, where dancers spun beneath floating lanterns, and voices met in song. Cultures had collided here, entwined like silk threads in a shared tapestry, drawn together by respect for a wise and gentle old king. Soldiers had once symbolised honour. Walls had welcomed. But ever since the shadows had slithered into Elysium, Valdoria became a memory with edges. Joy had been replaced by structure, spontaneity by silence. Now, the city held its breath. And even hope marched in perfect formation.

Avenna's stallion moved with majestic elegance, its immaculate fur sparkling under the Valdoria sun while its hooves tapped a steady rhythm against the cobblestones. The braided mane shimmered with strands of silver, like symbols of ceremonial peace and magic. As she passed, every gaze turned toward her. Her beauty alone wasn't the reason. The white and gold of her robes marked her as a Priestess of Elaris, but it was something deeper, something older that made the crowd pause. Avenna was the only priestess known to wield celestial light, an ancient force whispered in temple corridors and

feared in political chambers. Her aura was sovereign and commanding without force. Some looked on with respect, drawn to the purity she carried. Others watched with suspicion, unsettled by what they could never hope to master. The spiritual warriors of Elaris had never been universally welcomed in Valdoria. The Court of the Winged Guardian that represented Elaris taught balance, healing, and the pursuit of higher knowledge. But Valdoria belonged to Court Vivianite, where discipline, control, and the honour of steel stood above all else.

Avenna reined in her stallion, its golden tack gleaming as her robes flowed behind her like liquid sunlight. Her boots touched down with quiet grace as she whispered to the horse, stroking its neck. The creature gave a soft nicker before trotting obediently toward the royal stables beyond the arched gates. She turned her steps to the marketplace. The stone roads were lined with vendor stalls packed so tightly the awnings brushed against each other. The air pulsed with a rhythm, chants of merchants offering enchanted rings, potions glowing faintly beneath shaded cloth, crystal-tipped staffs, and relics from forgotten wars. Bottled moonlight glittered atop black velvet. Ancient spellbooks sat behind protective glass, their glyphs barely contained, their secrets pressed against the edges. Avenna moved through it all with precision. Her golden mask concealed her eyes, but she saw more than most. She passed a weaver whose sapphire-stained fingers infused spells into silk, an old alchemist crouched behind a display of remedies… some for strength, some for sleep, others for heartbreak. One

potion sat in a case of carved obsidian, labelled only with a sigil: Dusk Disease. No one spoke its name aloud, but its presence whispered louder every moon cycle. A disease that wasn't curable, no matter how many potions promised the result.

A modest table sat between a baker and a mapmaker. Behind it, an old woman with a face creased by time played with star-shaped charms etched with runes. Avenna stopped. She picked up a small bottle of enchanted ink, designed to bind magical runes directly onto the skin. She paid in lumens, thin golden Elysium coins, and bowed her head in quiet respect as the woman offered a silent gesture in return. The item vanished into her satchel. There was no time to linger.

Beyond the market, the Palace of Valdoria rose like a hymn to the divine. Its white marble towers gleamed, veins of silver running through them like frozen lightning. Golden rooftops soared skyward in sweeping curves that mimicked the wings of celestial guardians. Stained crystal lattices glowed in the sun, scattering soft hues of violet, rose, and deep blue across the palace stones. At the main gates stood two obsidian statues, warriors with blades crossed in eternal vigilance. Avenna approached without hesitation, her steps echoing against the stone. The wardens flanked the gates, clad in silver armour so polished it caught the daylight like captured stars. Their helmets bore the teal and gold crest of Court Vivianite: a sword entwined with a rose, delicate and deadly. One stepped forward, his voice formal but not unkind.

"Priestess Avenna of Elaris. The King is expecting you."

With synchronised grace, the guards stepped aside. Their polished armour flashed in motion, reflecting her passage like a mirror to her own gravity, and their teal cloaks moved with the wind. Without a word, Avenna crossed the threshold, leaving behind the weight of Valdoria's stares and stepping into the eye of the storm.

The palace stood as a living monument to divine architecture, its foundation carved from history and authority alike. White-stone walls bore the weight of Elysium's ancestral narratives, each one pulsing softly as floating lanterns cast starlight across their surface. The air shimmered faintly, thick with the scent of sacred incense and the echo of ancient enchantments, as though the structure itself was breathing, alive with memory and magic. The silence here was rich, humming softly like a memory that refused to fade.

Stained-glass windows flanked the wide marble staircases, each panel a symphony of colour and myth. They told Elysium's origin: the descent of the divine, the shaping of stars, the rise of immortal rulers who led with vision and strength, the fall of an old king and the rise of a new one. But one window disrupted the perfection, a fractured relic in a palace of polish. Its shattered glass depicted the moon's breaking and the rise of Morphea's darkness, its cracks like scars that never healed. Avenna did not pause. Grief had no place in a world that demanded strength without sorrow. The Hall of Celestial

Banners followed, lined with motionless knights from Court Vivianite, their faces hidden beneath helms etched with golden sigils. The white columns soared into the sky above, their enchanted gold veins glowing subtly as Avenna passed. Whether they acknowledged her presence or merely bore witness, she could not tell.

The throne room opened without sound, its vastness bathed in celestial gold. Towering pillars supported the sky-high ceiling, their crystal veins glowing with pulsing light. Above, a chandelier made of sunstone orbs floated mid-air, orbiting slowly in silence, held aloft by unseen magic. The throne itself, carved from celestial stone, rose at the far end like a crown of divinity, wreathed in a halo of gilded flame. Upon it sat the King of Valdoria. He was a man outside of time: ageless, by rumour and fear. His high cheekbones and precise jawline carved his face with regal command. Dark hair streaked with silver was tied neatly at the nape of his neck, the sigil of Court Vivianite emblazoned on his silver breastplate. His golden eyes gleamed like molten metal. There was no arrogance in him. His power needed no announcement. He was a handsome man, dangerously so.

Legends claimed he was the Immortal King, the same ruler who had risen when Aether became corrupt, and the Gods themselves began to fade, when Morphea's darkness swallowed even the Heavens. The previous king had fallen to that shadow, but his successor, blessed with celestial power like Avenna's that was gifted by the Gods, had driven the darkness back. Yet Morphea was patient.

In the centuries since, she had gathered strength again, pressing against the edges of the realm, and even he, for all his unyielding might, bore the weight of holding it at bay.

It was said that the King had outlived three wars, five generations, and countless betrayals. His gaze found Avenna instantly, and as their eyes met, her celestial magic burned against her skin, unprovoked, uninvited, as if reacting to his presence. Her body flinched before her mind caught up.

"Priestess of Elaris. You have come."

His voice rolled through the hall, measured and resonant, like prophecy spoken through a cathedral bell. Avenna bowed her head.

"My King."

Before the next breath could settle, she felt them… intruders. They were not announced, but their presence cut through the light like a blade through mist. Four figures stood in the shadows near the throne, silent, still and half-shrouded. They didn't speak. They didn't move. But their focus was locked on her like weapons unsheathed.

The King steepled his fingers, golden eyes narrowing at Avenna's mask.

"I imagine," he said, "you already know why you've been summoned."

The words fell heavily.

"Elysium is dying." The king said, getting up from his throne. He walked slowly towards her.

Avenna did not move, but her chest rose deeper,

bracing herself. The king was silent for a moment, standing before her and looking at her blind mask. His hand rose, slowly, almost touching it. It seemed he was intrigued by it and wanted to take a glimpse at her face, yet his hand lowered.

"The darkness spreads. Morphea's reach is no longer confined to Morvane. The affliction creeps through our cities. Dusk moves like wildfire." He paused. Avenna was looking into his golden eyes through her mask, waiting. She was hoping he wouldn't request that she reveal her face. She had no right to refuse, but the mask was her only safety in this world. It was a sort of armour from men full of desire, arrogance and lust. And the king was known for his love for beautiful women… "And those who fall to it… do not return the same."

Her hands curled slightly. She had seen the change in people. The light leaving their eyes, the haunted stillness that no healer could touch. The sickness hollowed the soul. *Dusk* crept slowly, almost gently at first, like a shadow stretching across the mind. It began with weariness, a heaviness no sleep could lift, thoughts thickening, names dissolving on the tongue before they could be spoken. Time grew unreliable, moments repeating, others vanishing entirely, memories slipping through unseen gaps as if the mind could no longer hold its own shape. Colours dulled to muted greys, familiar rooms felt strangely foreign, and the simplest tasks carried an unnameable dread. Then came the silences: confused, heavy with pauses where thought stalled and fear quietly took its place. Laughter felt misplaced,

voices… even those of loved ones, sounding distant, distorted, as though heard through walls that had not existed before. The afflicted withdrew, gaze fixed inward, caught between the grief of knowing something was wrong and the terror of not knowing what had been lost, trapped in a narrowing world no one else could follow, where the self slowly loosened and began to slip away. Over time, the body reflected the spirit's collapse. Skin dulled, appetite vanished, and movements slowed as though each step was through water. But it was the soul that withered fastest, fraying thread by thread, until there was nothing left to anchor it. When the last spark went out, death came quietly, as a final, inevitable release. Dusk was unravelling from the inside, a slow erasure of the self.

"We can no longer afford to wait." The King walked towards the throne with solemn grace, stepping onto the crystal stairs. His silhouette reflected in gold and flame. "You, Priestess, are the only one left who carries the light strong enough to resist it. You must journey across Elysium. Find Morphea and defeat her. Burn this darkness out of our skies."

Avenna tilted her head, her expression masked, but her voice clear, steel and silence braided together.

"I am strong, Your Majesty," she said. "But even I cannot do this alone."

The statement settled in the chamber like a sword planted into stone. And yet… something shifted.

"That," the King said softly, "is why you will not be alone."

The light in the throne room dimmed. It was as if the golden radiance recoiled, shrinking away from the shadows now shifting at the chamber's edge. From the depths of those shadows, figures began to emerge. Silent at first. Their approach stirred a ripple beneath Avenna's ribs. She turned her head slightly, though she already knew what was walking toward her.

Assassins. They moved like creatures carved from the space between breath and silence, trained to kill without sound or remorse. Avenna's heart hardened.

"They are known as The Eternal Slumber," the King announced, his voice echoing softly through the glowing chamber. "Elysium's finest. Assassins, shadows bound to my command. They will be your guards and your blades in the dark."

Avenna's lips parted in protest, but before a word could pass, one of the figures stepped forward. And in that moment, for the first time in her life, Avenna felt something dangerously close to fury.

He stepped from the darkness as though moulded from smoke and bone, a bare-chested warrior marked by battle yet defiantly alive. Each scar and muscle line across his torso told silent stories that nobody survived to hear. Old runes decorated the dark leather bracers that tightly gripped his forearms. A weathered harness formed an X shape on his chest where daggers lay embedded as if they were in a lover's close embrace… forever intimate and perpetually poised to strike.

The hooded black cloak was covering his body. His raven-colored trousers clung to his hips as they

provided enough looseness for movement yet remained tight enough to flirt. His shoulders were protected by pouldrons, covered in fur and citrine. Thin-soled boots with leather straps moved through the world without making a sound, but left no trace behind.

He was tall, unnervingly so, his form a living silhouette against the throne room's golden light. His skin, too, was darkened and painted in a matte black that absorbed the glow around him. A blind half-face mask of golden lace marked by dry crimson blood, like a regal masquerade piece, covered the top of his face, expressionless and alien. His eyes were hidden behind the obsidian glass slits that reflected the sunlight. Beneath it, his mouth curled into something smug and insufferably familiar. Gold chains with hanging star pendants that glinted like fallen constellations decorated his bare chest. Gold rings shimmered on his fingers.

Avenna's voice cut like frost.

"I know who you are."

The King inclined his head slightly, confirming what she already knew.

"This is Grail," he said. "Perhaps, you knew him as Morphea's Messenger."

The name alone tasted like venom in her mouth. Grail chuckled… a low, velvet sound that slid between mockery and menace.

"Infamous, am I?"

His voice was smooth and deep, every syllable wrapped in arrogance. The kind that only belongs to

someone who had danced with death, kissed it, and came back grinning. Avenna's anger sparked white-hot.

"You are responsible for countless deaths. You seduced thousands into Morphea's cult, convinced them she was salvation. That belief led to the massacre of priests and acolytes. My people." Her fists clenched at her sides. "You led them to their graves."

Grail tilted his head. His mask caught the light, sharp as a blade against the dark silk of his hood. His katana glistened in the sheath, next to an ornate golden sword.

"Ah," he said, mockingly thoughtful. "So we're skipping pleasantries, then? Just straight to the dagger-point truths?"

She did not dignify him with a response to that.

"You are an assassin. You take lives."

"And you heal them," he countered, lifting his hands, as though weighing the two on an invisible scale. "Balance, love."

Avenna's disgust was quiet, but searing. The King, however, remained unmoved.

Grail was more than a name; he was a myth tangled in blood and devotion. Infamous across Elysium, not merely for his unrivalled skill in combat or the way he moved like ink through parchment… silent, precise… but for his past as Morphea's most devout herald. He had once roamed the lands as a preacher. In those days, Grail spoke with fire in his chest and stars in his eyes, proclaiming worship of the goddess Morphea, who, according to ancient lore, was once revered as the divine

of beauty, fertility, love, and life itself. Her temples had overflowed with offerings; her name was sung in fields of bloom and whispered by those hoping to conceive. But something in Aether changed her. No soul alive could recount the full tale of what occurred there, only that a war among gods cracked the heavens, and Morphea fell into shadow. When she turned on Aether and waged war against Elysium, Grail did not abandon her. He followed, loyal. Some said she enchanted him like a puppet of divine seduction. Others claimed it was no spell… he believed in her pain, her wrath and her fall. He walked the cities preaching salvation in her name, gathering followers who ignored the rot that seeped through her miracles. He spoke of her suffering, her betrayal by the other gods, and begged others to see her not as the destroyer, but as the wounded mother of all life.

And then, he vanished. Gone from Elysium. The cult scattered and the worship quieted. For years, there was only silence. Until whispers resurfaced. Grail had returned as something else entirely. He appeared in Valdoria, no longer a preacher, but a sword and vengeance. Over time, he climbed the ranks thanks to his fearsome reputation. Now, he stood among the King's elite. A trusted assassin, a commander and a paradox.

No one knew why he'd turned. Why did he no longer whisper Morphea's name like a prayer? He now led the charge against her. But the King did not question it. Grail was loyal to something. Perhaps not to Elysium, perhaps not even to the King. But his blades struck true,

his kills were clean, and his silence was impenetrable. He was power incarnate.

"There is no one in Elysium who knows Morphea's ways better than Grail," the King said, turning his gaze toward the others. "And he is not the only one who will serve you."

More figures emerged from the dim. The first was Dy. Shorter than Grail, much… shorter. But no less dangerous. Legends said that he moved with a relaxed ease that didn't quite match the razor focus in his eyes. He wore a ripped, sleeveless hooded shirt and dark trousers, his body lean and built for speed. His skin was covered in obsidian paint, just like Grail's, but Avenna could make out some ancient runes and images inked into his arms. Twin wooden batons were strapped across his back. His combat was said to be fast, brutal and rhythmic, like music turned into war. His mask, black and gold, with braided strands jewelled with gold, covered everything but his eyes. They were bright, almost sky-blue, and clear like tropical waters.

Next came Kolm, an infamous vampire lord, as tall as Grail, silver hair spiked in deliberate chaos. He wore a red and gold jacket, cut for flair as much as function. His sword pulsed faintly with magic, the power of sound woven into every strike, capable of breaking stone or mind. His black and gold mask, similar to Dy's, concealed all but a pair of glinting, amused deep blue eyes that spoke of too many lifetimes and far too few regrets.

And then came Vier. Silent and neutral. Wrapped in a black leather cloak, his hood etched in glowing white and crimson sigils. His sword, similar to Kolm's, vibrated faintly with the hidden power of vibration magic, humming with latent energy. His stance was unreadable, his gaze cold, calculating, and utterly unshaken. His mask concealed everything but his grey-blue eyes.

The King's voice rang out once more.

"They have all sworn loyalty to me," he said with a finality in his tone that made disobedience impossible. "They will protect you, and it is not negotiable."

Avenna took a slow breath, steadying the fury burning low in her chest. Her gaze locked onto Grail, who hadn't stopped smirking. She hated the fact that she couldn't see his eyes and read his soul.

"I do not trust assassins with my life."

Grail gave a dramatic sigh, pressing a hand to his chest with exaggerated offence.

"Oh, tragic. She wounds me, boys."

Dy muttered something under his breath, unimpressed. Kolm chuckled darkly, casting a glance toward Vier, who merely rolled his eyes and folded his arms. The King remained still as a stone.

"They are my best warriors," he said evenly, "there is no better protection for you."

Avenna said nothing. She simply inhaled, deep and slow, pressing her rage back down beneath layers of discipline and purpose. She had no right to challenge

authority, a royalty… a man. So, she bowed her head slightly.

"Very well," she said. "I will do my best to save this realm."

The King inclined his head in return.

"Then it is decided."

The fate of Elysium now rested in the hands of a priestess and the shadows she'd once sworn to fight. As Avenna stood there, surrounded by those who danced along the razor's edge of morality and murder, one undeniable truth settled into her bones.

This journey was going to be hell.

CHAPTER THREE

The golden light of the throne room bled into shadow, swallowed by the soft glow of Elowen's screen. She leaned back in her chair, rubbing at her temple as the final frame lingered before her.

This… this wasn't how she wrote it. The skeleton of the quest still stood: King of Valdoria summoning Avenna, the reveal of The Eternal Slumber, Elysium's secret order of elite assassins, the looming shadow of Morphea creeping toward its inevitable crescendo. The bones were intact. But the soul? No. It had twisted.

Her fingers hovered above the keyboard, breath caught somewhere between disbelief and dawning dread. Her eyes narrowed on the scene: the group of assassins half-buried in digital gloom. Their silhouettes looked familiar in the way dreams sometimes echo memories. Close, but wrong. Especially *him*. Grail stood dead centre, like the throne room had always belonged to him. That damned smirk was etched into his face like sin carved into obsidian. His stance, his gaze, the effortless coil of his presence, all of it snarled with a magnetism she hadn't written. And it unsettled her.

Grail wasn't supposed to be cocky, or magnetic, or charismatic in that dangerous, delicious way that made

you want to follow him even if he led you straight into ruin. He was designed as a fallen celestial: quiet, reserved, sht even and cloaked in guilt and rigid with self-denial. A man of silence and shadows. Now he looked like temptation incarnate with one hand braced to the floor, knocking out slow push-ups like the throne room was a gym and not the heart of her game's most sacred lore drop.

Her eye twitched.

"What the hell happened to him?" she muttered. She snapped open the original design doc, scrolling with urgency.

Grail: Assassin / Fallen Celestial
Reserved. Silent. A man of few words. Shy.
Struggles with guilt and redemption.
Socially awkward. Intelligent.
Loyal but distant. Untrusting of others.
Moves like a shadow. Speaks only when necessary.

She blinked at the words, then back at the screen. Grail smirked directly at her, like he knew she was watching. This wasn't just code behaving badly. Instead… it felt personal. Because The Eternal Slumber was inspired by real people. She had shaped them in the image of the one thing that soothed her chaotic mind… music. Not just any music, but a faceless band who had never cared for fame or spotlight, who hid their identities behind masks and let the songs speak instead. To her, they were a cathedral of healing, hope and growth. Their

sound was a sermon to the broken, arriving in the world like devotion incarnate, soaked in divinity. Their words wrapped around her ribs and rewrote her spine. They sang of pain, transformation, surrender… and she listened.

So Grail had always been the voice in her private mythos: raw, magnetic and merciless. Dy became rhythm itself, pure pulse and control. Kolm, the storm beneath, gravity and weight. And Vier was the silence sharpened into sound. She had pulled them into Elysium cloaked in narrative, reshaped into lore, their origins disguised beneath myth. It was a tribute. A whispered thank-you to the band whose music had carried her through nights she thought she wouldn't survive. But now? Now those echoes were straying. Or, perhaps… someone had tampered with them. Elowen leaned in, predator-sharp. Her jaw tightened.

"I swear to gods… if one of the devs touched their code, I'll rewrite their lungs into punchable assets."

Her hand hovered over the keyboard, ready to dissect every line of backend until she found the source of this sacrilege. But then… a ping. Her breath hitched. Her gaze slid toward the corner of the screen, where the notification blinked like an omen. Because in a game where the characters were already slipping the leash… You never quite knew who was messaging you back.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Excited for the adventure :)*

Elowen frowned and shifted her gaze to the game's chat window. The username didn't ring any bells, only a few chosen people from the company were testing

the demo… but the message was clearly aimed at her. She hesitated, then typed back.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Pardon, but who are you?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Your new bodyguard.*

Her eyes narrowed. Grail? Her fingers hovered above the keyboard, heart ticking a little faster. She hadn't expected to hear from another player so soon, especially him. The most irritating character she'd encountered so far, and now he was in her inbox?

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *So you're the one playing as Grail in the demo?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *That would be me. Did I make a bad first impression?*

Oh, you absolutely did, she thought.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *More like… unexpected. Grail wasn't supposed to be like this.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *What do you mean? Like what?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *An ass.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *ouch…*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Sorry! I'm the story writer for the game. I created Grail. And I'm just a bit annoyed, because he is completely different from my original idea. He was meant to be… Not this… whatever you're doing.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Hah, well… guess the devs made some changes. I think he's fun this way.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Whatever.*

Another ping.

[**BLDome**]**:** *You should meet the others. Hold on.*

A notification appeared on-screen: a group chat invite labelled: [**Slumber Party**].

Before she could hit decline, another message flashed across her screen.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Come on. It'll be fun.*

Elowen sighed. Something told her she was stuck with these guys either way. With reluctant fingers, she clicked *Accept*. The chat lit up instantly.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Everyone, meet EllaStar5.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Finally, our priestess graces us.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *So this is our Avenna? Sick.*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *Wait… Aren't you the game writer??*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *…Yeah. That's me.*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *NO. WAY.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *Bro, you wrote this?! The story goes so hard.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Mad respect. I'm obsessed with the worldbuilding.*

Elowen blinked at the flurry of praise, caught entirely off guard.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Oh. Thanks. I wasn't sure how much it would differ from my original concept.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Enough to make Grail cooler, apparently.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *'Cooler' is highly debatable.*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *Is that how you got into the closed demo? Through your involvement?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Yeah. Early access perks. What about you guys?*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Let's just say we had… connections.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *Knew someone who knew someone. Vague music stuff.*

Her brows furrowed slightly at that. *Music stuff?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Huh. That's very vague.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *We're just mysterious, I guess ;)*

The chat paused for a beat too long. Elowen narrowed her eyes but let it go.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Right. Quiet assassins. Fitting.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *You'll warm up to us. Eventually.*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *Welcome to Slumber, Priestess.*

That caught her attention. She hadn't expected the other players to be this... tight-knit. Their banter rolled in like waves already in motion, like she had walked into a private room where everyone already knew the punchline to a joke she hadn't heard. Still, it wasn't unpleasant. It was just... unnerving.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *So… how long have you all been playing?*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *Since the start.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *VIP access, baby.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *We had to do the individual quests first, just like you.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Or maybe we just hacked it.*

Elowen raised a brow.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *That's vague enough to be mildly threatening.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *:P*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *We're just massive nerds and are here for the thrill. And some good music.*

A brief pause lingered before a new message flickered across the screen.

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Hey, Ella, what inspired your characters?*

Her fingers stilled. She sat back in her chair, chewing the inside of her cheek. It was a simple question, but coming from them, it felt heavier. How could she answer that without looking too obsessive, mental and completely unhinged?

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Music.*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *Uh-huh.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *…*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *What kind of music?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Ehm…*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *Go on, don't be shy.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Well… I was inspired by a very anonymous band, actually. The Eternal Slumber.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Oh?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Yeah. Their music feels close to my heart. The raw honesty of the lyrics was the spark I needed when I built the assassins.*

The chat fell still for a breath too long. She gulped and regretted her honesty immediately.

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *Huh. Interesting.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Never heard of them. Sounds like they've got insecurities with that anonymous shit.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *STFU Red.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Sounds cool.*

Elowen smiled softly to herself, a little embarrassed by how much she'd revealed.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Yeah. It took me ages to reach their management and receive permission to collaborate. Their*

music is also used in the game. I guess this whole project is… kind of my love letter to the way music can affect you. It's probably silly…

[**BLDome**]**:** *Not silly at all. Artists inspire artists. I think it's great.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Sounds a bit obsessive… Love letter, you say? Ooohhh….*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *Artistic obsession, Red. Ever heard of it?*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *Besides… It's always fun being someone else for a while, isn't it?*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *So, when you fangirl over this band, are you here for the chaotic drummer energy, the brooding guitarist aura, or the emotionally devastating vocalist?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I don't fangirl!*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** (͡ʖ ͡)

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I really don't!*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *Red, stop bullying.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *I ain't bullying! I need to know this for completely scientific reasons… Because that answer tells me everything about your personality.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Oh?*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Drummer girls usually like chaos and dangerous men with questionable life decisions. Guitar girls tend to fall for the broody, mysterious types who stare into the distance like they're carrying a tragic backstory. And vocalist girls… well, those are the ones who willingly let someone emotionally destroy them through pretty words.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I see. Intriguing. Then, I am certainly close to lyrical torture.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Dome… you hear that?* (͡° ͜ʖ ͡°)

[**BLDome**]**:** *Don't be a dick.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *As I said, I don't fangirl. Have nothing against it; anyone is welcome to scream their hearts out at the barriers and raise loving posters, but I prefer a different admiration.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *yeah, you base a whole game plot on them :)*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I sense a hint of sarcasm in your statement.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Me? Sarcasm? Don't know what that is.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Right.*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *Ignore him, he's a big child. He's harmless.*

Elowen smiled; she truly enjoyed the banter.

[**BLDome**]**:** *They're quite fluid in their genre, I guess. I heard a lot of negative feedback.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *That's what makes them different. They are genre fluid and do not belong to a specific frame of music. I guess those who misunderstood their work say they are overhyped… but I don't think so.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *You enjoy their music, that's what's important.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Exactly. Ok, well… since we are the only ones to play and we have to do the group quests… Should we set a time for the next session?*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Tomorrow night? Same time?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Works for me.*

The chat fell quiet, leaving behind only the faint electronic hum of her screen. Elowen leaned back, gaze lingering on the threads of conversation. Grail still irritated her. The group was strange, chaotic, vaguely suspicious, and for reasons she couldn't explain, she liked them anyway.

She was still smiling when she crawled into bed, the flicker of her screen clinging to her thoughts. Tomorrow, the real journey would begin.

◇

London woke with the scent of rain. Dew and the remnants of yesterday's storm turned the streets into gleaming mirrors. Pale gold sunlight scattered across puddles, broken by the rhythm of early walkers and the sigh of passing cars. The rays filtered through the sharp edges of ancient stone buildings, brushing rooftops and misted windows, but failing to offer warmth to the skin.

The city was alive, but not yet rushing. This was the stillness Elowen loved most. The sacred pause before the chaos. London, momentarily quiet, as if holding its breath. The trains had not yet groaned with impatient passengers. The streets hadn't yet erupted in caffeine-charged urgency and half-finished conversations. Wrapped in her coat, her breath bloomed in the cold like petals opening into the air as she walked. Every corner carried its familiar symphony: the scent of damp concrete, fresh bread, and sharp coffee. The gentle tap of

her boots on the pavement followed her down the narrow street she knew by heart.

It wasn't anything special, at least not to anyone else. The street didn't resemble the curated, photogenic cafés that lived on influencer feeds. Tucked away from the main road, pressed between a vintage bookstore and an old tailor's shop, stood her haven. *Magnolia*, read the sign. A small café that smelled of charred sugar and dark roast. The kind of place where the staff remembered her name and her usual order, but respected her silence. Unless she invited it.

The moment she stepped inside, the warmth wrapped around her like a memory. Vanilla, espresso and a hint of cinnamon. And something else, something like the air from an old library, heavy with the scent of ancient pages and forgotten poems. Quiet chatter floated across the room, gentle enough not to intrude.

And then there was the music. It drifted through the room like mist: soft, live, and deliberate.

Her gaze shifted to the far-left corner. Noah sat near the window, as he always did. She'd seen him before, always quiet and always alone. He never spoke to the baristas, never acknowledged the patrons. He played as if the music belonged to him and him alone. Those who listened did so at their own risk, entering a space they were never truly invited into.

He wore a simple dark hoodie again, sleeves pushed up to reveal veined forearms that moved with ease over the strings. His hands seemed to breathe sound rather than play it. His hair peeked slightly from under

the hood that was looming over his face, hiding his features. Noah's whole posture gave the impression of someone trying to fold himself out of the room entirely, vanishing into his music and the shadow it cast around him.

There was something about him. Quiet gravity, nothing loud, nothing attention-seeking. Just a pull. And though Elowen never spoke to him, she'd noticed it: the café always felt different when he was playing. As though the music rearranged the atoms in the air. She inhaled slowly, letting the melody settle in her chest. Still, she had work to do. She forced herself to look away and made her way to her usual table in the back corner, tucked beside a crooked bookshelf spilling with mismatched paperbacks and abandoned poetry chapbooks. She laid out her familiar arsenal: laptop, notebooks, loose pages, uncapped pens, transforming the table into a battlefield of creativity.

The page blinked back at her. Empty and waiting. Somewhere behind it, those guitar chords lingered like a soundtrack her soul had always known. Her tea sat forgotten beside her, steam curling upward, delicate and slow.

The game's quest screen still glowed on her laptop.

Next Main Quest: The Journey Through Valdoria

- Purchase essentials and weapons
- Visit Court Vivianite for supplies
- Gather intelligence for the road ahead

• Depart for the Elaris

She tapped her pen against the edge of the notebook. This was the point in the game where the players entered true open-world territory, where choices bore real weight. Valdoria, Elysium's radiant capital, would unfold in full. Cobblestone paths, golden towers, hidden merchants, and whispers wrapped in shadow. She could already see Avenna walking through it, luminous and unreadable, like a divine being hiding among mortals. And in the distance, her assassins: Grail, Dy, Kolm, and Vier. Spreading out, collecting the things they'd need before everything fell apart.

Her thoughts snagged. *Grail.* That damn smirk. That cocky swagger. That infuriating attitude. She sighed, and her breath stirred the steam from her cup. The café had quieted, slipping into that in-between hour just before lunch. The scent of espresso and cinnamon thickened the air. Rain had stopped, but London still wore dampness like a second skin. Elowen stood and walked toward the counter, boots clicking softly on tile, scanning for a snack. Her phone buzzed in her pocket. Elowen pulled it out, thumb scrolling absently through a flood of notifications she had no intention of answering. She walked on, screen glowing and mind elsewhere.

Then… impact. A shoulder brushed hers. A soft gasp followed. A wet, abrupt splatter hit the polished floor. The paper cup hit with a hollow thud, its contents splashing across her boots in a bitter arc of heat and dark roast. She looked up, breath catching. The man in front

of her blinked down at his soaked hoodie sleeve.

"Oh, shit! I'm so sorry!" she blurted. And then she saw him.

It was Noah. Up close, he looked even more reluctant to be witnessed. Tall… taller than she expected. His hoodie clung to his arm where the coffee had spilt, and his expression flickered between startled and quietly amused, like someone not used to being interrupted in the middle of his fade.

"No, it's fine," he said, voice low and careful. He shrugged, but the way he avoided her gaze said otherwise.

"I wasn't paying attention," she added quickly, her words tripping over guilt. "Let me replace that."

"Ehm, no it's o…" He started, but Elowen already walked to the counter. "…Thank you."

She ordered another large black coffee with a triple espresso shot in it and handed it to him gently, avoiding any more drama. He took it with a quiet nod, adjusting the sleeve of his hoodie in an unconscious motion that felt like self-protection. It seemed like he wanted to vanish back into the safety of the shadows.

"I like your music," she said before she could stop herself. "It's… calming. While I work."

That made him glance at her. Just once.

"Kind of you to say," he murmured. The words hovered between them. Then Noah looked down again. Elowen offered a small, awkward smile. He gave a final nod and took a step back, eager to retreat.

"Thanks... for the coffee."

And just like that, he was gone again. A silhouette dissolving into the soft hum of the café, reclaimed by background chatter and flickering candlelight.

Elowen returned to her table, her boots still damp, the ghost of his voice curling in her ears. She sat down and watched him for a moment longer. Noah sat with the cup cradled in both hands, silent now. Not playing or not speaking. Just… being. But there was something about him that didn't let go.

Her laptop screen blinked again. *Journey Through Valdoria.* How ironic, she thought. That journey had already begun. Not in Elysium and not in the cathedral towers or bloodstained lore. But here, on ordinary mornings and unspoken collisions. It had begun long before she named Avenna. Long before she imagined masked assassins and kingdoms beneath fractured moons. It had started in a place far less mythical. A place carved in tension and built for survival.

When Elowen was a child, the family apartment echoed with raised voices. Arguments weren't rare. Plates slammed, doors shook, and curses hissed like venom through clenched teeth. Joanna yelled with wildfire rage, and Marianne retaliated with icy jabs and passive-aggressive judgment. Elowen learned early that love, in that house, was tangled with fury and fear. It was a battlefield.

The only calm in the chaos had been Harry, Elowen's grandfather. A sailor and a brilliant cook, with calloused hands and a soft, sea-weathered heart. He told stories that smelled like saltwater and tasted of far-off

lands. He was warmth, a buffer and a quiet force of patience standing between storms. When he was home, laughter dared to exist. She remembered market walks with him, sitting on his shoulders during long afternoons, stirring stews while old jazz crackled softly in the background. He was the only man who had ever made her feel safe.

But the world has a way of cracking even the strongest walls. When the jobs dried up, and the money thinned and pressure thickened, Harry turned to drink. The day everything shattered, she was eight. Summer sunlight pressed faintly through the curtains when the shouting began in the kitchen. She found her grandmother trembling in the corner of the kitchen. Her mother, across the room, was bleeding from her arm, shielding them both from a dazed and swaying Harry. A knife lay on the floor. His hands were still shaking, and his face was pale. Joanna had fought him off, strong and fast, already bruised, but it was Elowen who made the call. Fingers trembling, voice barely audible.

"My grandfather attacked my mum with a knife."

When the police came, Harry didn't resist. He looked at Elowen with a sad, empty smile that didn't reach his eyes and let them take him. The house went quiet after that. It was a silence that hovered like a threat.

They moved. New apartment, new walls, but same ghosts. Marianne's bitterness sharpened, and Joanna's temper worsened. And Elowen, already too quiet and too sensitive, began to fold inward, like paper creased by too many hands. One night, she found

Marianne in the bathroom, gripping a bottle of sleeping pills. Her face streaked with tears, voice shaking as she accused her daughter of ruining everything… again. Joanna stood, unmoved.

"If you want to die, then fucking die," she said.

Elowen didn't understand the words, not completely. But she felt them. Felt the crack in the world growing wider.

"Grandma, don't do it," she whispered, tugging on Marianne's sleeve.

Marianne poured the pills into the sink. Instead, she collapsed onto the tiles, sobbing and begging her daughter for forgiveness. Joanna didn't move. So Elowen did the only thing she knew how to do… She apologised. For no reason, for nothing she caused. Just to make it stop and to breathe again. And that would become a pattern and the shape of her survival. Apologising for other people's damage and saying sorry just to feel safe.

Time passed. Harry returned, sober, ashamed and changed. He begged for forgiveness and got it. He moved back in and found work at a fine restaurant. He carved out something that looked like stability, and for a while, the chaos quieted. Elowen began to draw again. Landscapes, strange creatures, worlds made of stars and shadows. She devoured books and let music seep into the cracks. That's when Elysium began to form… As a sanctuary in her mind. A hidden world of golden cities and blindfolded priestesses. Masked assassins and magical beings. It was an exit wound stitched shut with myth.

Now, as Elowen sat in that quiet café, tea cooling

at her side, the soft hum of a guitar drifting from the corner, she felt the gravity of both worlds converging: the game, the past and the girl she used to be. And the weight of everything she had created to survive her. Elysium had never been just a story. It was a memory rewritten, and pain made playable. It held the echoes of voices she couldn't forget and wounds that never quite scarred over. The code was structured, the quests were mapped, and the dialogue was crafted with surgical precision. But beneath it, always, was her. The rawest part of her, the part that bled in metaphors and masked itself in magic.

◇

By midday, London had shed its morning gentleness. A unique pulse surged through the streets, boots striking pavement, voices echoing off steel and stone, car horns catching on corners like stray thoughts. Elowen moved through the crowd with practised ease, one hand tugging her coat collar close as wind nudged at her face. Skyscrapers rose around her, their mirrored glass reflecting back the grey sky.

Tucked between two towers of glass and concrete was the bistro, unremarkable from the outside, but known to her. Inside, Thea waited.

"There you are! I was about to file a missing person's report," her friend called before the door had even closed behind her.

Elowen smiled, the warmth of Thea's voice wrapping around her like a scarf. Theodora sat at a

window seat, stirring her latte with one hand and gesturing dramatically with the other. Her thick brown hair moved with every flinch of her head, her beautiful green-brown eyes glistened, and her full red lips did not stop talking.

"You were going to send out search parties, huh?" Elowen teased, sliding into the seat across from her.

"Obviously. Who else is going to endure my tragic tales of corporate despair?" Thea flipped her hair back with mock elegance, then shoved a menu toward Elowen, despite knowing she'd order the same thing she always did.

The rhythm was comforting and predictable. Thea's voice filled the space between them like golden light, rambling stories about spreadsheet-induced breakdowns and a coworker who couldn't stop saying the word 'synergy'. Elowen smiled and nodded, laughed where appropriate, soaking it in like the sun through a window. Thea was a storm in lipstick… intense, chaotic, but always sincere. And Elowen adored her for it.

Over avocado toast and Thea's 'whatever-looks-good,' the topic shifted, as it always did, toward Elowen's world.

"So," Thea said, resting her chin in her hand, "how's the game? Have they built you a throne of code yet?"

Elowen rolled her eyes, though her cheeks gave her away.

"Hardly. But I got beta access last week."

"Oh?" Thea's eyes lit up. "Tell me everything."

"It's... strange," Elowen admitted. "Seeing it all live. The characters walking around and talking. It's surreal, like watching your dreams wear new skin."

"And they kept everything how you wrote it?"

A pause. "...Not exactly."

Thea narrowed her eyes. "Oh no. They changed things?"

"One of them, especially… Grail. As you know, I designed him to be that mysterious, kind of... emotionally wrecked in a beautiful way character."

"And now?"

Elowen exhaled. "Now he's smug."

Thea's grin was immediate. "Oh no. So, he's hot?"

"Don't start."

"It's always the smug ones, El." She mock-fanned herself. "Brooding is nice. But a well-placed smirk? Lethal."

"It's a game!" Elowen laughed, though the protest had no real fire.

Still, something twisted beneath the humour. Because Grail wasn't just any character. His arrogance felt too familiar and too specific.

Thea sighed. "I know he's close to your heart, hun. After all, you based him on… what's the name of that band?"

"The lead singer of The Eternal Slumber," Elowen admitted softly. "Yes, I was inspired by the real Grail. But that's because I like his quiet brilliance and the weight he carries. The way his lyrics feel like they were carved from somewhere inside me."

Thea leaned in with a teasing smirk. "So, you *do* have a crush."

"It's not a crush," Elowen huffed. "I don't know the guy, how can I crush on him?!"

The teasing faded. Thea watched her closely now. Elowen reached for her cup. She stared into the swirl of cooling foam and let herself speak.

"No," she said, more grounded now. "It's not even really about him. I mean... yes. There's something in the way he exists that certainly is appealing. But this whole masking? This game and theatrics? It's more of a reflection of my own existence, not a search for celebrity crushes."

"So… nothing to do with sexy abs and pearly smile?" Thea teased. Elowen sighed and rolled her eyes.

"You're an idiot." She smiled. "Looks change with time, you know. Appearance is hardly something to catch my attention, as it can be deceptive."

"Well, I guess his singing is not bad," Thea shrugged, taking a sip of her coffee. "Even though his music is not my preference, if I'm honest."

"I get it," Elowen nodded. "I find his singing exceptional and soul-touching. But, perhaps it's just my sensitivity to sound and frequencies talking…"

"Ah, yes, your internal human tuning fork…"

"Shut up!" Elowen laughed. "Anyway, it's not just that. I just really admire the mind behind this all."

"You mean the mysterious man behind the mask with wild imagination, too much free time on his hands, and perhaps a mask kink?"

"You're so annoying…" Elowen huffed and placed a palm on her face. Thea laughed and crossed her hands.

"Ok, ok, no more teasing. Tell me, what is it about him?"

Elowen looked up. Thea was silent, waiting.

"He made me realise... this is the kind of person I resonate with. The depth, the presence, and the way he moves through the world… It's the role he plays on stage for others, while being someone completely different behind the scenes." Elowen's voice lowered, steady and soft. "So no, it's not about romance or crushes or anything so trivial. He just represents something I now understand I need. A frequency I've been searching for without knowing how to name it. He represents what I want to become…"

Thea said nothing. Her gaze was gentle now.

"I don't care about the persona on stage," Elowen continued. "It was never about the mask or the mystique, you know. Because… one day it will disappear, he will move on and perhaps create a different project, or vanish completely. Instead… I was drawn to the man underneath, the writer. In an admiring sense, before you say anything. Because in his work, I saw someone who made me feel less alone in my way of feeling. And it made me understand that I want to grow and to be on his level. I want to write in a way others could resonate with, I want to be that inspiration for others."

"You want to be him, not *with* him?" Thea asked.

"I want to be *like* him. An equal." Elowen's fingers curled lightly around the mug. "He set a standard, I

admit. How he honours depth and how he listens to emotion instead of shutting it down. I think for the longest time, I didn't even realise I was allowed to want that..."

"Is this why he is so popular with the ladies?" Thea raised her eyebrows. "Emotional intelligence?"

"Perhaps," Elowen shrugged. "I guess he set the standard for many broken women as a man who doesn't make you feel small for how deeply you feel, who sees your passions, your weird spirals of thought… and doesn't mock it or tune it out. He would lean in and… get it. Because he lives there too."

She paused, fingers lightly tracing the rim of her mug. Her tone grew sharper.

"I've been with someone who needed constant attention, constant reassurance and validation, but couldn't offer real support in return. Someone who saw my creativity as a threat, or worse, as pointless. Who made me feel like dreaming too loudly was annoying and like ambition was selfish. I've carried someone emotionally before, and I've dimmed my light just to keep them from feeling insecure in their own. I've shrunk myself and delayed my goals. I… want someone who meets me where I am. Who walks beside me, not behind. Someone who grows with me, who sees me and doesn't flinch when I burn a little too bright."

Thea let it sit. Then smiled quietly and reached for her own cup.

"You've changed," she said. "Before, you wouldn't dare to admit your desires and your true standards. You

would shape yourself to fit others, instead of asking them to shape to you. And you used to give yourself to those who didn't deserve it, who didn't know what magic you carry inside."

Elowen's smile was crooked, but proud. "I'm starting to see myself. Finally."

And for a moment, the world softened around them. Like something had finally clicked into place, one of those rare conversations that left your lungs lighter and your spine straighter.

Thea glanced out the window, her tone quieter now. "You know, it's strange," she murmured. "I was talking to Ju-Won the other day about relationships when we had a fight. About how easy it is to start confusing care with control. Or comfort with obligation."

Elowen's posture shifted.

Thea didn't notice. "He mentioned you and how it seemed that you always felt like you had to keep the peace and be the calming presence. For so long, you had to walk on eggshells so your partner wouldn't spiral." She looked back at Elowen. "And I remembered Miguel."

Elowen stopped smiling. Just like that, the breath in her lungs thickened. Her mind flinched backwards and dragged toward a memory she didn't ask for… A dim apartment. Exhaustion in her bones. Sarcasm that sliced instead of soothed.

"You're overreacting again."

"I never said that."

"You're so dramatic all the time."

Miguel. The man she'd once called husband. The one who taught her that silence was easier than being told her feelings were "too much."

Thea didn't notice the shift at first. She kept talking about Ju-Won and their relationship issues, about laundry disasters and pink socks, but Elowen was already somewhere else. Somewhere far more dangerous.

Miguel was charming, once. That kind of false charisma that makes you believe you're lucky to be chosen. Like you've been seen and understood or picked from the crowd like a rare flower. But Miguel wasn't a lover. He was a collector of control. A narcissist dressed in borrowed softness: quick to smile in public, quicker to criticise in private.

At first, the cracks were small. Teasing that felt a little too sharp and jokes made at her expense. A tone that twisted if she disagreed. Then it got worse.

"Is it really that hard to put your clothes in the laundry basket?" she'd asked once, her voice tight and tired. And just like that, the mood shifted.

"Why are you always so nagging?" he sighed, sprawled across the sofa like the exhaustion of the day belonged to him alone. Elowen remembered the way she clenched her fists from the effort of holding herself together. Again.

"Because I can't clean until I pick up all your shit off the floor, Miguel. It's always the same. Shoes in the middle of the hallway, cups left in random corners, dirty laundry next to the basket instead of in it, unfinished dishes in the sink…"

He raised the remote. "I just got home. Let me relax."

"I work too," she snapped, voice trembling but firm. "I'm not your maid or your mother. I want to live in a clean environment and be able to relax."

"Then relax," he shrugged, as if it were that simple.

Who was going to plan dinner and check if groceries were needed? Who would handle the bills and make sure all payments were made? Who would scrub the bathroom for the second time in one day because he didn't bother to clean the sink after shaving or the toilet after using? Who would wash the damn dishes that have been sitting there for two days? She was. Always her. Even when she was exhausted after overtime. And when she tried to explain, to pour her exhaustion into words, he'd just laugh.

"I've been on my feet since five. Can you not start the whining?"

Whining. As if she didn't work… As if answering B2B calls day after day, being screamed at by strangers and continuing to smile through her teeth and keeping her professional customer service tone, sitting rigid through soul-splintering meetings that pressure about stats and performance wasn't a "real job." As if exhaustion didn't count unless it left sweat on your collar.

"Oh, poor thing. Must be so hard, sitting on your arse all day."

It was erasure and disrespect. And the worst part?

She still found herself explaining her pain. Still trying to be heard.

"My job is different," she'd said, voice cracking. "You don't have to deal with rude, disrespectful and horrible people calling you names and wishing you were dead. You don't have to fake a smile so you don't get written up for unprofessional behaviour. You don't have someone breathing down your neck about targets while pretending it's about your wellbeing."

He blinked, unmoved.

"Not my fault you took that job."

And something inside her fractured. It kept happening. Fights would start small: laundry, money, another broken promise. They'd end in silence, or worse: Miguel out drinking till dawn, ignoring her texts, then accusing her of being clingy when she asked why he never came home when he said he would.

"You're suffocating me."

"You're always on my case."

"Why do you have to ruin everything?"

Then would come the apologies, but not from him. No. Elowen would be the one apologising. Again. Always again. Because when she called him out, he'd look at her with that face, the one that said: "You're making me feel bad about myself". He'd sigh and mutter, "Well, guess I'm just a terrible boyfriend then," and twist the guilt like a knife. Just like her mother used to.

"Guess I'm a bad mother," she used to hear.

"Guess I'm the problem."

Miguel made her feel wrong for wanting respect.

For needing rest and for needing anything. Elowen had grown up in a world that refused to acknowledge her. From the earliest moments she could remember, her feelings had been weighed, measured, and found wanting. *"You're overreacting,"* until she began to doubt even the simplest pulse of her own heart. She learned to dissect every emotion as if it were a puzzle to be solved and a problem to be fixed, rather than a truth to be felt. Her thoughts became carefully filtered, each one measured against invisible rules imposed by voices that never truly heard her. And so, instead of living in the full, messy spectrum of herself, Elowen became a quiet analyst of her own existence, perpetually questioning, perpetually cautious, her instincts drowned beneath the echo of a lifetime spent being told she was too much, or not enough, or simply wrong.

She once told Miguel she wanted to save for a house. That maybe, one day, they could have a garden with flowers, and maybe a little greenhouse. She wanted to build something that belonged to them.

He had scoffed at the idea. "I've got savings, and you don't. Not my problem."

She stood there, stunned, heart in her throat and ears ringing. All the dinners she'd cooked, the nights she'd waited and the patience. And still, he stood there like they were not a union. He was self-made, he said. A man who worked hard and a man who didn't ask for help. But she saw the truth: Miguel was a man who didn't know how to love without holding power. The more she gave, the less he valued it. And she gave

everything. Her time and peace to keep him pleased and to make sure she was a 'good girlfriend'. She gave her money, spendings divided 50/50, while he earned twice more than her and could afford his outings and savings, while she counted pennies. And her body, even on days when she didn't want to be touched, because good girlfriends make an effort, right?

Often, she would wait for him, dressed up, with a hot dinner on the table. Her phone buzzing with his ever-moving ETA.

"Be home soon."

"Just one more pint."

"Josh just arrived, staying for another."

And then silence. Or worse, another fight.

"You're always in a mood."

"You take everything personally."

"Why can't you just let me breathe?"

He made her believe she was too much. But the truth? He was never enough.

Thea was still talking. But the café had grown quiet in Elowen's mind. Her eyes stared at nothing, and her tea had gone cold.

"El?" Thea's voice softened. "Oh, shit. El. I'm sorry. Did I touch a nerve?"

Elowen shook her head slowly, swallowing hard. "It's fine."

"It's not."

"I'm… still working through it," she admitted. "Some days I'm fine. And then a phrase, a memory…

everything comes rushing back."

Thea reached across the table and took her hand.

"You don't have to rush it. Healing isn't a sprint."

Elowen gave a small, tired smile. "Sometimes I don't know who I am without that constant pressure. I don't know if I know how to be loved anymore."

"You will," Thea said. "And when it happens, it won't feel like pressure."

Thea squeezed her hand, her eyes steady on Elowen's. "El… you've been living in survival mode for so long that your body and mind don't know any other rhythm. Since you were little, everything felt like it could collapse at any moment. You never got the chance to just breathe before the next disaster hit."

Elowen's chest tightened, a small shiver running down her spine.

"You expect chaos even when everything is calm," Thea said softly. "Your system isn't wired for calm. It's wired for danger and for what comes next. Every choice you've ever made, every step you've taken… it wasn't for joy, or love, or even comfort. For you, it was pure survival. You learned to keep moving, keep planning, and keep bracing… because if you paused, even for a second, the world would crush you."

Elowen swallowed hard, letting the weight of that sink in. "Happiness… it feels like it's borrowed and temporary… You know. I'm always waiting for it to go wrong."

"And that's because it was never safe for you to trust it," Thea said gently. "You were trained to anticipate

chaos and to protect yourself before anyone else would. You survived storms no one else even saw coming. That's… That's how strong you are, El. That's why you analyse everything, and that is why you are so self-aware and so in control of your emotions. But it also means that you need to try unlearning that instinct isn't simple. You've been living at a hundred per cent alert for decades, and it's going to take time to just… let yourself exist."

Elowen exhaled slowly, feeling the coil in her chest loosen just a fraction, like a knot beginning to unravel.

"One day, you'll get to make decisions that aren't survival-based. You will make decisions for joy, for love, and for yourself. You'll have a life that isn't a constant emergency. And I'll be here when it happens."

Elowen let herself believe it, just a little, feeling for the first time that the reflexes of survival didn't have to define every moment of her life.

◇

The door clicked shut softly behind her as Elowen slipped off her boots, exhaling the weight of the day in a breath that sagged through her shoulders. Outside, the sky had shifted into velvet indigo, city lights twinkling beyond the windows like distant stars. The air inside her terraced home carried the scent of lavender, mingling with traces of old books and the warm cedar that lingered around the tall bookshelf near the fireplace.

Crystal suncatchers danced in the breeze by the window, scattering fractured rainbows across the walls, ethereal remnants of past illumination.

She rubbed her temples, the exhaustion from the ongoing effort of holding everything in. Maintaining composure was its own kind of labour, one she wore behind her eyes, in the curve of her spine, in the weight of silence.

From her bag, she pulled a small stack of fantasy novels, an impulse purchase after lunch with Thea. She'd needed something beautiful to hold. But she didn't open them. Not until after she picked up Hugo. She glanced at the clock. Nearly six. That familiar ache tightened in her chest, the one that always returned when she hadn't seen him in days. Miguel had him since Thursday. The schedule was fair, and she'd agreed to it because she believed in co-parenting. But fair didn't mean easy. Every time he left, the house felt hollow. Every hour without his voice felt like a window left open in winter.

Coat back on, keys in hand. Miguel's flat was only a short drive away. She pressed the buzzer and felt her heart flutter, soft with anticipation.

The door swung open. And there he was—Hugo, in all his six-year-old glory, dark hair wild, tomato sauce on his jumper, and a grin wide enough to split the sky.

"Mum!" he shouted, launching forward like a meteor of joy.

She dropped to her knees, arms open to catch him. "Hey, darling," she whispered into his hair, eyes closing. "Missed you."

"I missed you too! Daddy made spaghetti, but it was too spicy, and we watched a movie, and I found a worm in the garden, and I named him Wiggles!"

She laughed into his cheek. "Wiggles? That sounds like worm royalty."

Behind him, Miguel appeared in the doorway, arms crossed and posture stiff. He gave a short nod. "He's all packed. Homework's in the side pocket."

Elowen stood, her smile tightening around the edges. "Thanks."

Their civility hung between them like a worn thread, held together by shared blood and forced grace.

"Say goodbye to Daddy," she said gently.

Hugo waved with exuberance. "Bye, Daddy! See you Tuesday!"

"Bye, my boy." Miguel ruffled his son's hair, then turned and disappeared inside. Elowen didn't linger.

Back home, Hugo sprinted ahead, his backpack bouncing behind him as he launched into a breathless recounting of school antics and a sudden desire to reread the children's book he loved so much. She followed at her own pace, the contrast between his boundless energy and her quiet fatigue making her feel heavier with every step.

Dinner was roast chicken, steamed vegetables, and cucumber slices cut into stars. Hugo talked the entire time, and Elowen listened the way some people listen to rain after a drought. She didn't interrupt. Just watched him, the way he waved his fork mid-sentence, the way his eyes widened when he remembered a joke. She let it all

soak into her like light through skin. After the bath, the brushing, the pyjamas and stories, she gently worked through the tangles in his hair and kissed his temple beneath the glow-in-the-dark stars on his ceiling.

"Do you love me more than dragons?"

She curled beside him, cheek pressed against his, and smiled.

"More than dragons. More than stars. More than anything in the whole world."

"Even more than books?"

"Even more than books."

His small body softened under the weight of safety. His giggles faded into breath, and his breath faded into sleep. She lingered only a moment longer, watching the slow rise and fall of his chest. Then she slipped out and closed the door behind her with a whisper.

Downstairs, the silence returned. Elowen sank into her chair, releasing a long, weary sigh as she stretched her legs out in front of her. The familiar hum of her computer was a kind of lullaby now… quiet, steady and waiting. In the corner of her monitor, the login screen for the game blinked patiently, its gentle pulsing like a heartbeat in limbo.

Notifications lined the dashboard: beta feedback, patch notes, community posts filled with awe, critique, curiosity. She was just about to dive in, to let herself be swallowed whole by pixels and prophecy, when her eyes flicked to the window.

The suncatcher. It turned softly in the evening breeze, casting fractured rainbows along the walls from

the fairy lights on her shelves. She looked at the stack of books: psychology, science, fantasy and romance. She laughed at the spectrum of her literary interests. She found it amusing to be able to read an introduction to Jung psychology one day, and then root for a morally grey Fae Lord and his love interest the other day. Elowen also found it odd that after so many failed romantic endeavours, she still believed in love.

Relationships, she once believed, were like bridges. If one side faltered, the other could strengthen. She believed that if she worked harder, hammered in extra nails, reinforced the structure with love and patience, she could balance the weight. She thought love meant endurance. But Miguel never carried his half. He leaned and leaned until her spine cracked beneath the weight of his dependency, repackaged as affection.

She gave everything. She patched the holes, reinforced the planks, and bandaged the splinters. And Miguel… he moved from pub to sofa while she tried to speak her dreams aloud. He rolled his eyes. Laughed at her passion. Treated her storytelling like childish fantasy.

"It's just a waste of time," he muttered once, while she typed late into the evening.

He never asked what she was writing. Never read a single word. But Thea did. Thea, her lighthouse in the fog. Thea listened to her old fanfics and laughed in the right places. Thea cried at the emotional arcs, demanded sequels, clutched her chest and said, "You're a goddamn world-builder!"

Thea gave her the courage to keep going. Thea loved Grail before he was ever born from music or corrupted by dev interference. She sat across from her in cafés, looked her in the eyes, and said, "You've got this. Don't let that man dim your fire."

Miguel's words often reminded Elowen of her diminished childhood dreams. They were crushed by the reality of her mother's beliefs that creativity is a risky choice for a career. Joanna meant well when she told Elowen that wanting to be an artist or a writer was more suited to be a hobby or a side interest, while her true goals should be focusing on a well-paid, secure career. And Elowen believed that for a while, focused on her studies and being a star student… with no idea what career to choose. She never saw herself as an office employee, living her 9-5 routine. So, her plans changed regularly from wanting to be a teacher to a dentist, from a vet to a psychologist. And yet, regardless of career goals, her soul would always write stories and draw magic.

It was magic that Miguel never truly saw in her. And still, Elowen stayed. Because she was broke and because breaking up meant breaking down. She had debts, no savings, and a calendar full of lies. She said no to dinners. Pretended to have migraines. Told Thea she was working when really, she couldn't afford to be seen. Couldn't afford *anything*.

She endured and sacrificed. Elowen survived. And then came the test: two lines. They'd talked about it once, half-drunk, curled under blankets, pretending to be a future version of themselves. She remembered sitting on

the bathroom floor, clutching the test in trembling hands. Tears slid down her cheeks… She had no job after a redundancy. She was drowning in debt. How could she raise a child in this?

Miguel was on the couch.

"We need to talk," she said.

He didn't look up. "Okay."

She handed him the test. Silence.

"You sure that's 100%?" he asked. Something cracked in her chest.

"Yes," she whispered. "I did two tests."

"Then why are you crying?" he asked, frowning, like *her* fear was an inconvenience.

"I have no job. I'm in debt."

"We'll handle it," he said, turning back to the TV. No hug, no warmth. Just a shrug.

She curled under a blanket that night and disappeared from the world. But the next day, she rose. Because something stronger than fear had begun to grow inside her. Hugo was her new hope.

The loading screen shimmered to life: starlit blues and molten silvers bleeding into one another like watercolour in motion. The title, *In Elysium: Yet I Stand*, unfurled slowly across the monitor like ink blooming on moonlit parchment. Her cursor hovered for only a moment. A soft ping echoed in her headset, crisp and expectant.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Welcome back. You ready? :)*

A smirk tugged at her lips as her fingers slipped into a familiar rhythm.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Obviously. Let's go.*

More pings followed, like wolves howling beneath a digital sky.

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Finally! We were about to start without you.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *Lies. We literally just logged in.*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *We all know Grail was pacing like an impatient dog waiting for her.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Shut up.*

A laugh escaped her. She shook her head. *These idiots.* She barely knew them. They were strangers behind screens, with avatars for faces. And yet… they already felt like familiar voices in a dimly lit room. The kind of company that made the silence easier to bear.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *If we're done roasting each other, let's get to it.*

She hit *Start.* The screen blurred, then clarity rushed in like breath into lungs.

Stone streets drenched in golden dusk. Banners flapping above narrow alleys. Valdoria's spires clawed at the sky, like gilded daggers piercing the horizon. NPCs bustled through markets. Elowen leaned back slightly, the weight in her chest lightening. The world had returned.

Avenna stood before the towering golden gates of the Valdoria palace. Behind her, carved marble. Before her, the city: a vibrant sprawl of cobblestone streets and echoing calls, shadows slipping between rooftops and

secrets folded into corners. The journey had already begun.

CHAPTER FOUR

Avenna walked through Valdoria, where the streets throbbed under her boots like a living heart, which pulled her further into the capital's vibrant pulse. A blazing sun dominated the skyline and poured liquefied sunlight over the gilded rooftops of the noble houses. The sky became a canvas for spires that bore celestial runes while their golden tips seized sunlight as if they challenged the heavens above.

The city of Valdoria emerged from ambitious visions and was soaked in a historical legacy where each stone conveyed tales of ancient conflicts and heavenly encounters. The glistening canals were spanned by arched bridges that formed a network resembling veins. The stained-glass murals in grand cathedrals and civic halls emitted sacred fire-like light through windows, which created kaleidoscopic patterns on the surface of the cobblestone streets. The air thrummed with life.

Avenna navigated the market square with steady steps while her gaze took in the lively chaos all around her. The air carried the rich aroma of spiced meats, which merged with incense smoke and the sharp scent of fresh

herbs. Over the din, merchants yelled and displayed their wares of silks, relics, and magic-infused items. A bard strummed the lute nearby, sending the melody of a distant battle across the air.

She tried to focus. The continuous, low murmuring presence behind her remained constant throughout. Her so-called allies moved behind her in a scattered arrangement while each assassin blended into the darkness and radiated a silent threat. Their movements appeared as if they existed outside of this world. Their alien appearance paradoxically made them feel like integral parts of their surroundings.

The pair of Vier and Kolm left their current path to explore the weaponsmith's stall where metal met flame. Vier examined a curved blade with dancer-like precision as he held it while Kolm engaged in a deal for two stunning obsidian daggers. Dy stood at the rear while actively negotiating with a leatherworker.

Avenna busied herself with her own list. She obtained two mana-stabilising elixir vials, which were secured in fine velvet and sealed with wax featuring the Apothecaries' Guild crest. The satchel at her hip swallowed the dried sage bundle, which was tied with twine.

While she was leaving a stall filled with runestones, she felt it. That presence. An unwelcome shadow approached dangerously near the fire. *Grail.*

"I have what I need," she said, her voice sharp with dismissal.

"Not quite," came his reply far too close.

She turned just enough to glare at him. "I've got potions, scrolls, defensive wards, and half the market in my bag. What else do you suggest? A cannon?"

He tilted his head slightly, and gods help her, that smirk was still there: casual, irritating and absolutely devastating.

"You forgot protection," he said, voice smooth as silver sliding across the steel.

"I have magic."

He chuckled in a low, rich sound that scraped against her nerves. "So do half the nobles here. But they still wear armour."

Avenna scowled. "I don't need armour. I don't need a blade. I am a Priestess of the Winged Guardian, not a…"

"Soldier?" he interrupted. "Mercenary? Assassin?" He shrugged. "Welcome to Valdoria, Avenna. Where piety doesn't protect you, and neither does a pretty title."

Her hands curled into fists, but she said nothing. His tone shifted, just slightly, still edged with amusement, but underneath it, something quieter stirred.

"There's tension between the Courts," he said. "Vivianite and Winged Guardian haven't stood on friendly ground for generations. You wear that insignia in the wrong quarter, and someone might decide they're doing the city a favour by carving it off."

She inhaled slowly, steadying the burn that rose in her chest. She glanced at her insignia: a gold feather on a white round patch. "I'm aware of the politics."

"Are you?" His gaze swept the market, calculating.

"This city isn't just holy statues and pretty hymns. It's wolves in gold and velvet."

She glared at him, spine straightening. "I'll be fine. Isn't it why you're here?"

He just fell into step beside her.

"I am. That is why you're coming with me," he said.

She stopped cold. "To where?"

"The quarters of Court of Vivianite."

"No." The word was a blade. "Absolutely not."

"I didn't ask. You're under my protection, Priestess. Whether you like it or not. I need to grab a few of my weapons, and I can't leave your side. If you refuse to wear armour, I will need to upgrade my protection."

There was no mockery in his tone this time.

She clenched her jaw. Grail didn't smirk this time. He simply looked at her, like someone who'd already lost too many people by letting them believe they were untouchable.

Avenna exhaled slowly. "Fine," she muttered.

"See? That wasn't so hard."

She resisted the urge to punch him. But she followed. Behind them, the market continued its relentless song: coins clinking, fires crackling, voices calling. But Avenna's world narrowed to the path ahead, to the city she didn't trust, and to the assassin who walked beside her like a storm cloaked in shadow. And she was about to walk straight into the den of wolves.

Court Vivianite was no temple. There were no sacred texts carved into walls, no tranquil echoes of

prayer, no celestial light streaming from stained-glass windows. This place breathed discipline. It pulsed with the hum of restrained violence and years of honed muscle memory. Its architecture was stark and unyielding: cold stone, black iron, and corridors lined with weapons older than some of its warriors. No gilded altars. No soft-sung hymns. The only sound was metal against metal, swords clashing in relentless rhythm, boots pounding against gravel and orders barked across training grounds like thunder rolling through the courtyard. The scent of incense and sage had been replaced by blood-worn leather and the sharp tang of iron and sweat. Even the air was heavier here as if every wall carried the weight of blood oaths and buried sins.

Avenna walked beside Grail with her arms tightly folded across her chest, her expression unreadable, but her eyes missed nothing. She hated this place. It didn't matter that no one here had touched her. The mere energy of the space buzzed under her skin like static.

They stepped through the entrance to one of the inner chambers. Just a simple, square space tucked away behind heavy iron doors. His quarters. And that was surprising in itself. For all his ego and swagger, Grail's room was… painfully modest. A dark cloak draped carelessly over a wooden chair, a rack of blades aligned with unnerving precision, spare thin-soled boots placed neatly by the bed, and a couple of old masks hung on the wall. A worn desk sat in the corner, its surface surprisingly bare.

Except for one thing. Avenna's steps slowed. Her

gaze landed on a single object that seemed to breathe out of place in the dimness. A golden rose pin. Sculpted in such intricate detail, it almost seemed alive. Its metallic petals shimmered faintly in the candlelight like starlight trapped in gold. She stared, stunned.

Her voice was softer than she expected when she spoke. "What is that?"

Grail, halfway through selecting a set of throwing knives from the wall, followed her gaze. And for the first time since she'd met him, he showed hesitation. His voice was low.

"Nothing," he muttered.

Avenna raised an eyebrow, taking a step closer to the desk. "You don't seem like the kind of man who collects flowers."

He didn't answer. Instead, he strode over and, carelessly, yet too quickly, swept the rose into his palm and slipped it into a side pouch beneath his cloak.

She narrowed her eyes. "That looked like a relic from Winged Guardian. I've seen a few High priestesses wear it."

The moment the words left her lips, something sharp flashed in his expression. He exhaled sharply, turning away, his posture suddenly rigid. "Why do you care?"

"Because you don't seem to be the type to hide things unless they matter." She crossed her arms, her voice tightening. "You can pretend all you want, Grail, but that wasn't nothing."

He turned to face her, jaw clenched. "Maybe it

wasn't. Maybe it was. Either way, it's not your concern. Maybe I stole it, maybe it was a gift. Or, maybe, it is absolutely none of your business."

Her frustration surged. The way he ducked every answer and danced around the truth like it was a performance.

"This," she snapped, motioning toward him, "this is why I don't trust you. You act as if nothing touches you. Like nothing means anything. You answer every question with another question. You seem to know everything about everyone, yet refuse to open your own soul."

Grail's face remained still. Gods, she wished she could see his eyes just to know what expression he was making. She didn't stop.

"You convinced people to follow Morphea. You led them into war, into slaughter. And now you walk free, as if you're not haunted. As if none of it ever mattered."

Silence. A thick, electric silence. When he finally moved, it was slow and deliberate. A step forward, just enough for the candlelight to paint shadows along the line of his jaw.

"You think I walk free?" he asked, voice quiet.

Avenna felt her heart shift. Something in the way he said it made her breath still in her chest. He stepped closer, his presence suddenly larger, no longer flippant or smug.

"I may not be in chains," he murmured, "but don't mistake me for a free man."

Her breath hitched. Because in that moment, his mask cracked wide open. Not enough to see what lived beneath it, but enough to glimpse the truth: he carried his own prison inside him. Then, as quickly as it came, it vanished. He turned, grabbing a few more weapons with surgical efficiency.

"This conversation is done," he said, voice once again distant and detached.

And before she could speak, he was gone. The door clicked shut behind him, leaving her alone in the stillness. Avenna stood there, her arms still folded, but now, it was more to hold herself together. The scent of metal lingered in the air. But underneath it, she swore she could still smell the faintest trace of something softer.

She looked toward the desk again, to the space where the rose had sat. And she knew, whatever that flower was, whoever it had once belonged to, it mattered more than he would ever say. And maybe that was the real reason he unnerved her. Because buried beneath all that steel was someone who still felt. And that was far more dangerous than any blade.

Avenna clenched her fists, her nails digging into the soft flesh of her palms as she stared at the empty doorway where Grail had vanished moments before. He'd spoken like a man in chains. As if his scars bled deeper than hers. As if he were the one who had been betrayed. Her jaw locked. He didn't get to speak in that voice! Didn't get to look at her like that! Didn't get to carry a rose from her house while blood still stained his hands! And yet… The weight in his voice and the way he

tucked that golden rose away... She hated that it had shaken her.

With a sharp breath, Avenna spun on her heel, marching out of the chamber. She spotted him ahead, his back turned, moving without hurry. She quickened her pace, overtaking the cold silence between them.

"You think regret makes you innocent?" she snapped, her voice low, aimed like a dagger between the ribs.

Grail didn't even turn his head. "Still going on about this?"

"Yes," she hissed, stepping in front of him now, and cutting off his path. "Because you act like you're above all of it. Like Court Vivianite hasn't spilt oceans of blood just as dark as Morphea's."

That made him stop. He looked at her, slow and deliberate, the light catching on the sharp edges of his mask. His voice came quiet, calm, so infuriatingly composed it felt like a slap.

"You're right," he said simply. "Vivianite is full of killers. Those who justify their action by protection and those who do it just for fun."

He stepped forward, just enough for her to feel the press of his shadow.

"But tell me, Priestess…" His tone turned silken and dangerous. "Where was your court when the darkness came?"

Avenna's breath hitched.

Grail tilted his head slightly. "No wise sermon? No righteous condemnation?"

Her hands clenched tighter. Because he wasn't wrong. When Morphea's chaos bled through Elysium, it was Court Vivianite who marched into the blackened fields. It was assassins and mercenaries who held the line. Winged Guardian had stayed cloistered, cloaked in meditation and doctrine, praying for peace while war screamed across the realm. And they had paid dearly for their silence.

She didn't answer. Grail didn't wait for one. He gave a quiet scoff, more breath than sound, and turned down the corridor. Avenna stood frozen, fury and shame swirling in her chest like storm winds trapped behind her ribs. She hated her keen for that. If only she had been born during that war… She would convince her court to march into the battle with all their magic and light. Perhaps, her court wouldn't be so empty then.

She turned on her heel, storming in the opposite direction. She didn't care where the damn exit was; she just needed out of this stone prison. The halls twisted in endless curves, identical torch-lit passages and austere banners marking each wing with militant pride. The air grew colder the deeper she went, the weight of the fortress pressing down like a closing fist. She turned a corner and collided with a wall of armour. Literally. A group of Vivianite soldiers stood in the corridor, their armour dark with use. Warriors, clearly off-duty, yet armed as if battle could break out at any second. Avenna stepped back instinctively, shoulders stiffening. One of them, a towering man with a scar slicing through his cheek, glanced her over slowly, like she was meat in a

butcher's stall.

"Well, well," he drawled, smirking. "What do we have here?"

"I was just leaving," Avenna said, her voice flat, calm, and eyes sharp.

Another soldier stepped forward, blocking her way with a lazy swagger. "Priestesses don't usually wander these halls. You sure you're in the right place?"

"I said I'm leaving," she repeated. "Let me through."

The one with the scar chuckled. "We're just being friendly. Don't need to be rude."

"You're in my way."

That made them chuckle. One reached out, touching her arm in mock reassurance. Avenna flinched back, magic crackling under her skin.

"I wouldn't do that," she warned, her voice icy.

"Ooh, she bites," one of them muttered, amused.

"I said…" Her fingers began to glow, a pulse of power building in her palm, "…don't touch me."

But she never had to cast it. Because the next second… *CRACK*. A blur of motion. One of the soldiers flew backwards like a ragdoll, crashing against the wall with a sickening thud, his armour groaning under the force. Silence slammed into the corridor like a hammer. And then Grail stepped forward. His posture was loose, almost lazy: shoulders relaxed, hands at his sides, but his presence was a blade unsheathed. The soldiers stiffened instantly. Every trace of bravado drained from their faces like blood from an open wound. Grail tilted his head,

just a fraction, his voice deceptively soft.

"Is there a problem here?"

Silence followed. No one dared speak. He hadn't lifted a weapon or raised his voice. But whatever they saw in him was enough to douse their bravado in ice water. The men lowered their gazes in unison, heads bowed like penitents before judgment.

"…No, sir," one of them muttered, barely audible.

The scarred man's throat bobbed as he swallowed hard. "Forgive us. We didn't realise she was… under your protection."

Grail inhaled, slow and measured. "Then I suggest you leave."

His tone was calm. The kind of calm that coiled with threat beneath the surface. They didn't wait for a second warning. Without another word, the men turned and retreated, footsteps quick and uneven as they disappeared around the corner. Avenna remained frozen, tension crackling beneath her skin, her heartbeat thudding in her ears. Her gaze flicked to Grail, who was watching her with that same unreadable stillness.

"I was fine," she muttered, her voice tight.

Grail gave a quiet exhale and turned away without a word, walking past her as if the confrontation had never happened. She stood alone in the hallway, arms stiff at her sides. But her thoughts refused to be still. It wasn't just fear she'd seen in those men. It was something deeper. They were terrified of him. As if they'd seen a part of him, the rest of the world was better off forgetting. Avenna remained frozen, arms still stiff at her

sides, her thoughts a mess of tangled frustration and curiosity. Grail's silhouette was already halfway down the hall when her voice called out, sharper than she intended.

"You bark at me about protection," she said, stepping after him, "but you're the one parading around with no damn armour."

He stopped. She kept walking until she was beside him again, glaring. "No reinforced plates, no leather, not even a proper tunic. Just a sleeved cloak over your bare chest like you're some walking painting. How exactly is that safe?"

He turned slightly, the corner of his mouth lifting, but it wasn't quite a smirk. His gaze flicked downward as if referencing himself.

"Like a painting, you say?"

"Oh, please." She rolled her eyes. "It's not exactly subtle."

A brief flicker of amusement passed through his expression, but then he raised a hand and tapped two fingers against his chest, just above the black ink that curled up his collarbone.

"It's obsidian-infused paint," he said. "Not easy to pierce, deflects more than you'd think."

Avenna blinked. Her expression shifted just slightly, unsure if he was mocking her or being serious.

"And if it washes off?" she challenged. "Sweat, rain, blood?"

He looked down at her, the amusement fading from his face like the last embers of a dying fire.

"Then it washes off," he said simply. "Doesn't matter."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm immortal."

His words landed between them like thunder. Avenna stared at him.

"That's impossible."

"Is it?" His head tilted slightly. "You're a Priestess of the Winged Guardian, and you're questioning the impossible? I am a fallen celestial, after all."

She opened her mouth, then shut it again. Grail's voice dropped as he stepped in closer, his shadow brushing over her skin like smoke.

"I don't fear the blade," he murmured. "Not because I'm arrogant, before you say anything, but because death doesn't want me anymore."

There was something sad behind those words. He turned away again, his cloak catching in the movement like a shadow unfurling across the stone floor.

"Next time," he said without looking back, "worry less about my armour, and more about your own."

And with that, he disappeared around the corner, leaving Avenna rooted in place, heart thudding harder than before. *Immortal.* The word echoed through her mind. And the obsidian ink on his skin suddenly felt less like decoration… and more like chains.

◇

Elowen removed her headphones, which fell onto

the desk, making a loud sound that echoed through her silent room. As she stared at the unresponsive game screen, her jaw clamped shut and her muscles contracted while her fingers tapped against the chair armrest.

This was the first time she truly despised one of her own characters. But right now? Just a mocking smirk would have pushed her to delete Grail completely from the damn game. He transformed into a smug and arrogant fool who strolled around as if he were invincible. She had created depth in him, which was accompanied by sorrow that had become an integral part of his being, yet it was concealed under persistent taunts and annoying quips. It was maddening.

Her lips released a noise that blended laughter with a growl while she pulled at her hair roots with her hand. He represented everything she had resisted throughout her life. He seemed to be the kind of man who broke women yet remained unscathed. Her mind raced with restless bitterness until a ping cut through the quiet and pulled her focus to the chat window.

[**BLDome**]**:** *You okay?*

She didn't hesitate. Fingers flew across the keyboard with clipped precision, like her irritation needed somewhere to land.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I'm fine. Just frustrated.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Frustrated with what?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *With you.*

A pause.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Oh.*

She rolled her eyes.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Not you you. Grail. His entire personality changed.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Care to elaborate?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I wrote him to be noble and kind. Not a cocky, smug, manipulative pain in the ass.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Double oh.*

Elowen exhaled through her nose, massaging her temple. Her frustration pulsed hot beneath her skin like a wire pulled taut across her chest, aching to snap.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I'll be back in a minute. Need a break.*

She shoved herself from the desk. The chair rolled back with a muted squeak, a sound too small for the storm she carried in her shoulders. The kitchen greeted her with its usual hush. Just the soft hum of the fridge and the distant moan of old pipes. She reached for the half-finished bottle of red and poured herself a glass with the grace of someone running on fumes. The first sip was deep and warm. Comforting in theory, but not in practice. Because it wasn't just about Grail. It was what he reminded her of. The way he twisted the narrative so that everything became her fault.

"You're overreacting."

"I didn't do anything wrong, you're just being dramatic again."

"God, El, why do you always have to make everything so fucking intense?"

Miguel's voice, still living in the cracks of her memory, rose like smoke from a place she thought was sealed. Her grip on the wineglass tightened, knuckles bone-white. He never hit her. There were no bruises, no

broken plates and no police reports. Just the slow, suffocating erosion of her voice. Gaslight by gaslight. Silence by silence. Until she became someone who apologised before she even opened her mouth.

And now... it was back. In fucking pixels. In lines of rewritten code. Her creation twisted into her abuser. She downed the rest of the glass in a single breath and slammed it on the counter hard enough to make her flinch. The sound echoed through the quiet.

It was stupid. It was *just a game.* But her body didn't know that. Her nervous system didn't care. Trauma has no logic. Her chest tightened, her eyes burned. But she refused to cry. Not for him, not for this. She stood there for a long moment, breathing through the ache, the shame, the sheer ridiculousness of it all, before she turned and walked back to her desk. The wine curled warm in her belly, a fragile shield against the cold pit lodged deep in her ribs.

Ping.

[**BLDome**]**:** *You good?*

She stared at the screen. The cursor blinked.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Just tired, sorry. Logging off.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Fair. See you later.*

She shut the game. Crawled into bed fully dressed, letting the duvet swallow her whole like a tide pulling her under. And still, even with the lights off and the screen dark, the voice lingered. That smirk, that knowing tone. A man built from code, wearing the ghost of someone she tried so hard to forget.

She should have been asleep. Although the bed

offered warmth and the room remained silent while the night pressed softly against the windowpanes, she could not find peace in her mind. Underneath her conscious mind, her thoughts spun erratically as they whispered to bring her into repetitive cycles of irritation and doubt.

She tossed and turned. Her gaze lifted to the ceiling as she tracked the fleeting bursts of light from passing cars, which briefly lit her bedroom before disappearing. Eventually, she gave up. Elowen pushed back the covers with a sigh before sitting up and swinging her legs to the floor. She moved quietly to the kitchen to get a glass of water and then supported herself against the counter with her glass held loosely. Hugo was still asleep, unaware of her torment.

People often say that a child has the power to bring life back to a marriage. Holding something small and innocent in your arms transforms your priorities. Makes your arguments feel silly. Teaches you to let go. The strategy remains effective exclusively when both bridge sides remain undamaged.

Elowen had spent an excessive amount of time repairing her half of the bridge. Her bridge stood strong because of scraped knees and sleepless nights, and patience which drained her and hope that turned brittle inside her. She experienced both symbolic and physical bleeding from the constant strain of maintaining everything together. And Miguel? He never acknowledged her efforts until he presumed she would continue to manage everything.

The pregnancy was... surprisingly peaceful. At

least, physically. Her body had taken well to it. No complications or unbearable symptoms. Each night, she sang lullabies to her unborn son, who couldn't listen, but she wanted him to sense her promises. Miguel increased his visits to the pub during this time. He rarely came to doctor's appointments. He never made an effort to assemble the crib despite his repeated promises. Requests for anything she made became negotiation sessions, regardless of how small the need was, such as a new light bulb for the kitchen.

She wept so fiercely into her pillow during some nights that her tears left the sheets damp by morning. She presented her brightest smile whenever she stepped outside the house. Told people she was happy.

Following another of their poisonous arguments, she escaped once more to Thea's home. Thea welcomed her without hesitation by opening the door while her arms reached out for her, and her husband provided her with a warm blanket together with a mug of tea. He didn't say much; he never did. But his silence was kind, not indifferent. He purchased an additional duvet the following day to prepare for the possibility that Elowen would need to stay again. She'd been seven months pregnant. Thea still brought that up sometimes, reminding that Miguel failed to make even a phone call to check on Elowen's well-being.

Elowen demanded that they get married no matter what. She wanted Hugo born in wedlock. After all, they have been engaged for six years now. Miguel avoided arguments because he never put effort into

debating. They visited the registrar to sign their documents. No wedding.

Then came the birth. A long, exhausting, tear-streaked labour. And then… Hugo. As she cradled him for the first time with his big chocolate eyes looking up at her and his tiny fingers wrapping around hers, the world transformed from swamp back into ocean. The one she remembered. The one she'd dreamed of: rose gold light and gentle waves.

Her belief that she could rescue them existed for some time. She believed love was enough. She convinced herself that she might be asking for too much. *Maybe I'm overreacting. I should probably stop feeling angry about always having to do things by myself.* Miguel said he worked harder. Her job wasn't real work because she performed her duties sitting in the office. He argued that fielding angry calls from customers would never be as demanding as his physical job shifts. So she cleaned the house after work, cooked dinner and played with the baby.

Despite feeling completely worn out, she believed others endured tougher challenges. She should be grateful. Should be patient. Should be happy. Miguel was just tired and under stress. She should do better. Be better.

A new thread broke from that delicate rope with every instance he returned home smelling of alcohol and every act of ignoring her or his mocking and snapping at her because she didn't smile enough. And still… she stayed. She stayed because of Hugo.

Her glass was almost empty as she held it. Elowen blinked awake in the kitchen and placed the glass softly on the counter before pressing her palms against the cool surface. She checked the time… past midnight. But sleep still wouldn't come. She walked softly down the hallway and glanced into the small bedroom at the end. She heard the gentle breathing sounds. The little boy rested peacefully beneath a navy blue blanket adorned with moons and stars. His stuffed rabbit lay under his arm while his cheek pressed against the pillow, and drool left a dark stain on the fabric corner.

Elowen stepped closer, kneeling beside the bed. She swept a strand of hair from his forehead while her heart stopped momentarily. Without fail, she found herself stunned by his appearance every time she looked at him. Something so beautiful emerged from something so destroyed.

"Sweet dreams, little star," she whispered.

Hugo moved slightly before returning to his sleep.

Elowen started up her laptop again in her room, but she wasn't going to use it for gaming. She needed to do something. Anything. She didn't intend to log back in. Elysium wasn't yet a place where she felt ready to return because her feelings were still intense, and Grail's self-satisfied tone continued to haunt her mind as if it were a constant malediction. She just wanted to leave some feedback. She entertained the thought of letting out a rant to an unknown developer audience. Might fix it. She could potentially receive the original Grail version

she created.

But then she saw it. Her friends list displayed only one active name. [**BLDome**]**.** Still online. Her breath caught, just for a moment. Had he fallen asleep at his desk? Was he just sitting idle? Was he waiting?

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Couldn't sleep?*

A moment passed. She held her breath. Maybe he was AFK. Maybe he wouldn't reply. Maybe she'd just shut the laptop and pretend this whole emotional spiral never happened.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Sleep is overrated.*

A smirk tugged at her lips. She shifted, posture softening as she settled in.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *That's a very gamer thing to say.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Guilty as charged.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *So what do you do when you're not torturing me in-game?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Bit of music. Some composing. I play, too.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Guitar?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Guitar, piano… anything that makes sound and doesn't bite.*

She chuckled softly.

[**BLDome**]**:** *You? What's the world outside Elysium look like?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Mm… work at a gaming company, mostly remote now due to this assignment. Single parenting. Books. Tea. Building fantasy worlds and praying someone understands them. Hoping one day it will become my full-time job. Drafting more books...*

[**BLDome**]: *Book writer. Knew it.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Guilty as charged.*

A pause.

[**BLDome**]: *So how did Elysium happen?*

Elowen leaned back, exhaling.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Fantasy's always been my escape. It was a place I felt safe. Growing up, books were the one thing that didn't talk down to me.*

[**BLDome**]: *Makes sense. But why a game?*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Because stories let you watch someone survive. Games let you be them. You get to live it. Fight back. Make your own rules. And books are harder to gain recognition for.*

Another lull.

[**BLDome**]: *Do you often need that? The escape?*

The cursor blinked. Once. Twice. Elowen stared at it, her heartbeat thudding just a little harder. She could lie. Or she could do the one thing she hadn't done in months. Tell the truth.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Yeah. I do.*

[**BLDome**]: *Can I ask why?*

He wasn't pushing. Her fingers trembled slightly.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Don't we all?*

[**BLDome**]: *I guess... Everyone has their reasons. Is yours as heartbreaking as your idol's music?*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Sometimes. I won't bore you with stories about a traumatic childhood loaded with pressure and every mistake that was proof that I wasn't good enough. In short, home wasn't safe, school wasn't safe, and I was the weird kid. Bullying and all.*

She paused.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *So I escaped into books. Then into games. Anywhere I could be someone else. Someone braver. I built a mask, studied people, and mimicked behaviour. Eventually, the mask became permanent.*

Still no reply. Just that blinking cursor. So she kept going.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *That mask attracted the wrong people. I fell into toxic relationships easily. Broken marriage and all. Love was taken over by gaslighting. Eight years of it, before I broke free. And still… I found myself in another relationship. One that healed me just enough to hurt me more.*

The screen sat quietly.

[**BLDome**]**:** *I'm really sorry. There's nothing worse than letting someone else diminish your light. But I'm glad you made it.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Me too. Most days.*

A pause.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *That's why I hate Grail's change in the game. He reminds me of that same energy. That smugness. That untouchable pride. The way he talks is like everything's a game. Like people are disposable. Like emotions are a weakness. I see it… and I'm right back in that place. The one I clawed my way out of. I based him on a real person who helped me heal. And now he's been twisted into a parody of the man I fought to escape.*

Silence.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Maybe he's not finished yet. Maybe your version of him is still under the surface. Or maybe he's*

waiting to become who he was meant to be. Just needs the right push.

Elowen stared at the screen.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *That's the most optimistic thing I've heard in weeks.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Comes with the musician package. We write sad songs and hope they heal someone.*

She laughed softly.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Thanks.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Anytime.*

Another moment passed. And for the first time in what felt like ages, Elowen didn't want to outrun her thoughts. She let her fingers rest on the keys and exhaled slowly, hyper-aware of the quiet in her room.

[**BLDome**]**:** *But for what it's worth… I think it's incredible. That you took all of that pain and made something from it. Your game… It's not just a story, is it?*

She blinked. No one had ever said it like that. Not even Thea. And yet… he saw it. Instantly.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *How'd you mean?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *It's your way of rebuilding. Of creating a world where people can feel things they weren't allowed to. A place where someone like you can be… understood.*

Her breath caught.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Something like that.*

Her chest loosened, as if someone had reached in and unknotted a place she hadn't realised was tangled.

[**BLDome**]**:** *I admire that. Seriously.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *…Thanks.*

A soft pause unfurled over the chat.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Sorry if I was harsh earlier. I guess… I was projecting. Grail pushed a button I didn't know I still had.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *It's okay. But maybe… give him a chance. Maybe he's not the man you thought you created. Maybe he's the man you needed to face to finally have closure. Sometimes people act arrogantly or distantly because they've forgotten how to be anything else. Or because the world taught them that softness gets punished.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Your words sound like they come from experience.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *…Maybe.*

Her fingers hovered.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Have you ever had to become someone else just to feel safe?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Only when being myself felt dangerous.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *…I get that.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *So… why The Eternal Slumber?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Their music kind of rewired my entire nervous system.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Oh?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Nothing magical or cheesy, please don't misunderstand. It's a lot of things. But mostly… It's the lyrics. The frequency. And…*

She hesitated.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Go on, I won't judge.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I often feel things too intensely or not at all. It's hard to explain, but when I hear the band, I feel… at home. Like someone translated all that internal chaos into sound. I am not sure whether they use a specific frequency for*

their music, or any intended effect… But it calms my anxiety and stress. Somehow, other artists do not have the same effect on me, no matter how many times I searched. And the lyrics? I think they are extraordinary… The writing is so eloquent, beautiful and rich. I admire it. It's unlike anything else. It's the writer part of me that loves it.

[**BLDome**]: *…*

[**BLDome**]: *Wow. That's amasing. Never looked at it from such an angle. I get it when people are fascinated by music or lyrics because they can relate on a… surface level, may I say. But… I guess I never thought that music could also have such a deep impact, almost… biological.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Yeah. I never expected such a reaction as well. I discovered many talented musicians in my lifetime… but none had such an impact on me. I can enjoy many genres, and believe there are many talented artists… But, Eternal Slumber somehow bent the standard and changed the industry, in my opinion. I have also discovered a great community that respects this band and… I was happy to find out that many people felt the same. I felt… less alone.*

[**BLDome**]: *Yes, I heard about the community. I guess any musician would feel blessed with such support. I also heard how many people tried to unmask them.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *It's natural, I think. When something reaches you that deeply, you want to know where it came from, whose soul it fell out of. It's human psychology. But… They don't owe anyone their faces. Or their names. What they gave… the music, the feeling, that space to exist and breathe, that's more than enough. What I owe is to not waste the fire they lit inside me.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Grail, the vocalist, is private, closed off in that deliberate way that makes you realise how little of himself he leaves for the world to pick apart. And I respect that. Honestly, I like it.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *All I know is that he came from nothing. Built himself from nothing but a dream and a vision. He wrote music whenever he could steal a moment, took rejection after rejection, and never quit. And that's what I want for myself. No matter how many publishers pass on my books. No matter how many people don't understand the game. I'll keep going… because I've watched him do it and succeed. He's a great inspiration.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *aaaaaaaaaaadjfkjdkhfjksdfhds sori fingers glued to keybd*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Excuse me?? Did you just pass out mid-speech?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Sorry! I got a bit pekish. My caramel pudding got stuck to my fingers…*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Honestly thought I bored you into a digital coma.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Nah. It was stunning. Lowkey soul-punching. You should be a writer or something.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Haha… funny.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *But I get it, especially the music bit. Some things feel like background noise. Others rearrange you a bit.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Right? I think it's the same with books.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *I agree. So, you say you searched for many musicians to bring you that experience. Out of curiosity… what actually gets through?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *It depends on what I'm looking to feel. I grew up around rock… from classics to more alternative like Linkin Park, Evanescence or Radiohead. I also enjoy the complexity of Periphery and Muse.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *But I move between things depending on where I am emotionally. Sometimes it's ambient sounds, rain or the sea. Sometimes, more primal, rhythmic things, when I need grounding. But the piano always gets through. I never learned to play, which probably adds to it. There's something about it that bypasses thought entirely… it can make me feel things I didn't know I was carrying. I often have it on when I write or read.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Yeah, piano does that.*

The digital clock on the screen blinked **1:12 AM**. The exhaustion crept in, slow and syrupy.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I should sleep. Before I start sobbing over pixels again.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Probably wise. Though I'd argue these are emotionally loaded pixels.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Thanks. For talking.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Anytime. Really.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Night.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Sleep well, Star.*

Star. She stared at the word longer than she meant to. It curled around her heart like a soft thread, loosening something buried. With a quiet smile, she shut the laptop. The screen faded to black. She slipped into bed, the room dim and silent… but something had shifted.

She wasn't dreading tomorrow anymore. For the first time in a long time… She was looking forward to it.

CHAPTER FIVE

Soft morning light poured through Elowen's curtains, creating shifting gold patterns on the tangled bedsheets. With a low sigh of reluctance, she shifted beneath the blankets, stretching her limbs like a cat. Still half-asleep, she fumbled to find her phone and blinked the night away while unlocking it.

First instinct? Check the game chat. No new pings and no sarcastic remarks from **BLDome**. No teasing from **RedNocturne** or **SombreSky**. The screen remained silent and vacant without any online activity. She moved her thumb over the chat window, hoping it would activate, but it stayed dormant. Her lips formed a tight line as she secured the screen. It's perplexing how the sting of disappointment comes across as a quiet whisper that packs a pointed impact. She brushed the thought away as though it were morning fog and pushed the duvet back while stepping onto the chilly floorboards to start her day. Her initial activity for the day was a school run.

The kitchen was filled with the coffee machine's gentle bubbling sound, which brought a sense of familiarity and grounding. The aroma of roasted coffee beans rose into the air, resembling incense while

remaining simultaneously warm and bitter. As she leaned against the counter with her eyes half-open and her mug in hand, her phone vibrated on the marble countertop. Incoming call: *Robert Mendez*.

She sighed and picked up without ceremony. Robert greeted her with his standard combination of cheerfulness and professionalism while also exhibiting the lively edge from his coffee intake.

"Just checking in," he said casually. "You've been running tests for several days at this point. Wanted to hear your thoughts."

Her first instinct? *Grail*. She thought of the smirk and the arrogance. She could have said it. She almost did. But then last night crept in: the chat and the peculiar and hushed dialogue clung to her ribs like honey mixed with thorns.

Her fingers tapped absently against the ceramic.

"I think..." she started very slowly as she picked her words carefully, like handling sharp glass pieces. "I think it's good so far."

Robern waited, expectant.

"You've built something powerful. Seeing the world alive… it's... surreal."

He expressed his delight before asking his next expected question. "And the characters?"

Another pause.

"Well… The characters differ from my original vision. But maybe that's not a bad thing."

Robert laughed lightly. "Creators constantly waltz with chaos throughout existence. Things evolve. That's

the magic."

She gave a vague hum of agreement and exchanged additional pleasantries before hanging up the phone. After ending the call, she felt the silence become even heavier. She needed air.

Autumn's cool touch pressed against her skin as if it carried whispers of long-lost memories. The crunch of leaves under her boots accompanied her walk through London's rhythm: students hurried, traffic horns blared, and strangers brushed past each other like phantoms. It grounded her. She entered the café through the door, which caused a gentle jingle, while the roasted coffee smell and warmth wrapped her in an unexpected embrace. As she walked toward her usual table, she let out a breath and felt tension leaving her shoulders. And then, she froze. The music was gone. The soothing presence of live music, which was Noah's sound, was missing. The window corner remained unoccupied. No piano, no guitar. His shadowy figure, bending over the piano keys while his hood was drawn down, was missing.

She blinked in confusion because it affected her so deeply. His presence had inexplicably merged with her daily habits. The absence of sound made the surrounding noises feel overwhelming. She moved her head left and right before taking a seat and turning her attention towards concentration. Hours passed. She took quick notes and revised dialogue while mapping multiple story branches.

And then, her phone buzzed. A single message. Mum: *I'm in town. Let's meet.*

She exhaled slowly and deliberately until her lungs emptied. At that moment, for the first time that morning, she desired the game world to be real. Because Elysium was easier than this.

Experiencing restlessness, Elowen packed her belongings before exiting the café, where the door shut with a hollow sound. The outside air felt cool and fresh with wet leaves and distant rain, but failed to calm the burning sensation beneath her skin. Her feet moved rapidly as every step served as a silent protest against the emotional burden she held inside. And then… A voice.

The sound of that voice caught her attention with the immediacy of sharp thorns. Elowen reduced her walking speed and directed her gaze toward the narrow passage next to the café. And there he was. Noah. He had his back partially turned while his hood was lowered, and his hair appeared tousled from the wind. His body displayed tension as his shoulders remained rigid and his hands clenched at his sides. He was talking on the phone. And Elowen knew, somehow, that this wasn't a mundane conversation. She told herself to walk away. *Mind your business, Elowen*. Her feet acted against her will to guide her to the shadow's brink, where emotions smeared the world into a blur.

"I didn't walk away," he said quietly, staring into the wall. "I stood still for years while you ran to me only when it was convenient, just like now, when you decided to call me almost a year after everything, just because you're bored and need a shoulder to cry on."

Elowen gulped.

"I know he hurt you," he said. "I know you deserved better than the way he treated you. But… your pain didn't give you the right to use me."

There was a pause, and Elowen bit her lip. He seemed annoyed and hurt.

"No," he cut in, sharp and cold. "I understand perfectly. You let him tear you apart. And every time he did, you ran to me to stitch you back together. You needed me to listen. To make you forget. And once you caught your breath..." His voice broke slightly. "You went right back to him. I was invisible until you needed a distraction."

Elowen looked at him again. He was pacing nervously, hand in his pocket.

"I felt sorry for you," he said. "I still do. But somewhere along the way... You started doing the same thing to me. You suffered under a narcissist," he said softly, "and you became one yourself."

The silence after his words was devastating. Elowen swallowed and clutched her bag, slowly stepping away.

"You didn't want me, stop fucking lying! You wanted my comfort and my loyalty. You wanted a place to hide when the world turned ugly. But you never wanted *me*. I was never your home," he said. "I was just your shelter in a storm you never intended to leave."

And without another word, he dropped the call and turned to walk away. His eyes began to move upward in slow motion. Straight to Elowen. Their eyes locked. Elowen's breath caught in her throat. She hadn't realised

she'd moved so close. Throughout the whole time, she had been holding her breath. Her face flushed, mortified. *Shit.* He caught her listening in as though she were a sad voyeur witnessing someone else's heartache.

But Noah didn't look angry or even surprised. His expression didn't change. Without a word, Elowen turned and walked briskly down the street, her heart pounding with something sharp and aching. She didn't know if he'd recognised her. Didn't know if he cared. But the damage was done. His words followed her like ghosts.

"I was just your shelter in a storm you never intended to leave."

Gods. She knew that feeling too well. And for the first time since meeting him, Elowen realised… This man was a shattered human trying to put himself back together, just like her. Once, Elowen had thought progress was happening when she became absorbed in the new motherhood's delicate light as she observed baby Hugo resting between her and Miguel while noting their similar noses and long eyelashes. At that time, Elowen convinced herself that perhaps the worst period had passed. But happiness, like everything in this universe, was temporary.

Miguel's drinking patterns resumed their regular silent progression. Nights out became longer. The empty side of the bed… colder. And she was left alone with a child. Her reflection looked unfamiliar to her because of postpartum weight gain that swelled her curves, while her hair lost thickness and her skin appeared dull and

dry. It displayed stretch marks that looked like claw scratches. Motherhood ripped her body apart, leaving undeniable proof on her skin.

Despite his endearing nature, Hugo experienced challenging nights. Exhausted and sore with barely any sleep, Elowen spent countless hours attempting to comfort him. As tears gathered behind her closed eyelids, she rocked and hummed while whispering lullabies through clenched teeth. The numbness in her legs was combined with the locked pain in her back. She had developed a hoarse voice because she screamed into pillows during moments when nobody else would listen. And sometimes... she broke.

"Will you shut up for once?" During one sleepless night, she screamed those words because she could not manage the emotional storm inside her. As soon as she finished speaking the words her voice carried, they transformed into sobs, which caused the baby to cry harder. Sobbing with shame, she collapsed to the floor holding Hugo while repeating her apologies. But still… she told no one. Not Thea. Not her mother. No one. Because weakness had never been an option. Her mother had taught her that crying would not change things. Survival meant self-reliance.

The icy morning after that night began with her stepping out from her home before dawn in a scarf that failed to block the wind while pushing through the sleeping streets in Hugo's stroller. Miguel entered the hallway shortly after staggering in with the strong smell of beer.

"Where are you going?" he asked groggily.

Elowen didn't meet his gaze. "He won't sleep. I've been trying all night. I don't know what else to do."

"Pfft," he scoffed. "If you can't put a child to sleep, you're a shit mother…"

Elowen said nothing. She moved ahead, increasing her speed as she pushed the stroller. A quiet week followed. Miguel transitioned back to his 'kind phase' where he became a man who cherished laughter, jokes and family dinners. But she knew the cycle. The warmth never lasted. The subsequent storm arrived with an intense loudness.

"Why aren't you sleeping?" Miguel asked one night, slurring, while stumbling into the living room. In the kitchen, Elowen was cooking a late-night snack without making a sound. She was busy that day, after carrying four bags of groceries with a baby in a sling and cleaning the house, doing a few loads of laundry and entertaining her son. "Not in the mood again, I see?"

Her hands trembled, and her jaw clenched. She didn't look at him. He stepped behind her and mocked her about her perpetual anger when he placed his hand on her shoulder. And something inside her snapped. Elowen spun around with the kitchen knife aimed straight at him.

"Don't touch me! Keep your fucking hands off me, or I swear I will stab you in the fucking eye!"

His face darkened. "Are you fucking crazy?!"

She didn't answer. She hurled the knife at the counter and stormed past him. He grabbed her wrist and

spun her so she faced him. She launched the first attack with a slap so powerful that it stunned them both. He shoved her back. With tremendous force, she struck the floor. She howled in anguish, pure and primal. It felt as if that push completely broke the dam, and the bursting river of suppressed emotions roared out of her. Miguel shouted that she belonged in a mental hospital before he slammed the door and vanished. She screamed, and screamed, and screamed more with the tears in her eyes, sitting on the floor. It was surprising that neighbours didn't start knocking on the door.

Hugo managed to sleep all night with a miraculous stroke of luck. And Elowen? She didn't. She remained motionless beside the window while feeling numb and hollow inside. Her throat was sore from the screaming. The ring she wore pressed down on her finger with a weight that surpassed bone. The fierce tempest engulfed everything so completely that even the stars seemed too distant to touch.

She wasn't crazy; she knew that. She wasn't weak either. She was just tired. So, incredibly, fucking tired. She had asked for minimal effort, yet approached the wrong individual. Over and over.

◇

Elowen sat in the corner of the café, her hands wrapped around a mug of lukewarm tea, eyes tracing the slow march of the clock hands on the wall. She wasn't dreading this meeting exactly, just... bracing for it. There

was love here. Always had been. It just came wrapped in barbed wire sometimes. The familiar sound of quick, impatient steps against the tile made her lift her head.

"Elowen!" Joanna called out, weaving through the tables with a bright smile that tugged a little too tightly at the corners of her mouth.

Elowen smiled back, softly, as her mother slid into the seat across from her, shrugging off her coat with a flourish. Her hair was short, her lipstick perfect. She always looked good.

"Darling," Joanna said warmly, reaching across the table to pat Elowen's hand. "You look lovely. Tired, but lovely."

Elowen chuckled lightly. "Working a lot," she said. "Busy."

"That's good." Joanna stirred her coffee with a lazy circle of her spoon. "Keeping busy is important. Just make sure to take some rest."

Elowen sipped her tea, letting the silence stretch a little before Joanna filled it. Joanna swirled the coffee in her cup slowly, watching the dark liquid circle the porcelain as if she might read something meaningful in the pattern. When she finally looked up, the smile she offered was deliberate, polite in a way that carried more calculation than warmth.

"So," she said lightly, tilting her head, "did you have one of those counselling sessions recently?"

Elowen paused for a moment before answering. "Last week."

Joanna's eyebrows lifted, and a faint, amused

breath escaped her lips. "And? Did you manage to brainwash the poor therapist yet?"

Elowen frowned slightly. "Brainwash?"

"You know what I mean." Joanna waved a hand dismissively, the bracelets on her wrist chiming softly against one another. "You've always been like that, El. So self-aware, so analytical. Half the time, I feel like you're the one doing the therapy instead of receiving it. Honestly, I still don't understand why you go at all. You've read more psychology books than most professionals."

Elowen wrapped her fingers around her cup, though the tea had long since cooled. "It's not about intelligence, Mum."

Joanna leaned back in her chair, studying her daughter with the same thoughtful expression she had worn throughout most of Elowen's life whenever she felt a conversation drifting somewhere she did not entirely approve of. "I just think therapy is overrated these days," she said. "Everyone suddenly has trauma. Everyone needs a therapist to tell them their childhood was terrible."

A small laugh escaped her, though it lacked its usual ease.

"You had a good childhood, Elowen. We laughed, we travelled when we could. I worked myself to the bone to give you everything. There was nothing so horrible that should have scarred you for life."

Her voice softened slightly, but a sharper edge remained beneath it.

"Sometimes it feels like you're rewriting history."

Elowen held her gaze quietly, the familiar tightening in her chest returning as it always did when this subject surfaced. "I'm not rewriting anything."

Joanna's brows drew together, her fingers curling more firmly around her cup. "Then what exactly was so traumatic?" she asked, her tone hovering between confusion and quiet defensiveness. "Because when you talk about it like that, it makes it sound like I was some terrible mother."

"Mum, that's not what I'm saying."

"But that's how it feels." Joanna's voice carried a flicker of emotion she did not bother to hide. "I worked two jobs, raised you alone, even though your nan is adamant she was the main caregiver. I protected you from everything I possibly could. And now suddenly there's all this talk about trauma."

Elowen inhaled slowly, allowing the breath to steady the tight knot forming beneath her ribs. She had rehearsed this explanation many times in her mind, both during therapy and in the quiet hours after Hugo had gone to sleep, yet speaking it aloud to the person at the centre of it still required careful balance.

"This isn't about blaming you," she said gently. "It's about understanding what happened to me."

Joanna shook her head faintly, the movement impatient rather than dismissive. "I think you're overthinking things. You always have… You analyse every feeling like it's a scientific experiment."

A small, tired smile touched Elowen's lips.

"I analyse everything because I had no choice."

Her mother stilled.

"When I was little," Elowen continued quietly, "I wasn't just a child. I became the mediator, the listener, the one people came to with their problems. I was trying to understand adults' emotions before I even understood my own."

Joanna shifted in her seat, clearly uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation, but Elowen's voice remained calm and steady.

"You were strong," she said softly. "You worked constantly, carried a lot on your shoulders. I know that better than anyone." Her gaze drifted briefly to the window before returning to her mother. "But when the adults around a child are overwhelmed, the child often absorbs what they cannot hold."

"I never asked you to carry anything," Joanna said quickly.

"I know." Elowen's voice softened further. "But children do that anyway. They try to fix things, try to understand things. They grow up faster than they should because the situation around them demands it."

Silence settled between them for a moment. Joanna stared down at the surface of her coffee as if searching for a rebuttal she could not quite articulate.

"I still think you're perfectly fine, Elowen," she said after a while, her voice returning to its earlier firmness. "You're smart, independent, and extremely self-aware. You've always been stronger than most people."

Elowen nodded slowly.

"And the reason I became like that," she replied

gently, "is because I had to mature very early."

She let her gaze fall briefly to the table, tracing the edge of the saucer with her thumb.

"I learned to analyse every emotion because my own feelings were constantly questioned. I learned to fix problems because no one else had the capacity to deal with them at the time. I learned to carry other people's pain before I even understood how to process my own."

Joanna's lips pressed together.

"You're making it sound worse than it was."

"I'm explaining why I burned out."

Elowen lifted her eyes again.

"For years, I was the person everyone came to for advice, for support and for solutions. I carried other people's problems on top of my own and convinced myself that was normal. Eventually, there was nothing left of me. And that's on top of my recent diagnosis."

Joanna shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "Everyone is a little on the spectrum these days," she muttered, almost defensively.

Elowen did not respond. She had learned long ago that some statements were not arguments worth engaging with.

Joanna looked at her daughter for a long moment, something complicated passing through her expression. For a moment, Elowen simply watched her mother across the small café table, studying the familiar lines of her face. There had been a time when she saw no cracks there at all. As a child, Joanna had seemed larger than life to her, almost invincible. The woman who worked two

jobs without complaint, who protected her fiercely, who carried the world on her shoulders and somehow kept moving. Elowen had idolised her once, believing strength like that meant perfection.

Growing up had slowly rearranged that image. Not with anger or resentment, but with understanding. She could see the exhaustion now, the unresolved wounds Joanna had never allowed herself to face, the fears that had shaped her reactions long before Elowen was old enough to notice them. Her mother had loved her deeply. That had never been in question. But love and damage were not mutually exclusive things, and the older Elowen became, the clearer it was that both had lived side by side in their home.

She still loved her mother fiercely. That had not changed. What had changed was the distance she had learned to create between love and idolisation, between compassion and self-preservation.

"So, going to therapy," Elowen said softly at last, breaking the quiet that had settled between them, "is how I make sure I don't pass the same patterns on to Hugo."

The words lingered in the air between them. For the first time since the conversation had begun, Joanna had no immediate response, and the silence that followed carried a weight neither of them could easily dismiss.

Elowen looked at her mother, seeing not just the woman in front of her but the girl she once was: daddy's girl, trying to please a mother she could never quite win over, growing into a woman who measured her worth by

how much she was needed.

"You don't have to be needed to be loved, Mum," Elowen said quietly.

For a second, Joanna's eyes flickered… hurt, maybe, or something deeper. Then she gave a small, almost self-conscious laugh.

"Maybe I do. Old habits... Old fears. I suppose I've always liked being… in the middle of things. Your life, your relationships. I've never been the type to sit on the sidelines, have I?"

"No," Elowen said softly. "You never have."

Joanna leaned back, swirling the coffee again, her smile returning, but it didn't quite reach her eyes. The words weren't designed to manipulate, but they landed heavy anyway, filling the space between them with unsaid things.

Elowen softened. Because she knew that Joanna wasn't evil. She wasn't heartless. She was just... stuck in her own reflections. Trapped by the life she'd been told she was supposed to want, scrambling to make sure her daughter didn't end up adrift.

"I know you mean well," Elowen said after a moment. "I know you're proud of me. Even if you don't always understand why I choose the paths I do."

Joanna's smile warmed. Genuinely, this time.

"I am proud," she said. "More than you know."

They both sat there, cradling their cups, watching people bustle by the window, neither quite sure how to bridge the whole canyon between them, but willing to keep meeting halfway anyway. Outside, the air was brisk

and cleansing, but her thoughts spun with the force of an old wound reopening.

Elowen remembered the last time they had a tense conversation… about the diagnosis.

"What nonsense," Joanna had said, dismissing it with a wave of her hand. "You don't have any autism or ADHD! You're absolutely normal!"

And Elowen had sighed, already tired. "Who said autistic people aren't normal?"

Joanna's confusion was real and deeply ingrained. In her culture, anything different was whispered about, tucked under rugs and behind closed doors. She'd been raised in a world where you didn't air your struggles, you endured them in silence, presenting only the polished surface for neighbours to see. Elowen had broken free from that the moment she left their hometown to study in the UK.

She'd built her life from nothing in a foreign country, fought through loneliness, finished university, started a family, and in time claimed the place as her home. Joanna had only joined her a year ago, taking work as a housekeeper and part-time language tutor. English was still a stumbling block for her, but she tried, and Elowen was proud of that. They spoke mostly in their mother tongue, their shared words a small bridge back to the family who had stayed behind: Elowen's nan, still formidable despite age, and her brother, still rooted in the old world. And though Elowen was glad to finally have family close by, Joanna still carried the old

mentality's rules inside her bones, seeing the world through a lens where caution was safety, where independence was admirable but also dangerous, and where a daughter's choices could never be entirely trusted.

"You were the perfect child! Quiet and calm!" she insisted.

Elowen had looked away, fiddling with her bracelet that day. "The fact that you saw 'quiet' in a child and didn't question that says a lot."

Joanna had frowned. "You were fine! You played by yourself. You were obsessed with your drawings and fantasy books…"

"I had special interests. I stimmed. I masked. And I got a diagnosis to understand it, not to shame anyone."

"If that's autism," Joanna laughed, "then we're all a little autistic."

It wasn't worth explaining to her. It wasn't about her approval. Elowen hadn't gone through the diagnosis for Joanna. She had done it for herself. For Hugo. Her son had always reminded her of herself. The same sharp focus, the same deep well of emotions that didn't always surface in the right way. He covered his ears at loud noises and hated hugs from anyone but her. Preferred rainbows and pink glitter to toy trucks and superheroes. He liked building, creating, and memorising. He was brilliant, sensitive, and so beautiful.

When she mentioned this to Joanna…

"You should teach him to be a man," she had snapped. "All this pink and glitter, you'll confuse the

poor boy!"

But Elowen never wavered. She saw herself in him. She understood him. And in learning to love him freely, she had started to forgive the child inside herself, the one Joanna had never seen. She would never raise her child the way she had been raised. She wasn't perfect, but she was better. Elowen was determined to break the generational trauma and toxic cycle.

As she walked down the street away from the café, the pain in her chest burned hot. Her mother had tried to brush off everything that made her different. Had refused to see the wonder in her sensitivity and difference. She thought it made her a bad mother.

But this time, Elowen didn't shrink. She didn't explain herself. She didn't beg to be understood. But now… she learned to walk away. Elowen never thought of her mother as a bad parent. Joanna loved her, in her own complicated, imperfect way. But love wasn't always clean, and sometimes it tangled itself with expectation, guilt, and invisible strings Elowen could feel pulling at her even from miles away. She had learned, over the years, that staying didn't always mean closeness, and that sometimes, walking away was the only way to keep love intact. Moving to another country hadn't been about running from her mother; it had been about creating enough space to breathe, to choose for herself and to build a life without the constant weight of unspoken expectations. She didn't hate Joanna. She simply needed room to become herself, and that freedom had been the

greatest act of love she could offer to both of them. If anything, it made them closer.

The afternoon air was cool as Elowen walked the familiar route toward Hugo's school, the pavement still damp from the morning rain. For a few quiet minutes, her thoughts drifted aimlessly until something inside her chest shifted. The change was subtle at first, like a tremor beneath the surface of calm. Then her heartbeat began to climb.

She knew the signs immediately. Her breath shortened, each inhale feeling too shallow to reach the bottom of her lungs. A cold ripple ran down her spine while heat gathered behind her eyes, and the pavement beneath her feet seemed to tilt slightly as dizziness crept in. Her fingers trembled, the familiar electric restlessness spreading through her arms and chest as her body slipped into the reflex it knew too well. Anxiety was arriving, swift and merciless, and the busy sidewalk suddenly felt far too exposed. Elowen scanned the street through the rising haze in her vision until she spotted the nearest refuge: a small coffee shop tucked between a florist and a pharmacy.

She pushed through the door without looking at the menu board or the queue at the counter. The low murmur of voices and the sharp scent of roasted coffee pressed against her senses, but she moved straight past it all, finding the narrow hallway leading to the restroom. Inside the bathroom, she locked the stall door quickly and lowered herself onto the porcelain toilet, her bag slipping from her shoulder as her hands fumbled

through it. Her heart pounded wildly against her ribs, the pulse loud in her ears, her chest tight and fluttering as if something inside it was trying to break free. Tears blurred the edges of her vision while a tremor ran through her legs and shoulders, her body vibrating with a nervous energy that refused to settle.

Finally, her fingers found the familiar shape of her headphones. She slipped them over her ears with practised urgency, scrolling through her playlist until the name she needed appeared. When she pressed play, Grail's voice from The Eternal Slumber flowed gently into the quiet of her mind. Elowen closed her eyes, letting the first notes anchor her as she removed one of the many beaded bracelets circling her wrist. The beads were smooth beneath her fingertips as she began to move them slowly, counting each one with careful precision. Her body started to sway in small, steady motions, left and right, following the rhythm of the song. She placed her right palm against the centre of her chest and tapped lightly, matching the beat in her ears, guiding her frantic heart toward something slower and steadier.

It was the ritual she had built for moments like this. Grail in her ears, beads beneath her fingers and the quiet rhythm of her palm against her chest. Sway, bead, beat. Sway, bead, bead. Again and again, repeating the pattern until the shaking in her limbs softened and the storm inside her ribs began to ease. Slowly, breath by breath, the rhythm of the music reached her heart, and for the first time since the panic had surged through her, her mind found a narrow place to rest.

◇

Elowen shut her front door.

"Shoes off, mister," she called gently without even turning around. "And put them on the shelf!"

Behind her, Hugo padded in, his rucksack bouncing on his back and his jacket half off one shoulder. "Mum, I did put them there last time!"

"You left one on the stairs."

Hugo paused. "...That was Mischief. She's been stealing my shoes."

Elowen gave him a look, amused. "Uh-huh. I'll let the cat know she's being charged with footwear theft."

The chaos of the day began to melt as she helped Hugo out of his jacket and dropped her own bag near the hallway table. The house, her little sanctuary, felt warm again with him in it. The faint smell of lavender lingered in the air, and sunset filtered in through the blinds in soft amber hues. They moved through their after-school ritual with the comfort of repetition. Homework came first: Hugo sprawled out at the dining table with a pencil clenched between his fingers, tongue sticking out slightly as he focused. Elowen stirred dinner on the stove, glancing over every few minutes to help sound out a tricky word or explain a math problem.

"What's another word for 'bright'?" he asked, eyes narrowed at his sheet.

Elowen smiled, plating up his dinner. "Radiant."

He looked up. "That's a pretty word."

She walked over, brushing her hand through his hair. "So are you."

Dinner was simple: pasta, Hugo's favourite. Afterwards, they cleaned up together, giggling over a spaghetti noodle that had somehow landed on the wall. Then came their quiet time, a sacred little hour before bed that they spent drawing together. Hugo lay on the carpet with his coloured pencils scattered around him, sketching a dragon with big floppy ears and way too many teeth. Elowen sat beside him, adding shading to a constellation-covered sky.

He peeked over at her drawing. "Is that Elysium?"

She nodded, her heart warming at the way he said it… like he knew it.

"That's where you go when I'm asleep, isn't it?"

"Sort of," she replied, brushing his hair from his face. "It's where I go to tell stories. Where the characters wait for me."

"Maybe I'll make a world like that one day," he whispered, snuggling closer.

"You already do," she said softly, kissing the top of his head. "Every time you draw."

After bath and stories, two chapters of a fantasy book he insisted she read with voices, Elowen tucked him in. The way he wrapped his arms around her like he was still small, still hers completely, tugged at something deep and fragile in her chest.

"Do you miss me when I'm at Dad's?" he mumbled sleepily. Her voice caught.

"Every second," she whispered. "But I'm always

right here when you come home."

He nodded slowly, already drifting. "Love you, Mum."

"Love you more, starshine."

"I love you more than the entire Universe! I win!"

When he was finally asleep, his soft breathing filling the room like a lullaby, she closed his door with the gentlest care. Then, finally, she let the rest of the world fall away.

She padded back into her room, the stillness wrapping around her like a long exhale. She sat at her desk, cracked her knuckles, and flicked the switch on her PC. The soft hum of it spinning to life filled the silence like a heartbeat. Her fingers moved automatically.

She logged in. And for the first time that day… she smiled.

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *FINALLY, SHE'S HERE.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *About time. We were about to riot.*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *We almost left you behind, but we figured you'd cry.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *You're all insufferable.*

The warmth of their chaos slipped over her like a worn-in blanket. The banter, the rhythm and the safe predictability of it all. But as her eyes skimmed the messages, something snagged. **BLDome.** He was quiet all this time. Her fingers hesitated over the keyboard. Had she said too much last night? Scared him off? Made it weird? She pushed the thought aside, for now. Her gaze drifted to the glowing button.

Start.

She clicked it. The screen dipped to black, then bloomed, rich and golden, as Elysium unfurled before her like a waking dream. And Elowen let herself vanish into it.

◇

Before them lay a long winding road where ancient stone bones lined the pathway that transitioned from Valdoria's cobbled streets to packed earth. Soft plumes of dust rose beneath their horses' hooves while the capital's golden spires vanished into the haze behind them as hills with the appearance of sleeping giants absorbed them.

Near the head of their line, Avenna rode while her white mare demonstrated quiet grace beneath her. She remained silent and did not participate in the conversation that flowed from the group behind her. Her distant stare never wavered, searching tirelessly as though the answers she could not express lay on the horizon.

The Court Vivianite assassins demonstrated unusual efficiency while remaining in their wake. With his black and gold mask framing sharp eyes, Dy worked to train his horse to bow, but only received exasperated snorts from the animal and mocking laughter from his companions. Kolm focused on maintaining his longsword atop his finger for sidesaddle riding while loudly claiming his 'unparalleled precision'. Predictably, it ended poorly. Dy sent the blade into a tumble across the dirt with one clean slap. Kolm uttered an expletive as

he stopped his horse with the reins and performed a dramatic dismount to pick up his sword. Kolm muttered about Dy's envy while cleaning dirt from his steel sword.

Dy retorted with a roasted nut in his mouth while asking, "Of your idiocy? Hardly."

The constant sentinel Vier let out a deep laugh from behind them. "You deserved that."

Kolm pointed his sword at him. "Betrayal. He has betrayed my trust before, but never you."

"Spare me…" Vier huffed.

"Please," Kolm drawled, smoothing an imaginary crease from his sleeve. "The way you two are judging the situation, one would think neither of you has ever made a mistake in your lives. As if you're some flawless council of moral perfection."

Dy snorted under his breath and folded his arms. "Oh, relax, Your Clumsy Highness. Nobody here thinks we're perfect."

Kolm tilted his head slightly, blue eyes glinting with amusement. "The confidence with which you criticise suggests otherwise."

Dy shrugged, the corner of his mouth tugging upward. "Life's basically a standard paradiddle."

Kolm blinked once. "I beg your pardon?"

"Right mistake, left mistake," Dy said casually, playing imaginary rhythm with his hands. "Repeat twice until it sounds intentional."

Grail maintained his silence while riding at the line's end. He remained silent throughout the exchange, yet Avenna sensed his watchful presence. Always

watching. The dark cloak trailing Grail created smoke-like billows while his face remained partially concealed behind a half-mask. She noticed the slight tilt of amusement in his expression, indicating he was enjoying the moment, but kept silent.

Avenna exhaled softly, eyes flicking forward again. She wasn't used to this. To the sound of laughter. These men… warriors, assassins and killers, showed a surprising ability to be lighthearted and teasing while remaining fully alive. Her discomfort exceeded what was reasonable in this situation.

The group travelled toward Elaris. The journey there wasn't merely a pilgrimage. It was the first step in uncovering the truth. According to the king's command, their task began with gathering all possible information about Morphea's origin. Elaris's ancient archives and priesthood were said to hold some of the oldest surviving texts from before the Dusk fell upon Elysium. With a bit of fortune, they could trace the dark goddess's rise, and perhaps discover the seeds of her downfall.

Three days. She would spend three winding days in close contact with these men with no chance to get at least a minute to herself. Avenna was not looking forward to it.

The capital's distinctive edges disappeared while sleepy villages, along with meandering streams, emerged. Hillside stone cottages with moss-covered roofs emitted smoke from their chimneys as families cooked dinner. Youngsters sprinted barefoot through tall grass while their joyful laughter echoed through the air like

windchimes. The farmers wearing straw hats tended their wheat and barley fields while giving the passing group distant waves. Tilled earth mixed with wild lavender and drying hay filled the air with intoxicating aromas that triggered Avenna's senses to yearn for something she couldn't identify.

Roadside wooden carts displayed various goods such as herb bundles, dried meats and braided garlic, while others displayed bright fruits. Dy, of course, didn't hesitate. He decelerated his horse enough to grab roasted almonds from the stall before he tossed a coin into the merchant's hand without stopping.

Vier sighed, shaking his head. "You could try acting civilised for once."

Dy popped an almond into his mouth, lifting his mask just a bit. "But where's the fun in that?"

True to his nature, Kolm imitated Dy's behaviour and approached the vendor to chat with the self-assured charisma of someone who expected universal interest. He inspected all the choices as if he were choosing a royal treasure before selecting the most extravagant and impractical sweet on display: a bright pink candied fig mounted on a gold stick and covered with sparkling sugar. Of course. He bit into it with a dramatic flourish, the sticky syrup glossing his lips under a lifted mask as he rode past Avenna, chewing obnoxiously slow.

"You should try one," he called over, winking at her. "Might sweeten that scowl."

She didn't dignify that with a response. But after a moment, curiosity got the better of her.

"You're a vampire," she said, her tone neutral. "Shouldn't you be… I don't know, drinking blood instead of snacking on sugar like a festival child?"

Kolm turned in his saddle, his grin widening as if he'd been waiting for her to ask.

"Ah, the classic misconception," he said, wagging the candy stick at her like a teacher with a pointer. "Blood isn't the only thing we consume. It's more like… medicine. Necessary, yes. But not exclusive."

"So you can eat regular food?"

"Absolutely," he said, taking another bite with a satisfied hum. "We taste, we digest, some of us even enjoy wine tastings, thank you very much. Blood is simply… supplemental."

Avenna arched a brow. "And where exactly do you get your, uh… supplements?"

Kolm's grin turned positively devilish before he hid it under a mask again. "Let's just say there's no shortage of desperate admirers willing to offer a treat. Some women go for sword-wielding knights, others prefer a bite mark they can brag about at brunch."

She rolled her eyes so hard it nearly gave her a headache.

"You're insufferable."

"And yet," he said, licking a smudge of pink syrup from his thumb, "you're still talking to me."

She huffed and turned her gaze back to the road, unwilling to admit that despite herself… she almost smiled. Her focus had shifted. Up ahead, the treeline thickened. Dense, dark and ancient. The Whisperwoods

were untamed and alive with whispers and old magic. The last stretch of the road was smooth, deceptively so. Avenna's hand drifted instinctively to the edge of her satchel, brushing against the scrolls and elixirs tucked inside. The time for banter would soon end. And when it did? Only gods knew what waited in the dark.

The setting sun bathed the fields in fiery golden light before darkness gradually absorbed the luminance. The open plains transitioned into towering trees, which acted as guardians for the vast northern forest, where each wide and gnarled trunk had roots twisted into ancient shapes reaching down from the earth. As soon as the party entered under the forest's edge, a change occurred in the atmosphere. The world's noise faded under the thick forest cover while light filtered through the leafy roof above. The mare's hooves pressed onto the mossy trail while Avenna tightened her reins. The ground softened, muffled. All birds stopped their chirping as they moved past. The others trailed behind Avenna as their earlier conversation dwindled into silence. The riders travelled in silence while their senses became increasingly acute. The forest pulsed with a quiet life. The wind whispered secrets through the leaves. Unseen creatures moved in the underbrush while remaining close.

Avenna's fingers curled tighter around the reins. She knew woods like these. During her last escape from a kidnapping through similar trees, she had been hunted, marked by a desperate lord who believed her celestial gift could grant him divine favour. He had sent his minions

after her, cloaked men hungry for power they didn't understand. She remembered running barefoot through the trees, branches slashing at her arms, mud and blood soaking her skin. They caught her in the undergrowth where the trees grew thick, and the ground dipped low with mud and fallen leaves. Hands seized her from behind and dragged her down before she could gather the breath to scream. Her body struck the earth hard, the air leaving her lungs in a silent gasp as the weight of them pressed her into the forest floor.

The smell of sweat and leather filled her senses. There had been laughter, like a cruel amusement that crawled across her skin like insects. Someone twisted her arms behind her back while another pinned her shoulders down. The mud was cold against her cheek, gritty against her teeth as she struggled to pull breath into her lungs.

They spoke about her while she lay there beneath them. About her light, about what a gift like that must be worth and what they might take from her if they could break it open. Their voices carried that curious cruelty people sometimes had when something sacred fell into their hands, and they wanted to see how easily it could be ruined.

Her cloak had been torn away first. Fingers then caught at the fabric beneath it, tugging and pulling as though the layers of cloth were nothing more than an inconvenience between them and the prize they believed she carried inside her. They mocked her holiness while they did it. Called her blessed, divine while their hands

were not gentle.

What Avenna remembered most clearly was the weight of them. The suffocating heaviness of bodies pressing her into the ground, the forest spinning around her as she fought to breathe beneath the pressure. Her wrists burned where someone gripped them too tightly, and her knees scraped against stone as she twisted, trying to free herself from the crushing weight above her.

She remembered staring at the dark soil inches from her face and thinking that the forest would swallow her quietly. That the trees would stand witness and say nothing. It would not have been the first time men had looked at her and seen only something to take.

The High Priestess had warned her about that long before the world ever proved it true. Men, she had said, were creatures of appetite. A woman who wished to survive among them must learn to become a careful illusion: beautiful enough to be noticed, distant enough to remain desirable and accessible enough to keep their interest, yet mysterious enough that they never believed they fully possessed her.

Avenna had hated every word of that lesson. She had never wanted to be an illusion. She had never wanted to turn herself into something designed for the gaze of others. Yet the world had taught her the same rule again and again. Men looked at her and saw a body before they saw a mind. A prize before they saw a person and desire before they saw divinity. And sometimes survival meant smiling through attention she loathed, enduring hands that lingered too long and agreeing to

moments she would never have chosen simply because refusal carried consequences she could not afford.

Conflict could be deadly, and silence could keep her alive. Those truths had been carved into her long before the forest. But that night, pinned to the cold earth with their breath hot against her skin and their laughter filling the darkness, something inside her finally broke.

Fear turned into fire. The light inside her burst outward before she even knew she was calling it. It erupted from her chest in a blinding wave, raw and furious, burning through the air like a star tearing open the sky. The forest exploded with brilliance as the power tore through the bodies holding her down.

There were screams then. When the light faded, the forest had fallen silent again. Ash drifted slowly through the air like grey snow, settling over the blackened earth where the men had stood moments before. The trees around her bore the scars of the blast, bark scorched and branches split by the violent surge of celestial fire.

Avenna had remained on the ground for a long time afterwards, her body trembling against the cooling soil, the smell of smoke and burnt leaves filling the clearing. She never spoke of what had happened there. But the memory had carved itself into her bones, living quietly beneath her skin like an old scar that never fully healed.

Grail's horse came to a stop beside hers as if summoned by that very thought. He moved with the stealth of a shadow while his obsidian cloak trailed

behind him with only a faint whisper against the wind.

"You're tense," he said softly while his voice blended smoothness with steel.

She didn't look at him. "I don't like enclosed spaces."

He tilted his head. "You lack trust in your companions, or something else is the cause?"

That earned a glance, and he smirked faintly. Avenna said nothing. Because he wasn't wrong. She didn't trust easily. She maintained her distrust towards assassins who followed blood-soaked vows.

"Stay calm, Priestess," he whispered with a tone that blended amusement into his low voice. "You're safer here than anywhere else."

She doubted that. But she held her tongue. Their journey into the unknown made the shadows stretch out longer behind them. Towering trees formed an overhead structure resembling the ribs of a sleeping giant while their branches merged to obscure the sky. The canopy allowed fading light to filter through like falling stars, which bathed the surroundings in green and gold colours. In the far-off distance, a raven let out its mournful cry.

As they rode further into the forest, it felt as if the trees themselves stopped breathing. The forest offered only the sound of hooves striking earth and saddles groaning, while shadowy movement in the undergrowth disappeared before it could be identified. A figure showed itself as they approached the bend in the trail. Standing near the unstable wooden cart, a young elven

woman held a bundle of kindling at her feet. Her rough-spun cloak matched the wet bark colour while her pale hair formed braids over one shoulder, and worry tightened her expression.

Kolm spoke first since it was his natural role to do so.

"Well, aren't you a sight," he called.

Avenna ignored him, dismounting with practised ease. Her boots hit the forest floor without a sound as she stepped forward. "Are you in need of assistance?"

The elf nodded quickly, relief washing over her delicate features. "Yes. My mother… she's ill. She suffers from Dusk."

Avenna stilled. The word hung in the air like a curse. Elves had become a rare sight in recent years. When the new king claimed the throne, many of their kind rose in rebellion against his rule in a desperate resistance that ended in heavy losses and forced countless survivors to flee. Those who remained were still technically allowed within the realm, though only under strict conditions imposed by the crown. Their movements were monitored, their actions watched, and an additional tax was demanded from every elven household as proof of loyalty to the royal court. Even then, the king's sympathisers and hired blades continued to hunt them quietly in the shadows, and so most elves vanished from the roads altogether, scattering deep into forests, remote villages, and hidden sanctuaries where the reach of the crown grew thin. Dusk disease didn't discriminate; it was sad for Avenna to hear that even elves

were not immune to it.

"She needs warmth," the girl continued, voice thin. "I've been gathering wood, but I don't have enough, and night's coming fast."

Dy, perched lazily in the saddle, tilted his head. "You just need firewood?"

The girl nodded to his soft voice. "Please. I can pay if you wish. Not much, but…"

Vier was already dismounting, stretching his limbs like a cat waking from a nap. "We could use the break."

Kolm sighed with mock exhaustion. "Let it never be said I turned away a lady in distress. Especially one with such beautiful eyes."

Avenna ignored them all. She nodded once to the girl, her expression unreadable, then turned toward the trees.

Something was comforting in the task. The simplicity of it. Cutting, gathering, carrying… it was grounding. Avenna fought back silently against the mental pressure that challenged her thoughts. When she entered the thicket, her fingers brushed against the rough bark of an old willow, yet she remained unsettled by the persistent feeling of something being wrong. Not with the girl or with the request. The silence enveloped them completely until it became as natural as their skin. Still, she moved. Because movement meant control. Control meant survival. And survival? It was second nature. The forest swallowed her whole. The moss lent a quiet muffle to her footsteps as each step sank into the moist earth

beneath her boots. The atmosphere contained the dense aromas of bark and moist soil, along with an aged presence from ancient times. Avenna stooped down to pick up a fallen branch while her fingers made contact with its surface. And suddenly, the world shifted. A breeze stirred, unnaturally cold. The leaves above made a noise that didn't resemble the wind but rather something more mysterious and observant. She froze. The characteristic forest sounds disappeared completely, with no bird calls or insect noise and no far-off rustling sounds. Avenna rose slowly while her heartbeat accelerated until her eyes met the uninvited guests.

Three figures stood perfectly aligned between the trees as if the forest itself had grown them from bark and shadow. They didn't move, yet their presence bent the air… Dressed entirely in black celestial robes, their forms blurred at the edges, not quite touching the ground. Golden chains encircled their waists, draped like ritualistic shackles as if even now the universe needed them bound. Their faces were hidden behind flawless golden blind masks, just like Avenna's: smooth, emotionless, and inhuman, reflecting the forest light like rippling water.

Avenna's breath caught in her throat. *The Desear*. They were known only in fragmented scripture. Said to emerge when souls lost their way, when prophecy blurred, or fate bent too far from its intended path. Some believed they were once divine servants punished for questioning the gods. Others claimed they were fate's last attempt to guide a wayward spirit before it shattered

completely. Like dark priestesses, they levitated in the air.

Time stilled. The voices resonated in layers with echoes that felt interwoven rather than spoken because each syllable seemed extracted from distinct threads of a single tapestry.

"*The darkness you search for reveals itself to be different from your expectations."*

Avenna swallowed. "What does that mean?"

Her voice seemed dreamy and empty, as though she existed outside of her physical form. This moment existed completely outside the realm of reality. The figures did not move.

"*The two must become one*."

Her heartbeat stuttered. Static electricity seemed to move beneath her skin as her magic surged.

"*Make peace with your shadow because it belongs to you."*

The words curled tightly around her ribs as if they were clinging vines. She felt their weight.

Her voice barely escaped her lips. "Are you talking about Morphea? How… How do I defeat her?"

"*The veil will only be lifted through emergence*."

And just like that… gone. No flash or noise. The forest returned in a single breath. The branches crinkled while a bird sang from the treetops. The sound of her friends' laughter reached her from afar. But Avenna stood still, breath shallow. The Desear's words resonated through the forest with greater intensity than anything the forest itself could produce.

The two must become one… What did it mean?

Her return to camp felt dreamlike, her legs heavy, her mind a blur. The firelight flickered through the trees ahead. But as she stepped from the shadows, she was met by a figure already watching. Grail. He stood beside his horse, arms crossed, his masked face angled in her direction. Like he'd never stopped looking for her... Like he knew something had happened.

He pushed off the saddle, meeting her halfway. His voice was soft but edged. "You look pale."

She blinked, willing away the tremble in her hands. "I'm fine. Just tired."

He didn't believe her. She could see it, even through the mask. He studied her for a beat longer, then stepped back with a quiet huff. "Fair enough."

Relief flooded her, but it was short-lived. The others were gathered near the elven girl, arms full of wood. She offered them a grateful smile.

"Thank you. This will keep my mother warm through the night."

Avenna met her eyes, so full of hope, yet shadowed with a pain they both understood. There was no cure for Dusk. The elf reached into her pouch and held out a small leather coin bag. "For your kindness."

Kolm caught it before anyone else could move, tossing it in the air with a grin. "Now that's my kind of thank-you."

Dy scoffed. Vier chuckled quietly. The girl bowed and turned, disappearing into the thick woods once more, swallowed by the mist.

Grail tightened the strap of his weapons belt and turned toward the others. "We set camp here."

Avenna blinked. "Here? In the woods?"

He turned toward her, unbothered. "Yes, Priestess. In the woods."

Her arms folded on instinct. "You mean to tell me we're sleeping outside, with no shelter, no barriers, in the middle of this cursed place?"

Kolm flopped dramatically onto a fallen log. "Sounds accurate."

Vier shrugged. "You really are a spoiled Priestess."

Avenna glared at both of them before looking back at Grail.

"This is a terrible idea."

"Our horses need rest," he said simply, voice cool. "Push them further, and they'll be useless if we're attacked."

She opened her mouth, then shut it. Damn him. He was right. She exhaled sharply through her nose, her annoyance simmering. "I hate this."

Grail tilted his head slightly, starting a fire. "Duly noted."

With a glare sharp enough to kill a lesser man, she stalked toward the fire and dropped onto a log with all the grace of a thunderclap. Fine. She'd sleep in the woods. But she didn't have to like it. And she definitely wasn't going to let Grail think he'd won.

CHAPTER SIX

The quiet crackling fire produced restless shadows that appeared to dance like ghosts upon the surface of ancient tree bark within the clearing. The night enveloped them with its cool and damp vitality. The forest's stillness amplified every sound from the fire while the aroma of wood smoke merged with the natural fragrance of damp moss and decaying leaves. In the darkness beyond the firelight, an owl produced a deep, prolonged call. Above them, the broken moon dominated the sky… Elysium's accursed gaze, while its fragmented surface spilt silver streaks across the heavens as if sorrowful veins were drawn into the stars.

Avenna kept her knees pressed against her chest while she sat curled under her cloak, watching the dancing flames. The flames touched her skin with a brief burst of warmth, which failed to penetrate the deep chill residing within her. This deep-rooted cold remained untouched by any warmth. She hadn't camped outdoors in years. No protective temple walls, no incense, no quiet chants. There was nothing but her presence alongside a worn-out fabric and complete darkness surrounding her.

The assassins lounged like wild things. With his arms behind his head, Dy leaned back on a fallen log while his black-and-gold mask shimmered brightly in the firelight, resembling polished obsidian. Kolm remained perpetually uneasy as he sat atop a rock, idly toying with his sword as though he found inactivity more threatening than combat. Vier lay sprawled on the ground as if he were a majestic lion with his cloak beneath him, while his eyes stared into the night sky. None of them had constructed shelters. The only features around them were natural air and unbroken quiet, which seemed to make them an extension of the forest. As if they feared nothing.

Avenna was unsettled by their apparent lack of fear toward the woods. She glanced around, brow furrowing. Her voice unintentionally came out sharper when she asked, "Where's Grail?"

Vier emitted a slow hum and kept still without moving. "Wandering."

"Wandering?!" She huffed.

Dy gave his response without directing his gaze towards her. "Leave him be, Priestess. He'll come back."

Avenna clenched her jaw. "Isn't he supposed to protect me?" she snapped with irritation building inside her. "He's arrogant, reckless, and completely unreliable. It baffles me as to why the king would appoint him as my protector."

The silence that followed did not indicate agreement. Then, Vier spoke, his tone quiet. "You're truly misjudging him. Grail's not as simple as you think."

Avenna scoffed, hugging her knees tighter. "Oh,

sure. Because arrogant, brooding and cryptic equals depth now."

"You know nothing about him," Dy insisted more forcefully that Avenna lacked knowledge about him.

"I know enough," she bit back. "I know he led people into darkness. That he helped Morphea's rise. While everyone we held dear turned to ash, he made his choice to serve her. I watched my temple collapse. The priests who raised me died because of monsters like him."

Still, they said nothing.

She pressed more deeply while anger welled up from some hidden place within her. "He wasn't forced. He preached his message until people started following a goddess whose power comes from despair. How stupid do you have to be to follow someone like that? What even drove him to choose this dark, broken and miserable goddess like her?"

Kolm shook his head as he said to her, "You really don't know anything, do you?"

She turned to him, jaw tight. "I know that he's a killer."

"So are we," Vier said quietly. "And yet… You haven't asked why."

Dy adjusted his position to sit upright while leaning over his knees, and his voice became noticeably heavier. "You're right. Grail led people to Morphea. He did kill. The greatest cost of these actions fell onto him."

Avenna froze, frowning.

The fire's reflection danced across the edge of Dy's

mask as his eyes moved toward it. "Do you believe he trailed behind her because of his complete blind faith? Did he choose to become her weapon for no reason?"

"It's irrelevant. No reason excuses his actions." She answered, her voice wavered.

"He loved her," Kolm said while he didn't take his eyes off his blade. "More than anything. More than himself."

Avenna's breath caught.

"That's why it broke him," Kolm continued, idly turning the blade in his fingers. "He wasn't just her servant. He was her lover, her chosen. The one she marked as hers… and the one she left empty."

"She used him," Vier added, voice barely above a whisper. "The moment he outlived his purpose, she discarded him. And he's been dragging what's left of himself ever since."

Avenna's throat tightened.

Dy leaned forward, his voice low, like a confession given to the night itself. "They say he was once a god. A celestial being, roaming the Aether. He belonged to the Heavens, the realm above Elysium. But he fell… because he loved the wrong woman."

Avenna's fingers curled unconsciously into the fabric of her cloak. Vier's voice was thoughtful, quieter than usual. "Morphea promised him everything. Her heart, her body, her eternity. But he was never her first choice. She had another lover before him: stronger, older, more powerful, I guess. Grail was… a distraction. Something soft she turned to when the shadows didn't

hold her like they used to. When she was lonely or when she needed to be adored."

Avenna's chest tightened.

"She asked for proof of his love," Dy continued, his tone stripped of its usual mockery. "She asked for devotion and offerings. And he gave it to her. Again and again. Blood, souls and faith. He converted hundreds in her name, giving her power. Preached her divinity. Spilt oceans of red for her." He exhaled sharply. "And when she was done with him… she cast him aside."

The fire crackled. Leaves rustled softly overhead, the forest murmuring in time with the weight of the story.

Kolm's eyes rose to the moon above them. "And that's when he saw what he'd become. A weapon. A monster sculpted in her image. He became a vessel of her darkness."

Avenna's breath caught.

"He tried to undo it," Vier murmured, eyes reflecting the firelight. "He tried to get her back to light, but failed. And the gods… they don't forgive betrayal."

Dy's mouth twisted into something that wasn't quite a smile. "They punished him for his love. Stripped him of divinity. Banished him from Aether. Cast him down to Elysium like a broken relic."

Avenna couldn't speak. She felt a twist in her stomach, sharp and cold. There was a silence then, deep and suffocating. Only the fire moved, flickering and popping like it, too, mourned something.

Finally, Avenna whispered, "That doesn't change

what he's done."

Dy let out a dry laugh. "No. And you're not the only one still holding it against him."

Vier spoke gently, but the weight behind his words was a blade to the chest. "He's been paying for his sins longer than you've been alive, Priestess."

Avenna didn't respond. She looked back at the fire, the flames shifting like golden serpents dancing across charred wood. She had only ever seen Grail through the lens of his crimes, the blood on his hands and the weight he carried like armour. But now... she saw something else. A man built for the stars and condemned to crawl through ash.

She folded her arms across her chest. Somewhere beyond the trees, beneath the fractured moonlight, Grail was out there. Wandering alone in the dark. And she suddenly wasn't sure whether she feared him... or felt sorry for him.

The camp had settled into the uneasy quiet that followed difficult truths. The fire burned low at the centre of the clearing, its amber glow licking at the surrounding trunks while sparks drifted lazily into the night. Avenna sat with the assassins for a time, staring into the flames without truly seeing them. Grail's story lingered heavily in her mind, every word of his fall echoing louder in the quiet. The image of Aether, the betrayal, the love he once held for Morphea, it all stirred uneasily in her chest.

She could not settle. The weight of it pressed too tightly against her ribs. After a moment, she rose from

the log, brushing ash from her palms.

"I need a minute," she said quietly.

Dy glanced up, but he didn't question her. Kolm's gaze followed her movement briefly, sharp and knowing, before he returned his attention to the forest beyond the fire. None of them moved to stop her. They all understood that Grail was somewhere within the woods, and if anything threatened her, he would appear before the danger had time to breathe.

Avenna stepped beyond the reach of the firelight and into the forest. The night swallowed her quickly. The deeper she walked between the trees, the dimmer the campfire became until it vanished entirely behind the trunks. Moonlight filtered through the canopy above in pale ribbons, barely bright enough to guide her path. Fireflies drifted lazily between the branches, their small glows flickering like wandering stars.

She slowed her steps, scanning the darkness. The Desear should have been here. If anyone could offer even a hint of how to face Morphea, it would be them. But the woods gave her nothing. She walked deeper, searching the spaces between the trunks where the darkness thickened, calling silently for them to reveal themselves.

Still nothing. After a long while, she stopped beside a large oak and leaned her shoulder against its rough bark. The cold seeped through her cloak as she exhaled slowly, folding her arms around herself against the chill.

"How does one defeat a goddess…" she murmured under her breath.

The responsibility sat on her shoulders like iron. Her hands began to tremble. Avenna frowned and lifted them into the moonlight. The tips of her fingers were darkening. Black crept slowly beneath her skin like spilt ink, staining the edges of her nails. She swallowed and rubbed her hands together quickly, hoping the warmth would push it back beneath the surface.

But the darkness remained. She hated it. It had always lived quietly beneath her skin, a shadow she had learned to conceal with careful control. But lately it slipped through more easily, revealing itself whenever fear or worry tightened its grip on her chest. Her heartbeat quickened, breath shortening as dizziness crept along the edges of her vision.

The forest seemed to sway slightly around her. Avenna lowered her hands, forcing a steady breath as she pushed herself away from the tree. The prophets were not coming tonight. She would find no answers here. She turned to head back toward the camp and gasped.

A dark figure stood directly before her. Grail. He towered in the moonlit shadows, tall and still, his form blending so completely with the darkness that he seemed carved from it.

"You scared me," she said sharply.

"Don’t wander through the woods alone then," he replied calmly. "You never know who might be watching."

Avenna quickly folded her hands behind her back, hiding the blackened fingertips from his sight. Her gaze shifted downward, landing on the cluster of necklaces

resting against his bare chest. The chains glinted faintly against the dark paint that marked his skin.

"I just needed some time alone," she said.

"Oh?" His voice curved slightly with amusement. "And here I thought you were looking for me for company."

She huffed quietly. "You're certainly not the company I would prefer."

"Ouch."

She stepped to the side to pass him. He stepped with her.

"Move," she said.

He didn't. Avenna pushed against his shoulder, and his hand closed around her wrist before she could slip past. He lifted her hand slightly. Moonlight revealed the blackened fingertips.

"What's that?" he asked.

She jerked her hand away immediately. "Not your business."

Her pulse had already begun climbing again, the trembling in her fingers returning. Grail stepped closer. Avenna found her back pressed against the tree trunk before she realised she had nowhere left to retreat. Her breathing quickened.

"Relax," he said quietly.

"I am relaxed."

"Your heart says otherwise."

Before she could protest, his hand took her wrist again, slower this time, guiding her palm gently to the centre of her chest. His hand settled over hers.

"Tap," he murmured.

She frowned.

"What?"

"Tap."

He pressed her hand lightly against her chest.

Beat. Beat. Beat…

"Follow the rhythm," he said softly. "Your heart will listen if you give it something steady."

His hand guided the movement again, slow and even.

"Close your eyes."

"I'm not…"

"Close them."

After a moment, she did.

Beat. Beat. Beat…

Her breathing slowly softened. The dizziness eased. His voice lowered further as he leaned closer, until it brushed quietly against her ear.

"Let the rhythm carry it away."

She hadn't noticed him bending toward her. The sound of his voice settled into her mind like dark velvet, steady and calm. Her body began to follow the rhythm. When the trembling finally faded, his hand slipped away.

Avenna opened her eyes slowly. Heat rushed to her face. Grail was bent toward her, his masked face only inches away.

A cloud drifted from the moon. Silver light spilt through the branches. For the briefest moment, the reflection caught inside the slits of his mask.

She saw it. An eye. Focused directly on her. His

lips curved faintly.

"Good girl," he murmured.

Avenna huffed immediately, pushing his shoulder. "Get away."

She walked away quickly toward the camp, forcing her composure back into place. After several steps, she stopped and turned, ready to throw another remark over her shoulder. But the forest behind her was empty. Grail had vanished into the shadows.

That night, Avenna curled into herself on the cold earth. Her cloak did little to shield her from the creeping fingers of night. The fire had shrunk to glowing embers, its warmth barely reaching her skin. The others had already drifted into sleep, their breathing slow and even. But Avenna couldn't sleep. Her limbs trembled with cold. She shifted, tugging the edge of her cloak tighter, but it wasn't enough. Her body trembled harder. And then… something heavy settled over her. A thick, warm fabric, draped gently but firmly across her. She froze. It smelled of cold steel, damp earth… and something softer beneath… cedarwood and smoke. Her breath caught as she turned her head slightly. Just enough to see the edge of a black cloak falling over her shoulders.

He was gone again before she could speak. But her body relaxed. The cloak held the warmth her own could not. And for the first time that night, her eyes closed. Her fingers curled into the worn fabric, and her breath slowed. She didn't know why he had done it. She didn't even know if he cared. She slipped into sleep, dreaming of gods who fell for love, and monsters who

were once stars. The world around her was warm, bathed in golden light. Avenna stood in a vast floral garden, thick with mist and the sound of cascading waterfalls. Golden-winged birds fluttered through the air, singing melodies that pulsed like memory through her veins. Flowers bloomed with divine rhythm, petals stretching skyward as if reaching for the stars. Golden roses covered the earth in glittering waves, catching the light like spun sunlight.

By the largest waterfall, a voice sang. The words were lost in the air, but the feeling clung to her like a heartbeat. She moved to follow the sound, drawn to it, needing to see, but the mist thickened around her, swallowing the image whole.

And then she woke. Avenna's breath caught as her eyes opened, the dream slipping from her grasp like water through her fingers. The dawn light painted soft gold across the trees, morning birdsong gently replacing the cicadas of the night. She blinked the haze from her vision and realised she was warm. Too warm. A heavy cloak rested over her, thicker than her own, warm with fur lining and weighty golden tassels. The deep black fabric shimmered slightly in the light, elegant yet battle-worn. It wasn't his usual assassin's cloak, she noticed. Her gaze snapped toward the fire.

There he was. Grail sat nearby, sharpening his sword with slow, deliberate strokes. In his usual black cloak, mask, and hood over his head. His arms were wrapped in streaks of black paint, arcane and jagged-like shadows carved into his skin. She could see his form

more clearly now: lean muscle, sharp edges, old scars. A man honed by war and shaped by something far older than the battlefield.

"You always wear hoods," she said, voice dry with sleep.

He didn't look up, dragging the whetstone along his blade with that same rhythmic scrape.

"They're mysterious," he replied. That faint smirk played at the corner of his lips. "Keeps people guessing. Maybe I'm bald. Maybe I've got horns. Maybe I'm just painfully dramatic."

Avenna arched a brow. "You are dramatically painful."

He chuckled, still not looking at her. She hesitated, running her fingers across the fur lining of the cloak. "You didn't have to..."

"No," he said simply. "But it's warmer."

She blinked at that. He hadn't said *for you*, but she knew it was implied. She cleared her throat, shifting slightly. "Thanks."

A brief nod. Avenna hesitated again, watching the faint sunlight dance across his golden-stitched mask.

"Do you always wear it?" she asked softly. "The mask. I only ever heard of you wearing one that covered your whole face once, like your friends. People guessed you had sharp fangs or an inhuman face… Or maybe some horrible scars. But I can see half of it. You seem… normal."

His motion paused. She saw it, the slight twitch of his fingers and the shift in his posture. He placed the

sword down gently beside him and leaned back against the log.

"I did wear a mask that hid my face completely," he said, voice lower now, more thoughtful. "When I broke."

"Broke?" she echoed, her eyes narrowing.

"When I... fell," he clarified. "When Morphea still had her claws in me. The mask covered everything. Like a shell. I was ashamed of who I was, and was hiding from this world."

Avenna's lips parted slightly, her hand brushing against her own golden blindfold.

He continued, "But every time I tried to pull away from her, something in me cracked. Not just in here," he tapped his chest, "but the mask itself. It started to fracture. I thought it was breaking because I was weak. Turns out…" His gaze drifted to the treetops. "It was trying to let the light in. And finally started feeling comfortable being myself."

She swallowed hard.

"Or, maybe I just decided to keep half of my face open so it's easier to eat and drink, who knows." He smiled.

"So... you're free from her now?" she asked cautiously.

Grail turned his head to her.

"No one's ever completely free from their past, Priestess."

Avenna exhaled. The silence between them thickened, but it wasn't uncomfortable. It was the kind

that felt sacred, like neither of them dared to breathe too loudly, afraid they might shatter something delicate growing in the dark. Avenna found herself staring into the treetops too, following the direction of his gaze.

"Grail..." she said quietly, her voice a thread of curiosity and something more fragile beneath it. "Can I ask you something?"

He glanced at her without turning his full body, waiting.

"Tell me about Aether," she whispered. "What was it like?"

For a long moment, she thought he might not answer. His hands flexed slightly against his sides as if the memory itself was a wound he hadn't touched in a long time. Then finally, his voice rose again, lower now, carrying a distant sorrow.

"Aether was..." He stopped, searching for a word big enough to carry the weight of it. "It was a paradise that breathed." His words spun slowly, rich with longing. "The sky was endless. Soft, perpetual twilight painted in hues no mortal hand could ever mix. The rivers sang, and the trees bore fruit so sweet it hurt your teeth. Golden roses bloomed eternally. It was alive. Every blade of grass, every shifting wind carried the music of existence."

He shifted slightly as if the memory was a living thing pressing against his ribs.

"It was created in similarity to the original Elysium. When the Titans and the first gods walked among mortals. They moved through Elysium the way sunlight moves through the water. Gods lived beside the

mortals, the Fae, the Elves, even the mermaids who sang from the shores."

Avenna listened, her heart aching without fully understanding why.

"There was peace," Grail said softly. "There was love. A kind of love that wasn't desperate or broken." He paused, jaw tightening slightly. "But nothing stays untouched forever."

Avenna's brows knit together, sensing the shift in him.

"Human nature," Grail continued, voice a little rougher, "was always... evolving. Always reaching. Always hungering for more." He looked down at his hands, almost studying them. "They saw the gods' eternity and their endless life. And envy took root. Greed and fear took over love. They dared to seek that power for themselves."

Avenna's lips parted, her breath catching.

"They tried to ascend," Grail said. "Tried to steal eternity. They failed," he whispered. "But it changed everything."

He turned away from her gaze, his voice low and solemn.

"The gods... they could no longer walk among humans. They saw what they had become. So they split Elysium. Titans tore open the heavens and created Aether high above those who did not yet know how to ascend. Gods are born from the energy and frequency of life itself, each one taking ownership of the force they were created from… light, storm, shadow, fire, the countless

currents that weave the world together. And when Elysium lost its gods, when those frequencies faded from the realm, Aether became my new home. It kept the natural beauty and love that Elysium had lost, and I learned to love it in turn."

Avenna tilted her head, studying him. "So… what kind of God were you, exactly?"

For a moment, he said nothing, gaze fixed ahead as though weighing whether the truth was worth sharing. Finally, he exhaled. "I was the God of music, creativity, imagination… and the frequencies of life."

Her brow lifted, and a grin tugged at her lips. "You? A God of music? I can't picture you plucking some stringed instrument and singing a serenade."

He shot her a mildly offended look, his mouth curling into a pout. "Music is all around you… You just don't see it."

She laughed softly. "Oh? And where exactly is this invisible orchestra of yours?"

He stopped and gestured around them. "There, in the birdsong above us, in the way the wind bends through the leaves, in the river's rush against the rocks. Everything has a rhythm, a sound, a frequency. Even you."

"Me?"

"Your heartbeat," he said simply, and she remembered the last night. "It's your own music, a score that changes with every thought, every breath. When I was in Aether, I listened to the world's frequencies and kept them in balance. I wove the harmonies between the

living and the divine. I gifted humans the spark of creation, the ability to hear a song in their minds and make it real, to imagine something that has never existed and give it form."

Avenna's smile softened. "So you were… a kind of divine composer."

His smile warmed. "I sang in harmony with Aether itself. Every ripple of water, every sigh of wind, was part of the great song. My duty was to keep it from falling out of tune."

"I see."

"For a time, Elysium still bloomed," Grail said. "Still thrived. Its beauty didn't die all at once. It lingered and tried to survive. Until..." His voice drifted into smoke.

Avenna leaned closer, heart pounding in her ears.

"Until what?" she whispered.

His head bowed slightly. The firelight caught on the edges of his mask, casting fractured light across his face.

"Until Morphea was taken by darkness," he said.

The words hovered, and Avenna's chest tightened. She swallowed, steeled herself.

"Taken? How?" she breathed.

Then… snap. A sharp crack echoed from the trees. Both of them turned instantly, their bodies shifting like clockwork. Avenna's fingertips glowed faintly as her magic surged. Grail was already on his feet, slipping his ornate coat back over his shoulders, the tassels swaying softly as his hand moved to his sword hilt. Something

was watching them from beyond the firelight.

◇

The soft glow of Elowen's monitor illuminated her dimly lit room, the golden backlight of her keyboard shimmering beneath her fingertips. The game's music hummed faintly in her ears, the familiar notes of Elysium's theme weaving through the air like an old, beloved lullaby.

Most of the players had already logged off, sensing an intense battle ahead and agreeing to continue it tomorrow. The in-game chat was quiet now, save for one last name still online. She hovered over his username, hesitating for a moment before typing.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *You still here?*

A few seconds passed.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Yeah.*

Elowen leaned back, staring at the screen.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *You okay? You've been quiet today.*

There was a pause before he replied.

[**BLDome**]**:** *I'm fine. Just had a long day.*

She arched an eyebrow. Had she imagined it? There was something about his usual energy that seemed… dulled.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Long day doing what? You just game all day, or do you have a secret underground life I should be worried about?*

His response came quickly.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Definitely underground. Super top secret. Mostly involving world domination.*

Elowen smirked. At least his humour was intact.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Oh, good, I was worried you might be normal for a second.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Perish the thought.*

She let out a soft laugh, resting her chin in her hand.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *But seriously. What do you do outside of here? Are you a full-time gaming nerd with a musical hobby, or do you have an actual life?*

There was a moment of silence before he answered.

[**BLDome**]**:** *A little of both. My friends and I are… growing our band together.*

Elowen sat up a little straighter. Now *that* was interesting.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *A band?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Yup. A real-life divine orchestra of sorts :)*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *That's pretty cool. What kind of music?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Hard to explain. A mix of things. Alternative, cinematic… something between heavy and soft. We don't want to be boxed into a genre.*

Elowen grinned. The way he talked about it sounded almost poetic.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Like Eternal Slumber?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *:)*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *How mysterious. Do you sing?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *A little.*

Something in his hesitation caught her attention.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *That was the most modest answer I've heard from you. You must be good.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Or I just don't want to overhype myself.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Mmhm. Sure.*

She could almost hear the smirk in his silence.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *So you're a musician, a gamer, and…?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *I write poetry sometimes.*

Her eyebrows rose. Okay. Definitely not what she expected.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Seriously? You're telling me the guy who plays the cockiest assassin in this game is secretly a poet?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Even killers have a soft side, Star.*

She laughed, shaking her head.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Alright, I need proof. Share something with me.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *No.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Oh, come on. Don't be shy now.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *It's not about being shy. It's just… personal.*

Elowen hesitated, something about his tone catching her off guard.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I get that. I won't push.*

There was a long pause.

[**BLDome**]**:** *So should I be emotionally bracing myself for some soppy romance in the game?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Define soppy.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Like… tearful confessions under the moonlight, dramatic near-death hand-holding, long stares where no one's blinking, but everyone's sighing.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Okay, maybe not that kind. But yes, there's a love story in there. Because life without love, even imagined love, is a little less worth writing about.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *I knew you were a soppy romantic.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I mean, I've had my share of horrible experiences. Love that hurt, love that took more than it gave. But despite it all, I still… I don't know. I still want to believe it exists. Even if it's just something I let myself experience in fiction for now.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Makes sense. I'm surprised you still believe in it, considering you seem to base your game plot on deep psychological issues that are definitely coming from personal experience.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I've learned to love solitude. To breathe in my own space without relying on anyone else. But… I do get lonely sometimes. Not the 'I need someone to fix me' kind of lonely. Just… it would be nice to share silence with someone and not have it feel empty.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Aww, so you're telling me you don't secretly dream of the whole 'sweep you off your feet' thing? Passion and candlelight and all that typical cheesy stuff?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *How rude... But no… Passion, to me, isn't the start of a love story. That's just naïve. For me, it's the slow burn that builds once the mind is fed. I don't care about pretty faces or candlelit anything if the conversation dies after five minutes. I want someone who arouses my mind. That's where real passion lives.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Oh? That delicious little spark when someone's brain is the main course and everything else is just garnish.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Yeah, exactly that.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Oh, so if someone drops a clever metaphor or explains quantum physics, you're suddenly mentally undressing?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *…Okay, that was unfairly specific.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Yeah, I can see that… Someone walks in with their clever little smirk, drops a few too many well-placed insights, and suddenly your soul's like, "Yep. That. Right there. Strip, but make it intellectual."*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *That's disturbingly accurate, haha!*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Well, I guess I get it. Beauty fades, abs droop, hairlines run for the hills… but that sharp wit? That razor-edge mind that knows just how to wrap around yours? That never gets old. The way someone threads alchemy into agony, wraps metaphors around the marrow of your thoughts, and speaks in riddles that only the starving parts of you understand?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I can see why you like poetry…*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Correct me if I'm wrong, but you crave depth. You want someone whose intelligence challenges you and feeds that ravenous intellect of yours until you're dizzy and breathless.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Yes.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *I bet you've been sitting across from guys who looked promising… sparkly, even, but the deeper you went, the more you realised they ran out of pages while you were still writing chapters.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Yes! Gosh, you're so on point! I crave more than comfort, you know. I crave expansion. Maybe it's*

the writer in me, but I find typical, routine relationships so boring.

[**BLDome**]**:** *I think I can resonate with that.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *That is why I chose writing. Why I chose worlds I can create. Where love is more than the same taste in music, or routine dinner dates, or any other trivial modern stuff. I write about feelings that make you feel like home. A place where you belong, and can be yourself without the fear of pushing the other person away.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Yeah, I get it. You want to ignite minds.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I… never thought someone would actually get my point. I'm impressed.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Anyway… you know. Typical Tuesday night thoughts. No big deal. Just out here, soul-stripping strangers through Wi-Fi.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Strangers? After that? Please. I'm emotionally married to you now.*

The soft glow of Elowen's monitor bathed the room in its quiet light as her fingers flew across the keyboard, the last echoes of their banter still humming in her chest.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Guess I'd better write my vows in metaphor then. Something like… "I promise to challenge your synapses, feed your frontal lobe, and never interrupt your existential tangents."*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Wow! Romance isn't dead.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Exactly. Flowers are great, but have you ever been validated on a neurological level?*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Honestly, I don't even need gifts anymore. Just send me a well-structured thesis with footnotes and emotional trauma, and I'm yours.*

[**BLDome**]: *Noted. Will ditch the roses and show up with annotated volumes and existential dread.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Perfect. Bonus points if there's obscure Latin and a tragic backstory involved.*

[**BLDome**]: *You just described my entire teenage poetry folder.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Stop. That's hot.*

[**BLDome**]: *Glad you think so. I peaked in the candlelit "Why doesn't the moon love me back" era.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *You know, you talk like someone who's either a secret philosopher… or a serial killer.*

[**BLDome**]: *Why not both? I philosophise while I murder, which makes the monologue more compelling.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Oh, great. I'm emotionally entangled with Hannibal Lecter's poet cousin.*

[**BLDome**]: *You're not far off. Except instead of eating people, I just mentally deconstruct them and leave them wondering why they're crying at 2AM.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Terrifying. But also… weirdly sexy?*

[**BLDome**]: *I'll add that to my dating profile: "Might be an alien, probably too self-aware, definitely won't ghost you unless it's metaphorical."*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Alien tracks. No regular human talks like that.*

[**BLDome**]: *Caught me. I was engineered in a lab by sleep-deprived poets and eldritch soundwaves.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Makes sense. Just promise me if you're planning world domination, I get to help design the uniforms.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Done. But only if they come with metaphor-laced cloaks, masks and dramatic lighting at all times.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *So just to recap: you're possibly an alien, potentially a serial killer, definitely a poet, and suspiciously good at philosophy. Sounds totally safe to keep talking to you.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Glad to provide emotional security through grammar. It's my love language.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Mine is sarcasm laced with emotional repression and a dash of existential dread.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Ah. Fluent in Millennial. I see you.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Tragically so.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *But seriously… It's kind of rare to talk like this with someone. Effortless, but… not shallow. Feels like good brain weather in here.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Good brain weather. I love that. And yeah… same.*

A small notification popped up. He'd sent her a message. She clicked it open.

[**BLDome**]**:**

"You are a storm in a vial of glass,
A volatile rapture too fragile to last.
Catalyst-laced, a slow-burning art,
The alchemy seared into bone and heart.
You are the salt in the hurricane's throat,
A whisper of ether, an echo remote.
A fault in the filament, severed and frayed,
The taste of combustion, the light that decays.

And I am the ember, the spark in the fray,
A flicker too feeble, yet helpless to stay.
A spectre of longing, a fever, a thread,
Drawn to the ruin where angels once bled."

Elowen stared at the words, reading them twice, then again. Something in her chest tightened. Scientific and romantic, all at once. She exhaled slowly.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Okay. That was incredible.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *You think so?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Yes. Your chemistry references are immaculate.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Chemistry is fascinating. Apart from my obsession with technology, I have a soft spot for molecular interactions.*

Elowen let out a breathy laugh.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *So, in summary, you are an absolute nerd?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Oh, without a doubt. But if you tell anyone, I'll deny it.*

She shook her head, smiling at the screen.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I'll keep your secret. Maybe.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Mm. I don't trust that 'maybe'.*

She chuckled, then typed:

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *So… do you know any spoilers for the game since you have connections?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Nope. But you do. And you should definitely share them.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Not a chance.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Rude.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *I hope Grail gets his redemption.*

Elowen hesitated, then simply sent a smiling face emoji. His next message came slower.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Do you still hate him?*

She tapped her fingers against the keys.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Maybe I'm warming up to him a little. The last conversation between him and Avenna was exactly how I wrote it.*

She wasn't sure why she admitted it, but she could almost feel him grinning through the screen.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Progress.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *You say that like you're taking notes on my emotional development.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Aren't I?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Creep.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Affectionately.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *I should go. I have early business tomorrow.*

Elowen sighed.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Alright. Goodnight, Dome.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Goodnight, Star.*

His name flickered. *Offline.* She looked out the window at the moon, wondering who he really was.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Autumn's crispness filled the air with heaviness while the morning sky displayed a mixture of lavender and pale gold. Fall brought Elowen a breeze of chill, cinnamon and pumpkin-spiced lattes mixed with memories about her childhood.

While organising her bookshelves, Elowen smiled at a collection of interactive fairy tale books. She remembered wanting to talk about a similar book with her mother once. It was about a girl who travelled between worlds through mirrors, discovering magical places stitched together by wonder and danger. Elowen wanted to tell her mother how much she loved it, how it made her dream of writing stories like that herself someday.

But Joanna wasn't really listening. She smiled absently, nodding at the right moments, her hands busy straightening the collar of her coat and glancing down at her gold wristwatch to keep track of the time. Always a little rushed. Always a little elsewhere. Her mother cared, just not always in the way Elowen needed. Still, the distance hurt in small, quiet ways. She felt like an afterthought, a whisper slipping through the cracks of a

woman too busy balancing a life heavy with responsibilities.

Even now, Elowen noticed it… the absence. The way people's eyes would glaze over, just slightly, when she spoke about the things that made her heart race. They smiled, they nodded at the right times, but she could see it, the subtle shift. The way their gaze drifted to something behind her, the tightening around their mouths as if waiting for their turn to speak. She could spot it instantly now, like the trained flinch of someone who had spent their life performing for audiences who were never truly watching. And no matter how many times she told herself it didn't matter, a quiet ache still bloomed inside her every time.

Elowen placed the book on the shelf and opened the bottom drawer of the unit, placing a few old bookmarks there. Her glance stopped at an old photo album. She scanned through the pages, pausing at a picture of herself in a school uniform.

School had never been easy. She remembered the way she used to sit alone, struggling to connect with the other kids. While her classmates gossiped about celebrity crushes, Elowen rushed home, straight to her homework, then into The X-Files.

Fox Mulder had been her idol. Misunderstood, a little mad. Always chasing something no one else believed in. And she understood that. Because like him, she always felt like she was searching for something. Something lost in the stars. Something she couldn't

name. A piece of herself, maybe. Or a soulmate. Someone who would see past the layers, past the masks, and recognise the quiet girl with a storm inside her mind. But until that day came… she would keep performing.

If all else failed, she found solace in books: fantasy, encyclopedias, mythology; it didn't matter. She devoured it all. But the cost of being different was high. The bullying started subtly: ripped pages from her notebooks, whispers, and side-eyes. At first, she ignored it. Tried to focus on Eugene, the smartest boy in class. She admired him from afar and wrote letters she never intended to give. He never spoke to her, not once.

As the bullying worsened… she told no one. Not even her mother. There was already enough tension at home. So Elowen kept quiet. She'd hide in the school bathroom with a textbook, scribble notes, replay conversations over and over in her head. She fantasised about becoming stronger, prettier, better. Someone they couldn't touch.

Arthur was a change in that loneliness. Tall, dark-haired, bold new student. Obsessed with heavy metal and always ready with a joke. Girls were all over him. But Elowen was lucky enough to be chosen. She knew that Arthur used her for homework, but she didn't care. For the first time, everyone admired her. Girls wanted to be friends, and boys paid attention. Arthur flooded her phone with texts and hugged her in front of everyone like she was his. That alone made her feel seen. Beautiful, even. And she liked that. He talked about starting a band, touring, and becoming famous. He was a dreamer. She

admired that. While she coloured her world in sketches and stories, he sang his into existence.

Arthur never really listened to her stories or struggles. But she was pretty, and that was enough for him. And for a while, she pretended that was enough for her, too. Until it wasn't. A so-called friend spread lies and gossip. And Arthur, of course, believed her. The next day, he left Elowen for said friend. Ella didn't go to school for days. She cried in bed, skipping meals, hating everything and everyone, including herself. Maybe it wasn't just about Arthur. Maybe it was everything else too… the strain at home, her mother's expectations, her own confusion about who she was and who she was pretending to be… or maybe it was the upcoming change.

Joanna had fallen in love. Elowen remembered the flutter in her mother's voice, the giddy tones, the way she danced around Vincent like a schoolgirl offering coffee while he spoke to Harry like they were lifelong friends. Of course, they moved in with him soon after. Elowen hadn't protested. What was the point? Joanna was happy. That was rare enough. Vincent seemed decent, steady. He even smiled at her without that awkward stiffness adults often wear around other people's children. And Elowen? She was just relieved to be getting out.

The school was hell. A theatre of cruelty where she played the quiet, bookish freak to a disinterested, judgmental audience. The move meant a new start, a new school, new halls, new names, and no whispered insults

when she walked past lockers. She hated every last one of them. Wanted to spit in their faces. Still, she played the part. She had always been good at roles.

And then… Eugene. He'd left a note on her desk. Blushed when she caught him looking. The same boy who had spent years ignoring her, avoiding her like she carried a disease. Now he noticed her? Pathetic. That was her second lesson in boys: they only want you when you've stopped wanting them. When you're distant, cold, out of reach. It was the thrill of the hunt. The lions chasing the doe. The moment she turned to face them? They'd grow bored.

"Be a mystery," Joanna had said once through a haze of cigarette smoke. "Never reveal everything. They lose interest when the game is too easy."

Elowen hated how much truth there was in that. Hated that she believed it. All she ever wanted was to be loved for who she truly was. Not the version she sculpted, painted, and performed into existence. She wanted comfort, a gentle love. Love like the quiet beauty of a piano in a sunlit room… no words, just shared silence and something deeper humming in between.

But she never found that. Not in Eugene. Not in Arthur. And not in her future so far, no matter how she tried.

At her new school, she made a vow: no mistakes. Observe, adapt and blend. If she wanted to sit alone, she forced herself to sit with the loudest group. If she wanted to talk about awesome details of the director's cut of The Lord of the Rings, she commented on a recent celebrity

gossip instead. And slowly, Elowen lost herself. She became what they wanted. She became a reflection of what they needed. They liked her, told her she was easy to talk to, that they had so much in common. But it wasn't her they liked. It was their own reflection, mirrored back at them.

Her efforts to hide her true self and change herself to fit in never resulted in acceptance. Something about her always seemed peculiar, which made her an easy target. Her mother's voice echoed into her memory with the same piercing clarity.

"Men don't like smart women, Elowen. They like beauty and grace. No other skill matters more than the ability to maintain a relationship with a man, because it's a man's world! Use them, make them worship you."

Her mother delivered those words when she was fifteen years old. Elowen experienced a profound internal fracture for the first time because her true desires surpassed what she showed to the world. She wanted to be brilliant. Ella wanted to be respected and longed to earn affection based on her true self instead of her appearance. When she reached her twenties, she felt the mask suffocate her completely. Anxiety became her regular visitor. It got worse with time. During certain nights, she found herself unable to sleep while her heart raced without any apparent cause.

Elowen scanned through more pictures in the album. These were memories of her childhood, her school years and her secret sufferings.

The burden of trying to please everyone and pretending to be someone she believed she needed to become shattered her inside and left her feeling empty in every relationship she ever had. At first, it was Ronen, her school sweetheart. Then Miguel came into her life, and after she managed to escape that prison, she met Connor…

Gods, Connor was the most damaging one. Connor was the kind of man people trusted at first glance. The kind whose smile felt steady, whose voice carried quiet assurance, whose presence suggested safety the way a warm room promises shelter from the cold. He moved through the world with an ease that made others relax without quite realising why. Confidence wrapped around him like a well-tailored coat, neat and convincing, the sort that made you believe you had finally stumbled upon someone solid, someone gentle and someone rare.

Men like Connor listen, remember little details, and offer comfort at exactly the right moment. They step into the empty spaces left by past wounds and fill them so carefully that it feels almost miraculous. For Elowen, who has spent years learning how to survive storms, a man like Connor looked like calm waters.

That was the danger. Because his shadows revealed themselves slowly. At first, it was small things, barely noticeable shifts in tone or expression. A question that sounded curious but left a faint aftertaste of accusation, or a joke that pressed just slightly too close to a bruise, or a look that lingered with quiet calculation.

Elowen learned that men like Connor reshape you gradually. They learn the language of your healing, the fragile courage it takes to believe in love again, and they wrap themselves around it until you cannot tell where your strength ends and their influence begins. They watch you rebuild the parts of yourself that others once shattered, and instead of guarding those fragile walls, they quietly move in and make themselves comfortable within them.

Elowen believed she was healing beside him after Miguel. In truth, Connor was healing through her. Ella's patience became his refuge. And while she was busy convincing herself that she had finally found someone safe, someone worth the years of pain that led her here, he was slowly learning how easily her kindness can be used.

"God, you're so sensitive, Elowen. You take everything personally."

"You're imagining things."

"Oh, so now I'm the villain?"

He held her tight as he whispered his love and declared her too emotional while granting her forgiveness. It was always her fault. And for so long, she believed it.

Until Thea. Thea had been a force of nature. Loud, brash and unapologetically herself. She noticed Elowen's trembling hands and her insincere smiles, along with her diminishing spirit and then told her:

"You're drowning, El. You need to get out."

And for the first time, Elowen listened. Elowen

spent two years before finding the courage to move on. The guilt-tripping was brutal. The endless pleas for her to stay, combined with gaslighting and blame, weighed her down. The moment she made the decision to leave behind that part of her life and close the door permanently, she felt free again. She could breathe again. There were dark days. Weeks spent in bed, feeling empty. Days when she worked on ten projects at once, manic and restless. Moments where she wondered if she would ever feel whole again. But slowly, painfully, beautifully, she rebuilt herself. She stopped apologising for existing. She stopped living for someone else. And one day… Elysium was born. A world where magic was real. A world where light and darkness had to merge, not fight. A world that, in many ways, was her own mind finding peace.

Elowen placed the album back into the drawer and closed it. She was still healing, and her journey was far from completed. However, this time she felt much more hopeful.

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The soft click of her keyboard echoed in the café, the rhythmic tapping blending into the low hum of conversation, the hiss of the coffee machine, and the occasional clink of porcelain mugs meeting saucers. Elowen leaned back in her chair, staring at the half-written email glowing on her laptop screen.

To: Elysium Development Team

Subject: Refinements & Feedback

"Hi,

I've been testing the gameplay extensively, and I have a few notes regarding the characters, specifically their clothing, dialogue, and overall aesthetics. There are a few inconsistencies between the original concept art and their in-game appearances, particularly with the Assassin group's designs.

Grail's attire needs refinement. The original idea is for him to be a bit of a lone wolf, all dark and tragic, but currently, he gives off a more extravagant, almost flamboyant vibe. Perhaps adjusting the animation of his movements or altering his dialogue slightly would realign him with the initial vision.

The masks of the assassins should reflect their enigmatic nature more clearly. Right now, they don't feel as imposing as intended. Perhaps a few more golden details would correct it.

Avenna's cloak texture flickers awkwardly in some animations, particularly when she walks up staircases.

More suggestions to follow.

Best,
Elowen Starfield."

Her fingers hovered over the send button. She hesitated. The small refinements were not the sole source of her frustration. The sequel's story became a heavy burden that sat in her chest. She had only three months

before her first review deadline, but had nothing prepared. No plotline or main structure. The creative spark had completely vanished, leaving behind nothing but emptiness.

Elowen released a breath through her nose while her eyes wandered to the window, where the world outside moved in gentle waves. The sun reached its zenith as it cast a pale golden glow over the city while the wet pavement sparkled like glass. Every entrance to the café by a patron caused a sharp autumn breeze to shake the door while roasted coffee and cinnamon aromas filled the space. She ought to consider abandoning the project completely. She had considered the idea before. The city of Elysium had probably reached its full potential to offer her anything more. Maybe she'd lost her drift. The moment had arrived for her to begin a different project.

And yet… The gaming company assured her of a permanent job position contingent on Elysium's successful performance. They began discussing a series and even considered a movie adaptation. That could change everything. This opportunity might allow her to achieve recognition for her writing while revealing her worlds in ways she could never have foreseen. She couldn't give up. She just needed a sign. Something to ignite her again.

Elowen sighed, rubbing her temples. Her thoughts consumed her so completely that she failed to detect the presence of someone standing next to her.

"Hey."

She jumped slightly, snapping her head up. Noah. He spoke quietly with a hint of uncertainty, but his voice maintained a deep richness which strangely caused her stomach to react. He stood awkwardly with his hands buried in his hoodie pockets while his eyes quickly shifted away upon meeting hers. The air around him felt hesitant and unsure. Elowen's face burned. *Oh Gods.* She had spied on him during their last visit to this place. Had he come to ask about it? She searched frantically for something to say while he began to clear his throat.

"Uh… could I borrow a pen? Mine just ran out of ink."

Elowen blinked, her eyes instinctively flickering to the mess of notebooks, sticky notes, and different coloured pens sprawled across her table. For a split second, she almost laughed. It must have looked like a warzone of ideas to anyone passing by.

"Oh. Yeah, sure." She fumbled through the scattered pens before handing him one. His fingers brushed against hers for half a second as he took it, a fleeting touch. He nodded, tucking it between his fingers.

"Thanks."

He spun around and headed to his table, where his guitar and scribbled lyrics awaited in his notepad. Feeling a little unsettled, Elowen took a deep breath and moved her laptop away from her. Her thoughts returned to him for some unknown reason. It wasn't intentional. She had no control over the fact that another unfamiliar person entered the space only moments later.

Someone he seemed to know. The man matched the musician in height but possessed a lean physique and had messy platinum white hair. He burst into the café with the force of a wind gust while his checkered socks peeked out from under his jeans, and his smile spread a contagious cheerfulness throughout the room.

"There you are, mate!" With a broad grin on his face, the white-haired man clapped his friend on the shoulder. "You good, Noah?"

Noah instantly looked different. His whole manner shifted as soon as the man took his seat opposite him. His shoulders loosened, and his posture relaxed. And then, he smiled. Elowen noticed his dimples for the first time. His smile was warm and genuine in contrast to the nervous and hesitant expressions he usually wore when interacting with people. He looked… calm. The shadows that followed him seemed to disappear momentarily as their burden lifted. Elowen's chest tightened. It took Elowen some time to realise that she had been staring at him.

"Hey, Danny-boy," Noah replied, meeting his friend in a strong handshake.

Elowen lost track of their conversation but noticed that Noah was speaking a lot. Laughing, even. Noah shook his head with a half-hidden smirk behind his hoodie while Dan spoke animatedly to him. The sound of his laughter was gentle and barely reached the ears of those around him. Elowen could not recall a time when she had witnessed him in such a demeanour. He was always so withdrawn and quiet. So avoidant. But now?

He was at ease.

The two men stood up together after a short interval to collect their belongings. Noah placed his guitar on his shoulder while his friend continued talking beside him as they approached the door. Elowen feigned engagement with her laptop to appear occupied with her work while checking her email. But then, she felt it. The edge of her vision caught a small movement. A moment passed.

A quiet, modest voice sounded shortly. "Hey."

Noah's sudden appearance made Elowen look up in surprise. He hesitated, then held out the pen. "Thanks for this."

Elowen examined the object for a moment before she swiftly grabbed it. "Oh, yeah. No problem."

He offered one short nod before placing his hands back inside his pockets. He turned around and departed without saying anything else. She continued to watch him leave while her gaze wandered toward the window. Noah walked next to his friend outdoors with his hands disappearing further into his hoodie pockets as he kept his eyes on the ground. As he walked past the café window for half a second… he glanced back. Not at her, necessarily. Just a glance. A flicker of something unreadable. And then, he was gone. Elowen released a breath she had unknowingly been holding. Her fingers tightened around the pen.

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Only the faint clink of mugs touching wood filled the moment, along with the quiet sound of Thea's kettle cooling down. The kitchen air was filled with thick aromas of cardamom and cinnamon mingling with coffee beans as sunlight streamed through gauzy curtains. In the corner of Thea's kitchen, Elowen sat wrapped up in her oversized sweater sleeves while she blew on the rising steam from her mug.

Thea seated herself next to Elowen with a familiar thud and pulled a throw to cover their legs. With a simple sip of her drink, she announced matter-of-factly, "Your eye twitch has returned."

Elowen groaned. "Don't try to diagnose me as if I'm just another entry in your spreadsheet files."

"I don't have to. The way your forehead moves shows you haven't written anything in weeks, and you feel self-disapproval."

Elowen gave a dismissive eye roll while her shoulders sagged. "Ugh. Fine. Yes. I'm still stuck. The starting point for writing the sequel remains a mystery to me. Each attempt I've made to start the sequel feels incorrect or too transparent or seems as if I am stealing from my own story."

"You're not stuck," Thea said with certainty. "You're incubating."

Elowen looked at her sideways. Thea shrugged. "Inspiration's like bread dough. You don't scream at it to rise. The best approach is to let it rest in a warm and quiet space until it achieves readiness."

"You've read my writer's affirmations once again,

right?"

"I wrote your writer's affirmations."

Elowen smirked behind her mug. "You're a menace."

Thea extracted a slim envelope from behind the toaster with surprising ease. "Let's talk about inspiration," she sang as she passed it over.

Elowen reacted with surprise by raising her eyebrow before tearing open the envelope, and then stopped completely in her tracks. Her breathing stalled while her fingers quivered as she examined the delicate print as if it were a precious relic. A ticket to The Eternal Slumber.

"Is this…? The show was sold out weeks ago!"

Thea responded with a smug expression while staring into her coffee. "Happy early birthday."

Elowen blinked, completely stunned. "Thea! I always wanted to go!"

"I know, El."

"They're impossible to get."

"I *know*."

Elowen's laughter interrupted her words before confessing, "…you really are the best person alive."

Thea leaned back, triumphant. "You're the person who deserves to let out a scream-cry when you experience your musical crush."

Elowen hid her face between her hands before snickering through a scowl. "I told you already, he's not my crush!"

"Oh no? Just a casual lifelong obsession, then?"

"I admire him. There's a difference."

"Mhm," Thea hummed, unconvinced.

While Elowen exhaled with a smile, she gently traced the ticket's edge with her fingers. "You don't get it."

Thea tilted her head, gentle now. "I know, I know, you admire his writing skills and intelligence and talent… You think he's unique and aspire to be like him."

"Exactly." Elowen nodded. "But the way you say it sounds like I'm fantasising about something inappropriate."

"Well," Thea grinned, nudging her, "Nothing wrong with fantasising, hun. Anyone would want a wealthy provider."

Elowen laughed under her breath, but her eyes didn't quite follow. "I don't need a provider, Thea. I can provide for myself."

"Ah, yes, I forgot how proud and independent you are," Thea rolled her eyes. "Even a tall, lanky, well-spoken, famous musician can't win over your stubborn nature and desire to be self-sufficient."

"Fame is not a dream as many think." Elowen took a sip of her tea. "It would be, if fame came without the burnout, pressure, and without being dissected like a science experiment every time you blink."

Thea blinked, caught off guard. "Oh?"

"It's not all glitter and sold-out shows, you know," Elowen said softly. "People think fame is this endless rush of praise and opportunity, but it comes with a

weight. A kind of hyper-visibility that doesn't leave room for silence and solitude. And he strikes me as someone who needs that. A lot."

"You mean Grail?"

Elowen nodded. "Yes, the man behind the mask, specifically. You see the performance and think that's who he is. But that's the act, the theatre and his craft. Beautiful, yes. Honest, in its own way. But behind that stage persona? I guarantee you there are days he doesn't want to speak to a soul. Days he probably sleeps through a week just to feel human again. I know that cycle. I live it..."

Thea studied her quietly now, her earlier teasing gone.

"You're right. It's not all rainbows and sunshine, I guess."

"He's a human who has a difficult job. Yes, his performances are beautiful and artistic and theatrical, but I can only imagine the work that goes on behind the scenes. He's touring, keeping fit and healthy, and working on his new songs while performing several times a month. It must be absolutely exhausting."

Thea took a sip of her coffee. "He reminds me of you, El. With your endless projects, ideas, hard work and lack of rest."

Elowen smiled. "And I admire that he still shows up. That he turns all that inner chaos into art. That's what I respect… not the spotlight or the fame, but the fact that I can see the shadow he probably crawls through just to sing into that mic. That kind of strength isn't

glamorous. And if I ever achieve such success with my books, I can only hope to ever have such strength and drive."

Thea finally nodded, softer than before. "I think I understand now. I can see why his music also feels close to your heart."

Elowen leaned back, sinking into the chair. She stared at the ceiling, looking for words that seemed to hide within the wood grain patterns. Her voice broke the silence in hushed tones, deliberately unveiled.

"Through his craft, I can grasp that feeling for fleeting moments. His work extracts me from a reality where I find little love and surrounds me with a sacred experience. Beyond my books, no other escape exists for me."

Thea said nothing.

"His early projects have always held my attention, with his piano work standing out the most. His method of playing the piano keys sends me into a state of comfort." Elowen gazed at her tea. "Music is the oldest language of nature, you know. It heals, without needing to speak. My experience of sound surpasses that of many people, as you know. Frequencies cut through me due to my sensory differences. Grail's music echoes. I'm uncertain whether it originated from trauma or a spiritual awakening, or came through a distorted creative perspective. I don't really care for reasons, to be honest. The depth of his lyricism is unique, for which I will always cherish my gratitude."

Thea shifted beside her.

"For an instant," Elowen said in a whisper, "I contemplated abandoning my dreams and writing many times. The journey he walked, his enduring strength and his unique voice served as a reminder to me that creation maintains its significance. That I still matter. I don't care if it was a coincidence or some cosmic alignment. It arrived when I needed it."

Her fingertips brushed against the ticket as though fearing it would disappear.

"While others perceive him as an idol… I recognise him as a human with aspirations. He stands out as a man whose cleverness goes hand in hand with his unique eccentricity. A man who wanted to escape ordinary life, who fought his way through existence with music and passion. He desired more unique musicians but ended up becoming one himself. He became the dream he once had. I aspire to step one pace further toward achieving that kind of freedom. I want to create something completely independent. To make others feel through my writing. But for that… I need to end my pattern of self-sacrifice for everything that surrounds me. I need to escape the monotonous pattern that's been haunting me throughout my life."

She paused. Thea observed her like someone watching a constellation emerge piece by piece.

"We all wear masks," Elowen whispered. "I've had my mask on for so long that I no longer recognise where my mask ends and I begin. I used this mask to adapt to my surroundings because some aspects of my character seemed too extreme for the world to accept. He exits the

stage and takes his mask off. He reminds me that it's possible. Perhaps someday I will remove mine just in time before it becomes part of my bone structure."

Thea smiled. "He's your mirror. A representation of a life you wish to have, of success you aim for and… freedom you seek."

"Yeah, I just…" Elowen's voice trailed off as she turned the mug between her fingers. Her tea had long gone lukewarm, but the warmth of Thea's presence grounded her more than any drink could. "I want to look at my reflection and not feel… disgust. Or doubt. Or like I'm trying to fit into someone else's skin."

Silence followed. Thea, ever the anchor, reached across the table and squeezed her hand without a word. Her grip was strong, steady, dependable. The kind of reassurance Elowen never had growing up.

"You will," Thea said softly. "You already are."

Elowen turned her head slightly, her cheeks flushed with emotion. "Sorry. That got heavy."

Thea smiled. "You're a writer, El. Heavy is your mother tongue."

That made her laugh. Their mugs met with a gentle clink. Elowen held her Eternal Slumber ticket like a promise, tucked neatly into the side of her notebook. For the first time in weeks, the outline of a story began to stir again. But beneath that awakening, another layer pressed forward, a buried monologue that had lived in her bones since childhood. A silent film reel she couldn't turn off, one that never got its ending.

Reality is relative, she'd once written in her little

notebook after school. *Stars burn out long before their light reaches us. Maybe we're all orbiting ghosts, chasing warmth that no longer exists. Maybe we're all reacting to something that's already gone.*

And maybe that's what her life had always felt like. A delay. A performance trying to catch up with the truth. In the outside world, she was someone else. A different version of herself: smiling at her mother when she wanted to scream, smiling at her little brother under the weight of responsibility. At school, she cracked jokes while her heart galloped like a wild animal in her chest. She loathed attention and hated being watched. But she convinced herself she craved it. Because it was easier to burn for applause than disappear in silence.

Elowen learned how every performance comes to an end, because nothing lasts forever. She confirmed it when her family peace took a different shape after a couple of years since moving in with Vincent. Joanna binged crime series while Vincent sat nearby, half-asleep or shouting at football matches on the screen. Roommates, not lovers. They hadn't shared a bed in months. There were nights when Vincent stumbled in drunk, so Elowen would turn up her headphones and usher her brother onto her lap, letting him play her PC games while she tried to block out the shouting in the next room.

She never told Joanna about the rest. About the moments that felt off. About Vincent lingering in the hallway half-naked. About the lingerie gifts, he thought were appropriate for a teen. About the way his gaze hung

too long on places it shouldn't. She smiled through it. Memorised it. Filed it in her invisible notebook under 'teachable moments'. She thought if she said nothing, she wouldn't be the one to destroy their fragile excuse of a family. Her bedroom was her only sanctuary. Her portal and a paper-thin barrier between real and imagined. There, she could breathe. There, she could paint. There, she could write and spin stories about broken people with power, about love that didn't hurt, about monsters with tragic pasts. There, she was Avenna, or whoever she wanted. Outside? She was Elowen. Top student. Sarcastic, witty and modest.

She understood why Harry had snapped all those years ago. Why he drank and why he fought. Sometimes the glass just overflows, and you break the nearest thing, even if it's the one thing you love.

Her childhood room was her final refuge. The only place she could curl into herself and disappear into the world she'd built… one page, one brushstroke and one chapter at a time.

But now, life was different. Elowen still struggled with her true self, failed in rebuilding herself and felt like her life moved in a slow, torturous pace. However, she felt relieved to be in control. This time, all her choices were made strictly with analytical precision and her own feelings in mind, with no influence from external pressure.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The woods were eerily silent. Gnarled trees aligned against the night absorbed the flickering light from the crackling fire behind them while their long shadows danced ghostlike across the undergrowth. The forest cicadas abruptly stopped singing after their recent chorus. The night became completely still as the breeze stopped, and only the dense silence remained.

Avenna was prepared to draw light by keeping her fingers close to her belt. Adjacent to Avenna stood Grail, who maintained his stillness while his keen eyes examined the shadowy woods as moonlight made his mask's slits appear to sparkle. A snap. Avenna had no chance to respond before the forest came alive with erupting trees. Thick black tendrils burst forth from the ground to coil and whip around while they tore through the soil and scattered dirt and rocks. The atmosphere mixed damp rot and decay with an overpowering scent of unnatural presence.

Grail moved first. He leapt across the terrain at superhuman speed and rolled away as a jagged tendril detonated where he had been standing. His voice remained low and carried a teasing tone when he

instructed Avenna to stay behind him.

"Step away! Unless you're ready for a quick death."

Before she could retort, the creature emerged. It rose above them as its eight insect legs anchored into the soil while its terrifying golden jaws and helm reflected the broken moonlight. Its body took the shape of a terrifying nightmare as its black, chitinous limbs ended in sharp claws while moving with haunting elegance. Its back was adorned with a macabre arrangement of bones from previous victims, which clattered together. And its eyes, burning gold, were full of malice.

Strangulus. Legends claimed his kill was never quick. Strangulus preferred to watch the will to live crumble, to feel the final shudder as the soul surrendered. It was said that those who died in his choke were never reborn, their essence dissolved into his silk, feeding his endless hunger.

Grail attacked by swinging his sword while climbing onto the monster before securing a rope around its spiky neck. The creature gasped a rough whisper, meaning he had it trapped. Grail hesitated. Avenna evaded Strangulus's attack, which caused its lengthy limbs to strike the ground, producing horrific fractures while snapping the trees as if they were fragile twigs. The earth trembled beneath their feet while dirt particles were blasted into the sky. Grail was already in motion.

[Grail – Quickstep: +25% Evade Boost]

He dodged effortlessly, his movement fluid, vanishing into the darkness before reappearing behind

the creature in a blink. Avenna lifted her hands, calling forth a surge of brilliant light, illuminating the battlefield.

[Avenna – Radiance Burst]

Strangulus shrieked, recoiling from the sudden flare of light.

"Tch. So it doesn't like that. Good to know." Grail's smirk could be heard in his voice. Without hesitating, he dashed forward and swung his katana, aiming for the soft tendons at the creature's legs. His blade cut deep, and black ichor sprayed from the wound.

-5% HP

Strangulus Health Bar: ||||||||||||||||||||95%

Avenna wasn't done yet. She whispered a chant under her breath, her fingertips glowing with a warm, ethereal shimmer before she thrust her hands outward.

[Avenna – Celestial Barrage]

Orbs of starlight shot from her palms, striking Strangulus in rapid succession. The impact caused him to stagger, his body shuddering from the holy energy.

-8% HP

Strangulus Health Bar: ||||||||||||||||||87%

"Not bad, Priestess," Grail called over his shoulder, flipping his katana before rushing in again.

"Focus!" Avenna shot back.

She barely had time to react before Strangulus lunged toward her, its golden helmet flashing in the light. Avenna leapt backwards, her boots skidding across the dirt as she thrust out a barrier of light.

[Avenna – Divine Shield]

The monster's clawed limb struck the barrier, causing a deafening shockwave. Avenna gritted her teeth, her arms trembling under the force.

"Hold on!" Grail called, moving into position. His hands flexed around the hilt of his katana, and for the first time, Avenna saw something strange. A glow and a dark red mist curled around his blade, seeping into the air like living smoke.

[Grail – Bloodlust Mode Activated: +10% Damage Boost for 30 Seconds]

Grail vanished. A blur of movement, too fast for the human eye to follow. Then, a sudden streak of crimson. The moment he reappeared, he was already mid-strike. His katana slashed diagonally across Strangulus's leg, cutting straight through the bone. The creature let out an unholy screech, stumbling sideways as the entire limb collapsed beneath it.

-22% HP

Strangulus Health Bar: ||||||||||||||||||65%

Avenna's breath caught.

"You…" she started, staring at him.

"Told you to stay behind me."

The ground trembled as the forest erupted again. Avenna turned, her eyes widening as three shadows emerged from the trees.

"About time." Grail exhaled, rolling his shoulders. Dy, Kolm, and Vier dropped into position, their masks gleaming.

"Damn, we missed the opening scene?" Vier grinned, twirling his sword.

"You two seemed to be having fun, so we took our time," Kolm smirked.

Dy said nothing; he simply flipped the wooden batons in his hands, lowering into a fighting stance. Strangulus rose again, its movements slower but no less deadly. It howled: a low, guttural sound that sent a pulse of darkness crashing over the battlefield.

[Strangulus: Dark Chains – Movement Reduction - 30% for 15 Seconds]

"Shit." Avenna winced as her legs felt heavier.

"Hold position!" Grail barked. Dy was already moving.

[Dy – Echo Strike: Rapid Multiple Hits]

The crack of wood against chitin rang through the air, Dy's batons moving too fast to track.

-10% HP

Strangulus Health Bar: ||||||||||||||||||55%

Then, Kolm lunged forward. He swung his enchanted sword, the blade humming as it vibrated at a dangerous frequency.

[Kolm – Resonance Slash]

The attack landed directly against Strangulus's chest, sending shockwaves through its body.

-12% HP

Strangulus Health Bar: ||||||||||||||||||43%

Vier, not one to be left out, charged from the opposite side, flipping his sword in his grip.

"Heads up, ugly!" His arc of steel met flesh, cutting deep into the monster's side. Strangulus staggered. Avenna barely had time to react before black

vines erupted from Strangulus's back, twisting and lashing out like living whips. One of them snagged her wrist, the dark energy seeping into her skin like poison, draining her energy with a sickening pull.

[Avenna – Status Effect: Energy Drain]

"Damn it!" she hissed, trying to pry herself free.

Grail dodged between the lashing tendrils, his cloak snapping behind him as he closed the distance.

"Quit playing with your food, you oversized roach." He moved in for a clean strike, his katana flashing silver, but just as the blade was about to meet Strangulus's side… The golden helm pulsed. Avenna felt her body freeze. A sudden crushing weight pressed down on her chest, her vision tunnelling as her knees buckled.

[Strangulus: Gaze of Submission – Stun Effect Activated]

"Shit…" Grail stumbled mid-motion, his entire body locking in place. His hands trembled against his blade, muscles paralysed under an unseen force. The hollow sockets of Strangulus's eyes glowed brighter as if feeding off their resistance. Avenna fought against the sensation, gritting her teeth as her fingers twitched, desperately reaching for her staff.

Move, damn you. MOVE. The pressure was unbearable, like she was being crushed under the weight of the night itself. Strangulus struck faster than she could blink. One of its spindly, clawed legs shot forward, wrapping around Grail's throat like a vice.

"Shit!" Grail choked, his feet lifting off the ground.

Strangulus reeled him closer, its long, bony fingers curling around his body, tightening and squeezing. A sickly cracking sound echoed in the clearing. Avenna felt her lungs burning. The air had grown so thick, so suffocating, that every breath was a battle. The weight of Strangulus's aura pressed against her chest like invisible hands, clawing at her ribs.

She turned just in time to see Grail struggling against the monster's relentless grip. Thick, black tendrils had wound around his throat and torso, squeezing the life from him, lifting him off the ground. His fingers dug into the vines, trying to pull them away, but they only tightened further like a noose.

For the first time, Avenna saw panic in his stance. The ever-composed, ever-cocky assassin was choking. His katana lay mere inches away from his grasp, buried in the dirt beneath him. He reached for it weakly, his movements growing sluggish, his body faltering.

"Grail!" Avenna screamed. Dy, Kolm, and Vier rushed in, their weapons flashing as they slashed at the monstrous vines entangling him. Nothing. The tendrils absorbed their attacks, tightening further as if feeding on his struggle. Grail's fingers twitched, his chest rising in short, laboured gasps. Avenna didn't think. She ran toward him, throwing herself into the fray and grabbing his outstretched hand. The moment their fingers touched, her vision split.

Darkness. She was somewhere else. A small, messy room, the marble walls cracked and peeling. Celestial furniture overturned, broken glass scattered across the

floor. The air was thick and stagnant, pressing against her lungs. She couldn't breathe. Her heart pounded. She felt the creeping sensation of being trapped, of something holding her down. There was a mirror. A large, fractured mirror leaned against the wall, cracks spiderwebbing across its surface. She looked up, and in the reflection… Grail.

He was kneeling. His hands were clawing at his throat. His masked face was gone, replaced by something broken and blurry in her vision. He was gasping for air, struggling, but something unseen was squeezing the life out of him. And then, he spoke. Avenna froze. His voice was raw, desperate, barely above a whisper.

"Don't leave me." Her breath caught in her throat when she realised that she was speaking with his voice. "Please. Take me with you."

The words were strained as if they were being ripped from him against his will.

"I… I don't know how to let go." His fingers grasped at nothing, reaching toward the mirror, toward her. "I can't breathe without you. Even though it's killing me…"

He choked. His body shuddered, shaking violently, suffocating. "I still don't want to let go."

Avenna felt something inside her twist painfully. His words echoed through her mind.

Her vision disappeared, bringing her back to reality. Strangulus wasn't just a monster. He represented dependency. He was a prison made of one's own fears, insecurities and trauma. He was the thing that held one

down. And Grail… he was trapped. Trapped in that chokehold of toxic, damaging connection.

The creature's piercing shriek echoed through the trees, its golden helm flickering wildly with energy as the dark vines coiled tighter around Grail's throat.

"*You got me in clutches…*" Strangulus whispered. Grail struggled violently, his muscles tensing and twisting under the force of the suffocation. His hands clawed at the vines, his body jerking as if every fibre of him was desperate to breathe. "*You got me in clutches…*'

The phrase repeated. Again. And again. Avenna's pulse raced, her mind scrambling for a way out. Her eyes darted to the vines. The ones wrapped around Grail's throat were different, thicker, glowing with a golden, cursed energy.

Avenna's breath caught. The vines were anchoring him and holding him in place, binding him. And when Grail had tried to pull them off, they only got tighter.

"*You got me in clutches…*"

Avenna reacted on instinct. She grabbed Grail's wrist and yanked him with all her strength. Dy moved without hesitation, his twin batons flashing as he slashed forward. Strangulus screeched as one of its spindly arms was severed from the elbow. The vines recoiled, their grip faltering. Grail dropped to the ground, gasping. He landed on his knees, one hand clutching his throat, wheezing violently. His fingers dug into the dirt, his whole body shaking.

Avenna barely had time to register her own relief before something lashed around her ankle. It was a vine:

tight, choking and pulling. Avenna gasped, stumbling. And then… A flash of silver and black. Grail's katana cleaved the vine cleanly, severing it in a single stroke. The creature shrieked, stepping back, its own vines curling inward, tightening against its own limbs. Avenna's mind clicked. That was it. *The vines.*

"The vines!" Avenna gasped. "They're part of him! We can use them!"

The others turned to her, confused.

"We need to choke him with his own vines!"

Vier blinked. "You want us to strangle a strangler?"

"Exactly!"

Grail's head snapped up.

"Are you insane?" His voice was still hoarse, his breathing rough. Avenna turned to him, defiant.

"Trust me."

"No. You are literally asking to die!"

"And you literally asked me to trust you back in the castle!"

Grail froze. Her eyes burned into his mask. "You demand trust, but won't give it?" she challenged.

For the first time, he had no witty comeback. He exhaled sharply, rolling his shoulders.

"You're impossible."

She smirked. "So I've been told."

He growled something under his breath but turned to the others. "You heard her. Let's strangle the bastard."

Avenna darted forward, becoming the distraction.

Strangulus lunged, its tendrils reaching. She twisted, ducked, rolling into the dirt as it missed her by inches. The moment the vines struck the ground, Vier and Kolm grabbed them, pulling them back toward the monster's own limbs. Dy moved like lightning, striking at weak points, forcing the vines to lash inward.

Grail moved last. The second Avenna dodged another attack, and he grabbed two of the thickest tendrils and yanked them with brute force; the vines snapped back toward their master. Strangulus let out a bone-chilling shriek, its own bindings curling around its throat and torso.

"*You got me in clutches…*"

The phrase became ragged. The monster staggered. Its own vines were suffocating it, and it twitched violently, writhing in agony as the tendrils tightened. Avenna raised her hand, channelling one final burst of energy.

"You are released..."

The final vine constricted. Strangulus let out one last, gasping whisper. "*I… got me in clutches…*"

Then, it exploded. A brilliant golden burst of stardust erupted outward, scattering into the air. The suffocating darkness vanished, the weight in their chests lifting completely, only a small vial on the ground with shimmering gold light. The battle was over. For a long moment, no one moved.

The forest was silent. The wind carried faint golden flecks through the air, drifting like soft fireflies. Avenna stared at her hands. The vines were gone. It was

over. She turned to the others and they all burst into laughter. It was sudden and ridiculous. Vier threw his head back, Dy actually wheezed, and Kolm just shook his head in disbelief. Even Grail… For the first time… laughed.

Avenna's breath caught. She had never heard him laugh before. It was smooth, deep and unrestrained. For once, his voice wasn't layered in sarcasm or mockery. It was just laughter. Pure, unguarded and alive. And when he grinned, his teeth were perfect, white and sharp, his canines slightly elongated. His lips were slim and lovely, his jawline strikingly sharp.

Avenna swallowed. She had never seen his face. And yet, for the first time, she could tell that he was beautiful. She quickly looked away, her heartbeat unsteady. Grail smirked, rolling his shoulders.

"So. Still unimpressed?" Grail's voice was light, teasing.

Avenna turned toward him, raising a brow. "You almost died, like five times."

He gave a loose shrug, but there was a stiffness to it this time. "Not my worst day," he said. But the joke didn't land quite right. The others groaned as they slumped into the grass, exhausted.

Dy flopped onto his back. "I'm done. I need sleep."

Vier huffed as he dropped his pack. "I need a drink."

Kolm just grinned, voice rough with amusement. "I need both."

Their laughter echoed softly through the clearing, a fractured but genuine sound. Avenna, however, kept her eyes on Grail. There was something in the way he stood, shoulders tight, fingers flexing slightly at his sides, that made her hesitate.

"You're immortal," she said, voice quieter now. "How could you have almost died?"

Grail's gaze lifted to the sky, the light catching against the worn gold of his mask. For a moment, he didn't answer. Then, without looking at her, he murmured, "Immortality doesn't mean invulnerability."

Avenna frowned, stepping closer. He finally turned his head toward her, his voice lower and more careful.

"The thing we fought... it wasn't just a monster. It was shaped with Morphea's energy. Her divine imprint, I could feel it." He paused. "And she's the only one who can truly kill me."

A cold shiver ran down Avenna's spine. "So if these creatures... carry her essence..." she whispered.

Grail nodded once. A sharp, almost reluctant gesture.

"My immortality," he said, "might not be so certain anymore."

The thought hung between them. Avenna let out a slow breath, lifting her face to the clouds. Maybe it was the adrenaline finally wearing off. Or maybe it was the way Grail had smiled. But she felt lighter.

◇

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *HOLY SHIT.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *That was… surreal.*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *Impressive mechanics. That was not an easy fight.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Brilliantly crafted boss. Genius work.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Oh, stop it, you're making me blush.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *No, but seriously, this was INSANE. The vines, the suffocation, the foreshadowing…*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *The way the environment interacted with the fight was well thought out.*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *The Reward system also feels awesome. Coins, item upgrades… it feels earned.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *The psychological depth of Strangulus was intriguing. The embodiment of suffocation referencing to personal suffocation in mental health? I love the metaphor, just like Dusk representing dementia and depression.*

[**EllaStar5**]*: That was the intention. I'm really happy you caught on to that!*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *I love the animation.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *The design team did a good job, but I helped write the mechanics.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *Respect. This game is going to be legendary.*

Elowen leaned back in her chair, heart glowing with pride. She had poured so much of herself into Elysium, every sleepless night, every obsessive note and rewrite… and now, watching it resonate with others felt like quiet, radiant vindication. For a moment, she simply

sat there, basking in it. She was about to type out a thank you when a new private message popped up.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Your creativity is staggering. The way you layer meaning into every detail… It's remarkable.*

Her fingers hesitated. That particular praise felt different, and much deeper. Maybe it was how he worded it, so eloquent and precise, like he hadn't just enjoyed the fight, but *understood* it. Like he'd analysed her work instead of just reacting to it.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Thank you. That means a lot. Really.*

The group chat continued, now lighthearted and celebratory as they discussed their loot: coins, new skill upgrades, and freshly unlocked gear.

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Damn, I was hoping for a new sword. This one's all scratched up.*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *We need a costume upgrade next.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *Agreed. Our first assassin gear was so basic. Just all black and dark.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Right? And then we finally got our gold-trimmed upgrade. Lookin' fancy now.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *You guys like my designs?*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *Wait… you designed them?!*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Well, the initial concept, yes. The design team built from my sketches.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *That's crazy. Writer, and an artist?? You're amazing.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *I feel honoured to be wearing your brainchild.*

Elowen chuckled softly, warmed by their excitement. One by one, the players signed off for the

night, each promising to meet again tomorrow for the next quest. Except one.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Still here?*

She smiled at the screen.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Yeah. Not ready for sleep yet.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Same. Happens when I'm too wired after something good. How do you come up with all this?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Days of imaginative work. Dozens of drafts. Writing things that never see the light of day. Sleepless nights. Constantly talking to characters in my head like a lunatic.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *That last part is painfully relatable.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *You do that too?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *All the time. But with lyrics. They haunt me at night.*

Elowen smiled again, this time softer. There was something unexpectedly grounding in his confession, like they were two ghosts haunting different art forms, meeting somewhere in the middle.

[**BLDome**]**:** *How do you create characters? Are they based on people you know?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Sort of. They're… fragments. Pieces of myself. Pieces of people I've known. Pieces of emotions I've lived through.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *So they're all masks.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Yeah… I gave them masks so people could relate more easily. So no one had to put a face to them. So they could be anyone. Everyone.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *That's brilliant. Guess the idea came from the band?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Not really, to be honest. The concept of masks was a personal journey long before I found them. Maybe that's why the band resonated so deeply… it felt like the next obvious step. I always imagined masks as a kind of armour. Projection and expectation. When you can't see a face, you can pretend it could be yours.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *So, they're reflections?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Yeah. And for the player, it makes it easier to feel the character instead of judging them. Funny how removing identity sometimes makes someone more human.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Oof. Yeah. Like we're more ourselves when no one's looking.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Exactly. That's why I admired the band, I guess. No face, no name, no performative persona. Just the music without the clutter of parasocial fantasy.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Yeah. Especially now, when everyone's tripping over themselves to be seen on social media and everywhere in the world. Sometimes I think masks free us from the prison of expectation.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *That's how I've always felt. Like I've been wearing one for years. Not literal, obviously. But masking myself to be what others needed: polite, soft and manageable. It's exhausting.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *That's more than exhausting. It's destroying. But… maybe the goal isn't to take the mask off completely. Maybe it's learning when you can, and who's safe enough to see you underneath.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Gods, don't make me cry at 2AM.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *I'll allow exactly one tear. Anything beyond that and I'm sending memes.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I'll hold back. But thank you for getting it. Most people don't.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Well. Mask-wearers recognise each other in the dark.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *:)*

[**BLDome**]**:** *So, I couldn't help but notice a lot of references to mental health and the human psyche in your plot. Any specific reason for that?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I love psychology. I try to understand the human mind through my writing.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *That explains Strangulus. The suffocation metaphor was crystal clear.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *You really got the exact point.*

She sighed, catching sight of the blinking notification in the corner of her screen. Her PC needed an update. With reluctant fingers, she typed:

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I need to log off. But I really enjoyed this conversation.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Same. Would you mind if we had another way to stay in touch?*

Her heart skipped, just slightly.

[**BLDome**]**:** *In case you want to talk. Or, you know, in case the game servers explode and we get locked out.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Are you always this dramatic?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Only when necessary.*

A notification popped up. [**Dome**] **has shared their messaging app details.** She stared at the screen, her finger hovering above her phone. It was a small

thing, but somehow, it felt significant. He was still a stranger, someone she'd never met, and yet… she already felt that odd sense of familiarity. Like his voice had been echoing in a room she'd forgotten she built.

She clicked *accept*.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Alright, Dome. I'll allow it.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Generous of you, Star.*

She shook her head with a smirk and shut the game down. Just as she turned toward her bedroom, intent on putting the phone away and crawling under the covers, a new message lit up her screen, sent through the app.

We are echoes in the latticework of time,
Frequencies entwined in spectral dance.
Sparks convulsing through unseen currents,
Lingering in the quiet hum of happenstance.
Your voice hums in the marrow of static,
An encrypted hymn threaded through veins.
Wavelengths collapsing, reforming in tandem,
A ciphered ache in electric chains.
I see you in the flicker of dying pixels,
In the pulse of a system yearning to feel.
Data collides, an unspoken confession,
A whisper in wires that dares to be real.

Elowen stared at the words on her screen, unmoving. It was beautiful. It came from someone who truly understood what it meant to long for something intangible. Something unreachable, yet deeply familiar.

[**Ella**]**:** *You're a total nerd.*

[**Ella**]**:** *But you have the magic of lyricism. This is exquisite.*

[**Dome**]**:** *:) Goodnight, Ella.*

She exhaled through her nose, a quiet laugh slipping out. *Goodnight, Ella.* Somehow, it felt personal. Intimate, even. She saved the poem, closed the screen, and placed her phone on the bedside table. Then she turned over beneath the covers, the silence of the room wrapping around her like a soft echo.

She fell asleep smiling.

CHAPTER NINE

The development office for 'Black Static Studios' featured modern designs with glass walls and minimalistic workstations, while large monitors displayed animation renders and code. Stale coffee and marker odours filled the conference room alongside the soft chatter of designers, writers, and programmers. The big screen at the front showed recent player analytics as well as beta test feedback and bug reports. The lead designer stated their engagement levels had reached an all-time high.

"We have invited more testers. Players are completely immersed in the world. The online community is flooded with lore discussions, and theorists display an intense fascination with the masked assassins."

Elowen drank her coffee while she nodded in agreement.

Another developer mentioned that the boss mechanics received exceptional praise. "Strangulus was a hit. Players believe that the game features one of the most excellent combat designs among modern RPG titles."

A momentary surge of pride passed through Elowen, but she kept quiet as she anticipated what was

coming next. And there it was.

"What about the sequel?"

A hush fell over the room. Elowen exhaled, steadying herself.

"I'm still refining it," she said smoothly. It was a lie. She had nothing. They refrained from pressing, but their anticipation deposited its burden squarely on her shoulders. In the gaming world, development timelines stretched years ahead. Marketing departments wanted early concepts to feed investors and stir the community long before a release date was even whispered. Sequels weren't a response to success; they were insurance policies, greenlit before the original even left beta, designed to keep a franchise alive in the public eye.

If she didn't have a framework ready: characters, plot arcs, even a few tantalising concept pieces, they couldn't plan their next showcase, couldn't drip-feed teasers into the hungry maw of the internet. Publishers wanted content pipelines because hype was fragile. Let it cool too long, and the audience moved on. Which meant that even though the first game was still in its demo stage, Elowen was already expected to conjure the future.

Elowen reached the bistro for lunch to see Thea already seated with her blazer folded on her chair as she bent over the menu, looking displeased.

As soon as Elowen took her seat, she heard Thea declare, "Men are useless."

Elowen smirked. "What did he do now?"

Thea sighed dramatically. "He rearranged my

spice cabinet during my work hours. For 'efficiency'."

Elowen chuckled. "Monstrous."

Thea responded flatly with "Oh, absolutely", then she focused on Elowen. "But never mind that. How was your meeting?"

Elowen stirred her tea. "They want the sequel."

Thea tilted her head. "And?"

"I don't have it."

Thea's expression softened. "Do you feel stuck, or is your interest waning?"

Elowen hesitated. "...Both?"

Thea sighed, then nodded. "Maybe you just need inspiration. A break. You need something that will reignite your desire to write."

Elowen hummed noncommittally.

"Let's focus on the main topic of interest… Grail."

Elowen groaned, already regretting mentioning anything. "There's no topic of interest, Thea."

Thea wiggled her eyebrows, clearly unconvinced. "So… do we still hate him?"

Elowen released a breath through her nose while she selected her words with deliberation. "I… don't hate him."

Thea's mouth fell open. She clutched her chest dramatically. "Oh, my God! This is it. The ice queen melts."

Elowen rolled her eyes. "Oh, please. He remains an arrogant jerk but occasionally shows redeeming qualities."

Thea carefully observed her friend while studying

each subtle feature of her expression. "What event caused you to change your opinion?"

For a moment, Elowen paused before moving the ice cubes around in her glass. "I think it's… his player."

Thea sat up straighter. "Oh?"

Elowen shrugged. "He's not what I expected. He's… insightful. Thoughtful, even. He examines situations in a manner that often causes me to reevaluate my ideas."

Thea's smile spread across her face as if she were a predator who had found a weakness. "Exactly who is this enigmatic man who melted your previously cold and dead heart?"

Elowen groaned, rubbing her temple. "His username is BLDome."

Thea blinked. She settled into her chair with an expression of delight. "You actually know his username on a first-name basis?! Girl, you've got a digital boyfriend."

Elowen hissed forcefully, "I do not!" yet her neck betrayed her as warmth spread across its surface.

"You totally do," Thea teased. "Wait until he starts sending you his favourite memes and unsolicited images."

Elowen tossed a piece of bread at Thea. "You're mad."

Thea dodged with grace and experience. "You've never shown this much interest in a random guy before."

Elowen sighed. "Oh shut up! It's not an interest! He's just... I respect his perspective."

Thea sipped her drink, unimpressed. "Uh-huh. And does this respect include late-night chats?"

Elowen paused.

Thea gasped. "Oh my God, it does!"

Elowen scowled. "We just talk about the game."

Thea wasn't buying it. "Sure. The game. What if conversations extend beyond just discussing the game?"

Elowen shook her head, laughing despite herself. "You're reading way too much into this."

Thea pointed her fork at her. "Mark my words, El. The Dome guy will catch you off guard at the most unexpected times. He's gonna start sending you song lyrics or poems, or perhaps some cringy pick up lines…"

Elowen rolled her eyes yet felt unable to rid herself of the persistent warmth she felt inside. She moved the ice cubes around in her glass again, watching them clink and swirl.

"You need to watch less k-dramas, Thea," she said quietly. The teasing smile slipped a little from Thea's face, replaced with something softer. "I'm just... happy to find someone who understands," Elowen continued. "Someone who shares my passions. Someone whose mind moves in ways that make mine feel... less alone."

Thea nodded. Elowen paused, the ice cubes settling at the bottom of her glass.

"It doesn't have to escalate into anything," Elowen said, almost more to herself than to Thea. "A friendship built on understanding, on respect... that's rare enough. That's precious. And honestly," she smiled faintly, "I don't even have the slightest idea about the guy. All I

know and think of him is a pure guess and perhaps a bit of projection. For all I know, he might be a complete arsehole."

Thea studied her, unusually quiet.

"If we can just be two people who enjoy each other's company, who talk sometimes, who share a kind of... silence that isn't uncomfortable… that's enough."

Thea's teasing had softened entirely now, replaced by a warm, proud glint in her eyes. "You deserve that," she said, voice gentler. "That would be a beautiful connection."

Elowen smiled down into her drink. For once, she believed it too.

Thea left after a sudden call from Ju Won, who casually told her about their little boys breaking a TV screen with a Nerf gun. Ella smiled at Thea's doomed face and waved her goodbye.

The café's patrons had dwindled down to a few regulars sipping tepid drinks while they held on to the remaining free Wi-Fi access. London streets exuded a tired buzz that was further dampened by fresh rain and reflected the glow of streetlamps in shallow puddles. In her familiar corner next to the rain-streaked window inside the café, Elowen sat curled up with her laptop open while her fingers hovered motionless above the keyboard. She'd written exactly five words in the last hour: *The darkness gathered once more.* She released a sigh before sinking back against the cushion and folding her arms behind her head while looking up at the ceiling fan, which moved in lazy half-circles and had chipped blades.

The low whirr was hypnotic. The quiet of the city was interrupted by the distant sound of a siren as everything else seemed to pause.

As the café owner, Jessica, worked efficiently behind the counter, she counted the till while moving around with her typical clinking sound. Her sharp wit and warm heart made her good at telling customers who preferred solitude from those who wanted free drinks with friendly chit-chat. Jessica developed a fondness for Elowen from their first meeting. The way she claimed her spot in that corner made Jessica think Elowen belonged there. Perhaps she admired how Elowen routinely refilled the sugar tray whenever it emptied. Jessica understood that Elowen exhibited signs of exhaustion, which women who have maintained composure for too long can identify in each other.

Jessica called out to Elowen while removing her apron to put on her long trench coat. "Can I ask a massive favour?"

Elowen blinked up, straightening. "Of course. What's up?"

"My sister just called to inform me that Mum needs to be taken to the hospital and I must get there right away."

"Go now, Jess!" As she muttered, Elowen began shutting her laptop. "Do you need anything? Want me to call a cab?"

"No, no, I'm all good. Already booked." Jessica paused as she held her keys, which made a jingling sound in her hand. "There's one thing. Noah called about ten

minutes ago. You know… the musician? He left his notebook here."

Elowen frowned thoughtfully. "Oh?"

Jessica smiled. "I agreed to keep the place open so he could pick up the notebook that he forgot, as he needs it for tomorrow. If you have time to spare, could you help me by locking the back door? I'll lock up the front, and he should come from the back. After turning the deadbolt lock on the door, place the key inside the mail slot. You've done it before."

Elowen nodded. "No problem at all. Hugo's at his dad's tonight, which gives me some free time."

Jessica expressed her gratitude through a warm smile and stretched across the table to give Elowen's hand a firm squeeze. "You're an angel. You know where everything is. Help yourself to a cuppa or a snack, love."

Elowen laughed. "Noted."

Jessica exited the space, leaving the door to close with a gentle bell chime. The café fell into an unnatural silence when she left, as if the room was holding its breath.

Elowen went behind the counter, where she prepared one final cup of tea from the warming pot before returning it to her corner. The empty tables and dimmed fairy lights along the walls combined with the low flicker of the electric fireplace provided the room with a soft, sleepy haze.

She loved it here. The atmosphere of this place gave her a sense of security. This corner was where she penned her finest scenes. The birth of Grail's fall.

Avenna's first breath in Elysium. The origins of Morvane's bitter twist emerged from this table, where it started with a cinnamon roll and a scribbled napkin.

She tilted her head back, sighing. Her eyes moved to the Bluetooth speaker located near the counter. A thought bloomed slowly… wicked and childish. Why not? She stood up with her mug and crossed the wooden floor to link her phone to the speaker after leaving her boots on the ground. The sound of a chime filled the air before *I Wanna Be Yours* by Arctic Monkeys started to play. The ridiculousness of the lyrics always made her grin: a strangely happy tune for her, especially in moments like this when she felt a little flirtatious and impossibly light, as though the song itself was in on the joke.

The sensation entered Elowen's veins with the force of an electric jolt. Without thinking, she moved. Her right hand still curled around the mug while her left slipped to her waist, hips swaying lazily to the beat. Then, grinning to herself, she set the mug down and reached for the first thing within arm's reach… a long-handled wooden spoon from the café counter. It became her microphone.

She mouthed the words in exaggerated earnestness, strutting past the counter like it was a stage, spinning the spoon in her hand before leaning dramatically against the edge. On the next line, she sauntered toward the nearest table, bending low as if serenading an invisible crowd, her free hand roaming from her shoulder down her torso before sweeping up

into the air with a flourish. Her skirt rippled around her legs, her hair catching the golden fairy lights overhead as she twirled.

Deadlines, edits, pressure… they all vanished. She wasn't an author, an artist, a daughter or a mother. She was just pulse and movement. Light and sound. The room became her stage, the air itself warm with laughter she didn't quite let out. She spun once more, dipped low, and froze when she heard a quiet cough from somewhere behind her.

Her body reacted with a jolt before her brain registered what she saw. *Oh Gods.* Noah remained silent while his hand pressed against the counter. The shadow of his hood hid his raised brow, but his eyes sparkled with unmistakable amusement.

Elowen's face flushed hot. She hurried to put the spoon down while she uttered the most mortified whisper she could manage. "You weren't supposed to see that."

A small crooked smile appeared on Noah's face, revealing his dimples even in the dim lighting. With a soft voice, he apologised, and his eyes briefly shifted downward before returning to meet hers. "Didn't mean to intrude."

She opened her mouth. Closed it. Tried again. "Your, uh… your notebook."

He held up his hand. "Yeah. Thanks for staying."

"Have you been standing here long?"

"Nope," he answered while giving a small shrug. "I just… didn't want to interrupt."

Elowen swallowed while noticing the lingering warmth in her cheeks. "Well… Hope you enjoyed the performance, since you didn't save me from embarrassment."

He cracked a tiny grin. "Guilty as charged."

She paused for a moment and looked at him. Without another word, he walked over to the table near the fireplace where his well-used notebook rested open as if it had been abandoned. Elowen bit the inside of her cheek. Her attempt to keep her inner thoughts hidden had failed.

Elowen gripped her coat close to her body before she switched off the final café light, which cast the space into a cosy darkness. Jessica made sure the fairy lights stayed illuminated along the windows to ensure the space appeared welcoming to passersby, even during non-business hours. Soft velvet silence spread over the tables and counters. Noah lingered by the table where his notebook rested while he examined its pages with slow and unfocused fingers.

Elowen gathered her things quickly. Laptop, charger. Her notes were scattered across the desk, showing half-legible character names and scene fragments written in various coloured pens.

"Need help?" The tone was laid-back and mellow like the comforting heat of tea in a worn-out cup.

She paused. "No, it’s alright. I’ve done this enough times. Thanks, though."

After nodding, he went back to his notebook, but his eyes stayed on her. It existed in the peripheral zone of

her consciousness. She moved behind the counter once more and picked up her tote bag from the stool where she had placed it earlier. Noah's eyes scanned the mess as she shoved her computer and notebooks into the bag with loose pages protruding like rebellious flowers.

"Bit of a… paper explosion," he said.

She let out a small laugh. "Yeah. Organised chaos. Sort of."

His gaze lingered on one page, which had pushed through the rest. The page displayed slanted scribbles, which included various names and symbols together with a rough drawing of a city enclosed by high walls and pink blossoms.

"What's this?" he asked, gesturing lightly. "Your work?"

Elowen paused as she placed her hand on the page. "It's for a game design."

He blinked, surprised. "You… design games?"

"I'm the story writer. Lore, worldbuilding, quests and so on. That sort of thing. It's called Elysium, it's still in development."

A pause. "Huh."

She glanced up at him. "That unexpected?"

His mouth edges moved as if he worked to hold back a smile. "Little bit. You just don't… seem like the type."

She quirked a brow. "What type is that?"

He actually laughed. "Touché."

Elowen continue to pack her chaos. She closed her coat zipper, then took the café keys from the counter

hook and checked the till once more before leaving for the door. Noah followed her onto the silent street lit by street lamps while she turned the deadbolt and stepped outside. The street was nearly empty. Through the night air, distant headlights came as the tyres hissed gently against the wet road.

After placing the keys into the café's mailbox, she turned to see Noah remain standing there with his hands tucked in his hoodie pockets as he watched her through his usual unreadable expression.

"You headed home now?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yeah. It's not far."

There was a pause. His gaze travelled down the street before returning to her face. "Mind if I walk you?"

She blinked. "Oh… I mean, it's fine. I'm used to walking alone."

"I know," he said quietly. "Still."

She sensed he wasn't being pushy when the beat passed between them. His demeanour showed slight reluctance because he wanted to avoid causing her any discomfort. He demonstrated his offer without the awkward and exaggerated manner that characterised how some men asked permission. He was simply… offering.

Elowen tilted her head slightly. "Your behaviour seems gentlemanly for someone I hardly know."

He showed the slightest hint of a smile that was almost gone. "You waited for me so I could pick up my notebook. I believe it's inappropriate to let you head out on your own into the streets."

"I live five minutes away."

His shoulders rose gently in response to her words. "Then it's a five-minute walk."

Her eyes narrowed with a hint of scrutiny while her mouth lifted at one corner. "Alright."

The cool night air carried the crisp smell of autumn leaves mixed with faint traces of city smoke. Few late-night wanderers moved down the streets while their low conversations mixed with the distant noise of cars driving by. Streetlights emitted a gentle flicker that transformed the pavement into pools of golden light while their shadows extended far ahead. Elowen clutched herself tightly from the cold, mixed with her stronger reaction towards embarrassment near Noah. He walked next to her while keeping his hands inside his hoodie pockets and holding his shoulders at an angle as if he faced a nonexistent wind. His jaw was clenched tightly, but his expression stayed inscrutable.

She took a quick look at his profile, where the light highlighted his cheekbone contours and revealed his brow's slight tension. Noah had the kind of features that didn't immediately demand attention, yet somehow held it once you looked a little longer. His face was narrow and thoughtful, framed by short brown hair hiding under his hood. A few uneven strands fell forward near his forehead, giving him a slightly dishevelled look that made him appear younger than he probably was.

His eyes were pale, a soft blue that caught light easily, though there was something distant in the way they moved across the world, as if he was always half lost

in thought. His expression carried a quiet seriousness, the sort that suggested he spent more time observing than speaking. When he turned his head slightly, Elowen noticed the small beauty mark along his jawline, just beneath the angle of his cheek.

There was something gentle about the shape of his mouth, too, though it rarely seemed to settle into a full smile. Instead, it lingered in that uncertain space between thoughtful and amused, as though he was constantly weighing the world before deciding how to respond to it.

Elowen caught herself looking a second longer than necessary. *Pretty cute*, she thought quietly, before quickly redirecting her attention back to the path ahead, pretending she had never been studying him at all.

He spoke little, and although their silence didn't feel awkward, there remained an unexplained barrier between them.

Finally, she exhaled. "You didn’t have to walk me, but thanks."

Noah didn’t look at her. "Yeah, I did. It's not safe."

The simplicity of his answer made her blink. There was no bravado, no unnecessary explanation.

She whispered, "You're always this chatty?"

Noah directed his gaze towards her while maintaining a steady yet inscrutable expression. "You always peek at strangers in the alleys?"

Elowen swallowed. The unwavering tone of his voice caused her to feel warmth spread throughout her chest in a way that was disturbing yet somehow

comforting. The pair continued their walk in silence while their footsteps created a rhythmic beat on the pavement.

After a moment, Noah let out a breath through his nose. "I didn't mean it to sound rude."

Elowen huffed a soft, surprised laugh. "It's ok. I didn't plan stalking you, just…"

He smirked slightly. "Got invested?"

She shook her head gently. "No, it's just that I… related to it, I guess. But still, I shouldn't have listened. That was rude. I'm sorry."

He tilted his head slightly, eyes flicking toward her before returning to the path ahead. "You're apologising for feeling something. That's not rude."

She gave a faint, almost self-deprecating smile. "Maybe. Or maybe I just talk too much."

His smirk deepened. "Oh yeah. I'm also great at conversation. Haven't you noticed?"

Elowen raised an eyebrow. "Mhm. A real social butterfly."

Noah emitted a small warm chuckle that sounded low. "I talk approximately once every lunar cycle. I'm a man of many silences. It's very charming, I've been told."

"You remind me of a depressed teenager, while your music conveys similar sadness."

He shrugged, showing his confusion about her statement. "Not sure what you're on about, I tend to spread positive and cheerful vibes around me."

Elowen chuckled softly while saying sarcastically, "Yes, that's really clear."

He smiled and said sarcastically, "It's true. Life and everything it offers excites me so much."

Elowen smiled and continued walking. She hesitated, then glanced at him again. Elowen studied him for a moment.

"I really like how you play."

Noah gave her a quick look before his gaze moved elsewhere, and he shrugged. "…Thanks."

"I mean it," she pressed. "You're very talented."

He gave a timid chuckle that seemed slightly shy. "Cheers."

"Is it scary to perform in front of people?"

"Mm, sometimes."

"Do you feel anxious on stage?"

He paused and took in a breath through his nose before he responded. "I guess I do. But I try to not let it take over me. I let the music talk for me. But, performing to the public is certainly a challenge."

His manner of speaking created a deep pang in her heart, even though the reason remained a mystery to her.

"Well," she said after a moment. "I think you're doing well. It's scary, but I am sure it's worth it. Better regret something you've done, rather than wonder if you ever could."

That made him pause. For a long moment, he was quiet. After a long silence, he looked at her with a smile.

"…Thanks."

She swallowed and dismissed the warmth spreading across her cheeks. "So, anything specific you're working on?"

Noah shrugged, kicking at a loose stone. "I am. Both my mates and I. We're working on stuff."

"What kind of stuff?"

"…Something different."

"That's vague."

He smirked. "I'm a vague person."

Elowen rolled her eyes. "Though you claim to excel at conversations, your words remain quite mysterious."

"I like to keep people guessing."

"Of course you do."

Another chuckle, low and amused. After taking the turn, they noticed the street had grown quieter, which made the world seem more intimate.

She paused before speaking more softly and questioned, "Has music always been part of your life?"

He nodded slowly. "Yeah. Music played an important role in my life from childhood. Music served as the one thing that always made sense to me."

Elowen frowned slightly. "What do you mean?"

Noah's jaw tightened as he considered whether to continue speaking. After a brief pause, he explained... "It was always present. Even when everything else felt… off."

Elowen recognised that feeling all too well.

"That's how I feel about books."

Noah glanced at her. "Yeah?"

She nodded. She took a breath and gazed at the ground. "Books gave me an escape whenever life got overwhelming. Into worlds where things were different. Where I could control the endings."

Noah was silent for a long moment. Then, quietly, he said, "Yeah. Same."

"You like reading?" she raised her eyebrow.

"When I have time, yes." He nodded. "Helps me expand my vocabulary and… it's decent entertainment. Better than scrolling endlessly through nonsense."

"I see." She tilted her head slightly. "What's your last read?"

"Paradise Lost."

Elowen blinked, surprised. "Milton?"

"Yeah." A faint, almost sheepish smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "It's been on my list for a while. Figured it was time."

"And?" she asked, studying him more closely now. "Did it live up to the reputation?"

He exhaled softly. "It's… dense. But fascinating. I like the way Lucifer is written. You almost catch yourself sympathising with him before you realise what's happening."

Elowen's lips curved faintly. "That's the dangerous charm of fallen angels, isn't it?"

Noah glanced at her, clearly intrigued. "You've read it."

"A few times," she admitted. "Though I have a weakness for stories where the villain sounds a little too convincing."

"That explains a lot of classic literature," he said dryly.

She laughed quietly. "True. But if we're talking about dangerously persuasive characters, I think The Master and Margarita wins."

Noah's eyebrows lifted. "Bulgakov?"

"Yes." Her eyes brightened slightly. "Woland strolling into Moscow, casually dismantling reality and exposing everyone's hypocrisy. It's brilliant."

A slow smile spread across Noah's face. "I didn't expect that answer."

"What, you expected something safer?" she teased.

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe Austen. Or something poetic and tragic."

"Oh, I like tragic," Elowen said lightly. "But Bulgakov's chaos is far more entertaining."

Noah chuckled softly. "Fair point. The devil throwing a dinner party is hard to compete with."

"Exactly." She glanced at him sideways. "So tell me. Are you the type who reads Milton for the philosophy… or because you secretly enjoy the rebellion?"

He gave a small shrug, though the glint in his eyes suggested the answer.

"Probably both."

Her house was coming into view now. The walk felt… shorter than she expected. She took smaller steps to prolong the conversation because she didn't want it to finish. She searched for another question.

"What do you prefer, guitar or piano?

"Piano."

That surprised her. "Really?"

He nodded. "That's where it started."

The way he delivered his answer suggested that the piano meant more to him than just a musical instrument. Like it was woven into him.

"That's… really cool," she said sincerely.

He smirked. "That's your professional opinion?"

She rolled her eyes. "Yes. It is."

They reached the steps of her house. She paused momentarily before turning toward him.

"Coffee," she said, almost shyly. "I'll buy you one tomorrow. As a thank you for walking me."

His lips formed a slight quirk, but his expression remained difficult to interpret.

"Alright."

She swallowed. "By the way… my name's Elowen."

Noah briefly shifted his eyes as an unreadable expression moved across his face. His lips twisted into a minimal expression of amusement.

"I know."

Elowen blinked. "You do?"

He shrugged, looking slightly amused. "You always order the same tea. Strong, splash of milk and honey. Extra hot. The baristas call your name."

She reacted with a small laugh when she realised she had been caught off guard. "Wow. Great attention to detail."

Noah moved his head upward at a slight angle while his smirk became a touch more pronounced. "My awareness extends to many different aspects while I play."

A beat of silence. Elowen couldn't understand why her heart suddenly did that foolish little jump inside her chest. Elowen remained where she stood at the foot of her steps while watching Noah retreat a short distance into the dimly lit street. He moved his weight subtly as though he was considering what to say next. He responded with only a tiny nod that was hard to detect. "Get inside safely."

Elowen hesitated, then nodded back. "You too."

A pause. The air between them felt… strange. Something unsaid lingered in the quiet. Under the night sky, Noah released a gentle breath before he looked away. He moved with deliberate slowness while golden streetlight reflections danced through his untamed hair as he vanished along the road. Elowen kept her gaze fixed on him until he vanished from view. With a final turn, Elowen stepped into her home while her heart continued to beat rapidly and her pulse remained warm.

CHAPTER TEN

One of the most persistent questions in psychology is why so many women are drawn to the so-called 'bad boys'. Why, especially in adolescence, does the danger feel like a drug? Why does charm laced with defiance override kindness and sincerity? Why, later in life, do so many women lose themselves in stories where the villain kidnaps the heroine, not to harm her, but to ruin the world for her?

The question that pursued Elowen originated from her memories rather than literary sources.

His name had been Ronen. Ronen Bosco. He stood tall and bronzed with eyes that matched the forest and a cheeky beauty mark that added to his otherworldly smirk. He didn't speak much. His presence demanded attention even though he moved like a shadow and remained observant without being active. He was, in every sense, the living embodiment of a morally grey character. The '*she should have been kept away from him because he was bad for her, yet he ended up being good for her'* type.

Elowen spotted him right away. During lunch breaks, he leaned against the school hall windowsill and listened to his friends' mindless chatter while his hands rested in his pockets, and he smiled distantly. In fleeting

moments, they exchanged intense looks that created wordless tension, which made her heart stop. She wouldn't speak to him, not directly. Her silence toward him stemmed from loyalty rather than shyness. Ronen saw her. She knew he did. She felt it. Whenever she passed him by, she made sure not to look. He looked back.

Everything shifted on a quiet summer afternoon when an unexpected event occurred. Elowen was on her way home alongside her friend Lucy. They stumbled upon a group of Ronen's friends, Mr Bosco at the back. Lucy displayed her usual exuberant personality as she chirped with the boys. But Ronen wasn't paying attention to her. He paused before Elowen with a serene posture while their eyes made contact. He requested her phone number. Elowen blinked, stunned.

"Huh?" she managed.

He said, "Your number", as he extended his phone towards her.

Her fingers trembled as she typed in the number while she felt Lucy's inquiring look and warmth rising along her neck. She returned the phone with a faint smile as the moment ended. He said goodbye and walked off. Five minutes later, her phone buzzed.

"Are you free on Saturday? Want to go for a walk?"

He grabbed her hand the moment they met the next day and led her along quiet side streets to the park without any hesitation. Ronen remained mostly silent throughout their time together. Elowen talked without end about her favourite shows and horror movies, as well

as the books she read and the weather, because she wanted to fill every silent moment. And still, he listened. She felt her nerves buzzing when they arrived at her doorstep. He hadn't kissed her. She wasn't sure why. Maybe he didn't want to. Maybe he was being respectful. Maybe… she'd said too much.

They met the next day. And the next. She would regularly extend her hand, and he would regularly accept it. Their walks grew longer. She discovered he had a passion for cats, an obsession with rock music, and a working-class family background similar to hers. Although his academic performance was terrible, it stemmed from a lack of interest rather than ignorance. Ronen understood more than he let on. He just didn't care to prove himself.

She found herself captivated by this boy who seamlessly blended rebellion with romanticism while appearing detached yet maintaining an intense awareness of his surroundings. His sharp sarcasm masked something gentler underneath. Glimpses of his true nature were revealed only after she spent time observing him.

Ronen was Elowen's first love… the kind that swallowed you whole, made your heart race, and blurred the lines between reality and dream. With Ronen, she felt wild and alive. Their relationship started to develop more depth, but her family situation began to disintegrate. Joanna and Vincent's relationship became poisonous with raised voices, forcefully closed doors, and increasing bitterness. As Vincent's alcohol consumption

increased, her mother's anger became more volatile, like a damaged wire. Elowen felt trapped at the crossroads of love and survival. Her grades began to suffer. Her sleep was restless. The apartment, once tolerable, became suffocating. She had to make a choice. She chose school.

Ronen had never demanded too much. But Elowen couldn't afford any distractions. She required moments to breathe and think clearly so she could regain concentration before everything fell apart. So, she ended it. She made her decision because she saw no other way forward, even though she still loved him more than anything. Ronen took it with quiet composure. Elowen was uncertain if Ronen was showing restraint or experiencing heartbreak. He never revealed his feelings openly because he hid his emotions just as a soldier conceals his injuries. It left her wondering: Had she broken his heart? Or had he expected it?

At school, their glances met briefly like fleeting shadows moving across illuminated walls. And she tried to bury the ache. Her only escape from her thoughts was full immersion in textbooks, student council meetings and performances. Despite her busy schedule, she felt a sense of loss in his absence. She missed the unspoken understanding. The warmth of being seen without explanation.

Everyone says first love is unforgettable. For Elowen, it was foundational. A blueprint etched into her skin. Their connection strengthened with age as it evolved and endured through changing circumstances. The period of exploring themselves and each other

brought them to a point where they believed they could succeed. However, maturity brought forth a more destructive element than fear, which turned out to be doubt. In herself. She questioned whether Ronen's love was for her true self or the persona he was permitted to see. The curated Elowen. The confident one, the put-together one. The individual who mastered the skill of laughing at appropriate moments and saying the proper things while wearing suitable expressions. She was not the girl who analysed every word excessively while yearning for silence, struggling with physical contact and drowning under external pressures. Her growing inquiries led to increased anxiety, which constricted her chest while a voice in her mind warned that removing the mask would cause everything to collapse.

So she wore it longer. The anxiety had crept in quietly at first. At school, Elowen began to feel it tightening in her chest, an invisible pressure, like her lungs never quite filled all the way. She still laughed in the right places, still played the part everyone expected. But it was all getting heavier. She began to skip her classes. Her phone made a buzzing sound with a message from Ronen during one evening.

"Where are you?"

She gazed at the message for several moments before responding.

"Usual place. I don't want to go home."

The sky transformed into a deep velvet shade while the crescent moon hung low above the silent playground. She nestled her legs inward on the swing

and moved slowly back and forth, hoping that the gentle motion would calm her inner turmoil. Five minutes later, Ronen appeared. Without speaking, he settled down next to her on the adjacent swing. The chains creaked softly beneath their weight. Their quiet moments together had never felt uncomfortable. The silence between them gave their thoughts room to expand.

Elowen looked up at the sky before asking him, without making eye contact, why he didn't have a girlfriend when they broke up. She didn't know what she expected. Maybe something light, maybe something sarcastic. His unexpected answer hit her hard as if a stone had shattered a tranquil pond.

He said without hesitation, "I was waiting for you."

Elowen blinked. She questioned him, but her voice came out weaker than she intended. His lips formed a slight curve as he explained his reason to her. "I understand you have many things to deal with at the moment. I get it. So I waited."

She suddenly became overwhelmed by guilt and shame while longing for him. She attempted to ignore her feelings by convincing herself he was a distraction while claiming she needed space and that he'd cope without her. He remained calm and patient as always without any change.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

He shook his head. "You don't have to be. You just needed time. I would choose to wait for you instead of being with anybody else."

The words carved something open in her. She confessed that she believed he obstructed her path. Ronen lifted himself up while cleaning his palms on his denim trousers. His body was broader than her memory, but his confidence seemed stronger. She was shocked to see how fast he transformed from boy to man during the time she wasn't watching. He raised her up to her feet, which created a silent pause where everything around them froze. And then he kissed her. The sensation filled her heart with the most beautiful ache possible. They adjusted, fell into sync.

Her seventeenth birthday was approaching. She didn't know what the future held, but she knew this: Ronen would be her first. He had waited. And she was done running. The duration of their bond had no significance because it held true meaning regardless of its length. What they had was real. Their connection provided warmth during the cold and light while they navigated through the fog. She could not name what she was experiencing, but understood that she would never forget it.

Elowen felt like she had finally discovered home when Ronen cupped her face and drew her closer in their secluded spot.

Grail's character had been born from those very feelings, those early fragments of love and longing Elowen had once carved into memory. He was shaped by the foundation Ronen had laid: a man who watched quietly, who listened without interrupting, who understood her even in silence. A protector, through

presence. Someone who respected boundaries yet remained close. Ronen had given her that first taste of what it meant to be desired, to be chosen without having to perform for it. And so, when she crafted Grail, she painted him with the same brush: someone unreachable, yet tethered to her soul. But over time, Grail began to shift. Just like Ronen, he began to drift from the version she had clung to. The quiet understanding turned into cold detachment, and the protector became a stranger cloaked in arrogance. Elowen watched him, the character she had once poured her heart into, and felt that same ache bloom again. The fear of watching someone you love slowly become someone you don't recognise.

◇

The café door's chime sounded a quick trill when someone departed, and a draft of cool spring air entered. Thea drew her cardigan close against the chill while her fingers tightened around the barely touched oat milk latte since they sat down. Across from her at the café counter, Elowen stared off into the chalkboard menu while her eyes drifted into thought. Thea tilted her head. Elowen has fixated on that menu for ten minutes now.

"You good?"

Elowen blinked. She slowly shifted her gaze from the menu until it rested on Thea's face, covered with wavy brown hair loosely falling from a messy bun. "Huh?"

Thea arched a brow. "If your goal isn't to

memorise all the tea blends available in London, then you've probably been spacing out."

Elowen showed a small blush while her eyes turned to her partially consumed chamomile tea. "Sorry. Thinking…"

Thea finally took a sip from her latte as she said, "Obviously." Thea observed Elowen for a brief moment as her face showed a gentle change. "Alright. What were you thinking about? And don't lie and say 'nothing'. That's my line."

Elowen gave a faint, almost embarrassed laugh. "It's stupid."

"Of course it is. That's why it's probably important. Spill."

Her fingers followed the rim of her saucer as she paused. Then, finally, she said, "Ronen."

Thea blinked. "Wow. Okay. I haven't heard that name in a while."

Elowen nodded, still staring at her tea.

"Why did his memory pop into your head above others?" Thea asked. Elowen pressed her lips together and shrugged when asked. Thea settled back into her chair with crossed legs as she observed Elowen. "Weird time to be thinking about him."

"I know."

"Do you miss him?"

Elowen thought about it. She reflected on their nighttime conversations and their intense arguments, and how she would mute herself to keep him from feeling insignificant.

"No," she said finally. "Just… I don't know. The version of me from the past who believed in positive outcomes is what I miss."

Thea tilted her head. "You don't miss him. You miss being naïve."

Elowen looked up. "That's exactly it."

The door chimed again before Thea could reply. Elowen's eyes lifted instinctively. Noah entered wearing his typical jeans and hoodie, and his hair was hidden under a beanie. It was the first time he saw him without the hood on. He acknowledged Elowen with a subtle nod of recognition before walking to his regular spot without uttering a single syllable. The guitar case softly tapped his leg while he walked.

Thea watched his back, unable to catch his face with her eyes. "Ooh," she said. "Who's that tall figure radiating awkward energy?"

Elowen shot her a look. "Stop."

"What?" Thea whispered, grinning. "I'm just observing. Is he new?"

"He plays here from time to time and nothing more."

With a soft sound of approval, Thea drank more latte. "Is this guy who plays here sometimes known by a name?"

"Noah."

"Does Noah speak?"

"Barely."

"Oh, so he's broody. Say less."

Elowen groaned. "It's nothing like that."

Thea leaned in, her smirk growing. "You're blushing."

"I'm not."

"You are. Slightly. On the left cheek. Right where your crushes usually land."

Elowen gave her an exhausted look. "He just walked me home yesterday. That's all."

"Uh-huh. That's how your thing with Ronen started. A random guy walked you home, and before you knew it, your pen was etching his initials onto the pages of your notebook."

Elowen narrowed her eyes. "Would you prefer to dodge my scone now?"

Thea raised her hands in mock surrender. "Violence. Always violence."

Still, she glanced toward Noah's corner. Noah opened his guitar case using slow and meticulous movements with his hands. His fingers had mastered the art of playing a thousand chords. The musician had many stories carved into the lines of his hands. His hood was back on, hiding him in the shadows.

"Hm, so mysterious," Thea said. "Is he always so socially awkward?"

Elowen nodded, sipping her tea.

Thea arched an eyebrow, all sly amusement. "So basically: he's a broody type who loves music but possesses an enigmatic presence while maintaining reserved behaviour and enjoys writing song lyrics."

Elowen lifted her cup in a toast. "I seem to draw in this type of emotional damage."

Thea shook her head dramatically as she declared, "Poor Dome."

Elowen blinked. "What?"

Thea smirked. "Your gaming poet. He will remain outside the emotional triangle."

"Oh, please." Elowen rolled her eyes theatrically. "I've got time for both. One person exists entirely within a virtual world while the second person remains silent even under torture."

Thea waggled her eyebrows. "Sounds like your kind of balance."

Elowen tried not to smile. Noah picked the first several guitar strings with his fingers, which seemed to respond to their attention by tuning them softly. He concentrated deeply, which caused his brow to furrow as his lips formed into a tight line. The café atmosphere transformed into a gentle soundscape of murmured conversations and delicate clatter from utensils.

Thea nudged Elowen under the table. "You know what your problem is?"

"I'm sleep deprived?"

"No. You're a writer."

Elowen blinked. "That's not a problem."

"The problem emerges when every quiet stranger who extends basic decency becomes a source of romantic fantasy for you."

"I don't romanticise him."

"You do, but not in a typical way like others, who would probably want to have his babies. You romanticise his energy and personality. He's a perfect example of

someone who would inspire a character in your book. I give you a day before you write: He tuned his guitar with laser-like concentration as if he were unravelling the mysteries of quantum physics."

"Because he is very serious about tuning."

"Mhmm."

Elowen allowed the smile forming on her face to emerge. "He's just… quiet. Like a space between notes. You know? Just… intentionally paused."

Thea stared at her. "You really are in trouble."

"Shut up."

Noah positioned himself comfortably in his chair across the room and started playing his instrument. Elowen glanced toward him again. This time, he was looking right back. Their eyes met for just a second. Then he redirected his eyes to the strings while his mouth's corners twitched. Thea didn't say a word. She settled into her chair with folded arms and watched them both through smugly patient eyes because she knew something was about to happen. Elowen stirred her tea. She exerted maximum effort to suppress any smile.

"You're definitely crushing."

Elowen didn't even look up from her tea. "I can assure you I'm not. Why does everyone immediately leap to romance as the default explanation for connection?"

Thea raised a brow, unconvinced. "I'm not leaping. I'm just saying platonic sounds too boring."

Elowen smirked. "And I'm saying you're emotionally tone-deaf. It doesn't have to be romance. We can be friends, you know."

"Boooring," Thea sang under her breath.

"You're so annoying."

Thea grinned. "Now come on. Entertain me a little! I know you're traumatised and not into mad romcoms, but help me out here, I require some soppy drama! I want the tea. What do you see when you look at him? How would you write him if he were a book character?"

Elowen finally glanced up, her expression softening. Her voice lowered, thoughtful. "I see someone who's built a life with intention. Like he's edited it a thousand times before settling on the current draft. There's restraint in him. It's control and precision. Like he's learned to master his chaos."

Thea blinked, the teasing fading from her face as Elowen continued.

"He works with music, right? But it's thoughtful. I get the feeling he spends more time listening than performing. He values the silence between notes more than the applause. That kind of person chases meaning." Elowen paused, her gaze distant. "He's private. Like someone who's been burned before by the world. Maybe he gave too much once and watched it get twisted or wasted. So now? He curates what he shares. Protects the backstage."

Thea didn't interrupt. She was leaning in now, quietly watching.

"He has the kind of energy that gets mistaken for cold," Elowen went on. "When really, he just doesn't perform for approval. There's a whole storm system

beneath the surface; you can feel it in the way he looks at people. Into them."

Her fingers idly traced the edge of her mug.

"He probably wakes early. Because he wants to squeeze everything out of the day." She smiled faintly. "And I bet he's endlessly curious. Reading philosophy one day, watching documentaries the next, and then writing lyrics about both like they belong in the same breath. And he's probably a massive nerd and gamer, and doesn't hide it. And when he speaks, it's like he's offering you pieces of a puzzle he doesn't even expect you to finish. He just wants you to see the picture."

Thea blinked again. "Okay, damn. That's not a man. That's a whole cinematic universe."

Elowen let out a soft laugh. "Maybe. I'm just… witnessing someone who exists with integrity. And that, to me, is beautiful. I wish I would surround myself with more people like that."

Thea leaned back, watching her. "You're unbelievable at reading people."

Elowen looked up. "Comes with experience."

"So, why are you so eager to deny romance?"

"I'm not. I just don't make it a priority anymore and don't allow myself to be fooled by a spark that could burn me fully. I want to make sure that the next person I decide to give my heart to… makes me feel like I don't have to defend it."

Thea didn't smile this time. Her gaze softened. "You're scared."

"Of what?" Elowen asked gently.

"Of being wrong. Of letting someone close again and finding out they only liked the shape of you, not the weight."

"Maybe," Elowen whispered. " I've lived in 'almosts' for years… almost seen, almost loved, almost chosen. I can't do it anymore. I'd rather be alone than be loved loudly but not accurately."

Thea swallowed that quietly. Then said, "You deserve someone who maps you. You deserve to be worshipped."

"That's why I would prefer to have a connection deeper than romance, or love, or anything that would break without acceptance and understanding," Elowen said. "And people like Dome, or Noah, or Grail… they move through the world at the same frequency I do. And for someone like me, meeting such people… that's rare."

Thea smiled softly. "You always were a different frequency."

Elowen looked at her, something quieter now in her expression. "It's just nice not to feel like I'm broadcasting on an empty channel."

Thea gave a small nod, then squeezed her hand again. "Then maybe this isn't a love story. Maybe it's a story about connection, friendship and bond? And maybe that's even more powerful."

Elowen smiled, almost shyly. "Maybe."

Thea arched a brow. "Or maybe you write about passionate love and romance because, deep down, you hope to experience it yourself one day. The kind of love that doesn't need conditions or validation. And even if

your chosen one is as wounded as you are, you'd fit together like broken pieces, making something whole."

Elowen's smile softened, her eyes drifting to the window. "Perhaps, who knows."

"So, if you could imagine the perfect guy for a character like you, how would you write him?" Thea asked.

Elowen rested her head on her hand, fingers tucked beneath her jaw, her voice softening into a kind of reverence. "He doesn't speak much, but when he does… You listen. He thinks before he speaks. There's wit behind his sarcasm, but there's also a depth there that feels carved out of experience."

Her gaze drifted toward her mug again.

"Uh-huh," Thea nidded.

"He's emotionally selective. He gives himself less grace than he gives anyone else. And he won't unravel for you on the first night. He'll give you slices of soul, and if you're lucky enough to earn your way in… it's a goddamn honour."

Thea didn't interrupt. She just watched Elowen, quiet and present. Letting Elowen go where she needed to go.

"He's not grand gestures," Elowen continued. "He's not Instagram-perfect moments. He's the man who shows up at 3a.m. when your world's falling apart and doesn't say, 'I told you so.' He just hands you a glass of water and holds your hand. He learns your triggers. He protects your ambition even when you're too tired to believe in it. He won't always say the right thing, but

he'll do the right thing."

Thea sat back, eyes sparkling above her mug, and let out a sudden laugh.

"What?" Elowen asked, blinking.

Thea grinned. "You're seeking 'connection', mirrored energy fields, or whatever you call love without calling it love."

Elowen opened her mouth, but Thea raised a hand like she was flipping the next tarot card.

"Hey, I'm not saying it's that Dome guy, or Noah… more like their type. Creative and ambitious. Don't worry, I dig that. I can see it, clear as day. You two… The ridiculous, beautiful dailiness of it all."

Elowen laughed. "Pardon? What does that mean?"

"You won't be the couple that makes sense," Thea said softly. "But you'll be the couple that feels like something blessed. Just two people who finally get to stop performing. Where it would feel like home."

Elowen was quiet, mug warming her hands, but her thoughts had already drifted somewhere deeper.

Home.

◇

The sun spread its golden arms lazily across the afternoon sky over Elysium's dynamic landscape. The once majestic landscapes of Valdoria gradually transformed into softer and more lush vegetation. Ancient stones bore the weight of climbing vines while flowers spread beyond tree borders, and the road transformed into a path that descended softly into a vale

shining with coral and blush hues against a warm golden backdrop.

Avenna rode her white mare while maintaining a steady gaze, and her flowing robes moved behind her like starlight wings. The fragrant scent enveloped her senses first with its sweet and nearly overpowering nature. Citrus blossoms and honeysuckle flowers basked in the sunlight while spun sugar filled the air. Then, she saw them. The Fields of Euphoria.

The sacred spider lilies displayed exquisite petals that danced gracefully with the wind in synchronised movements. In sunlight, the golden pollen specks appeared to drift lazily through the air.

Avenna lifted her hand to pull the reins, stopping the group.

"This is it," she said. The tone of her voice remained calm while carrying an underlying sharpness. The remainder of The Eternal Slumber halted their movement behind Avenna.

Vier yawned from his saddle, eyes half-lidded. "Looks like a painter vomited their soul."

Kolm squinted at the scene. "I dunno. The scene appears as though a wedding, combined with a fever dream, produced an offspring."

Dy responded with his typical silence, but his gaze swept over the field with hidden vigilance. Grail munched on some item from a pouch while his masked face remained inscrutable.

Avenna dismounted. Her boots met the grass. "These are the Fields of Euphoria. They’re the natural

border to Elaris's lands. The forest path beyond the fields leads us to the city. But first…" She turned to face them. "These lilies are sacred. Magical. Beautiful, yes, but dangerous in their own way. Their pollum release influences humans. It makes you feel… euphoric. Peaceful, even. Like nothing in the world matters. Like you've found heaven. People have gotten lost here. Literally."

Grail smirked. "Do you mean 'I got turned around for a bit' lost or 'obsessed with a cloud for three days until I dehydrated' lost?"

"Both," she replied. "People don't eat. Don't drink. They're too happy to care. Some have died here from blissful neglect."

Vier blinked slowly. "It represents either the best or worst possible outcome."

"The amount of dignity you want determines the outcome. I'm immune," Avenna added. "Priestesses of Elaris ingest the pollum from a young age to develop a resistance. You lot aren't so lucky."

Kolm raised his hand. "Okay, serious question: what would happen if we simply held our breath and ran through the area?"

"You'll still absorb it through skin contact."

"So, we just stick to the path without touching the flowers?" Vier questioned.

"Yes."

"Seems easy enough," Kolm shrugged.

Avenna's eyes narrowed. "Please, don't make me regret this trust."

Avenna rode first, the group following her. Her horse moved slowly to not disturb the flowers, but a loud clatter behind her made her stop. *Clang.* The distinct noise of metal striking stone filled the air. She froze.

"…Kolm," she said slowly.

"I GOT IT!" Kolm called, already dismounting to pick up his sword.

"Kolm, no!" Too late. His boot crunched into the lilies. A shimmering wave of pollen exploded into the air, which twisted and turned like a golden mist.

Avenna shouted. "Back! Back, now!"

But the damage had been done. As golden sparkles swirled around him, Kolm remained standing with his sword in hand while he observed his surroundings carefully. He blinked. Then smiled.

"Ohhh… oh, yeah." He dropped the sword again and twirled, arms out and cloak catching the breeze. "I feel like a goddess of joy!"

Dy coughed behind her. "What makes everything smell like it's fresh out of the bakery?" He studied a nearby rock, "Wait… That's the perfect bongo."

Tap-tap. Tap-tap-tap-tap.

Vier descended smoothly from his horse and landed on the ground while his limbs extended as if he were a feline basking in the sunlight. "This grass is so soft," he purred. "Like clouds. Like dreams. Like… pillows made of unicorn laughter."

Avenna prayed to the heavens above as she turned her gaze toward Grail, hoping that one of them… Aaand he was gone. Running across the field like an unleashed

child on festival night. Laughing, spinning in circles and then suddenly dropping into full-body push-ups. Then sit-ups. Then he flopped backwards into the lilies and began making what could only be described as 'petal angels'.

Avenna groaned and dropped her head into her hands. This would not be easy.

Thirty minutes later… Dy was slumped over his horse's saddle, half hanging like a used cloak. Kolm was on backwards, talking lovingly to the horse's tail and calling it "Mr Buttfluff." Vier… well. Avenna tried. But she gave up and tied a rope to his ankle and let the horse drag him gently along the grass. He smiled the entire way, leaving a trail of petal impressions. And Grail? He was skipping behind her. Literally skipping and occasionally trying to hump Kolm, who fell off his horse a few times.

Vier managed to untie himself from his horse, and while Avenna was helping Kolm get on top of his for the fifth time, Grail decided to go on his fours and allowed Vier to ride on top of him.

"Oh my stars," Avenna muttered, watching Dy drying to battle Grail's spare cloak that got tangled on his head and shoulders. "I'm leading a parade of stoned children."

She kept walking. Finally, as the trees changed, petals fading from spider lilies to towering magnolias, their wide pink blossoms opening like cups of tea in the canopy above, the magic began to shift. This was the edge of Elaris's territory. Here, the magnolias grew with sacred

purpose. Their blossoms, when consumed, were an antidote to the lilies' pollen. She plucked a few from the lowest branches and crushed them gently. Then turned.

Dy was already reaching out. "That smells like happiness," he whispered and took a bite without complaint. Kolm stuffed the entire branch with blossoms and leaves in his mouth, struggling to close it.

Vier refused. He turned his head away dramatically. "No."

"Vier."

"No."

"I will force-feed you."

"No."

"Eat the flower."

He opened one eye. "I will not."

She lifted his mask partially and shoved it into his mouth. He grunted and chewed like a wronged cat. Then she turned to Grail, who was hugging a tree.

"Grail," she said firmly.

"Hmm?"

"Eat the magnolia."

"I'm happy here."

"I know. That's the problem."

"Why would I want to not be happy?" he asked, raising a spider lily to his mouth.

She snatched it away. "Eat this instead."

"No."

"Grail. You're having a sugar crash, I bet your pupils are the size of a Moon."

"I like the Moon. Makes me feel like a lone wolf."

He said, and howled like a wolf.

"You're more like a dog," Kolm said, branches falling out of his mouth.

"Arf-arf!"

She pulled a piece of jerky from her pouch and waved it. He froze. "Trade?"

His hand hovered. He dropped the lily and took the jerky. She shoved the magnolia into his mouth, and he bit down. And immediately gagged. "Ugh. That tastes like regret."

"Good."

Thirty minutes later… The group sat in a small circle beneath the magnolia trees, petals drifting down slowly like the sky was exhaling peace itself.

Kolm leaned back against a boulder. "My head hurts."

Dy had covered his masked face with both hands. "My mouth feels so dry."

Vier twitched. "I feel sick."

Grail was quiet, head in hands. "My headache is killing me."

Avenna sipped from her waterskin, staring at the horizon. "Next time, I'm tying all of you to the horses and dragging you blindfolded through it."

Grail shifted to lie down beside her, arms behind his head. "Come on… it was kinda fun, admit it."

She looked at him. His bare chest rose and fell in time with his slow, easy breath. The pollen shimmer had faded from his skin, but a few stray petals still clung to his shoulder.

He turned to her. "You smiled. I saw it."

"You were hallucinating."

"You smiled at me, specifically."

"I was contemplating murder."

He laughed. And then, silence. Above them, the magnolias swayed. Soon, they would be in Elaris. But here, just for a moment, they rested. And maybe, in the middle of absurdity, they'd found something sacred after all.

The wind changed. The weather pattern consistently shifted between the Valdoria and Elaris's first woodland breezes. The wind transformed from sharp and royal into a gentle touch that felt like soft velvet moving along the skin.

The travellers walked under a magnolia arch where flowers displayed their soft pink and cream shades hanging dense on branches just like mid-thought clouds. Each step forward was softened by a carpet of living blossoms while hummingbirds overhead produced a gentle sound that danced from petal to petal like delicate chimes. During his steps forward, Grail tilted his head back while his eyes closed beneath the mask.

"Are you certain we didn't pass away back there and find ourselves in heaven now?" Kolm asked.

"No," Avenna replied smoothly. "Had you passed away, I would have made certain you became aware of it."

"I'd haunt you. With passion."

"Test your mettle, and I will cast you out with nothing more than a slap."

The peacefulness of their surroundings quieted their playful conversation. Elaris was more than a constructed city since it emerged naturally from the earth's very skeleton. Stone temples from ancient times remained half-buried in the hills while moss and ivy cloaked them like giant slumbering forms dressed in emerald garments. Gently flowing rivers passed beneath polished jade and pale marble bridges where floating lanterns and blossoms dotted their surfaces. Wild herbs and honeyed incense perfumed the atmosphere while a breeze softly carried melodies of ancient hymns. Priestesses meditated with their hands on their knees beneath a blossoming tree while their eyes remained closed. Individuals traversed the meandering cobbled paths without shoes while their garments rustled alongside the wind.

A courtyard lay ahead where children acolytes dressed in light linen and golden sashes entertained themselves quietly with painted fans. The sound of their laughter became part of the calm surroundings by moving through the air just like bird calls. Avenna walked ahead with robes that shimmered golden-white as they flowed with every step. Her walk showed a respectful tranquillity here, while her body remained relaxed yet noble, and her lips displayed just enough of an upward curl to reveal her deep affection for this place.

Kolm leaned toward Vier. "This is way too wholesome. A single misstep would be enough for the city to cover us in sage."

Vier came close to Kolm and whispered, "You

deserve it. You literally tried to kiss a horse's butt."

"Shh."

Dy offered no response, yet his emotional impact was clearly evident. His head shifted towards the trees while distant waterfalls reflected light patterns that resembled visible prayers.

Grail maintained his role as the dark contrast but moved at a slower pace in this location. His mask cast shadows at an angle to the sun while his arms held close to his body signalled to Avenna what she knew as his 'contemplative mood.' The black skin paint rendered him a more pronounced figure of contrast, as if a shadow spilt through sunlight. And yet… even he was quiet.

They entered beneath a grand archway that was carved from ivory stone and featured celestial runes alongside symbols representing protection, healing, and time. The two priests formed their hands into a welcoming gesture while their heads remained lowered to show respect. Avenna returned the gesture.

"Why aren't they wearing masks?" Dy asked.

"This city and the lands around the temple are safe for us, with only a few travellers allowed to come. So there is no need to hide our identities and faces." Avenna responded.

One priest said softly to Avenna, "Blessings upon the Celestial Thread, my child. Welcome home."

She responded with a nod. He surveyed the row of black-cloaked warriors and veiled assassins standing behind her without showing any signs of fear. "Your companions are welcome here. May the blossoms bless

their presence."

Their journey followed twisting trails that featured lotus ponds along with small bridges spanning pure streams suitable for drinking. Monks dressed in white and gold robes used wide brooms to clean the stone steps. Someone plucked a harp in the distance.

The main temple soared from the earth as a precious gem embedded in the landscape, while its spires entwined with wisteria and morning glories, and its domed ceiling sparkled with mother-of-pearl inlays. The temple blended seamlessly with its surroundings instead of towering above them because it appeared as though it had emerged naturally from the earth. Windows were shaped like blooming lotus petals. Golden windchimes danced from every corner. And before it: The old tree's roots formed temple steps while its branches carried pink magnolias and silver ribbons that moved like prayers in the wind.

They dismounted in silence. The men directed their horses to one side, where a gentle acolyte was ready to secure them with comforting words and sugar cubes. They entered the temple. The air was immediately different: thicker and more fragrant. The alcoves were adorned with candles whose flames danced gently through the respectful silence. The stone floor was decorated with flower petals that looked like sacred confetti, forming a colourful, soft carpet. Beside the incense offerings were small bowls filled with consecrated water. Voices, clear and pure, rose in a haunting hymn. The priestesses formed a circle around

the central altar with their palms stretched upward and eyes shut while their song resonated through the bones as though light transformed into sound.

Kolm's jaw dropped. "This is like stepping into a prayer."

"Or a perfume shop," Vier added softly.

Grail remained motionless with his arms crossed over his chest while his eyes inspected every aspect of the environment.

Avenna directed their attention and indicated for them to follow her. She moved forward from the temple's sacred water pool at its centre toward a room adorned with velvet drapes and filled with cushions and low tables. A man with a long white braid wearing a lavender robe and having iridescent markings on his cheeks sat cross-legged on a platform made from interwoven gold and silver threads. He looked up, smiling.

"The universe knits together bizarre companions throughout time."

Avenna smiled. "Elder Illarian. My hope had been that you would remain at the temple."

He stood up elegantly with the poise of someone beyond the constraints of time while reaching out to meet Avenna's hands. "Avenna. The weight of stars remains with you lodged deep in your spine."

Her hands closed over his before she motioned toward the gathering. "This is The Eternal Slumber. Trusted allies."

"Hmm," he said, peering at them. "Yes. I see."

He clapped once. The acolytes brought trays featuring porcelain cups containing steaming green ginger tea and sweet magnolia scones glazed with honey and crushed rose petals.

"Please. Sit. You are welcome here," Illarian said.

They did. Kolm immediately took two scones. Vier carefully disassembled his scone as though it might resist. Dy showed his gratitude by nodding before starting to drink his tea. Grail grasped his porcelain cup with delicate care while his fingers showed an unusual reverence.

"The place possesses an overwhelming loudness through its absolute silence." He said.

Elder Illarian smiled, folding his hands in front of him with that quiet kind of delight reserved for those who truly listen to the world around them.

"A poetic observation," he said, voice warm like tea left steeping. "And not inaccurate."

Grail didn't move for a beat. Then, in a voice so low it nearly sank into the stone walls, he added, "It reminds me of the Gardens of Aether. Before."

Avenna's eyes slid toward him, curious. The way he said before… so final, so carved into bone, made her spine stiffen ever so slightly. Illarian tilted his head, knowingly.

"Ah," the priest murmured, his voice dipping like a hand brushing over old velvet. "So you once walked among the vines."

Grail's gaze didn't falter, though something in his posture tightened, subtly, almost imperceptibly, but

Avenna noticed it.

"There was a time," Grail said, "The grapevines stretched from one corner of the heavens to the other, heavy with fruit that tasted of first light." He leaned back slightly, fingertips brushing the rim of his untouched teacup. "It was a long time ago."

Avenna's lips parted just slightly, her gaze fixed.

Illarian nodded slowly, knowingly.

"Of course," the priest said softly. "It is an honour to welcome a God into our temple."

Grail's voice turned almost amused, like he was entertaining the memory for the first time in centuries.

"I am no God." He sighed then. "Just a vessel of devotion, scars and lost hope."

The room had grown still. Kolm, Vier, and Dy had gone quiet too, subdued out of a growing awareness that something sacred was being shared. Illarian stepped forward slightly, his silken robe barely making a sound.

"You descended, didn't you?" the priest said, gently. "Not fallen. That's not the right word. You descended."

Grail's smile, beneath the mask, was a sad thing. "I jumped."

Avenna said nothing. But her hands had stilled in her lap, and her breath caught halfway in her throat. The priest, rather than press, only nodded once more and murmured like a half-remembered hymn, "The Gardens of Aether remember their lost sons. Even those who leapt."

And Grail whispered back, "They remember, but

don't forgive."

"Forgiveness comes from within." The old man smiled, and Grail swallowed.

The silence after that was full. Avenna didn't know what to say, so she said nothing. And Grail… he just reached for his teacup at last and drank.

Elder Illarian placed his hands together in his lap before examining them closely. "Elaris is peace. But not perfect peace. This location served as a sanctuary for healing and balance in ancient times. We provided sanctuary for the soul and gave healing to the wounded minds of those who had become lost in the darkness. But…"

He turned his head to watch the petals floating through the window like falling snow.

"In time, that peace became… escapism. A beautiful dissociation. People come here with intentions to erase their memories. They smile and meditate. But their hearts are fractured and silent. The city provides serenity but serves as a place of avoidance for its visitors. Freedom… and the fear of reality."

Avenna cleared her throat. "We seek knowledge. Of Morphea. Of her origin and her history. Unlocking her past knowledge holds the potential solution to stop her."

Illarian nodded. "Then you must visit the archives. Those containing the oldest scrolls and celestial records exist deep beneath the temple. Some have not been touched in centuries."

"May we enter them?"

"I will provide you with two experienced scholars to support your research work. The archives cover a great area, yet they move with a consistent flow."

Avenna bowed her head. "Thank you."

"You can stay at the guest quarters while you conduct your research," Illarian added. "I suggest a few days. The tranquil atmosphere here will soothe your soul and define your power."

Grail, reclining slightly, chuckled. "Is there a room available without the overpowering scent of lavender's distant ancestor?"

Illarian grinned. "No. We have a room which carries the scent of sandalwood's rebellious niece."

Kolm snorted tea out of his nose.

"Three days," she said. "Research, rest and then we move on."

◇

The screen faded to black as the final notes of the temple's soft hymn echoed in her headphones. Elowen blinked, eyes adjusting to the dim glow of her desk light, the sharp contrast between there and here always jarring. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard for a moment before she clicked into the group chat. The screen filled instantly with a flood of notifications:

[**RedNocturne**]: *Okay, but can we talk about the FLOWERS*

[**SombreSky**]: *This was... interesting.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *someone mail me a bouquet of those lilies. I'm ready to take the trip.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *They'd probably kill you, Kolm.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *Worth it.*

Elowen let out a little snort, her fingers flying over the keys.

[**EllaStar5**]: *You're not supposed to want to get lost in the Fields of Euphoria, you maniacs.*

[**SombreSky**]: *That's where you're wrong. That was bliss. Pure serotonin.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *Best high I never actually took.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *Imagine taking your first date through those fields… talk about a shortcut to vulnerability.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *first date? Nah, bro. Every date. You get a petal crown and a spiritual awakening. That's romance.*

Elowen stifled another laugh, leaning back in her chair as the chat exploded with more chaos and praise. She watched the chat flicker for another few seconds, then typed:

[**EllaStar5**]: *I have an early meeting tomorrow with the dev team, so I'm off for the night. But thank you. Truly. You have no idea how much your words mean.*

[**SombreSky**]: *Sleep well, O mighty weaver of worlds.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *Try not to dream about Kolm dancing naked in the temple.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *…or do.*

She rolled her eyes, logging off with a soft chuckle as the last few messages pinged in. Her screen went dark. She sat for a second, soaking in the silence of her house. Reality was quieter than Elysium, but it buzzed in other

ways. Her heart still hummed with the remnants of candlelight and golden petals, with voices and laughter.

And then, her phone buzzed. A message from Dome.

[**BLDome**]: *So… Your Grail's not much of an ass anymore.*

She blinked at the message, then grinned, thumb tapping quickly.

[**EllaStar5**]: *I noticed. Can't decide if I'm impressed or annoyed.*

[**BLDome**]: *Field of Euphoria gave him a much-needed system reboot. Honestly, I don't know if I'll ever recover from him skipping through lilies.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Ha!*

[**BLDome**]: *You must be thrilled to see your story come to life.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *I truly am. I created this world thinking I was the god behind it, and now it's growing beyond me. Like a garden. I planted the seeds, but I have no idea what's going to bloom anymore.*

[**BLDome**]: *But isn't that kind of the point of good storytelling? You let it breathe and surprise you.*

Elowen stared at the message for a long moment, then typed:

[**EllaStar5**]: *Yeah. You're right. It is the point. Still feels surreal, though.*

[**BLDome**]: *Better than boring. You're doing something real, Star.*

She smiled softly, thumb hovering.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Thank you. Goodnight, Dome.*

[**BLDome**]: *Night.*

She set the phone down, the little glow still warming her skin. And for the first time in a long while… she didn't feel afraid of not knowing what came next. She welcomed it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Avenna could not recall any changes to her room walls since the day she first noticed them. The walls of Avenna's room displayed high stone surfaces that wore down from the sand and displayed cream and soft coral colours as if they were wrapping her in an embrace. Golden ore veins glinted faintly beneath moonlight streaming through the window lattice while crushed magnolia blossoms left a persistent scent on the linens. Avenna sat barefoot on her bed's edge while her white robe displayed small wrinkles, and her golden mask lay on a low carved table next to a cup of hot herbal tea.

There was silence here. The memories resonated throughout the entire space. The temple had not only been a place of discipline and relentless training. It had been the only home she had ever known, the only place where the scattered fragments of her life had been gathered and given shape.

She had no memory of arriving there. The elder priestesses told her the story many times when she was younger, always in the same calm voices that softened difficult truths. She had been found at the temple gates just before dawn, unconscious and alone upon the cold stone steps. No footprints marked the path behind her,

no messenger had claimed her, and no explanation had been left behind. Whoever had brought her there had vanished as completely as the night itself.

When she woke within the temple walls, her mind had been empty of everything that should have shaped a life. No childhood memories, no faces and no names. Not even the faintest trace of where she had come from or who had once held her. The only clue was the silver pendant clutched tightly in her hand.

It was shaped like a small star, delicate and cool against her skin, its surface smooth and unmarked by any name or symbol that could reveal its origin. The priestesses had kept it with her, believing that perhaps one day it might lead her back to the life she had lost.

But the years passed quietly. The memories never returned. At first, she waited for them. She searched her thoughts constantly for something familiar, some hidden image or voice that might rise from the emptiness and explain who she had been before the temple found her.

Nothing ever came. Eventually, she learned to live with the silence in her past, though accepting it had been far more difficult than the priestesses realised. There was a particular loneliness in knowing that the beginning of her story had simply vanished, leaving her to wonder if somewhere in the world there were people who had once known her name.

Perhaps they had searched for her. Perhaps they had forgotten her entirely. Or perhaps there had never been anyone to search at all. The uncertainty lingered like a faint ache she rarely spoke of.

Yet the temple had given her something stronger than answers. Within those stone walls, she had found guidance, purpose, and a kind of family forged through devotion. The voices of the priestesses, the echo of prayers, and the steady rhythm of ritual had shaped the person she became.

Home, identity, and meaning had grown there, even if the beginning of her life remained hidden somewhere beyond memory.

And yet, tonight… something stirred. Avenna let out a sigh before she stood up and draped her light shawl around her shoulders. The night called to her. Outside her balcony, crickets hummed while flowing water from afar tempted her thoughts with their moonlit lullaby. She slid her boots on, then hesitated. She pushed her feet back and moved barefoot across the heated stone surface. She took her mask and covered her face.

Night had settled gently over the temple, wrapping the stone halls in a quiet that felt almost sacred. Avenna stepped out of her chamber and closed the wooden door behind her with careful hands, mindful of the silence that lingered in the sleeping sanctuary. The corridor beyond was dimly lit by a few wavering lanterns set in iron brackets along the walls, their soft flames casting long shadows that shifted across the ancient stone.

Somewhere deeper in the temple a distant bell chimed softly, marking the passing hour before fading again into stillness.

Avenna drew her cloak closer around her

shoulders and began descending the spiral staircase that curled down through the tower like the spine of some ancient creature. The staircase opened into one of the temple's lower corridors, a long passage where pillars rose toward the vaulted ceiling and moonlight filtered through narrow windows high above.

Usually, this hour carried the low murmur of evening prayers or the rhythmic cadence of priestesses chanting their final hymns before rest. Tonight, however, the temple felt different.

As she walked, a sound drifted faintly through the corridor. Avenna paused. It wasn't a prayer. Nor was it the familiar choral chants that often echoed through the sanctuary at night.

It was a voice. Soft at first, almost distant, threading quietly through the darkened halls like a ribbon of sound carried by the wind. Curious, Avenna turned her head slightly, listening. The melody was unfamiliar, its rise and fall unlike anything sung during temple rituals. She followed it.

Turning down another hallway, she moved carefully along the cold stone floor. The lanterns grew fewer here, leaving long stretches of shadow between each small pool of golden light. The voice grew clearer with every step. A strange warmth prickled along her arms.

Goosebumps rose across her skin as the sound settled deeper in her chest, resonating somewhere beneath her ribs in a way she couldn't quite explain.

The corridor ended near a half-open door where

pale moonlight spilled across the floor. The voice was coming from there now, low and steady, carrying a melody that seemed older than the temple itself.

Avenna slowed her steps until she reached the door and gently leaned closer. The door stood slightly ajar. She peeked through the narrow opening. Her breath caught.

Beyond the doorway was one of the temple's small stone balconies, open to the night sky. Moonlight bathed the space in silver, illuminating the tall figure standing near the edge. Grail.

He faced the heavens above, his back partially turned to the room. Avenna could only see the side of his face under a mask, the faint angle of his jaw outlined by the moon's glow.

And he was singing. The sound of his voice filled the quiet courtyard beyond the balcony, deep and resonant, yet impossibly clear. It carried with it a smooth baritone that seemed to glide effortlessly between each note, as if the melody itself obeyed him. Avenna had never heard anything like it.

The language was unfamiliar to her ears, a series of flowing syllables that felt ancient and sacred all at once. Perhaps it was the language of the gods themselves. She couldn't understand the meaning, yet the emotion within the melody was unmistakable.

Something vast and aching that reached far beyond the temple walls. She couldn't look away. Moonlight caught briefly on his lips as he sang, revealing the soft movement of them shaping each unfamiliar

word. Occasionally the tip of his tongue brushed against those pearly white teeth as he formed a longer note, the gesture so natural it felt strangely intimate to witness.

The sound of him vibrated through the stone beneath her feet. God of music and frequencies, he had once said he was. Standing there now, listening to the quiet power of that voice filling the night, Avenna found she could not doubt it.

How could someone capable of such beauty carry so much darkness inside him? The thought lingered quietly in her mind as the melody continued, rising gently toward the stars. And Avenna stood frozen in the doorway, heart quietly trembling, as the song carried into the endless sky above the temple.

Moments later, she was in the gardens. They were bathed in silver. The bushes concealed fireflies that blinked and sent golden sparks dancing through the air in patterns reminiscent of living constellations. The combination of jasmine and wet stone perfumed the air near the river, which brought her comfort while magnolia trees glowed beneath the fragmented sky. The flower petals danced in the nighttime breeze, resembling fragments of dreams.

She moved at a leisurely pace along the riverbank, her fingertips brushing against the leaves while vines entwined the old stone walls before she reached the river bend. Moonlight danced on the water's surface while soft waves spread in silky motion. A quiet sound got her attention. It was a black heron. At the riverbank edge, the

heron remained perfectly still with an elegant arch to its neck while its feathers showed a deep night colour that shimmered like stardust. The bird's eyes sparkled with the serene knowledge of an ancient being.

Avenna froze, heart thudding quietly. A black heron was believed to be a messenger between spirit and flesh. This being serves as a bridge between the realms of sleep and consciousness. Its presence was rare and always meaningful. She didn't move. Didn't breathe too deeply. She watched in awe as the creature tilted its head to look straight at her. Something shifted in the air. It stepped forward. Slowly and deliberately. Avenna stretched out her trembling hand with her palm open as she sought connection rather than possession.

Snap. A rustle behind her. The wings of the heron flared open, creating a massive silhouette that shone brightly in the moon's glow. The bird took flight with a silent yet forceful call and disappeared into the starlit silver canopy above. Avenna whirled around, heart sinking.

A familiar voice delivered an amused "Oops" softly. "Did I ruin your moment?"

Her eyes narrowed. Grail loomed behind her with a relaxed posture as his dark cloak rustled softly around his feet. "Was trying to be stealthy. Guess I'm losing my touch."

"You scared it away," she declared with no emotion while searching the branches. "That was a black heron."

"I noticed," he said, glancing up. "They don't

usually show themselves."

"No," she murmured. "They don't."

She looked down. A feather rested at her feet, which had a midnight-dark hue with golden tints. She stooped to retrieve the feather, which she then gently held between two fingers before placing it into her robe's sash.

Grail moved forward with his hands hidden behind him as he tilted his head toward the river. "You're not mad, are you?"

She calmly responded. "No."

His statement came with a twisted grin as he declared his actions were part of his professional duties. "Babysitting."

"That's not necessary."

"Orders are orders."

With another sigh and a shake of her head, she took a seat at the riverbank where she dipped her feet in the cool water. Grail trailed behind her and then slumped down beside her while his boots remained on. They remained silent for an instant as moonlight bent around them while distant world sounds softened.

"So, do you often stalk people behind the chamber doors?" he asked, watching the sky.

Avenna blushed. Of course, he noticed her. It was silly to assume that the most dangerous assassin in the realm was so oblivious.

"I didn't know it was you, sorry." She sighed. "But, for what's it worth… You sing beautifully."

"Thanks," he smiled.

"Your attitude is still appalling, though."

"Touche." He laughed.

"Do you miss it?" she questioned while keeping her gaze fixed on the river. "The Gardens of Aether."

He was quiet for a long time. She worried he wouldn't respond after the lengthy silence. He admitted after a pause that he couldn't recall what it felt like anymore. "It's been too long. It feels like trying to recall the scent of someone you loved after their death."

She looked at him sideways. "What about Morphea?"

His jaw tensed. "That's a long story."

"Oh, I see..." she didn't push. He let out a measured breath while his fingers moved restlessly against the grass.

"She wasn't always darkness," he said finally. "Morphea used to be light. Pure. She received worship because she truly earned it. She brought healing. Joy. She made Aether bloom."

His voice went softer, nearly reverent. "And I loved her for it. Maybe it wasn't Morphea herself, but the way she made me feel valued that I loved. Like I could burn."

He quietly confessed that he had developed a craving for her. The unexpected openness in his voice made Avenna blink.

"She had this… light within her. This pull. Her eyes were like freedom. I didn't care that others whispered or that there were dark signs the first time we met. But then… we all have shadows, I guess. I could see

the fractures, but I took the step anyway."

"What happened?"

"There was another," he said bitterly. "A false god. New and powerful, empty inside. But he was like a magnet to many gods with his charisma, charm and confidence. He was loud, and I was quiet. He was dancing with the Sun, where I sang with the Moon. The false god tricked her with promises and manipulation, which led her to believe she needed to prove herself to be enough."

"I see…"

"She clung to him," Grail said. "Even as he hurt her. As she collapsed in his embrace, I lingered with hope. I watched helplessly as she came back to me with wounds but repeatedly returned to her abuser, who promised to change, to be better."

Avenna's throat tightened.

"She used me," Grail continued, voice flat. "For comfort. For warmth. And I let her. I begged her to choose me. 'Please say that… you will… stay.' I'd beg. "Give me everything. Take your aim at me and destroy me if necessary, but please don't leave me behind."

He laughed bitterly. Avenna gulped.

"She dragged me under, into that darkness, that… cold with her. Our love was abattage. Beautiful, brutal, doomed." He continued, staring ahead with narrowed eyes, "The false god fled. He stole her power, took it by force. Left her shattered, wounded… broken. She transformed into the shadow she had always tried to evade. Her pain turned to poison. Through Aether, she

unleashed the destructive force of fire because other gods turned away from her. After all, she was stained, impure."

"You followed her."

"I worshipped her," he said. "Still believed I could save her. Even after the exile, when all the gods pushed me away because I refused to fight against her. I continued to believe when all divine beings abandoned me. I fought for her, allowed her to crawl back to me, use me, and then leave me in pieces. Yet again."

She looked down. "Why did you finally stop?"

Grail was silent again, lost in memory.

"I was wounded," he said quietly. "A long battle for her name. I ended up in Elaris, before it transformed into today's city. I was bleeding, exhausted. Done. Wishing I'd disappear." He gazed upward at the trees and stars that appeared to breathe with life. "I saw a black heron. Just like tonight. It led me to this temple. And there I was welcomed by a priestess. She was dying of Dusk, wilting day by day. But she gave me everything she had. Her strength, her kindness. Her final gift… a golden rose that was gifted to her by the gods as a sign of purity and love."

"I see," Avenna nodded, remembering the little golden flower in his pocket.

"Before her last breath, she said… Fate doesn't belong to Gods. The fate belongs to you." He paused. "*Amor fati*, she said. Love your fate. That changed me. I felt like that string, that connection between Morphea and me, finally snapped. That the bow I held so tight

broke… I decided to become something else. Save more than I killed and tip the scales. I could not fix myself anymore, but I still could help those who needed it. To do something good before my soul was completely crushed. And I am still trying. Even though I understand her pain… I can't let mine take over anymore."

"Many people struggle to move on after they have been hurt, and in the end, they dive into their own darkness. Sometimes it's hard to swim back up when giving up and letting the darkness swallow you is so much easier."

"Yes. But I refused to, at least while I had some willpower in me."

Avenna was quiet, absorbing every word. "I misjudged you."

He gave a slow, crooked smile. "Most do."

She studied his arms. Scarred from pain and survival. She thought about how many of them remained inside him. Avenna spoke with dryness after the silence stretched out before her, "Your arsy attitude remains unexcused."

Grail laughed. The sound bounced off the water's surface before travelling towards the stars. The fragmented moon above looked on silently. Avenna pushed herself up from the smooth stones of the riverbank, brushing droplets from her palms. The ground was slick with moss, the kind that clung to skin like velvet. She shifted her weight to stand, and her foot slid. She caught a startled breath, arms flailing for balance, but Grail was faster. His hand closed around her forearm,

yanking her towards him before she could tumble backwards into the current.

Except his own footing failed. They went down together. The splash erupted around them, cold water rushing into every seam of their clothes. Grail twisted his body mid-fall, cushioning her against his chest as they plunged beneath the surface. The river swallowed the sound of her gasp. When they broke through again, she found herself lying half on top of him, her hair plastered in wet waves around her face, rivulets dripping onto the black paint that streaked across his skin.

He was drenched, the obsidian paint that masked his jaw and cheekbones bleeding away in thin, inky threads. Beneath them, pale skin emerged: pale against the wet black. Her eyes caught on the small, unguarded details: the curve of his ears, tinged faintly pink from the cold; the bare line of his throat where the water had rinsed the pigment clean; the soft, almost petal-like flush of his lips. She realised she was staring, and perhaps because they were so close, perhaps because she wanted to see more, she thought she glimpsed the faintest outline of his eyes through the black glass slits of his mask.

"Enjoying the view?" he murmured, voice low, almost amused.

Heat crept up her neck, betraying her. She didn't answer, only held his gaze, the corners of her mouth twitching despite herself. For a moment, there was no sound but the water curling around them. No movement except for the slow tilt of his head towards hers. She felt

him close the smallest fraction of space, his breath… warm even in the cold, brushing her skin. Then a heron, disturbed by their fall, flapped its wings in a heavy rush from the reeds. The sudden burst of motion jolted her back to herself.

Avenna blinked, heart thudding, and immediately pulled back. She crawled away through the shallow water, splashing gracelessly until her hands found the riverbank. Behind her, Grail shifted, standing with a fluid grace that somehow looked deliberate even now. Water cascaded from his neck and down his bare chest in crystalline streams. He extended a hand. She hesitated only a second before taking it. His palm was warm despite the chill, his grip firm but unhurried.

"Thanks," she murmured, avoiding his gaze, the blush still burning in her cheeks. She stepped onto the grass, wringing the water from her skirt while he remained in the river a moment longer, watching her.

Avenna turned without looking back. "I should… change," she said quickly, already heading towards the path that led to her chamber. He didn't answer. Only when she disappeared into the shadows did Grail glance up at the fractured moon, water still running from his skin, the mask's dark lenses catching the pale light as if they held their own reflection of the night sky.

◇

The golden interface of the Elysium chatroom flickered to life on Elowen's screen as she logged in,

fingers lightly drumming across her keyboard while her tea cooled beside her, untouched. The tranquil menu music hummed softly in the background: lilting piano over cosmic static, and a line of new messages popped up in the chat.

[**RedNocturne**]: *GUYS. URGENT ANNOUNCEMENT.*

[**SombreSky**]: *…what did you do*

[**AzureEcho**]: *bracing myself*

[**RedNocturne**]: *I fell in love.*

[**SombreSky**]: *With a blade, a beast, or a bad idea?*

[**RedNocturne**]: *None of the above. A priestess. A fae one. Two-dimensional and everything.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *Oh no.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Do I even want to ask what happened?*

[**RedNocturne**]: *She had glowy freckles and purple hair and floated like a hallucination. I gave her a flower, and she said, "The rivers remember kindness." I'm DONE. I'm moving into the temple.*

[**SombreSky**]: *Kolm's going to defect. All for fae romance.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *Don't judge my devotion.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *This is why we can't leave you unsupervised.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Honestly, she sounds cool.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *Thank you! Some of us still believe in magic.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *Anyway. I got a sick new glaive from the armour hall near the lower terraces. Celestial engraving on the hilt, glow stat for enemies. It slaps.*

[**SombreSky**]: *Found a side quest too. Helped a bunch of kids pick moonfruit near the shrine. They gave me shiny rocks, the strongest imaginary curse in the land, and wrapped me in ivy. They called me Ivy Pants.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Your title is canon now.*

[**SombreSky**]: *>:(*

Another message pinged in.

[**RedNocturne**]: *ALSO.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *I may have wandered off and spotted two familiar silhouettes chatting near the riverside. Under the moonlight. Very… romantasy.*

[**SombreSky**]: *Oh no.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *Don't.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *Just saying. Looked like someone was getting cosy. A certain masked assassin and a certain golden priestess?*

[**BLDome**]: *fuck off*

[**RedNocturne**]: *Grail and Avenna sitting in a tree…*

[**EllaStar5**]: *>:(*

[**SombreSky**]: *It's official. You're banned from field reports.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *How did Kolm survive this long without being throttled…*

[**RedNocturne**]: *Because I'm charming.*

A new system message appeared:

[**System Message**]: *New Quest Received – "Sacred Archives & Forgotten Truths"*

OBJECTIVES:

– Explore the Temple Archives

– Speak to the Acolytes
– Clear and organise bookshelf records
– BONUS: Locate and recover Five Sacred Scrolls marked with the Seal of the Golden Rose. Deliver scrolls to Elder Illarian in the Grand Lotus Chamber.

[**AzureEcho**]: *Alright, the quest just dropped. Looks like it's nerd mode time.*

[**SombreSky**]: *Finally. Let me flex my librarian instincts.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *I was BORN to alphabetise chaos.*

[**BLDome**]: *You'll just flirt with the Acolytes.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *That IS my process.*

As the group descended into more banter, Elowen noticed her private chat box blink. She clicked it.

[**BLDome**]: *So… is this where the romantasy plot kicks in?*

She stared at the message, smirking.

[**EllaStar5**]: *You're assuming there is one.*

[**BLDome**]: *Please. You don't build a golden-masked priestess and a broody, trauma-riddled ex-god if you don't want readers to scream.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Maybe I just enjoy morally grey enemies-to-something slow burns. With banter. And longing. And… intense eye contact through masks.*

[**BLDome**]: *So no romance at all. Got it.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Exactly. Strictly professional divine chaos.*

[**BLDome**]: *Bold of you to lie like that.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Okay. Fine. Maybe I'm as weak as the rest of us for a tragic, tortured soft bastard with a sword and abandonment issues.*

[**BLDome**]: *Glad we're being honest.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Always. Brutal honesty is my love language.*

[**BLDome**]: *Brutal honesty, huh? I'll remember that when Grail gets poetic and broody again. Wouldn't want to trigger your romance allergy.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *I don't have a romance allergy. I'm just… cautious. There's a difference.*

[**BLDome**]: *Mhm. Says the girl who described passion as an intellectual dissertation over wine.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *And what's wrong with that? Stimulate the brain first.*

[**BLDome**]: *So basically, if someone quotes Nietzsche while pouring your tea, it's game over?*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Depends. Did they pronounce it right?*

[**BLDome**]: *…Touché.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Anyway, if we're being honest… Grail's still an ass. But… a more tolerable one.*

[**BLDome**]: *A glowing review.*

A notification popped in:

[**RedNocturne**]: *Oi, lovers, you done flirting or do I need to hit skip?*

[**AzureEcho**]: *Let them be. Romance builds morale.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *We were just discussing battlefield strategy, obviously.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *Whatever helps you sleep at night.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *Can we resume the quest now? I want to punch a bookshelf.*

[**SombreSky**]: *Let's go make a floral offering to the archives.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Let's go, swampy fairy Ivy Pants. Quest awaits.*

The loading screen shimmered, ushering them back into Elysium. Petal-lined golden paths of Elaris stretched before them once more, and in the distance, the ancient towers of the Temple Archives waited, crumbling, mystical, and filled with secrets begging to be found.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Elaris's archives resembled a timeless monument: an ancient sacred cave carved into the temple's eastern wing that was partially buried under earth and roots. Violet wisteria vines climbed the stone walls covered in moss while intertwining with the carved runes, which revealed their secret messages to those who knew how to hear them. Time and dust had dulled the stained glass windows, which sent golden rays of light scattering across endless shelves that reached up to a domed ceiling, which disappeared into shadow.

Avenna glided through the aisles like a ghost revisiting its childhood home. Her fingertips brushed against leather-bound books which contained texts older than any known war, while viewing languages that seemed to dance before her eyes. Dancing shadows emerged across the marble floor as candlelight flickered from ornate sconces. The air became filled with a peaceful blend of prayer murmurs and page rustling that echoed a lullaby.

The peaceful moment was shattered when chaotic fumbling noises emerged from behind her. Vier passed by with three books balanced on his head while he muttered something about structural balance beneath his breath. Kolm winked at two acolytes while releasing a

dreamy sigh.

"The Fae priestess from the herbarium cast her gaze upon me."

Dy responded with a flat tone while he walked past carrying a stack of books and said she looked at the floor. "Don't get excited."

"But she looked at me first."

Avenna smiled briefly toward them while they walked by, and she added several of their collected books to her collection beside her. It's been two days since they started hunting for information. The scrolls spread across her desk mimicked gentle breaths as they murmured mystical truths only committed practitioners could comprehend. She scanned the aged paper swiftly while her eyes alternated between languages and decoded symbols to identify relevant marks.

And yet… her gaze slid sideways. Grail. He leaned lazily on a tall shelf while casually turning the pages of a well-used book as though it had always been in his grasp. Since their last conversation, he remained silent, and she also struggled to find the right words. She lifted her own book higher, letting the worn leather cover obscure most of her face. Still, she risked a peek over the top… and caught him watching her. He didn't look away immediately, and the faintest tilt of his head suggested amusement. Heat crept into her cheeks. She ducked behind the pages again. When she dared another glance, she found he'd done the same… his own book held up, concealing most of his face, though the angle was just wrong enough to suggest he was watching her over it.

Her lips twitched despite herself. She hid behind the book again, this time for longer, pretending to read.

A sudden crash made her flinch. Kolm, somewhere in the back of the archives, had managed to knock over an entire teetering stack of books. He froze mid-motion, caught between horror and sheepishness, then began to gather them up, muttering curses under his breath.

The silent game continued. She wandered deeper into the shelves, tracing her fingers along the spines, until she slid one book free, only to find Grail standing on the other side of the same shelf. Their glances met through the narrow gap. He smirked, slow and deliberate, as if he'd been waiting for her to look. She huffed, shoved the book back in place, and walked away before he could say anything. Somewhere behind her, a sharp thwack echoed, followed by Kolm's startled yelp. A priestess had apparently hurled a heavy tome directly at his head, scolding him for some overly bold comment she'd clearly not appreciated.

Later, as she settled at a long reading table, Grail passed by and, without a word, set a fresh candle beside her when hers burned low. Their fingers brushed briefly on the table's edge. She didn't look up, but her heartbeat betrayed her. She returned the favour an hour later when she noticed his ink pot was nearly empty. Without asking, she slid hers across the table to him, their glances meeting in the brief exchange. No words, no nod… just the faintest upward twitch of his lips before he dipped his pen and continued writing. Kolm, meanwhile,

reappeared juggling three scrolls in an effort to impress another priestess, only for one to unravel entirely mid-toss, tangling around his head and nearly sending him sprawling.

Avenna corrected the positioning of her robe's shoulder before she walked over to some acolytes who carefully sorted delicate scrolls through their soft touch.

"Excuse me," she said softly. "Are there any documented records or writings that discuss gods? Defeating or binding them?"

A boy who looked barely older than fifteen stood startled. The older woman with her braids resembling a crown stepped out and lowered her head in response. "West wing. Topmost shelves. They're rarely touched. Most humans fear gods instead of studying them."

Avenna headed toward the wing indicated to her, which remained quiet beneath layers of half-settled dust. The towering shelves ended in a soft haze where the parchment clouds concealed their peak. Scrolls with silver clasps and heavy books encased in animal skin stood alongside crystal jars containing folded silk sheets, which remained in silent respect. She stretched toward the book with its golden spine barely visible beyond her grasp. Stretching her fingers didn't help. She lifted herself onto her toes and let her robe rise slightly, but the book stayed beyond her grasp.

The drawled voice behind her asked, "Need a hand?"

She exhaled. "I'm not a helpless girl."

He maintained silence while she shut her eyes for

a brief moment. The book lifted from its shelf to float like it was tugged by unseen threads while her fingers snapped. The object floated in the air until it settled perfectly into her hand.

Avenna observed him while lifting an eyebrow. "Forgot where we are? This temple exists to support women who have learned to survive without the need for 'strong, tall' men to save them."

Grail raised one hand in mock surrender while smirking at the situation. "I had been anticipating a typical damsel-in-distress scenario in this situation. I even rehearsed a line. Something like, 'Allow me, fair lady'."

"The time you spend with Kolm is excessive."

He let out a quiet chuckle, which faded as her tone changed.

"Those men who believe that reaching the highest shelf makes them heroes only bring violence and force because they know nothing but how to take."

He studied her face. The lines around her mouth. The a sharp tension in her shoulders. "Is that personal experience talking?"

Avenna didn't answer. She opened the book and immediately reviewed the table of contents. Grail sat next to her as she moved to the floor and took up a cross-legged position while she skimmed through the pages of her book. Shortly after departing, the acolytes came back requesting help to arrange scrolls in alphabetical order in the western section. Dy grumbled while Vier sighed and Kolm flexed his arms dramatically as though he was lifting an immense weight.

The team helped Avenna extract a scroll from beneath the dusty crate. The scroll emitted a crackling noise when she touched it because the seal had long been broken despite the worn parchment remaining whole. Runes crawled across it like a flame. Grail returned with another. Then Dy. Afterwards, Vier and Kolm arrived carrying additional newly discovered scrolls, which she assembled together.

Laid side by side, the runes aligned. "Dissent. Exchange. Fury. Sorrow. Embrace."

Five words. Five keys? Dy crossed his arms while asking everyone their thoughts about the meaning.

"Could be poetry," Vier offered.

Kolm commented, "It might be a spell," while he enjoyed a stolen scone.

Avenna nodded with deliberation as she memorised the runes. "We'll bring them to Elder Illarian."

"What happens if he doesn't know?" Vier asked while she braided parchment strips.

"Then we keep looking."

She carefully rewound the scrolls as though she were tucking in a child for their bedtime. The wind moved through the broken stones with a gentle howl while a beam of sunlight cut across the dusty air above them. The ancient archives held their breath, full of forgotten secrets that no living voice had revealed for many centuries. They were getting closer. To something. Even if they didn't yet know what.

The archives smelled like parchment and incense: thick, heavy with the dust of the dead and the silence of truths too sacred to whisper aloud. Avenna walked ahead, her eyes absorbing the gilded edges of ancient tomes, carved columns etched with forgotten languages, the hum of magic veiled in the air like static. Behind her trailed Grail, silent and coiled like a blade not yet drawn, Kolm close beside him with her wary glances shifting toward every passing priestess. Vier and Dy lingered at the back. They were here to speak with the Elder.

Then, the sound cut the world in half. It was shattering. Like stone ribs being split from the heart of the temple. Then the screaming started: real, human, unfiltered, choking screams of people who would never speak again.

BOOM.

Dust poured from the ceiling in sheets. The walls trembled. Scrolls and relics tumbled from their shelves, crashing to the marble floor. Avenna turned with dread.

"Something… is attacking the temple!"

Footsteps. Not human and too heavy and too loud. Metal on stone like execution bells ringing across bones. Then a voice, a whisper inside the bones of the world.

"*Are you a beacon from Heavens?*"

The priestess flinched. Others turned pale.

Grail's voice cut sharply, "What the fuck is that?!"

The entrance to the archives exploded inward. Stone shattered, blood sprayed. One of the guards didn't even scream; he was simply gone, his body crushed

beneath a massive crimson blade that burned like wildfire wrapped in sin. And there he stood. *Sumon*.

He was tall. Taller than any man had the right to be. His armour was jagged, dented, and marked with runes that bled. A cloak of fur, long and matted, hung from his shoulders like the pelt of a betrayed king. And his helm had horns twisted from golden metal, catching light and shadow like a crown. Avenna froze. People ran, screaming, stumbling over one another, blood slicking the floors as debris fell from the vaulted ceiling.

A priestess, chanting protection spells, was yanked backwards. Chains, ethereal and glowing red with ghostlight. They wrapped her legs and her torso, and dragged her screaming into the shadows behind Sumon.

Snap. Silence. No one saw her again.

[Avenna – Celestial Barrage]

She lifted her hands, raw light flickering at her fingertips. Stars coalesced into orbs, and she flung them like comets at the intruder.

-6% HP

Sumon Health Bar: ||||||||||||||||94%

The impact pushed him back a single step. Smoke curled off his chestplate. He turned his golden gaze toward her, silent. Watching.

[Grail – Moonsteel Lunge]

With a growl, Grail drew both blades and charged. His boots crushed shattered relics as he blurred into a spin, blades slicing through summoned spectres that clawed toward them.

-3% HP

Sumon Health Bar: ||||||||||||||||91%

[Kolm – Chainbreaker's Ward]

Kolm snapped his staff outward, forming a barrier to halt the chains slithering toward them. The energy sparked against the metal, keeping it at bay. But there were too many.

From behind Sumon spilt a legion of dead souls. Ghostly figures, their faces Grail, their fingers ending in sharpened bone. Some wore broken priest robes. Some still bled illusions of who they were in life. And some... some looked like children.

"Why are they not fighting back?!" Kolm growled, looking at stunned priestesses and monks.

"They can't... they… fell for illusions," Dy growled.

Priestesses fell on their knees. One clutched a locket, sobbing, before the illusion of her lost daughter twisted into a monster and tore out her throat. Blood painted the floors like scripture. Sumon moved through the chaos with dreadful calm, chains sweeping wide and dragging bodies into walls, through pews, against each other. Bones cracked like dry branches.

[Dy – Pulse Shot: Scatter]

Energy blasted through five ghosts, scattering their illusion forms with a shriek. He ducked behind a pillar, charging his next strike.

-4% HP

Sumon Health Bar: ||||||||||||||||87%

Then, he was there. Sumon crossed the space in two impossibly fast steps, one hand raised, one chain

already coiled in fire. Before Grail could scream her name, the chain struck Avenna. Her light sputtered. Her body was lifted and dragged, mid-cast, across the archive floor like a rag doll. Her scream was silenced by the sheer force of the grip as Sumon's armoured hand closed around her throat. He raised her like a doll.

"Are you a beacon from Heavens?"

Avenna choked. Her light faltered, crushed under the weight of his touch. Her body convulsed as her lungs fought for air, her hands clawing at the armour that burned with crimson agony.

[Grail – Berserk Mode Activated]

Seeing Avenna in Sumon's grip snapped something feral in him.

[Kolm – Break the Bind]

Kolm threw his staff, shattering a ghost mid-lunge, but a chain whipped out, wrapping around his ankle.

Kolm - Bound (next round: STR struggle required)

[Avenna – Lightburst Attempt]

Even while suffocating, she summoned light. Pure, radiant and searing. It stuttered and cracked. It broke against his armour.

No HP loss

Sumon Health Bar: ||||||||||||||||87%

Then came the snap. Avenna's body went limp as Sumon whispered something in a language older than the archive stones. But before the light inside her could be extinguished, Grail hit him. Shoulder first, full speed.

[Grail – Shield Bash: Heavy Impact]

-5% HP

Sumon Health Bar: ||||||||||||||||||82%

Avenna was wrenched free, falling into Grail's arms. Their hands touched, and her world shattered. She was no longer in the temple. No screams or blood. She was in a garden. Moonflowers blooming under soft starlight. A lake glowing like a liquid pearl. The air smelled of lilac. Avenna stood barefoot at the edge of the lake, drawn forward.

There, in the centre, waist-deep in the water, stood a woman. Bare and so ethereal. Hair silver as starlight trailing down her back. She didn't turn. Avenna stepped forward. Her hand lifted without meaning to, an ache swelling in her chest. Her soul screamed to reach her. To touch her. To see her face. But when she looked down, the reflection was not hers. It was Grail.

He stood at the shore, staring at the woman. It was his desire, his memory. His limerence and his ache, reflected through her soul. Desire for a woman he barely knew, but believed was the one for him. His obsession, his dream.

Avenna gasped. She blinked hard, tearing away from the illusion as her lungs clawed back air. The garden faded. The silver-haired woman sank into the fog. Her heart still screamed with longing, but Grail's arms were real, grounding and holding her.

"You with me?" he rasped, his voice raw with worry and fury.

She nodded, still shaking. "Y-Yeah. I'm here."

But they didn't have time. Chains hissed like

serpents behind them. Screams still cracked through the temple halls. And Sumon had shifted. He roared.

[Sumon – Chainstorm Unleashed]

A vortex of blood-red chains whipped out in every direction. Debris exploded and pillars cracked. The floor groaned beneath the weight of war.

-15% HP

Sumon Health Bar: ||||||||||||||72%

[Grail – Feral Dance]

He dropped Avenna gently, and then something inside him snapped. He moved like lightning, kissing death. Slash – stab – pivot – dodge – slash again. He ducked low, drove his blade into Sumon's side.

-6% HP

Sumon Health Bar: ||||||||||||||66%

He spun, kicked off a column, and brought both blades down, again. Again.

"You like illusions?" Grail snarled. "How about the illusion that you fucking stand a chance?"

[Kolm – Binding Lash]

Kolm, still wrapped in a chain, bit down on it with a growl and drove his sword into the floor. Magic surged. The chain shattered.

"Let's dance, freak." He charged toward the knight.

[Dy – Shadow Step]

Dy blurred behind Sumon, knives flashing in both hands. A flurry of stabs bit into the knight's back joints.

-5% HP

Sumon Health Bar: ||||||||||||61%

[Vier – Phase Strike]

Vier barreled through two lingering souls, blade glowing violet. He slammed into Sumon's flank, knocking him slightly off-balance.

-4% HP

Sumon Health Bar: ||||||||||||57%

Sumon reeled back, only slightly. And then, his gaze flicked. Just for a second. Toward the broken wall to his left. Toward a shattered mirror, cracked and half-dangling from twisted stone. And he flinched, turned away. Avenna's eyes narrowed. She shouted over the chaos, voice cutting like a blade:

"He looked at the mirror! He turned away!"

Grail didn't pause.

"What?!"

"Hold him! I have an idea!"

[Kolm, Dy, Vier – Chain Intercept Combo]

Like wolves on command, they lunged. They dodged the whipping hell-chains and caught them mid-swing, wrapping them around Sumon's limbs, his own chains binding him.

Dy roared, veins glowing faintly from the backlash of contact. "Fucking HOLD, damn you!"

Chains writhed, but the trio pulled tighter, bracing against pillars, debris, even each other. He struggled, golden helm thrashing, armour clanking violently. Ghostly voices screamed from within him. The temple shuddered. Avenna sprinted. Blood pounding. The mirror lay in fragments, sharp and silver. Her hands

reached out. *Slice.* One shard cut deep across her palm. Blood spilled. But she didn't stop. Another on her forearm. She hissed, but didn't stop. Glass glittered in both hands. The biggest shard shimmered like moonlight warped through madness. She turned. Her own blood dripped down her wrists.

"Sumon!" she screamed. "LOOK AT YOURSELF!"

She thrust the mirror shard in front of his face. Chains trembled, and he screamed. A soul-deep, rending howl that shattered stained glass overhead.

"NO, NO! NOT THAT! DON'T SHOW ME! I DON'T WANT TO SEE!!"

Avenna stepped closer. "Enough illusions! This is reality. This is YOU. LOOK AT YOURSELF FOR ONCE!"

He writhed, pulled, but the chains held. Kolm grunted. Dy bled. Vier's nose cracked from backlash, but they held. The mirror reflected him. He screamed.

"REALITY BURNS! IT HURTS! LET ME GO BACK! LET ME SEE HER! LET ME SEE HER!!"

His armour cracked. Flames of gold and crimson poured from every seam. The fur cloak turned to ash. The blade dropped from his hand with a clang that echoed like a funeral bell.

"SHE PROMISED I WAS CHOSEN! SHE SAID I COULD BE ENOUGH! WHY WOULD SHE LIE?"

His body glowed. Too bright, too fast. Avenna dropped the mirror and screamed, shielding her face.

"Get back!!"

The blast was light and soul-rending agony, a dome of gold and red that tore through the archives, obliterating the dead souls, silencing every remaining spectre in one single, final cry. When it cleared… Silence. Ash floated, scrolls burned, and dust hung in the air. And on the scorched marble floor, at the centre of it all, lay a single vial. Inside, glowing gold liquid, pulsing like a heartbeat. Grail helped Avenna to her feet. She limped forward. Her hand was cut, and her cheek was bruised. But she reached down and picked up the vial. It pulsed in her palm.

The temple groaned under its own ruin. Pillars lay split and crumbled. The divine images from stained glass windows had collapsed to shattered remnants scattered across the temple floor as divine confetti. A thick coppery blood smell pervaded the air while the burnt incense and ancient stone aroma mixed beneath it. The priestesses walked silently through the debris while their hands emitted a soft light as they cared for the injured. Some sobbed. Some prayed. Others simply stared, lost in what they'd survived.

The team took their seats in the shade cast by the ruined altar. As Elder Illarian knelt on the floor, his fingers protectively held a scroll which he treated as though it were a delicate infant unable to awaken. Ash clung to his white robes. His eyes showed signs of exhaustion, yet they retained a hidden determination.

"You arrived in search of answers," he announced while carefully revealing the scroll. "My capacity to provide truth extends to just one statement."

His fingertips moved along the lines of the ancient script. Residual magic served to protect the letters, which shimmered faintly. The breeze softly blew through the temple's broken walls, making the parchment flutter.

"The Five Fords," he murmured. "They are not places as you hoped. They are stages. Of the soul and grief."

He paused, eyes sweeping across their faces. "Dissent. Exchange. Fury. Sorrow. Embrace."

Grail exhaled. "Do we need to interpret this as a metaphor or search for a river to shed tears in?"

Illarian didn't flinch. "This is your path. You're walking it already."

He grasped the scroll once more as his voice remained gentle but firm. "Dissent is the soul's first rebellion. The soul begins its rebellion when it understands reality contradicts its beliefs."

He flipped to the next line. "Exchange follows. Bargaining. The proposition that maybe the gods will return what they took forms a desperate logic dance."

Kolm scoffed under his breath.

"Then comes Fury," the elder continued. "The part that chooses to turn everything to ashes instead of facing emptiness emerges. Rage is easier than mourning."

He looked up, slower now. "Sorrow. A depthless weight. It drowns, softly tells you that you stand alone while the world progresses without you."

He approached the concluding passage with his voice just above a whisper. "And Embrace... Choosing to

live with the truth requires accepting reality while resisting its destructive power. One should bear grief like a scar instead of carrying it like a wound."

The space around them became quiet to a depth beyond silence.

Dy folded his arms, frowning. "Beautiful. Really. What practical use does this understanding have when facing a crazed knight who threatens our lives again?"

Illarian gave a faint, knowing smile. "Surviving your enemy requires understanding what causes their pain. The path to preventing becoming them lies in understanding your own self."

Avenna moved restlessly as her wounded fingers gripped the bandage roll more tightly between her thighs.

Kolm reached for her hand. "Let me help…"

"I'm fine!" She spoke quickly with a sharp tone and pulled away abruptly when she flinched.

He raised a brow, caught off guard. "You've maintained this level of charm throughout, or is the odour from the charred remains causing your mood to shift?"

Her jaw clenched. She rose from her position with a swift and abrupt movement. She stormed off into the hallway, where smoke and shadows swallowed her up.

Kolm blinked. "Didn't realise I was that offensive."

"Her own story exists," Illarian stated quietly while his eyes remained fixed on Avenna's path. "Few individuals could endure the burden, while even fewer

would live through it."

The team fell silent again. Even Kolm, for once, said nothing. The elder explained that she had been abandoned at the doorstep when she was just a baby. "People treated her like a spoken prophecy."

He took a slow breath.

"Lords saw her as an asset. Something to exploit. They harnessed her power to increase their own reputations and forced her to perform in extravagant displays that belied her wild nature. The noble who saw her as a threat decided to take action."

Grail's expression darkened as a shadow swept across his tense features.

"They sent an assassin," Illarian said. "The assassin approached her with gentle words and a tender touch. He made her believe she was loved. That she was finally safe. The assassin attempted to take her innocence during their fatal encounter. And her life."

A profound stillness as dense as stone filled the entire area. Kolm stared at the ground. Dy's jaw worked soundlessly. Grail demanded tersely what became of the monster.

The elder looked at him without blinking. "He attempted to run. Reached the temple's highest tower. It's strange… he must have slipped while he ran past me."

Grail's mouth twitched, almost a smile. "Clumsy fucker."

On her bed, Avenna sat with a stiff back while her

trembling hands worked to finish wrapping the last bandages. The room remained dim because only a half-melted candle provided a faint flicker of light. Dried blood left her fingers in a sticky state.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway, followed by a sound of an opening door not far from her and soon interrupted by Dy's scream.

"Close the fucking door, holy shit!"

There was a pause, then a knock on her own door. The voice from beyond the door identified itself as Kolm. "I'm not here to argue."

She didn't move.

"Just wanted to check on you."

There was a pause. After a while, she replied, "You can come in," with a voice so faint it was hard to hear.

Kolm stepped into the room carefully so he wouldn't bring too much ash inside with his boots. The small, tidy room exuded warmth through its unique atmosphere, which his emerald eyes quickly examined. Books were stacked with ritualistic precision. There was a solitary pressed flower wedged between the pages on her desk. Through the ripped curtains, light entered the room as a dim reflection of the past.

"Nice place," he said. "Very tragic heroine. Very you."

She didn't smile. He moved forward while his hands stayed loosely joined behind his back.

"I didn't mean to make you angry. The joke… my timing was shit. I just… wanted to help."

She glanced at him, but said nothing.

"I understand your experience," he stated softly. "To lose trust. To lose everything."

She turned slightly, her gaze narrowing. He smiled. "I was born in Valebright. I belonged to the Court of Ecliptara. Artists, performers and poets. My family was known for our theatre. Our illusions. We produced illusions that transformed the world into something beautiful despite its true state."

His voice turned bitter. "But that joy… it curdled. People stopped coming for wonder. They came to forget. Art became a distraction. Pleasure became currency."

He looked down at his hands. "They hated us. Envied our beauty and our craft. Called it false. Called us false. The citizens blamed the vampires for their city's decay as it began to rot."

She finally looked at him.

"The majority of my kind no longer exist here. Hunters made sure of that. We became monsters in their stories. So I put on a mask. Joined House Vivianite." He met her eyes. "I'm not fighting to be a hero. I fight today so that someday people will recall that beauty once held meaning."

Silence settled between them. He spoke more softly as he clarified that he never intended to treat her with glass-like care. "I just wanted to show I care. I use laughter as my armour."

Avenna looked away, her throat tight. "I know," she whispered.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The screen faded to black, the final explosion of crimson light from Sumon's defeat flickering one last time before dissolving into nothing. A soft breath slipped past Elowen's lips as she leaned back into her chair.

"Holy shit," she whispered to no one in particular, heart still pacing like a drum echoing through her ribs.

[**RedNocturne**]: *OKAY, but Elowen and Kolm? Besties now. Canon.*

Elowen laughed, warmth blooming in her chest as the chat erupted around her.

[**SombreSky**]: *That was INSANE. That boss fight? Cinematic level execution. Wtf.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *Sumon's moves?? I was screaming.*

[**BLDome**]: *Mate, the fight choreography was something else. That final mirror moment? Phenomenal.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *And the blood! So much blood! Ella, was that purely your design?*

[**EllaStar5**]: *:) The boss or the blood? I worry about you, sometimes. But the boss… that would be me.*

[**BLDome**]: *Let me guess. Was Sumon meant to represent limerence?*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Exactly. The illusion of 'this person could be your everything,' even though you barely know them. That ache that tricks you into thinking it's love.*

[**BLDome**]: *And defeating him meant reclaiming autonomy. Breaking the illusion. Chef's kiss metaphor.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *You always catch the deeper thread. Thank you.*

[**SombreSky**]: *OKAY OKAY so Kolm gets a whole soul-baring tragic vampire monologue, and the rest of us just stand there bleeding and emotionally unprocessed??*

[**AzureEcho**]: *Seriously! I demand trauma equality!*

[**RedNocturne**]: *Sorry, lads. The eyeliner and vampire angst combo earned me first dibs. Don't be jealous.*

[**SombreSky**]: *Jealous? No. Just emotionally neglected.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *Same. I want at least one brooding monologue and a mysterious scar backstory, or I'm walking.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Haha! Don't worry. You're next. Elderwyn's about to open ALL your closets and drag those skeletons out in style.*

[**SombreSky**]: *oh no*

[**AzureEcho**]: *oh yes*

[**RedNocturne**]: *bring it on, baby!*

[**SombreSky**]: *Shit, it's past midnight. We've got the gig tomorrow.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *You're right. Band call's at 9. Elowen, that was amazing as always. This story… It's something else.*

[**SombreSky**]: *For real. You've built something special. We're lucky to be a part of it.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Thanks, you guys. Wait… what's the gig?*

[**AzureEcho**]: *Well… we got a bit of attention lately. The band's picking up steam. We're starting our second tour.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *OMG! Congrats, guys! Now I feel guilty for never asking… what's the band name? Anything I've heard?*

[**BLDome**]: *Secret.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Oh, come on!*

[**BLDome**]: *Sorry, management rules :)*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Such secrecy, really!*

[**BLDome**]: *You know how all that stuff works. Identity protection, NDAs, all that jazz.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Okay, fair. But at least tell me if I've possibly heard you guys?*

[**AzureEcho**]: *Are you into deeply traumatising emotional vibes?*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Always.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *Then… probably not.*

[**EllaStar5**]: …

[**AzureEcho**]: *Joking. You've probably heard us.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Now I won't sleep. There are too many bands with amazing vibes. But seriously, I'm so happy for you.*

[**BLDome**]: *Thanks. We might be online less for a bit… tour wraps in about two months. But we'll try to log in on off-days between gigs.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *No problem. Take your time. Good luck tomorrow, you'll crush it!*

[**AzureEcho**]: *Night!*

[**SombreSky**]: *Goodnight.*

The chat dimmed. The room was quiet again. A private message popped up.

[**BLDome**]: *Can I ask a personal question?*

She hesitated for half a second, then typed back.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Sure.*

Another pause.

[**BLDome**]: *Was Avenna's story… based on personal experience?*

Her fingers froze on the keyboard.

[**BLDome**]: *It's okay if you don't want to talk about it.*

She stared at the screen a while longer. And then, slowly, began to type.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Not fully, no. But… inspired by. I was lucky. I've never been abused the way Avenna was. But I have been used. I've had men who made intimacy feel like a transaction. Where I felt like saying no would make me a problem.*

[**BLDome**]: *…I see.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Physical touch doesn't come easily to me. I have sensory issues.*

[**BLDome**]: *…I'm really sorry. Emotional abuse and manipulation can be as damaging as physical.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Don't be sorry. It taught me a lot. I don't hate intimacy; I still believe in it.*

[**BLDome**]: *The way you write Avenna… It's like you gave her your fire.*

She smiled at the screen. A soft exhale escaped her lips.

[**EllaStar5**]: *I guess I did. Every story I write gives a piece of me away. But it also gives a piece back. I learned to value myself. And I stopped pretending. Even when it cost me people… I stayed loyal to who I am.*

[**BLDome**]: *That's powerful. I don't think I'm there yet, but… maybe I'm trying. Maybe one day I'll hit your level of "I-don't-give-a-fuck."*

[**EllaStar5**]: *You will. Until then… You're welcome to hide behind Grail's mask.*

[**BLDome**]: *Hm, yeah, haha. Perhaps Grail's mask isn't my only one.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *It's okay. I let my mask grow into me until taking it off felt like peeling my own skin. But when I finally did, I felt lighter. I felt free.*

[**BLDome**]: *Then I'll keep trying to take mine off one day.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Healing takes time. Sometimes we think we've made it… Then realise we're still halfway up the mountain. I think for you, it might be even harder.*

[**BLDome**]: *Why do you think that?*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Because it's not just your personal life you're performing in. You're a musician. You don't wear one mask, you wear several. One for the fans. One for the stage. One for whom people expect you to be. All the lights, the validation, the thrill of being seen. But that spotlight? It's hot and blinding. And sometimes it burns more than it shines.*

[**BLDome**]: *Yeah... I agree with that. There's a lot of pressure to stay likeable. And when people decide you're not, suddenly you're everyone's favourite target.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Exactly. They forget you're a person.*

[**BLDome**]: *You're brave, Star. I don't know if I'm there yet. I cling to my mask like it's the only saviour I've got.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *You don't have to be. And until you're ready to step out fully, Grail's mask is a good shield.*

[**BLDome**]: *Heh. Grail's mask and I are old friends. Maybe one day we'll both retire. Everything must end, one day.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Not retire. Just evolve.*

[**BLDome**]: *Mmm. That's a better word. You're good at those.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *I collect them. Like charms :) Words that keep the soul from unravelling.*

[**BLDome**]: *Then tonight, you gave me one I'll keep. Thanks, Star.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Always. Goodnight, Dome. Good luck on your tour.*

[**BLDome**]: *Goodnight.*

Elowen sat cross-legged in her bed, the soft glow of her phone painting golden shadows across her quilt. Her fingers danced quickly over the screen, flipping between tabs of upcoming concerts, underground venues, and gig announcements across UK. She scrolled through lists of bands… hundreds of names, moody aesthetics, poetic taglines, but none that whispered this is them. No hint of familiar usernames. No sly 'Dome' tucked between the cryptic band bios.

With a sigh, she slumped against her pillow, eyes heavy. Her own ticket for The Eternal Slumber sat neatly tucked in her notebook, their concert only weeks away… a small bright flame of anticipation in the dull haze of

daily life. She decided to stop chasing shadows for now. If the boys truly wanted her to know, maybe one day they'd tell her. When they were ready. When the masks felt safe enough to lower.

◇

The weekend air held a crisp freshness, the kind that only arrived when spring tiptoed on the edge of summer. It smelled faintly of caramel from nearby food stalls. The sky overhead was a soft, endless blue, with lazy white clouds like sheep floating across it. Elowen and Hugo stood hand-in-hand outside the entrance to the arcade, the flashing lights inside casting dancing glows across the pavement like a low-budget aurora. The boy tugged her hand excitedly, already wide-eyed at the cacophony of sounds, blipping games, cheerful jingles, and the mechanical clunk of coins dropping. "Mum, look! That claw machine has dinosaurs! Actual spinosaurus!"

Elowen smiled and let herself be pulled inside. "Alright, then. But you know those things are rigged. You're better off bribing me for a plushie the old-fashioned way."

"I'll win it," Hugo grinned with unshakable confidence. "I've got a system."

Elowen arched a brow. "Oh, do tell."

"Secret," he whispered dramatically, placing a finger to his lips. "Assassin's honour."

That made her laugh out loud. "Alright, Assassin

Hugo. Lead the way."

The arcade was loud, chaotic, and smelled of too much popcorn and not enough ventilation. Yet, Elowen adored it, mostly because she adored him. They tried skee ball first, and she pretended to be terrible at it just so Hugo could coach her. Then they moved on to the racing games, both gripping plastic steering wheels and yelling like maniacs as they crashed into digital cones and flaming barrels. Elowen hadn't laughed this freely in a while. Not without guilt, tagging along.

It wasn't until two hours later, after too many tickets, too many sweets, and a failed attempt at the infamous dinosaur claw machine, that they stepped outside again, Hugo holding a small paper bag full of sugary gummy snakes and one hard-earned plastic medal with "Arcade Champion' printed on it in obnoxious Comic Sans.

"You, sir," she said, resting a hand on his shoulder like a general knighting his soldier, "have conquered this pixelated realm."

He saluted, chest puffed. "Let's go see fish now."

"The aquarium awaits."

The walk to the marine centre was short, tucked between the park and the train station. The moment they stepped inside, the lighting shifted, soft, ethereal blues and deep shadows mimicking the ocean depths. A hush fell over them, as though they'd crossed into a sacred space. Elowen watched Hugo's expression as his face lit up, his eyes widening at the enormous tank where a manta ray glided past like a ghost of silk.

They spent an hour moving from tank to tank. Hugo pressed his hands against the glass, following a particularly large turtle. "He looks ancient," he whispered, as if speaking too loudly might scare it. "Do you think turtles dream?"

"I think they must," Elowen said, "They move so slowly, they probably dream at normal speed while awake."

They wandered through the glowing jellyfish tunnel next, Hugo transfixed by their bioluminescence. "They don't have hearts," he murmured, reading the info board. "But they're still alive."

Elowen felt that comment settle somewhere deep in her chest. By the time they reached the otters, Hugo was practically bouncing. The playful creatures tumbled and twisted in the water, one of them pressing its little hands against the glass as if greeting them. Hugo pressed his back. "Hi! You're so tiny and fluffy! Mum, can I take him home?"

"I don't think our cat would approve."

At the gift shop, the familiar scent of new plushies and laminated bookmarks filled the air. Hugo trailed his fingers across shelves until his eyes landed on a deep blue octopus plush, its legs curled like ribbons and tiny embroidered eyes blinking up with quiet glee.

Elowen smiled. "Would you like it?"

Hugo hesitated. He looked at the toy, then looked away. "Nah."

"Are you sure? You were practically drooling."

He shrugged. "It's for babies. I'm too big. And

kids at school say it's stupid to still like cuddly toys."

Something in Elowen stilled. A quiet shame in his voice, like he had already been taught to abandon joy to avoid judgment. She knelt beside him, the octopus still in hand. "Do you think it's stupid?"

He shrugged again, but wouldn't meet her eyes. "No. But they do."

Elowen brushed a strand of hair from his forehead and said softly, "Hugo, listen to me. Your interests, your joys… they're never stupid. Ever. You like what you like. That doesn't make you childish or weird. It makes you you. And you're allowed to be exactly who you are."

He glanced up. "But what if they make fun of me?"

"Then they're the stupid ones," she said, voice firmer now. "And I mean that. Anyone who laughs at someone else for being happy? That's on them. You keep that happiness, alright? That's yours."

He was quiet, then nodded, small but sure. She handed him the plush. "Now, give this little guy a home?"

Hugo hugged the octopus tightly. "He's coming with us."

Elowen smiled, but as she stood, something cracked inside her. That word… *Stupid*. It pulled her back like a hand grabbing her wrist in the dark.

In the world of psychology, the triggers that push us to behave in a certain way are indicators of our trauma. Any wound, no matter how small it may seem, leaves behind huge consequences and leads to post-

traumatic emotions. We adapt and overcome our fears and our tragedies. Like children, we learn to walk again, step by step, moving away from the past and leaving it behind. And, perhaps, many are successful in their journey to healing; however, as soon as some event, movement, word, or even smell pushes the trigger, we stumble, fall, and the whole world collapses yet again. The walls are closing in, the past is catching up with us, and we are plunging into the abyss of our dark thoughts. As a result, a new struggle begins, where the desire to escape from this oppressive abyss forces us to strive upward… to the surface of the ocean in the desperate wish for a breath of air. Some manage to get out, while others slowly sink to the bottom, turning into dust.

For Elowen, that trigger had always been one single word. *Stupid.*

Her childhood had been shaped by the pursuit of perfection. Her mother, her grandmother… all painted success as the bare minimum. While other kids played, Elowen had been forced through reading lists, mathematical equations, and essays on classics too dense for her age. Every moment of confusion was punished with narrowed eyes and the sharp cut of that word.

"Are you really that stupid? Focus!" her grandmother would hiss, tapping the chalkboard.

Her mother? No better. Disappointment sat in her expression like a crown of thorns. Elowen lived for her approval, wore obedience like a second skin, and smiled when her soul wanted to scream. She learned to adapt, to mask, to smile through panic, to nod when

overwhelmed, to laugh at jokes that made her flinch. That word—stupid—was a blade that had carved out who she was. And now, decades later, to hear her son fear it… to see that shame reflected in his eyes, like a cycle looping again… no. She wouldn't let it pass.

By the time they left the aquarium, Hugo was quieter, holding his new plush tight under one arm. Elowen knew his little mind was turning with thoughts, but the smile he gave her before they stepped onto the bus said everything she needed to know. He felt safe again. Seen and heard.

As the evening softened into twilight, Elowen made dinner, and Hugo sat cross-legged on the floor, giving the plush octopus a name: Nebula. It made her chest ache in the most beautiful way. She had broken the cycle today. Even if just a little.

◇

The lamp in the corner glowed soft amber, casting long shadows across Elowen's desk. The window beside her was cracked open, letting in the faint, autumn breeze. Night was quiet, but her mind rarely followed suit. A mug of tea cooled untouched beside her elbow, its steam long since faded. Her pencil moved in small, slow circles over the paper, sketching the faint outline of a shoulder, a tilt of the head, strands of hair caught mid-motion.

Avenna stared back at her from the page, half-rendered, caught between paper and soul. Elowen's brows furrowed as she leaned in closer, adjusting the

shadows beneath the collarbone. She exhaled slowly. The room smelled faintly of graphite and eucalyptus. Her cat, Mischief, lay curled like a dark guardian at the foot of her chair. The quiet, so rare and precious, wrapped around her like a shawl. But even silence had its memories. She was shading Avenna's mask now.

There had always been masks. Elowen hadn't always known that, of course. Back then, she thought it was simply what good girls did. She had to be obedient. She had to make sure she had good grades. She had to make her mother proud. She smiled on cue. Sat straight at the dinner table. Let her mother's friends crowd around her with pinched cheeks and syrupy praise.

"Oh, what a perfect little girl she is! Such a wonderful angel!" She remembered the way people laughed, leaning too close. "Come on, show us a smile!"

She always hated that phrase. Even now, it left a sour taste in her mouth: the entitlement, the demand. As if her face were a performance space anyone could rent. Even as a child, she'd felt the invasion in her skin, the weight of eyes that didn't ask, just expected. She had always been an introvert. Physical affection is rarely felt comforting. It felt like an obligation. Even hugs from her mother felt too much, too often. Joanna knew this, but still insisted.

"When you come and visit," her mother would say with a theatrical grin once, "I'll squeeze the life out of you, pumpkin! Oh, don't make that face. You can endure a bit!"

Elowen's pencil paused mid-stroke. *Endure a bit*.

Because her comfort didn't matter as much. Because Joanna's love was loud, invasive, and came with expectations. Because Elowen had moved away, dared to prioritise her own peace, and that act, that rebellion, was something her mother still quietly punished her for. So Elowen had learned to please. To be the daughter who smiled, even when she wanted to cry. Who tolerated hugs, even when her skin crawled. Who nodded along during endless conversations, even when her mind was far, far away.

She became a master of mimicry. Learned how to smile with her eyes, lift her eyebrows just right, and nod at the right moments. When others laughed, she mirrored their joy. When they grew serious, so did she. And when the ache inside her grew too loud, when the mask slipped, she'd pinch her own skin or scratch at her wrists. Pain made it easier to silence the panic.

Elowen adjusted Avenna's pose on the page: tilted her wrist, added tension to her expression. There was power in quiet characters. They screamed through silence.

Her mother's pride had always been a drug. When Elowen brought home good grades, Joanna beamed like a queen. Her voice turned syrupy. She bragged to friends. "My girl, Elowen, top of her class again!"

She began sketching Kolm next: head tilted, smirking slightly, one fang visible in the faint outline of his mouth. He'd become her comfort project. Even his pain was soothing to draw, because it was known.

There were days, in her youth, when her hands

trembled over her homework while the shouting thundered behind closed doors. Joanna, Vincent and chaos wrapped in vodka and broken promises. Sometimes, she managed to escape into Ronen's arms. Sometimes she took her baby brother with her, holding his small hand as they walked together, pretending they were going somewhere magical. But other times, she had to leave him behind, alone in a house teetering on violence. She felt guilt for that. But she'd been a child, too. Barely surviving.

She reached for her tea, found it cold, and smiled faintly. Her thoughts wandered to water. She remembered her slight touch with death. An accident. In a park, with Harry beside her, talking to someone else while she fed the ducks. She didn't remember falling in. Just the sudden shift. One moment, standing. The next… underwater. She remembered the bottom of the pond. The pale light. The way the sky blurred through water. Her lungs burned. But she didn't fight. She watched bubbles float away, feeling her heart slow, her mind still. It was… peaceful. For once, there was no noise in her head. Just the beating of her heart, the pulse in her ears. And then, a hand. Strong and pulling. Air rushed into her lungs. Tears burned her cheeks. But she didn't cry because she was scared. She cried because the duck had taken away her ice cream. Maybe that had been a shock. Maybe it had been the truth. Either way… the water stayed with her. Became her sanctuary. Her soft addiction, even.

She turned her pencil again, shading the corner of Kolm's coat. Avenna stared up from the other page. Elowen exhaled slowly. She wondered how many of her characters were just fragments of herself, splintered and stitched into something people could understand. She wondered if anyone would understand the real her.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The morning light spilt softly across the wooden floorboards as Elowen nestled deeper into her chair, legs folded under her like a cat in winter. Hugo was at school. The house was silent except for the delicate hum of a soft piano from the speaker beside her and the faint clink of a spoon resting in a half-forgotten teacup. Her tenth one, probably.

Steam curled from the fresh cup beside her laptop, dancing with the sunlight. Her glasses slid slightly down her nose as she stared at the screen, then back at her project notebook: worn, frayed, and filled with character sketches, timeline maps, and abandoned bits of world-building she hadn't touched in years. Today felt different. She wanted to return to it... to the book series she abandoned a while ago. For the first time in ages, she didn't feel the pressure of producing something perfect, only the ache to reconnect with a version of herself she'd let collect dust.

The conversation with **Dome** had stuck with her unexpectedly. The way he asked questions, the way he listened without rushing to reply. His thoughtful

observations had made her reflect not only on their game world, but on the worlds she once created before. Somewhere in that late-night dialogue, something stirred… a quiet defiance against the years she spent in pause. So here she was, fingers poised above her keyboard, a calm determination rising in her chest. Her world was calling.

She opened her notebook again, flipping past old sketches and half-planned cities. She found her main character's name written in ten different fonts. A scribbled list of elemental systems. Archaic spell trees. And then, something slipped from between the pages. A folded piece of paper, yellowed slightly at the edges. She blinked, startled by its sudden appearance. It was her handwriting. She unfolded it carefully.

Keep creating. No matter what. No matter who. Even if love fails. Even if your voice shakes. The stories will save you.

She swallowed hard. Her pulse thudded softly in her ears. She remembered the moment she wrote it, hunched over her desk as a teenager, eyes raw from crying, Ronen's voice echoing somewhere in the back of her mind like a ghost that hadn't learned how to leave. That version of herself had held the pen like it was a sword. And this little note had been her armour. The memory surged back.

Elowen always knew that the line between mystery and secrecy is very thin. At what point does secrecy become mistrust? Ronen had always been good at questions. Not answers. Even after nearly five years

together, Elowen had known very little about his inner world. He was a locked door, and she'd spent years standing in front of it, waiting for an invitation that never came. She remembered those nights, the quiet ache of wanting to understand him, only to be met with kisses instead of truths. Their intimacy often served as a distraction, an erasure of her doubts. By the time her thoughts returned, the questions had already dissolved.

She had opened up. Offered pieces of herself one by one, naïvely believing he would do the same. But all she got was his embrace. And eventually, she began to hate him for it.

"She always talked about you behind your back," he said, voice casual. They were discussing her school friend.

"That's on her conscience," she snapped, barely looking up from her notes. "I choose to forgive people for their actions."

"You're stupid," he snorted.

The word sliced through her like glass. Because it wasn't supposed to come from him. She stood, body trembling with fury. "Maybe I am stupid. But my friendships are mine. I don't need your approval."

That had been one of their first serious fights. One where she didn't cry and just left. And yet... a few days later, there she was again. In his arms. Their arguments never ended in a resolution. Only in bodies tangled on bedsheets and words that stayed unspoken. She had stopped asking him how he felt. Because she already knew the answer: she wouldn't get one.

Back in the present, Elowen stared at the note in her lap. She leaned back in the chair, letting her head fall gently against the cushion behind her. A deep breath expanded her chest, but it didn't quite reach her stomach. That's where the ache still lived.

The night Ronen whispered, "Marry me," had been the breaking point. Post-coital exhaustion, sweat, her body sore. Her heart… numb. He'd said it like it was a natural extension of the moment, like asking her to pass him a towel. She had nodded, lips curved in a soft, tired smile. She had said yes. And inside, something had fractured. Because she didn't know if she loved him anymore, she wasn't even sure she'd ever known him. Because she was tired of pretending. Of lying with her body and staying silent with her voice.

She hadn't told him how she liked to be touched. She hadn't told him that the chaos of his hands overwhelmed her. She hadn't told him that her mind drifted away during sex… drifted into silence, into numbness, because it was easier than facing the truth. She had mastered performance. Even in love.

The words on the old note blurred for a moment as Elowen's memories dragged her deeper. To a graduation season. The end of childhood, the cusp of supposed independence. Her school days were officially over. Ahead of her stretched the wide, unknown: university, a new life crafted by her own hands. Freedom awaited her, just as she had once dreamed. She should have been filled with hope. And part of her was. But another part ached under a quieter weight. Because while

her classmates filled the halls with laughter and plans, her thoughts remained tethered elsewhere, to a small hospital room, to a frail man fighting for his last breaths against an invisible enemy.

Harry. Cancer had stolen pieces of him for the past two years, and every day she watched him diminish, from a vibrant sailor who smelled of sea salt and mischief, now reduced to brittle bones and soft, struggling smiles. And she... She had pulled away. Out of fear. She didn't want this image of him, the fragile shadow of a man, to overwrite the Harry she remembered: lifting her onto his shoulders, whistling old tunes, spinning stories of oceans and storms. She had avoided visits. Had distracted herself with meaningless errands, schoolwork, and plans. She hated herself for it. Because some small, ugly part of her was already grieving. And she didn't know how to grieve properly. Not the way others seemed to: loudly, messily, and cathartically. Grief to her was a silent weight. An understanding. Death was part of the cycle. And yet, despite knowing this, she couldn't face him. Couldn't face what his death would unravel inside her family. So she stayed away. And every absence left a new bruise on her heart.

The memory shifted, slipping to the last fragile summer with Ronen. The air was heavy that day. Thick with a storm that hadn't yet broken.

"How did you feel when your grandmother died?"

But as always, he dodged. "Are you worried about your grandfather?" he said instead, twisting his Rubik's

cube lazily, never meeting her eyes.

Irritation prickled beneath her skin. "Can you answer the question for once?" she snapped.

"Why are you angry?" he said with a smirk, as if her emotions were amusing. The fury inside her ignited.

"Because I can't get a direct answer from you!" she exploded. "I don't even know if I really know you!"

His response? A shrug. Hands slipping into pockets, the same damned dance of evasion.

"If you can't see the answers between the lines," he said smugly, "maybe that's not my fault."

Rage. Raw, unfiltered rage boiled up in her veins. "Don't you dare blame this on me!" she hissed.

The realisation hit her all at once, like a slap in the face. He had always kept her at arm's length. Always hidden behind riddles and smirks. And she, stupidly, had thought that if she just loved him enough, he would let her in. But that was the joke, wasn't it? He had never intended to let her in at all.

She remembered stepping closer, desperate. "Why don't you trust me?" she demanded, the words thick with something between anger and pleading. "What are you so afraid of?"

His gaze wavered, just for a second. And in that crack, she saw it… his fear.

"I'm not afraid of anything," he lied. She saw through it. Through him. And something inside her snapped. The fight escalated, voices rising, accusations flying. He sneered, and she shouted.

"Don't be stupid," he said, cold and dismissive.

Her hand flew before she even thought. A sharp crack against his cheek. She didn't hit hard. The final, irreparable break in the glass they'd been pretending wasn't already fractured. He pushed her. Not hard, just enough. She stumbled back, sitting heavily on the sofa. And the truth that had been festering between them for years finally bled into the open. She remembered standing, yanking the ring from her finger, and placing it silently on the table between them.

"El..."

But she was already walking away. Already slipping into her shoes and closing the door. He chased her and caught up to her on the street. Grabbing her hand, begging.

"Elowen, please," he said, genuine panic in his eyes. But it was too late. Her voice came out like a whip, every word slicing clean through him.

"I tried!" she cried. "I gave you my best! I trusted you even when you didn't deserve it! I opened myself piece by piece, and you stood there, arms crossed, hands in pockets, never offering anything real in return! I deserved more than riddles! I deserved more than games!"

She was trembling, tears clouding her vision, but her voice never broke. "You made me feel like loving you was a test I kept failing. And I'm done taking exams I never signed up for."

He tried again. Stammered half-hearted apologies and promises. She didn't listen. She saw him now for what he was: a boy pretending to be a man, too afraid to

be seen, too proud to admit it. And she was done letting boys live in her heart rent-free. She needed something real. Not secrets. Not riddles. Not conditional affection.

And so she left him standing there, alone on the pavement, hands uselessly reaching for something that had already slipped away.

Ambivalence. It had become one of her favourite words. A word that captured the maddening, aching truth of how she had loved Ronen. Loved him and hated him, simultaneously, violently. He had broken her in ways she hadn't understood until much later. He had made her believe she was free, even as he built the cage around her. And the pain... oh, the pain was sharper because she had tasted freedom, real freedom.

Psychology had plenty to say about first loves. In every article, every study she read afterwards, trying desperately to understand herself, she found the same truth: first love imprints differently. It carves into the developing brain, where experience, emotion, and memory are still raw clay. Hormones flood the system. Every high feels like the apex of the universe; every low feels like the end of existence itself. It was biology. Chemistry. But it was also more than that. It was the first map she wrote for love, and the scars that came with it.

Elowen knew now why everything afterwards was so complicated. Why had she hesitated in every future relationship? Why every time someone reached out their hand, she flinched internally, wondering what part of herself she would have to amputate this time to be loved. And no matter how far she grew, how deeply she healed,

she still sometimes felt the ghost of that cage rattling inside her.

The memory shifted again, darker now. The aftermath had been worse than she wanted to admit. After Ronen, her mood blackened. She was raw, angry, and volatile in ways she hadn't been before. Little things triggered her: tiny slights, careless words, even small inconveniences. She snapped at her mother once. Raised her voice, finally letting the oceans of resentment she had bottled inside spill. Joanna hadn't reacted well. The slap had come fast: sharp, bright, a sting of skin-on-skin that echoed louder than words. Elowen remembered the searing shock of it, the way her cheek burned, her eyes wide, her whole body locking up in disbelief.

But what stayed with her even longer than the pain... was the betrayal. That even there, even then, when she was at her lowest, when she needed understanding more than ever, she was met with control. With discipline and expectation. She stitched herself tighter. Taught herself not to bleed where anyone could see it. Taught herself to endure silently. Being too loud, even in pain, made her a problem. Made her unlovable.

Elowen let out a slow, shuddering breath. Her hands were steady now, even as her heart thudded a little harder in her chest. She tucked the old note back into her project book, smoothing the pages carefully.

She stood, stretching the stiffness from her body, and walked to the small kitchen to brew another cup of tea. Outside, the day was sliding toward afternoon, the

light slipping into that soft golden hour that made everything feel possible again. It was school pick-up time soon. The soft piano music played on, wrapping her in a cocoon of calm. She poured the boiling water over fresh leaves, watching the steam rise. She thought of Noah, for some reason. Imagining his hands playing the piano keys made her smile.

◇

The school gates were crowded, parents buzzing with polite small talk, some with tired faces, others tapping away on phones. Elowen stood slightly to the side, arms crossed gently, her thoughts still tangled in character notes and old wounds. The chill in the air clung to her coat, but the sun was still out, shimmering weakly like it hadn't quite made peace with autumn yet. Hugo was walking towards her, backpack slung half open and one of his shoelaces already untied. But this time, his face was pinched, his eyes a little red.

"Mum…" he said, quieter than usual. He opened his fist, and inside it, carefully cradled in tissue, lay a butterfly. Its wings, dusky blue and dusted with black flecks, were unmoving.

"Oh..." Elowen sighed.

"She wasn't flying," he whispered. "I thought maybe she was just tired, but…" He sniffled. "She's dead."

Elowen knelt down, brushing his hair back gently. "I see."

"I wanted to save her."

"I know."

He blinked up at her. "Why do things die, Mum? Why can't they just... stay?"

She took his hand, guiding him toward the bench just past the playground. They sat, the butterfly still in his palm between them.

"You know," she began, "death is a part of life, my love. Like… when a star burns out in the sky, its pieces go into other stars, other planets, maybe even into people. You remember how I told you about everything being made out of stardust? The butterfly's body may be done, but her energy… that part of her that flew and danced in the sun, it goes on."

Hugo looked down, still sad, but the confusion in his face softened. "So, she's not just… gone?"

"No," Elowen said gently. "Maybe she's flying somewhere else now. Maybe she's a part of the wind, or a flower, or even the moonlight."

He nodded, holding the tissue tighter. And just like that, her mind slipped into the past again.

She had been alone in the house when her family was visited by Death many years ago. The sun filtered through the kitchen blinds. The quiet was so rare, it almost felt borrowed. Everyone had gone shopping. She had stayed back. And then the phone rang.

It was Vincent. His voice was unsteady, quieter than usual. "Harry's gone," he said.

There was more after that. He said something about her mother, about Marianne, about holding back

tears and staying strong. But Elowen barely heard it. She had known it was coming. She had seen it written in Harry's eyes weeks before. He had already started saying goodbye without words. She hung up. No tears came. She loved him enough to let him go.

Grief never looked the way people said it would. At least not for her. As a child, when others lost grandparents or pets, they wailed, hugged, and collapsed in messy sobs. She had watched them with confusion. In wonder. Why did death make them so broken? Why did they cry like it wasn't supposed to happen? Even then, she had believed death was a doorway, not a cliff.

She had never considered herself religious. Christianity, to her, felt rigid. Cold, even. Full of cracks and control. Too often, it placed women on pedestals of suffering or silence. But that didn't mean she didn't believe. She did, just not in a god on a throne. She believed in energy, in patterns and in balance. In something greater. Not because a book told her so, but because nature whispered it every time the wind stirred the trees. The moon pulled oceans. Why not hearts?

When Harry died, she didn't cry. She smiled. Because in her mind, he wasn't gone. He was somewhere in the starlight. Or the sound of a distant wave. He was free of illness, and now his travels were far beyond the seas he once sailed. Harry was her Elysium. And even in Elysium… Death was present.

Joanna's grief was volcanic: rage and silence woven together. She snapped. The house was filled with tension. Grief unspoken, forced into tight, resentful

shapes. And Elowen's imminent departure to London only poured salt into the wound. She didn't want a dramatic farewell. She just wanted to leave. That morning at the train station, everything blurred. Marianne's eyes were red-rimmed. Joanna stood like a marble statue: elegant, polished, but her hands trembled when she hugged Elowen goodbye. Vincent's hand squeezed her shoulder a little too hard. And little Anthony waved with both arms, bright and unaware.

She smiled back. Because when the train pulled away, she finally exhaled. London called to her.

"I'm free," she whispered, forehead pressed to the window. That's what she believed. But now, years later, she knew better. She wasn't free then. She had escaped a house, but not her cages.

"Mum?" Hugo's voice tugged her back to the bench, to the butterfly in his hand and the sun-warmed stone beneath them.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Do you think... do you think she's okay now?"

She smiled softly, brushing a thumb over his wrist. "I think she's part of something bigger now. And I think... she's probably dancing through the sky, just in a way we can't see."

He nodded. Still sad, but peaceful. "Can we bury her when we get home?" he asked.

"Of course."

They stood together, and she gently helped him close the tissue around the delicate wings. As they walked

hand in hand down the pavement, leaves crunching beneath their steps, Elowen thought, not for the first time, how strange and beautiful it was that grief could be so quiet... and still leave so much behind.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The message came just after sunset.

A soft ping echoed from her laptop speakers as she settled into the armchair, a fresh blanket tucked around her legs and a half-eaten almond croissant forgotten on the side table.

[**BLDome**]: *We've got two free days between venues. You around?*

Elowen's lips curled into a slow smile. Hugo was away for the weekend with Miguel. The house was hers… just her, a blanket, a cluttered desk of scribbled notes, and an itch to disappear into somewhere unreal.

[**EllaStar5**]: *More than around. I'm logged in, glasses on, and fully committed to questionable life choices.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *Boys' night initiated. I've got snacks, a few new merch items, and zero intention of sleeping.*

[**SombreSky**]: *I'm past sleep deprivation.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *I'm living off anxiety and protein bars.*

[**BLDome**]: *My voice is fried. If I speak above a whisper tomorrow, it'll be a miracle.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Then let's hide together. All-nighter?*

[**AzureEcho**]: *If we pass out mid-battle, we blame the devs.*

Elowen cracked her knuckles, heart light. She clicked *Launch Game*. The screen dipped to black, then shimmered into life. The opening chords of *Eternal Slumber*'s main theme spilt through her speakers: low, orchestral and reverent. Like the breath of a temple.

[**BLDome**]: *So, next chapter then? Are we heading out of Elaris tonight?*

[**RedNocturne**]: *Just praying Elderwyn's less emotionally damaging.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Endless forests, strange whispers, and ancient curses. Just like home.*

A trio of blinking dots pulsed across the screen before Dome replied.

[**BLDome**]: *That's poetic. I'm stealing it for lyrics later.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *You'll owe me royalties.*

[**BLDome**]: *Deal. Let's go get cursed, team.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *Let's go be miserable in the prettiest setting yet.*

And just like that, they fell back into Elysium.

◇

The travellers left Elaris without any intention of returning to Valdoria's capital because of the time that was not their alley. They selected a peaceful path which led away from the paved roads into the less-known areas of the realm where villages lay hidden between hills

beneath wild lavender and silver birch trees. Before they could reach Elderwyn, there was still one cursed patch of Elysium standing in their way.

The Fields of Euphoria. Avenna sighed audibly the moment the glowing lilies came into view again, their dreamy scent already wafting through the air like it had plans. The others froze behind her like kids approaching a haunted ride for the second time.

"I'm not doing this again," Vier muttered.

"You don't have a choice," Avenna replied, already stepping forward with the calm exhaustion of someone about to herd enchanted toddlers through a landmine maze. She lit her palms with controlled, golden energy and turned back toward the group with narrowed eyes.

"Same rules as last time," she said. "Don't sniff. Don't wander. Stay on the bloody path."

Kolm was first. She grabbed him by the wrist like a misbehaving puppy, his eyes already glassing over at the shimmer in the air. "Is that... my childhood dog?" he whispered, leading his horse behind.

"It's a bush, Kolm."

Next came Dy, mumbling about seeing a fairy waving at him in the distance. Then Vier, who immediately tried to wander off toward what he swore was a free drink stall in the middle of the meadow. Avenna bodily yanked him back onto the light path like she was dragging laundry across a floor. By the time they were all across, she was sweating.

And then there was Grail. With a sharp sigh of

impatience, she reached for his hand, lacing her fingers with his to tug him along before he could make some smug remark. The warmth of his palm startled her, and just as she began to march him forward, she felt him squeeze. She shot him a glare over her shoulder, cheeks already betraying her with heat. He didn't bother hiding his smirk, the curve of his mouth making it clear he knew exactly what he was doing.

Her heart thudded harder with every step, the squeeze of his hand still steady against hers. She pressed her lips together and fixed her eyes on the path, determined to ignore the rush in her chest. But Grail, damn him, didn't let go.

"If I ever have to babysit you four through that field again," she said, hands on her hips, "I'm leaving one of you behind as a warning to others."

They turned east, the cursed flowers finally behind them, toward the faint flicker of chimneys and lanterns from a sleepy little village tucked between hills. It was called Willowdown.

Their journey to Willowdown was scattered with simple but endearing tasks: they repaired a man's broken cart wheel that had shattered on a root-twisted road and helped an old widow unable to fix her swollen wooden door before they led a tear-streaked little girl in a too-thin cloak back to a quiet forest-edge cottage. After days of travel, they discovered that the inn in Willowdown offered the most welcoming atmosphere they had found. Ivy covered the walls of the inn while lanterns burned slowly to release a fragrance of both honey and clove. The

floor noises created a warm ambience while the barkeep's daughter softly sang lullabies as she cleaned the mugs.

Before he reached the second verse of his song, Kolm had already consumed enough alcohol to become drunk. The ancestral lute-like instrument felt comfortable in his hands as he played it with practised ease, while laughing villagers gathered around him. His voice flowed through the fire-lit room, carrying a melody strong enough to melt snow. Dy retreated to his room immediately after their arrival and quietly mentioned that he needed to rest 'before the walls started talking' due to his tipsy state. Vier remained behind in the stables where he gently groomed his horse, showing a tenderness he seldom expressed towards people. He remained silent and allowed the chilly air to bite his nose as he whispered to the beast in an ancient language.

Avenna remained seated next to the frosted window of her temporary room as soft strands of magic shone from her hands while she weaved beams of light between her fingers like delicate silver silk. The light fluctuated in sync with her breathing pattern. There was something healing in repetition. Breathe, pull, shape, let go. Again. The knock was soft and hesitant. As she blinked her eyes, she felt the threads of light escape from her fingers while the glow disappeared.

"Come in."

Grail entered with a wooden tray that held a bowl of stew along with two hefty slices of bread, while steam rose from the dish in gentle spirals. Butter melted along the ridges. Next to the tray rested a small ceramic mug

that exuded the scent of spiced apple and herbs.

"You didn't show downstairs," he said.

Avenna looked first at the food before redirecting her gaze upward. "I lost track of time."

He offered a lopsided shrug. "Figured. Thought I'd bring you some food."

She paused briefly before nodding and gesturing for him to place it on the side table. Once he set down the tray, she moved to take her seat and drew the bowl near until she felt its warmth seep into her fingers. The aroma of rosemary and thyme mixed with slow-cooked meat triggered an immediate growling response from her stomach.

Grail didn't sit on the bed. He settled himself in the worn armchair next to the hearth with one leg crossed over another while his arms stayed folded.

"Normally, you appear... more like a deity," he said with a laugh while his eyes followed her as she took a bite of bread.

"Are you implying I look terrible?"

"No," he chuckled. "Your fingers show traces of butter, and your lip is smeared with stew. You've never displayed more humanity than in this moment."

She used her hand to clean her mouth. "I can be human."

"I know. I just don't see it often."

Her chest grew warm as she chewed slowly while her focus remained on something beyond the food. Between them, the only noise was the sound of fire crackling during those moments. Then he spoke again.

"You've been practising more than usual."

She gave a small nod before reaching for her spoon to take another bite from the bowl. "I need to be stronger."

"You're already stronger than most of us."

"Not enough," she said softly. "Not for what's coming."

He tilted his head. "Is that what you were thinking about? When you drifted off in battle?"

Her spoon froze halfway to her mouth. She didn't look at him.

"You noticed that?"

"Your actions never escape my attention."

Silence. She set the bowl down slowly. Her hands curled into her lap, uncertain.

"Yes," she said, finally.

"I thought maybe you were hurt. Or overwhelmed. But... it wasn't that, was it?"

Her voice barely rose above a whisper.

"No."

Grail moved closer in a relaxed manner while maintaining a steady voice that felt present yet non-threatening.

"So... what was it?"

She closed her eyes. "Visions," she said at last. "I had visions."

His body stilled. "Of what?"

She swallowed. Her voice trembled, but only barely. "Of you."

Grail remained motionless as the firelight traced

his golden mask while shadows followed along the contours of his jaw, which the helm only partially concealed. The only sound in the room came from the crackling fire and distant tavern laughter that reached through the quiet.

He watched her for a long moment. He asked her quietly yet firmly. "In your visions?"

Avenna didn't look up right away. Her spoon remained suspended above the bowl as she captured reflections of orange light from the broth before it settled back down with a gentle sound. "Yes."

He leaned forward slightly in the chair. "Not just me as I am now…?"

She shook her head. "Not you now. It felt… like a memory."

Her voice was measured. Her eyes flicked to his. "I saw fractures. The suffering you endured remained hidden so profoundly that it filtered through the years. But it wasn't like watching… I… was you."

Grail stilled.

She said, while her fingers tightened in her lap, "It felt as though I was inside your skin. Your grief became mine to feel. I stood at the heart of the storm instead of merely watching it."

He moved his head up gently while her words settled in his mind as bitter-tasting herbs.

"Have you experienced this type of thing before?" he inquired.

She shook her head with greater determination than before. "Never. My magic's always been light-based.

Illumination, barriers, healing. Nothing like... this. No visions. No echoes. It's not how my power works. Or… it never used to be."

The silence between them lasted a long time without being awkward, yet carried an intense weight. She spoke again, this time with a gentler voice that carried a careful rhythm.

"The sensation I experienced went beyond mere pain. I felt the denial in you. You refused to acknowledge the extent to which everything had fallen apart. You resisted acknowledging her true nature. Admitting everything was a lie became unavoidable. You gave your soul to someone who meant to use it as a tool."

He didn't speak. He dropped his head down a little while his mask blazed with the firelight as though it were being eclipsed.

Avenna continued, quieter now. "I experienced that feeling because I shared that knowledge too."

That caught his attention. His gaze lifted.

"There was someone once," she said. "Someone I trusted. Who promised things, made me feel like I was chosen. And I ignored the signs… The little things. The control, the manipulation. Every compliment hid a dangerous trap. I told myself I was imagining it." Her voice sharpened faintly at the edges. "Even when darkness fell, and he attempted to steal what wasn't his possession, I refused to acknowledge the truth. I blamed myself for being naive. For letting it happen. I told myself I was overreacting."

Her eyes scanned in his direction while her voice

settled into a calm tone. "Denial eats you. Through weeks and months and years, you maintain the belief that the wolf which ripped you apart was nothing more than an unknowing dog."

Grail placed his hand on the chair's edge and watched his fingers twist into the wooden surface. "And grief?"

Avenna smiled faintly. "Grief emerges after the denial passes away," she said softly. "Then, without warning, you find yourself in a destruction which you played a part in creating."

He gradually pulled back in his chair. They remained quiet for an extended period.

Then Grail stood. "I should let you rest."

Avenna looked up, her expression unreadable. But she nodded once. He moved to the door, then paused. He touched the door handle while speaking in a noticeably softer tone.

"I'm unable to explain why your perception leads you to see me." A pause. "But… thank you. For not turning away."

Avenna's chest tightened unexpectedly.

"Grail."

He stopped. The single word held him in place.

For a moment, neither of them moved. The fire crackled quietly behind them, its light casting shifting shadows that danced across the walls and the dark shape of his mask. Then he turned.

The distance between them suddenly felt far too small for the way her pulse began to climb. He studied

her in silence.

She rose from the bed without quite deciding to do so. The movement felt almost instinctive, her body drawn forward by something deeper than reason. One step, then another. The space between them narrowed.

Grail did not retreat. The firelight caught faintly on the gold surface of his mask, reflecting in the narrow slits where his eyes watched her carefully.

"You should sleep," he said quietly.

"You should leave," Avenna replied.

Neither of them moved. The words hung between them like a fragile thread neither dared cut. She could feel the warmth radiating from him now, close enough that the scent of smoke and night clung faintly to his skin. Her breath slowed, though her heart did not follow.

"You're trembling," he murmured.

"That happens when someone makes me nervous."

His lips curved faintly beneath the mask. The silence returned. Avenna's gaze dropped briefly to his chest, to the dark paint that traced across his skin and the chains resting against it. Her fingers twitched slightly before she realised what she was doing.

Last time she had stepped away. This time she didn't. Her hand lifted slowly and touched his chest. The contact was light at first, hesitant, her fingertips barely brushing the cool metal of one of his necklaces before sliding lower against the warmth of his skin.

Grail inhaled sharply. His hand caught her wrist.

"Avenna," he warned quietly.

But she didn't pull away. Instead, she stepped closer. Close enough that she could feel the slow rise and fall of his breathing.

"You enjoy pretending you're above all of this," Avenna said softly, her voice carrying that familiar edge he had learned to recognise. "Standing there like some untouchable judge of everyone else's mistakes."

Her hand was still in his, though neither of them had acknowledged it.

Grail tilted his head slightly. "Someone has to maintain standards."

"Oh, please." She scoffed, faintly. "You're an assassin. Not a philosopher."

"And yet here you are seeking my wisdom."

"I'm not seeking anything from you."

A faint, dangerous amusement flickered in the tilt of his head.

"You're standing very close for someone seeking nothing."

The words landed between them like a thrown blade. Avenna hated the way her pulse responded. She hated this pull.

Of all the men in the world, it had to be him. A man who lived in shadows and blood. A man who moved through the world like a blade slipping between ribs. An assassin who irritated her, challenged her and provoked her at every turn.

And yet here she stood, refusing to step back. Her gaze lifted toward the dark slits of his mask. She couldn't read him. That unsettled her more than anything.

Normally, emotions radiated through people like heat through glass. She could sense their intentions, their fears, the tremble beneath their words.

With Grail, there was only silence. And yet… Something in the tension of his grip told a different story. He wanted the distance gone. She could feel that much. But beneath it lingered something else.

Hesitation? Fear? It was subtle, buried deep, but it was there. The realisation sent a strange thrill through her chest.

"Careful," Grail murmured quietly. "You're staring."

"Maybe I'm studying the enemy."

"Enemy?" His voice held a quiet smirk. "That's a generous title."

Avenna stepped closer. Not enough to touch, but enough that the air between them changed.

"You should be worried," she said calmly. "Most enemies don't stand this close to their executioner."

"Bold assumption."

"Is it?"

The standoff stretched between them. Avenna could hear his breathing now, steady and slow, completely at odds with the chaos climbing through her chest. Her fingers tightened slightly in his grip before she realised she had moved at all.

His thumb brushed faintly against her wrist. It sent a ripple straight through her spine. She swallowed. Gods, she hated this.

"You're playing a dangerous game," Grail said

quietly.

"Funny," she replied. "I was about to say the same."

For a moment, neither of them moved. Then Grail lifted his other hand slowly. Avenna watched the movement, every instinct in her telling her to step back.

She didn't. His thumb brushed along the line of her jaw, the touch slow and deliberate, as though he were testing the reality of her standing there. Her breath caught despite herself. Her fingers curled into the fabric at his side, pulling him just slightly closer.

The tension between them snapped taut. He responded instantly. One hand slid to the back of her neck, fingers threading gently into her hair as if he had been resisting the motion for far too long.

Their faces were so close now that she could feel the warmth of his breath against her lips. For a moment, neither of them moved. Then Avenna tilted her head slightly. Instead of closing the distance, she turned her face toward his cheek.

Her breath brushed against his skin. Grail shuddered. It was subtle, but she felt it. Her gaze flickered downward, and she noticed the faint ripple of goosebumps rising along the painted skin of his chest.

A slow smile touched her lips. She leaned closer. Her mouth brushed lightly against the edge of his mask near his ear. The contact was barely there. Yet his hand tightened sharply at the back of her neck, fingers threading into her hair.

His other arm slid instinctively around her waist

to steady her as she rose onto her tiptoes, the height between them forcing him to bend slightly toward her.

Her hand slipped from his chest. Lower… His abdomen tensed beneath her touch. Grail flinched. His breath shuddered softly against her temple.

"You play dirty," he murmured.

Avenna's smile deepened slightly against the mask near his ear. "I learned from observation."

"Observation."

"Mhm." Her voice carried quiet mischief. "Temples are full of desperate men watching innocent priestesses. You'd be surprised how much you learn about them."

His fingers tightened slightly in her hair.

"And your unfortunate lovers?" he asked quietly.

She felt a tiny shift in the tension of his body. Avenna smiled.

"They taught me a few things, too."

For the first time, his breath faltered. Grail lowered his head slightly, the movement bringing him closer as he breathed in the faint scent of her hair.

"How generous of them," he said dryly.

Avenna pulled back just enough to study him through the shadowed slits of the mask.

"Are you jealous?"

"What if I am?"

The answer caught her off guard. Heat rose unexpectedly into her cheeks. She hated that reaction even more than the pull between them. Still, she refused to retreat.

"What would you do about it?" she asked softly.

His arm tightened slightly around her waist.

"I would watch your enemies closely," Grail replied quietly. "Just long enough for them to realise they are not contending with you alone."

Her pulse stumbled. The air between them grew impossibly thin. Her lips drifted closer again. Just the final breath of distance between them. Grail swallowed…

Then gently stepped back. The sudden absence of his warmth left the space between them strangely cold. For a moment, Avenna simply stood there, her breath uneven, her mind struggling to catch up with what had just happened.

Grail's posture relaxed slightly. He smiled. Then he bowed his head in that infuriatingly graceful way of his.

"Good night, priestess."

And just like that, he turned and walked toward the door. Avenna remained where she stood, fingers slowly curling against her palm as she watched him leave.

Confusion flickered through her chest. Frustration… Something warmer she refused to name. She had always known how to hate him. That part had been easy.

But lately… Finding reasons to keep hating him was becoming far more difficult.

◇

The sun had climbed high, but its warmth was

hollow. Dry winds pushed brittle leaves across cracked dirt roads, rustling through the yellowed grass and forgotten belongings scattered across a once-bustling village now lost to time and the darkness. No one spoke as the group entered the desolate remains. What was left of the village was more memory than matter: beams splintered like bones, cloth banners torn and brittle, windows smashed inward. Doors hung from their hinges, swaying gently in the breeze like weary soldiers too tired to fall. The smell of dust and burnt wood lingered in the air. The sun beat down through holes in broken rooftops, casting uneven rectangles of light on the debris below. Even the flies had abandoned this place.

Avenna's horse moved cautiously, its hooves crunching over glass and bone. She held the reins loose but steady, her magic humming faintly beneath her skin. It always did in places like this… places that remembered pain.

Kolm rode behind her, unusually quiet, his gaze catching on a collapsed dollhouse and a row of rotted apples still laid out on a vendor's cart. Nearby, Dy's mount sidestepped nervously at the sight of a children's chalk mural that had somehow survived. A sun with a smile. Two stick-figure parents. One child.

Vier exhaled slowly, guiding his horse around a fallen fence. "What do you think happened here?"

"Same thing that happens when grief festers long enough," Avenna murmured. "It hollows things out. Looks like Morphea's grasp has extended."

Grail said nothing. His head turned slowly as he

surveyed the destruction: every cracked window, every discarded toy. His blade rested heavily against his back. They continued. No birds sang, no insects chirped. It was the kind of silence that made your own heartbeat feel too loud.

THUD. Dy was ripped from his saddle with such force that his horse reared up and bolted. The group wheeled around as his body hit the ground with a sickening crunch.

"What the…" Kolm started, but the air answered first.

THUNK. A black blur cut through the edge of the square, too fast to follow. It vanished between two broken homes, its passage marked only by the sudden slam of a shattered shutter.

"Dy!" Avenna shouted, already off her horse, her palms glowing gold as she crouched beside him.

"I'm…" Dy winced, holding his ribs. "Not... dying. Just surprised."

Then it appeared again. Small and fast. It landed directly in front of them, knees bent, like a predator low to the ground. The figure was half the size of Grail, but bulkier, wrapped in segmented armour that clanked together like pieces of grief forged in metal. But it was the helm that stilled the group. A stone pyramid. Massive and angular. There were no eye holes, no mouth and no slit for breath. Just cracked stone carved with lines and sigils that pulsed faintly. Two war hammers hung in each hand, old and stained and jagged. And though the creature made no sound… They all heard it.

"I'd rather die than be alone."

Avenna staggered. The voice bloomed in the chest. A sentence you thought you'd whispered to yourself once in despair, only to hear it echoed now, like your own fear staring back at you.

"Who…" Kolm started, but didn't finish. Because the gravity shifted. Literally. The air pushed down. The ground seemed to pull upward.

[Passive Effect: Weight of Despair – All movement speed reduced, -10% stamina regen]

Obsidian. Grail took one step forward, and his boot sank a half inch into the dirt as though the planet had grown hungry for his soul.

"Magic's distorting," Avenna said through gritted teeth. She raised a hand to summon light, but her fingers ached. Her arms drooped. The fatigue hit her like heatstroke. Obsidian charged. He was on them before they could react. His hammer struck Kolm's blade with such speed that Kolm barely blocked in time, but the sheer force sent him skidding backwards.

-7% HP

Obsidian ||||||||||||||||||93%

Obsidian didn't pause. He flipped the second hammer underhand and swung toward Vier, who ducked and rolled, slashing out, his blades just grazing the armour. The stone helm never turned. Yet somehow, he was watching them. Then… It tilted toward Avenna. And she froze.

[Obsidian – Petrifying Gaze]

Her limbs wouldn't move. Her mind slipped

away. She remembered being held down and being powerless… being told to stay still. The fear of being reduced to nothing. She couldn't breathe. Obsidian's hammer raised toward her… Grail moved like lightning, intercepting the blow and knocking the weapon away. Avenna gasped, stumbling back and blinking hard.

[Grail – Lightbreaker Slash]

-8% HP

Obsidian ||||||||||||||||85%

Behind her, Dy cried out. Chains erupted from the earth, curling around his ankles and arms, glowing faintly with ethereal energy.

[Obsidian – Chains of Attachment]

Each link vibrated with fear, with doubt, with memory.

"Kolm!" she shouted.

Kolm was already being dragged by chains of his own, resisting with gritted teeth, each step like pulling his body through mud. Obsidian stood in the centre of them all. Unmoving. Yet tightening the noose.

"*I'd rather die... than be alone*," came the voice again.

The battlefield smelled like old dust and sun-baked stone. Kolm's blades, after his successful escape, clanged furiously against Obsidian's hammers, trying to force space between the attacker and Avenna. But the air was still thick with despair, the weight hadn't lifted. Chains still coiled around Dy and Vier.

[Grail – Rift Cleave]

With a roar that cut the sky, Grail surged forward.

His blade blazed silver as it struck Dy's chains. They shattered in a crackle of light.

No damage

Obsidian ||||||||||||||76%

Kolm spun at the sound, using the opening to slash through Vier's bindings. The team was free. But not fast enough. Obsidian snarled, if such a sound could even come from that encased helm, and lunged toward Avenna. The hammer flew. She didn't have time to react. Kolm slammed into her side, knocking her off her feet just before the weapon struck. It buried itself into the dirt where her shoulder had been.

[Avenna – Celestial Beam]

From the ground, she raised her hands and blasted light into Obsidian's side.

-10% HP

Obsidian ||||||||||||66%

He screamed. The monster hurled his second hammer toward her.

[Grail – Interception Dash]

In an instant, Grail grabbed Avenna and dragged her out of the air. She fell against his chest. And her vision tore away.

She was Grail, again. She felt the weight of his emotions. The fire in his shoulders. The burden in his chest. His hands… were soft. They brushed across a woman's shoulders. Tender and slow. Almost longing. But even in the softness, there was something else. Guilt and possibly regret. He tried to pull away. But her voice came.

"You have nowhere else to go. You belong here. With me."

Avenna's stomach twisted.

"We are alike. We are broken. And broken things must stay together."

His thoughts surged. *She's right. I'm not enough. I was born to bleed for her. To love her, or die trying. Even death would be better than loneliness.* Avenna felt her heart skip a beat. Those feelings represented longing twisted into servitude. A devotion laced with self-destruction. She gasped.

"Avenna," Grail said, his voice tight but sharp. "You're the smart one. Figure it out."

She blinked, coming back to her senses.

"The orb," she said, voice trembling but clear. "Inside the helm. I saw it shining… I think it's his tether. We need to expose it."

Kolm grinned. "Now that's a weak spot."

The team rallied.

[Grail – Unrelenting Assault]

Strike after strike battered Obsidian's head.

-8% HP

Obsidian ||||||||||58%

[Kolm – Cross Blades Execution]

He followed the tempo, blades slashing in rhythm.

-7% HP

Obsidian |||||||||56%

Cracks formed. Vier circled to flank. Dy, limping, summoned his magic to trap Obsidian's legs.

[Avenna – Beacon Pulse]

Avenna charged her magic. Light bloomed, and the orb inside flickered.

[Avenna – Divine Focused Beam]

Avenna let the light blast forward, cutting through the air like the cry of a phoenix. It hit.

-12% HP

Obsidian |||||||44%

The stone cracked. The light inside grew brighter, then unstable. Obsidian screamed, and his chains snapped in every direction.

"*I'd rather die... than be alone*!"

[Grail – Final Breaker Slash]

-10% HP

Obsidian ||||||36%

Kolm followed, his strike driving into the cracked helm.

-8% HP

Obsidian Health Bar: ||||28%

[Avenna – Radiant Echo Burst]

Her final surge of light collided with the exposed orb.

-20% HP

Obsidian Health Bar: ||8%

The pyramid shattered. Stone exploded in a blinding burst. The air fell still. Obsidian staggered, weaponless. Light consumed him. He didn't scream again… just disappeared, only a golden vial left on the ground. Then Dy collapsed.

"Shit," Kolm hissed, catching him. "He's bad."

Avenna was already moving.

"We camp here," Grail said. "Use the village. Check the ruins. Find what you can."

They broke into a ruined home that still had a half-standing roof. Avenna worked quickly, hands steady despite the shaking in her limbs. Dy was bleeding from a deep wound across his hip.

"Go," she said to the others. "I need wood. Cloth or any fabric you can find. Any herbs you see. Willow bark if there's any."

Vier and Kolm nodded, already heading out. Only Grail lingered a moment longer, watching her as she worked, before vanishing into the ruins, boots silent against the stone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The sun had begun its slow descent behind the fractured bones of the ruined village, casting long shadows that danced like ghosts between the splintered remains of homes. Charred beams jutted out of the earth like the ribs of something ancient and broken, and every step stirred up dust laced with memory. Inside one of the less-damaged husks of a home, a crumbling cottage with ivy curling up the soot-streaked walls, Avenna knelt beside Dy. The wooden floor beneath them creaked with every shift of weight, but she paid it no mind. Her hands moved with the quiet devotion of a ritual.

Dy lay back on a threadbare cot they'd dragged in from a half-collapsed room, one leg propped awkwardly over a torn satchel. His breathing came in low, ragged huffs, and sweat darkened the silver strands at his temple.

"Hold still," Avenna murmured. Her voice was soft but firm with intent. "It's deep, but not fatal."

He tried to smirk, but the wince betrayed him. "That's a relief. I'd hate to die like this. Sweaty and pantless in a haunted shack."

Avenna didn't laugh. She simply soaked the cloth in the cracked bowl beside her again and wrung it out with precision. Her fingertips brushed across the angry,

swollen gash carved into Dy's upper thigh, just above the knee. Blood had clotted but stubbornly returned each time she wiped it clean. Beneath the crimson, his ceremonial body paint had begun to crack and flake.

"I'm going to cleanse the paint," she said quietly.

"Make me look less dramatic, why don't you?" Dy mumbled, closing his eyes.

She dipped a clean strip of linen into the bowl and began to wipe, slowly, gently. Each motion peeled away a sliver of the paint he wore into battle. The black lines, once symbols of silent strength and mystery, now dissolved under her hands like ink surrendering to rain. The wound was exposed fully now. It looked like Obsidian's parting gift, a reminder of how close Dy had come to never speaking again.

She reached into the small leather pouch at her side and withdrew a glass vial. Inside was a thick green paste, pungent with crushed herb and old magic. She dipped two fingers in.

"This will burn," she warned.

Dy gave a rough chuckle. "I've been scraped worse by a poorly made saddle."

"I need you to take off your mask…"

His head turned slightly. "Why?" His tone wasn't suspicious so much as weary.

"In case the weapons were poisoned," she said firmly. "The lips are one of the first places it shows. Colour changes, swelling, tremors. I need to see them."

He went still. The pause stretched, taut as a bowstring. For a long heartbeat, she wondered if he'd

refuse outright. Then, with a soundless sigh, he lifted his hands and unfastened the clasps. The mask came free.

Avenna froze, the salve forgotten in her palm. Her eyes widened in sheer surprise.

Dy was an elf. His ears tapered delicately, catching the firelight like carved ivory. His eyes, brighter than she'd expected, held an intensity muted only by his hesitation. And his hair… the strands she had thought were braids, visible beneath the edge of his mask, were false adornments, woven in to disguise him. His real hair was short, a little spiky, messily swept as though he had never cared to tame it.

His face, unmasked, was nothing like the shadowed monster she had built in her mind. Ordinary. Almost boyish. A pointy nose, small lips, a softness in the line of his jaw. Quite… cute. She caught herself staring, and in that moment, he noticed. His gaze flicked to hers, then away again quickly, like he wasn't used to being looked at without armour. A faint flush touched his ears.

"So," she said softly, lips twitching, "you're an elf?"

His ears reddened faintly at the word, and he glanced aside. "Don't spread it around."

Her smile deepened despite herself. "I haven't seen many. Hardly any, actually."

"That's because there aren't many left," he said quietly, the humour draining from his voice.

He hesitated, fingers tightening against the edge of the cot as though weighing how much to say. At last, he exhaled. "When the new king took the throne, the

elves resisted. My people never bowed easily. We kept our lands, our ways, too long for his liking. He wanted unity under his law, no exceptions, no ancient forests or old gods standing in his way. The uprisings started small, but… he made an example out of us." His jaw clenched. "Villages burned, families scattered. Most were killed outright. Those who survived… hid. Changed names. Buried their ears under hoods and braids. Pretended to be something else."

Avenna's gaze softened. "So the stories about your people just… faded into myths."

"That's what he wanted," Dy said, a bitter smile tugging his lips. "Erase us until we were just campfire tales. Easier to rule a world when no one remembers the ones who defied you."

She studied him in silence for a moment, her own chest heavy with the weight of it. He wasn't frightening at all without the mask. Just a man carrying the ashes of his people.

"I wouldn't dare spread it," she murmured at last. "The world doesn't deserve to forget you twice."

He blinked at her, and for a fleeting moment, something softer than defiance flickered in his eyes. Avenna forced herself back to her work, dipping the salve onto the cloth.

"Hold still," she instructed, tone sharper to mask her own strange fluttering.

The moment the ointment touched his wound, his whole body jolted. His hands gripped the edges of the cot, knuckles pale, a hiss slicing through his teeth.

"Fucking hell, Avenna!"

"I told you it would burn," she replied, steady, unmoved.

"I thought you were exaggerating."

"I never do."

Silence fell between them again. Only his breathing, slightly calmed now, punctuated the space.

"Thank you," he said finally, voice raw.

Avenna glanced up. His face was turned toward the cracked ceiling beams, eyes half-lidded with fever and pain, but the gratitude in his voice was honest.

"You're welcome," she replied.

He exhaled slowly, a quiet rhythm returning to his breath. "Haven't been scraped like that in a long time. Reminded me I'm still mortal."

She hummed, finishing the last smear of salve. Her touch lingered for a moment, intentional, though she wouldn't admit it. "You don't act like someone who doubts that."

"Because I don't," he said. "I just prefer not to be reminded."

Avenna sat back slightly, wiping her fingers on the cloth. "Can I ask you something?"

"I'll allow it," he said dramatically, though his eyes fluttered open with a seriousness that belied his tone.

She didn't smile. Her voice lowered. "Why did you become an assassin? Why are you working for the king you hate?"

The question hung in the room like a bell that

had just been struck. Dy blinked, as if trying to decide whether this was a game or a truth session.

She continued before he could deflect. "You've got Kolm's flair. Grail's edge. But I get the feeling there's more. You don't move like someone who kills for sport."

Dy let out a breath, not quite a sigh, but something heavier than air. "You're not wrong."

He reached for a waterskin, drank, then leaned back again.

"I always felt… that call," he began, voice softer now. "Not to death. Not even to glory. Just… that rhythm. You know?"

She didn't answer, just watched.

"Swordplay… most people think it's all muscle and rage. But it's not. It's choreography. Breath and heartbeat. A tempo of sorts. And the problem was…" He looked down at his hands, flexing his fingers as if trying to feel that tempo again. "Swords always felt wrong in mine. Heavy and too rigid. They wanted to control the dance. But I need them to join me."

"So you chose batons."

"I chose freedom," he said. "Batons let me move like I wanted to. Flow, impact and recoil. No edge or slicing through bone… just breaking it with precision. When I fight, it's like I'm breathing in rhythm."

Avenna listened, her heart oddly quiet.

"I didn't want to be part of an army," he said next. "I didn't want to kill because a man in silk barked orders. Soldiers destroy because they're told to. But assassins? We get to choose."

She raised an eyebrow. "You chose this life?"

He nodded, eyes dim with memory now. "I chose it because of what I saw. Once. A soldier… under some fancy lord's command, killed a child. Just… because."

The words hit like a cold gust. Avenna's breath caught.

Dy's voice dropped. "That boy looked so small. Just curious. He'd wandered into a forbidden grove with no weapons, no threat. But the lord ordered him removed. And the soldier obeyed." He looked at her then, with something fierce behind his gaze. "I swore that day I'd never take orders that made me a monster."

Avenna said nothing. Her throat was tight.

"So I trained. And I vowed: if I ever killed, it would be the ones who deserved it. The slavers, the child burners. The lords who sent blades into homes." He ran a hand through his hair. "I didn't want to be silent about it, either. That's why I chose batons. They're loud. The cracks echo. You hear every hit. It's punishment you can hear."

Avenna whispered, "Like a sermon." He blinked. She continued, eyes lowered. "You chose the noise of beatings over the silence of blades. Because you wanted them to know and to feel."

"Exactly," Dy breathed, as if surprised by how easily she'd caught it.

Avenna sat beside him now, shoulder to shoulder, her body warm even in the cooling air.

"For me," she said slowly, "a priestess's prayers are meant to be heard. Not whispered, like it's done now.

Shouted into the heavens, even if no one listens. Maybe that's why I understand you."

He turned to look at her. "You do understand."

She offered a small nod. And finally, Avenna said, "Rest now."

Outside, the world remained still. Kolm's distant singing floated in from the direction of the inn's broken tavern. Grail's footsteps paced somewhere beyond. Vier's low hum, likely to his horse, carried like a lullaby.

Avenna adjusted the blanket draped loosely over Dy's legs, then sat back with a quiet breath. Her gaze drifted toward the doorway, where the dusky sky had turned a bruised violet.

"Can I ask one more thing?" she said softly, her voice barely above the sound of Dy's breath.

He cracked one eye open. "You're full of curiosity tonight."

"I've just been thinking," she murmured. "I understand why Kolm follows Grail. There's something poetic in it… Grail's charisma, his pain, the mystery. It draws in a soul like Kolm's. But you…" Her eyes met his. "You're more grounded. I can't quite place what made you choose to follow him specifically."

"We met a while ago," he said, "before Kolm joined. Before Vier. Just me and Grail, hired separately for the same job. We didn't speak at first, just moved in tandem like it was rehearsed."

He shifted on the cot, wincing slightly but continuing. "There was something about the way he fought, Avenna. I've seen all kinds of warriors, but

Grail... his swordwork was like watching time bend. Precise and fluid." She listened closely, almost forgetting to blink. "He noticed my technique, too," Dy added. "Most don't. They see the noise, the flash. But he saw the rhythm and asked about it after. Like he was genuinely fascinated."

Avenna tilted her head. "And that was enough?"

Dy looked toward the cracked ceiling above them. "It was his energy. Something dark and deep in him, but… controlled. Beautiful, even when broken. I'd never seen anything like it. And something in me just said… 'follow that rhythm.'"

Avenna didn't respond right away. She merely looked down at her hands, now stained with the remnants of salve and ash, and whispered, "I think I understand."

◇

The screen faded to a dim sepia hue, soft music thrumming in the background while the characters of The Eternal Slumber stood idle near the flickering firelight of their makeshift camp. Elowen leaned back in her chair, arms stretching high above her head until her spine cracked with a satisfying pop.

"Two hours," she muttered, flexing her fingers. "And I still forgot to blink."

On her second monitor, the chat box buzzed to life.

[**RedNocturne**]: *Can we talk about how DY stole my emotional side plot??? betrayal.com*

[**AzureEcho**]: *I did not steal anything. I earned it with blood and trauma, thank you.*

[**SombreSky**]: *To be fair, you got all the violin moments early game, Red. It's Dy's turn.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *But Avenna and Kolm had a thing! There were sparks.*

[**BLDome**]: *And then Dy came in with his soft voice, elf charm, and batons of justice.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *I hope your baton gets woodworm.*

Elowen snorted, taking a sip from her water bottle. The chaotic male energy of this chat was a strange kind of group therapy. Unhinged and cathartic.

[**SombreSky**]: *Anyway. Someone take these herbs off me. My storage is full of weird-ass flowers.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *How weird are we talking?*

[**SombreSky**]: *One's literally called "Whispering Thistle." It hums when you pick it.*

[**SombreSky**]: *Also found a rare Moonpetal. Sold it for like 800 coin.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *You WHAT?*

[**SombreSky**]: *Don't hate the player, hate the game.*

[**BLDome**]: *While you all were getting sappy and sweet, I was out here chopping wood like a peasant, upgrading my swords and saving your asses from wild boars.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *Oh, thank you, noble woodman.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *I'm taking psychic damage from how cute that scene was.*

[**BLDome**]: *Alright, lads. Break time. Fifteen minutes.*

[**SombreSky**]: *brb snacks.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *gonna cry into my keyboard because Dy stole my bestie.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *gonna wash off all this in-character trauma.*

Elowen smiled and pushed her chair back. The house was quiet. She padded into the kitchen, the kettle already humming, steam curling in ghostly ribbons. As she leaned on the counter, her phone buzzed.

[**BLDome**]: *Hey. How have you been these days? Outside the game, I mean.*

She stared at the message for a second, then tapped back:

[**EllaStar5**]: *Honestly? A bit tired. Some personal stuff, nothing dramatic. But… I started writing books again.*

Another buzz.

[**BLDome**]: *That's awesome!*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Yeah. Got back to working on a book I kind of… abandoned a while ago. Feels weird, but also kind of right.*

[**BLDome**]: *I'm glad. Maybe that spark you lost is coming back. The one that made you start writing in the first place.*

Her fingers stilled. Something in her chest squeezed, familiar and almost forgotten. A quiet ache where old embers still lived.

[**EllaStar5**]: *I hope so. Last time I felt that spark was when I first moved to London.*

And just like that, the memories opened, like a diary page left in the sun.

London had felt like a dream at first. Everything was brighter, louder, more alive than the quiet places she'd known before. The city had swallowed her whole in the best way, her senses flooded with new sounds, scents, and stories she could barely contain. Those first few weeks, she'd lived in a haze of exhilaration. She was overwhelmed, yet captivated, like a child stepping onto a stage for the first time. Everything was a marvel.

But the fantasy cracked fast. Beneath the surface of cobbled streets and glowing signs, life hit hard. Rent, tuition, groceries. The shine of independence dulled beneath the weight of bills she hadn't been taught to face. Her family covered accommodation for a time, and Vincent offered pocket money, but the shadows of adult life crept in. Joanna and Vincent's relationship was cracking. She knew the help wouldn't last. And it didn't.

Reality hit like cold rain. She remembered the payday loans, those innocent "just a hundred here" moments. Interest piled silently like mould under wallpaper. She took more and more. Until the hole she'd dug was too deep to escape. Shame had wrapped around her like a scarf pulled too tight. She didn't dare tell anyone. Not her parents or her friends. She handled it. Quietly and alone.

But she had a weapon: her imagination. And it became both her sanctuary and her curse. Every night, stories flooded her mind like tidal waves. Characters, worlds, dialogues so vivid they left her breathless. She

would write till her fingers ached, skipping meals, skipping people. She vanished into fiction like it was her real home. Then… the part-time job. And with it, Miguel. A walking contradiction: loud and wild, yet disarmingly sweet. She remembered him, gesturing at rowdy students who were trying to skip the queue, swearing in Spanish under his breath, flicking glances at her when he thought she wasn't looking.

"Give me a minute," he'd said one night, finishing his cigarette outside the staff door. "I'll lock up and give you a lift."

She hadn't planned on accepting. Her dorm was right around the corner. But he'd said it so matter-of-factly, she just… nodded. She remembered the sunrise. They parked near the cliffs. The sky was a goddamn *miracle*. Rose gold flooded the horizon. Light kissed her cheeks.

"Nice, isn't it?" Miguel had said, cigarette smoke curling around his grin.

"Thank you," she'd whispered.

He hadn't moved. Just watched the sun rise beside her.

"You're welcome," he'd said. And then, like a dagger dipped in charm. "Tomorrow I'll teach you how to make a real latte. You make shit coffee."

She'd laughed. But in that laugh, her heart cracked. Something had stirred. Something sweet and dangerous. And the first drop of poison was radiant with rose gold.

Elowen blinked as the kettle screamed behind her. She reached for it slowly, hands trembling just slightly. The memory faded, but the ache remained. She poured the water, letting the steam rise around her like fog, and typed one more reply to Dome before returning to her seat.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Yeah. It's coming back.*

As Elowen returned to her desk, the warmth of the mug nestled between her hands, her phone buzzed again.

[**BLDome**]: *So... what's the book about?*

She paused, hovering near the chair, thumb tapping the rim of the mug.

[**EllaStar5**]: *It's... kind of complicated, to be honest.*

[**BLDome**]: *Come on. You've just emotionally bled into a scene with Dy after edging Grail in your bedroom. I think I can handle a synopsis.*

She sighed, sliding back into her chair, the screen casting a gentle glow across her face.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Alright. It's a dark fantasy romance. Called "The Devil's Sigil."*

[**BLDome**]: *Uh-huh.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *The idea is... what if the devil was never evil? What if he was framed instead? Like... what if Lucifer was actually trying to protect us, but got cast out because he knew too much?*

[**BLDome**]: *So you're rewriting biblical history with dark fantasy? Hell yes.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Exactly. There are romance elements, of course… but also trauma, emotional scars, and psychology.*

Some philosophy, too. About identity, control, and guilt. How perception shapes reality.

[**BLDome**]: *That's intense. Sounds deeper than half the bestseller shelf.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *It's wrapped in dark romance, but if someone wants to see more in it... they will. That's kind of the point.*

A beat.

[**BLDome**]: *I'd love to read it, once you're ready.*

She smiled.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Maybe one day. Right now, all my energy's on the game. And honestly… I feel the pressure. It's hard to write a sequel when the first isn't even out yet.*

[**BLDome**]: *Wait, you're writing a sequel already?*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Yeah. Game studios like to plan early. Story-heavy games take years. If the first hits, the second has to be waiting in the wings. So the arcs are built ahead.*

[**BLDome**]: *Damn. Didn't realise how deep in you already were.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Deep enough to drown, some days.*

A pause.

[**BLDome**]: *I get that. The tour's been... amazing. But it's like heaven and hell at the same time. Everyone screaming your name, lights in your face, all this adrenaline and connection...*

[**BLDome**]: *And then the silence after. The crash, the noise in your head doesn't stop. And then the pressure to work on future albums and band evolution.*

She could feel the weight behind his words.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Like overstimulation with nowhere to go, right? I get it. It's a beautiful kind of chaos… but still chaos.*

[**BLDome**]: *Exactly. Sometimes I wonder what comes after. When the lights go out. When it's quiet again. Feels like... I'll be forgotten. Or worse, like I won't know who I am without all of this.*

Her grip tightened around the mug.

[**EllaStar5**]: *I think who you are without all this... is still someone worth remembering. We shift every day. You know that paradox… Theseus's Ship? If every piece gets replaced, is it still the same ship? Our bodies are like that. Cells die, regenerate. Even memory shifts. We're not the same people we were a year ago. We're walking ghosts of memory, wearing recycled skin.*

A pause.

[**BLDome**]: *Okay, wow. Look who's the nerd now.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *You love it.*

[**BLDome**]: *I actually do. "Recycled skin"? Get out of here with that poetic horror.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *You're welcome. I'm here all week. Existential dread is free with every tea refill.*

[**BLDome**]: *...You're dangerous when you say things like that, you know.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Then log back in before I write you into the sequel as a morally grey knight with unresolved trauma.*

[**BLDome**]: *lmao*

Her screen came alive once more. In-game, Avenna stood just outside the halo of the campfire. The others were already moving.

[**RedNocturne**]: *RIGHT, break's over, emotional damage restored, let's goooo*

[**AzureEcho**]: *I'm freshly hydrated and only mildly emotionally unstable.*

[**SombreSky**]: *I found more whispering herbs. They're chanting in my bag now.*

[**BLDome**]: *Alright, team. Let's pretend we're not falling apart and push toward Elderwyn.*

◇

The road narrowed as the forest opened its arms. Gone were the crumbling villages and haunted fields of war-torn memory. Before them now rose towering trees, their branches weaving a roof of emerald light above the path. Sunbeams poured through in narrow shafts, catching in mist and illuminating dust motes like tiny spirits set adrift. The scent of pine, moss, and distant rainwater filled the air… earthy and old, like a forgotten spell still whispering under every root.

Elderwyn. The forest of shadows and song. Where fear, anxiety, and worry had been sewn into the soil as sacred rites. The moment they crossed the moss-laced threshold, a quiet tension gripped the party.

Dy pulled at his reins with a grunt, shifting in the saddle. His thigh still ached beneath the bandage, the skin tender where Avenna had pressed her healing magic into the wound. She had spared him the worst of it, eased the infection, sealed the bleeding, but pain lingered like a ghost dragging its nails along muscle and bone. He said

nothing, though. Just tightened his grip and rode.

The horses moved with uneasy grace, their hooves barely making a sound on the velvet carpet of moss that stretched across the forest floor. Above them, birds sang, high and melodic, like flutes echoing through canopies. And every now and then, a blur of wings zipped past: fairies, their gossamer trails catching gold in the sun.

Kolm tilted his head, watching one spiral lazily around a nearby fern. "I swear one of them just winked at me."

Grail, riding ahead, grunted. "I hate fairies."

Avenna blinked. "What did they ever do to you? They're literally just… flying lights."

"Annoying, pesky little things."

Kolm chuckled. "Must've been rejected by one in another life."

"Probably tried to court one and got hexed," Dy added, voice dry.

Grail shot them both a look over his shoulder but said nothing, and the conversation drifted back into silence, swallowed again by the whispers of leaves.

This part of Elysium had once been second only to Valdoria in wealth and vitality. Elderwyn's hunters, who belonged to the Court of Forgebloom with its sigil of a growing plant, fed the realm. Its druids and shapeshifters offered wisdom and defence in equal measure: natural magic, old as the stars. It was a place where instincts ruled, and beasts spoke to men. But now… fear clung to the bark. Shadows moved at the edge of vision. And every villager they'd passed along the

way had worn the same expression: resignation. They could not leave. Elderwyn was their livelihood, their ancestral duty. But it had become a prison made of roots and routine. The deeper they rode, the thicker the magic grew… old magic, laced with earth and bone and memory. Avenna felt it like a pulse in her chest, slow and thunderous.

At last, after winding past a half-sunken statue of a horned druid and a crumbling archway overtaken by vines, they reached it. A lake. It lay nestled in a shallow basin, surrounded by twisted pines and pale silver-leafed trees that reflected the light like glass. A waterfall spilt down its far side from a mossy cliff, delicate as a silk ribbon unravelling from the sky. Mist curled along the surface in smoky tendrils, and faint bioluminescence glowed beneath the water in soft purples and blues, like sleeping stars.

Kolm whispered, "What is this place?"

Vier, riding beside him, spoke gently. "This is Myelin's Veil. The Druids say the water remembers every soul that's passed through Elderwyn."

Kolm whistled low. "I'd like to not be one of those, thank you."

They dismounted slowly. The ground here was soft, carpeted with moss and scattered petals from silver blossoms above. It felt sacred, but also quietly haunted. They made camp near the base of a great tree whose roots curled protectively around a patch of earth like a cradle. Avenna traced the soil with her fingers, murmuring a protection ward beneath her breath. Just in case. Dy sat

near the fire as it crackled to life, unwrapping his bandage to check the wound. It had scabbed over but remained bruised and red. He grimaced, fingers gently testing the skin. Kolm crouched beside the fire, turning the spitted deer slowly, his gloved hand slick with blood from a vial at his side.

"Not bad," he murmured, licking his teeth. "Not as fresh as Valebright's red wine deer, but it'll do."

"I don't want to know how you know the difference," Dy muttered.

"Connoisseur of chaos," Kolm said with a dramatic bow of his head. "And a lifelong sufferer of good taste."

Vier was silent nearby, kneeling beside his horse and pouring water into a metal bowl he'd salvaged from a burned-out house three villages back. The stallion drank gratefully, snorting and stamping softly. The quiet around them was almost peaceful, if not for the way the trees still leaned inward, like eavesdroppers. Grail and Avenna had wandered off into the woods in search of more firewood, the quiet crackle of leaves beneath their boots disappearing into the dusk.

Avenna walked just ahead, letting the soft light flicker across her face, golden through the canopy. She didn't speak. Grail walked behind her, his presence quieter than usual, though not withdrawn. This part of the forest wasn't threatening yet; it was beautiful in that ancient, slightly mournful way. She let her fingertips brush the bark of a nearby tree, feeling its heartbeat.

Behind her, Grail finally said, "You feel it too?"

She nodded. "Like the ground is listening."

He grunted. "It probably does."

They collected branches in silence, pausing once when a low sound echoed through the trees.

Back at the camp, the fire popped, throwing sparks into the air. Kolm sat cross-legged now, strumming a low tune on his travel lute while the deer roasted, soft chords mingling with the night air. Dy sat nearby, leg outstretched, watching the flames with an unreadable expression. Vier returned from tending to the horse, settling beside Dy and passing him a canteen.

"You alright?"

Dy shrugged. "Could be worse. Could be dead. Could be Kolm."

Kolm didn't look up. "You'd be lucky to be me."

The fire crackled louder as Avenna and Grail reappeared, arms full of dry wood. They moved with unspoken rhythm, dropping it by the fire and taking their places without a word. It was night now, truly. And the forest began to change. The birds quieted. The fairies disappeared. And the shadows thickened. The kind of darkness that curled inside your ribs. Avenna felt it in her chest.

Elderwyn had accepted them, for now. But it hadn't forgotten what they were. Outsiders.

Night had fallen with reverence in Elderwyn. The darkness in the forest descended not as a sudden veil but as a hushed chant performed in the shadows. The leaves produced ancient whispers through rustling tongues

which defied translation. A gentle crackle from the campfire echoed softly across the distance. Kolm roamed the camp's outer perimeter, where he alternated between repelling wild boars and speaking harsh words to a wolf that stared too long at his attire. Dy rested his nap beneath a fallen tree's crooked arm while one arm lay behind his head, and the other occasionally twitched from remembered pain. Vier sat alone in a cross-legged position while sharpening his blades with the focused devotion of someone who practised prayer through preparation.

But Grail had moved beyond the firelight. He moved silently through the forest floor as his boots touched down on moss that felt thick and lush beyond nature's normal capacity. The thick moss spread across roots and soil as a living carpet that absorbed the forest's breath. As Grail advanced further into the forest, the rhythm of the world seemed to slow down to the pace of a meditative heartbeat. The soft murmur of Avenna's voice earlier, when she mentioned needing water, might have moved him. Or perhaps it was something quieter. His soul held an old longing which existed before his earliest memories and which pulled him toward waters and places of closure and new beginnings.

Small lights blinked ahead of him. Fairies. Faint, fragile, and few. These fairies differed from the playful daytime versions they had observed. Night fairies possessed unique qualities: wings that were nearly invisible and an illumination resembling frost-kissed glass. The fairies moved around him unafraid like

moonlit dust because they sensed his mournful presence, which made him safe. Small lights provided direction to the lake, which appeared different in the darkness. Its surface was decorated with shimmering silver bioluminescent petals. The waterfall maintained its murmur but now sounded akin to a gentle lullaby with soft hypnotic tones beyond human voice capacity. The nearby trees bent inward, and their foliage faced the lake as if worshipping at a temple. And then he saw her. He stopped, mid-step, breath frozen in his throat.

She stood in the shallows with her back half-turned toward him and was bathed in moonlight while water fell all around her. The water worshipped her by kissing her thighs and wrapping around her waist before trailing off her bare shoulders like satin. Long strands of wet hair trailed behind her in bright, knotted strands. The water's gentle flow caused the ends of her hair to ripple while they captured the bioluminescent light, which resembled threads of starlight.

She moved with such a gentle slowness that it seemed she wasn't cognizant of her own motion. Her palm brushed the lake's surface and sparked ripples that distorted the shining reflections. Her fingers traced the water's surface as though they were deciphering an unspoken language. The droplets adhering to her skin sparkled as they moved along her neck and arms before reaching her collarbone, where they mapped patterns found only in nature.

And she was unmasked. He saw the pale curve of her cheek, the strong, elegant line of her nose and how

her lips took on a soft and exposed appearance when she stopped speaking. She stared downward at the lake's rhythm while her expression showed rawness instead of serenity. She removed her daily attire to reveal her true physical and spiritual self before the trees.

Her hips moved rhythmically through the forest's music that had swept her into its mystical dance. Her posture conveyed a response to the musical notes that filled the air through the arc of her back and the gradual weight shift from foot to foot, along with the tilt of her chin. The fairies glided around her as silent chimes would move in space.

At the clearing's edge, Grail leaned against a tree with his hand pressed to its bark as if he needed something tangible to stabilise himself. His chest tightened as if moving could destroy the illusion or reveal that this wasn't real. He wasn't sure what stunned him more. The beauty… yes. That was obvious. Avenna appeared as a mythical being below the moon and half-buried in water that shone like polished opal. Her complete stillness ripped him open like a knife tearing through flesh.

A branch cracked beneath his heel. She turned. The trance shattered. Her eyes darted upward in a flash of surprise before she reached understanding. She held his gaze across the illuminated surface of the water. For a moment, neither of them moved. He saw it all in that instant. The tightening of her shoulders, her chest expanded suddenly as she took in a sharp breath, the momentary exposure of her vulnerability revealed itself

on her face as she understood her total exposure to him, both physically and emotionally.

She didn't cover herself. She didn't run. Nothing he had ever experienced hit him as hard as that moment did. She just stared at him. The moment lingered between them as mist floated from the waterfall. He didn't speak. His mouth opened, but no words came. Not even breath.

She remained motionless with her skin covered in sparkling drops while glowing fairies illuminated half her form, and shadows cloaked the remaining side. A goddess unearthed from fear and light. And Grail… felt everything. The heaviness in his chest, the ache in his ribs and the way his mask suddenly felt suffocating. His pulse thundered.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"I take it you plan to keep staring," Avenna's voice finally broke the quiet, calm but sharpened with challenge, "or will you have the decency to turn away?"

The words struck through the fog in Grail's mind like a blade, and he flinched visibly. He turned without a word, his cloak catching the breeze as he shifted his stance, back now facing the lake. A quiet grunt left him, half an apology, half swallowed shame. Behind him, water whispered against skin. She stepped slowly out of the lake, her feet sinking into the mossy edge of the shore. Cool night air grazed her damp flesh as she reached for her undergarments, slipping into them with slow, unfazed grace. Grail didn't turn, but he did inhale… deep, strained, as though the air had thickened around them and he was forcing it past something in his chest.

She let him wait a moment longer before she spoke again. He heard the wet sound of her hair being squeezed out, droplets hitting the moss like gentle rain. When she allowed him to turn, he did so carefully, as though movement itself might betray the flustered state beneath his painted skin. Her underdress, white and clinging to her like moonlight woven into silk, revealed more than it hid. The fabric moulded to every curve,

sculpted by the water still dripping from her form.

She didn't shy away from him. In fact, her eyes lifted, studying him. Assessing. Measuring his silence like an artist critiques a shadow on canvas. And then she smiled. That subtle, knowing smile… one that teased, with warmth and a faint flicker of something more ancient beneath it.

"I've never seen you this flustered before," she said, voice velvet-soft in the darkness. Grail turned his head sharply. He smirked, but the expression twitched. He was grateful for the paint. Grateful that the blackened skin masked the heat rising across his cheeks.

She began to braid her wet hair with slow, precise fingers, her body still glowing faintly from the lake's soft reflection. Grail tried to focus on the trees, on the firelight still faintly visible through the brush… but he could feel her presence like gravity. And then she stepped toward him. He didn't move. She came close and tilted her head as if trying to peek beneath his mask. Her hands lifted, slow and deliberate, like testing a line she expected him to draw. He caught her wrists gently before she could touch it. They stared at each other. That nearness pressed against their skin like silence held too long.

Avenna didn't pull away. She didn't tease further either. She simply allowed him to see her. Her face, damp and bare. Her eyes, so achingly clear. Her lips parted slightly in the cool air. She wasn't afraid of him.

He whispered it before he knew he was speaking at all.

"You will be the end of me."

Her breath caught. She didn't move. And Grail moved forward, just an inch. Enough to bring them into the same breath. Her gaze dropped to his lips, and his to hers. The world itself seemed to exhale. The fairies hovered, silent. The forest held its breath. Just the hum of water behind them.

And then, the lake exploded. A thunderclap of water and force ruptured the stillness like a scream. The waterfall burst outward as if something had torn free from beneath its depths. Waves crashed against the shore, sending up mist and shrieks from the fairies now scattering like shattered stars. Grail's body reacted before thought did. He lunged forward and wrapped his arms around Avenna, shielding her from the blast. Water soaked his cloak instantly, slamming against his back like a warning. He twisted, hoisting her up in one seamless motion over his shoulder.

"By all the fractured stars, Grail, unhand me this instant!" she hissed, half gasping, half growling, as her legs kicked once in protest while his hand landed on her backside. "I swear, if you don't put me down…'

"Later, love," he snapped, already running.

He tore through the brush, boots pounding moss and roots as the light of camp came into view. Avenna's long braid slapped against his shoulder with every step, and her hands pressed against his back with enough intent to show him exactly how much she hated being carried. They burst through the treeline just as Kolm turned.

The vampire raised a brow. "Well, that's a look.

Avenna, I love the new outfit… very baptismal vengeance."

"Shut up," Grail growled. "Busy."

Kolm's smirk began to rise until his expression shifted. His eyes narrowed, catching the movement behind them. His hand instinctively went to his blade. Behind the trees, the mist parted… and they arrived.

Auric stepped forward first, emerging from the broken water like something dredged from forgotten rot. He was hunched, draped in layers of ragged, potion-stained cloth, chains dangling from his body like shackles of purpose. The vials along his form glowed in hues that should not coexist: sickly greens, burning coppers, and translucent blacks that seemed to warp the air around them. His skeletal fingers clutched a long alchemical spear, its length etched with ever-shifting runes that glowed with twisted logic. Every step he took left a trail of decay, grass shrivelling, moss turning to dust. His voice rasped like rust being peeled from bone.

"*Dissolve me... I want more...*"

And slithering beside him, too smooth to be real, too fast to be natural, came *Consuma*. She unfurled herself from the forest like a nightmare: her lower half a thick, muscular serpent's tail, scales dark and oil-slicked. It rattled with each undulation, a sound more felt in the spine than heard. Her upper body was armoured, feminine only in shape, though her face mocked the idea of beauty with its mantis-like design, insectoid eyes, and gold mandibles twitching with hunger. Snakes hissed from her head. Her voice was a melody broken by pain.

"*Does it hurt for you, as it does for me?*"

The air dropped in temperature. Fear slithered into lungs. The forest turned its face away. Behind them, the rest of the group scrambled to position. Dy limping into formation with a wince, Kolm spinning one sword, Vier already halfway through a silent spell. Grail placed Avenna back on her feet, his hand lingering on her arm just a moment longer than needed. Her wet dress clung to her form. She looked at the incoming monsters, hair still dripping, eyes narrow, and said nothing. There was no time to dress. There was no time to question.

[Auric – Corrosive Touch]

A swipe of his skeletal hand rotted a fallen log in one stroke, reducing it to sludge.

[Consuma – Mind Venom]

A hiss escaped her lips. Her voice slithered into the minds of The Eternal Slumber.

"*Does it hurt for you... as it does for me?*"

[Kolm – Rogue's Descent]

Kolm blurred forward, blades drawn. He slid beneath Consuma's first strike, carving twin slashes across her armoured midsection.

-8% HP

Consuma |||||||||||||||| 92%

She shrieked, a metallic rasp of fury, and struck back with her tail. He dodged, barely. And then he lunged. Fangs sank into the crook of her collarbone. Her blood spilt into his mouth, burning sweet and unnatural. He didn't stop.

[Kolm – Bloodlust Unleashed]

Crimson coated his lips. His eyes darkened with old hunger. He licked her off his teeth.

"Disgusting," he muttered, "but divine."

Dy flanked left, dragging his batons forward, his leg stiff and trembling but unyielding.

[Dy – Rapid Beat Barrage]

He danced through Auric's fog, striking high and low with vicious rhythm. Each hit cracked against the chainmail of potions, sending two vials bursting into steam. Auric's chuckle curdled the air.

[Auric – Elixir of Madness]

A vial shattered midair. Pink mist bloomed. Vier, casting from a distance, choked on it.

[Vier – Inner Ward]

He carved a rune through the haze, barely resisting the madness that screamed into his mind. His blade trembled.

[Grail – Retaliation Drive]

Across the battlefield, Grail tore himself from Consuma's tail with a guttural cry, knife flashing through scaled flesh. He hit the ground hard and rolled to a crouch, breath ragged and ribs screaming.

[Consuma – Tail Snap Counter]

Her tail whipped toward him before he could rise fully. The strike connected with his hip and cracked against the sword at his side. His weapon flew, spinning through the air in a silver arc, disappearing into the moss and brush beyond.

He froze for half a breath. His hand clutched air. The weight… gone. He stared toward the trees where it

had vanished, throat tight, but there was no time. Only his knife now. Avenna took her place in the clearing, divine light pulsing under her skin.

[Avenna – Beacon Pulse]

Magic gathered in her palms…

[Avenna – Divine Focused Beam]

She raised her hands, the blast forming. But a sound broke the spell. It was a growl. From behind the trees, a wolf struck. Avenna barely turned in time; its weight slammed her down, claws ripping across her arms. She screamed and reached for anything, and found it.

[Grail's Sword Acquired]

She raised the blade, wedging it between the wolf's jaws as it snapped toward her face. Its breath was foul. Its claws dug into her chest. She cried out, panic rising like bile in her throat. Her arms shook, and her fingertips turned black, shadows slowly rising to her wrists.

[Grail – Retaliation Drive]

Across the battlefield, Grail tore himself from Consuma's tail with a guttural cry, knife flashing through the scaled flesh. He turned and froze. He saw her. Pinned and bleeding. His sword between her and death. She roared, holding the beast off, eyes wide and desperate.

[Consuma – Ravenous Embrace]

Consuma's tail lashed again, wrapped tight around Grail's chest. He gasped as pressure crushed his ribs. He couldn't reach Avenna, and she was losing the blade. The wolf's teeth pressed closer. Consuma coiled

around him, voice thick with hunger.

"*Does it hurt for you... as it does for me?*"

Consuma ||||||||||||||| 87%

Auric ||||||||||||||| 95%

[Kolm – Reaper Waltz]

Kolm dove in with a roar, blades spinning. He slashed Consuma's tail, forcing her grip to loosen on Grail. His movements were manic now, blood smeared across his chin, eyes wild.

[Kolm – Vampiric Precision]

He carved upward, slicing through the snake-hair that hissed and lunged at him.

-5% HP

Consuma ||||||||||||| 82%

"You're not the only one who devours," Kolm hissed.

[Dy – Flurry of Judgment]

Back near Auric, Dy spun both batons into a blur of force, cracking three more vials off Auric's body. Auric stumbled slightly, liquid fire dripping down his cloak.

-5% HP

Auric ||||||||||||| 90%

Dy's leg buckled. Pain flared. He growled, pushing through, sweat pouring down his temple.

[Vier – Nature's Blade]

Vier stepped behind him, sword now glowing green with druidic energy. He slashed clean through Auric's corrupted aura. A wave flared.

-6% HP

Auric |||||||||||| 84%

Auric snarled.

[Auric – Corrosive Touch]

He grabbed Vier's shoulder. Steam burst from the metal. Vier screamed as his armour melted. Grail ripped himself free of Consuma's tail and hit the ground rolling, knife still clutched tight. His chest heaved, and his ribs burned. But his eyes were locked on *her*. Avenna… Pinned, still bleeding and still holding on. He sprinted toward her. But too late, wolf's jaws clamped down on her forearm. She shrieked, and blood painted the blade. Avenna cried, snarled, and shoved, but her strength waned. And the wolf pressed harder. Avenna's scream cut through the clearing like a blade through silk. Her knees gave under the weight. The blade in her hands shook. Still, she held.

Grail's mind split. He screamed her name.

"Avenna!!!"

The wolf's teeth pressed closer. Avenna's grip faltered. Her body trembled beneath the weight. Her arms shook, blood ran in rivulets from her shoulder, soaking the white fabric until it clung like funeral shrouds. The sword slipped, half an inch, maybe more. The growl in the beast's throat deepened. Its breath coated her skin: hot, reeking of rot. Her vision blurred with pain, and for a heartbeat, she let go. She felt it… That surrender. The moment when the body says enough, when even the soul begins to consider silence as salvation.

Let the teeth have me. Let the blood stop running.

"Avenna!"

Grail's voice broke through the fog, hoarse and cracking, in desperation. "Keep fighting! Hold on, I'm coming!"

The words were dragged from him, spit from lungs bruised by battle and terror. His voice shattered something in her chest, and with it came the tears… hot, stinging and blinding. She sobbed. Loudly and desperately. Ragged and furious and full of every aching part of her. The wolf's weight bore down. Her skin screamed, and muscles tore beneath the tension. Blood mixed with moss beneath her back. But she felt it, that flicker in her chest. Her light, faint.

[Avenna – Heartflare Surge]

Light exploded from her palms. White fire laced with anguish. The wolf yelped, thrown backwards by the blast. It hit the earth, limbs splaying. Avenna rose, not steady. She grabbed the sword and charged. She didn't scream this time. She stabbed the wolf in the chest. And again. And again. Its body spasmed once, then stilled. But she didn't stop. She straddled it, kneeling over the corpse as her blade descended again and again, slick with blood and bits of bone. Her scream tore through the night as her blade tore through flesh.

She stabbed.

And stabbed.

And stabbed.

Until the wolf was nothing but ruin beneath her. Until the moss drank deep and her sobs became screams and her screams became silence. When she stood, the sword was trembling in her hands. Her hair clung to her

face, soaked in blood and rain and tears. Her breath came in sharp, panicked gasps. Her skin gleamed with sweat and gore. And her eyes… Grail saw them.

Murderous.

Avenna turned, light pooling in her hands again. She didn't even look at him. She looked at Consuma.

[Avenna – Divine Wrath Pulse]

Light screamed from her fingers and slammed into Consuma's side.

-9% HP

Consuma |||||||||||| 73%

The monster screamed and grew. Her body surged with energy, scales stretching, muscles thickening. The light fed her. She laughed, voice echoing like bells in a crypt. Kolm stumbled back, blade twitching in his hand. Grail took a step forward, his eyes locked on Avenna.

"She's feeding off it," he muttered. "She grows from our anger."

Kolm wiped blood from his mouth. "Then we need to stop your Priestess."

Grail shouted, "Avenna, STOP!"

But she didn't hear him. Or didn't care.

[Avenna – Lightbound Flurry]

She stormed forward, sword glowing like the sun. Her eyes were glassy, unseeing. She slashed. And slashed. Her feet left the ground as her magic surged through Grail's sword, twisting it into a holy weapon soaked in rage and radiance. Consuma coiled to strike, but Avenna screamed, in rage so vast it ruptured the world.

[Avenna – Lightburst Rend]

The sword struck, light erupting on contact.

-10% HP

Consuma |||||||||| 63%

Consuma lunged, fangs wide, and Avenna spun. The blade flashed. She redirected the strike into herself. But the monster's jaws closed on her own tail. She screamed, writhed, and thrashed violently. Avenna turned, her braid flipping across her shoulder, blood trailing behind her like a comet. Grail held his breath. He moved, faster than the thoughts clawing through him. He caught her wrist just as she raised the sword for the final strike. Her hand trembled in his grip. And the light snapped. Her body went rigid, her knees buckled. And then she fell into her mind.

It was wet grass beneath her again, but not her body.

She was Grail. The air was thick with storm clouds, the sky bruised purple and grey. Rain fell in slow, icy drops. And Morphea… was above him. Her divine form straddled him with elegance and menace alike. Her silver hair fell in sheets around them. Her mask, black and gold, hid half her face, but the visible side smiled with lust and knowing. She moved atop him, slow and commanding. Her hips rolled, her fingers threaded into her own hair as she looked down and moaned, pleasure thick in her voice. But he… Avenna in his skin… felt the ache. The Grail behind the pleasure. The weight that no release could lift. He gripped her hips, and she leaned down, biting his arm hard. Blood welled where her white teeth sank in. And he let her. Let her devour him. Poison

him. Because pain was easier than emptiness. Because destruction was better than loneliness.

The vision shattered. Avenna screamed as reality hit her again, Consuma thrashing, her body jerking violently. Grail dragged Avenna back just as the beast's eyes rolled upward. Her body exploded into gold-glimmering dust. The light scattered in the air, slowly falling like embers. All that remained was a single vial, glass and gold, untouched in the moss.

◇

[**BLDome**]: *...That scene… was deeply emotional. It felt as if Avenna was waiting to scream like that.*

Elowen's hand tightened on the mouse.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Yeah. That's exactly it. She screamed because she was empty. Because she held everything in for so long that it cracked her open from the inside.*

[**BLDome**]: *Did you… Just come up with that? Or was it… inspired?*

[**EllaStar5**]: *I've had moments like that. Where I looked fine. Sounded fine. But something tiny tipped the scale. A comment or a tone. And suddenly I'm sobbing into a pillow at 3AM, trying not to wake anyone up.*

The dots appeared. Then stopped. Then came back.

[**BLDome**]: *...I think you just described half my tour nights. You spend hours on stage pouring your soul out. Then come back to a hotel room. And you wonder if the people*

screaming for you really saw your pain. Or if they were just screaming for the sound.

She exhaled slowly.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Being seen and being witnessed aren't always the same.*

[**BLDome**]: *Witnessing, yes. Like you're allowed to exist in all that mess of yours. Without needing to earn your place.*

Another pause.

Her fingers hovered over the keys, hesitant, but honest.

[**EllaStar5**]: *When I wrote that scene, I thought of a version of myself that no one ever met. The one who didn't argue. Who just took it all in. Who folded instead of fought. Avenna's scream was the one I never let myself release. So I gave it to her.*

There was no immediate reply. Just the flicker of typing dots that blinked in and out like uncertain breath.

[**BLDome**]: *Then I think you gave her the most human thing in the world. Permission.*

Elowen blinked hard. The tears came again, but gentler this time. Quiet grief uncoiling like steam from something long sealed shut.

A new message.

[**AzureEcho**]: *Back. Coffee in hand. Ready to emotionally self-destruct once more.*

[**RedNocturne**]: *I have returned with snacks and a personal vendetta against boars.*

[**SombreSky**]: *And I have returned with nothing but regret and six Whispering Thistles.*

[**BLDome**]: *Back in a sec. Just catching a breath.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Same.*

She leaned back, let her head fall against the chair. The glow of the screen was still warm on her face. Avenna hadn't moved. But for the first time in what felt like hours, Elowen had.

Elowen had been raised by a proud, strong woman who never allowed herself to bend. As a child, Elowen scoffed at the thought of women trapped in toxic relationships. She judged them from a distance. Why stay? she once thought. Why not just walk away? But she didn't understand then. Because toxic people aren't always cruel. Sometimes they just don't know how else to love. And Elowen never thought she'd end up in a similar place.

The turning point was quiet, a slow corrosion. Her mother had taught her how to be desired, not how to desire right. Taught her to be practical, to find value in every connection. Love was optional. Stability was everything. Find a provider, a source. Every relationship? A transaction. Be charming, beautiful, and needed. But never ask for anything in return. Because the need was weakness. And weakness was dangerous. You want something – get it yourself. Do it yourself. So Elowen learned to please. To perform, but not to receive. Not to set boundaries. She gave, and gave, and gave. Until there was nothing left to call hers.

She hadn't recognised Miguel as a predator. Not at first. He was quiet, distant and detached. Not violent. But indifference… that's a slow, effective poison. He left

her alone with their child more and more. Made her feel like she wasn't trying hard enough, that her failure to be everything at once was a personal flaw.

Everything she had built, every brick of strength and self-reliance she'd gathered through years of surviving, came crumbling down in a whisper. And silence became her only sanctuary. Each night, she performed her duty. Sex was an obligation. She'd wait for him to fall asleep, then crawl into her son's bed and cry into his warmth, feeling like a stranger in her own home.

Eventually, she told Miguel she wanted a divorce. He didn't even fight. She asked if she was worth fighting for. He looked at her. Said, simply… No. And something inside her broke.

After that, she started visiting the beach alone at night. Said she was going for a run, just to escape the house he was in. Anything to get out, to breathe. She'd cry into the waves. Beg the stars for something. Someone… Anything…

But nobody came. As always, she was alone in her battle. And then she made a plan. Gave Miguel six months to move out. She worked harder, paid debts, and saved what she could. But she fell into desperation, and somewhere in the middle of it all, she joined a dating app. She hated herself for feeling happy each time she received a compliment or a flirtatious remark, just to remember she was a woman, that she still mattered. And that's when she met Connor.

The ping of a message brought her back. She sniffed, wiped her cheek again, and looked at the screen.

[**BLDome**]: *You ok?*

Elowen closed her eyes. Another tear slid down.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Yeah.*

[**BLDome**]: *I hope Avenna gets a chance to heal after this. She's been through hell. It's tearing her apart.*

Her fingers moved again.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Sometimes healing hurts more than the wound. Because that's when you're raw. And the people you thought would help you stitch yourself back together? They're the ones who break you worse.*

There was a pause.

[**BLDome**]: *Yeah. Maybe it's not about healing right away. Maybe first you break everything. Let it ruin you. Only then can you rebuild.*

Her eyes welled again.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Exactly.*

Then the chat flared.

[**RedNocturne**]: *OKAY, but I'm ready to stab something again, my daggers are literally bored.*

[**AzureEcho**]: *Break time's over, you beautiful disasters.*

[**BLDome**]: *Back into the shadows, priestess?*

Elowen laughed.

[**EllaStar5**]: *Back into the light. Let's finish what we started.*

She clicked *"Resume."*

Avenna's figure shifted in the clearing, shoulders rising, spine straightening, sword in hand. Her eyes burned with clarity.

◇

Avenna sat in the blood-soaked grass, her breath shallow, her limbs limp and heavy. The fire of battle had dimmed in her eyes. Her hands, once glowing with divine fury, now trembled with the aftershocks of rage too great to contain. Her fingers were slick with blood… hers, the wolf's, it didn't matter anymore. Grail dropped beside her, cloak half-torn, dirt smudged across his jaw. Without a word, he reached into his side and ripped a strip of fabric from his cloak. His hands were shaking too.

"Avenna," he murmured. His voice was low, barely audible over the fading crackle of chaos. "Let me see."

She didn't look at him. Her eyes were fixed on something far away, something not in this forest, not in this world. Somewhere else. She didn't hear Dy's grunts or the sharp ring of Vier's sword meeting metal. She didn't see Kolm stumble into the fray, pale and shaking, blood caked to the corner of his mouth. She didn't move when Grail gently lifted her arm. Her flesh was torn where the wolf's teeth had bitten into her, jagged and deep. He cleaned it with water from his flask and pressed the cloth to it, tying it tight. His movements were steady, and careful.

His voice is softer now. "Avenna… did you have

another vision?"

Still nothing. Her lips parted slightly, but no sound came out. Her gaze drifted, past him, to the others. Dy, fighting even as his thigh buckled beneath him. Vier, relentless, dancing between the last vials and chains of the enemy. Auric swayed in the distance, a ghost of what he had been, glowing with a dying light. Only a few chains remained across his cloak. Only a handful of vials still intact.

Grail turned, trying to rise. But her hand caught his arm. He looked down at her again. "What is it?"

Still no words. Just that dazed, hollow expression. She reached up. Her fingertips brushed his cheek. The world spun.

She was no longer in Elderwyn. The vision was soft, at first. Like a dream. She stood in the corner of a vast, dark chamber. White marble pillars rose around her, broken in places, smudged with ash and blood. The floor was cracked. The air was heavy.

At the centre of it all was Morphea. She was kneeling in a pool of shadow, shoulders hunched forward, silver hair tangled down her back like seaweed. Her skin was bruised: blue, purple, red. Her arms wrapped around her own ribs as if trying to hold herself together. Tears ran down her face.

"I am worthless," she whispered. Again. And again. "I am worthless… I am worthless…"

She rocked back and forth, her voice hollow. Avenna, in Grail's body, knelt beside Morphea, arms slowly wrapping around her in a gentle embrace. He held

her with a tenderness that felt wrong in this broken place. Morphea flinched but didn't pull away immediately.

"No…" she said, pushing him weakly. "Don't touch me." He remained still. "I'm not worthy of your kindness," she hissed. "I don't deserve you." Her hands struck his chest. "You should've come sooner."

He flinched.

"I was pure once," she said bitterly. "I was light. I was whole. And you…" Her voice broke. "You let that false god get to me. You let him fill my veins with rot. And you just watched. You watched me burn."

Grail, or the memory of him, reached again. But this time she slapped him, hard.

"You're as worthless as I am!" She spat. "You let me break." She stood now, looming above him, trembling. "You get scraps of me now. Nothing more. You don't get the me I was. You get this. You get the dark. You get the ashes."

And her voice dropped to a whisper. "I'll consume you. Like the rest of the world." Her hand touched his chest. "And you'll thank me for it."

Avenna jolted back into her body. Grail was in front of her, lips moving, but no sound reached her ears. It was all muffled. Like she was underwater. Behind him, Vier's blade glowed. One final strike. The last vial broke, spilling gold light into the earth.

Auric ///// 0%

The alchemist screamed. He exploded, and golden dust spiralled into the air like pollen caught in

moonlight. The battlefield went still. Another vial, untouched, lay nestled in the moss. Avenna blinked slowly, her body swaying. Grail's voice broke through at last, but too late. She slumped sideways, eyes rolling back.

Her world went dark.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Warmth. It clung to the skin like soft mist. Somewhere in the distance, a crackling fire popped in rhythmic intervals, and the sharp scent of herbs laced the air. Avenna stirred, her fingers curling against the soft linen beneath her. She opened her eyes. A wooden ceiling greeted her, beams aged and cracked with time; above her, a slow wisp of smoke trailed from a small hearth. Avenna blinked, her breath catching in her throat. The pain… it was gone.

Her arm… She lifted it. Smooth, unblemished skin. No wounds, no dried blood, no ache. Only a faint warmth, like an old memory. She sat up slowly, her body still trembling from something deeper than injury. Her gaze wandered around the room: a single bed, a fire lazily burning, the scent of soup and pinewood thick in the air. A window stood open, a curtain fluttering like a shy breath. She moved toward it, barefoot, cautious. Pulling back the linen, she looked outside. A village. Children darting between worn cottages, laughter echoing off stone. A woman hunched over fresh kill, slicing cleanly while a man beside her hammered iron over flame. The clang of metal, the chatter of life, it felt too normal for a world so broken.

Then, the door creaked. She turned sharply. Grail

stepped in, still armoured, cloak speckled with dried leaves. He froze when he saw her.

"You're awake," he said. "You… look better."

She didn't answer. Her eyes returned to the window, distant and unreadable.

Grail lingered by the door before speaking again. "A group of hunters found us. Led us here. The village healer worked on you and Dy, said the wounds weren't fatal. You've been out for a day."

Still nothing. She stayed silent, gaze tracing the smoke rising from a nearby chimney.

"Kolm's not doing well," he added, quieter this time. "His body's rejecting the usual supplements. The healer says his veins have gone black. He's in a haze. Burning from the inside."

Avenna flinched. Her throat tensed.

"…Dusk," she whispered. "It's Dusk." She turned sharply, eyes blazing now. "When he bit Consuma… she must've infected him."

Grail's brow furrowed. "You're sure?"

"I've seen it before." Without another word, she pushed past him, already heading down the narrow hall.

Kolm's room was dim, lit only by a flickering oil lamp. The air inside was heavy with sweat and fear. Kolm lay twisted in soaked sheets, trembling violently. His skin, once vibrant with theatrical paint and smug bravado, was now ashen and pale. His lips were cracked. His breath came in harsh, broken gasps. Dy stood on one side of the bed, worry etched into every inch of his frame. Vier paced near the door, arms crossed, jaw locked tight.

As Avenna entered, they turned, startled. They still haven't got used to her face. Grail followed silently behind, saying nothing.

Avenna's voice was sharp. "Close the door. No one else comes in."

Grail didn't question. The door thudded shut behind him. She moved closer, her eyes never leaving Kolm. "Take off his mask."

Vier blinked. "What?"

"You heard me."

He hesitated, hands twitching. "Why?"

"I'm here standing, facing you directly with no mask on, so at least have the decency to trust my words. I'm so tired of everyone in this world hiding their faces. I am tired of believing in Gods that won't give me a chance to look them in the eye. If you want him to live, you'll do as I say." Her tone left no room for argument.

Vier looked at Grail. A pause, then a nod. With trembling fingers, Vier reached out and undid the clasps. The mask fell away.

Kolm's face, bare and raw, was nothing as she'd expected. Beneath the glamour and swagger was a normal face: high cheekbones, long lashes damp with tears, a faint patchy stubble along his jaw. His eyes, half-lidded and dulled with fever, still shimmered that stormy blue. Avenna stared at him. Just for a moment. Then she turned. Without asking, she stepped toward Grail, reached for his belt, and unsheathed a dagger.

"Wait…" he started, but too late. She cut her wrist.

A clean, straight line. Blood bloomed at once: bright, glowing faintly in the firelight. She pressed it against Kolm's mouth.

"Drink."

Kolm didn't question. His hands shot up, clutching her wrist as though starving, and he drank. Deep, instinctual gulps.

Dy gasped. "No blood has helped, why would…"

"Mine will," Avenna said, voice steady. "Because mine is not just blood."

They stared.

"What do you mean?" Vier asked, voice barely above a whisper.

"I mean," she said, eyes locked on Kolm, "that my blood is the only cure for Dusk."

The silence thickened, suffocating. Grail stepped forward. "You're saying you…?"

"I'm celestial-born. That's the only thing I could establish through my memories," she said simply. "My blood is elixir. A weapon and a remedy. And a curse."

Kolm let go of her wrist. He fell back, unconscious, a streak of her blood on his lips. But his veins… They were changing. The blackness faded like dusk retreating before dawn. She healed her wound with a single touch, light flooding the skin until it closed without a scar. No one moved.

"No wonder," Grail said, more to himself. "No wonder they were all after you. You were never just a priestess to them. You were a source."

"Or a threat," she whispered. "To those who

wanted to control the sick. Or the ones who wanted me… gone."

The room pulsed with unspoken truths. Avenna turned and left.

The mask felt heavier this time. Avenna tied the straps at the back of her head, the metal whispering against her skin as it settled across her face. Her fingers lingered there for a moment. A breath in, a breath out. She didn't need to wait long. The door creaked open with familiar care, then clicked shut with precision.

"I can see why the king has chosen you," Grail said, voice low… like he was afraid to break the stillness of the room.

She turned to him, her eyes softening beneath the golden half-mask. "I still don't know why I see those visions," she said. "Why do I see you?"

He stepped forward slowly, his hand brushing hers, just barely a graze, as if touching her too firmly might summon another vision.

"It's not the touch alone," he said, thoughtful. "They only happen during battle, right? When your heart's pounding, when there's fear or pain or… Maybe something deeper. Something you haven't let surface yet."

She swallowed.

"What did you see this time?" he asked.

Avenna hesitated. He moved to sit on the edge of her bed, his hands resting on his knees.

"I suppose… they're more like my memories,

right?" he murmured. "So I can only guess what you've seen."

She exhaled. "I don't just see them," she said, voice fragile. "I am you in those visions. I feel everything. The shame. The silence. The ache."

She stepped back and leaned gently against the wall. Her eyes dropped to the floor.

"Why did Morphea say it was your fault?"

Grail looked away, his jaw clenched as he turned toward the window. Outside, the village bustled, unaware of the stillness in this room. He bit his lip.

"She was… everything," he said finally. "A goddess made of contradiction. Not light or shadow, but something in between… like moonlight on deep water. Beautiful and dangerous. Impossible not to notice."

He shook his head, a small, breathless laugh escaping him.

"I was nothing. A puny god. Just… a boy who sang in Aether's gardens while the real gods mocked him. My voice was soft. My presence, softer. I didn't shine like they did. I didn't matter."

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

"But she liked my voice. Morphea… she would dance to it. She'd paint with flower pigments while I sang. The garden bloomed when she laughed."

A pause. His voice cracked. "I never touched her. Never dared. Every time she reached out, I flinched. I thought I wasn't worthy. And then… someone else came. Braver, bolder." He looked over his shoulder. "And she chose him. Because I was a coward. Because I let her slip

through my fingers."

Avenna said nothing for a while. Her hand rested over her heart, fingers trembling.

"It wasn't your fault," she whispered at last. "How you saw yourself… that doesn't justify what she did. She used you, twisted your love to fit her pain."

He didn't respond.

"She projected her wounds onto you," Avenna continued. "Because it's easier to make someone else carry your hurt than face it. But you didn't deserve that." She stepped closer, slow and deliberate. "Just like you didn't deserve my anger. I painted all assassins with one brush because of my past. I let old wounds speak in place of reason. And I blamed you for ghosts that weren't yours."

Grail looked at her.

"I denied it for so long," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "Let it turn into rage. Against assassins, against myself. Against this whole cursed world. And all it did was poison me, tainted my light until I couldn't even recognise it." She exhaled shakily. "But I want to be better. Even if it hurts."

He nodded, slowly. "I understand," he said, finally. "And I'm sorry too. For misjudging you."

The following morning, the group gathered near the village gate, sunlight catching on metal and leather. Their inventories restocked, blades sharpened, satchels packed with fresh provisions. They were on a way to locate a witch, who could provide some guidance. Kolm

stood at the centre of it all, mask back in place, silver hair freshly styled, and a smirk dancing on his lips like he'd never been on the verge of death.

"Alright, my dearest tragic fools," he announced, spinning one of his blades with flair, "I'm alive, flawless, and still more attractive than the rest of you combined. Let's go find this witch before I expire from boredom."

Avenna couldn't help it; she laughed. They moved as one down the cobbled path toward the forest's edge, where the trees grew darker, twisted into shapes like clawed hands and tangled thoughts. The wind here carried a different scent: herbs, soil, and something older. They stopped before a crooked hut built into the side of a moss-covered hill. It had no windows, only a heavy wooden door etched with strange carvings. Bundles of herbs dangled from the roof. A toad sat lazily on the crooked step. Smoke twisted out from the chimney like a beckoning finger.

Avenna stared at the door. No one moved. Then… A voice.

"Come in, wanderers."

The door creaked open… And the shadows welcomed them. The hut breathed like it was alive. Inside, the light was soft and strange, dim gold from a single hanging lantern swaying on a chain, casting shadows that danced over dried herbs dangling from the rafters. Bundles of rosemary, lavender, and belladonna brushed against each other like gossiping crones. The scent of lemongrass and smoke curled thick in the air.

At the centre of the room, a cauldron bubbled

lazily over low flames, the liquid inside glowing faint green, releasing puffs of steam that shimmered as they rose. Runes were etched into the walls, faded but pulsing faintly in rhythm with the fire.

Avenna stepped in first and froze. The witch was nothing like she expected. She stood near the cauldron, gracefully turning as they entered. Her black hair fell in silky waves, streaked with silver like moonlight caught in ink. Her emerald-green eyes gleamed with knowing. A moss-green dress clung to her form, flowing like water, embroidered with starlight and shadows.

"Welcome," she said, smiling. "I've been expecting you. My name is Lysaria."

Her voice was warm, lilting, strangely soothing.

"Please, sit. You've travelled far." She gestured toward the sitting room… small, a little cramped, with cushions arranged in a circle and carved wooden chairs tucked wherever they'd fit. Each member of The Eternal Slumber took a seat, some more awkwardly than others. The assassins shuffled like wolves in a tea shop, unsure what to do with their weapons or limbs.

Then, cups appeared before them. Delicate porcelain, mismatched yet beautiful. Each was filled with hot lemongrass tea. Avenna raised her brows as she watched Kolm sniff his cup suspiciously before sipping. The sight of all four assassins, deadly, masked, stoic, crammed together in a room too small for their pride, sipping tea like they were at someone's grandmother's… was almost too much.

She smirked. "Charming. Never thought I'd see

you guys at a tea party."

Kolm huffed. "Even assassins need antioxidants."

Avenna turned to the witch. "We were hoping you might help us."

The woman bowed her head. "You may call me Lysaria. I am the Whispering Root of Elderwyn. And yes, I saw you coming." She moved with flowing grace to a nearby cabinet and pulled out an old deck, wrapped in violet silk. She sat at the low round table and unwrapped the Tarot cards like something sacred.

"Perhaps I can help a little," she murmured. "Let's see what the threads say."

She shuffled the cards slowly, deliberately. The air in the room stilled.

"Who's first?"

Kolm immediately raised his hand and slid forward, plopping down in front of her. Lysaria chuckled. "The loudest ones are usually the most afraid."

Kolm stiffened, then gulped his tea. She laid out the cards with practised elegance. A spread of reds and golds, swords and cups, and then, hearts.

Her eyes lingered. "You live in the theatre of life, don't you, Kolm?"

He blinked. "Well, I'm fabulous, obviously…"

"Hm, but you don't know the difference between the stage and yourself," she continued, gently. "You act even when no one's watching. You've hidden behind charm for so long, you've forgotten who the actor is." Kolm went very still. "If you want love… the real kind… You must stop performing. Love within isn't something

you flaunt. It's something you become. Until you know your own heart, no one else will."

Kolm looked down. "That's… rude."

Lysaria just smiled. Next, Dy stepped forward, quiet as always. She laid the cards. Symbols of wands, swords, and pentacles.

"You are wiser than you believe," she said. "But you question it constantly. You must follow your instincts, Dy. Your heart knows more than your mind allows."

He nodded once, seriously. "Thank you."

Then came Vier. As he sat, Lysaria's fingers paused above the deck. She looked at him, slowly blinking. "My, my. What a man."

The others leaned in.

Lysaria bit her lip with a smile. "You don't need a reading, do you, darling? You're already exactly who you're meant to be."

Kolm groaned. "Oh come on! He gets praise while I get eviscerated?" Vier stood without a word, utterly unbothered. Kolm hissed, "I get an emotional colonoscopy, and this guy gets a standing ovation."

Vier shrugged. "Don't be jealous."

Then… Grail stepped forward. Lysaria's hands stopped. She pulled one card. Death. Avenna saw him swallow. Lysaria looked at him, her expression shifting into something more reverent, more serious.

"I know who you are," she said. He didn't speak. "Death is not an ending," she continued. "It is change. Evolution. But to transform, you must stop clinging to

your pain like it's your armour."

She leaned closer, voice like wind through leaves.

"You must learn to love your fate. Forgive not just the world, but yourself. For all that you were… and all you failed to be." A pause. "Your past self will always walk beside you. But you choose whether it drags you back… or walks as your companion. That is the beauty of this life. That is the lesson of Death."

Grail's fists curled slightly. But he nodded, once. Then, finally, Avenna stepped forward. Lysaria touched the deck, paused… and drew a single card. The World.

"The cycle completes," she whispered. "What was, ends. What will be… awaits."

Avenna frowned. "That's it?"

Lysaria smiled. "Acceptance is your final test. Only when you embrace every part of you: light, shadow, divinity, rage, will you be ready."

"But what am I supposed to do?"

The witch tilted her head. "You will find your true power in Valebright."

Avenna leaned in, desperate. "There has to be more. I'll trade. Anything you want, just please… give us something we can use against Morphea."

Lysaria's laughter was rich and soft. "There is no trade for inner peace, child. No shortcut to wholeness. Only time. And will." As the group gathered to leave, Lysaria stopped them at the threshold. "One last thing," she said, coyly. "A favour."

She explained that deeper in the woods, something stirred, an ancient root-beast, corrupted by

Dusk, blocking the sacred spring. If they could clear it, she could restore the land.

The task was pretty simple, quick to complete. It only took them a few hours before they appeared back in the hut. In return… Lysaria clapped her hands and whispered spells older than the trees. A few bundles of clothes shimmered before them, and enchanted tools, glowing faintly. Avenna watched in awe as Lysaria approached her, holding something wrapped in velvet.

"For you." She unwrapped a golden bow, delicate and strong, the limbs etched with runes that pulsed like heartbeats. "You'll never need arrows," the witch said. "Your light will provide."

Avenna touched the weapon, her breath catching.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Go," Lysaria said, her voice echoing just slightly. "The world waits."

The journey from Elderwyn to Valebright was shorter than they expected… less of a march, more of a glide. The land, once gnarled and heavy with shadow, softened into golden woods, sunlight filtering through canopies like melted honey. The Eternal Slumber rode in quiet formation, the path winding gently ahead. Dy, Kolm, and Vier rode slightly ahead, chatting in low voices, their tones light but distracted.

Avenna's pace lagged. Her horse moved slowly and steadily, head dipping as if echoing her own weariness. Beside her, Grail adjusted his reins to match her pace.

"Is it the witch?" he asked, his voice low, only for her. "You seem quiet."

Avenna didn't answer at first. Then she nodded. "I thought she'd give me more. A direction, a step forward. Not riddles."

"She said you'd find your power in Valebright."

"I don't want power," she said, eyes fixed on the dirt path ahead. "I wanted… release. I wanted to know how to stop the pain, the darkness. Not just outside, but inside too."

Grail watched her in silence.

She glanced at him. "I was ready to give it up… my power, all of it. Maybe if I weren't… this, I'd feel lighter. Maybe the world would stop needing something from me."

He said nothing. Along the way, they encountered a druid whose grove had been corrupted by shadowflowers. Avenna's light restored it. They also met hunters begging for help to track a rogue beast. Vier felled it with a single arrow. And lastly, an enchanted tree that only opened its knot-portal to a riddle, Kolm's smugness was unbearable after solving it.

But none of it could prepare them for the explosion of colour that awaited them ahead. They reached the crest of a hill, and the city bloomed below like a wild dream.

Valebright shimmered under a midday sun, painted in hues of peach, periwinkle, and gold. Every rooftop was tiled in radiant colour, and banners of glowing silk danced on invisible strings between marble

towers. Laughter echoed through cobbled streets, musicians played floating instruments, and children ran through streams of enchanted bubbles that refused to pop.

The group left their horses at the city stables, greeted by a cheerful stablemaster who spoke in rhyme. Walking through the market was like stepping into a festival spun from dreams: stall after stall sold glowing pastries, singing fruits, bottled laughter, scrolls that unfolded into illusions.

A fire-juggler twirled flames that sang opera. A woman sold enchanted mirrors that reflected your truest self, and people passed them quickly, afraid to look.

"Good to be home," Kolm smiled.

Ahead, at the far end of the road, a grand estate loomed: carved from pale marble, its columns veined with lavender quartz. Water flowed in elegant rivulets from crystalline fountains, and herons, golden and white, splashed lazily in the reflecting pools. And then, Avenna stopped. On the rooftop of a market stall sat a black heron. Still, watching. It met her gaze. Then with a loud cry, it leapt into the air and soared, directly toward the estate.

"I suppose that's our clue," Grail murmured.

At the estate's gilded gates, guards in lavender-trimmed armour raised their halberds. Avenna stepped forward, straightening her shoulders.

"I am the Priestess of Elaris," she announced. "I travel under the King's blessing to bring an end to Morphea's blight."

Before the guards could reply, a voice called from the garden.

"Well, now! That's music to my ears." A portly man waddled forward from beneath a rose arch. His robe was embroidered with hummingbirds, and his greying hair was slicked back so tightly it looked lacquered.

"I am Lord Celanthar Verrowind," he said, bowing with a flourish. "You honour me with your presence, my lady Priestess."

He smiled. Wide, polite. Too wide, too polite. The kind of smile that never quite reached the eyes.

"Do please come in. My estate is yours for the length of your visit!"

The inside was decadence made real: chandeliers of starlight glass, velvet drapes, golden cherubs carved into doorframes. Servants hurried like whispers down the halls, offering trays of sugared fruits, chilled wine, and silk slippers for tired feet.

Kolm muttered, "Bit much."

Verrowind ignored him entirely. His gaze never left Avenna.

"You are even more divine than described," he said. "Your powers… unusual, no doubt. Rare. And entirely captivating."

Avenna smiled politely. "You're too kind." She didn't move closer.

Kolm leaned toward Dy. "If he ogles any harder, his eyes'll roll out."

Verrowind clapped once. "Tonight, I'm hosting a ball. How fortunate, no? You must attend! And as a

thank-you for gracing my home, I shall introduce you to a man of great interest. A scientist. Formerly of Morvane. Rather knowledgeable about… Morphea."

The Eternal Slumber exchanged glances.

"A deal then?" Avenna asked.

"A pleasure," Verrowind purred. "Oh, and dear Priestess? Feel free to choose any gown from my daughter's closet. She's… relocated, shall we say."

There was something odd in his tone. Like a note out of tune. They bowed as custom dictated.

Rooms were prepared, perfumed linens, and crystal basins. Everything was designed to impress. And yet… As dusk fell and Avenna stood on the balcony of her guest room, Grail lingered at the far edge, leaning silently against the railing. A black heron perched on a branch just beyond the marble rail. It cried once. A sound not of joy, but of grief. Avenna turned slowly to Grail. He hadn't moved.

That cry was a warning.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It had been nearly a month since Elowen last entered Elysium. The tour had taken over her friend's schedule. And while the players worked hard on stage, Elowen remained quiet. She was waiting for her own upcoming gig next week, with The Eternal Slumber coming to London.

Outside her world, London was dressing itself in December's skin. Window displays glistened with tinsel and faux snow. Oxford Street had transformed into a corridor of warmth and nostalgia, the air crisp with cinnamon and burnt caramel from roasted chestnut vendors on corners. She was out doing some early Christmas shopping, nothing elaborate, just a few little things for Hugo, and perhaps something small for Thea. It felt good to walk. Good to be anonymous, surrounded by the slow march of strangers carrying bags and laughter. A paper cup of hot chocolate steamed in her gloved hand. The city felt like it was breathing again.

Then she stopped. In front of a small, nondescript sports shop. A football kit was displayed in the window: red and white, the number ten printed in bold. Her feet rooted to the pavement. The noise of the street faded. The hum of the city, the flicker of lights, the shoppers brushing past her, all slipped into the background as

something inside her chest twisted.

She remembered Connor. He had been divorced. Mature, respectful and calm. He shared custody of his four-year-old son, Sammy, and from the very beginning, Elowen had admired that about him. There was no drama, no anger toward his ex-wife. They navigated co-parenting with a practised civility that Elowen found both admirable and unfamiliar. He was educated. A total football fan. The kind of man who had seen the worst of love and still tried again, as per his words. They had matched through some half-forgotten app. In the beginning, she hadn't cared much. She wasn't looking for anything serious. Not so soon after Miguel. Not when her life was still bleeding at the edges.

But Connor had been easy to talk to. Charming without force. Their conversations flowed effortlessly… from music to books, dreams and doubts alike. For a while, it was just that.

He was nothing like Miguel. That alone felt like safety. Still, she treaded lightly. He had baggage too; he didn't hide it. After his divorce, he'd fallen into a toxic relationship that nearly ended his life. A moment he described with brutal honesty and no dramatics. She never judged. She knew darkness too intimately to flinch at someone else's shadows.

At first, she thought she could keep her heart out of it. But then, a spark ignited deep in her chest. That's when she pulled back. She'd felt herself slipping into that familiar current, the one that whispered hope in her ear too soon. Because she couldn't risk mistaking loneliness

for love again. Because her heart was still too broken to be entrusted to anyone, even someone kind.

One day, over coffee and chaos, Thea asked the question:

"What are you so afraid of?"

Elowen didn't answer right away.

"I still live with my ex," she eventually muttered. "And I don't know if I'm doing the right thing. Maybe I'm not ready."

"You live with him because you can't afford not to," Thea said bluntly. "That's not the same thing. Rent is ridiculous right now. And Hugo gets to see his dad. You're making the best of what you've got. Doesn't mean you have to lock yourself in a tower like some tragic heroine."

Elowen smiled faintly.

"When's the last time you had real, passionate sex?" Thea pressed.

Elowen rolled her eyes. "Please don't remind me."

"I don't get it. You write all this steam in your books, but when do you actually test your own plotlines? Where do you get inspiration from?"

"My imagination," she shrugged. "It never stops. Even if my life does."

"Then maybe it's time your life caught up to your pages."

One evening, it happened. Connor had always been confident. When he finally kissed her, when his hands found her waist and pressed her to the wall… it was reclamation. Of her body, her desire. Her identity.

For a brief, exquisite moment, she felt like the heroine she wrote about. But the illusion didn't last. Because reality had rules. And she was still living with her ex-husband.

Connor became less understanding. He began to question, pressure. Insist. Why was she still living with her ex? And so she gave in. Again. She told Miguel to move out sooner. And for the first time in years, he looked afraid.

"Elowen," he said one night, stepping into Hugo's room while she folded laundry on the bed.

She looked up, already tense. He knelt down and took her hands. She froze.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "Stay."

Eight years. Eight years of being ignored, dismissed, and neglected. And now, suddenly, he begged. He apologised. Said he should've fought. That he didn't see her until he felt her slipping away.

"Do you love me?" he asked.

She searched herself. Dug deep. Found remnants. Love for the father of her child. But not for the man kneeling in front of her.

"No," she said. Quiet and steady.

Miguel left the room without a word. A week later, he tried one last time. She found him in her bed, pressing against her.

"The last time," he murmured. She pushed him back.

"Let me go," she whispered.

"Come on," he hissed. "It's the least you could

do."

The least she could do. Something in her snapped. She shoved him off with such force that it startled even her.

"Go to hell," she growled.

Miguel moved out the next morning. And then came the fall. Rent, daycare, food. She went hungry so Hugo wouldn't. She stayed silent. Too proud to ask for help. Too ashamed to admit how badly she was drowning.

Now, standing in front of a sports store with a hot chocolate going cold in her hand, she remembered everything. She had survived. She had learned. And as the wind caught the back of her coat, she turned her gaze to the sky above. Clouds parted. The first stars, dimmed by the city's light, still glowed faintly above. The cold air kissed her cheeks, but she didn't move. She remembered that sudden change within her, years ago.

Spiritual awakening arrives in silence. She didn't know when exactly her consciousness had begun to shift, when the door opened, when the lock gave way. It was slow. Her fascination with religion, myth, and the unseen had always lingered, even in childhood. But back then, it was just curiosity… something academic, detached. She had liked the mystery, the beauty of belief. But in the wreckage of adulthood, in the stillness that followed heartbreak and survival, something changed. Her interest deepened. It stopped being a topic and became a practice.

She researched everything: crystals for their

frequency, their energetic fields backed by ancient knowledge and even threads of physics. She turned to herbs, brewing teas instead of reaching for meds. She lit candles with purpose. Learned to meditate, to breathe, to forgive herself. She began to dress differently, her style softening into something less jarring and less performative. Her world became quiet and intuitive. She started a healthier lifestyle, better diet and even signed up for a gym. For the first time, she was becoming. And perhaps… it had a lot to do with Connor.

He was everything Miguel wasn't: gentle, emotionally present, endlessly accommodating. He accepted her spiritual quirks without question. He'd smile when she rearranged her altar, or laugh when she held a stone up to the light and mumbled about its energy. He'd drive her to the woods or the sea on a whim, just to sit in silence with her. He knew she felt safest in nature. And because of that… she softened. The mask slipped. She didn't have to pretend with him. She didn't have to perform. And so the doors to something deeper began to creak open. Connor cooked dinner more often than not. He made sure the fridge was stocked. He surprised her with small comforts: lavender salts, new pens, fresh teas.

He didn't read her books. Fantasy wasn't his world. But he respected it. He respected her. Her need to disappear for hours into chapters and characters and worlds built from stardust and hurt. With Connor, she felt… safe. Not consumed or belittled. And for a while, life became… manageable. Her finances improved.

Connor had his own place, and splitting costs meant freedom. She could pay bills and breathe.

Her evenings alone, when Hugo stayed with his father, were a strange, silver blessing. Quiet baths, open books. Sleep without fear.

They lived simply. Balanced and peaceful. But peace doesn't erase patterns. And deep down, Elowen knew her own. Her people-pleasing, her quiet fear of conflict and her mistrust of men. The scars from family, childhood, everything that had come before. She had spent years adapting, becoming whatever others needed her to be. She did everything she could to be perfect for Connor. Kind, considerate, low-maintenance. She feared missteps. She feared being a burden. She was trying not to repeat the past.

Even if, sometimes, that meant slipping back into old masks, just to keep things steady. But still… it was progress. Her life had order. And with that space, she poured herself back into her writing.

Elowen couldn't find an agent because fantasy was out of trend, they said. Too niche. But she didn't quit. She self-published, marketed alone. Took rejection and turned it into fuel. And though the results were modest, she kept going. Because dreams, even slow ones, were worth chasing. And during that time, as she healed her life brick by brick, she also began to understand something deeper about herself.

Elowen stepped inside the house and shut the door softly behind her. The heating hummed gently in

the background, the air inside faintly scented with sandalwood. Shopping bags thudded to the floor, her coat slid off her shoulders, and for a long moment, she simply stood there, still. The quiet wrapped around her like a blanket. She poured herself a cup of tea, letting the steam curl up toward her lips like a ghost. Her fingers were cold, even around the mug. The lights on the small artificial tree in the corner blinked lazily, an attempt at cheer.

In psychology, any romantic relationship is said to pass through four main stages. She'd read that line in a journal once, years ago, and hadn't stopped thinking about it since. It came back to her now, like a quiet revelation whispering through the walls.

The first stage: euphoria. The blinding, obsessive thrill. The rose-coloured glasses. The way the world shifted and glittered when they smiled. Every moment apart felt like a punishment. Sex was electric. Fantasies were endless. Love was the driver, and reason took the back seat. She remembered that stage with Connor, how her body felt alive again, how her laughter came easier. The way he'd made tea and brought her candles. The way he'd kissed her was like she was fragile and fire all at once. All that love-bombing was blinding.

The second stage: early attachment. The softening and settling. The partner became real, and with that reality came comfort. Routine, familiarity. The wild, euphoric chaos gave way to quiet dinners and shared shows. Flaws emerged, but were forgiven. Bonds deepened. This was where they lived for a bit. Because

something had shifted. And soon, they were teetering on the precipice of the third and most difficult phase: the crisis stage.

Alienation and distance. Often, even growth. The kind of slow, aching change that makes you realise you've moved forward while your partner stands still. Or worse, while you stay frozen and they grow without you. And that… that was what she feared most. That she hadn't changed enough. That she hadn't healed. That the problem was still her.

"You need to come out more," Thea had said in the past.

"I know, I know," Elowen had replied, phone tucked under her chin as she made the bed. "You know I hate socialising and being surrounded by people."

She had sighed, eyeing the laundry basket in the corner of the room like it had personally offended her.

"Come over this weekend," Thea had said gently.

"I will," Elowen had promised, and then ended the call with a quiet smile.

But the moment the phone went silent, the weight returned. She carried the laundry to the kitchen, dumped it in without ceremony, and turned the dial. Then she looked up. The kitchen was a mess. The dishwasher still needed to be unloaded. Connor was sitting on the couch, headphones on, controller in hand, laughing with friends through his mic.

She wiped the counters. Cleared the table. Unloaded the dishwasher. All without a word. Then she would sit back down at her desk. The cursor blinking at

her, expectant and indifferent. She would open the manuscript and try again.

This wasn't resentment. She told herself that. Connor was good. He was kind. He'd supported her through every breakdown, every fear, every sleepless night. He had never yelled, never belittled her, never dismissed her needs. But he also never noticed when she was drowning quietly. And she was terrified of saying so. She remembered how often she had nagged Miguel, how she had spiralled into confrontation, and she swore to herself she wouldn't be that person again. Not now. Not with Connor. She wanted to be the best version of herself this time.

No complaints, no expectations, no confrontation. Gratitude, stability and peace. She clung to those words like lifelines. Repeated them like mantras. Because part of her knew, if she voiced her dissatisfaction, if things really fell apart… she had nowhere to go. She would ruin another relationship. She had fought too hard for this sliver of calm. She couldn't afford to start again.

◇

The water was hot, laced with rosemary and salt. Elowen sank deeper, the porcelain tub curling around her body like a cradle. Steam rose and clung to the mirror across the room, blurring the reflection of a woman she barely recognised anymore. She closed her eyes, allowing the flickering light from the single candle

to dance against her eyelids. There was silence in the flat now, except for the faint hum of pipes and the muted dripping from the tap.

She took a slow breath, then another, and let herself remember more about her struggles with Connor.

Weaponised incompetence. She had read that term in an article, years ago, and felt something jolt inside her. When someone pretends they're bad at something, or clueless about how to do it, so someone else will take over. The incompetence isn't real. It's calculated and convenient.

She had seen it before. She had lived it before. And with Connor… she was seeing it again. But it was subtle with Connor. When he left the kitchen a mess after cooking dinner, when he forgot to restock groceries but remembered his pub meetings with mates, when he didn't clean up after himself and pretended he was about to do it as soon as Elowen took over, when he would tell her he'd cook but would dump the decision on her… it wasn't malicious. It just… happened. Because she was the one who noticed. She was the one who fixed it.

And she told herself it wasn't worth bringing up. That she was too demanding. That maybe she was too particular, too sensitive, too something. She didn't want to nitpick. Didn't want to become the version of herself she hated. So she swallowed it. She folded the clothes. Did the shopping lists. Organised the bills. Called the plumber. Cleaned the kitchen. Wrote the book. Entertained her son. Cooked the meals. Edited the chapters. Mowed the lawn. Remembered birthdays.

Organised Christmas gifts for the whole family. And still told herself to be grateful. Because Connor was kind. Because he wasn't Miguel. Because that was supposed to be enough.

The third stage of their relationship, the crisis stage, had begun quietly. It began the day Connor announced he was selling his apartment. There had been no discussion. Only a declaration.

"The sale will help with the deposit for the house we can buy," he had said. "And clear some of my debts."

That was the first time she realised how little her opinion factored into his plans. Yes, the market was unstable. Yes, the sale could help. But her credit history was still poor, and she needed more time to recover financially. She said this. She tried to explain that they wouldn't get a good deal on a mortgage because of her credit score and his defaults. But the apartment was his. The choice, ultimately, wasn't hers. That control was quiet, hidden beneath smiles and reason. But it was still control. Then came the bigger cracks.

"We're done with kids," he said once, laughing with friends over drinks. "Two's enough. We're not adding more chaos."

She had opened her mouth to speak, but the moment had passed. He said *we*. When they first met, they agreed on the possibility of another child. Maybe not now. Maybe not soon. But someday.

Then the apartment was sold. And just like that, everything changed. Suddenly, there was no house waiting because the property market was in chaos, and

they couldn't get a mortgage.

She shifted in the bath, sinking deeper, until the water whispered at her chin. She was tired of being grateful. Tired of performing peace. She wanted a place that didn't ask her to shrink. She wanted to stop surviving on silence. But most of all… She wanted her son to see her choose herself. She hadn't realised how long she'd been lying in the bath. The water was cooling now. Her skin was wrinkled, and her neck stiff where her head rested against the porcelain edge.

The screen of her phone lit up on the bath-side shelf. She blinked at the message.

[**BLDome**]: *Hey… how've you been? Sorry, we haven't been online much. Tour's been mad. Two more gigs and things should settle again.*

Her lips curved faintly as her shoulders sank deeper into the water, steam from the opened tap curling off the bath's surface.

[**EllaStar5**]: *It's okay, really. I get it. Life happens.*

There was a pause. Then another message appeared.

[**BLDome**]: *How's everything with the book? Or game writing? Any good news?*

Her fingers hovered above the screen. A beat passed before she typed:

[**EllaStar5**]: *Honestly? Not great. It's been a bit… hard to focus.*

Another pause.

[**BLDome**]: *You okay?*

She stared at the message. And then, like he could sense the hesitation…

[**BLDome**]: *No pressure. Just… sometimes talking makes it easier. I won't judge.*

Something inside her cracked. She drew her knees to her chest, water lapping at her collarbones. Her thumb hovered, then moved. Slowly, deliberately. Her reply wasn't brief. She typed, and typed, and typed. She told him about her thoughts, all of it.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *He had this way of making decisions that always seemed reasonable at first. Until you realised they only ever worked in his favour. We ended up living somewhere that made my life ten times harder, but because it suited him, that was supposed to be enough.*

She paused, breath catching between memory and confession. Dome didn't reply.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *After we moved in together, he suddenly became… helpless. Simple things he used to manage on his own somehow kept falling apart until I was the one fixing everything. Before I knew it, I wasn't his partner anymore. I was the person keeping his life running.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Did you tell him?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I tried to talk to him about it. But every time I did, he somehow turned it around. If I said I was overwhelmed, suddenly I was the one hurting him. If I said I was tired, it meant I didn't appreciate everything he did. And he often reminded me that the main finances were his. That's when I understood the balance between us wasn't real. If he walked away, he still had everything. I was the one left with nothing.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *At some point, I stopped living and just… switched into survival mode. I was suddenly everything at once… the one holding the house together, the one carrying Hugo, the one fixing problems before they even appeared. Meanwhile, he talked about big ideas and plans, but none of them ever turned into action. And if I tried to carve out even a little space for myself, especially for my writing, somehow I was the one made to feel selfish. Weekends were the only time I had to breathe… and somehow they always became about him. Every lost weekend felt like watching the life I was trying to build slip a little further away.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *That's a slow erasure.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Exactly. I felt like a failure in everything. I begged him for help, but he only patted my shoulder and said, "Your work doesn't go unnoticed." Like I was his employee. And when I opened up, he made it about him… his loneliness, his self-esteem. Always me comforting him. And then came the paranoia… checking my phone, asking who I was texting.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *That's control.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *And then… well, maybe that's a bit too much information… But after a while, the attraction just disappeared. He never forced anything outright, but there were always those sighs, the long silences, the wounded looks that made it clear what was expected. Eventually, it became easier to say yes than to carry the weight of saying no.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Ella… that wasn't consent.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I stayed longer than I should have because leaving felt impossible and some part of me kept hoping things would change… But deep down I already knew*

the truth… whatever we had was gone, and we were just dragging the weight of it behind us. When we finally broke, the fight turned into a storm of old wounds, and by the end of it, he blamed everything on me… even the way my mind works.

[**BLDome**]**:** *That's disgusting.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *That was the day something snapped in me. I realised I wasn't even sad anymore… I was done. I lived on autopilot: worked, cooked, cleaned, collapsed. Thank the stars for Hugo. He adapted, quietly caring for himself, even asking me one morning if he made me happy. That nearly destroyed me.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *You're raising a boy who recognises emotions. That's powerful.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Maybe. But I was drowning. My book abandoned, my job slipping, my body recoiling every time Connor touched me. So I shut down. Stopped… caring.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *You didn't stop caring. You just had nothing left to give.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Yeah. And I know I wasn't perfect. I built walls, got cold, snapped too quickly. When he did try, I was too resentful to accept it.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *That's strength, admitting it.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *It's the only way forward. I don't want to carry these wounds into the next chapter. I don't want to just escape. I want to be better.*

She wiped her face, not even realising when the tears had started. The messages stopped. Her fingers froze. Dome didn't push. The silence was understood… like a held breath, like a hand waiting, palm up, in the

dark. Elowen closed her eyes, sank deeper into the cold water, and drifted elsewhere.

"I warned him," Thea had sighed once. Only Thea ever saw the real her: the unmasked, ungodly, unpolished version. "I told him right from the start, if he ever crossed that invisible line holding you together, you'd shut down. Retreat. Vanish behind that damn wall you always build."

Elowen had smiled weakly. "He says I'm impatient."

"You?" Thea's brow arched sharp as glass. "You've endured more bullshit than most people could survive. You lived with Miguel. You tolerated Connor's incompetence for years."

"I tried to explain," Elowen whispered, the words pressing heavy in her chest. She leaned back in her chair, her eyes lingering on the steam rising from her cup as though the thin spiral might somehow carry the words away before she had to say them. "After everything," she began slowly, "after the survival mode, the constant balancing act of being the partner, the parent, the therapist, the maid… after the fight that tore everything open the first time… I still went back."

She gave a small, humourless breath. "Even after he accused me of emotionally cheating because he found that admiration letter I wrote to Grail. Even after he destroyed half the things I had packed for that gig trip. I still convinced myself it could be fixed."

Thea sighed. "I can't believe you gave him a

chance."

Elowen nodded faintly. "My therapist told me very clearly that what I described fit the pattern of domestic abuse. Emotional manipulation, gaslighting, control, and even property destruction. But when you've lived in survival mode long enough, 'bad' starts looking a lot like normal." She rubbed her hands together slowly. "And for a few months things were calm. Almost peaceful. Long enough to make me believe maybe the worst of it had passed."

Thea shook her head in disbelief. "El."

"I know, it was stupid." Elowen's lips curved into a tired half-smile. "He started mentioning this woman from work in small, casual ways. Little stories... How she got too drunk at a party. Something funny she said in the office. Just her name slipping into conversations more and more." She looked down for a moment. "My intuition started screaming long before anything concrete happened."

Thea leaned forward. "And?"

"One evening his phone lit up next to me," Elowen said quietly. "Her name appeared in the notification. I hated myself for it, but I opened the message while he was out of the room." She paused briefly. "Turns out they'd been texting for almost a year. Banter, jokes that crossed the line, endless selfies, voice notes. They'd even been meeting up outside work… coffee shops, shopping trips, evenings out."

Thea stared at her. "You're serious?"

Elowen nodded. "It made me laugh because he

didn't see the irony in this… it wasn't emotional cheating for him. Just friendship. Just talking." She gave a short breath through her nose. "And the lies kept coming. Saying he was somewhere with friends when he was actually at a pub where she was. Eventually, I stopped asking. Stopped even trying to untangle what was true and what wasn't."

Thea's expression softened into something heavier. "God, El…"

"At the same time," Elowen continued, her voice low but steady, "my own world was collapsing. I was terrified of losing my job due to possible redundancy. Money was tight enough that I was counting coins for groceries. Meanwhile, Connor was going through another storm with his ex-wife over their son, and I ended up pouring every ounce of energy into helping him navigate that." She let out a tired breath. "While he was drinking at the pub and texting another woman."

"And you never talked to him about it?" Thea asked carefully.

Elowen shook her head. "What would have been the point? I already knew the script. Denial, deflection, turning it back on me." She looked up at her friend. "I didn't have the strength for another war. I was barely standing as it was."

Thea reached across the table, resting her hand gently over Elowen's.

"Last week," Elowen continued quietly, "I broke."

She stared somewhere past Thea now, her voice softening. "I cried for hours. Not just about him. About

everything. The exhaustion, the fear, the years of carrying things I never had time to grieve." She swallowed once. "And somewhere in the middle of that, I realised I was finally grieving my grandfather."

A faint smile flickered across her face before fading again.

"He was the only place that ever felt truly safe. When he died… I didn't just lose him." Her voice dropped to almost a whisper. "I lost the only place that ever felt like home. And I think that's why I've spent all these years feeling like I'm wandering through someone else's life." Elowen had swallowed hard. "Sometimes I think I'm just… difficult. Ungrateful."

"Ungrateful?" Thea scoffed. "Honey, you sacrificed your time, your space, your career, and even pushed your passions like writing away for him!"

Elowen had laughed weakly at that, a sound with no joy. "Nobody reads my books anyway."

"People love your blog, your little Corner of Thoughts," Thea said gently. "I'm sure a time will come, and they will be pulled towards your beautiful, magical worlds."

Elowen had gone quiet.

"Connor suffocated you with his constant need for validation," Thea snapped. "There's nothing wrong with passion and affection. But he ignored boundaries. You speak different languages, El. And you're the only one translating."

Elowen swallowed.

"You need someone like you," Thea had said.

"Creative, independent. Someone who disappears into their own world while you disappear into yours, then comes back to you with passion without pressure. Someone who misses you when you're gone, not resents you for needing space. Someone who kisses your hand before grabbing your ass."

"One can dream," Elowen had muttered bitterly.

Elowen's head dipped lower in the bath now, lips just above water, trembling.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I went quiet again, didn't I? Sorry. My mind just… wandered. It got heavy and personal.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *I don't mind.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Anyway, after all that, I am surprised my passion for writing didn't disappear. And after I discovered The Eternal Slumber, especially Grail… I felt motivated. I want what he has. I want to move people the way he moves me. But some days, I just stare at the mirror and hate what I see… weak, unworthy.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Stop. You're exhausted, not unworthy. You've been carrying a burning star inside you without a place to put it. That's not easy. But it's building to something, I promise.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Then why do I feel like I'm drowning? Why does the mirror feel like a god I've disappointed? I stand there asking myself… what if the love I crave isn't missing? What if I'm too greedy to receive it? What if I ruin every good thing because I always wish for more? What if protecting myself just drives people away?*

[**BLDome**]: *Ella… I wish I could take those thoughts out of your incredibly smart head. You're wounded, yes. But you feel deeply, and the world tricked you into believing that was a flaw. It's not. It's your gift. It's why you write the way you do. Why you love the way you do… even when you're exhausted, even when you're burning alive.*

[**BLDome**]: *You haven't ruined anything. You've just been surviving a storm no one else saw. And still… you're here. Still dancing with the stars. Still letting people in.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *You're gonna make me cry again.*

[**BLDome**]: *Then cry. You don't always have to carry the weight alone, Star.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Thank you.*

[**BLDome**]: *Hey, I should crash soon. We've got soundcheck at 6am and two more gigs before we can breathe. But listen… I'll check in. Just because I disappear for a bit doesn't mean I'm ignoring you, okay?*

[**EllaStar5**]: *I know. It's okay. Thanks for tonight. For listening. Sorry for… all of it.*

[**BLDome**]: *Always. And stop apologising for your feelings. Now get out of that bath, you wrinkly moon nymph. Drink water. Wrap up. Sleep. You've got an ocean to conquer tomorrow.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Goodnight, Dome. Break a leg.*

[**BLDome**]: *Only if you promise not to break your heart in the meantime.*

CHAPTER TWENTY

It had only been a couple of days, but somehow, everything felt lighter. As if the weight on Elowen's chest had finally learned how to loosen. Like her lungs remembered how to stretch wide enough for breath again. And the reason? Because someone finally understood. Dome hadn't tried to fix her. He hadn't thrown her a rope or a list of to-dos. He just listened. Sat with her pain like it was sacred. And that was enough to pull her out of bed that morning with a spark she hadn't felt in weeks. After dropping Hugo off at school, her heart buzzed with something unusual: excitement.

Tonight was the night. The band that had carried her through the storm, the music that stitched her together in the bath, in the dark, in silence… The Eternal Slumber was playing live. And she was going.

Miguel was taking Hugo overnight. And for the first time in what felt like forever, Elowen would step out into the night without a mask of survival, only the one she chose to wear. She got ready slowly. Ritualistically. As if preparing for a ceremony. Her white attire clung to her like armour. She chose Avenna as her inspiration. Thin golden chains wrapped delicately across her shoulders and hips like celestial binding. She tied the gold blind mask behind her ears, letting the hood fall

over her hair.

In the mirror… she didn't see Elowen. She saw Avenna. And for the first time, that felt exactly right.

The line outside the venue was quiet when she arrived, only a few early birds scattered along the path, sitting on bags and sipping takeaway coffees. London's cold nipped at her through the silk layers, but the adrenaline burning in her belly warmed her from within. She took her spot near the front, hugging her arms across her chest. Time would pass slowly, she knew that. So she reached into her handbag for her small notebook… a black, weathered thing full of doodles, reflections, scraps of poetry, and half-formed ideas. But instead of the notebook, something else slid out first. A green envelope. Her heart skipped. She picked it up gently, brushing dust from its edge. She had almost forgotten. The letter. Her letter to Grail. She'd written it late one night, months ago, when her soul was too heavy and her hope too small. A letter of pure gratitude. To the man behind the music. To the soul who unknowingly reminded her that she was still alive.

Elowen held the letter in her palm, letting its weight ground her. Funny how paper, so light, could anchor a soul. But this letter meant more than anyone would ever know.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Kintsugi, which means 'gold patch' in Japanese, is the art of restoring shattered ceramics using a lacquer mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. But more than an art form, it is a philosophy. A way of seeing. A belief that our cracks and breaks are not flaws to hide, but marks of endurance. That we become more beautiful because of them.

All her life, Elowen felt like her life was a tower in a Tarot spread. As soon as she built it, it would crack and fall. But now, Elowen no longer wished to rebuild her tower. Not after everything. Instead, she chose to live in its ruins. She let the broken stone turn to moss and meadow. The ceiling that once caged her now gave way to the open sky. The walls that once confined her turned into trees and rivers. She had found freedom in surrender. And for the first time, she truly saw the beauty in her scars.

Night had fallen over London, the sky cloaked in navy and soft, bruised lilac, as Elowen stood in front of the venue. The hum of anticipation pulsed around her… low, steady, like a heartbeat under the earth. Neon signs flickered, gold letters spelling The Eternal Slumber above the doors. The crowd had swelled, hundreds now, and

yet Elowen had arrived early enough to secure her place against the front barricade.

The world buzzed, but her mind was quiet. She rested her fingers lightly on the cold metal rail and took a deep breath. When the lights fell, silence dropped like velvet. A beat. Then another. Then bass… low, primal, pulling breath from lungs. A sound that didn't just vibrate through the floor, but through memory, through soul. Lasers cracked through the darkness, gold and amethyst beams slicing the air like celestial swords. Fog coiled like incense from the stage. And in the haze, he appeared.

Grail.

And when he sang, Elowen forgot how to breathe. That voice had held her during panic attacks. Had lulled her through heartbreak. That voice had spoken to something ancient inside her, something no one else could reach.

Live, it was everything she imagined and more. His lips moved slowly, perfectly in sync with the words that had once echoed in her darkened room, late at night when the rest of the world had forgotten her. He was the embodiment of creative sacrifice. A monument to discipline, vision, and quiet suffering. To sweat-soaked notebooks, sleepless nightsand believing when no one else did.

Elowen wanted to walk beside him, equal in purpose, in artistry, in impact. She wanted to know what books sharpened his mind. She wanted to know his writing routine, his inspiration sources. She wished to

listen to him talk while they shared their creative experiences, sipping Earl Grey in some small, shabby cafe. She wanted to watch his hands while he played the piano, so she could learn the mastery of gestures for her brush strokes.

She closed her eyes, and she listened. As others jumped and screamed, bodies surging in worship, Elowen remained still. She stood amidst thousands, calm and smiling, hands on the railing as if it were an altar.

The art of manifestation had always intrigued her. She'd spent years whispering wishes into the void, words like mantras, promises she barely believed. And nothing ever came. Because underneath the affirmations… was doubt. Her energy had been steeped in fear. Fear of failure, of rejection, of lack. And the Universe, like a mirror, had only ever reflected what she truly felt.

But now… now it was different. She no longer begged for success. She believed she deserved it. She stopped worrying about what hadn't come yet and let go of bitterness. She began to speak with conviction. And slowly, quietly, the world began to shift. The more she accepted her imperfections, the more light came in. She stopped blaming the world for her misfortunes, and she stopped masking. She looked up from her cage and saw open sky. She forgave. Her mother for not being everything she needed, but trying in her own way. Marianne, for past traumas, for broken trust. Miguel, for the damage, the pride, the things that could never be fixed. Connor, for giving her hope… and then breaking it. For being the experience she needed, even if he didn't

mean to be.

She forgave herself. For all the roles she played, for lying, for doubting, for staying, for leaving. For being too much. For not being enough. For everything in between.

As the music soared into another chorus, Elowen saw her younger self. That little girl with wide eyes and trembling hands, clinging to books like lifeboats. Dreaming of stories, of magic, of being heard. She reached for her, took her hand. And showed her that even though the path had been thorned and wild, even though her tower had crumbled… she was still standing. The story was not over. The first book of her life had ended, yes. But there would be sequels. She thought of everything she'd once believed held her back. How she'd been told the world belonged to men, how she'd been told she was too odd, too sensitive, too much. How she'd hidden behind personas, masks, sweet apologies. But now… she knew better.

The world belonged to anyone willing to rise and rise again. To anyone who could fall apart and fill their cracks with gold. She stood in the golden light of the stage, her face aglow with tears and joy. And for the first time in a very long time, she wasn't chasing anything. Not love or success or healing. And maybe she hadn't met her destined soulmate. Maybe she would walk alone. But she would walk barefoot, joyful, and free. She would dance in the rain, she would write until her fingers bled. She would carve a home from starlight and ruin and

build something beautiful out of nothing. Because she had become the gold in her own cracks. Because she found home, within herself at least.

As Grail's voice poured over the crowd, raw and aching, Elowen felt it unravel something deep inside her. Each note carried her backwards, to the first time she'd known freedom with the sea. She could see it again: the beach burning gold beneath the sunset, the horizon painted in rose and fire. She remembered stepping into the water, the cold licking at her ankles as if daring her closer. And she had gone, answering the call, letting the waves lift her, carry her, hold her as no one else ever had. Floating beneath that sky, she had tasted silence… the kind that stilled her mind, her heart, her very soul. Now, in the swell of his song, that same silence bloomed again, reminding her that freedom was not a dream. She had lived it once. She could live it again.

As the crowd surged and shimmered like a living sea, Elowen reached into the folds of her costume. Her fingers brushed against smooth paper… a weightless thing, yet it carried every ounce of her soul. The letter, green envelope, gold-inked seal pressed gently into its corner. *For Grail*. A thank you, for someone who made her believe in herself.

She lifted it slowly, hands trembling. She wasn't hoping to be noticed. Grail, on stage, was radiant, unearthly… pouring his soul into every note, every breath, every flick of his wrist. He was too absorbed in the divine ritual of performance to notice a single outstretched hand. But she held the letter high anyway.

For the universe to see that she was ready to let go. And then… it happened. He saw her, in the middle of a lyric that had once cradled her through sleepless nights, Grail's gaze swept over the crowd... and stopped. His hand, still holding the mic, extended toward her, deliberate.

A thousand screams swelled behind her. Flashing lights split the dark. But Elowen stood frozen in time, lips parted in disbelief. And then, from the left side of the stage, another figure stepped forward. Kolm. Not the sarcastic, blade-twirling vampire from the game, but the man behind the legend: bass slung low across his frame, moving with quiet precision. Dressed in deep red velvet, the coat glinting like wine under candlelight, he was both regal and otherworldly. He stepped down toward the edge of the stage, never missing a beat. Without a word, his hand reached for the envelope. Elowen hesitated, only for a second. And then she placed it gently into his palm. Kolm nodded once, solemnly, with a grace that felt almost sacred. He turned, elegant and measured, and crossed the stage like a shadow gliding across velvet. Grail, now facing away from the audience for a brief instrumental pause, allowed Kolm to slide the envelope into the inside pocket of his cloak.

Elowen let out a slow, shaking breath. That was it. The ache in her chest, the years of fighting for a voice, for love, for herself… it quieted. A part of her that had clung so desperately to validation, to proof that her art, her story, her soul mattered… was finally able to exhale. She lowered her arms and bowed her head in gratitude. And

as she rose again, she caught it… barely there. A flicker beneath the stage lights. A subtle dip of Grail's head. A nod, small and silent. And that was all she had ever needed.

◇

Elowen was still trembling when she returned home. The adrenaline had dulled to a humming thrum in her bones, but it was far from gone. With tea in hand and a throw blanket wrapped around her like armour, she sank into the sofa. Soft classical piano played in the background from her speakers, like music to a life finally beginning to bloom.

Her phone buzzed against her thigh.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Hey, how are you?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Just got in. Still shaking from the gig lol*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Did you start a mosh pit?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *No mosh. But I think I ascended.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *No wonder your aura's vibing through the screen.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I don't think I've ever felt this free. Like really free. It felt… divine.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Good. You deserved that. Back to Elysium tomorrow, then?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Yes, please. I've missed it. Missed you guys. I need to be Avenna again.*

A pause. Then his name flickered back onto her screen.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Can I ask something?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Always.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *If you didn't write, didn't read. No stories and no creating. Just a perfect evening. How would you spend it?*

She stared at the message for a long second, then laughed softly. Her thumbs tapped carefully.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Okay um. I'd be in the softest pyjamas imaginable. Wrapped in my fleece throw like a human burrito. Tea, obviously. Always tea. And maybe some anime. But not the light kind... I want trauma, maybe some 700-episode masterpiece… make me cry and question everything. If I'm feeling chaotic, I disappear into Skyrim. Just me, lo-fi, and an avoidance of the main quest.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *...Damn. That sounds… idyllic.*

She smiled, heart, folding a little inward.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *You'd be welcome, you know. Tea, anime, spiral rants about time and space. Game nights and chaos. All of it.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Should you truly mean that, I might… really like that. A lot.*

She stared at his words, letting them settle into her like warm honey.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I meant it. Every word.*

A beat.

[**BLDome**]**:** *I'll hold you to that. One day. But for now, rest. Tomorrow we dive back into Elysium. And I want Avenna sharp, cocky and chaotic.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *She'll be ready. And so will I.*

◇

The next morning arrived wrapped in a silvery chill. Frost painted delicate vines across windowpanes, and the low sun blinked through pale clouds like an eye still waking. The concert had been transcendent, liberating even… but somewhere deep in her chest, a maternal thread ached for the familiar weight of Hugo's small hand in hers. She glanced at her phone, confirming the time of her lunch with Thea, then began her walk to their favourite café.

The streets were quiet, as most people were either at work or tucked away indoors, escaping the cold. A soft mist lingered near the cobbles, and her breath curled out in puffs, ghosting in front of her. She stepped in, the scent of cinnamon and roasted coffee wrapping around her like an embrace. Thea was already there, waving eagerly from a booth near the frosted window. Dressed in a thick jumper with a coffee cup the size of her head in both hands, she looked up with a grin that faltered just slightly upon seeing Elowen's flushed face and wind-bitten cheeks.

"Well, well, if it isn't the golden girl herself," Thea said with a smile, setting her cup down. "I take it from the glow radiating off your skin that last night was something special."

"It was…" Elowen exhaled with a dreamy smile as she slid into the booth opposite her. "It was everything."

Thea laughed, her eyes gleaming. "You're welcome. Don't bother pretending you're not going to thank me twenty times."

"I'll spare you nineteen," Elowen teased, then gripped Thea's hands across the table. "But seriously, thank you. I don't even have the words. I can't remember the last time I felt so... free. Like the world finally tilted back into place."

Thea studied her for a moment, her expression softening. "You look different today. Lighter somehow. But also... you're fidgeting like a squirrel on caffeine."

Elowen laughed, a bit too loudly, and immediately stilled her fingers. "Yeah. A little overstimulated, I guess. I was in a crowd of thousands last night. All the noise, the lights, the adrenaline… It's catching up with me."

Thea's brow pinched gently in concern, but she said nothing, giving her friend space to ride the high in her own way.

"So," she said instead, lifting an eyebrow. "Was he as good as you imagined?"

Elowen's lips parted into a wide, almost reverent smile. "He was... magnificent. Honestly. The way he moved, the way he held the audience. It was something divine. He saw me, Thea."

Thea tilted her head, confused. "What do you mean?"

"I had the letter with me... I wasn't waving it around like an idiot or anything. Just... holding it up quietly. I didn't think he'd even look in my direction, but he did. And Kolm… his bassist, he reached down and took it. He actually gave it to Grrail. Slipped it into his cloak."

Thea blinked, stunned and silent for a second. Then she grinned, eyes glossy. " That's... El, that's beautiful."

Elowen nodded, cheeks flushing from memory. "For the first time, I felt seen… not as a fan, not even as a person, but as an artist. Like something I gave was worthy of being received."

Thea reached out and squeezed her hand. At that moment, the café door jingled and let in a gust of icy wind, and someone else. Elowen's gaze flicked automatically toward the sound. Noah had just stepped inside, wrapped in a dark coat with his hands buried in his pockets. His hood was down, beanie over his hair, slightly damp from the mist. He scanned the room quickly, and the moment he spotted her, he offered a quiet nod. Her breath caught. He walked to the counter, giving his order, then made his way to his usual table in the far corner. No guitar today. Just coffee and his phone. Yet his presence vibrated in her periphery like a bassline, steady and deep.

"You two are suspicious," Thea muttered, sipping her coffee. "Distant, but suspiciously... synced."

Elowen laughed, but her hands were trembling slightly. She pressed them to her lap, fingers curling. She felt her heart rate increase, and a little nausea took over. "He's just…" she trailed off, head going dizzy.

"What's wrong?" Thea asked, voice dipping.

Elowen shook her head too quickly. "Nothing. It's fine. I'm fine."

But her breathing had quickened. Her eyes darted

toward Noah's table and then down to her tea. Thea watched, her amusement melting into concern as Elowen began to blink more rapidly, as if trying to hold something in.

"Sweetheart," Thea said softly. "Breathe."

But Elowen couldn't. Her chest felt tight, her vision growing slightly blurred at the edges. She stood up abruptly, the chair scraping back, startling even Noah, who lifted his head in concern.

"I… I need…" Elowen murmured, her voice cracking.

Jessica, the café's owner, had just approached with their ordered food.

"She's not feeling well," Thea said quickly. "Jess, can we use the back room for a bit?"

Jessica nodded instantly, eyes wide. "Of course. Go."

Thea gathered Elowen's bag and gently took her arm, leading her past the counter and through the staff door. Elowen stumbled slightly, her hand gripping Thea's coat as though her body couldn't find its balance.

Noah watched the whole thing in stunned silence, then stood slowly, uncertain whether to follow.

The back room was quiet, dim, lined with boxes of supplies and a single old sofa in the corner. Thea helped Elowen down. She slid her back against the wall and collapsed into herself, knees bent, arms wrapping tightly around her shins as she rocked slightly, gasping for air.

Her heart slammed against her ribs with such

violent insistence it no longer felt like a rhythm, as if it were trying to escape the prison of her body entirely. Each beat struck too hard, too fast, climbing into her throat until she was certain that if she opened her mouth, it would leap free and collapse onto the floor beside her. Air refused to enter her lungs properly. It lingered at the threshold, shallow and useless, leaving her chest tight and hollow at once. The room tilted in subtle, cruel increments, the walls leaning closer without moving, the ground no longer trustworthy beneath her. Nausea coiled low in her stomach, thick and suffocating, as though something poisonous had replaced her blood and was now spreading with every frantic pulse.

Her hands trembled uncontrollably, fine at first, then visibly, violently, the shaking travelling up her wrists and into her forearms until she could no longer pretend she had any authority over her own limbs. Tears gathered without permission, clinging to her lashes and distorting her vision, refracting the dim light into something unreal and distant. She could hear everything too loudly and not at all, the muted clatter of porcelain somewhere beyond the door, the faint hum of conversation that sounded impossibly far away, like a world she no longer belonged to.

Elowen pulled one of her beaded bracelets from her wrist, her fingers clumsy and desperate, the elastic catching briefly against her skin before snapping free. She held it tightly, anchoring herself to its familiar shape, its small, predictable structure. One bead. Then another. Then another. Her thumb moved over each smooth

surface with reverent precision, counting them silently, clinging to the certainty of numbers when nothing else made sense.

She lowered herself fully onto the floor, her back pressed against the cool surface behind her, her knees drawn inward. Her legs betrayed her next, restless and desperate, swaying gently from side to side in a fragile imitation of control, a rhythm she did not choose but could not stop. The motion soothed something primal, something buried deep within her nervous system that demanded movement, demanded proof she was still here, still alive, still inhabiting a body that no longer felt like her own.

Time fractured. Seconds stretched into something endless and merciless. She pressed the bracelet tighter into her palm, her fingers trembling as they continued their ritual. One bead. Two. Three. She focused on their texture, their temperature, their existence.

Somewhere beneath the terror, beneath the suffocating chaos of her nervous system collapsing in on itself, there remained the smallest, quietest thread of awareness. This had happened before. It had ended before. It would end again. But in this moment, as her heart continued its violent rebellion and her breath refused to obey her, survival did not feel certain.

Thea was rummaging through her bag with clinical precision, her movements efficient, purposeful, as though she were assembling something delicate under pressure.

"Where's your phone? Where are your headphones?"

Elowen's fingers fumbled uselessly against her coat pocket, numb and uncooperative. She barely managed to grip the phone before tossing it weakly toward her. Thea caught it with ease, unlocking it without hesitation, her thumbs moving swiftly across the screen until The Eternal Slumber's playlist appeared.

"Got it," she muttered. "Hold on, El. Hold on."

She slipped the headphones over Elowen's ears, the familiar weight settling against her skull like a protective barrier. A low, sustained note bled into her consciousness, vibrating softly against her temples, followed by that voice. Haunting and measured.

Elowen clutched the headphones as though they were the only solid thing left in a dissolving world. Her breathing still stuttered, catching painfully between inhale and exhale, but something had begun to shift. The music threaded itself through the chaos, reaching into the violent storm inside her chest and wrapping itself around her nervous system with careful, deliberate patience.

Her body responded before she could think. She rocked gently, her shoulder brushing the wall behind her in small, repetitive motions. Her head followed, tilting back until it made soft, rhythmic contact with the surface. Once. Twice. Again.

Her lip was caught between her teeth, biting down harder than she realised, the sharp sting grounding her in ways logic could not. Tears spilt freely now,

tracing silent, helpless paths down her cheeks. Her eyes remained closed, as though the act of seeing would only invite the world to collapse further.

Noah appeared at the doorframe. He stopped the moment he saw her.

"Is she okay?"

Thea glanced up, startled by his presence, then softened slightly. "Anxiety attack," she whispered. "A common occurrence... Yesterday she was at a massive concert. Perhaps too much noise, lights, emotions… It's overstimulation. Her body and mind just... crash."

Noah stepped closer, slower this time, as though approaching a wounded creature that might startle and disappear. His eyes never left Elowen. He watched the way her fingers curled tightly around the headphones. The way her head continued its gentle, fragile rhythm against the wall. The way her entire existence had narrowed into survival.

"Is the music helping, then?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah," Thea nodded, her voice softer now. "She's still trying to discover what helps... So far, it's mostly this band she likes, or some classical piano bangers. She says the vocalist's voice has a frequency that calms her nervous system. It's like... her reset button. We tried so many different songs and bands, yet somehow these guys are the only remedy for now."

"I see," Noah murmured.

But he did not look away. He watched her as one would watch the ocean during a storm, knowing

instinctively that stepping in would only make it worse, yet unable to leave.

Gradually, the violent tremors in her hands softened. Her leg, which had been bouncing uncontrollably, slowed, then stilled entirely. Her chest rose and fell in deeper, quieter rhythms, each breath reclaiming territory that panic had stolen.

Her head stopped striking the wall. Her lip fell free from her teeth. Her fingers loosened slightly around the headphones. Eventually, Elowen's eyes opened. They were glassy and unfocused at first, swimming in the aftermath of survival. Then they found him.

She froze. Embarrassment bloomed instantly, hot and suffocating. She looked away, her throat tight.

"I'm sorry," she whispered hoarsely. "I didn't mean to make a scene."

Noah shook his head gently, his voice calm, certain.

"It's okay. I get it... Sometimes I have anxiety before performing, too. You don't need to apologise for being human."

Thea checked her watch and cursed under her breath. "I'm late for work."

"It's ok, go," Elowen said quickly, her voice fragile but determined. "I'll be okay."

Thea hesitated, then turned to Noah. "Sorry to ask, but can you just stay with her for a bit?"

He nodded immediately. "Of course."

She gave Elowen's shoulder a final squeeze, grounding and warm, before leaving. The door clicked

shut behind her, the sound louder than it should have been.

Silence settled into the room. Only the music remained, whispering softly into Elowen's ears. And Noah.

He didn't move at first. He stood there, watching her. She sat on the floor, small in a way he had never perceived her before, her fingers absentmindedly returning to the bracelet in her lap. One bead. Then another. Her legs swayed faintly, her body still negotiating its return to equilibrium.

He felt useless. He hated that feeling. Slowly, carefully, he crossed the distance between them. He lowered himself to the floor beside her, leaving space between their bodies, enough that she would not feel cornered. Enough that she could still breathe.

His hands rested loosely against his knees, though he was acutely aware of every small movement she made. The subtle tremor still lingering in her fingers or the way she leaned ever so slightly toward the wall, as though it were still holding her together. The faint redness beneath her eyes was evidence of a battle no one else could see.

The song faded into its final note, dissolving gently into silence.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

They walked in silence. The cold air of late autumn curled around their coats, catching in their scarves and rustling the bare branches overhead. Frost still lingered in the edges of pavement cracks, sparkling faintly under the grey morning sky. Elowen's breath misted in slow clouds as she walked beside Noah, their shoulders close but never quite touching. The quiet between them was soft, reverent. Like the air after a storm.

Elowen tugged gently on the sleeves of her coat. "You know," she began, her voice light, "it's strange… before finding out about my neurodivergence, I handled everything fine. At least, I thought I did. Now, it's like I can't keep it together the same way. Everything hits harder."

Noah glanced sideways, his pace unchanging. "Maybe you were never really handling it. Maybe you were just... holding it all in."

She turned toward him slightly, intrigued.

"I mean," he continued, adjusting his hands deeper into his pockets, "when you don't know what's wrong, you mask. You adapt and survive because you have to. But once you find the answer, once someone finally hands you that missing puzzle piece, it's like…

that invisible chain snaps. You're not fighting in the dark anymore. And for the first time, your body... your mind... they feel safe enough to stop pretending."

Elowen was quiet for a moment, eyes tracing the fog on the windows of a nearby shop. "That's exactly it," she murmured. "It's like I gave myself permission to finally feel it. I don't have to constantly pretend I'm fine when I'm not."

Noah nodded, gaze forward, his tone soft and sure. "You were just tired of holding your breath."

She gave him a smile. "I feel like I'm more anxious now... but also happier. It's weird, right? I cry more, but I also laugh more. I feel like I've finally released something that was crushing my chest for years."

They continued walking, their steps echoing faintly in the empty street.

"I get it, you know," he said. His voice was quieter now. "I get overwhelmed, too. More often than people realise."

Elowen turned her head slightly, studying him.

"It's mostly when I'm around people," he continued, his tone measured, careful, as though he were translating something that did not naturally exist in words. "Social situations. Expectations or being watched. It starts slowly at first. But then it builds." He exhaled faintly through his nose. "It feels like the room is shrinking. Like the walls are closing in, inch by inch, and there's nowhere to go without drawing attention to the fact that you need to escape."

His fingers shifted subtly inside his pockets,

restless energy with nowhere to go.

"When I perform, it's easier," he said. "Because I can move. I stim a lot. People think it's just part of the performance, part of the emotion, but it's not. It's how I regulate it. It's how I get the excess energy out before it consumes me entirely. Every movement has a purpose. It keeps me anchored."

He paused, glancing briefly at the ground before continuing.

"But off stage…" His mouth tightened almost imperceptibly. "There's no acceptable outlet and no structure. Just expectations. Conversations I don't want to have. People I don't know wanting access to something I never offered them."

He hesitated, then added quietly, "I don't like talking to strangers. I never know how to exist correctly in those moments. Everything I say feels either excessive or insufficient. Like I'm performing a role I was never meant to play. And I can see it in their faces sometimes. That moment when they decide you're… off. Too much. Or not enough."

Elowen smiled softly and nodded.

"I know exactly what you mean," she said. "You see it in their expressions before they even realise they're making them. Their eyes lose focus. Their energy shifts. It's like they're no longer with you. Like they've already left the conversation, and you're just finishing it alone."

Noah let out a quiet breath that almost resembled a laugh.

"Yes," he said. "Exactly that."

She looked ahead again, her hands tucked into the sleeves of her coat.

"It's hard for me because I say what I think," she admitted. "Or what I feel. And people don't always like that. They take it personally. Or they think I'm being rude when I'm just being honest."

Noah raised an eyebrow slightly, curiosity flickering behind his otherwise composed exterior.

"What kind of thoughts?" he asked.

She looked at him then. Her eyes travelled over him slowly, deliberately, taking in the rigid line of his posture, the quiet intensity he carried even in stillness. Then she looked away again, a faint, knowing smile touching her lips.

There was a pause.

"I don't think you're unsociable because you're afraid of people," she said finally.

He turned his head toward her, intrigued.

"No?"

She shook her head.

"I think you just don't care."

He frowned faintly, surprised. She continued before he could respond.

"Not in a cruel way," she clarified softly. "You don't care about their noise, their drama or their constant need to fill silence with meaningless words." Her voice remained calm. "You exist somewhere else. In your head, in your work. In whatever it is you're creating. That's where your attention lives. That's what matters to you."

Noah said nothing. But he did not look away.

"You have very specific views," she went on. "Very specific goals. And you only allow people into your life if they align with that. If they understand it or if they contribute to it. Everyone else…" She shrugged lightly. "They're just… there."

His brow furrowed slightly in recognition.

"And I don't think you're anxious because you're afraid of them," she added. "I think you're anxious because you don't want to waste yourself on conversations that have no depth or no meaning. You don't want to pretend to care about things that don't matter to you. But you're still too… decent to dismiss people outright."

She glanced at him briefly.

"So instead, you stay. And you endure it. And you search for the correct words. Words that won't hurt them. Words that won't expose how disconnected you feel from the entire exchange."

Silence followed. Noah stared ahead again, his jaw shifting slightly, his tongue pressing briefly against the inside of his cheek. A faint smile appeared at the corner of his mouth.

Elowen returned it.

"Fair. So… What else helps you?" Noah asked after a pause. "Other than music, I mean. Is it the only thing that calms the nerves?"

Elowen chuckled quietly. "Music is magic. Literally. We're mostly made of water, right? And water reacts to sound. Frequencies, vibration." She smiled, eyes

sparkling now. "Sorry, going a bit nerdy here… But drawing helps too. Painting, especially. I could sit for hours and just... let my body move. The brush sort of knows what it's doing even if I don't."

Noah looked at her then. His steps slowed slightly, as if something had shifted in him.

"Well," he said carefully, "If that's the case… maybe, if you're up for it… No pressure, obviously, but I've got this little studio in my place. It's kind of sad, actually. Plain white walls, no soul at all. Thought maybe it could use some... you."

She blinked, surprised. "You want me to paint something?"

He nodded, still not looking directly at her now, suddenly shy. "If you want. I mean, it's a big wall. You could paint whatever you like. Flowers, space, weird creatures, whatever your imagination throws at you. I'll buy all the materials."

Elowen beamed. "I'd love to," she said instantly, cheeks flushed with excitement. "Honestly. That sounds... amazing."

He looked relieved and gave the tiniest smile, barely there, but warm.

"I'm free this weekend," she added quickly, "if you are. We could go shopping for supplies, pick out the colours and all."

"Saturday?" he offered.

"Perfect," she nodded.

They turned onto her street. Her house came into view. As they reached the front gate, Noah slowed to a

halt, awkward again.

"Thanks for walking with me," Elowen said, brushing her hair behind her ear as she stepped toward the gate. "Really. I didn't want to go home alone today."

He gave a polite smile and nodded. "Of course."

She hesitated for a moment, then tilted her head. "Would you... Like to come in for tea?"

Noah glanced up in surprise. "I don't want to intrude…"

"You're not," she assured. "I've only got about an hour before I need to do the school run anyway, but I'd like to thank you properly. And…" she paused, lowering her voice just slightly, "there's something I've been meaning to give you."

His brow furrowed with curiosity, but he nodded. "Alright. Just for a bit."

She smiled and pushed the gate open, leading the way.

Noah sat on the edge of the sofa, posture a little too upright, fingers loosely intertwined in his lap as his gaze wandered across the living room. The house was... charming, yes, but more than that. It felt personal. Every inch of the space spoke softly of Elowen. Teal walls embraced the room with a sense of warmth and individuality, their colour softened by the golden light filtering through the windows. A brick fireplace rested in the centre like the heart of a storybook. Gold picture frames gleamed quietly along the walls, housing photographs of a life deeply lived: Elowen with her son,

her son alone, Elowen and Thea mid-laughter, their eyes crinkled and full of joy.

Bookshelves spilt with novels and notepads. Russian classics, fiction, and science books. Crystals lined the windowsills. Plants… far too many for the size of the room, flourished in corners, dangled from ceiling hooks, or clung happily to macrame holders. Suncatchers caught beams of sun, casting little rainbows over the hardwood floor. A small desk in the corner overflowed with sticky notes, sketches, an empty teacup, and a PC… a battlefield of inspiration mid-war.

Noah exhaled slowly, smiling faintly. The space felt... alive. And then, a stare. He turned his head slightly and locked eyes with a black cat, glossy, sharp, with eyes full of judgment. The feline perched on the windowsill like a silent sentinel, unmoving. Noah gulped.

Elowen entered the room with two mugs in hand, the scent of cinnamon and black tea trailing behind her. "That is Mischief," she said, noticing the standoff. "Don't take it personally. This cat just doesn't like men around me."

"Oh," he muttered, "good to know." He accepted the mug, grateful for the distraction.

His eyes drifted back to the altar-like setup: the crystals, the candles, the handmade little details. He tilted his head, voice softer now. "Do you… like witchy stuff?"

Elowen smiled, a little caught off guard but not bothered. "Yeah. I occasionally practice. It's kind of… another special interest of mine."

She shrugged gently, as if it didn't matter, but

there was affection in her voice. "It's how I express myself. The rituals, the symbolism, the space it creates. I don't know… It makes the world feel less... empty."

Noah's gaze lingered on her a second longer than he meant to. "That makes sense," he said quietly. "It suits you."

Mischief narrowed its eyes from the windowsill, tail twitching like a warning.

Noah glanced her way. "Okay, I'm going to drink this tea very respectfully now and pretend I'm not being hexed by your cat."

Elowen laughed, the sound bright and soft. "Wise choice."

Noah shifted on the sofa, teacup warming his hands, his gaze drifting toward Elowen's desk. Papers were scattered across it in messy little constellations. "Mind if I…?" he asked, tilting his head toward the chaos.

She hesitated, shy, then nodded. "Go on."

He rose, careful, and sifted through the pages: plot outlines, character sketches, ink-smudged ramblings. Then his hand stilled on a sheet filled not with prose, but with lyrics. He read them once, twice, a third time, lips moving silently as though tasting every word.

Home in You
I was drifting through the static,
no coordinates to claim,
Every signal that I followed
only vanished just the same,
The gravity of strangers

always pulled me into blame,
Till your voice cut through the darkness
and it called me by my name.
You spoke in constellations,
every syllable a spark,
Your voice became the compass
that could guide me through the dark.
The cosmos bowed in silence
as your presence pulled me through,
And the nameless ache inside me
found its mirror deep in you.

I found my home in you, the only place I can be me,
Your voice, a tide that pulls me through the depths of every sea,
I found my home in you, where the pages never fade,
Where the ink runs on forever in the path the stars have laid.

Your eyes became horizons
where the constellations bend,
Every glance a revelation
I could follow to the end,
The search was over wholly
when your soul aligned with mine,
Two reflections bound together,
written deep beyond all time.
Two hearts aligned in silence
where the galaxies converge,
And every hidden law of time

began to twist and merge,
The symmetry between us
was the pull I can't escape,
Every path and every lifetime
bending back into your shape.

I found my home in you, the only place I can be me,
Your voice a tide that pulls me through the depths of every sea,
I found my home in you, where the pages never fade,
Where the ink runs on forever in the path the stars have laid.

If the void should call, I will answer with your name,
If the galaxies collapse, I will love you all the same,
In each frequency, your voice still threads the empty air,
Through the quiet nights, I will always know you're there.

No longer lost,
my compass always turns to you,
The journey ends
where every star has led me through,
Through time and tide,
through galaxies we've had to cross,
In you I'm found…
in you I'm never lost.

"Home in You," he murmured, eyes softening.

"What's this?"

Elowen's cheeks warmed. "Just… trying some songwriting. For fun. It's probably clumsy, out of rhythm…"

"It's not," he cut in, still staring at the page. He sank onto the sofa again, the paper balanced in one hand, his teacup in the other, and read through the verses once more. Silence stretched, filled only by the sound of their tea cooling. Then, finally, he looked at her. "This is good. More than good."

She ducked her head, a small smile breaking through her nerves. "Thank you."

After another beat, he cleared his throat. "Would you mind if I…" He held the page gently, as though it might dissolve. "If I took this? Maybe played around with it. Try to find the music in it. Just for fun."

Her eyes widened, surprise giving way to something warmer. "Of course," she said softly. "I'd love that."

Noah smiled then, quiet but certain, and folded the paper with a care that made it feel like a promise. She set her tea down on the coffee table and moved toward a small wooden drawer nestled beneath a shelf. She knelt, rifling through it before pulling out a small pouch: black velvet, tied with golden thread.

Noah blinked. "What's this?"

She hesitated. "It was... originally made for someone else. The lead singer of The Eternal Slumber. I meant to give it to him last night but... I don't know. It didn't feel right anymore. And yesterday, after hearing

him play piano... somehow I thought of you… I think it's meant for you."

Noah accepted the pouch carefully, tugging the thread loose. Inside lay a single piano key: matte black, cracked but mended with shimmering gold, looped through a black leather cord.

His eyes widened. "Kintsugi," he said immediately, thumb brushing the golden fracture. "That's... beautiful."

"It's a real key," she said.

"It's amazing," he said, holding it up to the light. "Creative and thoughtful. I love it."

"It might be a bit big to wear as a necklace," she added quickly. "But maybe it could hang in your studio?"

He nodded, grinning. "Yeah. Right above the keyboard. Feels right."

They both sat for a moment in a quiet haze of comfort, sipping tea.

"You've got a beautiful home," Noah said eventually. "Feels like a real-life library enchanted itself and decided to settle down."

Elowen laughed. "It's a mess half the time, but I love it."

"Organised chaos. My favourite."

She tilted her head. "You say that like someone who's spent an embarrassing amount of time sorting magic inventories in Skyrim."

He smirked. "I may or may not have lost three hours arranging soul gems by size and aura."

Elowen laughed again. "God, you remind me of

someone I know. A well-spoken nerd with love for poetry."

"He sounds divine," Noah deadpanned. They chuckled, the air between them lighter now, softer.

After a beat, he glanced toward one of the framed photos. "Do you mind if I ask... is it hard? Raising your son alone?"

Elowen grew quieter. Her fingers curled more tightly around her cup, the ceramic warm against her palms, grounding in its simplicity. She watched the faint ripple of her tea as she shifted it slightly, her reflection distorting across its surface.

"Sometimes," she admitted softly. "But… I wasn't always alone."

She paused, choosing her words with care, because they were difficult to release.

"I've been in relationships," she continued. "On paper, I wasn't alone. There was always someone beside me. Someone sharing the space, sharing the bed or sharing the routine." Her lips pressed together faintly. "But somehow… I was still carrying everything myself. Every decision and every emotional weight. It was like building something with two hands and realising only one of them was ever mine."

Noah didn't interrupt.

"It's strange," she went on, her thumb tracing the rim of her cup in slow, absent circles. "It's easier now. Not lighter, no. But… clearer. I don't wait anymore. I don't hold out parts of myself hoping someone will meet me halfway and then pretend not to notice when they

don't." She exhaled slowly. "I've stopped holding out empty cups."

Her voice softened further.

"I still get lonely," she admitted. "Not for presence, as it is easy to find. For connection that feels… real." She hesitated, searching for language that wouldn't betray the depth of it. "I want to feel understood. Not managed, tolerated or admired from a distance like something decorative. I want to be known. As a woman, as a mind and as someone who exists beyond what she provides for others."

Her fingers stilled.

"Maybe it's because I'm a writer," she said quietly. "I've spent years dissecting love. Pulling it apart and examining it from every angle. Writing it into existence for people who never questioned whether they deserved it." She smiled faintly, but there was sadness behind it. "And somewhere along the way, I realised that what I'd been living wasn't love. It was comfort, habit and proximity."

She glanced up briefly, her eyes vulnerable in a way she did not try to conceal.

"Real connection doesn't beg for attention or constantly prove itself. It just… exists. It challenges you and expands you. Makes you feel seen in places you didn't realise were invisible." Her voice dropped slightly. "It makes your mind come alive."

She looked away again, almost embarrassed by her own honesty.

"I don't want something that consumes me," she

said. "I don't want chaos mistaken for passion or intensity mistaken for meaning. I want something deeper. Someone who doesn't need me to perform being lovable and who doesn't punish me for having depth. Someone who doesn't shrink when they realise I exist beyond what they expected."

Her lips parted slightly, then closed again before she added, more gently,

"I want to be able to exist beside someone without constantly questioning whether I'm too much or not enough. I want to be understood without having to translate myself into something smaller."

The silence between them shifted.

"I'm not rushing anymore," she said firmly. "I've rushed before. And all I did was break things. Break myself trying to build something that was never meant to hold me." She inhaled slowly. "I'm tired of building nests for people who only ever planned to rest in them temporarily. I want someone who builds it with me. Or someone who builds one for me, just once."

She looked at him then, her eyes honest.

"I'm not looking for a distraction," she said. "I'm looking for home. A person who will give me that feeling. And I want to be that home for them too. If that exists. If not…" she gave a small, accepting shrug. "Then at least I finally understand what it should have felt like."

Her voice softened to almost nothing.

"I've ended my old cycles," she said. "I'm not surviving anymore. I want to live now."

Noah's eyes darkened slightly, something shifting

behind them.

"Ending cycles…" he murmured. "That's hard."

He leaned back slightly, his fingers loosely intertwined.

"Especially when the toxic ones feel familiar," he continued quietly. "They become muscle memory. You know exactly how they'll hurt you. Exactly how they'll end. And somehow, that predictability makes them easier to return to." His jaw tightened faintly. "Because at least you know who you are inside them."

He paused, his gaze lowering briefly before returning to hers.

"The unknown is harder," he admitted. "Because it requires you to exist without the identity pain gave you."

Elowen nodded. "And happiness… when it comes, it doesn't feel right at first. It feels temporary."

He looked at her, intrigued. "Isn't it?"

She smiled. "Of course it is. That's the point. Happiness isn't supposed to last forever. That's what makes it precious. I don't chase happiness anymore. I chase home."

Noah blinked, visibly struck by that. "That's... I've never thought of it that way."

"Home," she said, "is what you protect. Relationships won't always be smooth. But when you're healed, you don't chase the highs. You protect the calm. Because that's where love lives. Real love. The kind that sees you and doesn't flinch."

He was silent, just watching her, and then she said

it softly:

"Maybe... like Kintsugi, two broken pieces can still become whole together."

They smiled at each other. Just holding the moment. Noah glanced at the clock and finished the last of his tea. "Thank you," he said quietly.

She stood with him, walking him to the door. "I can't wait to see this dreadfully boring wall of yours," she teased, elbowing him lightly.

He actually laughed this time. "It's offensively white."

They reached the door and paused. Close now, close enough to notice the little things. The way his lashes flickered with hesitation. Her fingers curled lightly against the doorframe. He didn't move for a moment. Then slowly, he stepped back. She reached out and opened the door, the cold air slipping between them. He lingered one more heartbeat.

His hand gently squeezed her shoulder, and he stepped out. "Goodbye, Elowen."

"Bye, Noah," she said softly.

As the door shut behind him, she leaned her forehead against it for a moment, smiling to herself. Somehow... she felt light.

◇

The night had fallen in Elysium like a velvet curtain, pierced by stars that flickered nervously above the shattered moon. Avenna stood on the balcony of the estate chamber, the stone cool beneath her bare feet. The

dying sun had painted the sky in deep bruises of amethyst and ochre, but now only the fractured moon cast her light: eerie and pale, like a memory too soft to hold.

She gripped the rail gently, fingertips brushing the iron like she might steady something deeper than herself. The anxiety in her chest hadn't left since dusk. It was dread. Something wrong in the air.

Grail stepped onto the balcony soundlessly, and Avenna didn't ask how he got there… she never did. He moved like he belonged to the dark, and perhaps the dark belonged to him.

"Can you feel it too?" His voice was low, rough silk. "The dread. It's… inside the walls. Hiding."

She nodded without turning to him. "Yes."

He stepped closer, and only then did she turn to look at him. Her breath caught. Grail wasn't himself, or perhaps, he was more himself than ever. The witches' gifted attire had transformed him. A cloak of deep teal clung to his shoulders, trimmed in gold threads that shimmered under the moonlight. His armour had been polished to a golden sheen, the battle scars almost entirely gone, though a few had been left… deliberately, it seemed. A reminder of what he'd endured. His mask had changed, too. Still gold, but smaller now, revealing the curve of a cheekbone, the slope of a straight nose.

"You look…" she began, then stopped herself.

He tilted his head slightly, almost teasing. "Magical?"

She smiled. "Good. You look good."

His lips quirked beneath the edge of the mask. "So do you."

Avenna glanced down at herself: the teal and white gown draped her frame like moonlight through forest canopies, golden embroidery shimmering like vines wrapping her ribs. She flushed slightly. She grabbed her boots and put them on, fixing her dress. He extended a hand.

"Shall we?" he asked. "The ball awaits."

She arched a brow. "You're in quite the charming mood tonight."

"Perhaps," he said, lips curving faintly.

And so she took his hand. They entered the ballroom through arched golden doors. Columns stretched into the high ceilings, adorned with crystal garlands and soft moss-green tapestries. Candles floated mid-air, casting trembling halos over marble floors. Guests swirled in opulence: gowns like waterfalls, coats of velvet and brocade. The Lord of the estate stood surrounded by sycophants, grinning wide, eyes like a shark's.

Kolm stood nearby, strangely reserved, women fawning over him, yet kept at a polite distance. For once, he didn't flirt… instead, he lifted a glass of wine with a smirk and nodded to Avenna. Vier was hidden among guests near the musicians, inspecting the strings of a fiddle with deep fascination. Dy had found the buffet and was chewing thoughtfully through his second pastry, cheeks adorably puffed. But Avenna's gaze didn't linger. It was all noise and colour, until Grail offered her his

hand again.

"Dance with me," he said simply.

She hesitated, just for a breath, then nodded. The orchestra began again. Grail stepped forward, placing one hand on her waist with the other still holding hers. She let herself be led. The first few steps were careful, testing. Her heart beat faster, but her feet moved as if they'd done this a thousand times. His grip was steady. His posture was protective, but not possessive. When he guided her into a gentle spin, his fingers brushed hers. As they moved together, something shifted. The room began to blur. Guests faded, and the music dulled behind a veil of stars. It was just them now, her and Grail. Turning slowly beneath the chandeliers that glittered like constellations. He moved with such ease, as if this had always been written.

Her breath caught when his hand settled firmer at her back, guiding her in a slow arch, then back to him. Their bodies aligned, the rhythm perfect. She followed without thought. Avenna had never danced like this before, not in any court, not in any dream. It was a connection. The music crested, the final few notes played slowly, like time was being asked to wait. Grail spun her one final time, then caught her again, dipping her low, his arm steady beneath her back. She held her breath… he was close. So close. His breath mingled with hers. And for a split second, she let herself forget. She let herself feel it. That thump. That old, familiar ache in her chest… something dangerous, something she had sworn to bury. She was falling.

No…

Her smile faded. She pulled herself upright abruptly, slipping from his arms like sand through fingers.

"I need air," she muttered, and turned without another word. Grail watched her go but didn't follow.

Avenna rushed through the gold-trimmed archways, past the draped halls and out into the estate gardens. Her heels clicked against the stone until she slipped them off, feet bare against cold grass. Herons burst from the hedges at her arrival, taking to the cracked-moon sky with shrieks. Petals from silver roses scattered under her steps as she ran.

Don't fall, she whispered. *Don't you dare fall again.* She slowed, breath hitching, tears already clinging to her lashes. She looked up at the broken moon.

"I swore I wouldn't do this again," she whispered to the sky. "I swore…"

She pressed a hand to her heart. But it was too late. She had fallen. And denial was no longer armour.

A soft rustle behind her made her turn, eyes still glistening. She expected him and was ready to lie. But it wasn't Grail. It was the Lord. And his smile was far too pleased. The air in the estate garden felt heavier now, like something ancient stirring beneath the cobblestones. Avenna stood rooted to the spot, her hands at her sides, the soft green fabric of her gown fluttering in the cold wind.

Lord Verrowind emerged from the hedges with that same rehearsed, regal smile he wore at the ball. His

dark, silken cloak trimmed in embroidered gold shimmered faintly beneath the broken moonlight.

"My Lady Avenna," he purred. "What a delight it is to find you here beneath the stars. Don't you find the night… liberating?"

Her back straightened, her instincts already on edge.

"I was hoping we might speak in more private terms," he said. "You've honoured my halls with your light. It would bring me great pleasure if you stayed longer. The town will be festive for days still. There is much to enjoy."

"And what," Avenna asked, "would that cost me?"

He laughed, light and hollow. "You mistake me for a man dealing in transactions. You think I desire your powers? My estate is impenetrable. My guards are loyal, my protections… vast. Your light does not interest me."

"No," she said slowly, "but I do."

His eyes glinted, the mask of civility slipping for just a moment. "I merely believe a woman of your status deserves better than chasing shadows. Why not stay? Let others carry on with impossible quests. Enjoy comfort, luxury, purpose."

"And the suffering?" she asked. "The people outside these gates… starving, fading, what of them?"

"They are the natural order," Celanthar replied smoothly, stepping closer. "Without desperation, there is no need for order. No one begs for light unless they've lived in the dark. The lower they fall, the more they look to us… the higher. You and I, we are not them. We were

not meant to be."

"I am nothing like you."

"Ah," he said with a knowing smile, "but you could be. Power, wealth… even worship. Everyone has a price. Even Priestesses."

"I've already paid mine."

Her light flared in her palm. Behind Celanthar, guards stepped from the shadows, surrounding the garden.

He exhaled slowly, his façade now gone. "I merely want what must be preserved. Morphea's presence ensures my prosperity. Her monsters bring fear, and fear brings control. I cannot allow you to disrupt that. You've come too close to breaking the balance."

"So you'll stop me?" Avenna guessed that there was no mysterious scientist who could help with any information about Morphea. It was all a lie.

"I won't need to."

The hedge rustled. A growl, low and painful, cut through the night. And then she appeared.

Ayro. A monstrous beauty. Her armour, sleek and blackened like obsidian glass, shimmered with hints of green under the moon. Her face hidden, except for her lips, parted in a constant expression of sorrow. Her movements were not human; her steps echoed with the twitching precision of a predator. A long sword dragged across the stone, trailing mist. Her segmented tail coiled, poison dripping from the tip like venomous intent.

"You hurt yourself…" she whispered.

Avenna gasped, stepping back, her light blazing.

Lord Verrowind spoke again, almost lovingly. "My daughter. A sacrifice greater than any. Her soul was...re-forged. Morphea offered me strength, and I offered blood."

"You sacrificed your daughter?" Avenna's voice broke with horror.

"For a future. For power. For peace."

Without warning, a blade flew past her, lodging itself in a soldier's throat. *Thunk*. A blur emerged from the shadows. Grail. And behind him: Kolm, Vier and Dy.

Kolm's voice cut the tension. "Well, this party took a turn. Wasn't expecting a dance with a soul-eating scorpion, but... I'm adaptable."

Vier's hand was already on his sword. His eyes never left Ayro. Dy looked solemn, his usual smile gone. "That's not just a monster."

Grail's voice was cold as winter steel. "You will pay for this, Verrowind."

The Lord, now pale beneath his charm, turned before running. "Kill them all."

Avenna turned toward Grail as Ayro's limbs scraped against the marble tiles. Her fingers hovered near her waist, where light had already begun to stir.

"Go," Grail said, voice calm but steeled. "Find Verrowind. We'll handle this."

She hesitated, just for a breath. Their glances locked.

"Be careful," she said quietly, and then turned and sprinted.

Avenna vanished into the night, her dress

catching moonlight as she raced after Lord Celanthar Verrowind. Grail stood still for a heartbeat, watching her disappear into the hedges. Then he turned. And the monster was waiting. Ayro stood tall in the garden clearing, her sorrowful lips the only visible part of her face. Her body was armoured from neck to claw, sleek plates of dark steel curving along limbs that ended not in feet, but in jagged scorpion legs that clacked and hissed against stone.

"*You hurt yourself…*" she whispered.

[Grail – Shadowrend]

Grail launched first, a blur of motion. His katana carved a clean arc through the air, crashing down against Ayro's left shoulder.

-9% HP

Ayro ||||||||||||||||||||||||||||| 91%

She didn't flinch. Her helmet turned, tracking him like prey.

[Ayro – Lamenting Strike]

She surged forward, sword clashing with Grail's. The impact sent a pulse, grief incarnate, straight into his chest. It was like swallowing the screams of every innocent he couldn't save. Grail stumbled back, jaw clenched, eyes already glassing with unshed tears.

"Damn it…" he whispered.

Kolm came in from the right, blades flashing in opposing rhythm. He ducked under her swinging tail.

[Kolm – Siren's Slice]

Both his swords struck: one high, one low, creating a humming resonance that fractured part of her

left pauldron.

-10% HP

Ayro ||||||||||||||||||||||||| 81%

She hissed, reeling, and her tail snapped toward him.

[Ayro – Tail Lash: Venom Surge]

The spiked appendage sliced across Kolm's ribs. Armour tore, and blood followed.

-12% HP

Kolm rolled back with a wince. Vier moved next, pushing forward through the soundwaves Kolm's blades had left behind. His own blade thrummed with sonic resonance, vibrating like a tuning fork in a storm.

[Vier – Crescendo Cleave]

He struck downward, a vicious blow that reverberated into her core.

-11% HP

Ayro ||||||||||||||||||||||| 70%

Ayro's metal groaned under the pressure, her knees buckling for a moment.

[Ayro – Spiral of Anguish]

She whirled. A cyclone of blades and limbs. Vier caught the brunt of it, slamming into a tree with enough force to crack bark. Dy, ever silent, slipped behind her like a ghost. He gripped his twin batons, charged with blue static and reinforced with crystal cores.

[Dy – Twin Nova Bloom]

He slammed both batons into the backs of her legs. A burst of energy jolted through her frame, forcing her down to one knee.

-9% HP

Ayro |||||||||||||||||||| 61%

Still… she wept. Tears slipped from behind the helmet, trailing down her exposed lips.

"*You hurt yourself…*"

Her voice cracked. Grail's eyes burned. "This isn't right… She was human."

Ayro screeched, lurching forward, claws dragging earth. Her blade shimmered with that same devastating melancholy.

[Ayro – Lamenting Strike: Echo Variant]

She struck Dy across the chest. His batons dropped. His body locked. Dy gasped, paralysed from the flood of emotion. Shame, regret, loneliness.

"She's using memory as a weapon," he choked out. "She's making us hurt ourselves."

Kolm gritted his teeth, flanking right again. "Then let's hurt her back."

[Kolm – Duet Fang Flurry]

His blades danced in rhythm, crossing and diverging, each blow a note of clarity in her chorus of pain. One slice severed a plate near her hip. The other lodged into her tail.

-12% HP

Ayro |||||||||||||||||| 49%

Ayro shrieked. The monster's control slipped; the girl within twitched.

[Ayro – Echo of Despair]

A pulse exploded from her chest, engulfing the area in emotional static. Regret washed over them all.

Grail dropped to his knees again, sword buried into the ground. His breath came in sharp gasps.

"She was someone's daughter… and now she's this."

Vier pushed up from where he'd fallen. "Then we free her."

[Vier – Harmonised Blade: Dirge Form]

His sword released a frequency meant to destabilise her inner balance. The hum filled the garden. Ayro's limbs began to shudder, legs locking, motion faltering.

-10% HP

Ayro |||||||||||||||| 39%

She stumbled. Her sword dragged, and the rhythm broke. Grail stood, sword in one hand, katana in the other. His face was wet with tears. His arms were trembling.

"I swore I would save them," he whispered. "But sometimes… salvation looks like mercy."

[Grail – Eclipse Breaker]

With a cry, he slashed upward with both blades. One cut her shoulder. The other her chest.

-11% HP

Ayro ||||||||||||||| 28%

Ayro's head snapped back. Her tail writhed, now split and flickering. Sparks flew and metal cracked. But she didn't fall. Instead, she whispered again, quieter now.

"*You… hurt… yourself…*"

Grail clenched his jaw. "I know."

Dy, now recovering, moved in with a final strike

of his batons.

[Dy – Static Silence]

He slammed them into her knees. A shockwave rippled, overloading her joints.

-9% HP

Ayro |||||||||||| 19%

She dropped to both knees now. One eye visible behind the helm… human. So deeply human. And they all froze. A single tear slipped from her eye.

"*Papa…? You… hurt… yourself…*" she whispered.

Rain had begun to fall. Avenna's feet slammed against the polished stone floors of the estate, water and blood trailing in her wake. The grand halls, once echoing with music and laughter, now roared with chaos, panicked screams, the crash of broken glass, and soldiers barking orders. Candlelight flickered and danced, casting grotesque shadows across the walls. Servants scattered. Nobles tripped over gowns and fear alike.

She sprinted up the winding staircase, her light pulsing from her palms in rhythmic flashes, her heartbeat made visible. A blade hissed through the air behind her, a soldier catching up.

[Avenna – Light Pulse]

She didn't even look back. Her fingers flared, and the force knocked him into the column with a sickening crack. He didn't get back up. Two more appeared in the corridor ahead, spears raised.

[Avenna – Radiant Sweep]

A golden arc of energy tore through them, and

their weapons shattered like glass. They dropped to the floor, groaning. She didn't stop running. She shoved open the doors to her chamber, breath hitching in her chest. Her bow: gold, carved with ancient runes, lay across the windowsill. Rain streaked in through the open glass, soaking the floor. The sky outside was black, no stars, no moon… just thunder, rolling low and steady like a threat. She grabbed the bow, slinging it across her back with shaking hands.

[Avenna – Solar Flare]

She spun around, blinding light bursting outward. The soldiers shrieked, stumbling against the walls, clutching their faces. She darted out, back down the corridor, leaping over fallen bodies. The estate burned around her. The rain couldn't reach the higher halls, and flame danced along the tapestries. She descended into the main hall just as lightning cracked across the stained-glass dome above, shattering it in a kaleidoscope of colour. Wind poured in like a scream. And at the centre of the chaos stood Lord Celanthar Verrowind.

Smiling, like a man who still thought he held all the cards. And beside him… The creature rose slowly, her bare feet not touching the floor.

Storm. Her dress, endless and white, shimmered like cascading water, flowing even in stillness. Three heads turned toward Avenna: one serene, one weeping, one twisted in furious rage. Four arms extended, two now raised, conjuring liquid blades out of the very rain seeping into the hall. Avenna's breath caught. She took a

step back.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" Lord Verrowind's voice slithered toward her like poison. "Created from the body of my wife. A woman who gave me nothing in life, except the perfect weapon in death."

"You're insane," Avenna whispered, her grip tightening on her bow.

The Lord laughed. "And your friends? Oh, they'll be dead soon. You? You'll be devoured. Drowned in grief and beauty."

A gust of wind swept the hall. Water streamed in through shattered glass. Candles went out one by one. Storm stepped forward.

"*Pour yourself on me...*" the three mouths sang in harmony.

Avenna staggered back as the melody wrapped around her like a net. It slithered into her mind, softened her limbs. Her bow drooped.

[Storm – Echoes of the Siren]

She saw herself dancing. Grail's eyes, the hurt, the sadness.

"*You're tired, aren't you?*" the calm head cooed.

"*You'll never be enough*," the crying one mourned.

"*Then die*," the angry one screamed.

Avenna fell to her knees.

[Avenna – Celestial Surge]

A flash of light burst from her body, knocking the hallucination back. Water hissed as it evaporated around her.

-9% HP

Storm ||||||||||||||||||||||| 91%

Rain crashed harder now, as if the sky itself were screaming. Storm raised two blades and lunged. Avenna rolled to the side, breath ragged. She fired her bow.

[Avenna – Arc of Purity]

A glowing arrow seared through the air and pierced Storm's shoulder.

-12% HP

Storm |||||||||||||||||||| 79%

But Storm sang louder. Wind circled Avenna, pulling her into a spiral.

[Storm – Tempest's Embrace]

Avenna was flung into a column. Her back cracked against the stone. She gasped from a sharp pain in her side. She reached into the folds of her gown, blood on her fingers. And then, her hand brushed something metal. A blade… Grail's knife. She pulled it out slowly, the steel catching the firelight. The handle was worn, the edge still sharp. Tucked into her dress. He must have placed it there before the ball. Her heart skipped. The moment she touched it, everything changed.

A vision crashed into her. She wasn't herself. She was Grail again. Kneeling, blood-soaked, inside a temple bathed in moonlight. The soft voice of a priestess beside him.

"You seek peace, but healing will burn like fire," she said, placing a golden rose in his palm. "But fire can purify. Let time heal you. Let love be for yourself, not others. Let your past become your wisdom, not your prison. Learn to love your fate."

Rain poured over them. Grail wept, and the rose shimmered. Avenna gasped, vision gone. Storm screamed, blades raised. Lord Verrowind shouted something incoherent from behind a column. But Avenna was calm. She took a breath, steadied her stance. And with all the silence in the world, she threw the knife. It soared through the air like a promise. Straight and true. Right into the heart of Lord Celanthar Verrowind.

He froze and collapsed, gone. Storm shrieked in fury. She turned her blades toward Avenna. But Avenna had already drawn her bow again.

[Avenna – Light Manifestation: Soul Arrows]

She fired once.

-8% HP

She fired again.

-10% HP

And again.

-12% HP

Storm |||||||||||||||| 49%

Storm screamed, staggered, and sobbed.

"*Pour yourself on me…*" whispered all three mouths.

Avenna's hands trembled. Tears spilt down her cheeks. Her light pulsed with grief. She drew one final arrow. The glow flickered. And then it… changed. The arrow turned dark. Like obsidian smoke. Her fingertips blackened, she hesitated. Her heart clenched.

And she let it fly. It struck Storm directly in the heart. Her dress exploded into golden mist. Her faces dissolved into light. She crumbled into stardust, falling

like snow. A vial remained on the marble floor, filled with golden liquid. The storm fell silent. Avenna looked up. A black heron stood on the balcony railing, watching her. Avenna's skin… it was changing. Black crept along her fingers, up her arms. She stepped toward the heron. It did not move. She reached out and touched its wing. Her hand met the feathers of the heron: warm, soft, ancient. And just like that, the world spun away from her.

She wasn't Avenna anymore. She stood beneath an arch of cascading wisteria, the scent of rain and jasmine clinging to the air. Sunlight broke through clouds in golden shafts. There were waterfalls in the distance, crystalline sheets falling into a still lake that rippled with hues of amethyst and teal. The sky above was fractured like glass, pale stars visible even in daylight.

She stepped barefoot through the dewy grass, the hem of her gown whispering over wildflowers. And then she heard it. A voice. Low, melodic and rising in waves… an ancient song that wasn't in any language, but carved itself into her bones all the same. A lullaby for grief. A hymn for lost things. She moved toward it, slowly, as if approaching a holy place. And there, beneath the great willow trees, he stood. *Grail.* But not the warrior she had always known. Not the killer, the masked executioner cloaked in rage and regret. This Grail had no armour. He wore soft, flowing robes of white and gold, the fabric catching the wind like banners of peace. His mask remained, but the ornate golden filigree shimmered in the sunlight, delicate as spider silk. And behind him…

Wings. Two vast wings arched from his back: black as void, yet shimmering with a cosmic sheen. Like the feathers had swallowed starlight. They moved with slow grace, heavy and ancient, unfurling as he sang like a confession to no one but the sky. Each note trembled with sorrow and beauty. With unbearable longing.

Avenna felt something break in her chest. Because this wasn't just Grail as he might be. This was Grail as he truly was, when no one else was watching. Just the soul of a man who had been made into a weapon. A man who was now trying to become something more. She watched herself watching him. Her hands were trembling. Her breath caught in reverence. And she realised, it wasn't his voice that made her weep. It was the way he stood. Always alone. Singing into a world that had never known what to do with the kind of love he carried. A love too fierce, too silent and too loyal to name. She felt her heart scream and ache. This was a soul that had been shattered and reforged again and again. A soul that bled in hope. Hope that maybe, somewhere, someone would see him and not flinch. Hope that even in a world of monsters and wars and fate, someone might still listen to his song.

The music stopped. He turned slightly, sensing her behind the tree. But he didn't speak. He just looked up, into the sunlight cracking through the clouds, and let the silence breathe. Avenna felt herself smile, even as tears slid down her cheeks in the vision. She had seen him before in blood and shadow. But now… she saw him in light.

She was back. The heron took flight, cutting through the air like a shadow torn from the moon. Feathers spiralled around her, black and glistening, soft as whispers yet heavy with omen. She stood in the golden dust of what once was Storm, her chest rising and falling with uneven breaths. Her fingers… blackened, stained with something deeper than soot, tightened around the bow still humming in her grip. The rain soaked through her dress now, clinging like a second skin, but she didn't shiver. Her skin buzzed, veins sparked. Her soul was no longer curled up in the corner, as it was clawing at the sky. And for the first time in years… no, lifetimes, her heart wasn't numb.

Dy's batons cracked through the air like thunder, spinning in precise rhythm as he ducked beneath Ayro's sweeping tail. The scorpion-like stinger slashed across his shoulder, tearing fabric, nearly skin. He hissed through his teeth and rolled to the side.

[Dy – Mirage Reversal]

He launched back with a dual hit to Ayro's exposed leg joint.

-6% HP

Ayro: /////// 25% HP

Ayro turned sharply, her sorrowful lips unmoving, but her aura wailing with pain. She slammed her sword down in a crescent arc at Kolm, whose twin blades vibrated with sonic tremors. He ducked, then countered.

[Kolm – Resonant Slice]

-5% HP

Ayro: |||||| 20% HP

Grail's cloak swept in a wide circle as he parried the next strike with his katana, then stepped into the monster's space, blade raised. His muscles tensed.

[Ayro – Lamenting Strike]

Her sword crashed into his own—he blocked it, barely. But the wave of her melancholic magic rushed through his system like cold guilt. Images, his past, all the people he had failed. Every life taken, every regret whispered against his ribs.

He stumbled, sweat beading on his brow.

[Grail – Soul Severance]

He raised his katana… but didn't swing. He froze. Ayro staggered for a moment, the light from the estate windows glinting off her armour and scorpion limbs. Her lips moved with no sound.

"*You hurt yourself...*"

Grail's hand trembled. She was human once. A girl, a daughter. Another soul twisted, contorted into weaponry.

An arrow of light ripped through the air beside him, so fast it whistled past his cheek.

Ayro: ||||| 0% HP

The arrow struck Ayro in the heart. She froze. Her face tilted skyward as if relieved. Then her body arched backwards, gold spilling from her chest like liquid starlight. She burst into golden dust that danced through the rain like broken moonlight. In the remnants, a single vial landed on the wet ground, shimmering faintly.

Grail turned slowly. And there, just past the drifting particles, bow still stretched in her hand, chest rising with fierce, aching breath… stood Avenna. The wind pushed through her hair, tangling gold threads against the storm. No mask. Her eyes, aflame with determination, locked onto his with such weight that his chest clenched without warning. Though she stood radiant in white and teal, shining like the divine being she was meant to be, something about her was different now. Smoke... A quiet, velvet-black smoke curled at her feet, whispering through the light. It clung to her fingers, those same fingers still wrapped around the bowstring. And behind her were feathers. Black heron feathers, gliding through the wind like silent omens. She looked like a vision torn between heaven and hell.

Kolm, breathing hard and wiping golden ash from his blade, glanced between them.

"Well," he muttered, lips twitching, "remind me never to ghost her on a date."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The rain wept. It poured like mourning across the cobbled streets of Valebright, washing the blood into the gutters, painting the city in streaks of grey, ash, and memory. The once-luminous heart of the Court of Ecliptara had become unrecognisable, a theatre of smoke and rot, swallowed by a creeping madness.

The darkness had taken form… living, writhing, and infecting. It surged through the alleys and arched windows like ink dropped into clear water. Shadows pulsed and breathed, tongues of black mist licking stone walls, curling around lamps and pulling them into eternal night. Wherever it spread, the screams followed. People fell into despair. Their eyes turned empty, veins turned black like cursed rivers beneath the skin. Their mouths gaped, but no words came out. That terrible silence of the Dusk disease, the moment the soul surrendered before the body. A woman screamed. A child sobbed. A building collapsed under the weight of fire and shadow.

"Run!" Avenna shouted over the storm, sprinting toward the sound of that child's cry. A girl, no older than five, huddled under a splintered canopy, clutching a tattered stuffed rabbit, tears mixing with soot on her cheeks. Avenna scooped her up in her arms and turned,

just as a scorpion-legged corpse twisted out of the mist behind her. Grail's blade flew across the air, slicing through it in a single arc, and the monster collapsed in a heap of brittle limbs and shattered breath.

"There!" A mother sat atop a broken-down horse cart, desperately slapping the reins. The horse refused to move, eyes wide, legs trembling. Avenna ran to her, child in her arms, heart thudding against her ribs.

"Here!" she said, lifting the girl into the woman's embrace.

The mother reached down with both hands, eyes wet and thankful. "Light protect you, thank you!"

"Run!" Avenna barked again, slapping the side of the cart. The horse jolted forward, finally obeying. The wheels groaned over cobblestone, fading into the fog. Avenna turned and raised her hands, palms glowing with searing light. The shadows recoiled. Just for a moment, they hissed and trembled at her brilliance, backing off like animals fearing fire. It gave her just enough space to move.

Across the city, the others were spread, ushering civilians through alleyways, shielding them behind glowing blades and magic sigils. Vier slashed through a cloaked figure consumed by rot and smoke. Dy lifted a toddler into his arms, whispering something soft, his eyes shining. Kolm broke a window to pull a family out, shielding them with his own body as a blast of corrupted wind tore through a nearby tower.

There was no winning this. Only saving who they could. Time blurred. Hours melted beneath blood and

smoke and burning daylight. The rain became mist. The screams dulled into sobs. And when at last the sun lifted above the charred rooftops of Valebright, it felt... wrong. Invasive. Like hope didn't belong here anymore.

The members of The Eternal Slumber stood in the centre of what had once been a square. Now it was a grave. Blackened stone, corpses littered in every direction, some with open eyes, some holding hands. A merchant lay curled against a burnt fruit stall. A child in a red scarf was cradled in his sister's arms, unmoving. Kolm stood in silence. Then he screamed. The raw, animal roar of heartbreak. He struck the ground with his blades, again and again, sparks flying with each impact. "This was my home!" he bellowed, voice cracking. "This was my fucking home!"

No one stopped him. Not Vier, who stood with his head low. Not Dy, whose tears flowed silently. Not Grail, who crouched beside a broken toy on the ground… a wooden marionette with one leg missing. He turned it in his palm, slowly and carefully. It was small and delicate. Meant for laughter. Now just a relic of innocence lost. He said nothing. Only looked up when Dy's voice finally broke the silence.

"What now?" he asked. "What... do we do now?"

They all turned to Avenna. She stood apart, quiet, her bow still in her hand. Her fingers… blackened. The strange dark shimmer that crawled up her skin glowed faintly under the rising sun. Smoke still drifted behind her. Her gown was torn, and blood and dust clung to the fabric. Yet she stood tall: statuesque, battle-worn, but

radiant.

Grail stepped closer, concern in his voice. "Your hands..." he said, softly. "Is it the Dusk?"

She didn't answer at first. Just looked down at her fingers and touched them as if they belonged to someone else. Her breath was steady, but her eyes... her eyes were somewhere far away.

"I don't think so," she finally said. "I don't feel like it's killing me. Or consuming me."

Grail's brow furrowed. "Then what is it?"

Avenna turned her face to the sky. The clouds still loomed heavy, but far in the distance, above the ruins and fading rain, something moved. A black heron. It soared quietly, cutting through the air like ink through water, flying westward. Away from Valebright and toward the sea.

"Atlantia."

Grail blinked. "What?"

She turned toward them all, her expression unreadable. "We're going to Atlantia."

Kolm scoffed, wiping at his face with his sleeve. "Why?"

Avenna didn't smile. But something about her face softened. She looked toward the sea again, the heron now a speck in the sky.

"I don't know," she said. "But my heart tells me... the answers are waiting there."

The port was chaos. Sailcloth flapped in the wind like torn wings. Ropes creaked, voices screamed, crates

crashed… Bourne of desperation, of fear, of the sour stench of death chasing them from behind. Citizens rushed in droves toward any ship that still had room, dragging children, possessions, and hope behind them. The storm from the night before had passed, but the air still smelled of smoke, and the clouds above the sea rolled in slow, dark spirals like bruises on the sky.

The Eternal Slumber cut through the crowd like silent wolves. Blood-soaked, exhausted, their presence alone forced a path through the mob. Near the edge of the dock, a rough-looking trading ship was being loaded by a haggard crew. The name carved into the side read Windward, its hull weathered and grey, barnacles clinging like scars. The sails were off-white and threadbare, patched too many times to count. A snarling mermaid carved into the prow grinned at the waves with a chipped fang.

A man with a crooked nose and salt-stained coat barked orders, kicking a crate with one foot while chewing on a stem of blackroot. Grail approached him directly.

"You heading for Atlantia?" His voice cut the air like steel.

The man turned, brow raised. "What of it?"

Grail didn't bother with words. He reached into his cloak and pulled out a pouch. The sound of coins jingling silenced a nearby sailor. He tossed it at the man's feet.

The captain looked down. "I don't take civilians," he scoffed. "You want to flee, join the others at the

refugee dock. We're a trading vessel, not a ferry."

"We're not civilians," Grail replied flatly. "But I'll happily cut the throats of your crew and commandeer the vessel if that's what it takes."

The captain narrowed his eyes.

Grail stepped forward, slow and cold. "Fortunately for you, I'm in a foul mood, and I'd rather not stain my blades any more than necessary. So I'm offering a trade. Gold for passage. Same destination. No questions."

The captain looked at the pouch again, then chuckled low in his throat. "I like your attitude. Welcome aboard."

The ocean stretched like obsidian glass beneath them. Waves moved like sleeping breath, rising and falling in a lazy rhythm beneath the *Windward*. The sails caught wind with a soft sigh, and the ship cut through the water like a dagger through velvet. Gulls circled lazily in the grey sky, and every now and then, a fish broke the surface with a soft splash. The ship creaked with every wave, its wood groaning under age and weight. Ropes swayed above like crooked spider legs, and the flag atop the mast bore the crest of a long-faded trading house.

Kolm hung over the railing, green as envy, moaning into the sea.

"If I die," he muttered, "I want Morphea to know it wasn't her darkness that killed me… it was the gods-damned ocean."

Dy sat perched high in the rigging, cross-legged,

arms stretched to the wind, humming a soft melody. His braids fluttered behind him like a banner. Vier stood near the mast, polishing his sword, quiet as ever. His foot tapped rhythmically, in tune with the humming, though he'd never admit it. And at the very front of the ship, seated beside the snarling mermaid figurehead, was Grail. Avenna climbed beside him, steadying herself on the damp wood as the wind tugged impatiently at her cloak. The narrow ledge offered little room, and when her foot slipped on the salt-slick rail, she lost her balance with a startled breath. Grail moved before the fall could claim her. His hand closed firmly around her waist, steady and unyielding, and he pulled her back and guided her down so that she sat in front of him instead, her back to his chest, her face turned toward the restless ocean stretching endlessly ahead.

For a moment, she remained still, feeling the ghost of the slip still trembling in her muscles. Behind her, Grail adjusted his position slightly, bracing his boots against the curved wood beneath them. The wind swept across the prow with sharp, biting fingers, and he noticed the faint shiver that ran through her shoulders. Without a word, he stretched his arms forward, slow enough to give her time to refuse, and wrapped them around her. The movement was deliberate, almost cautious, yet there was something inevitable in the way he drew her in, like a spider drawing silk around something fragile it intended to keep.

Avenna did not pull away. Instead, she leaned back into him, letting the warmth of his body shield her

from the cutting wind. His embrace closed around her fully then, his forearms crossing lightly at her waist as the ship cut through the dark waters. She could feel the steady rhythm of his heart through the thin layers between them, strong and calm, and her own pulse responded with a nervous flutter, quick and light like the beating wings of a trapped butterfly.

They watched the waves for a long while without speaking. The ocean moved like liquid glass beneath the moon, the ship's prow slicing through it with a low, endless murmur.

After a long silence, Grail's voice broke the moment. "Are you afraid?"

Avenna kept her eyes on the distant horizon.

"I used to be." The wind caught a strand of her hair and tossed it across her cheek. "I used to be angry, too. Furious at the world. I wanted to change everything." Her voice softened slightly. "Then I became sad when I realised I couldn't."

She inhaled slowly, tasting salt on the air.

"But now… now I'm learning to accept it. Accept that I'm changing. That I can't control everything."

"You sound braver," Grail said quietly behind her. "You took your mask off."

Avenna smiled faintly. "I'm just done hiding."

She shifted slightly in his arms and turned her head enough that he could see her profile, the moonlight tracing the lines of her face.

"Once my mask was protection," she whispered. "Now it's just… a wall. And I don't want walls anymore.

I want to meet the world as I am. Scarred, cracked and raw."

For a moment, Grail did not answer. His gaze lingered on the endless horizon ahead of them.

"I respect that," he said at last. "I hope one day I can do the same."

They sat together in silence again, the ship rising and dipping gently with the swell of the sea. The world felt suspended in that quiet space between waves.

Then the vessel shuddered.

Only slightly, but enough to break the fragile stillness.

Grail's arms loosened at once as he rose to his feet with fluid urgency. Avenna blinked in surprise, steadying herself on the railing.

"What?"

He was already moving toward the helm, his voice sharp now as it cut through the night wind.

"Captain!" he barked. "What was that?"

The man was staring at the water, expression gone pale.

"Oh, gods preserve us," he muttered, reaching for a harpoon. "We've stirred him."

Grail narrowed his eyes. "Who?"

The captain turned. "Bloodjaw. The Leviathan. Call him what you want, he's the reason half the fleet never returns. Ancient beast. Sleeps below the Spine Trench. We just woke him up."

The ship's bell rang sharply.

"Battle stations!" the captain screamed.

Sailors scrambled. Cannons rolled into place. Spears, crossbows, and ropes all scrambled into ready hands. Grail unsheathed both blades. The water stilled. Then it burst, a roar like hell split the ocean. A massive form erupted from the depths, a beast of sinew and bone and rot. Seaweed clung to its gnarled back, barnacles splitting off its spines. Its head alone was the size of a house, with four jaws that unfolded like petals of death, rows upon rows of jagged teeth yawning open.

Bloodjaw ||||||||||||||||||||||||| 100%

Its eyes were black stars, no soul, no mercy. The tail slammed the surface, sending tidal waves across the ship. Avenna barely held on as crates flew and a sailor was thrown overboard, vanishing in seconds.

"Steady!" Grail shouted.

Bloodjaw swam beneath the ship, vanishing for a breath, then bursting up again, mouth wide, jaws snapping near the rudder.

"We'll never outrun it!" Dy shouted from the mast.

Kolm clutched the railing. "No shit!"

"Guns ready!" the captain shouted. "Hit its eyes if you can!"

A blast, but a miss. The crew tried, firing steel and fire, but the beast was fast. Too fast. Grail stared at it and studied it. Then he turned and sprinted.

"What are you doing?!" Avenna shouted, her voice raw.

He didn't answer. He was already climbing the mast. The wind ripped through his teal cloak.

"Grail!!" Avenna screamed, but he didn't turn.

He reached the top post, standing against the sky, and then he jumped. Straight toward death. Straight toward Bloodjaw's head.

The sea boiled. Grail clung to the curling horns of Bloodjaw, his hands bleeding, the beast's thick, salt-slick scales rising and falling beneath him like mountainous terrain. Wind howled around him, thunder cracking overhead. The sky had turned black, stitched with veins of lightning, just enough light to flash across the beast's thousand teeth as it screamed into the storm. The beast dove, dragging Grail beneath the surface. He held on. Water crashed into him like fists, and he lost his grip for a breathless second, then caught the ridge of its spine, hauling himself up just as Bloodjaw surged up from the depths again, breaching like a god of old wrath.

Grail climbed its skull with ruthless momentum, boots digging into flesh, one blade in hand, the other lost somewhere in the churning tide. The crew screamed from the ship, cannons thundered, bolts fired into the waves. Avenna stood at the edge, her hands trembling around her bow, light gathering like breath in her palms.

"TAKE YOUR BITE!" Grail roared, leaping midair, cloak snapping. Sword overhead like lightning incarnate. The monster shrieked and snapped its jaws shut on him.

"GRAIL!" Avenna screamed, stumbling forward.

Bloodjaw vanished beneath the sea, the waves devouring him whole. Silence. Only the wind. Only the sound of thunder retreating. Then… Bloodjaw erupted

again, rearing from the water like a mountain breaking through the ocean. Its cry rattled the air, glass shattering on deck, men covering their ears. Avenna gasped. There, through the gaping maw of the beast, a blade… piercing upward. From the inside, it jutted through its nose with grotesque elegance, golden and bloody.

The monster's jaws cracked open, and Grail was there. Alive, barely, arms braced against the top and bottom, holding them apart with the last shreds of his strength. His face was shredded with scratches, his cloak in tatters, blood pouring hot and steady from his chest.

"Avenna!" he roared, voice breaking against the tide. "Fire your fucking arrow!"

Her breath caught. The bow trembled in her hands, fingers poised but frozen. If she missed, even by a breath, she'd drive the arrow through him, not the beast. Light swelled between her fingers, blinding in its purity, forged from the ache in her chest and the fire in her soul. But her heart stuttered, refusing to release.

Grail's arms quivered, his body buckling beneath the crushing weight of the jaws. His teeth were bared, his expression wild with pain. He was slipping.

"Avenna… now!"

Her hand shook, the world narrowing to him, his scream, the blood, the desperation in his eyes. She loosed the arrow with a strangled whisper. "Please…"

It flew, and time fractured. She watched it cut through the air, a streak of blinding promise, straight into the beast's gaping maw. The explosion was instant, a detonation of searing white light that tore flesh and bone

apart. Bloodjaw shrieked, its jaw splintering, skin cracking as fire poured down its throat. But the sound wasn't only the monster's, it was Grail's scream too, raw and broken, ripped from his lungs as the arrow struck true. He howled, wrenching his sword free from the monster's nose, flipping with one last surge of defiance. He carved down through jaw, neck, chest, belly, splitting the monster as its death-cry merged with his own.

Blood and water and light. Bloodjaw collapsed with a final, deafening screech, waves crashing as it sank into the abyss, dragging Grail with it.

"No!" Avenna's scream tore her throat raw, sharp enough to shatter her own heart. Without a word, Vier dove in after him, his form slicing into the water with practised grace.

Seconds passed. Then, two heads surfaced. Vier, dragging Grail's limp form to the ship. Kolm and Dy reached down, hauling him aboard with a rope. Avenna dropped to her knees beside him, hands already glowing with trembling light. She pushed her power into him, but the moment her light touched his chest, Grail groaned, his body rejecting it.

She yanked her hands back. "No… no, no, no... My arrow, it... the celestial light... I hurt him."

Kolm looked at the wound. "That thing went through him?"

"I didn't mean to…" Avenna's voice broke.

"It's fine," Grail rasped, half-conscious. "You made it... dramatic."

"You're bleeding out," she whispered. "My

healing light doesn't work on celestial damage. I can close the other wounds, but not that. I…"

"Land ho!" the captain shouted from the helm. "I see the coast!"

Avenna stood, her voice urgent. "Help me. We need to move him. Now."

The others gathered around, lifting Grail carefully. His sword still hung from his side, stained with blood and light. As they carried him toward the lower quarters, Avenna turned one last glance at the sea, where black feathers floated gently on the surface. She didn't know what was waiting for them in Atlantia.

But she knew who she was carrying toward it. And she would not let him die.

◇

The screen froze on the last frame of Avenna's glowing figure, bow still raised, Grail lying in the arms of his team. Elowen exhaled slowly, hand hovering over her mouse. Her room fell quiet, apart from the chaos erupting in the group chat.

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *HOLY SHIT*.

[**SombreSky**]**:** *THAT WAS WILD*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *Bro I need a cigarette*

[**BLDome**]**:** *…why is my man always nearly dead??*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Let the record show: I called it. She was gonna shoot him. Take that aim, baby!*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *I DIDN'T THINK SHE'D ACTUALLY DO IT THO*

[**BLDome**]**:** *YEAH OKAY THANKS FOR THE ARROW TO THE HEART, ELLA*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Oh please, you LITERALLY jumped into a sea monster's mouth…*

Elowen laughed, leaning back in her chair, cheeks still flushed with adrenaline and glee as she rubbed her temples. The chat was still flying.

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *Nah, seriously, Ella. That was insane. The pacing, the tone… chef's kiss.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *RIP Grail, my man*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Okay, but… am I alive next session or nah?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *No promises.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Rude. I want a healing arc. Grail deserves soup and redemption.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *He deserves therapy.*

Elowen chuckled again, fingers dancing across the keys.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Honestly, I'm so happy with how it's going. Some things shifted, like Grail was originally supposed to get injured during training, but someone decided to be dramatic…*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Don't blame me for being cinematic.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *It was cooler, tbh.*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Next session tomorrow? Same time?*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *I'll be there. Already emotionally ruined.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *Sleep tight. Don't let the trauma monsters bite.*

Elowen smiled, warmth blooming quietly in her chest. She closed the laptop with a soft click and padded into the kitchen. Another mug of tea. Steam curled upward as she wrapped her hands around the cup, letting the heat ground her.

Ding.

[**BLDome**]**:** *That game is gonna be a hit, you know.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *You did an amazing job.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *I hope Grail survives, though.*

She grinned into her cup and typed back:

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *No guarantees in life. Especially not with sea monsters.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Cruel. But fair.*

A pause.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Also… are you feeling better than last time? You seemed kind of low.*

Elowen blinked, her smile softening.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Yeah. I am.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Good.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *You've been carrying a lot lately.*

She reread his words, her chest tightening.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Thanks. That means a lot. Really. The concert helped.*

There was a pause before his reply came through.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Did it take the edge off? The anxiety, I mean.*

She hesitated, then typed honestly.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *At first, no. I felt so overstimulated. Too many people, too much noise. My chest was tight, and I*

thought I'd just panic and run. But eventually… it melted into the music. And that's what saved me.

[**BLDome**]**:** *I get that.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *I suffer from social anxiety, too. Badly. On stage, it feels like I'm someone else, like the world blurs into lights and sound… but once I step off, it's brutal. My hands shake so badly that I can't even hold a pen sometimes.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *It's like an internal scream, right? The only reason I don't freeze is that I learned how to mask. People don't see it. They see me smiling, chatting, like I'm calm… but under the table, my hands won't stop fidgeting, my heart's about to explode, and my brain won't shut up about everything I said. Did I overshare? Was I too blunt? Did I make them uncomfortable? It's exhausting.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *How do you even live with that?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Practice. Years of it. I've trained myself to hold back, even with my closest friend. I don't talk about my special interests much because I know it might bore her. I've learned to cut myself short, even when I'm burning inside to share.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *That sounds… hard. Not being able to be yourself.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *It is. Writing is my only outlet. It's lonely sometimes, because despite being unsociable, I wish I had just one person I could pour it all out to without judgment. Someone who wouldn't think I'm too much, or weird, or annoying. Just… listen.*

There was a long pause before his reply appeared.

[**BLDome**]**:** *If you ever feel like saying something blunt, embarrassing, or messy… say it to me. No judgment.*

Her throat tightened.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Thank you. Really. That means more than you know.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Did you always have anxiety?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Yeah. Always. It's frustrating, because I don't want to seem rude. And now with the band growing… It's harder. Even though we barely exist online and try to stay unrecognisable, people are starting to notice. Sometimes I get stopped on the street, and I freeze. My mind empties. I feel like if I try to leave, they'll think I'm an asshole. But staying there makes my chest lock up.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *That must be awful. I can imagine. Honestly, I'd probably lose my mind if I ever saw Grail in person.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Lose your mind?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Yeah. I'd want to shake his hand, but also probably stare at his eyes like a creep while panicking not to say: 'Hey, so, I'd love your reading list because your vocabulary is insane; also information on your rituals and creative process so I could level up like you, everything that makes you tick because I admire your stubbornness and genius… and please don't think this is a love confession but do you want to be my friend so we can share ideas?"*

[**BLDome**]**:** *lol That's 100% a confession. And if Grail has anxiety too, you'd both just stand there shaking, staring at each other in pure awkwardness.*

She laughed softly, shaking her head.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *No, he'd just walk past me. He wouldn't think anything of me… another fan.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *You should give yourself more credit. He was also once a fan, you know.*

Her fingers hovered, then she remembered his words: no judgment.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *You know what? I truly believe Grail and I could be friends. As a pure creative connection. Like twin souls who understand struggle, creativity, and the world differently.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *ugh soul flames and cosmic twin shit.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *lol No. not like that! Some connections are just raw understanding. Look at typical bonds… painters and poets, musicians and muses… just soul and raw connection.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Maybe. But with Grail… it might be hard for him to even notice that, when so many fans see him as some cult deity and drool over him. Half the crowd prefers their phone screens to actually listening.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *True. But there are two sides to this. His image is a show, a performance. It pulls people in, because whether we like it or not, humans judge by the cover. There's psychology and biology behind it.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Go on.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *It's natural to be drawn to sex… on a primal level. Sex means life, survival, pleasure and beauty. It's aesthetics. Once, it was worshipped. Only later did the church make it shameful. Sexual energy is sensation… It's ascension and spirituality. Performers lean into that because it makes people feel something in a world that numbs us with overstimulation. But if the music sucked? No one would stay*

for the abs. It's his songs, his feelings, his soul… that's the fire people gather around. The sexual aura? That's just the spark.

[**BLDome**]**:** *…I never thought of it that way. But you're right. Same with your books, huh? No matter how brilliant inside, if the cover doesn't grab, fewer will look. People are built to perceive with their eyes first.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Exactly. But the ones who really see will find the depth anyway. Music without lyrics can still paint colours, spark visions, even make paragraphs spill into my head.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Really? Give me an example.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Half my scenes are born from music. No words, just sound. It's like the melody grabs my hand and drags the story out of me.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *That's wild. I want to see that in action.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *lol Maybe one day.*

They wrapped up the call, but before she could log off, another message popped up.

[**BLDome**]**:** *One more thing. Sending you a file. Listen to this. Don't overthink, just… write something. Show me what you mean.*

The file downloaded. She clicked it, and a soft piano filled her headphones. Gentle, haunting and alive. Elowen smiled, curled into her blanket, and drifted to sleep with the piano playing like a lullaby in the dark.

The weekend air was crisp, the scent of autumn clinging faintly to the wind as Elowen stepped into Thea's warm little house. Laughter filled the garden as her son and Thea's children ran through the trees

swinging plastic swords while their feet carried pure joy. In the kitchen, Elowen sat at the table with both hands wrapped around a floral mug. Steam curled from the tea like a lazy spirit rising. Thea leaned back against the counter, watching her quietly.

"You seem... brighter," Thea said softly, tucking her knees up onto the chair like she always did when the house was still. "Are you feeling better?"

Elowen nodded, her gaze flicking out the window where the trees danced in the breeze. "I'm fine. Busy again. I've been working on books again, and it just… I don't know. Feels like something's shifted. Like life's started clicking again."

Thea raised her eyebrows and grinned. "I don't remember the last time you were this consumed. And that's saying something. I was honestly worried, after Connor… you'd lost the books along with everything else."

Elowen smiled quietly. "Maybe I needed time. The breakup… it drained more out of me than I thought. Not just emotionally, but creatively. And I blamed myself for a long time." Her voice lowered, eyes softening with the weight of memory. "I knew I hurt him," she admitted. "And he wasn't a bad person. He was kind and gentle despite all his negative traits. Just... not what I needed."

Thea sipped her tea, staying quiet as Elowen slowly spiralled into the past.

"I was tired," she whispered. "So tired. Doing the chores, raising a child, working full-time, writing at

night. And every time I found energy to create something, to build something… he'd pull me back." She scoffed. "Even normal conversations became loops. I'd tell him something, explain something, and by the third time he asked about it like we'd never talked before, I just... stopped. I shut down. Because clearly, my words didn't matter."

Thea put her cup down gently. Her expression was calm, patient, but her eyes burned with quiet fire.

"I felt like I didn't even exist anymore. Like I was disappearing. I didn't have a corner of my own, not even inside my own head. I was constantly suppressing myself to survive his moods. Managing his perception of me was like a job. And when I did break… when I yelled or melted down, it was me who ended up in the bathroom, crying, convinced I was failing everyone."

Thea leaned forward, jaw tight, elbows braced on the table. "You were overwhelmed because you were doing everything alone," she said softly. "Emotionally, logistically. Sometimes even financially. Connor was not a partner, hun, he was a weight. He drained you and dismissed your overstimulation. Invalidated your experience. Played the victim when you needed support. And when you snapped under the pressure, you were the one who carried the guilt."

Elowen lowered her gaze.

Thea added, voice firmer. "You're human. One who was pushed too far for too long, with no space to breathe. The anger? Justified. The meltdown? Expected. The guilt? Misplaced. You had every right to be furious…

at him, at life, even at yourself for choices made in survival mode. But don't sit in shame. You did the best you could in a hostile environment, with no margin for error."

She reached out, fingers brushing Elowen's knuckles.

"You weren't tired because you're weak, El. You were tired because you've been carrying too much for too long. Because your nervous system was running on high alert in a place that should have been your sanctuary… and instead, it suffocated you."

There was a pause, then Thea tilted her head, narrowing her eyes playfully. "Though I do think that mysterious café musician might have something to do with your little spark lately."

Elowen groaned. "You and your conspiracies."

Thea raised both hands in mock innocence. "I'm just saying."

Elowen chuckled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Not every connection has to be a love story."

"But there's a connection?"

Elowen paused, then nodded slowly. "There is. He's… different. Quiet and sharp-minded. A little awkward, just like me. And yes, we have a lot in common… music, philosophy, games. It's that rare feeling of being seen. We both carry scars, luggage, and demons. I'm not looking for a Netflix rom-com or a bestselling novella storyline. I just want peace. And with him, I don't feel the need to shrink myself. And in all honesty, if it stays in these occasional café meetings and

chats… so be it. It's more wholesome than any fake connections I thought I had."

"Fair enough."

She leaned back, calm in her voice now. "I'm chasing wholeness, you know. And if someone wants to meet me there… scars and all… they're welcome."

Thea lifted her mug. "To wholeness."

Elowen clinked her cup against it. "To home within yourself."

The wind moved gently through the narrow streets of the city as Elowen took a stand under the subdued sky while her boots left scratches on the ground, and she remained patient. As the sun descended slowly towards the horizon, it painted London's architecture with a soft golden light. She gripped her coat closer to her body while her fingers adjusted the bag strap as she studied people moving around her.

Then, from a distance, a familiar shape. Noah. He made his way toward her with the same subtle and reserved awkwardness she anticipated while a bashful half-smile played on his lips. His scarf was slightly crooked, beanie was under a hood.

"Hey," he said, voice soft.

She smiled and waved. "Hi."

They reached the art shop quickly and entered its bright interior, where endless rows of paints, brushes, and canvases stretched out like treasure maps. Elowen disappeared between aisles in seconds. Noah followed her slowly, watching as her fingers drifted over acrylic

sets as though she were handling holy relics. Her brows knitted in thought, lips slightly pouting as her eyes scanned the shelves like she was deciphering an ancient language only she understood.

She selected two green shades, studied them, exchanged one for a darker tone, then hovered over the golds. He caught the way she picked up a brush, weighed it in her hand, then… hesitated. Her mouth tugged into a small, awkward smile as she set it back, almost guiltily, before moving on without a word.

Noah tilted his head. It happened again with another brush. Then a palette knife. Each time she held something longer than a second, she ended up retreating, placing it back neatly, as if afraid she'd been caught stealing.

Finally, he stepped closer. "Are the materials not good enough?"

Her cheeks warmed. She shook her head. "They're… a bit pricey."

That stopped him. "Pricey?" His brows lifted. "Don't worry about that. I'm buying them anyway."

She gulped, eyes darting away. "Regardless of who pays, I'm not sure what's acceptable. I rarely go over a fiver for a paintbrush."

Noah stared at her. Silent, then glancing from her to the shelves, then back again. His expression was part surprise, part disbelief.

"Elowen," he said finally, voice steady, "today, ignore the price. If it makes you feel better, think of it as a job. Payment for your craft. I'm hiring you to paint my

wall. That's all."

She bit her lip, reluctant, but eventually nodded. Still, he noticed how she kept steering toward the cheapest sets, the budget brushes, never once reaching for the professional-grade supplies that made her eyes light up.

When they stepped back out onto the street with her small bag of materials, Noah let the silence sit before asking, "When was the last time you treated yourself? Properly. Like a shopping spree, or buying something you really wanted, no hesitation."

She thought about it, chewing on her cheek. "A year ago. I bought this interactive book, Beauty and the Beast. Beautiful golden title, little puzzles inside. It cost twenty-five pounds, and I stood there in the shop for twenty minutes debating whether I could justify it."

He blinked at her, amusement breaking across his face. "That's it? That's your big indulgence?"

She frowned, baffled. "That is plenty. Money isn't my strong point... I've learned to spare every penny."

He studied her for a moment, then asked, "So what would you do if you won the lottery?"

She laughed. "Oh, I've got a whole list."

"Of course you do."

"First," she said dreamily, "I'd get an accountant. I need someone responsible to help me with money. Then, I'd buy a cosy little house. Five bedrooms and a garden."

"Five?" He looked at her sideways.

"One for me, one for Hugo. A guest room. A gaming room. And one just for me…my witchy library

and writing room. Then I'd tend to my garden. Grow a cherry blossom and a pine tree. Make a vegetable patch with a big greenhouse, stained glass on the windows. A pergola with grapevine or wisteria climbing up it. And under it, a rocking chair where I could sit and read while it rains. Oh, and plenty of fairy lights. Like an insane amount of them."

He smiled despite himself.

"And I'd pay off my family's debts. Help my friend with her mortgage. Put something aside for Hugo's future. Maybe buy a tiny corner shop, make it into a whimsical café-bookshop for introverts. The kind of place where you don't have to talk to the staff if you don't want to, where you can just sit with your coffee, write, and be left alone. I'd hire people to run it, of course… I'm hopelessly unsociable, so I'd only visit to sit in the back and write."

"And the rest of the money?"

She smirked. "Emergency fund. Maybe tickets for The Eternal Slumber if they tour again."

Noah was quiet for a long moment, then looked away, a smile tugging at his lips.

"What?" she asked, narrowing her eyes.

"Nothing. You're just…" He shook his head, half laughing. "You're nothing like anyone I've met. Completely bonkers. But in a good way."

She tilted her head, thoughtful, before asking, "What about you? What would you do with a big sum of money?"

He shrugged. "Buy a home. Maybe a few, so I

could travel and have my own space. Large land, no neighbours. A few pairs of jogging trousers because they're comfy. Maybe build myself a good gaming PC. And the rest…" He glanced at her sidelong, lips twitching. "I'd buy you that rocking chair."

Her laugh broke bright into the evening air. "Guess we're both the type who don't really know what to do with money."

He smiled back, but didn't say the rest of what he thought, that she knew exactly what to do with it. She'd already built herself a world.

The subway journey offered quiet comfort to its passengers. She spent most of her time staring out the window while lost in thought, and he took occasional glances at her whenever she wasn't looking his way. She followed him through a quiet, upscale section of London upon arrival. Vintage lamps lined the streets, which led to ivy-covered building facades and red brick buildings that featured tall windows.

"Nice area," Elowen said, glancing around.

"Mm," he nodded. "Haven't been here long… Originally from a smaller town. Ended up here for work… You know, music stuff."

She raised an eyebrow. "Mm… My gaming friend Dome is just as secretive as you."

His gaze met hers and lingered briefly longer than intended. "Oh?"

The house was unexpected. She anticipated a minimalist modern design with clinical elements. Instead, it was warm. Old hardback books with damaged

covers and stacks of paperbacks formed miniature towers on every flat surface. The fireplace mantel displayed vintage candle holders. The wall held a wooden clock that carved its rhythm into the room through ticking sounds. The couch appeared invitingly plush and well-used, with a blanket casually draped to one side. Mismatched frames displayed photos that captured different moments rather than any human subjects. A foggy lake, sheet music.

It was… old-soul. The atmosphere was not characterised by dust or outdated styles but exhibited profound personal touches and rich layers. This house communicated through its quiet stories rather than loud aesthetic displays. The corner of the living room held a humming PC tower next to a sleek gaming chair. The gaming console beside it displayed a frozen game scene on its screen. The juxtaposition made her smile.

"You game a lot?"

He shrugged. "When I can. I like the immersion."

She nodded. "Same. I find gaming especially appealing when real life becomes overwhelming."

Through a tight corridor, he guided her until they reached a room protected by double glass doors. "Here's the studio."

It was a dining room once, clearly. But now? The room featured a grand piano, which dominated the area with its shiny black finish and beautiful patina of use. Production equipment filled one wall with a keyboard and synth pads while mixers and monitors complemented the setup. The corner held a couple of

guitars, with one acoustic and one electric, both exhibiting signs of frequent use. A low couch stood by the wide window where a mug sat half-full of an abandoned drink. Elowen's eyes wandered to the far wall. A giant, perfectly white, untouched expanse.

She gasped. "Oh. Here's the culprit."

Noah rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah. I assumed nobody could solve this problem except you."

She approached while carrying brushes and paints in her arms. Her fingers reached out, almost reverently. "This is going to be fun."

Elowen maintained a distance from the wall while she stood with crossed arms and her head tilted and lips pursed as she contemplated deeply. Art supplies were spread across the coffee table, including brushes and paints, while her open bag continued to spill out materials like a magician's overflowing pocket.

She faced Noah, who stood silently observing while holding a beverage. "So... any preferences? Colours? Shapes? Your soul in a visual metaphor?"

He smiled faintly and shook his head. "I trust you. Go wild. I'm genuinely content with whatever creation you produce."

She playfully called his words dangerous as she took his offered drink. "This head is full of weird."

"I've noticed."

Elowen sipped her drink with a grin before getting down to her knees beside the coffee table. After opening a new paint set, she organised her brushes with

surgical precision before arranging everything with deliberate grace. She dismissed his need to entertain her with a quick look over her shoulder. "My plan is to stay for several hours if it's not a bother, but I'll have to return another day as well if it's ok. Feel free to game or pretend I don't exist by disappearing if you need to."

Noah leaned against the piano. "I've begun experimenting with several new song ideas lately. Mind if I play while you paint?"

Elowen's smile was small, but warm. "You can go ahead if you're okay with me falling into a painting trance and maybe leaving some paint on your floor.

"Fair trade."

He settled himself at the piano bench and lifted the fallboard with the same familiar reverence as someone who handled music as if it were delicate glass. First, he struck a few quiet notes to test the tone before writing in his worn leather pad. Elowen rolled up her sleeves.

And then it began.

Noah looked at her while she paused briefly to hold a paintbrush that appeared capable of painting an entire wall with one stroke. The paintbrush was at least as big as Noah's hand. She submerged the oversized paintbrush into a massive bucket filled with intense blue paint before quickly applying the initial stroke to the pristine white wall.

He blinked. The brush moved again. And again. The wall surrendered. A blur of motion and deep blue tones layered with richer shades emerged as streaks of teal

and mossy green merged across the painting surface. From the bottom emerged darker blue shades, which seemed to depict the essence of depth. Her movements embodied a feral precision as she was driven by purpose… she painted as if she was setting free something living within the canvas.

Noah produced gentle musical notes that did not disturb the atmosphere but rather functioned like a sacred soundtrack. From one note to the next, his eyes constantly returned to her. Her breath held as she pulled a line across the canvas. Her faint hum accompanied each layer of colour she added. She didn't speak. Didn't even look at him. She was gone, entirely inside it.

The span of two and a half hours seemed to disappear into a dreamlike state. He lifted his gaze from his notes once more and discovered the wall had transformed. It was a painting… no, a world. The sea spanned the entire space with a deep, calm surface that reflected a glowing moon positioned in the centre under a twilight sky blending deep navy with silver-infused indigo. She created small bursts of white above the painting, which resembled stars scattered across the night sky as if forming a constellation whose name only she knew.

As she moved back, Noah watched her brow rise while her brush dangled loosely in her hand.

She gave a weary smile and commented, "Not bad." A blue streak marred her cheek. Her hands were covered in smudges. Her jumper had surrendered to paint splatter.

He blinked. "Not bad?"

She shrugged one shoulder. "It's not done yet. A few more highlights and additional detail work will complete this piece. I will need to return once the paint has dried."

He smiled, warm and easy. "You can come back anytime."

Elowen finished her fifth teacup by taking a substantial sip. "You'll see... once I paint your kitchen fridge, you'll change your tune."

They both laughed. Eventually, she slumped into the little sofa near the window. Noah leaned back in his chair, watching her fingers absently trace the rim of her teacup. Then, as if the thought had been circling for a while, he said quietly, "I made music for that poem of yours."

Elowen's head snapped up. Her eyes widened, interest sparking like fire catching on dry wood. "You did?"

He gave a small shrug, but his lips curved with a hint of pride. "Yeah. Want to hear it?"

Her whole face lit up, brighter than he'd ever seen it. "Yes. Please." The words tumbled out too quickly, followed by a laugh, her grin spreading wide and unguarded.

He stood, crossed to his laptop, and clicked a few buttons. A low hum filled the room, then the sound of a piano drifted through the speakers… slow, deep, each note like it was sinking into the bones of the walls. A heartbeat later, soft drumming entered, steady and

deliberate, the kind that pulled you under rather than pushed you forward. Then came the guitar, smooth, aching, climbing and falling like waves hitting a midnight shore. It had that haunting quality, heavy yet delicate, a song that pressed against the chest instead of just filling the air.

Noah let his eyes flick to her. Elowen sat completely still at first, then closed her eyes, her lips parting in the smallest sigh. Her shoulders loosened. She swayed, just a little, as if the rhythm touched something buried beneath her skin. And then that smile… wide, radiant, so alive it seemed to melt the shadows right out of her. He'd never seen her smile like that.

The music wound down, the last note lingering in the silence like smoke. He cleared his throat softly. "I'll finish it. Add more detail. And when it's ready… I'll sing."

Elowen opened her eyes, cheeks flushed, her whole expression brimming with delight. "It's perfect," she whispered. Then louder, grinning, "It's absolutely perfect."

"Thanks."

"You're very talented, you know," Elowen said softly, fingers tapping against her mug.

Noah's lips tugged into a small smile, half-grateful, half-shy. "I'm trying. It's… not easy. I only just parted ways with my previous manager."

Her brows lifted. "Oh? How come?"

He shifted, clearly uncomfortable. "Disagreements." A pause. "Maybe I'm… difficult to

work with. I'm precise with my music. A perfectionist, I guess."

Elowen frowned, leaning forward. "Don't say that. You're not difficult. Perfectionism isn't a flaw… It's the thing that drives you toward greatness. If someone can't keep up with your level of work, then they don't belong walking beside you."

His eyes flicked to hers, surprised.

"I feel the same about my writing and art," she went on. "I can't stand leaving imperfections. I've spent nights awake at two in the morning because one paragraph felt off. I'd rewrite it, again and again, until it finally clicked. Sometimes I think the endless editing nearly drove me insane. I've edited and changed covers for my series a number of times…"

Noah chuckled, a knowing glint in his eyes. "That's what makes creativity such a brutal path."

She nodded, sighing. "It's cost me relationships. Sanity, too. I've accepted that maybe I'm not built to make someone else happy, or to be what people expect in love. I'm too immersed in my own world. Too… difficult."

"I get that," he murmured. "Since the band started gaining traction, I barely have time for social or personal life. Music eats everything."

Her smile was small but certain. "That's not wrong. Or bad. When the right time comes, you'll find someone who fits into that lifestyle… who understands the demand of creativity instead of resenting it. My family didn't get it for a long time, but eventually they

accepted my ways. Some even support me now. And the ones who don't?" She shrugged. "Boundaries. Sometimes letting go of toxic ties, family or not, is the only way to breathe."

Noah studied her quietly. "Do you think you'll ever regret it? Choosing your passion over… a connection?"

She thought for a moment, then shook her head. "No. Creativity is my oxygen. Even if I never become a bestselling author, I'll always create. That's who I am. And I trust the Universe to bring the right person into my life, if one exists. Someone who won't take from it, but admire and support it."

He gave a small nod. "That's a good way of thinking."

Her head tilted. "Why? Did you ask because you've had your own struggles?"

He gave a low laugh. "That's an understatement."

"I won't ask," she said gently. "I'm not interested in what's behind you. Past is past… it can't be changed. What matters is the present and the future. Who you are now, what you've learned, what you aspire to become. We're all damaged in some way. Improvement is what matters."

He raised a brow. "Improvement? Not fixing?"

"Fixing implies you're broken. That's disrespectful to your past self. Without that self, you wouldn't be who you are today. Improvement is growth. Fixing is a shame."

His lips parted slightly, surprise flashing across his

face before he nodded. "I get it. My own… improvement was trying to be someone better. Because honestly, I've always felt like an ugly human being. Awkward, odd. So I tried to work on myself."

Elowen stared at him for a long, long moment. He shifted under her gaze, his hand twitching, a faint tremor running through his fingers. His cheeks flushed.

"What? Why are you staring at me like that?"

She leaned her chin on her palm. "I'm trying to find something ugly about you. But I can't."

His brows knit, baffled.

Her eyes traced him openly. "All I see is messy, soft hair. Pretty eyebrows. Eyes that are deep and sad, but alive. They show a soul behind them. Intelligence that's rare these days." She paused, her voice quiet but certain. "A beautiful mouth. Teeth too. And I'm sure that mouth sings divinely."

Noah's throat worked.

Her gaze drifted lower. "A strong jaw. That little mole on it. Shoulders under that oversized hoodie that look far sturdier than you let on. And of course, the height…" she smirked faintly "unfair, really. I'm jealous. You're closer to the stars. I can only dream of reaching them."

Noah's chest tightened.

"And your voice…" she added, softer now. "Deep, deliberate. You speak as if each word matters. Cadence, thought, purpose. There's nothing ugly there. What I see is a normal, slightly awkward man with a dream so big it keeps him alive. And that…" her gaze finally slid away,

settling back on the wall as she set her empty teacup down with a sigh "is the most beautiful thing in the world."

For a long while, he just stared at her. Then, as if the weight of her words was too much to hold in the open air, Noah tugged his hood lower to shadow his eyes.

Elowen's gaze wandered across the room, landing on the instruments scattered in quiet reverence: guitars propped on their stands, a keyboard with pages of notes stacked nearby, a bass resting against the wall.

"Is it hard?" she asked curiously. "Music, I mean. Is it hard to come up with projects?"

Noah's lips curved, almost wistful. "Usually, not. I don't remember a time without it. I'd listen to a song and, the same day, sit at the piano and play it back. Just… hear it once, and my fingers would know."

Her brows rose, wonder flashing across her face. "That's insane. I'd kill for a skill like that."

He chuckled softly, shaking his head. "It never felt like skill. Just… part of me. And in thirty-two years, I don't remember a single day when I didn't create something. Music's in my bones. If I don't make it, I feel… off. Empty."

Elowen blinked at him, then suddenly broke into laughter.

He frowned, amused but confused. "What?"

"I can't believe you're younger than me."

His eyes widened slightly, questions flickering there.

"I'm thirty-four," she said, lips twitching in a grin.

He huffed, exhaling through his nose. "That's hardly a difference."

"It is!" she teased. "I've had two whole years ahead of you to get disappointed in this world."

A short laugh escaped him, warm and genuine. "You sound like an old lady."

She gasped playfully. "And you sound like a cheeky brat." Her laughter softened into a smile. "But it also gave me two years to see beauty in this world. Maybe when I was crawling across the ground, your soul was still drifting between the stars. You feel… mature. Wise, even. Like you're a little ahead of me."

Noah studied her quietly at that, and for a moment, the room felt suspended, her words hanging between them like a fragile thread of truth. And before long, the hour had slipped away. Elowen stood up, stretching her arms above her head, grinning through the exhaustion. "I should go. I promised I'd be back home before eight. Got some game testing to do."

"Need me to call a cab?"

"Nah, already booked."

Noah followed her to the door, leaning lightly against the frame as she slipped into her coat and boots.

"I'll pop back next week," she said, smiling. "Hopefully that wall behaves."

"It's already warmer in here," he said quietly, surprising even himself.

Their eyes met, just for a breath. And then, gently, she stepped out. He watched the taxi disappear down the road, then closed the door and turned back toward the

wall. The ocean, the sky, the stars… it wasn't just art. It was a presence of sorts. His house didn't feel like a space anymore. It felt like a place someone had touched.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

The salt in the air tasted like old tears. Atlantia rose from the coastline. A place carved from sorrow and silence, beneath a veil of sea mist and twilight, where the sky was never quite dark, yet never truly light either. The entire city shimmered in perpetual dusk, the sun long gone and the moon high but fractured, casting rippling patterns over cobbled streets slick with ocean spray.

Buildings stood tall and graceful, carved from pale shellstone and coral, their windows rounded and gleaming like the eyes of deep-sea creatures. Crystals clung to walls like barnacles, humming softly with ancient enchantments. Balconies overflowed with sea glass wind chimes, and ropes of pearls tangled through spiralling railings.

Sirens lingered by the sea walls, their tails glistening under moon-filtered mist, their songs weaving faint lullabies into the crashing tide. Fishermen and traders hollered in the market squares, selling starfish-powder poultices, bottled whispers from the ocean, and memory-ink tattoos. Children chased glowing jellyfish through narrow alleys. Sailors soaked in ale told stories of monstrous leviathans and ships that never returned. But beneath the beauty was a silence. Atlantia was a mirror of isolation, shame and questions left unanswered.

At the city's heart, rising from spiralling bridges and tide-washed marble steps, stood the manor. A palace of pearl and teal. The estate shimmered like it had been sculpted from the ocean itself. Dome-like spires spiralled upward, crowned in mother-of-pearl. Vines of seaweed and ivy crawled across its walls, and enormous stained-glass windows glistened with depictions of the sea gods. The sea air moved through open balconies like a sigh.

Inside one such chamber, draped in white-blue silk and hushed by the scent of sea salt and kelp, Grail lay still. His breath was shallow. Each inhale a fight. The bedding beneath him was damp with sweat, his cloak half-thrown aside, his armour removed and placed carefully nearby. Only the mask remained, and the jagged paint smeared across what skin could be seen.

Avenna knelt beside the bed, her hands trembling as she gently rinsed the wound across his side with warm salted water. His blood was dark.

Nearby, the others sat in still worry: Vier, Kolm, Dy, their usual sardonic comments and bravado faded into silence. A knock. The chamber doors creaked open. A man entered. Tall, graceful, with long wavy hair of deep teal and seafoam, his robes flowing like tidewater and adorned with opalescent scales. The man moved like the ocean itself: slow, powerful, and eternal. His presence shifted the air. This was Lord Thalor Serinthal of Court of Infinite Springs, a siren noble, the keeper of the manor, and one of the last dignified souls in Atlantia. He spoke with a voice that echoed like distant waves.

"You are all welcome here," he said, his voice kind

but clouded. "For as long as you need."

Avenna looked up from Grail's side, her voice barely more than a whisper. "He's not improving."

Thalor stepped closer, frowning as he looked down at the assassin, pale and broken.

"I may know someone," Thalor murmured. "Someone who walks between tides. A healer. Old, even by siren standards."

Minutes passed before the door opened again. She entered like driftwood shaped by the sea: crooked, elegant, and humming with age-old knowledge. Her skin was pale green-grey, marked by barnacle-like bumps. Her eyes clouded, but were clear. A shawl of translucent fishnet wrapped around her, decorated with charms, shells, and pearls that clinked with every step.

"I'm Lirael," she croaked, her smile disarming in its softness. "You called?"

She approached the bed and set her basket down. Her fingers hovered over Grail's wound, then over his chest, as though reading an invisible map of his soul. Her seaweed-wrapped hands moved in patterns older than written history.

After a long silence, she spoke. "His wound festers with more than poison. Your celestial light has blessed him, girl... but it also marked him."

Avenna's heart clenched.

"Will he survive?" Dy asked.

Lirael's sea-glass eyes twinkled. "Perhaps. But we'll need more than poultices and prayers."

She knelt with a creak and pulled out a folded

map from her pouch. Her finger pointed to a glowing lagoon etched at the northern tip of Atlantia.

"Here," she said. "The Moonwell Lagoon. Its waters run over a Celestial Pearl that fell from the stars aeons ago. Seaweed from its depths has healing properties unlike anything in this realm."

She turned to Kolm. "You'll need salt from the caves beneath the eastern cliffs."

She faced Dy. "Morvane traders keep chemical tinctures. You need something acidic and something alkaline."

She looked at them all. "Mix those three, with blood… and you might just save him."

The team exchanged glances. Kolm rolled his eyes. "Why is it never simple?"

Vier smirked, rising. "Because we'd get bored."

Dy patted Grail's shoulder and turned to go. "We'll get it done."

They filed out, leaving Avenna with the healer. Lirael looked down at Avenna's hands. Blackened fingers, faint smoke from her veins. She reached out, touched them, and her eyes narrowed.

"I've seen this before."

Avenna tensed. "What is it?"

Lirael took a long breath, settling on the edge of the bed. "There was another. Long ago. One who touched the dark. She refused to accept it. Fought it and pretended it wasn't her. In the end... it consumed her. But you…" she tilted her head. "You don't have to fight."

"What am I supposed to do?" Avenna asked, her

voice cracking.

Lirael smiled gently, sadly. "You look in the mirror. You speak to your shadow. You honour it. Light and dark are not enemies; they are lovers. They dance. And you, little one... You are both."

Silence passed between them like a tide.

"Everything is a cycle. Where one cycle ends, another begins." Lirael whispered. "And maybe... just maybe... this is where yours begins anew."

She left, the door closing like a wave behind her. Avenna turned to Grail. His chest still rose, barely. She reached for his hand, and it twitched. He gripped her fingers. Her hand brushed against his mask, hovered there. She almost pulled it away. But she stopped.

Instead, she leaned closer and whispered, "Your mask is your armour. I won't take it from you." She rested her forehead against his, careful, reverent. "I'll wait," she whispered.

Outside, the sea whispered against the stone. The tide was turning.

Dy moved through the alleyways of Atlantia as if walking through a dream half-forgotten. The mist clung to him like memory, curling at his ankles, rising in breathy wisps with every step. The further he walked from the manor, the louder the sea sounded in the distance, crashing with a mournful, rhythmic grief.

This part of Atlantia was different. Less like a city and more like a wound dressed in stone and fog. The market was dense, tucked between cracked pillars and

open braziers burning strange incense. Morvane symbols were stitched into fabric here, black serpents curling into infinity. And it struck Dy that he was walking not just through streets, but through what remained of the Court of the Luminary.

It had once been a beacon. He remembered that well. In the golden days before Morvane fell, the Court of the Luminary had stood proud, a guild of thinkers, alchemists, and seekers who believed that reason could rival magic, that knowledge could be sacred. They peered into the heavens and dug into the deepest truths of the earth. But when Morphea's dark tendrils infected the city, logic fractured under despair. Some Luminaries went mad, others died chasing impossible cures, and the rest scattered like stardust caught in a dying orbit. Now? They were ghosts with hands: obsessive, twitching, feverishly working to reverse what they could no longer comprehend.

Dy stepped beneath an overhang strung with bells, ducking into a stall lit by soft bioluminescence. A trader looked up: skin the shade of wet obsidian, her eyes like stormglass. The air smelled of dried salt and metal.

"You've come from the manor," she said.

Dy nodded. "A friend is dying. I was told you have ingredients... from Morvane. Something acidic and alkaline."

She motioned with a flick of her hand. "Take your pick."

He watched as she pulled out a lacquered tray: on it, three vials. The first shimmered gold-red like a liquid

sunrise. "Extract of crystallised aetherroot, very acidic," she said. "Rarest in these parts. Draws out infection at the cost of great fatigue."

The second was cloudy teal. "Distilled memory moss. Alkaline. Taken from the shallow sea graves. It still remembers things long buried. Good for healing nerves… but temperamental."

The third vial looked almost empty, just a faint white glow drifting inside. "Starcatcher serum, sweet like sugar," she whispered. "What the Luminary used to use in their rites. It amplifies. Use it wrong, and it burns. Use it right, and it brings someone back from the edge."

Dy studied the vials, then opened his satchel and pulled free a velvet-wrapped object. He unfolded it slowly, revealing a green crystal.

The trader's breath caught. "Vivianite."

"Yes," Dy said. "I'll take all three."

He watched her eyes soften. She took the crystal without a word, then handed over the vials, placing them in a dark box and wrapping them in sea silk.

Dy gritted his teeth, clutching the vials as he moved back through the veil of Atlantia's fog, the market folding behind him like a closing dream. He didn't look back.

There was only forward now. Grail was dying. And for the memory of every Court that fell, Dy would help him live.

The caves of Atlantia were nothing like the vibrant, echoing crystal caverns of Frostmere. Kolm had

expected something colder: something that hummed with ancient silence. But these caverns were alive. The moment he stepped through the jagged entrance, hidden beneath a rusted shipwreck wedged into the cliffs… he felt it. The pulse. The slow, molten breath of something sleeping just below the surface. The air shimmered with mineral heat and salt, and the walls were slick with condensation, veins of glowing ore twisting like serpent spines under the rock.

Kolm pressed a palm to the wall, feeling it vibrate faintly beneath his fingertips. Court of Gildhollow used to mine places like this, he remembered stories from his childhood. Not just for gems, but for the salts. The rare blue-green grains that crystallised from the pressure of tectonic plates and magical residue. Those salts, when ground and combined with organic healing agents, could draw out venom, shadow, and even curse-rotted sickness. If anything could help Grail, this was part of it.

He descended deeper, the shadows growing thicker, heavier. His boots scraped over stone slick with algae, and the only light came from the occasional flicker of phosphorescent moss or a stray bioluminescent beetle. Every step was careful and measured. He was used to silence, but this silence was different. It listened. A low hiss echoed from a deeper chamber. Kolm paused, hand resting on the hilt of one of his twin blades.

Then, movement. Subtle like a shimmer in the darkness. He reached the chamber's heart and found it: a small pool, glowing faintly blue from underneath. Around the pool, crusted into the edges of the rocks,

were clusters of glittering salt formations, their colours muted but unmistakable. The cave breathed around him, warm and strange, as though it remembered the blood of those who once carved into its sides.

Kolm knelt, chipping off delicate clusters of the salt and placing them into the sealed vials he'd brought. The minerals shimmered faintly, almost... mournfully. As he filled the last vial, he sat back on his heels for a moment, listening to the distant lap of seawater dripping into the cavern from cracks in the rock.

He thought of Valebright. Of laughter echoing through the streets, the old theatres lit by enchanted lanterns, and the children who used to paint their faces and dance for coins during the festivals. He remembered the colour. The songs. Then he remembered the hollow-eyed bodies on the cobblestones. Rising, Kolm strapped the vials into his belt, gave one last look into the pool, and whispered, more to himself than anyone else.

"For every note you stole, Morphea, I'll make you bleed music."

He left without another word, the echo of his footsteps swallowed by the cave.

While the others took to the streets and caves, Vier stood at the edge of the cliffside lagoon. The wind was calm, brushing faint salt onto his lips, and below him the water shimmered. The moon hadn't yet risen, but the lagoon pulsed like a living thing, lit from beneath by something soft, golden, and strange. No signs. No maps. Only the old healer's words before she disappeared

into the city: *The Celestial Pearl fell here. The seaweed will bloom near its light, but the water will test your soul before it lets you near it*.

Vier stripped quietly, only down to his tunic and trousers, mask off and strapped his blade to his back.

With one last breath drawn into his chest, he dove. The water swallowed him whole. It was cold at first, sharp enough to remind him he was still alive. But deeper, the chill became familiar. The quiet wrapped around him like old grief, pulling him in. He swam. Past sunken statues from a forgotten age. Past the skeletal remains of boats and bones wrapped in sea moss. He swam until the world turned quiet. Until all he could hear was the pounding of his heart and the soft pull of his breath through his nose.

Then came the light. Like the inside of a dream. A pale, golden glow that throbbed from beneath a bed of seagrass and strange seaweed. The strands shimmered blue and emerald, swaying like ribbons in slow motion. And floating near it… Mermaids. Beautiful in the way a thunderstorm was beautiful. Fluid bodies marked with coral scars and glimmering tails. Their eyes, when they turned to look at Vier, were pale and endless. One approached. Her hair was a pale tangle of silver and jade. Her eyes narrowed with interest.

"*You do not belong here*," she spoke, though her mouth never moved.

Vier didn't answer. He reached slowly toward the swaying seaweed near the base of the light.

Another mermaid moved closer, her voice

rippling through his mind. "*The pearl knows pain. It does not offer healing lightly*."

He paused. Then, without speaking, he rolled up his sleeve and showed them the scar across his ribs and the burn. The mark left by fire and war long past. A hum vibrated through the water. The mermaids tilted their heads in eerie unison. Then one of them, perhaps the first, reached out and brushed her fingers over his chest, just once, tracing the old wound.

"*You have bled for others*," she whispered.

He nodded. She nodded back. And the seaweed, once softly undulating, wrapped loosely around his arm like a silk ribbon. He harvested it carefully, slicing it with the tip of his dagger, coiling it into the pouch tied at his belt.

When Vier broke the surface again, the stars had scattered above him like broken glass. His skin was cold, his hair wet, his breath sharp. But in his hand, wrapped like a gift from the abyss, he held what Grail needed.

And perhaps... something more.

The chamber was silent, save for the occasional echo of waves brushing the shore just beyond the open balcony. The gauzy curtains danced softly with the sea breeze, scattering moonlight like silver dust across the floor. The air was cool and fragrant with salt, with herbs steeping in warm bowls of water, and with the subtle metallic scent of blood.

Avenna stood alone now. The others had gone, allowing her the space she needed. She had gathered the

ingredients one by one: Dy's rare medicines, Kolm's cave salts, Vier's enchanted seaweed, and had spent the last hour grinding and mixing them into a smooth, faintly glowing paste. Avenna knelt beside the bed, wiping her palms slowly, carefully, on a linen cloth.

Grail lay still, barely breathing. With trembling hands, Avenna dipped her fingers into the healing paste and began applying it. Slow, gentle strokes, her palms glowing faintly with healing light. The moment the paste touched his skin, he tensed, brow furrowing, but didn't wake. She continued, pressing light into him again and again.

The waves sang low in the distance. The sand shifted on the floor, trailing in from the balcony. Avenna's eyes stung.

"Don't you die," she whispered, voice cracking. "Don't you dare die on me."

Her fingers curled around his, squeezing. His hand was cold. She leaned forward, her forehead brushing his temple, tears slipping down onto his cheek.

"I can't fight this darkness alone," she murmured. "You promised to protect me. So now I will protect you… your rest, your peace, so you can stand with me again."

Still holding his hand, she stayed there, curled by the bed, her head resting against his arm. The wind hummed around them, and slowly, the exhaustion took her. She drifted into sleep. And in her dream, the sea faded. The moon disappeared. She stood barefoot in a blooming garden, rich with violet trees and silver moss.

A waterfall trickled nearby, glowing with faint golden light. And just behind a curtain of leaves, she heard singing.

She stepped closer. There he was. Grail. Dressed in white and gold, fabric flowing over his body like woven light. His skin shimmered in the dusk, and obsidian paint streaked across his shoulders and down his chest. But behind him… wings. Enormous, shadowed wings stretched from his back. Black as the void, but beautiful, like night incarnate. He was humming, eyes closed, fingers trailing over the wings of a butterfly. And for the first time, he smiled.

Avenna stepped closer. He turned toward her, that same small, wondering smile still lingering on his lips. She reached for him. They danced, silently, slowly. Just movement and connection. Her hands found his. Their breath matched the rhythm of the wind. She felt her own heart ache with something like love.

She woke with a gasp. The bed moved. Grail sat upright, groaning softly. His hand was still in hers. Groggy, fogged with pain, but awake.

"You're so bright," he murmured with a pained smile. "It struck me through."

She blinked, stunned. Then the tears came, too fast to stop.

"You idiot," she whispered, flinging her arms around him. "You reckless, stupid…"

He winced slightly at the force, but chuckled, wrapping one arm around her waist. His touch was gentle and hesitant.

"Don't do that again," she scolded, pulling back slightly. "Jumping into beasts' mouths like a madman!"

"I went with what my heart told me," he said softly. "Lately… I've been doing that more."

She went quiet. Her gaze dropped to his chest, to the wound. Then her fingers, now streaked with black paint, hovered near his jaw. He lifted her chin gently, tilting her face up. His thumb moved slowly across her cheek, brushing away the tear with tenderness. For a moment, he simply looked at her, the faintest curve touching his lips, as though committing the fragile expression on her face to memory. Then he leaned forward, closing the small distance between them, and kissed her.

The kiss began gently, hesitant at first, as if both of them were still deciding whether the moment was real. His hand slid to her waist, warm and steady, drawing her closer until the space between them vanished. When she moved with him, he guided her down onto the bed beside him, the motion slow and careful, never breaking the contact of their lips.

The kiss deepened, lingering and searching, carrying everything neither of them had found the courage to say aloud. Pain, longing and trust. It moved between them like a quiet current, pulling them closer with every breath they shared. When they finally pulled back, his breath was uneven.

"You're stained," he whispered, seeing his obsidian paint smudged across her lips, her collarbone, her hands.

She glanced down, then looked up with a small smile. "I don't mind."

He didn't smile this time. Instead, he slid off his hood and cloak, letting them fall to the floor. Bare-chested, his mask still in place, he turned to her. She watched him. He lifted her hand, placed it gently on his mask. And didn't stop her. Her fingers trembled as she unfastened the straps. Slowly, carefully, she pulled the mask away.

It fell beside the bed. And then she saw him… His face. Half-painted, half bare. A soft mouth. A nose sharp with a soft hump. High cheekbones. And eyes… gods, those eyes. Green, grey, with a touch of blue. Long lashes. So heartbreakingly human. She reached up and touched his face. He closed his eyes, leaning into her palm.

He kissed her again. Their lips met with a hush of breath, a kind of reverent silence that spoke louder than words ever could. His hand cradled her jaw, thumb brushing her cheek with a tenderness that made her eyes sting. Avenna felt the heat bloom beneath her skin, low and patient, like the sun rising over deep water.

Their foreheads pressed together for a suspended moment, breath mingling in the cool air. The sea whispered beyond the balcony. The curtain billowed in the breeze. But inside this room, time slowed. She reached for him, and he let her. He stilled beneath her touch. The way her fingers mapped the scars on his chest, the faded remnants of a past carved in pain. She honoured them. His hands found her waist, trembling

just slightly. Like she was something sacred. As the moment stretched between them, his hands moved, loosening the fabric from her shoulders the way one might uncover a long-hidden work of art. There was nothing hurried in the gesture, only a patient curiosity, as though he wished to see her slowly, piece by piece, exactly as she was.

Moonlight poured through the window and settled across her skin when the last layers slipped away, pale and luminous beneath the silver glow of the night. With every breath she took, the light shifted along her form, soft and living, like water stirred by a gentle tide. Grail did not rush closer. For a moment, he simply looked, his gaze lingering with a mixture of wonder and quiet disbelief.

Avenna gasped when his lips found the dip of her shoulder, when his hands moved along her spine like tracing an ancient script. Each inch a confession. She arched beneath his palms, a soft sound catching in her throat. He inhaled sharply when her fingers foxtrotted down his chest, tentative at first, then bolder. She touched him like she was learning him, memorising him. And he let her. His muscles tensed beneath her hands, but he didn't pull away.

The world outside that room faded. No monsters, no war, no gods. Only the rhythm of breath and pulse, the quiet creak of the bed beneath them and the sea roaring somewhere distant.

When Grail moved over her, it was with devotion. He lingered over the places that made her tremble,

whispering words that weren't words at all, just the poetry of breath and skin. She held onto him like he was her anchor and her sanctuary. He moved slowly, letting her feel every inch of him. Letting her catch her breath. Letting her decide the rhythm. The tension between them wound tighter. His forehead dropped to hers again, their noses brushing, their eyes fluttering closed as their bodies aligned, hearts thudding in unison.

Avenna whispered his name as an invocation. Grail answered with his mouth on hers, on her throat, on the places that had never been worshipped properly until now. His hands gripped the sheets when hers gripped him. They moved together like waves meeting shoreline: slow at first, then deeper, more insistent. He groaned her name into her skin, as though trying to bury it in her body.

Her fingers dug into his back. His breath hitched as he buried his face in the crook of her neck. The bed creaked beneath their weight, matching the rhythm of their joining, the kind that shook something loose inside the soul. There were no demands. No roles to play. No masks. Just Grail and Avenna… lovers, by some deeper recognition. Two broken beings who, for one fleeting moment, burned together in the same fire. A fire of renewal. A quiet blaze that turned pain into warmth and shame into surrender.

Their bodies sang of loss and finding. And when their movements slowed, when breath turned soft and limbs entangled like roots searching for home, a hush fell between them. And in the spaces between heartbeats,

between light and shadow, they found something that felt achingly close to hope.

Something that felt like… *home.*

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Avenna stirred slowly, the weight of sleep clinging to her lashes like sea salt. The morning light poured through the veil of the balcony curtains, casting delicate ribbons across the floor. She felt warmth near her, steady and comforting, and just for a second, she allowed herself to remain there, cocooned in that stillness.

Then came the voices.

"Wish I was healed like that," Dy murmured, barely holding back a snort.

Kolm whistled low. "Do you think he knows that his naked butt is right in full view? Majestic, really. Might sculpt it into stone later."

"Truly," Vier added with the deadpan precision only he could manage, "a celestial moon."

Avenna's eyes snapped open. The blood drained from her face as she registered the three figures casually loitering at the door of the bedroom, grinning like absolute fools.

She sat bolt upright, dragging the sheets up with a yelp of mortification. "What are you doing here?! Get out!"

Grail groaned beside her, his voice muffled against the pillow. "Gods... shut up or I swear on the abyss I'll plant my bare ass on one of your smug little

faces."

A pillow flew in their direction, though it barely missed Kolm, who ducked with an exaggerated shriek. "You wound me! What happened to gratitude?"

Dy laughed, already backing out. "You're welcome for the rescue. By the way… congrats on finally making *that* happen. Couldn't stand your longing glances at each other."

"Out!" Avenna shouted, flustered beyond recognition as she tried to fix the bedsheets around her.

"Nice to see your face for once," Vier added, nodding toward Grail's unmasked, half-sleepy glare.

But Grail, still rumpled and gloriously dishevelled, sat up slowly, reaching for his discarded clothes and tugging them on without haste. "Don't get used to it," he muttered, slipping the mask back on. "Some things are prettier in shadow."

"Like Kolm's chances with women," Dy muttered.

"HEY!"

Avenna pointed toward the door, practically fuming now. "GET. OUT."

Grail groaned and dragged the trio out by the scruffs of their necks like the misbehaving cats they were. As he was about to shut the door behind him, he turned, just for a breath, and looked back at her. That smile was soft.

Then the door closed.

Later, in the sun-drenched square of Atlantia's upper terraces, the group gathered near the coral-flecked fountains that overlooked the sleepy, pearl-toned bay.

The city bustled below them, sailors preparing nets, sirens weaving spells into song, and salt-coated merchants shouting out deals in languages foreign to the sky.

"Well," Kolm said, arms behind his head, "I say we retire here. The wine's not bad, and I've seen at least two flirtatious merfolk willing to take me in."

"You say that in every city we don't immediately almost die in," Dy replied.

"But this one has pillows shaped like clamshells. I mean, come on."

Avenna rolled her eyes, but Grail stepped forward, his voice low but resolute.

"We can't stop now. Not until she's gone. Then... maybe."

Maybe. That single word hung in the air like a shared breath. From the shadows of a nearby stall, the old healer emerged again. Her sea-worn robe trailed behind her like a tide, and her hair was tied back with a net of silver threads and tiny shells.

"There may be something to aid you," she said, her voice the rustling hush of waves against stone. "A weapon lost to history, forged by pain itself."

A hush fell over the group.

"It's called Eclipse Fang," she continued. "An obsidian blade, bound with gold, that pierces all: flesh, soul, even divinity. It rests deep within the frost-veined caves of Frostmere. It will not be easy to find... and less easy to wield."

Kolm muttered, "Why is it always in a cave? Never, say, behind a bakery."

The healer ignored him. "The journey would take weeks by foot, but Lord Serinthal has a portal, a mirror tied to the old magics. He will grant passage, if asked kindly."

Avenna nodded, her gaze heavy with gratitude. "Thank you. For everything."

The old woman's eyes twinkled. "May your light and shadow walk in harmony, Priestess. That's the only way you'll survive what comes next."

As she turned and vanished into the misty city, the group was left standing in the hush of sea breeze and seagulls, the weight of fate thick in the salt-heavy air. And in the distance, beneath the gentle sigh of waves and call of the gulls, a black heron circled overhead… silent, watching.

◇

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *EXCUSE ME?! Was that a cutscene or a softcore novella?!*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *I need to bleach my eyes.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *Now I see why the rating.*

Elowen choked on her tea, coughing violently as her cheeks flared crimson. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard, torn between replying or crawling under a pillow and never emerging.

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *"I'll protect you"... with my entire body, apparently.*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *That man took 'healing arc' to a whole new level.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *Plot twist: Kolm's jealous. Of Grail's ass.*

Silence lingered for one dangerous breath.

[**BLDome**]**:** *I mean… you'd be jealous too if you knew how magnificent it is.*

The group chat imploded. Elowen burst into laughter, pressing a hand over her face. Then, a private message lit up.

[**BLDome**]**:** *That was… uh… unexpected.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *YOU THINK?!*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I swear I had nothing to do with that. I just wanted slow-burning, aching tension. Soul connection. Not… whatever the hell Grail just pulled.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Pretty sure Grail just coded his own subplot. We may need to bump the game rating to… whatever category includes "divine intimacy under moonlight."*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Why does no one respect the damn plot I wrote?!*

[**BLDome**]**:** *We respect it. We just upgraded it.*

Back in group chat…

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *[insert lover jokes here]*

[**AzureEcho**]**:** *Do we call them Gravenna now? Avail? Because I'm buying merch.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *I'm emotionally compromised.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *One more word and I'm stabbing each of you with the dagger we haven't even found yet. I'll code it in if I have to.*

The chaos spiralled beautifully. Kolm begged for a violin that could stun enemies. Dy requested enchanted

food that offered emotional buffs. Vier suggested a flying horse. Meanwhile, Elowen just tried to remember how to breathe.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Let's schedule the next session in two days. I need emotional recovery time.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *You and me both.*

Players signed off one by one. The night went still. And then, her private chat blinked again.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Jokes aside... the story today was… metaphorical too, wasn't it?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *You noticed?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Yeah. The shadows on her fingers. The way her light healed others but wounded him. At that moment, she touched the darkness and didn't die.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *That was kind of the point. I wanted the game to reflect real shadow work. You know… trauma, healing, self-acceptance. That terrifying moment when you realise your flaws are part of your survival.*

There was a pause in the chat. Just a stillness, suspended in between words. Then another message came through.

[**BLDome**]**:** *You are crazy talented. El. Never give up.*

There was a delay before the next reply appeared.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *You really know how to say the right thing sometimes.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Only behind the screen, maybe. In real life, I'm… less talkative.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *So what, in person, you're just awkward silence and brooding stares?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Possibly with a touch of mysterious intensity. But less poetic. More... distracted or something.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *But seriously, are your thoughts always that deep and mildly depressing when you contemplate life?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Certainly not. I might've even written a happy song once. Just never released it. People relate more to pain than sunshine.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I can't imagine you singing anything remotely cheerful. No offence. You're more… tragic monologue than musical montage.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Rude. But I certainly did, for sure… life and everything it offers excites me so much.*

Elowen froze, just for a second. Her mind spun a little too fast. Her fingers hovered over the keys, something flickering at the edge of knowing… but she didn't chase it. Not tonight.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *You should sleep. I think we both went too deep tonight. No pun intended… Shadow work isn't for the faint of heart.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Yeah… agreed.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Goodnight, Star.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Goodnight, Dome.*

She logged off, the screen going dark. But she didn't move right away. She sat there, bathed in blue light, staring at the frozen screenshot of Grail on her wallpaper, his mask tilted down, cloak sweeping behind him. And above it, the words: The Eternal Slumber, playing in the background.

Her mind whispered. And for just a moment… just one, she wondered. Elowen lay curled on her bed,

the room dim, her phone glowing against the dark. The music he'd sent earlier still echoed in her chest, pulling at her like a tide. She opened her messages, scrolled to Dome's name, and hesitated only a moment before typing.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I wrote something for that music you sent.*

Her thumbs lingered, then she pasted in the passage, breath held as if she were unveiling a secret:

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Their bodies moved as though gravity itself had bent to pull them together… slow, inevitable, like stars collapsing into each other. Every brush of skin unravelled into heat, every exhale trembled with recognition. It was an echo of promises made lifetimes ago. The press of his mouth against hers felt like remembering. When he touched her, it was worship. And in that collision of heartbeats and breath, the universe folded smaller and smaller until nothing existed beyond them. Just two souls, burning at the same frequency, finally reunited after wandering through centuries of silence.*

Her chest tightened, but she pressed send before she could retreat. Quickly, she added:

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Your music made me imagine what it feels like when two souls finally find each other after searching through past lives… how they crash into each other like a nebula, beautiful and destructive all at once.*

The screen stayed quiet for a moment. Then his typing bubbles appeared… disappeared… appeared again. She imagined him sitting there, staring, trying to find words.

[**BLDome**]**:** *…wow.*

The dots flickered again.

[**BLDome**]**:** *Can I confess something? I wrote that track while staring at a half-eaten biscuit.*

Elowen clapped a hand over her mouth, laughing aloud.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Please don't say it was a chocolate digestive.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *…it was. Half of it went soggy in tea. That's the muse behind your nebula.*

She laughed harder, curling into her blanket.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *You're ruining the magic.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *No. You made it.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *I didn't even have anything specific in mind when I played it… It was just a sound. But now, with your words… it has a face. A colour.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *You made it alive.*

Elowen stared at the screen, her laughter softening into a long, quiet smile. She tucked her phone to her chest, feeling the echo of his words humming like a second heartbeat.

The cold had dulled its edge, retreating into the corners of February like a beast too tired to bite. Elowen could feel it in the air, the faintest whisper of spring. It wasn't here yet, but it was close. The skies had grown softer, a little less grey, and some days the wind smelled like thawed earth and possible things.

For the last month, she'd been wrapped in the cocoon of motherhood. Hugo had been out of school for winter break, and with Miguel taking extended time off

over the holidays, she'd taken full charge. They'd built dens in the living room, watched Studio Ghibli films on loop, painted dragons and stars, walked along frosted paths in the park until their noses were red and their fingers numb. Even though it meant putting aside some of her projects, including the mural in Noah's studio… she didn't mind.

She needed the pause. Noah had been away too, gone to visit family back in his hometown. The cafe hadn't seen much of her. The game had been on hiatus with everyone caught in their own seasonal whirlwind. And for once, the silence in her life had been calm. She'd even finished a new book. It was a sudden inspiration. She printed the final draft with shaking hands and quietly left it on her desk without telling a soul. There was no dramatic announcement, no tearful video online, just her, a cup of tea, and the slight smile of someone who'd won a private war.

The day Hugo left with Miguel for a weeklong trip, Elowen helped him pack: his little backpack full of snacks, pyjamas, and all his most sacred toys. They talked about how much fun he would have, and how important it was to listen to Daddy, and not eat too many sweets, no matter what Grandmother said.

"You're not gonna be lonely, are you?" Hugo asked as she zipped up his coat. His little brow furrowed the same way hers did when she was deep in thought.

Elowen crouched down, brushing back his curls with a soft hand. "Of course I'll miss you, silly bear. But I'll be okay. And I'll be waiting right here when you get

back. And I will try to not eat all of the biscuits."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

Miguel gave her a quick wave and a nod from the driver's seat. Elowen kissed Hugo's forehead and watched the car disappear around the bend, standing at the window just a moment longer than she needed to. A piece of her was always left with him.

Ten minutes later, her phone pinged.

[**Noah**]: *Painting mood?*

She stared at the screen, smiling softly. Something about that message… so simple, yet exactly what she needed.

[**Elowen**]**:** *Absolutely. I've missed that damn wall.*

[**Noah**]**:** *Good. I've missed the paint splatters on my piano.*

A few hours later, she stood at his door, a light wind nipping at her scarf. The grey sky was streaked with lavender hues, fading to evening. When the door opened, she found him relaxed, warm-skinned and flushed as if he'd just stepped out of the shower. He was wearing a loose white t-shirt and jeans that had clearly seen a few years. His hair was short, a bit messy, as if he'd run his hand through it too many times while composing something.

"Hey," he said, voice a little hoarse, but honest.

"Hey," she mirrored, smiling, stepping into the familiar warmth of his home.

The familiar scent hit her first: coffee, something woodsy, and the faint hum of his cologne that always

lingered in the corners. His place still looked the same: a blend of sophisticated chaos. Books spilt from shelves like they were trying to make a break for it. Musical gadgets and old records shared space with ceramic mugs and a stack of gaming magazines. It was the home of someone who didn't mind clutter as long as it meant living. It felt… comfortable.

"How was Christmas?" she asked as she slipped off her boots and scarf. "You vanished for ages."

"Chaotic," he said with a short laugh, leading her to the living room. "Family gatherings. Obligatory roast dinners. My little cousin still thinks I'm in a band that plays birthday parties."

"Oh no…" she laughed.

"Yeah," he said, exasperated and amused at once. "I could win a Grammy, and she'd still ask if I do the music thing on weekends."

Elowen laughed, flopping onto the edge of the sofa while he moved to the small bar tucked beside his bookshelves. She noticed a glass of whiskey, nearly empty, resting beside the grand piano in the adjacent studio.

"You celebrating something?" she asked, nodding toward it.

He glanced at the glass like he'd forgotten it was there, then smirked. "Yeah. Kind of a big deal. Just signed with a big production studio I've been trying to get in front of for years. It finally happened."

Elowen sat up straighter. "Wait, seriously? Noah, that's amazing!"

He poured her a glass of wine: red, rich, and full, and handed it to her with a casual clink.

"Cheers to surviving Christmas," he said with a smirk.

"And to kicking ass professionally," she replied, raising her glass and tapping it against his.

They sipped in the quiet, the hum of his speakers low in the background, playing something soft, just piano, no words.

"So," he said, settling beside her, his fingers lazily spinning the bottom of his glass, "what about you? Been hiding out?"

"Pretty much. Hugo and I went full Ghibli marathon mode. I've got Totoro permanently imprinted on my soul now."

"I approve."

"I also finished a book."

Noah's brow lifted in admiration. "Really?"

"Yep. Decided to make the game plot into a series. Thought it fit perfectly, since I am good with fantasy. Hit 'save' and just sat there like I'd climbed Everest with a broken pen. It's done."

"Wow." He blinked, almost reverently. "That's huge. So, now your characters will also live on pages."

"Yeah," she whispered, almost unsure whether to smile or cry. "Took long enough, huh?"

He didn't say anything, just raised his glass again and toasted silently.

She sipped her wine, letting it warm her throat. "I'm really glad to see you again."

Noah's voice was softer now, "Same."

She met his eyes, and something was lingering behind them… gratitude, maybe. Or recognition. The kind of look people give each other when they've shared too many unspoken things. Outside, the wind picked up just enough to rattle the wind chimes by the door. Somewhere in the distance, the city yawned with its usual breath of cars, footsteps, and laughter in alleys. But in this little bubble of mismatched bookshelves and paint-stained teacups, it was peaceful.

By the time the second glass of wine was half-finished, Elowen had pulled her legs up under her on the sofa, cheeks flushed with warmth and amusement. Noah, however, had started to sway. He wasn't drunk-drunk. Not yet. But the way he lingered on words now, the way his hands moved as he talked… more animated, more un-Noah, told her the whiskey had definitely settled in. They'd been talking about everything and nothing. Old cartoons, favourite snacks and the bizarre existential crisis of realising adults don't actually know what they're doing.

And then, out of nowhere, as she was sipping her wine and watching him swirl the ice in his whiskey, Noah tilted his head at her.

"You ever get those days, hic," he said, slowly, "where you wake up already tired?"

Elowen looked up from her glass, caught off guard by the question.

"Yeah," she admitted softly. "More than I'd like."

He nodded like he already knew. "Like... nothing

happened yet, but your chest is already tight. Brain spinning… hic, pardon. Can't even find the reason why. It's just... noise."

Her smile faltered. "That's anxiety," she said, voice gentler now. "At least for me. It sneaks in like smoke through the cracks. Doesn't even knock."

"Y'know what yer problem is?"

Elowen blinked. "I have a problem?"

"No. No, no… like, yer main problem. The boss-level problem." He poked the air dramatically, nearly toppling his glass.

She leaned back with an amused smile, eyebrows raised. "Okay then, tell me, Doctor Noah. What's my boss-level problem?"

"You… you think too much," he said, as if revealing the secret of the universe. "Like all the time. Like a brain hamster on coke just spinnin' that lil' wheel." He flailed his hands in dramatic panic, mimicking the chaos, before letting out a loud hic.

Elowen nearly spat out her drink. "Excuse me?!"

He ignored her. "I love yer brain though. So pretty. All... sparkly and loud. Like fireworks in a library." His grin stretched wide. "Like... Boom! Knowledge! Boom! Existential dread! Boom! Pretty fairies on the canvas!"

"Okay, okay!" she laughed, holding her stomach. "You are so drunk."

"Nooo," he said, dragging the word out like a defiant child. "I'm not... I'm not drunk. *Hic.* I'm... observationally liberated."

He leaned in real close, face suddenly serious, eyes locking onto hers, and then he whispered way too loudly, "But listen…"

She froze, suppressing another laugh. "I'm listening."

"I read this thing," he said, waving a vague hand. "Like, science-y. Proper clever shit. And it said... wait, what was it…"

He blinked. Long pause.

"Uhh…"

"Take your time."

"Right! Right. It said that like... your brain can't tell the diff'rence between what's real and what you imagine." He jabbed a finger at her. "That's why people fall for fictional char'ters and stuff like that. *Hic.* So if you imagine you're a badass... like, a real one, not the Marvel Thanos shit..."

"I can't…"

"No, no, shhh, listen!" he pleaded, almost dropping his glass again. "Fuck… Yeah, so… Then your brain's like, 'oh damn, guess we're powerful now.' Wild, right?"

He paused, slumping dramatically into the back of the sofa with a proud sigh.

"You're basically a wizard," he said, eyes fluttering half-closed. "Or like... a sexy mind ninja."

Elowen dissolved into giggles, nearly spilling her wine. Noah's smile lingered, softening into something more fragile. He set his drink down carefully, the ice clinking.

"I'm sorry," he murmured after a minute, rubbing the back of his neck, eyes cast down like the floor held answers. "I'm blabbering like a drunk poet. I just... I dunno. Today's been unreal. After everything… the gigs, the work, the writing… *Hic.* I looked at my bank account earlier and just stared at it like it belonged to someone else."

Elowen blinked, her own amusement dissolving into gentle understanding.

"Should I expect a rocking chair?"

"I keep my promises. But… It's not just numbers," he continued. "It's years of not knowing if it would ever work. Years of people looking at me like I was wasting my time. And now... suddenly I'm signed with a production company. A proper one. And I'm sitting here thinking… what now? I made it to the top of the mountain I've been crawling toward and... I'm overwhelmed."

Elowen signed. "I get that," she said softly. "I really do. I think I'll feel the same when my books or game finally make it. It's like... your life finally shifts, and even if it's in a good way, it still shakes everything you were used to. But that doesn't mean it's bad. It just means something's about to bloom."

Noah glanced at her, his eyes warm with something unspoken. "You've got a way with words."

She smiled, nudging him. "I'm a writer. Comes with the territory."

He chuckled and stood up slowly, stretching. "Right. I won't distract you from the actual point of your

visit. That wall's been lonely long enough. I'd better make some coffee."

Elowen smirked and got up too, already collecting her brushes and palette from the bag. "If it's not too much to ask," she added, "could you maybe play while I paint? Even after all that whiskey?"

Noah's eyes twinkled. "Music's probably the one thing that works regardless of how drunk I am. I might miss a few keys, or stumble at my own feet… but hey, imperfections have character."

She grinned. "I like character."

He walked toward the piano, brushing his fingers along the keys. The sound that followed was low, careful, but smooth, like the tide returning to shore. He adjusted the stool, glanced at the sheet music beside him, and began to play, softly at first, just feeling it out.

It was the music for her poem; she recognised it. Elowen turned to the wall, dragging her sleeve over her cheek and rolling up her jumper. She stood still for a moment, the brush in her hand, breathing in. And then she painted.

The room dimmed into that familiar kind of intimacy… the kind made of late winter evenings and golden lamps. The soft, melodic notes of Noah's piano filled the space like the scent of something nostalgic. He played like the world had narrowed down to the music and the sound of her brush sweeping across his wall. Her strokes were slow at first, layered shades of deep navy, teal, and soft dusk-purple bled into each other, creating the details.

Noah began to sing. Those were the words she wrote. At first, it was so quiet she didn't even register it. A hum, a breath of melody. But then it deepened: rich, unfiltered and raw. And it was beautiful. Elowen froze for a moment, the brush hanging in the air. She turned her head, just slightly, her gaze catching the sight of his fingers: long and elegant, dancing along the keys, eyes closed, voice like velvet soaked in stardust. The sound curled around her ribs like smoke.

Noah stayed at the piano, singing quietly, like the music had hijacked his soul. His tone was aching, hopeful, melancholic, and yet… full of something alive. Elowen turned back to her painting, but her hand was slower now, her heart full. And for a while, they didn't talk. She painted. He played. And the world fell away.

At some point, she said quietly, "You know, I can't imagine you singing a happy song at all."

His voice broke into a soft chuckle. "You're not wrong. My public stuff? Mostly sad. But I write the happy ones too… I just don't feel like sharing them."

She smiled. "That's kind of tragic."

He looked at her from the piano bench, something amused and sad in his gaze. "Yeah. Maybe. Or maybe the world's just not used to happiness, being honest."

Elowen's brush hovered for a second, and then she glanced back at him, the candlelight catching the sparkle of dried paint on her cheek. "Could you share one with me?"

Noah stilled. She didn't push. She didn't even

look again. Instead, she dipped her brush into the pinks and whites, quietly painting soft petals into the corners of her storm. Cherry blossoms bloomed along the edges of the night ocean, like delicate truths peeking through shadows.

Noah stood slowly. Without a word, he crossed the room and picked up his acoustic guitar, the old one, worn at the edges. He didn't return to the piano. He just sat on the sofa, opposite her. Watching her work. Watching the paint stain her knuckles and the light catch in her lashes. And then he played. The strum was gentle, but firm. Like a heartbeat just before a confession. A soft rhythm, patient and certain, a lullaby with bones made of firelight.

You leaned in like dusk that dares the tide
You do not conquer, instead you coincide.
My ghosts, once rabid in their roam,
Stilled at the altar of your tone.
You draw breath like whispered flame,
My atoms kneel, no shame, no name.
Your smile… an eclipse mid-collapse,
Your laugh… the tremor time unwraps.

'Cause darling, you're gold; no glitter, no lie,
You're forged in storms and painted sky.
And I… I'd break down gracefully,
To feel your alchemy on me.

Hydrogen breath, your oxygen grace,

Gods, I breathe better in your space.
And if this life's just chain reactions,
You're the cause of all distractions.
Your touch rewrites the laws I knew,
Gravity bends to fall for you.
They said love fades, but here you are,
Still burning like a distant star.

'Cause darling, you're gold; no glitter, no lie,
You're forged in storms and painted sky.
And I… I'd break down gracefully,
To feel your alchemy on me.

So kiss me like a slow eclipse,
The kind that aches and tempts the lips.
If we explode, then let it be,
A masterpiece of entropy.
You're not a spark. You're how it ends…
The kind of fire the void defends.
So if we fall, let's fall with grace,
Two atoms dancing into space.

You're gold; no chain, no cage, no ring.
Just the warmth that winter couldn't bring.
And I… I'd break eternally,
To feel your alchemy in me.

There was silence… thick, warm, and unhurried. Then Elowen stepped back from the wall, brush still in hand, the final details of paint glistening faintly under

the amber overhead lights. Her gaze traced the arcs and hues: the sea and sky blended into one, the cherry blossoms now softly edging the corners like a dream slowly blooming. She smiled, setting the brush down.

"That sounded like a love song," she said, glancing over at Noah with a raised brow. "Not exactly happy-happy."

Noah chuckled, low and genuine, slipping the guitar strap from his shoulder and gently leaning the instrument against the sofa. He walked over to stand beside her, hands tucked in the pockets of his jeans.

"And who says a love song can't be happy?" he replied, his eyes on the mural like it was a constellation only now aligning.

"Touche," she murmured, her smile lingering.

They stood like that, quiet, shoulder to shoulder, staring at the wall they'd somehow created together. His breath was steady beside hers. Her arms folded behind her, fingers tangled. Around them, the studio felt impossibly still, like even the air paused to take in what they'd made.

"You've got something rare," Noah said at last. "A kind of raw, grounded magic. Like your art feels something."

Elowen tilted her head at the wall, contemplative. "What's the story, then?" she asked, a playful challenge in her voice. "You're a storyteller too. You tell me."

Noah's lips curled slightly, thoughtful. "Mmm. Maybe it's a place where grief learned to soften its teeth. Where the sea sings. A place built from quiet chaos and

healing hands. Maybe... It's home."

She didn't speak right away. But the look she gave him said everything.

He glanced down at her, then back to the painting. "You and I… we both bleed our stories out. You into pages and paint. Me into chords and lyrics." His voice was softer now. "Maybe that's what this is. A shared story of survival."

Elowen's smile deepened, more fragile now. "Acceptance," she whispered. "A story of acceptance."

He nodded. She watched as he turned, walking back toward the corner where his guitar rested. And that's when she saw it, just above the piano, hanging from a tiny hook drilled into the side of the shelf. The black piano key. Decorated with gold cracks. Her gift… it hung like a relic. A memory in motion. Her chest tightened. She turned back to the mural, eyes drifting over the moonlight on the painted sea. This felt like closure somehow. Not an ending… but the closing of a quiet chapter. A piece of her would always live on this wall. And she hadn't expected it to mean this much.

Then his voice, calm and casual, broke the quiet.

"You know," Noah said, not looking at her, just adjusting a few cables near his keyboard. "You don't need a paintbrush to come here."

She blinked. "What do you mean?"

He glanced over his shoulder. "You're welcome anytime. No paint required. If you ever want to draw, or write… or just not be alone. I don't mind. Actually…" He shrugged, almost sheepishly. "I kind of like having

you here. I have plenty of walls to paint."

Elowen stared at him, warmth pooling in her chest in a way she hadn't expected. She didn't reply right away. Just gave a small, quiet smile.

"I'll take your word for it," she said, brushing her fingers lightly against the side of her jeans. And as she turned back to the mural one last time, she whispered, more to herself than to him… "Thank you."

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

The magic mirror hissed with frost as Avenna stepped through, boots sinking into thick, untouched snow. The cold met her like a slap: sharp, sobering and immediate. A wind carved through the white wasteland, howling like the ghosts of everything forgotten. Before them stretched an endless, bone-white tundra, the sky a smudged canvas of grey and violet.

They were in Frostmere now. Ice crystals clung to every surface, coating twisted branches, ruined archways half-swallowed by snow, and cracked stone markers whose ancient runes had long since faded. This land was tired. Like a world that had wept itself dry.

Ahead, Dy trudged through the snow, hood low over his face, eyes squinting against the sting. Kolm complained loudly about his hair freezing and his blood turning to slush, while Vier, naturally quiet, kept a slow, methodical pace, eyes scanning the terrain. He hummed a tune… low, almost melancholic, just to fill the dead air. Avenna walked a little behind them, her boots leaving soft prints behind her. The cold nipped at her fingertips, biting into the blackened edges of her skin, but she kept walking. A warm weight touched her shoulder. She looked up: Grail had stepped beside her, his own cloak

already dusted with frost. Without a word, he lifted one arm and wrapped the thick material over her shoulders, drawing her into his side. She offered him a grateful smile.

The village of Frostmere appeared like a memory half-buried in snow. The buildings were squat and strong, made of heavy timber and black stone, their rooftops heavy with icicles. Smoke curled from chimneys into the grey sky. People moved about in thick layers, faces half-covered in scarves or furs. Eyes lingered on the newcomers.

This was the heart of the Court of Gildhollow. Miners, jewel-crafters and isolationists. The kind of people who spoke only when needed and measured trust in years. The group approached the centre of the village, where an older man stood sharpening a tool. His beard was silver-grey, his eyes sharp like chipped sapphire. When he saw them, he just stared. Grail stepped forward, but it was Avenna who placed a gentle hand on his arm and spoke first.

"I'm Avenna of Elaris," she said, lifting her hood. "Priestess of the Winged Guardian. My companions and I seek passage. We're not here to trouble your people. We're here to find a way to stop the darkness that's swallowing our realm. We believe there's something hidden here that can help."

The man didn't flinch. "Nothing here but frost, stone, and old regrets."

"We've heard of a dagger," she pressed. "Forged from obsidian and old magic. A weapon said to pierce

anything, even gods. Is it only a myth?"

At that, the man's face changed… barely, but enough. His eyes shifted. His shoulders lowered. And he finally spoke again, voice low. "Come inside."

The inn smelled of ash, pinewood, and stew. It was warmer than expected, firelight dancing along the walls, candles flickering atop worn tables. They sat around the hearth, steam rising from mugs of bitter tea. The man introduced himself as Ruthen Vale, elder of Frostmere.

"My father told me of it when I was a boy," he said, voice like gravel wrapped in frost. "A dagger buried in the Veilspire Cavern, halfway up the godless mountain." A hush fell. "Only two kinds of people ever went looking for it," he continued. "The foolish… and the desperate. Neither came back."

"What's guarding it?" Grail asked.

Ruthen leaned forward. "They say two beasts. They were born from Morphea's darkness. Souless and murderous."

"Sounds delightful," Kolm muttered, chewing on roasted root vegetables.

"We'd like to leave at dawn," Grail said. "If you can guide us close, we'll take it from there. If we don't return… pretend we were never here."

Ruthen stared at them a moment longer. "I'll show you the base path. But the mountain's mouth doesn't open for just anyone. Be prepared."

That night, the group rested in sparse, low-ceilinged rooms. Thin beds, thick furs, a fire that hissed

behind a stone grate. Avenna sat cross-legged in front of the flames in her room, warming her hands, watching the dark tendrils on her fingers twitch in the light. They ached.

A knock. She turned, and Grail stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

"You okay?" he asked, voice softer than usual.

She nodded, but her eyes were distant. "I have a bad feeling about tomorrow."

Grail leaned against the wall, arms crossed. "Yeah. I've been thinking that too."

There was a pause. Just fire crackling, wind howling outside the small window.

"I think we're close to the end," he said, finally. "But I'm not sure I'm ready for it."

Avenna looked up. "Scared?"

He exhaled. "Not of death. Of… everything after. What if there's no after?"

"I don't know what's coming," she said. "But I've learned something."

"What?"

"That the scariest endings… are often disguised beginnings."

He sat beside her and looked at her. She didn't look away. The fire painted gold over her features and the cracks on her fingers. They sat in silence a while longer. The fire flickered low, casting amber light that licked the stone walls and bathed their skin in molten gold. The air smelled of aged timber, faint herbs, and the lingering salt of the ocean that had never fully left them. Grail leaned

in, his breath warm as it ghosted across Avenna's collarbone. His lips met hers slowly, no rush or hunger. His hand found the edge of her dress, fingers curling gently under the soft white-teal fabric, lifting it inch by inch. His hand smoothed up the back of her thigh, never demanding. She moved closer, allowing the space between them to fall away.

Avenna climbed into his lap, her knees folding beside his hips, the last bits of her dress bunching around her waist. His chest was bare, firelight dancing over the painted skin stretched over lean muscle, and the golden chains across his neck caught the glow, shimmering like sunlight held in place. His cloak pooled around them like a shelter. His mask was still on, though tilted slightly, enough for his lips to meet hers again.

She kissed him, deep and slow, hands braced on his shoulders. Her breath hitched as she felt him against her, their bodies aligning like stars returning to their orbit. Grail's hands held her hips with restraint and awe, as if she were spun from light and dream. She lowered herself slowly, inch by inch, until they were one again. A quiet gasp left his lips, and she kissed the sound away. Her hair fell like a veil around them, the fire illuminating strands of gold and auburn as she arched above him. Grail tilted his head back, his throat exposed, lips parted, breath heavy. A tiny trace of black paint lingered on the corner of her mouth.

Clothing rustled softly, bodies shifting on the old rug, their breath the only music to fill the space between heartbeats. He reached up, brushing a hand through her

hair, the tips of his fingers trembling as they traced her jaw. Her eyes, heavy with heat and wonder, met his as she gently pushed his mask upward, just enough. Just enough to see the way his eyes burned when looking at her.

A sudden twist and they were tangled again, her back on the rug, his weight above her, his cloak enveloping them. The fabric of her dress spilt around her hips, tangled between their limbs. His mouth returned to hers, hotter now and deeper. Their kiss was an echo of their past, and a promise of everything they hadn't yet dared to say.

He thrust into her slowly, then with more certainty. Her hands clutched at his back, fingers skimming the golden chains that never left him. His mouth met her neck, her shoulder, the underside of her jaw. His touch felt like worship and claim at once. She whispered his name between moans. His breath faltered, catching on a groan as her legs wrapped tighter around him. She met every thrust with her own, lifting into him with fierce grace, her body aching and giving in the same breath. Sweat glistened on his skin. She watched the way his lips parted in pleasure, how the sharp gleam of his canines caught the firelight. He looked like something unholy and beautiful. A creature sculpted by agony and longing.

When he stilled, just for a second, she reached for his face, tracing his cheek, brushing her thumb over the remnants of paint. He looked down at her, chest heaving, eyes burning. And then he moved again, slower this time,

hips rolling into hers with aching care. They moved together again. Then again. And again. As if they were trying to undo time. To carve eternity into the now. Two bodies, tangled in silence, spoke a language older than stars.

The snow moaned beneath their boots as they trudged toward the mountain's mouth. Avenna's cloak whipped behind her, heavy with frost, her breath like a phantom in the wind. Grail walked beside her, silent as ever. Ahead, Dy, Kolm, and Vier marched through the icy fog like shadows.

"I'm freezing my fangs off," Kolm muttered, his boots crunching on brittle snow. "If I die, please declare my love to that Priestess with violet curls. Tell her she has my body and soul…"

Vier didn't flinch. "Oh, how lucky of her."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

Dy snorted. "Focus. The cold's not the enemy. Yet."

The cave ahead loomed, a wound carved into the world. Jagged teeth of rock framed its maw, like the ribs of a sleeping god. The elder met them at the threshold, wrapped in bearskin and silence. His eyes, sunken from decades of snow, held a grim reverence.

"If you return, we'll drink to your madness," he said. "If not… the mountain will remember."

Kolm gave a dry salute. "Touching. I love a farewell with optimism."

Dy grinned, nudging him forward. "Come on,

theatrical man. Into the belly of the abyss."

The elder turned, vanishing into the storm. Inside, the cave swallowed them whole. Stone turned slick beneath their boots. Stalactites glimmered with frost, as if the mountain itself bled crystal. Avenna lit her fingers, a halo of white gold shimmering through the dark.

"Feels more like a tomb," Vier murmured.

"Don't say tomb," Kolm replied. "Say treasure vault. Tombs are never good news."

As they descended deeper, the silence thickened into something sentient. And then, it shattered. There was a roar. The air distorted. The shadows twisted, and from them emerged two nightmares. One floated, a tattered cloak hanging like remorse, a thurible swinging in one hand, a cracked golden helmet obscuring his face. His feet never touched the ground.

Rise.

Beside him, a skeletal titan lumbered forward. Tarnished armour clung to ancient bones. A pristine gold helm crowned his rotting form. A massive, rune-carved mallet dragged sparks across the cavern.

Phantom.

Avenna's light burst like a second sun. "Positions!"

Rise: |||||||||||||||||||| 100%

Phantom HP: |||||||||||||||||||| 100%

"*Make me disappear*," Rise whispered, voice like a deathbed prayer. The mist struck instantly.

[Rise – Shroud of Purification]

White fog exploded from the thurible, swallowing

the group in blindness and illusions. The mist thickened, sacred and suffocating. Kolm stumbled. "What the… no, no no… Valebright?"

He was back in the ruins. His mother on her knees, her throat crushed, the scent of blood and fire in the air. The hunters had laughed. And Kolm had run.

"No!" he snarled, blade shaking.

[Kolm – Soundstrike Slash]

His sword hummed, vibrating through the air like a cry for absolution.

-5% HP

Rise HP: |||||||||||||||||||| 95%

[Dy – Harmonious Disruption]

Dy slammed his batons together, creating a ripple of dissonance, as if breaking a cursed spell with rhythm alone.

-8% HP

Rise HP: |||||||||||||||||| 87%

[Grail – Twin Blade Reverence]

He moved like a shadow, steel slicing with grace and guilt.

-12% HP

Rise HP: ||||||||||||||| 75%

But the mist clung tighter. Rise's chants began again… low, insidious and soaked in false holiness. Avenna raised her light but froze. The air shifted. And suddenly, she wasn't in the cave anymore. She was kneeling. Weeping and howling. Her palms bruised, her skin blackened, her fingers cracked. Her hair tangled over her face like vines of grief. Every sob came from the

bone. And beside her… Grail. He was holding her. He reached to soothe, to hold, to whisper words of comfort. But she screamed. Slammed her fists into his back. He didn't flinch. She scratched his shoulders, tore at his clothes, bit into his skin, trying to push him away, to punish him for staying.

He let her. He just… let her. And with each strike, her stomach twisted with disgust, shame and loathing… For herself. Her darkness wasn't a shadow that followed her. It was her own hands. Her own voice. It lived inside her, and it hurt the one who stayed.

"No…" she gasped in the vision, collapsing.

And just like that… The vision broke. The cave returned. Her breath was ragged.

"Stop!" she cried out.

Everyone turned. Avenna's light flared.

"His illusions… feed on our refusal to forgive ourselves," she said, her voice steady now. "It's not the grief. It's the shame of surviving it."

Rise paused mid-chant. Behind her, Grail took a step forward. His swords glinted, but he didn't strike yet.

"You heard her," he said, voice low. Rise twitched, like a broken puppet. "Don't engage it. Break the pattern," Grail repeated, more to himself this time.

[Rise – Shroud of Purification intensifies]

The mist grew thicker. But this time, they moved with clarity. Avenna flared.

[Avenna – Light of Truth]

A beam of celestial light slammed into Rise's chest.

-15% HP

Rise HP: |||||||||||| 60%

But Phantom wasn't idle.

[Phantom – Echoing Void]

The cave shook. The mallet struck stone, shockwaves burst forth. And with them… visions. Avenna's hands, covered in blood. Her own voice. The feeling of rough hands on her body, the pain inside her, the blood flowing on her thighs. Avenna froze, winded.

Vier roared. "Anchor yourselves! Focus!"

[Vier – Crescent Earth Rumble]

He smashed the ground, grounding everyone. Illusions shattered like glass. Grail attacked.

[Grail – Celestial Fang]

Katana sliced through Phantom's rib cage.

-10% HP

Phantom HP: |||||||||||||||||| 90%

[Phantom – Spectral Mirage]

He vanished. Reappeared behind Kolm. *SMASH*. Kolm gasped, barely dodging the second blow.

[Kolm – Requiem Counter]

His blade sang upward, vibrating.

-9% HP

Phantom HP: ||||||||||||||||| 81%

Chains wrapped around Avenna.

[Rise – Sanctified Shackles]

"Grail!"

[Grail – Vowbreaker's Dance]

Steel severed the chains.

[Dy – Starlight Pulse]

His batons pulsed in bright rhythm. Rosary cracked.

Rise HP: |||||||||| 54%

"Now!" Grail shouted.

[Avenna – Divine Wrath Pulse]

Light exploded from her hands.

-20% HP

Rise HP: ||||||| 34%

"*Make me…*" Rise whispered, "*disappear*."

Kolm bared his teeth. "As you wish, fucker!"

[Kolm – Last Lament]

A perfectly timed strike, straight through the cracked helmet.

-25% HP

Rise HP: || 9%

[Rise – Final Chant]

Darkness coiled.

[Avenna – Purity Arrow]

She drew and loosed.

-9% HP

Rise HP: 0%

Rise dissolved, like incense smoke fleeing the sun, gold vial on the ground. But Phantom was wrath incarnate.

[Phantom – Desperation Quake]

The floor split. Kolm fell, caught by Dy's hand just in time. Grail leapt.

[Grail – Dagger of Dusk]

A divine blade to the knee.

-11% HP

Phantom HP: |||||||||||| 70%

[Avenna – Anchor Light Burst]

Phantom faltered.

"*You are not real*," Phantom rasped.

Avenna's voice was quiet, shaking. "Keep lying to yourself like that!"

Dy struck.

[Dy – Miragebreaker Leap]

Magic exploded through Phantom's torso.

-18% HP

Phantom HP: |||||||| 52%

Kolm gritted his teeth.

[Kolm – Sonic Shred]

His blade became vibration itself.

-16% HP

Phantom HP: ||||| 36%

[Vier – Light of Reality]

A torch flared, ghostfire burning Phantom solid. Avenna stepped forward. Her fingers trembled.

[Avenna – Celestial Strike]

A streak of light. Again, then again, then again. The light became blinding, like an explosion.

-36% HP

Phantom HP: 0%

The mallet hit the floor. The helm clanged down beside it. And a gold vial was left on the ground. Avenna gasped for breath.

Grail walked forward. In the very heart of the cavern, a dais shimmered. Atop it… A dagger, glimmering with celestial light. Forged from obsidian.

Hilt carved from celestial ore.

Avenna's hand hovered over it. Then, gently closed around the hilt. And from far above, something in the mountain exhaled. A low, ancient groan. As if destiny had just woken.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Elowen leaned back into her chair, letting her fingers rest on the keyboard as the game's chat exploded with energy.

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *THAT boss design? Filthy. Who even coded that torment?*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *Grail almost got nuked again, lmao. This is why we don't let him make decisions. He's too lovestruck.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Speak for yourself. Grail is thriving. In a… near-death kinda way.*

Elowen laughed softly, eyes flicking across the screen, fingers poised over the keyboard.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I can't believe we're 95% through. One more chapter and it's done. Kinda don't want it to end…*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Wait, YOU don't? You've tortured us for weeks.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *Stockholm syndrome. We've bonded through mutual suffering.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I'm serious! I'll miss these weird late-night chaos sessions with you all.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Maybe if you finish the sequel script, we can start a new journey together.*

Her chest warmed a little at that.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Bold of you to assume I wouldn't kill you off in chapter two.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *You wound me.*

[**SombreSky**]**:** *Tomorrow, same time?*

[**RedNocturne**]**:** *Let's finish it.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I'll be there. Got a meeting tomorrow, but I'll make it for game time.*

A soft ping echoed in her private chat.

[**BLDome**]**:** *What kind of meeting? If it's not top secret classified.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Developers want to go over the final stage of the game update. Also… they mentioned there might be an announcement.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Oh? Announcement sounds fancy. You nervous?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *A bit. But… I think it'll be good. I just hope I don't say anything embarrassing and end up a meme.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *I'd personally frame it and put it on my wall.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Of course you would.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *You gonna tell me what visions Avenna's having, or are you gatekeeping your own lore?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Gatekeeping, gaslighting, girlbossing. Obviously.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Rude.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *You'll see tomorrow. It's worth the wait.*

A pause followed.

[**BLDome**]**:** *You seem lighter lately. Happier. Did something happen?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *I think I just… found some peace lately. Life's quieter. Calmer... Not easier, not really… but clearer.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *And maybe I made a friend. That helps too.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Oho. Is this the part where I ask if you got yourself a bf, and you deflect by telling me to mind my own business?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *No bf. Just… someone I met. Someone who feels familiar. Like… they understand the world the same weird way I do. Like I can share things without feeling like I'm too much, and get to talk to someone who understands the burdens of creativity.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *...Like home?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Yeah. Exactly that.*

There was a long pause.

[**BLDome**]**:** *I am deeply offended. All this time, and I get replaced by someone with tea and deep chats?*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Maybe if you invited me out for coffee and some esoteric rambling, we wouldn't be having this conversation.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *…Touché. I'll be reflecting on my cowardice immediately.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Good. You should.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *I'd still like to take you up on that offer, by the way.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *What offer?*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Anime binge night. Games. Talks. I haven't forgotten.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *It still stands. Door's open. Whenever you get brave enough to walk through it.*

[**BLDome**]: *I'm glad you've found a friend. And a connection. That matters more than most people realise.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Thanks. Though now all I have to do is convince my best friend that it's not some secret love affair in disguise. She seems to romanticise every part of my life.*

[**BLDome**]: *Maybe she's onto something. Romance builds character, you know.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *lol Oh no. Don't you start too.*

[**BLDome**]: *What? Maybe you're just in denial.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *I don't think so. He doesn't really strike me as the type.*

[**BLDome**]: *Oh? And what type is that?*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Serious... Focused. He seems the kind of man who puts his goals and achievements first… and I respect that. I want the same. To achieve something with my writing, my projects. So I'm grateful to know someone walking that path without the pressure of outdated relationships where couples talk about favourite colours and foods.*

[**BLDome**]: *lol. You sound like a soul that's been disappointed in love one too many times.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Not disappointed. More… disillusioned. I learned to appreciate myself again. My time and space. And I realised… I should never again try to please someone else at the cost of my well-being, happiness, or true self.*

[**EllaStar5**]: *Next time, if life throws love my way, I want it to be equal. I want a connection where silence feels safe, where creativity flows without apology. A partnership like… sodium and chlorine. When separate… volatile. But together, they create something essential and balanced.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Don't you try swooning me with chemistry references here.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** :P

[**BLDome**]**:** *I get it. And I hope, when the time's right, you find that. A partnership with no pressure, no disasters. Just unison. Creativity, respect and acceptance.*

She stared at the screen for a moment, warmth pressing into her chest, before typing back with a faint smile.

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Maybe the Universe will allow it.*

[**BLDome**]**:** *Night, Star.*

[**EllaStar5**]**:** *Night, Dome.*

She stared at the message long after he went offline. Then back to the still screen. The name Eternal Slumber hovered beside her game playlist. The final frame of Grail, head bowed, cloak catching invisible wind, frozen in place.

◇

The clack of her boots echoed against the marble flooring as Elowen strode through the lobby of the office building. Glass, steel, and silence. The kind of sterile modernity that somehow made her feel like a stranger in her own skin. She tugged at the collar of her coat, breath fogging in front of her. Even inside, February didn't seem to let go.

The elevator pinged open. She stepped in alone, pressing the button for the top floor. As the doors closed, the metal mirrored back her reflection, tired eyes, pale

lips, a faint nervous flush rising under her scarf. She exhaled. The elevator opened into an unusually quiet corridor. Carpet hushed her steps. At the far end, a single glass-walled meeting room glowed with warm overhead lights. Through the frosted edge of the door, she spotted a few familiar figures. Developers, coders and writers. She adjusted her blouse, blinked twice, and stepped inside.

"Morning," she offered, voice light, maybe a bit too bright.

"Morning, Elowen," replied Robert. His salt-and-pepper hair was slicked back in that clean but exhausted way all execs wore after too many deadlines. "We're just running through some update notes. Join us?"

She nodded, sliding into a seat near the edge. The conversation spun around new patch ideas, user interface tweaks, and localisation feedback. Metrics, API stability and all the soulless words needed to keep a soul-born creation from breaking on launch. She answered questions and offered notes. Her face was calm. But the longer it went on, the more she noticed something... was off. Half the team filed out. Only Robert, a company solicitor she didn't recognise, and herself remained.

Robert folded his hands.

"Before we move into the next discussion, we'd need your signature on this NDA."

Her stomach dropped. "NDA?" she asked, taking the paper, scanning it quickly. Standard clauses. No leaks, no disclosures. High-level client involvement. Nothing strange, nothing... alarming. She signed. Robert gave a curt nod.

A soft knock came from the door. The secretary peered in. "They're here."

Elowen blinked. "They?"

The door opened further, and in stepped a tall man in black jeans and a hoodie. Normal. Boring, even. But behind him… Her breath caught.

Kolm was the first, Dy followed and then Vier. And finally… Grail. Elowen's mouth went dry. She couldn't breathe.

They sat and didn't speak. Grail didn't look away from her, though she couldn't see his eyes. Her gaze went instinctively to his collarbones. There it was… The piano key. Hanging over the teal of his cloak. She stood abruptly.

"I… I need a moment, please."

"Elowen?" Robert rose instantly, alarm flaring across his face.

But she was already gone. Out into the hallway, around the corner, away from eyes, from voices and from the unbearable weight of being perceived. The magnolia plant by the window smeared into pale pink and green as her vision blurred, her nervous system abandoning clarity in favour of survival. The air felt wrong here, too thin, too close. She reached the wall and leaned against it, the cold surface biting through the fabric of her clothes, grounding and hostile at once. Her knees gave way beneath her, and she slid down until she was sitting on the floor, folding inward instinctively, arms wrapping tightly around herself as if she could physically prevent herself from coming apart.

Her breath fractured. Each inhale caught halfway, refusing to complete itself, her lungs stuttering in quiet rebellion. Her heart slammed violently against her ribs, erratic and punishing, the rhythm no longer belonging to her. She pressed her palm hard against her chest, as if she could force it to behave through sheer pressure, but it only made her more aware of its chaos. Her hands began to shake, uncontrollably. Her fingers curled against her sleeves, searching for something to hold, something to anchor her, but there was nothing except the endless roar inside her own body. Tears gathered, heavy and humiliating, clinging to her lashes before spilling freely down her cheeks.

She tilted her head back. The wall met her skull with a dull, grounding contact. Once. Twice. Again. Just enough to interrupt the spiral. Just enough to replace the internal chaos with something external. Something predictable.

Footsteps approached. She didn't look up at first. She saw black boots and the hem of a teal cloak instead. Grail didn't speak. He lowered himself beside her slowly, his back resting against the wall, leaving space between them.

Her breath hitched sharply, and a broken sob escaped her before she could stop it. Her head fell back again, but this time his hand moved. He placed it gently between her head and the wall. Her skull met his palm instead of the cold surface.

The contact was soft. It startled her, but not enough to break the rhythm entirely, just enough to slow

it. He said nothing. His hand remained there, steady, absorbing each fragile, desperate motion without complaint. Her breath trembled, the world tilting again, but less violently now.

"Have you got your headphones with you?"

She shook her head faintly, her hands rising to cover her eyes, ashamed of her own helplessness, ashamed of being seen like this. Silence followed.

And then he sang.

Softly, without performance. The notes slipped into the fractured space inside her chest, threading themselves between her breaths, slowing them. The melody wrapped around her nervous system with careful precision, like hands smoothing the surface of stormed water.

She knew these lyrics. Her lyrics. Her fingers loosened slightly from where they clutched her sleeves. Her breathing faltered, then lengthened, her lungs finally remembering how to complete the motion. She drew her knees closer and rested her forehead against them, her body folding inward.

His hand was still there. Still between her and the wall. She could feel its warmth even without touching it directly. Minutes passed in fragile quiet. Her breathing had begun to steady, no longer tearing itself apart with every inhale. The storm inside her chest had loosened its grip enough to allow awareness to return.

Her focus shifted gently, instinctively, away from the wreckage of her own nervous system and toward the quiet presence beside her. Toward the hand still resting

between her head and the wall. It was tense.

She hadn't noticed it before, too consumed by her own unravelling, but now she saw it clearly. The faint tremor running through his fingers. The unnatural stillness, as if holding that position required effort, as if he was afraid to move too soon and undo whatever fragile equilibrium had formed. Her gaze followed the length of his hand. Black paint clung to his skin, stark and deliberate, the pigment settled into the lines of his knuckles and the delicate ridges of his fingers. Golden rings caught the dim light, familiar in a way that made her chest tighten for entirely different reasons. She knew those hands. Gods, she knew them. She had watched them move across piano keys, had studied the precision of their motion, the quiet authority in their restraint.

Slowly, carefully, he lowered his hand from the wall, as though ensuring she no longer needed its protection. His fingers curled inward once they reached the floor, forming a tight fist, squeezing briefly, then releasing again. The movement was small, almost imperceptible, but she saw it. Saw the tension still living inside him, the energy with nowhere to go. His hand trembled faintly as it rested beside him, from the quiet aftermath of exposure.

His secret was no longer protected. She realised then, with a strange, sudden clarity, that he was nervous too. Perhaps more than she was. He had never intended for it to happen like this. Not while she was broken open on the floor, stripped of composure and dignity.

Was he afraid now? Afraid of what she would

think. Afraid of what would change. Afraid of losing something he had never fully claimed but still cared about.

Her chest tightened. His voice, when he sang, carried a softness she had always associated with safety, but now she heard something else woven into it. A faint, almost imperceptible tremble beneath the steadiness. The vulnerability of someone who was no longer hiding behind distance or myth. When the last note faded, he went quiet.

She listened. His breathing was controlled, but not entirely calm. Slightly uneven. Slowly, cautiously, she turned her head just enough to peek at him through one eye. He was looking toward the window.

Her gaze fell back to his hand, still trembling faintly beside him. She wanted to touch it. The urge rose suddenly and instinctively. To reach out and to wrap her fingers around his and squeeze gently. To reassure him and tell him without words that nothing had broken. That he had not lost her. That he had never needed to hide from her in the first place.

Her hand twitched. Lifted slightly from where it rested against her knee and then… paused. Fear stopped her. Fear of the shift and of what crossing that distance would mean. Fear of stepping into a truth neither of them had spoken aloud yet.

So instead, she let her hand fall back into her lap.

"I knew," she whispered finally, her voice hoarse and small.

He turned his head slightly toward her. "How?"

She didn't lift her gaze. "I discovered your identity a while ago, online by accident." She swallowed faintly. "I've known for a while now, but wanted to keep it to myself out of respect. However, it felt unreal until we spoke and… until I heard your voice. In your studio."

He exhaled quietly. "Must've been too drunk to realise I slipped when I decided to sing. It was naïve of me to think you wouldn't recognise it. Or maybe… I didn't want to hide anymore."

Her breathing had steadied now.

"Am I correct to assume that you play under the nickname *BLDome*?"

"Yeah."

"I'm disappointed," she said softly.

He stilled.

"In myself," she added quickly. He turned toward her fully now.

"Why?"

"I should have known," she murmured. "Noah. Grail. Dome. They were never separate people, were they? Just different ways for you to exist without being entirely seen."

She lifted her gaze then, meeting his through the painted slits. A faint, exhausted smirk touched her lips.

"You're such a dramatic arsehole."

His mouth curved in response. He reached up and removed the mask. Messy brown-and-wheat hair fell loosely beneath the hood. His face was half-painted, his cheeks faintly flushed, his eyes softer than she had ever seen them.

He extended his hand toward her. "Noah Rivers."

She wiped beneath her eye with her sleeve before placing her hand in his. "Elowen Starfield."

Their hands met.

He smiled faintly. "Can I invite you for some tea and an anime binge watch? I promise a cosy atmosphere, frequent interruptions due to sudden musical inspiration, and possibly an irresponsible quantity of chocolate digestives."

She let out a quiet laugh. "The deal was for you to come to mine."

He tilted his head slightly. "Then I suppose I'm overdue, if your cat doesn't mind."

They both stood. He slid the mask back on. When they returned, the room buzzed with confused whispers and glances. Robert rose.

"Elowen, are you alright?"

"She's fine," Kolm said, feet up on the table now. "Just emotionally obliterated by Grail's presence."

"Keep talking," she replied dryly, "and I'll kill your character off next update."

Laughter broke the tension. And somehow, surrounded by developers and rock stars, masked faces and legal contracts… Elowen felt something strange bloom in her chest.

Warmth. *Home.*

They began to discuss the terms for the sequel, but Elowen's mind drifted to something else. She smiled, to herself, to the world.

◇

Elowen sat at her desk, the soft hum of her computer barely audible beneath the pounding of her heart. Her tea sat cooling beside her… forgotten. The glow of her monitor cast faint shadows across her room, painting her walls with that same quiet blue that always came before something sacred.

This was different. For the first time in their journey, the chat didn't explode into gifs or inside jokes. There were no sarcastic quips, no spammed reactions. Only voices. Real ones. The headset cupped her ears gently, and suddenly she wasn't in her room anymore. She was there, with them. She recognised Kolm's theatrical, drawling tone, tinged with amusement even when he pretended to be annoyed. Dy's voice was lighter, fast-talking and full of subtle wit. Vier's was low and calm, a quiet drum that grounded them all.

And then… The last one. The one that wrapped around her ribs and tugged gently. Not disguised anymore. Not masked by reverb or modulated for effect. It was him. Soft and deep and so cadent. Hearing him like this… out loud, present, was like breathing in warm air after a long winter. And gods, it was unfair how his voice alone could unravel her nerves and stitch them back together in the same breath.

They talked about the mission ahead. The final arc. The final descent into the deepest pit of Morphea's realm. Each player spoke in turn, strategies and jokes passed like torches in the dark.

Then his voice, low and smooth through her headset, cut through the quiet. "Are you ready, Ella?"

She closed her eyes for a breath, feeling the corners of her lips rise without permission. She leaned forward, voice like velvet and challenge all at once.

"You'd better prepare yourself."

And then she hit enter. Lights flickered, music swelled. And the descent began.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

The wind howled through the chasm beneath them, whispering threats from the crashing sea far below. The bridge… worn, knotted rope and splintered slats of dark wood, groaned under each cautious step the party took. One by one, they crossed in single file, the sway of the structure magnified with every gust. Mist curled up from the water like ghostly hands, licking the edges of the cliff.

Ahead lay Morvane. The Hollow City, shrouded in shadow. Broken towers loomed beyond the bridge, piercing through the thick fog like blackened ribs of a drowned god. Buildings leaned like wilted flowers under a moonless sky, their windows empty, weeping lightless voids. The whole island seemed to breathe: slow, laboured, toxic. Pink and red canopies of magnolias and blossoms were the only ones to break that darkness. Each step on the rope bridge felt like it echoed across time. Avenna led, her light dimmed, muted by the despair saturating the air. Her cloak flared behind her, the bow across her back lightless for the first time. Behind her walked Grail, silent, blades at his side. Dy, Vier, and Kolm followed, their usual banter absent. Even Kolm's sarcasm had withered on his tongue.

No one spoke.

A wave slammed into the rocks below… thunder, sea foam, and inevitability. And then the fog twisted. A ripple, then stillness. Avenna halted mid-step. Her breath hitched. The air folded inward like a gasp.

And then it appeared. A hunched creature hovered above the planks, no taller than a child. Its insectoid limbs glistened like wet obsidian, its torso twitching with tiny spasms of effort. Tentacles writhed beneath it, barbed and thorned, slithering in and out of the mist with obscene elegance. But it was the mask that stilled every breath. Gold, smooth and shaped like a human face, featureless but for the eyes… empty sockets that were somehow worse than seeing pupils.

It reflected. Whatever stood before it, the mask mirrored back. Not as they were, but as they feared to be. It tilted its head.

"*Do you hate yourself?*"

Kolm gritted his teeth. "What in the frozen hells is that?"

Eloi |||||||||||||||||||| 100%

Avenna's light flickered wildly, almost extinguished by the sudden wave of nausea in her chest. Her hands trembled. Around her, the others staggered. Dy fell to one knee, clutching his head. Vier was staring at his reflection in the mask, eyes wide, unmoving.

[Eloi – Mirror of Doubt]

The mask flashed. And then they saw them. Not each other, but themselves. Twisted and distorted. Avenna saw herself alone. On her knees in the rain of Aether. Drenched, screaming. Her skin blackened. Her

eyes were glowing with Morphea's corruption. Her voice saying:

"*You failed them. All of them. And Grail died because of you*."

"No," she whispered. Her voice broke like glass.

Grail stumbled back, seeing himself holding his own bloodied mask. Alone in Elaris's temple, corpses piled behind him. His voice saying:

"*You only protect to soothe your guilt. You kill more than you save*."

Dy saw himself as a child again, locked in a room. Unwanted and forgotten.

Kolm saw his mother, eyes accusing, whispering, "*You let them burn us*."

Vier closed his eyes. He refused to give in to the illusion. Avenna's voice broke the air, hoarse.

"Stay with me! Don't listen!"

[Eloi – Tentacles of Desperation]

The creature's limbs shot out, thorned and gleaming, wrapping around Grail's leg and yanking him to the side. He slammed onto the bridge with a grunt, dragged inches toward the abyss.

"NO!"

[Avenna – Radiant Snapflare]

Her hand flared with one burst of light. Enough to halt the creature's pull. But not to banish the darkness.

Eloi: |||||||||||||||||||| 98%

And then the bridge began to creak. To shift and to tilt. Eloi hovered still, almost delicate. Avenna's light flickered against the fog, weak but still alive. Eloi loomed

ahead, floating in place like some cursed priest of doubt, his mask reflecting the worst within them. The air was thick with despair, and its claws reached into every chest.

[Grail – Twin Blade Reverence]

He charged, blades flashing in mirrored arcs.

-8% HP

Eloi: |||||||||||||||| 90%

The tentacles shot out again.

[Eloi – Tentacles of Desperation]

They caught Vier's leg this time.

"Shit!"

He slipped, body yanked toward the edge of the bridge, the void howling beneath him.

"Vier!"

Kolm lunged, dropping his blade, both hands grabbing hold of Vier's wrist. The bridge tilted under the strain.

"I've got you, mate! Don't let go!"

Vier gritted his teeth. "I wasn't planning on it, you dramatic fuck!"

Avenna blasted the tentacle binding Vier.

[Avenna – Lightflare Arrow]

-5% HP

Eloi: ||||||||||||||| 85%

The grip released, and Kolm hauled Vier back onto the boards. Both men panted, eyes wide. Grail stumbled, his sword arm caught in a thorned lash. He dropped to one knee, blood blooming through the fabric. Avenna turned toward him instinctively, her hand shooting out to grab his. Their fingers locked. And the

vision struck.

A flash…. A garden. Too bright and so perfect. It was Aether, she knew it. Trees of silver leaves, petals falling like stars. Avenna blinked, confused, until she saw him… The King of Valdoria. Beautiful and radiant, the sun gilded his skin. His voice was like sugar, and his energy so magnetic.

"My Moon," he said, brushing hair from her face. "You are the tide I bend, the dream I chase."

His words were sweet poison. He kissed her like a thief. Held her like a jailer. Touched her like she was not a person, but a source of the power of life, of creation.

"I have devoured the sun," he murmured. "And now I will take the moon. My immortality needs you. Elysium swells for the moon's pull. You can bring life... and I will control it."

He took her. Again. Again. Again. She begged, cried.

"Stop. Please!"

He whispered lies into her ear. When he left her, crawling in the garden dirt, she wept. Not for him or even for her body. But because something inside her had died.

When Grail reached for her, moments later, she couldn't let him touch her. Not sweet, gentle Grail. He didn't deserve what she was now. And part of her wanted to poison him with her pain. To lash out, to ruin him the way she'd been ruined. She saw herself turning dark. Her light twisted, like an eclipse.

She gasped, yanked back into the present as Grail

squeezed her hand.

"Avenna!"

She pulled him upright, chest heaving, body drenched in sweat. The others regrouped behind her, bruised, cut, weary. Eloi floated above them, mask shimmering. The illusions were worsening. The team struggled to stand.

"Do you hate yourself?!"

"I do," she said. "I hate myself for being weak. For being a coward. For letting it happen. But I forgive myself for surviving. For falling apart."

The mask cracked once. Twice. A soundless scream poured from Eloi, his body flickering. Avenna advanced, golden light bleeding from her palms, wrapping her like a shroud.

"Do you hate yourself?" she pressed, voice rising. "Because I hated myself for a long time. But now?" Her arms opened wide. "I accept all of it. Even the ugly. Even the broken."

The mask split further. A whimper tore from the shadows.

Kolm stepped forward, his sword slipping from his fingers to the ground with a heavy clang. His voice shook as he raised it to the night. "I forgive myself," he said. "For not being strong enough to save my people. For turning my back when I should have stood. For running from the fire instead of through it. For hiding behind smiles and laughter while my heart bled inside my chest." His hands clenched at his sides. "I forgive myself for being afraid. For being human."

Dy moved beside him, eyes dark. "And I forgive myself for the child," he whispered. "For not saving him when the soldiers took him. I release the hate I've carried, the chains of guilt that rotted me from the inside. I forgive myself for failing. For being too late. For loathing myself for years as if that punishment could bring him back." He exhaled sharply, tears wetting his lashes. "I forgive myself, because I know he would want me to."

The shadows around Eloi writhed, their edges breaking, the scream rising higher.

Then Vier stepped forward, quiet as always. His voice was steady, but the words hit like a blade. "I forgive myself… for wanting to die."

The others turned, stunned. Vier's gaze never wavered. "For years, they called me flawless and unshakable. But inside, I prayed every night that I wouldn't wake. I buried it deep so no one would see, because the world needed me to be strong. But I was drowning. And I forgive myself for that. And now… I mourn."

Eloi staggered, mask nearly gone, hands clutching at his face as if trying to hold it together. Then Grail. He was bloodied, chest heaving, one knee bent against the broken planks. He pushed himself up, every movement slow and brutal, and faced Eloi with fire still burning. His voice was hoarse, cracked, but fierce. "I forgive myself... For Morphea's pain. For carrying her darkness as though it were mine. For believing I was unworthy. Not enough. For letting her stain me with her scars and convincing myself it was my burden to bear." His fists

tightened around his blades. "I forgive myself for taking on her guilt, for hurting others because I couldn't stand my reflection. For hiding behind the mask. I forgive myself for every sin born from my fear."

Avenna's body pulsed with light. She lifted her hand, the glow intensifying, threads of gold weaving into her palm. Her voice cracked as she whispered, "I forgive myself… and I carry yours too."

The radiance swelled, and in it shimmered Kolm's grief, Dy's release, Vier's hidden truth, Grail's unmasking. All of them poured into her hand until the light became blinding.

She stepped forward, fire in her chest, tears streaming down her face. "Eloi!" she cried. "We forgive ourselves. And we forgive you, too."

The mask shattered completely. Eloi screamed, a howl of shadow and anguish that split the night.

[Grail – Heavenfall Leap]

With the last of his strength, Grail launched from above, swords like wings, tearing through the air. Steel met flesh, searing light bursting from the impact.

-60% HP

Eloi: 0%

The creature convulsed, collapsed into a heap of shadow and gold. Silence followed. Just the wind whispering through broken beams. And there, glowing faintly on the shattered planks, the golden vial pulsed with light… waiting.

The team stood breathless. Avenna lowered her hand slowly, light flickering out, her chest heaving as

though she had poured her very soul into the strike. She looked at the vial, then at the shadows ahead, and for the first time, she did not feel the weight of self-hatred. Only release. The wind howled across the broken remnants of what once might have been a garden. It was a garden no longer; only its skeleton remained. Dead vines clung to shattered trellises, and the brittle stalks of long-frozen flowers broke underfoot with every cautious step. The once-beautiful statues, half-swallowed by snowdrifts and frost, leaned like mourners bowing to a grave. Even the light had no warmth here, muted by a sky that seemed bruised, endlessly churning grey and silver.

Avenna pulled her cloak tighter around her shoulders, her hands buried deep in the fabric as she stepped onto a fractured path. Every slab of obsidian stone was edged in ice. Every breath steamed from her lips like smoke from a dying pyre. Ahead of them, the castle rose. A black cathedral of sorrow.

The ruins of Morvane loomed like a sleeping colossus, jagged and half-swallowed by the sea. One tower leaned at a precarious angle, crumbling at its edges, while the shattered rose windows caught the cold light like broken eyes. The sea groaned against the cliffs beyond, but even its eternal crash sounded subdued, like it, too, mourned what had been lost here.

"Gods," Dy whispered. His voice was the first to break the silence in what felt like hours. "This place feels like grief carved into stone."

"No," Kolm muttered, his eyes sharp as he scanned the horizon. "Grief has colour. This is worse."

Vier didn't speak. His steps had slowed, hands deep in his pockets, eyes cast to the ground as if afraid to lift his gaze and find something staring back. And still, Grail walked beside Avenna, silent and still as stone, yet something in him felt…tense. They approached a collapsed archway that might once have been a gateway. The cold was bone-deep here. The kind of cold that stripped sound from the world. Even Avenna's light magic felt dimmed, muted like a candle in fog.

A tremor rolled beneath their boots. A hush swept the air. Even the wind stilled. Avenna turned her head… and the sky cracked. From above the ruined castle, a tear opened across the heavens: black and jagged as lightning frozen in place. And from that wound descended a shadow draped in robes of night, the air warping around his wings. Scorched feathers the colour of despair, unfurled with dreadful grace.

He landed with no sound, and yet the ground quivered beneath his weight. Avenna froze. The figure's scythe was vast, nearly twice the height of a man. Its blade was carved from sorrow itself, etched in runes that shimmered with memory. He lifted his head. And from beneath the hood, the face was revealed.

Avenna staggered back. It was Grail. Grail as he might have been before the paint, before the exile, before Morphea. Young and beautiful. And utterly hollow. No soul.

"*Aether is calling me back*," the creature said. His voice was smooth, almost melodic.

Grail stumbled, eyes wide, stepping forward like a

man in a trance. "That… that's me."

Hollow |||||||||||||||||||| 100% HP

Avenna's light surged into her palms. The others moved behind her, weapons drawn.

[Hollow – Wings of Despair]

A massive gust roared out from the Reaper's wings. A tsunami of hopelessness that crashed over them with impossible weight. Avenna dropped to her knees, light flickering in her palms. Dy cried out, his batons slipping. Vier gasped and stumbled, hands covering his face. Kolm hit the ground hard, breath knocked from his lungs.

Grail took a single step back, then forward again. His body shook. He reached for his sword.

[Grail – Celestial Fang]

With a roar, he surged forward and slashed across the creature's midsection.

-8% HP

Hollow: |||||||||||||||| 92%

But Hollow didn't stagger. He didn't even blink. Instead, he moved his hand.

[Hollow – Scythe of Sorrow]

The blade struck Grail, tearing into his side, sending him sprawling. Avenna screamed, pushing to her feet.

[Avenna – Lightburst Nova]

Her magic exploded from her chest, a radiant pulse of warmth and defiance that ignited the air around them.

-10% HP

Hollow: ||||||||||||||| 82%

Dy pushed through, shaking off the haze.

[Dy – Dissonant Pulse]

His batons clanged together, and the sound itself fractured the shadow. Kolm followed it up.

[Kolm – Piercing Crescendo]

His blade slipped under Hollow's robes and sliced.

-15% HP

Hollow: |||||||||||| 67%

Then came the scythe again.

[Hollow – Echoes of the Past]

Reality fractured. Dy stood at the child's grave. Vier was surrounded by the dead of Frostmere. Kolm... was holding his mother's hand, watching her fade. And Grail? He knelt before Morphea, her body broken.

[Grail – Soul Shatter Reversal]

With a scream, he rose. His blades danced. The illusion shattered and the scythe cracked.

-18% HP

Hollow: ||||||||| 49%

Avenna rushed to catch him. Their hands touched, and the world vanished. She was on marble. Her dress was torn, and blood smeared on white columns. She looked at her hands: darkened, bruised. She heard a soft voice. Grail reached for her, but she slapped him away. Hit him, hurt him. He only opened his arms. She screamed again. She felt pain, devouring inside her that turned into complete darkness. And the last ray of light that was shimmering in her palm was

diminished and replaced by black.

Avenna gasped, snapping back into her body like she'd been thrown from a storm. Her bow was already glowing in her grasp, the light crackling along the string like it was alive.

-12% HP

Hollow: /////// 37%

She stepped forward. Hollow floated above the fractured stones, robe hissing with shadows, blackened angel wings spread in eerie stillness. Avenna's boots scuffed across the ruinous stone. She could feel the tremble in her knees, but her hands were steady. Hollow's scythe lifted.

[Hollow – Wings of Despair]

A beat of his wings sent out a gust of darkness. Avenna blinked, saw a flicker of Aether again, that twisted garden, the betrayal. And in front of her now… Grail as he should've been. Smiling, maskless and arms wide.

She flinched. Took another step back.

[Avenna – Arc Light Surge]

She loosed an arrow through his chest. The illusion fractured.

-14% HP

Hollow: ///// 23%

Grail stood beside her again, the real one, hunched, scarred, cloaked in his obsidian paint and shame and love and pain. Bleeding from the side. His sword was dragging from his fingertips.

"That's not me," he muttered. "Not anymore."

[Grail – Obsidian Severance]

He slashed through the black mist surrounding Hollow's wings. The scythe clanged against the ground as Hollow stumbled.

-11% HP

Hollow: /// 12%

The scythe came swinging.

[Hollow – Scythe of Sorrow]

It caught Grail's shoulder, biting into flesh. He fell, breath knocked out of him. But Avenna stepped over him. Her light flared around them both like a shield.

"No more," she said. "You are not our end," she said softly. "You're the shadow of a man who finally chose to live."

Hollow hesitated. Wings twitching.

[Avenna – Crescent Light]

She fired an arrow, not at Hollow, but at the broken sky above. Light exploded in a halo over the ruins, pushing back the darkness. Kolm, Dy, Vier all surged forward.

[Kolm – Sonar Fang]

-6% HP

[Dy – Rhythm Break Pulse]

-5% HP

[Vier – Lightpiercer Slash]

-4% HP

Hollow 0%

The creature screamed, wings snapping into ash, cloak unravelling into dust, the scythe exploding into fractured metal. Its body unravelled like a thread in

moonlight, vanishing into the wind. Grail stood slowly, swaying. He looked down at his own hands. Scarred and painted. Avenna placed hers on top of them.

"You don't have to hate what you've become," she whispered. "I don't."

He looked up at her. And for once… he didn't look away. In the silence that followed, a single golden vial gleamed where Hollow had once stood. Avenna stepped forward and picked it up.

The wind screamed louder as they pushed onward, bodies heavy with fatigue, souls stretched thin from battle. The castle loomed like a corpse at the end of the world, its spires jagged as broken teeth, its halls drowned in shadows thick as tar. Darkness grew from it, pulsing with a rhythm that felt too much like a dying heartbeat.

Avenna's steps never faltered. Grail walked just behind her, his breath shallow but steady. The others trailed close, blades dulled from war, eyes bright with stubborn fire. Above them, the sky split with a shudder of wings. A black heron, feathered in night, soared over the ruins. It circled once, then dove, disappearing into the shattered windows of the throne room ahead.

No one spoke. They knew what that omen meant. Their boots crunched over brittle stone and shattered marble as they entered the palace grounds. The halls were silent but for the echo of their steps. The remains of ancient banners flapped lifeless in the breeze, and time had rotted the gold from every ornament.

The throne room was a tomb. Columns stood like gravestones. The throne itself was cracked down the middle, a jagged line like a lightning scar splitting it in two. Moonlight poured through holes in the ceiling, dust dancing in it like ash. The air was cold.

Then came the sound. A whisper, or a dragging. The shuffle of fabric over stone, from the shadowed arch behind the throne, he emerged.

Forme.

He was hunched, barely a shape at first, until he stepped into the light. An emaciated figure, ancient and trembling, wrapped in torn, threadbare robes that once might've held elegance. Now they clung like cobwebs to sagging limbs. One hand dragged a rusted sword behind him, the edge chipped, its grip wrapped in bloodied cloth. In the other, he clutched a severed skull, dirt still clinging to the cracks.

But it was the mask that made them freeze. Gold and cracked. Streaked in blood. It was Grail's mask. A warped, twisted mimicry. As if it had tried to mirror him and failed halfway through, breaking under the weight of memory.

"*I must change*," the creature rasped, voice like dry leaves. "*I must... become someone else*."

The party raised their weapons. Avenna stepped forward.

"*But I must change... I must...*"

The skull in his hand rattled. The sword lifted. And then he screamed. A cry that ripped the warmth from the room.

[Forme – Echoing Lament]

A sound of ancient grief rolled over them like a wave. It wasn't rage, begging and pleading.

Kolm staggered, hand to his head. Dy cursed, backing away. Grail stepped forward, but his blade trembled. Avenna raised her bow. And Forme charged.

[Forme – Mirror Image]

He split, five shards of himself, each reflecting one of them. They turned toward their mirrors.

The throne room exploded into chaos.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

The throne room stank of ruin and smoke. What once must have been a grand court now resembled a battlefield waiting to happen, scorched banners clinging to cracked pillars, shattered glass mosaics underfoot, light filtering weakly through broken domes above. The black heron screeched as it flew in, circling the skeletal chandeliers before vanishing into the ceiling shadows.

They stood in formation. Avenna in the front, her bow trembling ever so slightly in her hand. Behind her, Grail at her shoulder, flanked by Dy, Kolm, and Vier. Their cloaks torn, armour dented, eyes lined with exhaustion.

Forme: |||||||||||||||||||| 100%
[Avenna – Divine Arrow Shot]

She loosed her first arrow.

-4% HP
Forme: |||||||||||||||||| 96%
[Forme – Mirror Image]

His mask shimmered. Suddenly, four copies of Avenna stepped forward from the darkness.

Kolm cursed. "Oh, great. Which one bleeds when we stab it?"

[Dy – Twin Pulse Sweep]

He spun, knocking two illusions out. No damage.

[Forme – Echoing Lament]

Forme opened his mouth, and a Grail scream flooded the hall. The sound twisted into the voices of the party's deepest regrets.

[Avenna – Light Pulse Aura]

A burst of light surged from her chest, dispelling the scream.

-6% HP

Forme: |||||||||||||||| 90%

Forme hissed. The illusions reformed. This time, they looked like Grail.

[Grail – Twin Blade Reverence]

With a battle cry, Grail sliced one cleanly.

-8% HP

Forme: |||||||||||||| 82%

Forme lunged. His blade met Grail's side.

[Grail – Retribution Arc]

He countered mid-spin.

-12% HP

Forme: |||||||||||| 70%

The battle spiralled. Kolm and Vier fought through illusion after illusion. Dy used his vibrations to disorient. Grail defended. Avenna fired. But they were slowing. Bleeding, hearts hammering.

Avenna raised her bow once more, her breath sharp, her chest heaving. She aimed for Forme's head. But her knees faltered. Forme struck, the arrow misfired.

Grail lunged, taking the blow in her place. She

caught him. Their hands clasped, and everything fell away.

Avenna stood on the cracked clouds above Elysium. Aether was ashes behind her. And before her, Elysium twisted and wept. Cities collapsed, mountains cracked, and oceans roared black. She screamed, and with that scream, from her body poured shadows. One. Two. Four. Eight. Twelve. Each one a monster. Each one born of pain. Her betrayal and grief, her rage. They wore masks and wielded weapons. They were the twelve knights. Morphea was the creator of these broken creatures.

Avenna gasped. Back in the throne room, still on her knees. Grail's blood was warm on her hand. She stood, her eyes burned black. She raised her bow and called darkness.

[Avenna – Eclipse Arrow]

A shaft of black smoke formed, wrapped in crimson flame. She took a breath and fired.

-70% HP

Forme: 0%

The arrow pierced his chest. Forme screamed and cracked. His mask shattered, and the skull fell. His robes ignited, a gold vial on the floor. From the smoke, a portal opened. Swirling and pulsing. Ahead lay Aether. Ahead… lay Morphea.

The portal opened with a sound like breath being drawn from the lungs of a dying world. They stepped through. Cold hit first, the kind that sank into bone and memory. Aether. Once divine, verdant, a garden etched

by gods, now nothing more than a mausoleum of beauty long undone. The sky was bruised with eternal night, stars drowned behind clouds of ash. The moon hung low, fractured, bleeding silver light across barren fields.

Where once flowers bloomed in endless colour, now only stalks remained… withered, skeletal. Marble statues of gods, some crumbling, some weeping, stood frozen in agony. As if even their divinity had failed.

The team stood in silence. The only sound was the crunch of ash beneath their boots and the faint screech of something ancient overhead. The black heron circled once, twice… then flew toward the horizon.

The gates loomed ahead: tall, golden, ornate, but tarnished now. Their lustre dimmed by grief, by time, by rot. Vines wrapped around the ironwork like veins choked by sorrow. The metal shimmered faintly in the moonlight, as if remembering its holiness.

Grail stepped forward, one hand brushing the hilt at his side. His breath caught. He placed his hand against the gate. For a moment… nothing. Then the doors groaned, metal shrieking, protesting the passage of mortals into sanctity long corrupted. They stepped forward together. Beyond the gate: silence. Dead trees arched overhead like mourning angels. The wind whispered with voices that no longer lived. Cracked fountains, once singing with water and laughter, now dry, their statues faceless and blind.

Then, the blossom tree. Massive, ancient, impossibly beautiful amidst the ruin. Its silver-white petals shimmered like tears made flesh. Each one pulsed

gently, impossibly alive. And beneath it…

The throne. Carved of alabaster and celestial stone, it rose like a scar in the land. Roots twisted around its base.

And on it… she sat.

Morphea.

Her black gown spilt over the marble like a pool of ink. Her golden crown was bent, broken at one side. A gold blind mask adorned her face, but cracks spiderwebbed across it, revealing blackened skin beneath. Her fingers gripped the arms of the throne with lazy grace, nails sharpened to talons. The hem of her gown trailed down the steps like flowing darkness.

She was still. Slowly, the golden mask turned toward them. She leaned forward slightly, fingers tapping the armrest, her gold crown glinting like a relic of a long-forgotten war.

"Welcome," Morphea said. "To my Heaven."

Silence. Her words hung like smoke, curling around their throats. She rose slowly, the black folds of her gown spilling like ink across the steps as she descended. Each footfall echoed with purpose. Her mask tilted slightly, gold catching the dead light.

"A new Heaven," she continued. "Hollow. Beautiful. Honest. Built from rot, because that is what gods are made of, isn't it?" Her head cocked. "And people. Empty things, all of you. Pretending you're not broken."

Her eyes flicked to Grail.

"You most of all."

He stiffened, but said nothing. Morphea took another step.

"You chose another," she whispered, venom lacing her voice like wine. "You thought light would save you. Thought love would make you clean. But you're still mine, still filthy. Still trailing your shadow like a leash."

He blinked. "I…"

"Don’t lie to me!" she snapped, voice cracking like thunder. "You still crave the ache. You still dream of me."

Morphea’s steps drew her closer, the gown whispering across marble like liquid shadow. The cracks on her golden mask widened as if her very skin could no longer contain the poison she carried.

"You still dream of me," she murmured, her voice silk dipped in venom. "Even now, I see it. In the tremor of your hands. In the way your eyes cannot look away. You ache for me still."

Grail’s jaw tightened. "I ache," he admitted, voice low, "but not for you."

Her head tilted. "Liar."

He drew in a breath, steady but ragged at the edges. "I ache for what I was. For whom you made me believe I was. For the nights I carried your scars as if they were holy scripture. For the weight I mistook for love." His eyes found hers through the cracks in her mask. "But I do not ache for you."

Her fingers clenched as though the words had struck her. Yet she laughed… soft, bitter and elegant. "Oh, how righteous you sound now. Tell me, did she

wash you clean? Did she kiss away the filth I buried in your bones? Did you finally believe you were worthy when she called you hers?"

His silence hung heavy, and for a moment, his throat betrayed him, because there had been times when the memory of Morphea still clawed at his ribs, when her shadow whispered in his sleep.

But then he lifted his chin. "No. She did not make me worthy. I made myself worthy. You may have stained me, but the ink does not define the page. I bled, I faltered, I hid behind the mask… but I grew from it. I learned." His breath shook, yet his voice carried. "You are not my definition anymore. You are only my past."

Her mask tilted, the gold crown glinting faintly like a sun long extinguished. The silence quivered, her body trembling as though holding together an unravelling truth.

"You think you've outgrown me?" she whispered, softer now, dangerous in its fragility. "That you can walk away from the ruin we built? From the empire of wounds we carved into each other?"

He stepped closer despite himself, despite the memory of her hands once being both sanctuary and prison. "I cannot walk away from it. It lives in me. You live in me. But you do not own me. Not anymore… My scars are mine now. And I forgive myself for letting you mark me."

Morphea's hand lifted, talons grazing the cracked edge of her mask. The webbing spread, golden shards flaking away as black skin burned through. Her voice

trembled with elegance laced in despair.

"Then look at me, Grail. Look at the ruin you loved."

With slow, deliberate fingers, Morphea reached up. And peeled the mask away.

Kolm muttered a curse. Dy took a step back. Vier's torch sputtered, almost dimming entirely. Even Grail's hand fell from his blade. Avenna stumbled.

Because staring back at them... was Avenna.

Not exactly, not quite. But her face… Her features. Her bone structure, her lips. Colder, etched in bitterness. But it was her.

"You…" Avenna whispered, voice barely above a breath.

Morphea smiled without mirth.

"You tried so hard to run," she hissed, voice softer now. "To become better. To choose differently. And yet, Grail... you chose me again." Her fingers tapped her collarbone. "Not just anyone. *Me.* The hopeful version, the light version. You clung to the parts of me that couldn't survive."

Avenna stared, blood draining from her face.

"I don't understand," she said. "What is this?"

Morphea's gold crown seemed to glisten like rot. Her hair flowed like white smoke down her back.

"I'll tell you a story," she whispered, stepping back into the blossom's shadow. The petals, pale as bone, seemed to shiver as her gown brushed them. "Once… a divine woman walked in Aether. She had light and purpose. She had a future."

Her voice draped over them like silk torn on broken glass. She paced slowly, every word sharp. "Then the King of Valdoria, your beloved immortal tyrant, came with his dagger, forged to kill gods. His tongue spoke with sweet poison, his touch was like the sun on your skin. He killed beauty and hope. And then he found her."

Her head tilted toward Avenna.

"He took her. Again. And again. And when he was done… when he took her power, her purity… her heart… he left."

Avenna's heart thundered in her chest.

"She was shattered," Morphea breathed, softer now, almost fragile. "Too broken to carry on. And so… she did what broken things must do to survive."

Her arms unfurled, black sleeves cascading like wings of tar.

"She split."

Grail's breath caught.

"I kept the fury," Morphea said, her eyes glinting. "The grief, the hunger and the truth. I became what pain demanded of me."

Her gaze snapped back to Avenna.

"And I cast the weakness aside. The light, the innocence. The version of me that still believed." Her lip curled. "That version was you."

Avenna stumbled back, head shaking. "No…"

Morphea's voice cracked like thunder. "You were me. The echo, the hope. Because I no longer needed the part of me that wept."

Avenna's vision blurred, tears stinging her lashes.

Morphea descended a step, her golden mask held in her hand now like a broken crown. "I destroyed the King's realm. I sent my shadows to retrieve the dagger, and I buried it in the snow. Because his eternity will rot. He will be king of nothing."

Her head bowed, and when she spoke again, her voice trembled with something dangerously close to grief.

"But there was a moment… before."

Her eyes lifted, fixed on Grail now.

"I almost bared my face to you," she said quietly. "You see, gods do not show their faces. We hide behind perfection and fear, because faces betray truth. But once…" her voice grew distant. "I saw you. Maskless, singing in Aether."

She stepped toward him, her voice dark silk spun with sorrow. "You were the God of sound, of music. Of inspiration. And I… I fell. I almost tore my mask away then. Almost let you see me… I wanted you to know the woman, not the god."

Her cracked lips curled in a broken smile. "But I didn't. I was too afraid. And when the King shattered me, I buried that part. The part that might have been saved by you."

The mask dangled loosely in her hand, her knuckles white.

"And so I chose the fury. And I stained you with it, because it was all I had left." Morphea took another step forward. She looked at Avenna.

"I showed my weakness yet again, allowing myself to be separated from the light, rather than killing it. So now… I will kill the one who destroyed me… And you... You will die too."

"No…"

"Because I don't need you," Morphea said, eyes darkening. "Not anymore. I don't need the girl who begged. Who hoped… Who broke quietly in the night."

A shadow rose behind her. Then another. The broken silhouettes of the knights, her twelve shadows. Her trauma incarnate.

"You're my past," Morphea said. "And now I'll erase you."

Her eyes met Grail's. Cold and endless.

"And you... still don't get to save her."

Morphea's twelve shadows burst forward like a floodgate ripped open by wrath itself, howling things, twisted echoes of anguish shaped into monstrous forms.

Kolm was first to meet them, roaring as he leapt into the heart of chaos. Two shadows lunged at him with curved blades that howled in the air. He spun, dodging one and driving both his swords into the other's gut.

[Kolm – Requiem Dual Slash]

He ripped them free and twisted, but pain seared across his thigh as another knight crashed into him, cleaving through muscle.

"FUCK!" Kolm staggered, blood spraying stone, but he didn't fall. He pushed back, one blade reversed in his grip, parrying with trembling arms.

To the left, Dy blurred. His batons gleamed with

kinetic charge, spinning like twin stars. He ducked a scythe swipe, leapt into a backflip, then cracked a shadow across its malformed skull.

[Dy – Starlight Collapse]

A pulse of vibration exploded on impact, but black tendrils erupted from the ground, coiling around his waist and hurling him like a ragdoll into a shattered pillar. The stone cracked with the force. Dy didn't rise.

Vier's boots scraped across stone as he sprinted into the chaos, arms out, lighting torches with a single breath of flame.

[Vier – Hymn of Resolve]

A ring of golden fire flared from his body, licking at the wraiths nearest him. One screamed as flame consumed its shadowed cloak, but another cut a ragged blade deep into his shoulder. Blood poured from the wound. Vier dropped to one knee, holding his torch high like a flag on a battlefield.

Avenna stood amidst the storm, arrows glowing with light as she fired shot after shot. But her hands trembled. Her aim faltered. Two missed wide, the third hit, but the shadow barely flinched. Her knees buckled. Her light dimmed.

She looked at Grail… at his silence. He moved like a ghost beside her, his blades slashing, parrying, slicing through two shadows…

[Grail – Twin Blade Reverence]

But every time she appeared, every time Morphea stepped forward, his arms froze. His breath caught. Because it wasn't just an enemy he saw, it was her. It was

Avenna. Or something close enough to break him.

"Morphea…" he rasped beneath his mask.

She moved toward him, dark and divine, skin laced with shadows, her crown twisted into thorns.

"Why won't you fight me?" she hissed. "You already chose your new toy. The replacement. Why not finish the job?"

"Because…" His blades lowered. "You're still her. You're still part of her. You can still be her."

"I will be what I am now!" She roared.

Her scream could have split the sky. She threw a wave of darkness so thick it shattered the floor beneath Grail, launching him across the room. He slammed into the wall, dust exploding outward. His mask cracked.

Avenna shouted his name, but the roar drowned it.

[Morphea – Echo of Origin]

The room shook. And then, there were more of them. The shadows multiplied. From every corner, nightmare-flesh spilt forward. New limbs and new weapons. Kolm cried out as one sliced open his ribs. He fell to one knee, blood soaking his side.

Vier coughed blood into his palm, barely keeping his torch upright. Another shadow kicked him down. Dy, broken-legged, crawled across the battlefield, dragging his batons. His mouth was open in a scream, but no sound came.

Avenna fired another arrow. Missed. Her vision blurred, and her hands were numb. And in the middle of it all, Morphea walked slowly, calmly, between her

twisted children.

"You don't deserve them," she hissed at Avenna. "You don't deserve *him*."

She lifted her arms.

[Morphea – Queen's Shroud]

A dome of shadows expanded across the chamber, swallowing light. Avenna screamed as it rushed toward her. And then… nothing. Silence. Until… A scraping of boots on fractured stone.

Grail stood. His cloak was torn, his blades lowered. Blood soaked the ground beneath him. But his eyes… his eyes burned with something new. His mask lay on the ground, straps torn, the surface fractured like brittle bone.

At first, his lips parted only in a cracked hum… broken, trembling, a sound more wound than music. But with each breath, it grew. Louder, steadier. Until his voice rose, carrying words that echoed through the chamber like a prayer carved in stormlight.

I've worn the ashes of my sins,
Carried the weight that was never mine.
Bound in a circle that never ends,
But tonight I sever the line.

The air quaked. The stones beneath their feet splintered. His voice deepened, gaining power, until the garden itself seemed to breathe with him.

"I forgive the fire, I forgive the fall,

I forgive the silence that consumed it all.
No more chains, no more disguise…
I rise, I rise, I rise."

Light bled through the cracks in his skin, green and blinding, spilling across the floor like molten rivers. Morphea staggered back, her mask shaking in her grip.

"Your shadow tried to live in me,
But I am more than what you gave.
I'll break the cycle, I'll let it bleed,
From the ruin…I'll be saved."

On the last word, wings tore from his back with a deafening snap: two enormous, black wings streaked with veins of emerald energy, lightning threading their feathers. They spread wide, eclipsing the chamber.

Morphea's breath hitched. "What?"

The shadows trembled.

[Grail – Divine Reclamation]

He rose, hovering above the ground, eyes blazing with light and sorrow. Chains of stardust trailed from his blades, wrapping him in fragments of eternity.

Then he landed like a meteor. He moved faster than the eye could follow, blades flashing, wings sweeping, each strike a vow renewed. Shadows crumbled beneath him like ash, their screeches vanishing into smoke. He tore through one… and another.

And then… Kolm. His sword lifted, trembling at first, but his voice broke through, joining Grail's chorus.

"I forgive the fire, I forgive the fall,
I forgive the silence that consumed it all.
No more chains, no more disguise…
I rise, I rise, I rise."

Dy staggered, half broken, clutching Vier's arm for balance. The two of them straightened, and though their bodies bore wounds too deep to ignore, they still raised their voices. One rough, one quiet but steady, they sang.

"I rise, I rise, I rise."

The ground shook, as though the song itself split the stones. Their blades cut shadows, their voices cut despair. Avenna felt the words reverberate through her bones, a chant, a promise, a release.

Together, they fought like one, their chorus resounding:

"I rise, I rise, I rise."

The refrain built, louder with each breath, swelling until even the shadows quivered, faltering before them. Grail's wings swept wide, emerald lightning coursing through their feathers, and when his voice broke, the others carried him: Kolm's defiant bellow, Vier's ragged growl, Dy's low, unshaken note.

"I rise, I rise, I rise!"

But Morphea was not done. In one breath, she blinked from the throne, shadows splintering in her wake, and reappeared before Avenna, her gown dripping black like a wound, one hand bloodied, the other stretched forward like a claw reaching. She caught Avenna's throat.

"LIGHT MAKES YOU WEAK!" she screamed, blood leaking from her side. "HOPE MAKES YOU STUPID!"

Avenna gasped. The dagger glinted in her other hand.

Grail shouted, "NO!", but shadows wrapped around his arms, yanking him back.

The others collapsed again, their strength gone. And Avenna, tears burning in her eyes, felt her fingers slipping from the dagger. Morphea's own wounds were bleeding black ichor.

"You think you're better than me?" she snarled. "You think your love, your light, your pretty friends will save you?"

Avenna's eyes widened. Her hands clutched at Morphea's wrist.

"You… you were me. I remember now..."

She saw herself in Aether. Screaming, begging, broken. Her skin darkened, veins turning black.

"Avenna! No!" Grail screamed.

The darkness enveloped her. Morphea screamed, triumphant. Until… The darkness shuddered and

cracked. Avenna's memories surged: Kolm's dumb jokes. Dy's soft voice. Vier's steady presence. Grail… his arms, his silence and his kiss.

She reached for the dagger and pulled it to her chest. Light didn't return, but something else did. Shadow and light, both. She looked at Morphea, tears running down her face.

"You were never my enemy," she whispered.

Morphea screamed. Avenna took a step, holding the dagger. And… hugged Morphea, tight. The throne room erupted in a scream.

"You are my shadow self."

The pain in Morphea's cries was centuries of agony, betrayal, abandonment, and longing echoing through the heavens. Avenna's arms didn't loosen. Her grip only tightened, trembling as she whispered:

"You say you rejected me, but… I rejected you as well. I'm sorry." Avenna said. Morphea writhed, clawed, and screamed. Avenna didn't flinch. "I thought if I buried you, I'd be pure again. But pain doesn't die in silence. Grief doesn't leave just because you pretend it never visited."

Tears slid down Avenna's face, soaking into blackened skin.

"You were never evil. You were me. The broken mirror, the scream I swallowed because the world only wanted the light."

Morphea's voice cracked. "They hated me!"

"They feared us," Avenna breathed. "Feared a woman who knew sorrow so deeply she could birth

galaxies from it."

Morphea's form began to tremble, the shadows retreating and unravelling. Her limbs became smoke, her crown cracking, her golden mask shattering to ash.

"I see you now," Avenna said, eyes wide, lips shaking. "And I accept you. Every fury, every wound, every scar. You don't have to fight anymore."

Morphea's scream became a sob. Her body collapsed into transformation. She became smoke… dark, luminous, powerful, and that smoke wrapped around Avenna like a veil. It poured into her skin, into her bones, into her soul. Avenna gasped, staggering back. The silence that followed was holy. When she lifted her head, the change was visible. Her golden hair shimmered with a single thread of silver, like moonlight woven through sunlight. Her skin still bore the black tint at her fingertips, like ink-stained wisdom etched into flesh. And atop her head, where once there was nothing, now rested a crown of obsidian and pearl, flickering with stars.

The throne room, the whole of Aether, held its breath. And then, the air shifted. A tremor ran through the marble floor. The black cracks webbing the walls pulsed once, then softened into lines of green light. Petals began to fall. Pale at first, then rich with colour, drifting down like snow that carried life instead of death. The roots crept through the stone, splitting apart the cold tiles, curling upward in vines heavy with roses and wildflowers. The hollow walls that had echoed with nothing but silence now whispered with wind. Water spilt from fissures in the marble, trickling at first, then

rushing, until streams wound their way through the ruined chamber. They surged into rivers, into waterfalls that poured from high ledges, filling the empty void with music.

Aether breathed.

From the shadows lining the temple, statues of gods: cold, grey, eyes blind and empty, began to tremble. Their stone skin cracked, pieces falling away in a cascade of dust. Beneath, flesh glimmered. Warmth returned, colour flooding lips and cheeks as if blood had been waiting all along. The gods gasped, one by one, as though waking from centuries of sleep. Their eyes opened.

A tree burst upward at the heart of the throne room, branches sprawling, leaves unfurling like emerald fire. Fruit shimmered along its limbs, and blossoms rained from its canopy in a storm of fragrance and gold dust. The air filled with birdsong, faint and hesitant at first, then swelling into a chorus that harmonised with the rivers.

Where despair had lingered, now came warmth. Where silence had suffocated, now came breath. Aether was no longer hollow. It was alive. And as they watched, the gods who had been frozen for so long stood among them, bewildered but radiant, their voices joining the song of rushing waters and rustling trees.

The garden had returned. Avenna met Grail's eyes last.

"I am life," she said. "I am death."

She stepped forward, power and calm moving in equal measure. "And even in Elysium," her voice

dropped to a whisper, reverent and absolute, "yet I stand."

The air trembled. And before she could fall to her knees, Grail's wings burst wide with a single sweep, carrying him to her. His arms caught her mid-collapse, pulling her into him so tightly it nearly stole her breath.

And then Aether answered. The walls of the throne room shuddered, marble seams splitting open. Water poured forth in sudden torrents, cascading from the heights like newborn waterfalls. They spilt over ledges and broken arches, tumbling down in silver streams that flooded the floor in a glowing tide.

The currents swept around them, foaming at Grail's boots, rising higher, until they washed across his shoulders, over his wings, and down his back. The sound was thunder and hymn at once, the rivers of Aether baptising him in endless waves.

He held Avenna against his chest, but the water seemed to see him, to seek him. Each surge was cleansing. Washing the old stains of grief, the centuries of guilt, the shadow Morphea had pressed into his veins. It stripped the ache from his bones like peeling away rust, and in its place left radiance.

He bowed his head, his hair plastered to his face, his breath shuddering as the waterfalls poured endlessly over him… like infinite baths of light. And as they flowed, the sorrow that had chained him seemed to dissolve into the current, carried away. Where despair had dwelled, and warmth took root. Where grief had rotted, light began to fill. His chest lifted with the air of

renewal.

Avenna stirred faintly in his arms, and when he looked down at her, it was with eyes no longer burdened by shadows… but blazing, clear, and whole.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The King of Valdoria sat slouched on his golden throne, twisting a flickering strand of crimson light between his fingers. It crackled and hissed like a snake, pulsing in time with his breath.

A slow, poisonous laugh coiled from his lips. "Morphea is gone," he muttered, licking his teeth. "She really thought she could win."

But the room didn't answer him. Then, a flutter. A shadow darted across the polished floor. The King blinked. A black heron soared through the high cathedral windows, circling once overhead before landing on his throne.

He stared at it. It stared back.

"Curious little omen, aren't you?" he said, rising.

He extended a hand, amused. The bird shrieked, loud, sharp, righteous, and lunged at his face. The King reeled back in shock, stumbling down the steps of his dais.

THUNK.

A sword embedded itself into the throne just behind where his head had been. A scream of fury caught in his throat as his gaze jerked toward the massive doors. Four silhouettes stepped into the throne room.

Kolm, Dy, Vier, and Grail… teal cloak flowing,

golden katana loose in his hand, and a golden sword strapped across his back, his obsidian-painted skin glistening faintly with starlight. A mask, pearl-white and flawless, adorned his face… its surface etched with glowing teal runes and laced in filigree of molten gold, a celestial crown carved into porcelain.

Golden armour clung to his shoulders and, intricate and angular, studded with sapphires that shimmered like fragments of night sky. Each gem caught the faintest breath of light, igniting him with shifting constellations as he moved. Gold chains draped across his torso, glinting with the rhythm of his breath. His cloak, trimmed with golden embroidery, rippled in the air like a banner of storm and divinity, each hem marked with lacework sigils too ancient to read.

He stood like a sovereign forged of shadow and light both, a god who bore his scars as if they were jewels, his wrath tempered into something holy. To look at him was to see ruin made beautiful, brokenness reforged into regalia.

The King's voice boomed. "WHAT IS THIS?"

But none of them answered. Because from behind them, like a storm, entered Avenna. She walked like a queen reborn. Her gown was black and teal, gold embroidery swirling over her hips and shoulders like flame-kissed vines. Her hands were bare, fingertips still kissed with shadow. Her golden crown, now turned into a celestial headpiece, shimmered, forged from both starlight and darkness. Light surrounded her. So did darkness. Her blind mask glistened with celestial gems

and sapphires.

The King froze.

"Morphea…" he whispered. And then... "No. Avenna?"

Her eyes did not flinch.

"You broke me," she said, her voice low. "Split me in two. Took my light and left me hollow."

The King stood taller, rage flashing in his expression.

"So it was you all along! You were weak," he snarled. "I made you stronger. I saved you from yourself."

"You shattered me," she snapped, louder now. "You called it love, but it was ownership. You made me question my own voice, my worth. My divinity."

His lip curled.

"Don't be dramatic. You were too emotional. Too sensitive to rule. I had to take control."

Avenna stepped forward.

"You made me doubt myself. You punished me for wanting to be free. Every time I tried to rise, you chained me with guilt. You told me I was broken, and then blamed me for bleeding."

"You wanted too much," he spat. "No one could ever love someone like you... so delusional, demanding and selfish! That's why they all leave you. That's why I left you!"

Avenna stopped. She looked back at the four who had followed her into the storm. Kolm. Dy. Vier. And Grail… her shadow's light. She turned back to the King. Her voice softened, but it cut like obsidian.

"No, you left because I stopped being your mirror. Because I stopped playing small so you could feel big."

The King's hands trembled, crackling red light crawling across his knuckles like blood.

"You're nothing without me."

"I am everything you tried to erase."

He lunged forward, red light arcing toward her. But it never touched her. Grail stepped forward, blades crossed, blocking the attack. The force crackled against his swords but did not budge him.

"I failed once," Grail growled, his voice heavy with past and purpose. "I watched you take her light. And I did nothing."

The King snarled. "You were just a puny god! You think you matter?"

Grail didn't flinch. "I was a weapon," he said, stepping closer, steel humming. "Now I'm a shield."

"You can't kill me!" the King bellowed. "I'm immortal! I am the sun!"

"No," Avenna said quietly, stepping beside Grail now. "You're just a man. A scared, starving thing. And your time is over."

Her hand rose slowly, a gentle wave through the still air. Twelve golden vials shimmered into being above her, each one spinning midair like a star caught in orbit. They pulsed once, twice... then shattered. Light burst from their cores, glittering, swirling and divine. The radiant liquid merged in the air, twisting like silk in water, condensing… forming the shape of a single arrow.

Avenna's other hand lifted, and a bow bloomed

into her palm. She drew the arrow back.

The King snarled, rising to his feet, red lightning boiling in his palms. "You can't kill me! I'm the sun, immortal!"

He hurled his crimson light at her, but he never reached her. Because in that moment, Grail appeared behind him, arms locking around the King's throat in a crushing chokehold. Vier darted in from the side, pinning the King's left arm. Dy took the right, his batons pressing into pressure points that made the tyrant cry out in rage.

Kolm strode forward with casual menace, yanked the golden crown off the King's head, and tossed it aside like rusted scrap.

"Guess even immortality can't fix your ego," Kolm muttered, stepping back.

Avenna's gaze didn't waver. Her eyes were fire and silence. Her fingers released, and the arrow flew. The impact was silent. Then… he gasped. Hands clutching his chest, falling to his knees, eyes wide with disbelief.

"No… I can't… I can't die…" he rasped, trembling. "I'm immortal…"

Avenna stood before him, calm, towering.

"You were never a god," she said. "You were a tyrant clinging to delusion."

She tilted her head, voice softer now, but heavy with ancient finality.

"I am Death."

And as he screamed, his body cracked, splintering from within, until it broke apart like sand under a storm.

Ash drifted where he once knelt. Silence held for only a heartbeat. Then the ground shook. A deep rumble echoed through the ruined halls. The dark veil surrounding Elysium shattered like glass, a web of threads unravelling across the sky. The pressure, the eternal weight of dread, of pain… lifted.

The moon above became whole. The stars aligned. And from the heavens, rain began to fall. But this was no mournful downpour.

Outside, people flooded the streets. And for the first time in generations, they laughed. They danced beneath the storm. Some cried, others held each other, but all of them felt the same thing:

Hope, freedom and a new beginning.

Avenna stepped through the broken throne room doors, her boots hitting wet stone, her friends at her side. Rain soaked through her crown, her cloak, but she didn't flinch. Her eyes were fixed on the sky. And from above, gliding silently through the clouds, a black heron descended in a slow arc before vanishing toward the cliffs beyond.

They reached the outer courtyard. An elder figure stood waiting beneath the archway: tall, robed in faded white and lilac. Elder Illarian. He bowed low, then lifted his gaze to Avenna with reverence.

"You have freed Elysium," he said. "Not just from a tyrant, but from the sickness in its soul."

Avenna stepped forward, brow furrowed.

"What now?" she asked. "What comes after the ending?"

Elder Illarian smiled.

"Elysium needs a ruler again," he said. " A soul untainted by hunger for power. There is one… far beyond these lands. A child of stars and earth, whose spirit was born from both light and darkness. If found, they will bring balance."

Grail's voice was quiet. "How do we find them?"

The elder looked to the horizon.

"Follow your Winged Guardian," he said.

And above them, the black heron circled once more, then began to fly west, toward distant, golden clouds beyond the rain. Avenna stood still for a moment, rain streaking down her cheeks like silver ink. Then, slowly, she turned to face the others.

"I want to go," she said. "To fix what I've broken. To heal this realm and to redeem myself, if I still can."

Her gaze swept over them, vulnerable and fierce. "Would you come with me? Even after all I've done?"

Grail stepped forward, slow, steady, and gently took her hand. "I go where you go," he whispered. "Because I am your shadow and your shield. Your lover."

Kolm groaned as he limped into view, clutching his side but grinning. "Well, shit. Guess the most fun I've had was bleeding beside you."

Dy winked. "You're chaos. But you're our chaos."

Vier bowed low. "Lead the way, Priestess."

Avenna smiled softly, a glow rising in her palms. She lifted her hand, and magic shimmered outward like a wave of silk and starlight. The men blinked as their armour and garments were swept away in a flourish of

teal and gold.

Kolm now stood regal in an ornate black and gold vest, the embroidery etched like runes that glimmered faintly under the torchlight, each stitch like a relic of forgotten gods. His frame was lined with sharp precision, paired with fitted black trousers tucked into tall leather boots that gleamed with rain. A warrior reborn, but regal… his presence weighty as stone, carved and unyielding.

Vier's battle-worn form was softened into something shadowed and effortless. Loose black trousers hung low, his movements liquid in their freedom, while a dark leather tunic clung to him like a second skin. Its surface shimmered faintly in the rain, like oil over water. He looked less like a soldier and more like an oracle: calm, distant, but carrying the quiet weight of storms.

Dy stood bare-chested, unflinching against the chill. His torso bore golden runes spiralling down his skin like rivers of light, alive and breathing with him. Each symbol glowed faintly, casting a divine sheen across his muscles, as though his very body had been carved into scripture. His loose black trousers gave him a raw, primal look, boots heavy against the earth, every breath a promise of violence and fire.

All three were cloaked in long teal mantles, their hems edged in threads of gold, hoods deep enough to drown their faces in shadow. And upon them shimmered their masks: golden skulls, wrought with artistry, etched with glistening constellations as though the heavens themselves had pressed stars into the bone. Each mask

burned differently: Kolm's with authority, Vier's with stillness, Dy's with fury.

Avenna looked at them, pride blooming in her eyes. She stood adorned in a flowing gown, her own mask resting in her hands like a crown yet to be claimed.

"Now," she said, voice rich with magic and meaning, "You are no longer assassins. You are Reapers. Of darkness, despair and hollow souls. You are known as The Eternal Slumber, messengers of Death, Transformation, and New Life. And with your skills and powers, you will uplift the darkness from the souls of those who succumbed to darkness. Your swords and weapons will save the broken ones, and your presence will become a symbol of growth, healing and hope."

Behind them, the black heron flew onward, disappearing into the golden light. Avenna inhaled deeply.

"Let's start a new cycle," she said. "One of healing. Of redemption."

They stepped forward together.

The music swelled. The screen faded to black. The words appeared: "In Elysium… yet I stand."

And the credits rolled.

◇

Elowen's headphones roared with overlapping voices, all yelling, laughing, howling disbelief.

"WHAT THE ACTUAL HELL!!!" Kolm shouted.

"Did she just say 'I am Death'?! That was so

metal…" Dy laughed.

"I'm still crying. Don't look at me." Kolm sniffled.

"No, seriously, who the fuck saw the Morphea plot twist?!" Vier said.

"Bro, the King got absolutely wrecked. Man crumbled like old bread." Kolm was overly excited.

Elowen laughed so hard she nearly dropped her tea, her hand over her mouth as she tried to keep up.

"I swear on all seven of my backup drives, this was a masterpiece," Noah said into her headphones.

She sat back in her chair, the screen a flurry of scrolling reactions and half-coherent screaming. Her lips still held a grin, but her chest… Her chest felt light. Like something had unknotted itself after years of silent tangles.

For a moment, she didn't speak. Just listened. The sound of her friends losing their minds, the occasional beep of messages flooding chat, the faint hum of the final credits theme still echoing in her ears. And in that gentle chaos… she felt it. *Hope.* A soft knock came through her headset: Noah's voice. She blinked, eyes misting.

"You wrote a fucking masterpiece, love. A story worth telling. One people need to hear."

She smiled.

"Thank you. That means more than I can say." She replied. She wiped a tear from her cheek.

And in the quiet that followed, surrounded by laughter, praise, and static joy… She allowed herself to feel it. She did it. Just like Avenna, she made it through the darkness. And the light?

The light felt earned.

◇

Spring unfurled its fingers across the city, gilding every windowpane in amber. The air had that new warmth in it: soft, trembling, promising. Elowen's arms hugged a cardboard box as she juggled keys in her hand. The moment she stepped inside with Hugo, a familiar meow greeted her.

"Mischief," she grinned, setting the box down. The black cat blinked once from the windowsill like a judgmental little god before leaping down and curling around her ankles. Elowen laughed as she untied her boots and stretched. "Evening, chaos demon."

The house still smelled of new paint, unpacked dreams, and vanilla. The place wasn't perfect: boxes half-opened, curtains still pinned awkwardly, but it was hers. Every square foot. Every squeaky floorboard and every sunbeam. Hers.

She flicked the kettle on. The kitchen light bathed the space in warmth. Her email pinged with updates from her agent. *Elysium Chronicles* had just hit its third print run. Her books gleamed in store windows now, next to posters of *In Elysium: Yet I stand* and upcoming DLC teasers.

Life was… surreal.

After a few hours of cooking dinner and watching Hugo build a rainbow house in Minecraft, she sighed.

Then the doorbell rang. She blinked, checking the time. Almost 9 p.m.

"Odd," she murmured, wiping her hands on her joggers.

She opened the door and blinked in surprise. Dan, Aaron, and Reid filled the porch, still in their casual post-gig clothes but with their hands painted black, smudged faintly with glittering traces of stage paint. They grinned widely, waving like mischievous schoolboys caught sneaking out of detention.

Behind them stood Noah, hood up, hair tousled from the drizzle, eyes tired but faintly glowing in the porch light.

Dan bowed dramatically, his silver hair dripping water. "Game night, ma'am."

Before Elowen could even laugh, Hugo came tearing down the hallway in socks, his face splitting into the biggest grin. "KOLM!" he squealed, barreling straight into him.

Dan bent down, scooping Hugo up with ease, hoisting him onto his shoulders like it was second nature. "Ready to lose at Uno?"

"You're the one who cheats!" Hugo shot back, already shuffling through a pack of cards he'd snatched from the shelf.

Dan ruffled Hugo's hair with a painted hand, leaving a faint black streak and passing him a traditional gift of a drum stick. Reid plopped onto the carpet as if he belonged there, pulling crisps from the bowl before anyone else could claim them. In seconds, the living

room was loud with laughter, voices overlapping, Hugo giggling so hard he nearly fell off Dan's shoulders.

And in the hallway, Elowen and Noah lingered. He stepped inside last, shutting the door softly behind him. The others' noise filled the house, a storm of warmth and joy, but here, in the narrow glow of the hallway light, Noah stood still. Shoulders slack, breath heavy like he'd finally let himself exhale.

Elowen tilted her head, studying him. "You really brought the whole pantheon."

A faint grin tugged at his lips. "Strength in numbers." His voice was low, worn, but threaded with amusement. Then, quieter, his gaze found hers. "Hope it's okay."

She held his look for a beat too long before answering softly, "It's more than okay."

He gave a lopsided grin. "Told you I'd eventually gather the courage to come for game night."

Elowen smiled. "Took you long enough."

He stepped inside. The hallway lights wrapped around him, gold against grey. His shoulders sagged slightly, like someone exhaling after holding their breath far too long. His face still had strokes of paint around his ears and eyebrow.

"How was the album wrap?" she asked.

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Wild… Messy. Possibly heretical. But it might just be the best thing we've made."

She watched him for a beat, smile growing. "Can't wait to hear it."

He nodded, then, without warning, leaned forward, head gently resting on her shoulder. A long, soft sigh escaped his lips. She didn't flinch, didn't shift. Just stood still, letting him breathe.

After a few seconds, she murmured, "Coffee?"

He chuckled into her hoodie. "Gods, yes. A very large mug of espresso, please."

As she stepped toward the kitchen, he stayed a moment longer in the hallway, taking in the half-finished house. Blank walls, box fortresses. A crooked plant by the radiator. And yet... it felt lived in. Alive. Like someone had bled stories into it. Like home.

He followed her, and soon, the kettle sang. Mugs clinked together, filled with coffee and hope. From the living room came Hugo's shriek of laughter as Dan declared himself Uno champion of the gods. Reid disagreed, Aaron mocked them both, and the sound of joy poured through the house like light through a cracked door.

Later, her PC screen still glowed faintly in the corner. A paused scene from Elysium. A canopy of blossoms overhead. Avenna and Grail stood side by side.

"Do you think they'll end up together?" Grail asked, his gaze peering from the screen into the kitchen.

Avenna smiled faintly. "Who knows? Fate is a curious thing. Let's see how their paths align. Perhaps they'll be good friends. Perhaps their paths will split. Or perhaps… they'll unite. Regardless, that's the beauty of life."

Grail huffed. "You're always so cryptic."

Avenna bumped his shoulder. "I learned from the best."

The screen dimmed slowly, and the sound of rain tapped on the windows.

Elowen passed the controller to Noah. "You still suck at co-op, right?"

He grinned, slouching onto the couch beside her. "Only when I let you win."

They shared a blanket, a bowl of crisps between them, while the others' voices still echoed from Hugo's room: laughter, shouts and playful threats of draw four. The Xbox whirred to life, filling the living room with the soft tones of a new quest.

Beside the monitor, stacked neatly on a desk:

Manuscript Draft: '*In Elysium 2: Return to Aether*.'

Somewhere between pixels and paint, between code and cat hair, between heartbreak and healing, life had started again.

And for once, it was enough.

EPILOGUE

The melody moved through the room like sunlight over water; hesitant, tender. No grand declarations. Just a series of gentle notes, played with care and not much thought. He didn't need to think when he played. That was the point.

She sat curled by the window, a book balanced in her lap, long forgotten somewhere between two pages. Her gaze drifted often: toward his hands, the light catching against the side of his face, the slow rhythm that was more feeling than sound. Outside, the wind had softened. The world breathed more slowly here.

He finished the melody with a sigh, leaving the last note unresolved, hanging.

"You always stop before the final chord," Elowen said, her voice a thread in the quiet.

Noah didn't look at her. Just smiled faintly.

"I like the silence it leaves behind," he said. "Feels like a breath being held. Like the song's still deciding if it wants to end."

She closed her book without marking the page and stood, crossing the room with bare feet and quiet steps. When she reached him, Elowen didn't ask permission. She just slid down beside him, shoulder to shoulder, as if she had always belonged there.

Neither of them spoke for a moment.

"Do you ever feel like it's already over?" he asked suddenly, voice low and flat, like something hollowed out. "And you're the only one who didn't get the memo?"

Elowen turned toward him, but didn't speak right away.

"I used to feel the fire when I created," he continued, staring past the edge of the coffee table like it held ghosts. "Now it's like I'm stuck playing a role I never meant to write. The world still claps, but it all sounds... far away. I don't even know who they're clapping for anymore."

She stood slowly, wordless, and crossed the room in silence, like breath. Then, without asking, without permission, she slid down beside him onto the floor. Her shoulder brushed his. Just to anchor.

"I think I know what you mean," she said after a while, her voice laced with something half-buried. "Sometimes I look at the things I've written… the ones that mattered, the ones I poured myself into… and they're just sitting there, gathering dust. Forgotten. Like my soul whispered, and no one even turned their head."

Noah glanced at her, barely. "And the ones that did well?"

Elowen gave a quiet, breathy laugh, tired. "Stereotypes. Clean arcs, even. Empty things dressed up as something profound. I wrote those because they sold, because they were safe. And people loved them. But they weren't really mine."

Noah didn't answer. But he was listening.

"I keep wondering," she murmured, eyes fixed on the darkness beyond the window, "what happens if I climb all the way to the top, only to find there's nothing there? Just more noise, more pressure. A hundred versions of me that I never wanted to become."

He nodded slowly. "What if the diamond days are behind us?"

"Then we make new ones," Elowen said without hesitation. "Maybe not as bright, maybe not even as clear. But more honest. More us."

He looked down at his hands, calloused and still. "I've been thinking lately that maybe my Elysium has already fallen. That whatever beauty I was chasing… maybe I missed it. Maybe I blinked, and it was gone."

Elowen didn't argue. But she didn't yield either.

"Even in Elysium," she said softly, "everything ends."

The words hovered between them like something ancient, something true.

"But that doesn't mean you're done," she continued. "When the song fades, you don't have to fade with it. You get up and keep walking. Not toward some golden, untouchable dream. Just… forward. Even if you're limping."

His voice, barely audible now: "Toward what?"

"A new rhythm. A new song. A different kind of story. Maybe even a quieter one. Not paradise, maybe. Not even peace. But something real, maybe even something broken. But maybe that's where the beauty

lives."

Noah tilted his head back, eyes closed, exhaling through his nose like her words were something holy. "But what if no one's listening anymore?"

"Then play for yourself," she said. "Write for yourself. The world doesn't always know what's worth loving. But you do."

He let the silence settle again. As the space between them.

"And if I still feel lost?" he asked.

Elowen leaned her head against his shoulder… "Then let it be a beginning," she whispered. "Even if you don't know what it's the beginning of."

They stayed there like that, quiet, frayed, breathing the same slow breath. Just presence. The room held them the way a weary soul holds a final note… gently, reverently, without rushing to resolve it. Outside, the world turned. And somewhere, in some shadowed corner of the soul, a new chord waited to be played.

And then, as if cued by some invisible thread, they looked at one another and smiled. Just a quiet, knowing smile.

Like maybe, even if the road ahead stayed uncertain...

This moment, this room, this silence… they could build something here. A place without applause or expectations. A place that asked nothing of them but truth.

A place that, for now, felt like home.

BONUS:

NOAH

She used to sit by the window. Table five. Always table five. Café Magnolia, where the lighting was soft, and the air smelled like vanilla dust and second chances.

I'd be in the back, pretending I wasn't watching her over the rim of my coffee or from behind the piano. Pretending I wasn't memorising the way she stirred her tea like she was painting the surface of the moon. Pretending I wasn't writing whole verses about her sighs, her scribbles, the way she chewed pens when she was lost in thought. Writing her books, perhaps. Or, maybe her online blog, dissecting my lyrics yet again.

The notebook graveyard spread across her table. The ink stains on her fingers. The way she smiled at nothing, like a secret had just crawled into her mind and made itself at home. She wore exhaustion like a second skin, but it never dimmed her. It made her brighter, somehow. Like a lighthouse wrapped in sea mist… blurred, but still shining.

◇

Woke up late. Forgot to close the curtains last night, so the sun's been blinding me since 6 a.m. Lay

there like some awkward cryptid until hunger finally dragged me into the land of the living. Burnt toast. Again. I really need to start buying proper bread.

Spent the morning hunched over the piano, picking apart a verse that's been haunting me for weeks. One of those pieces that refuses to behave, like it's daring me to understand it. I like those. The ones that fight back. The dissonant chords that force emotion through you whether you want it or not. That's the kind of honesty I trust.

Went to the café again. She was there, deep in her writing. Gods, she writes like she's obsessed. I caught a glimpse of her notes a few times when I passed her table. Couldn't help it. I noticed she misspelt metamorphosis. Wrote it as *metamorphisis*, her pen too eager, her mind already ten steps ahead of her hand. I lingered longer than I should've once. Just watched her hands move. The slight furrow in her brow. The way she argued with the page without ever saying a word.

Caught up with the lads. Ran through soundcheck for the next show… tight, but my mind kept drifting. Back to her. The one with the storm in her silence and the ink on her skin.

Her focus on her craft... It's magnetic. Watching someone quietly rise, unapologetically… It's rare. I admire that. Deeply. I wonder if I look like that while immersed in my music.

◇

Rain today. The gentle kind. Like the sky was

sighing. Left the window cracked open and let it breathe through the flat. Everything smelled like petrichor and old wood.

Didn't get much done this morning. Tried to layer some vocal lines, but nothing stuck. Some days, the music bleeds out of me like a wound. Other days, it's stone. Today felt like stone.

Made tea… some questionable herbal blend that tasted like soil and citrus peel. Ugh, hate it. Prefer my coffee. Sat by the window and just... existed. No mask. No posture. Just silence and rain.

Went back to the café. She was there again. Talking to her friend, something about her was off. A little dimmed. Sad, maybe. And it unsettled me more than I expected.

Tour's creeping closer. I should be more prepared. But my head's too full.

◇

Woke up to a text from the label. Merch drops, deadlines, vocals still due. Coffee didn't even taste like coffee. Just pressure. But something in me felt different today. Couldn't place it. Not joy or dread. Something suspended. Like the air was holding its breath.

Spoke to someone interesting in game chat. We ended up talking for a while. She said something about dreams coming true. About fear and success being tangled like twin serpents. She mentioned me. Grail, anyway. Said she felt like him. That part stopped me. Not

because it was about me, but because she got it. The ache. The exhale after years of holding your breath. The weight of finally being seen. She said she thought I was brave. That made me laugh. It's easy to look brave behind a mask. The real courage? That's what she did.

Sharing her celebration and her fear in the same breath. That's art...

◇

Studio again today. Spent more time staring at the mixing board than actually working. The track's close, but something's missing. It might just be my patience. Or sleep. Hard to tell these days.

Realised I left my notebook at the café. Dammit. Called Jess to keep it for me so I can pick it up later. And then I saw her… dancing in the café, like a fucking fairy. Hair wild, feet bare. No audience. Just joy for its own sake. Then I noticed her notes. Game notes. And suddenly it hit me, how did I not get it before? She's Avenna. She's the player behind the screen. The one who built the damn world I've been living in.

I ended up walking her home, because apparently I'm still trying to be a functioning adult. We talked. She didn't overshare. Didn't gush. Just offered this quiet, reverent moment… part sadness, part curiosity, part dry humour. Like she was speaking to herself, and I was simply lucky enough to be present. I admire that. The restraint and honesty. The weight of her words. Funny, isn't it? I don't know her well, not really. But every time

she talks, it's like hearing a distant echo of something I haven't found words for yet. And today… It made the noise in my head settle. Just a little.

◇

I noticed the silence. She hasn't messaged in days. Didn't publish her blog as well. And that… did something to me. It's strange how someone can weave themselves into your rhythm without meaning to.

I've been restless. Didn't sleep well. Every time I closed my eyes, I kept wondering… what would I even say, if I had the chance? If she knew? Would I want her to respond with something casual? Or poetic? I don't know.

She once said she felt like Grail. And I wonder, has she ever considered that I might feel like her? That I, too, stare into the void and ache for a connection I can't name without risking its disappearance?

Maybe she's lost hope. Maybe she thinks the world's too loud for soft things to survive. Maybe I think that too. But even so, I hope she's okay.

◇

She was there. At the gig. Front row, dressed like a vision torn out of a myth. White and gold shimmered under the strobes like a living dream.

And for a moment… just one, I wanted to rip the mask off, step off the stage, and speak. Not perform or impress. Just speak with no spotlight. Just… Noah. But I

didn't. Maybe I'm a coward. Or maybe I'm still waiting. Waiting for the right second to burn the bridge behind me and leap into something raw and unarmoured.

She wrote me a letter.

It felt heavier than it should, as though her words had substance beyond paper.

"Dearest Grail,

Imagine being held by a nebula… weightless, breathless, yet safe. There's beauty in that paradox, the way it devours and cradles at once. I've always longed to dissolve into something like that. Something infinite and sacred. And through your craft, I come close. Even if only for a moment.

Your music is my sanctuary. My breathing space when the world feels sharp and unrelenting. Apart from my writing, there's no other refuge that feels so entirely mine. Saying thank you feels pitifully small for something that has kept me tethered to myself, but it's all language allows.

I find myself always drawn back to your earliest works, especially your piano. Secrets spilling through your fingertips as if the instrument itself were complicit. Honest and gentle. Familiar... Music is the universe's first language: the heart's pulse, the wind's howl, the silence between words. And your music inhabits. I feel it in my ribs, my spine. In the hollow, hidden places that don't often make it to the surface.

There was a moment I nearly gave it all up… my books, my spark and my will to create. I doubted myself and thought I wasn't good enough. Then your voice found me, or I stumbled into yours. Either way, it reminded me that beauty still exists, and that I still had a purpose to carve. I stopped questioning whether it was fate or accident the moment it

became the thing that kept me alive.

Where some have built gods from you, I see a man. A brilliant, unusual, exquisite soul who dared to sculpt something holy out of silence. You once wished for a rare kind of musician. You became one. And in doing so, you gave permission for others, like me, to try.

I've worn masks my whole life. For survival. To be palatable, to fit inside cages built by others. But through you, I learned the mask can come off. That silence doesn't have to be eternal. That maybe there's still time to reclaim what I buried to stay small, to be loved, to stay safe.

I want to master the art of kintsugi, to make my fractures gleam instead of hiding them. To see my reflection and not flinch. Your presence reminds me that scars can be sacred, and broken things can still sing.

I don't claim to know you, but I recognise the outline. And I hope, beneath the weight of the symbol, you find moments of stillness and peace. May your spirit be like Vivianite, luminous even as it grows from decay. You've become a light for countless others. I hope someone, somewhere, holds a light for you, too. Because I will. And if ever the weight turns unbearable, and you wonder if anyone truly sees you… know this: one soul, hidden behind her own mask, does.

With reverence,

E."

◇

She moved through the aisles as if she belonged there. Like the shelves of brushes and paints were altars,

and she was the only one who remembered how to worship.

I hung back, pretending I wasn't staring. Pretending I wasn't memorising the way her fingers grazed the tubes of acrylic like they were relics. Pretending I didn't notice how her lips parted when she found a shade she liked, how her brows pulled together like the colour was asking her a riddle only she could solve. The way she picked up a brush, weighed it, smiled faintly, then put it back, too fast, like the touch had burned her. The way she lingered on a sketchpad, eyes soft, only to step away with that little twist in her mouth, that quiet surrender I've seen in people who've learned not to want too much.

She did it again. And again. Until I realised… she wasn't asking, *Do I want this*? She was asking, *Am I allowed to?* That thought sat in my chest like a stone. Pricey, she said. I knew how cheap this world had been with her. And I just stood there, watching her choose the cheapest options anyway, even when her eyes kept drifting toward the better ones. Watching her shrink herself in front of shelves that should've been nothing but joy.

It broke something in me. Because here was a woman who carried whole galaxies in her chest, who could see nebulae in shades of green and gold, and she'd taught herself she wasn't worthy of the tools to hold them.

◇

She came over tonight.

We talked, not small talk. Never that with her. It was layered and honest. Like brushing dust from something forgotten to see what still gleamed underneath. There was an ease to it, like we'd read the same book in different lifetimes and were only now comparing notes.

Then I played. She painted. The synergy was effortless. Her brush moved like breath, and I found myself playing notes for her poem. She just existed in my space, fully immersed, quietly untouchable, like someone listening to something the rest of us hadn't learned to hear yet.

I didn't say anything. Didn't want to break the moment with an explanation. So I played. And let her paint her truth onto my walls. I think part of me understood, right then, that no matter what I wrote, it would always circle back to this.

◇

She painted again today. But this time... she danced. And I swear, for a moment, the air changed. She moved like a forest witch: feet bare, hands stained with paint, answering a melody I poured.

I sang quietly as I played. She moved without permission, her bracelets rattling. And just once, mid-turn, she looked at me.

I don't know what to call it. But it felt like something sacred, and I'll take that over anything else.

◇

Music was supposed to save me. Sometimes I wonder if it only broke me differently. On stage, under the mask, I'm not myself. I can't be. The crowd doesn't want Noah; they want a god, a phantom and a myth. So I give them that. I move like the music is possession, I let the lights blind me, and for a while… it works. Everything blurs. The mask takes the shaking out of my hands, the weight out of my chest. I can breathe behind it, because nobody sees me there. They only see the performance.

But off stage? That's when it starts again. The anxiety, raw and sharp. My hands tremble so badly that I can barely sign a contract. Someone stops me on the street… kind eyes, smiling, telling me what my songs mean to them, and all I can think about is whether they notice the sweat on my palms, the twitch of my fingers, and the fact that I'm swallowing words because my throat is too tight. Fame is supposed to mean belonging. All it ever gave me was exposure. Nakedness and embarrassment.

Behind the mask, I built a version of myself who could sing louder than the panic, who could take every part of me I despised and drown it in music. But after a while… I couldn't tell where the stage ended, and I began. Was Noah the ghost, and the mask the man? Or was it the other way around? I don't know anymore.

And then there's her. She wears masks too, but

not like mine. Not a single porcelain shield, but dozens, layered like armour. A smile that hides the trembling under her table. A laugh that conceals the words she swallows before anyone can tell her she's 'too much.' The careful pauses in conversation where I can almost see her choosing which version of herself is safest to show.

I envied her at first. The way she could change masks so seamlessly, move between them as if it were instinct. She makes it look easy. But then I noticed the cracks. The heaviness in her shoulders. The way her voice catches when she thinks no one's listening. And I realised… maybe her masks are heavier than mine. Maybe that's why she breaks so quietly, in pieces small enough for no one to notice but herself.

And I don't know what terrifies me more: that she'll collapse beneath them… or that she'll learn to wear them so well, she'll forget what her own face looks like.

◇

Our messages have become something else. Sometimes I reread them like mantras. The rare kind. Soul-level understanding, the type that rearranges your interior without asking permission.

Tomorrow's the meeting. And she doesn't know. She doesn't know I'll be there… as Grail. I don't know what I'm more afraid of… That she won't recognise me.

Or that she will.

◇

The meeting room was unbearable. Bright lights, stale air, polished smiles sharp enough to cut skin. Then I saw her. And she saw me. I wore her gift. Something quiet and symbolic. Her eyes widened. Recognition bloomed, and then she ran.

She fucking… ran.

Shit.

I followed. Sat beside her in a hallway filled with echoes. And I sang. Just to soothe her chaotic mind. When she finally spoke, "I knew"… I exhaled. Fully. For the first time in months. Relief cracked through me like a hymn breaking glass.

◇

The tour ended. My body ached, and my voice was threadbare. My mind felt like an abandoned notebook… pages torn, ideas scattered, too many versions of myself left unfinished. But still... I thought of her. So I drove and dragged the guys with me.

She opened the door and didn't ask why. I let my head rest on her shoulder. Breathed out everything I hadn't known I was carrying. She just let me exist, and that was enough. And in that moment, I remembered why I sing at all. Home isn't a place. It's the quiet knowing of someone who sees you fully… and still stays.

Because your soul sounds familiar. And they're willing to hum it back to you when you forget the melody.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane Elend is a passionate storyteller, artist, and creator of worlds where darkness meets light, and love battles fate. A dark fantasy and romance author, Jane crafts intricate tales filled with complex characters, intense emotions, and deep spiritual undertones that explore the eternal dance between good and evil.

With a background in psychology, Jane brings a profound understanding of human nature into her writing, delving into her characters' deepest desires, fears, and inner conflicts. Her stories often explore themes of redemption, love, destiny, and the mysteries of the universe, reflecting her fascination with the unseen forces that shape our lives.

When she's not weaving her next dark fantasy, Jane expresses her creativity through art, drawing captivating illustrations and working on her Webtoon. A firm believer in the power of manifestation and the signs of the universe, she infuses her work with spiritual depth and cosmic wonder.

Originally from Tallinn, Estonia, and now living in Bournemouth, Jane balances her busy life as a writer, artist, witchcraft practitioner, and magic believer.

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