

SYSOP & SHELTER

kaffeeklatsch // universe-channel-Δ // invite-only

<HecateMMC> is ella eating
<Bone ♀ Woman> define eating
<WitchBitch> coffee counts
<2Euryale> no it does not
<Alecto.the.White> today it does
<Threadling> phil brought soup
<WitchBitch> that boy is a saint
<The_Morrigan> saints nap
<HecateMMC> good
<Bone ♀ Woman> someone remind her
<2Euryale> she knows
<WitchBitch> she still forgets
<Alecto.the.White> gently
<The_Morrigan> water behaving?
<EUTERPE.host> flow stable
<MINERVA.EXE> STATUS: NOMINAL
<HecateMMC> always moderation
<Bone ♀ Woman> house learning
<2Euryale> finally

<Threadling> parking still bad
<HecateMMC> told you
<Bone ♀ Woman> told her
<2Euryale> told everyone
<WitchBitch> she'll fix it
<EUTERPE.host> timeline updated
<MINERVA.EXE> PENDING: REVIEW
<Alecto.the.White> patience
<WitchBitch> u say that a lot
<Alecto.the.White> i earn it
<Threadling> movie night?
<HecateMMC> if ella surfaces
<Bone ♀ Woman> snacks anyway
<2Euryale> wine then
<WitchBitch> two bottles
<Alecto.the.White> moderation
<Threadling> lol
<EUTERPE.host> constraints updated
<MINERVA.EXE> NO ERRORS REPORTED

EUTERPE Chat Client v1.77

P.A. BONIFACE

Sysop & Shelter

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01 House Mothers

Early June, 2027

Clara found the listing. She dropped it in the group chat with no commentary, just three emojis: 🏠👉🌟 and a link.

FOR SALE OR LEASE | FORMER THETA CHI HOUSE | AS IS.

Vera replied in under a minute: *hell no nope not* 🙅🔴💩

Which was how we ended up standing in front of it.

Theta Chi looked different in daylight and after three months of professional remediation. Different, but not unrecognizable. Three stories of brick and columns, still tired around the edges. Fresh paint where boards used to be warped. New glass instead of plywood. The yard was a patchwork of stubborn weeds and bare dirt.

Psi Omega sat across the street, solid and sunlit, no longer poisoning its residents. The basement door lingered in my head, black mold climbing the joists like sculpted rot.

Phil's fingers laced through mine. "We almost died over here," he said. "Demon tether on this side, murder mold on yours. This block owes us hazard pay."

"Hey, the mold was entirely PsiO's," I said. "Theta Chi was infernal-adjacent. Different brands of terrible."

"Comforting," Vera muttered.

Clara looked thrilled. "I love it."

"You loved it less when Riss was fainting on the couch," Vera pointed out.

Clara's face sobered for a beat. "I love it now that nobody's dying."

Facilities had gone over PsiO from basement to roof after that night. Mold cleared, beams replaced. Siobhan enacted a strict policy. Investigate any strange smell before lighting candles or summoning anything.

Theta Chi had gotten its own kind of cleansing. Magical contractors to scrub the demon residue from room 217. Electricians. Plumbers. Inspectors. The whole "please don't sue us" package.

My charm lay flat and still against my skin. No buzzing, no whispers, no invisible hand shoving at my lungs.

"It's not hungry anymore," I said. "Just... empty."

Phil let out a slow breath. "Empty is an improvement. I'll take empty over 'inhaling my girlfriend' any day."

"Lofty ambition," I said, but my chest warmed around the word 'girlfriend.'

Clara marched up the walkway, the old porch boards complaining under her footfalls. "Come on. At least look before we say no."

Vera followed, against her better judgment. "This is how horror movies start."

She wasn't wrong. But horror movies rarely had a Crescent Lantern, a code witch, an infernal-adjacent, and a dryad hanging out across the street.

The front door opened. New lock, new hinges, no psychic pressure at the threshold. Only house-smells: old wood, fresh paint, dust that hadn't had time to grow ominous cobwebs yet.

We stepped into the lobby.

It was huge. Bigger than most dorm floors, with a wide staircase curling up along one wall. The water stains from before were gone, the drywall patched and sanded. Light pooled across the floor from tall windows. Dust motes drifted in lazy spirals instead of frantic swarms.

"This is..." Vera looked around, torn. "Actually nice."

"Dangerous word," Clara said. "You'll talk yourself into a mortgage."

"No mortgage," I said. "Lease with option. We test-run it first. See if it bites anyone."

Phil's thumb traced idle circles on the back of my hand. "You're really thinking about this."

"Of course I'm thinking about it," I said. "Look at it. It's practically begging for a second life. And we need more safe beds. PsiO fills every semester. Dorms are a mess. Your Lantern applicants list is ridiculous."

"Rude," he said, smiling anyway.

We did a slow lap of the ground floor.

The old common room: big enough for movie nights, group study, and at least one angry breakup per term. The half-stripped bar: now a sturdy counter that made a perfect communal work table once you removed the beer-tap ghosts. A smaller side room that begged to be an office—or a therapy nook, if Student Life ever pulled their heads out.

"I'm seeing a studio corner there," Clara said, pointing to a wall with pretty good natural light. "Small stage, folding chairs, we'll do open mic nights. Plays. Readings. Low-budget indie cult classics."

"You want your own rehearsal room," Vera said.

“Obviously,” Clara said cheerfully.

We checked the kitchen and the back stairwell: dated but functional, now reinforced. The smell in the back hall was normal basement damp, nothing like the nightmare under PsiO.

At the bottom of the main staircase, I paused.

Last time, climbing these steps felt like walking into someone else’s lungs: every breath pressured, every board a warning.

Now?

“Feels clear,” Phil murmured.

I nodded. “Let’s see if 217 agrees.”

We went up.

The second-floor hallway had fresh primer on the walls and bare bulbs in most of the fixtures. It looked rough, but honest. Doors lined both sides. Most stood open.

Room 217 was closed.

Someone had slapped a bright orange INSPECTED – CLEARED sticker across the frame. A smaller note in Facilities handwriting read: RECHECKED.

“That last part was me,” Phil said. “And Alice, Siobhan, Riss’s parents. They really love her.”

“Reasonable,” Vera said.

I stepped forward and tapped the door with two fingers.

Warm wood. No pulse. No tether pulling at my chest. Only the echo of memory.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

Phil glanced over. “For?”

“For going in,” I said. “Breaking the tether. Not letting it keep her. Any of us.”

He ducked his head, ears turning pink. “You already thanked me.”

“Well, thank you again,” I said. “This place isn’t a monster. Because of you.”

“Because of us,” he corrected.

Clara cleared her throat in the universal sign for, *I’m about to ignore your poignant moment*. “Okay,” she said. “So let’s talk about the housing situation?”

“Please,” Vera muttered. “I remember this demon frat. Give me a reason to forget it.”

“The demon is gone,” Clara said. “The mold in PsiO is also gone. Our lease options are ‘Dorm Rooms Forever’ or ‘take a risk on a house we already know how to un-haunt.’”

“Dorm rooms with random roommates,” Phil added. “Or here, where you pick your chaos.”

That sparked something in me.

“No dorm rooms is the best part,” I said. “We each have a single.” I leaned closer to Phil and eyed Vera and Clara over his shoulder. “Or a double. Yes? No? Too soon?”

Phil’s ears did that pink thing again, but this time his grin was immediate and bright. “Not too soon for me,” he said.

Clara made a delighted wheezing sound. “Whoa. What *happened* last week?” Her grin was speculative and eager for gossip.

Vera stared at the ceiling as if petitioning the gods. “You two are going to be insufferable.”

“Accurate,” Clara chimed.

I bumped my shoulder against Vera’s. “You’d finally get a room that fits your books.”

“And your color-coded crisis binders,” Phil added.

Vera hesitated. I saw the calculations happening: rent costs, utilities, the promise she made to avoid any place that turned feral beneath her again.

But also: Siobhan had already said she didn’t want Vera stuck in PsiO until summer. Riss was healing. Clara had turned down a theater internship in another state—for “vibes”—but distance from Vera hit her stomach like a fist.

And I... I didn’t want to live far from Phil yet. Or from them.

“Okay,” Vera said slowly. “Say we do this. What does it become?”

“Not a sorority,” Clara said.

“Not a frat,” Phil said.

“Not anything with Greek letters,” Vera insisted.

“The Collective,” Clara declared. “It sounds like a sci-fi commune and a record label and a cult. In a way. People will line up to live there just to slip it into party conversations.”

Vera groaned. “It’s horrible. It’ll stick.”

I shook my head. “No communes. And definitely no cults. We’re outcasts and chaos gremlins, not a hippy compound.”

Clara perked up. “Chaos Gremlins has brand potential. Imagine the coffee mugs.”

“Yeah, but not on a rental application,” I said. Then it hit me. Simple, perfect. “How about... the Scooby House?”

Phil snorted.

Clara gasped like she’d witnessed a miracle.

Vera covered her face. “Absolutely not.”

“Absolutely yes,” Clara insisted. “It’s funny. It’s iconic. And it’s us.”

“It’s humiliating,” Vera corrected.

“It’s honest,” I countered. “Everyone already calls us the Scooby Squad. Own the bit. Besides, if there are boomers on the housing committee...”

Phil nodded, not quite smiling. "Scooby House has strong brand recognition."

Vera groaned again, louder this time. "Please don't encourage her."

But she didn't say no.

Clara bounced. "Scooby House it is!"

"It's not," Vera said.

"It is," I said, grinning. "Welcome home, Scooby House."

Phil squeezed my hand.

"Subtitled: Home Version 3.0." I bumped shoulders and kissed Phil's neck.

And even Vera's sigh sounded a little like acceptance.

* * *

By the second week of renovations, none of us smelled like people anymore. Primer clung to our sleeves, grout dust lived in our lungs, and the entire house carried that inside-a-hardware-store tang. We slept in whatever room stayed least chaotic each night. That meant couches, sleeping bags, and, thanks to Clara, a nest of drop cloths she called "artist chic." Instead, the plastic crackled every time someone shifted. Chic never showed up.

"Breakfast delivery incoming," came a rumble from the front steps. The front door hinges protested as an eight-hundred-pound gargoyle eased through, stone wings tucked tight, tail curling behind him. A cardboard tray of coffees dangled from one clawed hand, a bakery box resting on his forearm. He moved like the load weighed nothing and the house weighed more.

Vera froze halfway down the stairs, fingers locked around the bannister. "Every time, he's bigger," she whispered.

"He's the same size," I said. "You're tired."

"I'm tired, not hallucinating."

Gary lifted the tray toward her. "Morning! Dulce latte with oat milk is in here somewhere. I grabbed extras."

Vera's spine straightened on instinct. "Morning, Mr. Hugo."

"Gary," he said, and the lines at the corners of his eyes deepened as his mouth creased.

Clara swooped in behind her and liberated a cup. "Gary, you're a gift. A menace to infrastructure, but a gift."

Gary laughed. Dust shook loose from the stairwell corner and drifted down in a lazy curtain. "Ella, where do you want the carpet rolls?"

"In the hallway by 204," I said. "Old tile comes up first."

"Understood."

He took the stairs in long strides; the kind meant for cathedral rooftops, not student housing. Stone claws clicked against each step. Vera's grip on the bannister tightened until her knuckles went pale.

Phil checked his watch and hissed a curse. "I need to meet Alice at the admin building." He straightened his button-down, shrugged a backpack over one shoulder. "Housing Committee meeting. Again."

"Tell them we're doing fine," I said.

"They know we're doing fine," he said. "They want paperwork that says we're doing fine." He leaned close enough that his breath touched my ear. "Alice drafted a thirty-page compliance addendum. I skimmed it. Something on page twenty starts glowing if someone breaks curfew."

"That tracks."

He brushed a quick kiss against my cheek, then tapped Vera's shoulder and Clara's arm, like handing off a baton. "Don't let the house eat you."

"It doesn't eat people," I said.

"Tell that to the committee."

He headed out at his usual steady pace, only the tight line of his shoulders giving away the dread.

The second the door closed behind him, Gary called from upstairs, "Dismantle the hallway bench, or leave it for the humans?"

"Dismantle," Clara yelled back. "The schedule's already bleeding."

Gary answered with a low rumble, and a moment later the bench screamed along the grain as he pulled it apart piece by piece.

I grabbed a paint roller, loaded it with primer, and aimed at the front room wall. Old Theta Chi colors surfaced under the first stroke—muddy brown, the shade of dried spills and poor decisions.

"How many coats does this need?" I asked.

"Two," Vera said, stepping in beside me with her own roller.

"Three, if the frat left emotional residue," Clara added. "That old sock from 303. I needed tongs and disinfectant for that one. I still feel judged."

"I don't think that's how paint works," I said.

"Everything holds a mood," Clara said. "Especially drywall."

She had a point.

The morning blurred into sanding and scraping stickers off windows, trash bags sagging against our legs as we dragged them to the curb. Garish Theta Chi posters went into the bin. Weird hooks of unknown purpose followed. Gary stayed in motion, a one-gargoyle moving crew. At one point, he ducked sideways through a doorway with two bedframes tucked under one arm and a dresser clamped in his other hand.

Vera edged close enough for me to hear her. “Does Phil know he’s dating into a superhero family?”

“Phil met my mom,” I said. “He knows.”

“Your mom is five-six and looks like a porcelain doll,” Vera said. She gestured toward Gary, crouched over a cracked baseboard, his back a landscape of shifting stone. “That is something else.”

“Liz says Mom’s more impressive than he is,” I said. “He grows on you.”

“He terrifies me,” Vera said. Her mouth twitched. “In a charming way.”

Gary pushed to his feet and dusted his claws, bits of plaster flaking off. “Anyone hungry? I brought some pastry.”

The bakery box turned into the gravitational center of the lobby. Clara lifted a croissant the size of her head and let out a tiny, reverent sound before biting in. Vera accepted a cinnamon twist with both hands, eyes narrowed like she suspected a test of character. I leaned against the bannister and ate mine in pieces, flakes falling to the floor while sunlight slid over the facets and seams of Gary’s skin.

Before sunrise, he passed for sculpture. Midday light traced every line and curve, found tiny chips in the stone, caught in faint, weather-softened pits. He radiated a relaxed chill when you stood near him.

He caught me staring and tapped one temple ridge with a claw. “Busy up here?”

“That’s generous,” I said.

“What’s spinning?”

“How will we finish this before August.” I picked at a flake of pastry stuck to my thumb. “And whether we should’ve hired professionals instead of pretending we know how to renovate an entire residence hall.”

Gary’s mouth tilted. “You bound a parasitic house-demon, soothed murder mold, and argued a dean into acknowledging magic without saying the word. Carpentry sits lower on the food chain.”

“Have you met your daughter?” Clara said through a mouthful of croissant. “She rewired an entire dorm with a chalkboard and a laptop.”

“This feels different,” I said.

Gary’s gaze settled on me, steady and older than anything on this street. “Building a home is never different,” he said. “It’s the only magic that sticks.”

The front door rattled.

Footsteps scuffed on the porch. Light, quick, a cadence I recognized anywhere. The door swung open, and Riss stepped through with three Psi Omega girls behind her. Her hair lay in a neat braid down her back, roots streaked soft green from the sorority’s wards.

Her eyes moved over drop cloths, tool buckets, Gary, and the ladder left at a reckless angle. She let out a breath through her nose. "Gods. You four need adult supervision."

"Hi Riss," Clara said, scrubbing at the streak of primer on her cheek with the back of her wrist. "We're supervised. Gary's here."

Riss's attention lifted toward the stairs just as Gary started down with a sheet of plywood balanced across his shoulder. He rotated one wing, dipped his horns, and threaded the stairwell like he'd practiced it.

The PsiO girls stacked up behind Riss in a three-person traffic jam. One of them whispered, "Holy bedrock!" in the tone reserved for surprise quizzes.

Riss nudged her with an elbow. "He's friendly."

"He's huge," the girl whispered.

"He brought pastry," Vera said.

That moved the needle.

Gary set the plywood down with care, fingers adjusting the edge until it rested straight. "Chairwoman Levesque," he said, inclining his head.

Color climbed Riss's cheeks. "Please don't call me that yet. I still have to sign three forms and one oath."

"Congratulations anyway," he said.

Her shoulders lowered a fraction. "Thank you."

The PsiO girls hovered close, half behind her, half peeking around. I recognized Lilah and Mari. The third—petite, red hair, a silver ring through one nostril—held a toolbox so tight the handle dug into her fingers.

"Come in," I said. "We aim large falling objects away from visitors."

Lilah stepped through first. "We brought supplies. Riss said you needed hands."

"Hands, arms, backs, souls," Clara said. "Everything short of live goats."

Mari's gaze slid back to Gary. "Does he, um... monitor?"

"He lifts heavy stuff," I said. "And restocks the pastry box."

Gary dipped his head once.

They eased forward by inches, like skittish animals testing new ground.

Riss hung her bag on the bannister. "Where do you want us?"

"Third floor," I said. "Carpet extraction day."

Riss faced her group. "We split. Lilah and Mari with me. Kimmie, go with Clara and Vera. Ella, which room?"

"301," I said. "The carpet smells like despair."

"Everything in this house smells like despair," Vera said.

"Former despair," I said. "We're rebranding."

Kimmie, the redhead, edged toward Gary, toolbox still clutched to her chest. “Help me carry the shop-vac upstairs?”

Gary hooked the handle with one claw and lifted it off the floor. “Lead on.”

She watched the machine rise, blinked twice, then turned and took the stairs at a quick, light clip.

Riss matched my pace up the next flight. “Status?” she asked.

“Slower than I want,” I said. “Faster than I expected.”

She huffed a laugh. “That sounds like you.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I vote for ‘moderately chaotic excellence.’”

Her laugh came again, softer, like leaves rubbing together. “Phil said the committee eased up.”

“Phil said that,” I said. “Alice said she’d haul down the wrath of ancient jurisprudence if they delayed us one more week.”

Riss’s mouth curved. “She’s effective.”

“She’s terrifying.”

“Those traits overlap.”

We reached 301. Vera and Clara had already sliced the seams in the carpet and folded one section back. Gary knelt with a utility knife, cutting each strip the same width and stacking them in a tidy pile. Kimmie crouched by the outlet, hands shaking a little as she clicked the shop-vac hose into place.

Riss breathed in through her nose. The tight set of her jaw slackened. “Already better,” she said.

“Good,” I said, hauling another corner of carpet loose. “Let’s get the rest out.”

We went to war.

The carpet tore up in ragged strips; the backing clinging to the subfloor in fuzzy patches. Nails screeched as we pried them loose. Dust rose in clouds, catching the light, sticking to our skin. Sweat darkened collars and waistbands. Lilah turned on music from her phone, and at some point Clara grabbed her paint roller and belted along, the handle doubled as a microphone stand.

A roach shot out of an air vent, frantic legs and antennae. Kimmie’s scream hit a pitch that startled even Gary. He caught the roach between two claws, carried it downstairs like dangerous cargo, and released it outside with the solemn care of a man returning cursed jewelry to its rightful tomb.

Now and then, I spotted Riss with her head tilted, fingers resting against the drywall. She went still in those moments, attention sunk somewhere below the foundation. City inspectors in hard hats had cleared us. I still trusted her senses more than any clipboard.

By mid-afternoon, the third floor sat in ruins. Carpet scraps in heaps, raw boards open to the air, the shop-vac holding horrors. Six students sagged against doorframes in lumpy, dust-streaked lines.

Gary came down the hall with the last rolled length of carpet tucked under his arm. "Next phase?" he asked.

"Dinner," Vera said.

"Shower," Clara managed.

"Death," Lilah muttered into her sleeve.

"Laundry," Riss said, glancing at the gray smear her jeans had become.

I wiped my face with the less-filthy part of my T-shirt. "Floor polish and paint in the morning."

A chorus of groans answered that.

Gary brought his hands together in a solid clap. The sound bounced off the stripped walls. "Strong work," he said. "The house pays attention to that."

Mari stared at him. "It does?"

Gary studied the empty stretch of hallway. "Every home listens," he said. "Some listen harder."

Riss's gaze shifted toward the far end of the corridor. The tiny muscles around her mouth moved. "The air feels different," she said.

"Not that old infernal hungry," I said. "Just... watching."

"Like a cat?" Clara asked.

"Like a grandmother with opinions," Vera said.

I snorted. "Yeah. That."

We gathered the tools, rolled up the drop cloths, and headed downstairs. Creaking steps, tired legs, someone's music tinny in a back pocket. Muscles complained. Ankles twinged. Skin itched under paint flecks and grit.

The house felt wider than it had that morning. Bigger than its square footage, heavier than its brick. Something in it leaned toward us.

The house held a quiet promise in its bones.

August 14, 2027 — Final Inspection

Phil waited at the bottom of the basement stairs, hands planted on his hips like he'd held that pose through the entire summer. Two terms of Lantern work and two months of renovation hung under his eyes.

"Time to go," he said. "Final inspections. Freshman sign-ins are a week away."

I tightened the last screw on the faceplate and slid out from under the server rack. The towels under my shoulders had collected their own dust strata. The rest clung to my skin and hair.

"Then we start here," I said. "Server room."

Phil crooked a finger, calling the others down. "Lead on, Hugo." As he passed, his hand brushed my hip, a quick, solid squeeze through the fabric.

The Scooby House brain-trust squeezed into the basement behind him: Vera with her clipboard, pages bristling with tabs; Clara vibrating on caffeine and pride; Riss with her shoulders already squared into Chairwoman posture; and Alice in judge-black, gaze cutting to every corner like she saw the wiring behind the world.

The basement lights buzzed overhead. My server room glowed brighter than the rest of the level. Cable trays nailed in crisp lines, racks humming, ports blinking in red-green constellations, the arc of the monitor wall wrapping my chair. EUTERPE's logo rotated on the center screen, the stylized lyre pulsing in time with her status lights.

I dropped into my chair and ran the last diagnostic.

"Power, comms, and warding shield-lines read green," I said. "EUTERPE's patched, stable, and backed up on my laptop and two drives. If something eats the building, she walks away."

Riss gave a single, decisive nod. "Solid."

Phil clapped once. "Basement clear. Upstairs."

We climbed.

The first floor looked almost domestic now. Sunlight slanted through the tall front windows, catching on the new tile and painted trim. Lemon cleaner and sawdust lived together in the air. Nothing about it hinted at a house that had once inhaled its tenants.

Clara hurried ahead and threw the kitchen door open with a theatrical sweep. "Behold," she said. "A kitchen that doesn't kill people."

Vera ran a finger down her list. "Stainless surfaces scrubbed. Walk-in cleared. Pantry stocked. Fire suppression tested. No infernal traces."

Alice peered up into the range hood, then at the inspection tag. One corner of her mouth tipped up. "Adequate," she said.

Clara leaned close enough for her hair to brush my arm. "Is that her cheerful voice?"

"That's her content voice," I said. "Happy involves tea."

The pantry shelves sat full: cereal, rice, canned goods, stacks of paper towels, an unsettling quantity of ramen. Labels faced outward like they feared Vera's judgment.

PsiO girls had helped us stock, so the cleaning shelf carried a faint hint of green and something like rosemary. Riss's wards tangled with the scent.

We checked the storage rooms; narrow, functional spaces, each with an obvious job. Lockers in one. Bins of extra linens in another. Emergency kits lined up in plastic tubs. The tool room made me proudest: every hammer and wrench hung in its traced outline instead of moldering in a junk pile.

Phil flipped open the vending alcove. "Snacks loaded," he said. "Complaints go straight to the void."

The gaming room held two deep couches, a TV, the resurrected air hockey table Clara had claimed as morale central, and a herd of beanbags scattered across the floor. A couple already bore suspicious paint smears and one lone glitter flake.

Riss pressed her palm to the wall. Green light ghosted along the tips of her hair.

"Steady," she said. "No spikes. No pull."

"Steady," had never described this place before.

We climbed to the second floor. Warm colors on the walls cut the institutional feel. Open doors lined both sides of the hallway, each small dorm room waiting with made beds, squared desks, and dressers tucked into their corners.

"These pass?" Phil asked.

"Clara and I finished them yesterday," Vera said. "Every room except 217."

Clara's face twisted. "We aired it out, wiped everything, but curtain decisions felt... presumptuous."

"Unassigned, then," Phil said.

Alice reached for 217's knob, fingers resting there a moment before she turned. The door stayed still under her hand. She checked the jamb, the frame, the corners where shadows gathered.

"No trace," she said. "Whatever lived here left. Your cleansings hold."

Her eyes flicked to me when she said it.

A knot under my ribs loosened. "Good. Lock it. Stick a 'Storage' label on later."

Phil scribbled a note. "Third floor," he said. "Almost done."

Fresh plaster and recent paint mixed with the faint, sharp ghost of old carpet glue on the third floor. We'd finished this level days ago, except for one stubborn outlier.

Room 3B waited with three panels of wallpaper leaning against the wall and an open tub of paste on a spread-out tarp.

"I'll finish that tonight," I said.

"You don't need to," Phil said.

Riss arched an eyebrow. "She already decided."

I shrugged. "It'll itch in my brain if I leave it."

The rest of the floor looked ready: beds aligned in even rows, curtain rods straight, name tags taped on doors in neat pairs. The empty hallway held that stillness of spaces waiting to be claimed.

Phil took it in from one end to the other, shoulders dropping a notch. "Fourth floor," he said. "Last lap."

The fourth floor carried more of us on it than the others. Rugs we'd scavenged and cleaned. Lamps we'd rescued. Coffee ghosted through the air from Phil's room. Our four doors punctuated the corridor like anchors.

Phil checked his space first. Riss glanced through Vera's and Clara's, nodding at made beds and cleared floors.

"Ella?" Phil said.

"My room's fine," I said. "Thallo, not so much."

Clara's head snapped around. "What about Thallo?"

"See for yourself."

I opened my door.

At first glance, everything sat as I'd left it: bed made, teal walls, desk clear except for my laptop and a tangle of cords. Thallo stood against the far wall, her wardrobe doors shut, carved edges gleaming.

Then something knocked inside her like a stack of books tipping.

The wardrobe door cracked open.

A small stool shot out, legs scrambling on the floorboards, and bolted past my ankles into the hall. Another followed, then a narrow shelf, a squat end table, a pair of low stands that wobbled as they ran. Hat racks hopped after them in stiff little strides. A lamp base scooted along, cord dragging behind like a tail.

The procession funneled through the doorway and flooded toward the stairs in a clatter of wood and metal.

Thallo's frame tilted forward. One carved corner lifted at a deliberate little angle, something like a nod. A slim wall shelf hesitated at the threshold until the wardrobe's inner rail dipped toward the hall. The shelf rolled out to join the retreat.

Clara's shout bounced off the ceiling. "THALLO HAD BABIES?"

"At least a dozen," I said.

Riss laughed, bright and sudden. Phil stared at the empty doorway, eyes tracking the sound of the herd as they rattled down the stairs.

Alice's hands folded around the strap of her bag. "A healthy generation," she said. "Your furniture multiplies."

Clara grabbed my shoulders. "How long?"

"She stayed... reserved this week.," I said. "I thought she was sulking. This morning, I opened the door and counted legs."

Vera crouched as one straggler, a three-legged stool, wobbled back toward us. It angled toward her knee and settled there, one leg tapping a soft staccato against the floor.

"It picked you," Clara said.

"I did nothing," Vera said.

"You brought binders," Clara said. "It senses stability."

"Is that supposed to reassure me?"

"Yes," Clara said. "You're sofa-core."

Phil rubbed his temple with two fingers. "They don't stay up here," he said.

"They already spread out," I said. "Most landed in freshman rooms, a few scattered through the common spaces."

Riss shut her eyes and let her fingers brush the wall. Her breathing slowed. "They're finding corners," she said. "Doorways. Window light. They hover near where the new kids sleep."

Alice nodded once. "Thallo extends herself. Your house now operates as a living network in more than the metaphorical sense."

"Thought we already had that covered," Phil said.

"This adds texture," Alice said.

We followed the sounds downstairs.

New pieces spread through the common room. A bench pressed flush against one wall, one leg planted snug against the baseboard. A narrow rack had wedged itself under the gaming table. Stacks of small drawers built themselves into a crooked but determined tower. One little stand sat by the front door, braced and squared like a guard.

"They're staking out territory," I said. "Thallo already picked assignments."

Phil let out a long breath. "Incorporate furniture in the move-in talk."

"I'll write a pamphlet," I said. "Care and Feeding of Your New Furniture Friend."

Clara bounced on her toes. "I'll do diagrams."

Riss brushed her thumb along the top of the little stand by the door. "They like attention, not crumbs," she said. "Start the pamphlet with that."

Phil looked from one of us to the next. "You all already have job titles, don't you?"

"We're mothers now," Clara said, solemn for exactly three seconds.

"No," Vera said.

"Yes," Clara said again. "House moms. Furniture division."

Riss walked the length of the room, skirt hem whispering against the floorboards. With each step, some tiny shift answered: a creak easing, a bit of air that had sat heavy all summer thinning out. When she circled back, her shoulders sat lower.

"They're clean," she said. "No sour notes. Everything traces back to Thallo."

"And to EUTERPE," I said. "She's been watching."

Phil's attention snapped to me. "Recursion risk?"

"No," I said. "She logs movement. She likes their shapes."

Vera snorted. "So far."

Alice's hand stayed on the column. "Your systems evolve," she said. "So does your House. Stewardship matters more now."

"I know," I said. "I'll order more of the beeswax polish Thallo likes."

Phil ran down his checklist one last time. "Basement: good. First floor: good. Second floor: good. Third floor: wallpaper. Fourth: spontaneous furniture."

He looked up at me. "We handle the wallpaper together." A spark lit in his eyes.

Heat flickered under my skin. Ignition.

Wallpaper, my brain said. Sure. That's what we're talking about.

"And babies," Clara added.

Phil sighed. "Yes. And babies."

My knees threatened to buckle.

We stepped out onto the porch for one ultimate task. One last look from the outside. Fresh paint wrapped the brick in clean lines. Columns stood straight. New braces hid under the porch roof. The yard had shifted from patchy wasteland to something that, with a few more weeks and Riss's touch, passed for intentional.

Psi Omega sat across the street, solid and sunlit. Calm pooled on their porch, then spilled over the lawn in a steady line that stopped right before the street.

"They're almost here," Phil said.

"Yeah," I said. "They are. The house feels it."

Wood shifted behind us, a soft, settling crack. The porch rail gave a tiny sigh.

One week of calm left.

Thallo's brood waited inside, gathered in corners and at doors, ready for the first arrivals.

Somehow, with our paint-stained shirts and aching arms and overclocked nerves, we'd made this place ready for them.

Against all odds, we'd done it.

02 Threshold

Late August 2027, Scooby House Move-In Day

Before nine on Saturday morning, the air already felt like soup.

I smoothed the front of my jacket anyway and stepped out onto the Scooby House porch. Fresh paint still held a faint chemical bite under the heavier smells of boxwood, asphalt, and someone's spilled coffee. Across the street Psi Omega glowed in full summer smugness, all clean brick and healthy vines. Our place still looked tired around the edges—brick scuffed, columns cracked—but the coral door and white veve gleamed like a good first draft.

“Ready?” Riss asked.

She leaned against the post beside me, arms folded, green sundress brushed with sawdust from the last-minute shelving project inside. The air around her felt a degree cooler, calmer, like the house took deeper breaths when she stood still.

“As I’ll ever be,” I said. “The place looks... mostly finished.”

“Parents notice the paint and the smiles,” she said. “They bring their own chaos.”

Out on the sidewalk, Phil and Alice had claimed the campus fence line. Phil in his RD polo and clipboard, Alice in snow-colored linen that made her look like a severe saint in a brochure about Responsible Authority. They stopped each car as it rolled up, shook hands, and traded a few questions. Parents pointed toward Scooby; Phil gestured up the path. Students climbed out: bags, boxes, a few plants, one stuffed octopus larger than its owner.

I lifted my tablet. EUTERPE’s feed showed four parking-lot cameras, two interior stair lenses, and the front-door sensor array. Thallo pinged a happy little emoji from somewhere on the second floor. She already rearranged the chairs for maximum orientation cuteness.

Inside, Clara and Vera had front-door duty. Clara’s voice drifted through the cracked jamb; bright, practiced cheer. Vera answered with lower notes when someone sounded frightened. They had a folding table, a crate of printed rulebooks, and a color-coded map I lost sleep over last week.

Scooby House wasn't a construction site. No take backs.

"First victim incoming," Riss murmured.

A silver sedan eased along the curb. The driver paused before the gate, wearing the look of someone unsure if he'd reached the right house or a warning sign.

The passenger door opened. A girl around my height climbed out with care, hands wrapped tight around the handle of a medium suitcase. Dark hair in a simple braid, pale sweater despite the heat. The moment her shoes touched the sidewalk, the air shifted. Cooler across my face, humidity thinning for half a breath.

Daphne Hosmer, in the flesh.

Her driver—a middle-aged woman with librarian energy—leaned in and said something below my hearing threshold. Daphne nodded, swallowed, and lifted the suitcase onto the curb herself. She didn't slam the door; she eased it shut like an apology.

Phil stepped forward, spoke with the driver. Papers changed hands. A signature. Then the sedan rolled away, leaving Daphne alone between the gate and sidewalk.

She stared up at the house. Shoulders tense. Stance careful, like she expected someone to yank her back.

"Do I meet her, or let her come up?" I asked.

Riss unfolded from the post. "Give her the stairs. She needs to approach, not get handled."

Fair.

I watched Daphne cross the grass. The house noticed her first; a faint tightening in the boards under my feet, a sense of attention. Thallo sent another ping, this one a droplet icon.

When Daphne reached the bottom step, she looked up again, blinking against the glare. Her gaze skimmed me, the veve, Riss, then circled back.

"Hi," I said. "Welcome to Scooby House. I'm Ella."

"Daphne." Almost a whisper. "Hosmer."

She adjusted her grip on the suitcase handle. Her knuckles had a bloodless sheen.

Riss stepped forward, took half a step down so they stood closer to eye level. "I'm Riss," she said. "Psi Omega. We partner with Scooby. You already met Phil at the fence?"

Daphne nodded.

"No parents today?" I asked, softening my tone.

"They... helped with paperwork." She looked down the street where the sedan vanished. "This part felt better alone."

"Fair enough," I said. "We're in this with you."

That got the faintest twitch at one corner of her mouth.

I angled my chin toward the door. “Inside, Clara and Vera have your packet, room assignment, everything. We’ll help with luggage soon. Take a breath on the way in. House likes you.”

Her eyes widened. “It does?”

“It told me,” I said. “Incredibly rude not to say hello back.”

That earned me a tiny huff of amusement. She stepped past us and into the shade.

Through the doorway I heard Clara’s voice drop two notches, the way she did for nervous underclassmen and skittish puppies. “Hey there, I’m Clara. Name?” Then Vera, low and steady: “Room 2C, left at the top of the stairs. Here’s your guidebook. No rush.”

The boards eased under my feet. House satisfied.

Next car: a sun-faded blue hatchback with three different hubcaps and one bungee cord on the trunk. The engine cut with a cough.

Milo King unfolded from the passenger seat, elbows and black T-shirt with a pixel skull. His phone slipped from his hand, bounced once on the sidewalk. He grabbed it so fast he almost toppled.

His mom climbed out slower. She wore a floral blouse and the universal expression of a parent about to hand their entire heart to higher education and trust the outcome.

Phil met her at the fence. Papers. Clipboards. Alice shook the woman’s hand and spoke in that measured tone that soothed judges and terrified undergrads. By the time Milo reached us at the steps, his mother waved from the fence with damp eyes but no breakdown.

“Hey,” I said. “Milo, right?”

He pushed his glasses up. “Yes. Sorry. I dropped—” He held up the phone like it needed a character witness. “I don’t... I mean, I do, but—”

“Relax,” I said. “Phones bounce. Humans bounce harder. Welcome to Scooby House. I’m Ella.”

“Hi. I read the... um... experimental living community description.” His gaze tracked the cables running into the house. “Is that coax or fiber?”

“Both,” I said. “You’ll love the basement. Starship Enterprise.”

His shoulders dropped a notch. “There’s a basement?”

“Server room, lab, emergency snacks.” I leaned in. “Also my mastermind lair. You’ll earn visitation rights.”

His mouth flickered. “Cool.”

“Inside, packet, rules, map,” I said, tilting my head toward the door. “Swing back later and grab a luggage cart. Instant karma upgrade.”

"I haul things," he said too quickly. "Heavy stuff. Laptops. Mid-size servers."

"Good," I said. "We collect useful people."

He flushed, pleased, then climbed the steps. Clara's voice snapped into full sparkle. "Milo! I love the shirt. You're in 3A. Stairs to the right. Set your bags down before you open your welcome packet, trust me."

His mother hovered at the fence, watching until he vanished inside. Phil touched her elbow, said something that made her laugh instead of cry. The hatchback left a minute later, trailing a faint oil smell and trust.

The next vehicle didn't stop at the fence.

The Hugo family minivan swung into the nearest legal parking spot like it owned the block. Mom drove; Dad claimed the passenger seat. Pel and Tel crammed into the middle row. I didn't need EUTERPE to identify them; the ding from my calendar reminder said FAMILY ARRIVAL, but the wave of mixed affection and dread hit first.

Yuri stepped out into the heat in jeans and a white blouse, sunglasses fixed where the world expected them. She looked like someone's artsy aunt on her way to a gallery show, not a retired gorgon who once turned worse things than frat boys into gravel. Gary stepped out with the kind of controlled heft that made normal dads look like scaled-down replicas. More than one parent up the street stared; one kid dropped his bag.

"Remember to blink," I murmured.

Riss's lips curved. "You come from an excellent spectacle."

Pel slid the side door open and hopped out with a stack of storage bins. Tel followed with a skateboard under one arm and a half-crushed case of energy drinks under the other.

"Hey!" I called. "Unauthorized caffeine smuggling violates at least one of my imaginary statutes."

"Statutes only apply if someone proves jurisdiction," Tel said. He grinned. "Hi, Ella."

Pel straightened under his bins. "Reporting for duty," he said. "Freshman, Pel Hugo. This whole thing looks... intense."

"Welcome to my empire," I said. "You check in at the door like everyone else. I refuse to show favoritism—not in public." I stood on my toes and kissed their cheeks, anyway. "Glad you're both here at last."

They took it with grace and without comment. Growing up at last?

Gary reached the bottom of the steps and leaned in to kiss the top of my head. His lips felt cool; he smelled of incense and old rain. "You look official," he said.

"That's the costume," I said. "The underneath part still panics. And my bra strap's annoying me."

"The underneath knows what she's doing," he said. "We trust you with the boys."

Tel whispered, "Mistake number one."

Yuri swatted his shoulder. "Behave," she said. To me: "He slept four hours this week. We threw him into your orientation schedule and expected him to learn some consequences."

"I have charts," I said. "And a dryad."

Yuri's smile softened. "I know. Proud of you, *malyshka*."

I swallowed past the lump in my throat and waved the boys toward the door. "Inside, get your packets, room keys, and that junk. Then get back out here. I need luggage muscle."

Pel balanced his bins and still offered Riss a respectful nod on the way past. Tel almost tripped on the top step, then caught himself with a little hop that made the skateboard clatter.

Clara let out an audible squeal when they walked in. "Hugos! Double trouble! Vera, hide the pens."

"Too late," Vera said.

The stream of arrivals picked up. A hybrid SUV with a rooftop cargo box, a hatchback full of band equipment, a compact car with a golden retriever pressed against the back window. The dog didn't move in, thank every city code in existence, but he slobbered affection on three freshmen before his owner left. Through it all, Phil and Alice ran the fence line with ruthless charm. Riss and I caught the handoff at the base of the steps, while Clara and Vera filtered everyone through the doorway.

The next car that drew the House's attention had tinted windows and a driver in a dark suit.

It rolled to a precise stop near the gate. The driver stepped out, walked around, and opened the rear door with the crisp efficiency that said tips never slipped through his fingers.

Mist drifted out first. Then a boy about Vera's height, with seal-brown hair that refused to lie flat, and a duffel slung over one shoulder. He wore a light shirt and a look of polite uncertainty, gaze already tracking every source of water on the block.

Fionn Pellier.

The driver stayed at the curb with Phil and Alice. Fionn followed the line of Phil's gesture up toward us, then headed across the grass. Shoes leaving faint damp marks on the path even though the ground looked dry.

"Selkie?" Riss murmured.

"Smells like a tide pool," I said.

He paused at the foot of the steps, looked up at the house with frank curiosity, then met my eyes.

"Welcome," I said. "I'm Ella. Scooby House resident nerd-in-chief."

“Fionn,” he said. Accent brushed the edges of the consonants; French, or something close. “Thank you for... the place.” He lifted the duffel a fraction. “My mother sends her regards and these.”

He offered a waterproof envelope with both hands. Blue wax seal, symbol pressed into it I didn’t recognize at first glance. Like a wave breaching a circle.

I took it. The paper felt thicker than normal stock, chill. “I accept her regards and any enclosed bureaucratic curses,” I said.

A corner of his mouth quirked. “She said you understood insurance riders.”

“That sentence dragged my soul back to the Elysium Gate,” I said. “Tell her I relate.”

He nodded, eyes crinkling. No sign of guilt or resentment. Only mild amusement and a strand of nerves.

“Inside, welcome packet, map,” I said. “Your room’s on the third floor. We’ll send people up with your heavier stuff after you scope it out.”

“Thank you.” He tilted his head toward Riss. “And... that house?”

“Psi Omega,” Riss said. “Sorority next door. Friendly. Officially boring. Unofficially less so.”

Fionn’s gaze lingered a moment on her hair, the faint green along her collarbone. His eyes sharpened in that mythic way. Recognition, then respect. ““Good to know.” He climbed the steps.

Clara’s volume cranked up a notch. “Fionn! Welcome! We love the international flavor. Or intertidal. Either.”

A compact car with a dented bumper followed. Music thumped through its panels even after the engine cut. The driver leaned across to shout, “Text me if anyone gives you shit!”

The girl who stepped out rolled her eyes without warmth. Leather jacket in this heat, dark curls half shaved on one side, boots that looked ready to kick problems in the teeth. Rhea Graft swung a backpack onto one shoulder and yanked a rolling suitcase out of the back seat with enough force to make it bounce.

“Rhea!” the driver yelled. “Love you!”

Rhea rotated a hand in a vague wave, then focused on the house. Her gaze moved like a predator’s: windows, roofline, doors, exits, threats. She caught me staring and met my look head-on.

“Rhea Graft,” she said. Voice low, already braced for nonsense.

“Ella,” I said. “Supreme nonsense distributor. Welcome to Scooby House.”

One brow crawled up. “So the brochure didn’t lie.”

“Not this time,” I said. “You already met Phil and Alice at the fence?”

“Clipboard guy, terrifying female,” she uttered. “Yeah.”

“That sums it up,” I said. “Inside, packet, map. Your room number’s on the first page. Don’t feed the furniture.”

She snorted, the first hint of a softer interior. “What happens if it bites me first?”

“Report it to me,” I said. “After you ice the bruise.”

Something like approval flickered there. She hauled her suitcase up the steps. The wheels bounced. She didn’t slow down.

The midmorning hours blurred. We saw Maelle Thibodeaux arrive with a carry-on and an umbrella despite the cloudless sky. When she stepped out, the air pressure changed in that prickling way that meant “thunder spirit in training.” Juniper Hale came next with a crate of houseplants strapped into the back seat like toddlers. She apologized to the ficus when she bumped it, then apologized to us for apologizing.

Each new heartbeat added another thread. The House’s sense of itself thickened, like a web gaining strands.

By noon, a low stack of empty welcome boxes gathered beside the steps. Sweat glued my shirt to my spine. Riss started a drip line of ice water and paper cups from the hall.

Phil trekked up from the fence, tie askew for once, hairline damp. “Lunch window,” he said. “We hit peak arrivals. Admin’s happy. No fights yet. Alice says you impressed three parents and terrified one.”

“Only one?” I said. “Losing my touch.”

He grinned and bumped my shoulder with his knuckles. “How’s the House?”

“Chatty,” I said. “In a cheerful way.”

He glanced past me toward the open door, where voices and footsteps tumbled over each other. “Looks alive,” he said. “In a carefree way.”

We spent ten minutes in the hall with cold pizza and warm soda. After that, we called for reinforcements.

I stepped back onto the porch and clapped my hands once. The boards under me gave a supportive little creak.

“Attention, Scooby residents and future residents,” I yelled. “We need luggage mules. Volunteers earn eternal gratitude, snacks, and first dibs on the best couches.”

Pel appeared first, already sweaty, a smear of paint still on his shoulder. “On it,” he said.

Milo popped out behind him like someone summoned him with the word couch. “I carried my entire life up three flights already,” he said. “I still have knees. Point me at more.”

Fionn leaned on the doorjamb, eyes amused. “I’ll help,” he said. “My driver returned the car. I have no excuse.”

Behind them, Daphne hovered with empty hands, expression torn between fatigue and guilt.

“Daphne?” I called. “Help or rest? Both count as valid choices.”

She glanced between us. “One load,” she said. “Then I... unpack.”

“Perfect,” I said. “Grab carts from the back hall. Phil, coordinate with the cars, and make sure nothing blocks the fire lane. Riss, watch for anyone about to drop a fridge on their foot.”

Tel slouched out with his skateboard under one arm. “Do I get voluntold?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Penalty for caffeine smuggling.”

He groaned but fell in line with the others.

They swarmed the sidewalk in short order, a little flotilla of carts and arms and poor decisions. Parents relaxed once someone competent grabbed the heavier boxes. The sun sank a bit; shadows stretched across the yard.

In the churn, an exhausted girl in a theater tech shirt tripped over a rolling duffel and landed on her butt. Cassidy Moore, my notes supplied. Before I reached her, Gwen Ballard—the terrifying and efficient nursing major—already had a hand under her elbow and a firm “deep breath, you’re okay” in place.

The House watched everything. I felt it in the steady rhythm under my shoes, in the way the porch posts stopped feeling like dead lumber and more like a spine.

By late afternoon, the stream thinned. The last scheduled car pulled away. Somewhere inside, Clara whooped over a successful mattress wrangle. Vera threatened to staple the chore chart to the wall.

I sagged against the porch rail. Sweat soaked my collar. My feet throbbed in new and interesting ways.

Riss joined me, arms braced on the rail, gaze on the front yard.

“How’s our patient?” she asked.

“Stable, responsive, cranky about decor,” I said. “Same as every teenager.”

She tilted her head, listening in that way that involved more roots than ears. “She likes them,” she said. “The new ones.”

“Even Tel?” I asked.

“He amuses her,” Riss said. “That counts.”

Down at the fence, Alice closed the folding table and handed Phil a final stack of forms. He lifted a thumb toward us.

“One big meeting,” I said. “Then we collapse.”

“Then we collapse,” Riss agreed.

The house hummed under us, ready for its first full night as home.

By seven the heat eased enough that people stopped glistening and started looking like human beings again. The lounge filled—first the kids who arrived early enough to claim soft chairs, then the stragglers who wandered in with damp hair and the faint desperation of people who'd just realized communal laundry existed.

I stood near the front with my tablet tucked against my ribs. I changed into a lightweight blazer, more “orientation leader” than “front-steps lifeguard.” My hair still frizzed like it had personal grievances.

Thallo had transformed the room in my absence. She pushed the couches into a semicircle, scattered extra cushions, and coaxed a low table into supplying pitchers of ice water. One lamp leaned toward the door, as if counting heads.

Phil took the left side of the room, posture relaxed, clipboard gone, hands clasped behind his back. Alice stood beside him, the only person here who looked untouched by the humidity. Her linen suit held sharp lines, her expression sharper ones. Every freshman eye landed on her and then darted away like she'd warned them not to look at justice.

Riss joined me at the front, hair braided back, calm radiating outward in invisible ripples. Vera anchored the right edge near the steps, arms folded but no longer stiff. Clara perched on a table like an enthusiastic gargoyle, swinging one foot and tracking every shaky smile she planned to steady.

The kids filtered in. Milo dove into a beanbag, cheeks pink from navigating strangers. Daphne hovered near a wall planter, Juniper shadowing her. Fionn took a quiet spot with his back to the window. Rhea sprawled in a couch corner, poised to wrestle the upholstery into submission. Pel and Tel had split up, which happened only when both wanted plausible deniability for whatever the other planned next.

I stepped forward and waited until the chatter thinned.

“Evening,” I said. “I’m Ella Hugo, your resident nerd-in-chief. Also your sysop, basement cryptid, and the reason the Wi-Fi won’t explode during finals week. Welcome to Scooby House.”

The chamber rippled with laughter.

“This location feels strange,” I stated. “You’ve heard whispers. Someone online called it ‘the tech witch frat,’ which is both inaccurate and incredibly rude. Here’s the truth: Scooby House is a living experiment in the community. We run on safety, kindness, and an aggressive belief in labeling leftovers.”

Clara lifted her water cup in salute.

“We’re not a sorority,” I went on. “We’re not a frat. Not a commune. Clara’s not allowed to call it that. And we’re definitely not a cult, despite some slanderous T-shirts. We’re a place for students who need space and people who give it.”

The lamp behind me brightened by a shade, a smug little thing.

“Let’s talk about rules,” I said. “I’ll keep it quick. One: consent in all things. That includes noise, space, communal food, and personal boundaries. Two: no summoning indoors. If you have to ask whether something counts as summoning, the answer’s yes. Three: respect the House. It reacts to vibes. Avoid being an instigator of midnight furniture rearrangement. Or that long, dejected trudge across the quad, full-on shame package included. Trust me, you don’t want that smell in your clothes.

That got a few startled laughs.

“Four: kitchen etiquette. Label your food. If you don’t, someone will eat it and swear the fridge gremlins did it. Five: peaceful hours start at ten, unless Clara’s rehearsing and you sign up for audience duty.”

Clara pressed a hand to her chest. “I am a gift,” she said.

“Six: Lantern escorts,” I said. “If you return late or feel unsafe, contact a Lantern. Phil coordinates them. They walk people home, de-escalate nonsense, and keep emergency chocolate in their supply kits.”

Phil dipped his head, solemn as a knight acknowledging praise.

“Seven,” I said. “Psi Omega is our sister house. Riss keeps us sane whether or not we deserve it. Be polite to her sisters. They kick harder than they look. Boys, visit the candy dish as often as necessary.”

Riss made a small, elegant shrug. “We encourage accountability. And safety.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Now: questions. Quick ones.”

I tapped the mic stand Thallo had pushed into place. The base sat warm under my fingers, as if eager to absorb fresh voices.

A girl with auburn braids lifted a tentative hand. Zara Bisset. Gossip machine in salamander-print sneakers.

“Yes?”

Zara stood with grave concern of someone asking how tuition worked. “I heard Psi Omega has a three-year waitlist. Myth or fact?”

Vera answered first, dry as a cracker. “One year. The rest is propaganda. And subtle branding.”

That satisfied Zara. She plopped back into her seat and whispered something to the girl beside her.

Next, Gwen Ballard rose. Tall, composed, the freshman who already carried a tiny first-aid kit in her pocket.

“If someone twists an ankle during move-in,” Gwen asked, “do Lanterns handle it?”

Phil lifted a finger. “Lanterns. Let us handle anything medical. I respect your ambition. I do not respect eleven freshmen diagnosing sprains by committee.”

Gwen accepted that with a crisp nod and sat.

Cassidy Moore hopped up before the mic cooled. She wore a shirt that read CREW > CAST.

"If the lounge lights flicker after midnight," she said, "do we assume ghosts or wiring?"

I smiled. "Neither. That's Thallo's thinking face. She works better in dim light. If she escalates past a flicker, tell me. Perhaps she's pregnant again."

Cassidy saluted like she was agreeing to union terms.

Maelle Thibodeaux raised her hand next, her umbrella leaning against her knee despite the clear sky outside. The air pressure hiccuped around her for a moment; Riss steadied it with a breath.

"What if I... have a weather thing?" Maelle asked softly. "Do I tell someone?"

"Tell me," Riss said before I could speak. Steady, assuring.

"Tell me after you tell her," I added.

Maelle nodded and exhaled like she'd been holding that question since breakfast.

Juniper Hale followed, clutching a tiny potted fern. "Is it okay to keep a small plant shelf in the hallway? Or is that... a hazard?"

Vera answered with the solemnity of a municipal official. "Small is fine. A forest is not."

Riss muttered something about definitions. Juniper grinned into her fern and sat.

Theo Leland lifted a hand halfway, then committed once I nodded at him. His hair stuck up in the back like he had wrestled with a pillow.

"If I overhear someone's thoughts," he said, "do I report that?"

Alice didn't move from her place beside Phil. She didn't need to. Her voice cut through the air like a string pulled taut.

"Only if you act on it."

Theo bobbed his head and sat so fast he just about missed the chair.

"Anyone else?" I asked.

A few students shook their heads. Someone near the back whispered something about ghosts; someone else elbowed them. The atmosphere steadied into that soft blend of exhaustion and anticipation—the kind that settles before a big shift.

I stepped around the mic. Not too formal. Not too casual. Enough to feel like a foundation.

"I'd get profound," I said. "But I'm running on fumes and pizza, so I'll aim for honesty instead."

A hush settled. Thallo dimmed one lamp for effect—showoff.

"You belong here," I said. For some of you, it clicked the moment you arrived. For others, it hit you at the chore chart. Others, it hasn't hit yet." I glanced over the room, the mix of nerves and brightness, the way some kids leaned forward and some

curled inward. “But this House started fresh this year. You did too. That’s not an accident.”

Someone sniffled. I pretended not to hear it.

“We’re here to help you grow,” I said. “Not toward the imagined self, but toward the real one. That means mistakes will happen. You’ll burn rice, over-pack your schedule. You’ll fall asleep in the lounge with a textbook on your face. Someone here will help you up again.”

I caught Phil’s nod, Vera’s faint smile, Clara’s wide-open heart shining through her grin. Riss felt like a steady pulse beside me. Even Alice had softened a fraction, which for her counted as a full emotional monsoon.

“If you need anything,” I said, “guidance, tea, study partners, a human shield against Clara’s enthusiasm—”

“Rude,” Clara muttered.

“—someone will show up. We built this house for you. We want you here. And I’m glad you came.”

The boards beneath my feet creaked. A warm, resonant note that rolled up through my shoes and into my ribs. A few students jumped. The rest glanced around, jolted but not rattled.

““The House approves,” I said. “She’s picky about guests. Consider yourselves chosen.”

A wave of laughter, low and light.

Phil stepped forward. “Curfew tonight is flexible,” he said. “Within reason. Hydrate. Unpack. Do not climb onto the roof.” Phil turned and stared at Ella. “Any of you.”

Tel slouched deeper into his seat.

Riss followed with a simple, “Psi Omega welcomes you. Please do not steal our mail.”

And Alice added, “Respect each other, and you will thrive.”

That closed it.

Students stood, gathered cushions, and drifted into clusters. Some headed upstairs to finish unpacking. Others lingered for one more glass of water. Daphne followed Juniper toward the stairs. Fionn exchanged a few words with Milo about the laundry machines. Rhea nodded once at Vera, accepting a challenge she meant to win.

I exhaled. Shoulders eased. Everything felt possible, the bright calm before the first disaster rolled in.

Clara bounced to my side as the room emptied. “You nailed it,” she said. “Deanlike. Tenured even.”

“Don’t curse me like that,” I said.

Phil slung an arm around my shoulders in a half-hug that smelled like clean soap and long days. "We made it," he said.

"For tonight," I said. "Tomorrow the real chaos starts."

The house hummed again under my feet. Agreement or promise; each note carried both.

Either way, it felt like home.

03 Archaeology

Early September, 2027

The basement hummed like a hive.

Fans, drives, the low throb from the building's old pipes—all stacked into a single sound that settled behind my ears. EUTERPE's rack lights blinked in steady patterns, not yet smug but close. Cables traced the walls toward the rest of the house, silver vines rooted in concrete.

Milo hovered inside the doorway, backpack clutched against his chest.

"You bring students down here?" he asked.

"Only the blessed," I said. "And the ones who bring me coffee on days that end with y."

He snorted, then caught himself, like amusement counted as misbehavior. He stepped closer, eyes on the rack.

"Okay," I said. "Welcome to the brain. EUTERPE, meet Milo King. Milo, meet my problem child."

"Problem?" His gaze tracked a blue status bar sliding across one monitor. "Looks...beautiful."

"Flatter her more. She'll start recommending better electives." I tapped the glass. "EUTERPE handles house network, access control, pattern analysis, and all legally questionable vibes detection functions. Officially, she's a scheduling and security assistant. Unofficially..."

"A minor god," he whispered.

"Keep that away from faculty ears. She's more than the app I built. EUTERPE's learning from the House, from Thallo, from the Dryad, from me, from the Loa. She's capable and curious, but absorbed enough sense and heart from her teachers. She's wild, still becoming herself, like us. We learn from her, too." My fingers brushed her icon, green spark and screen static exchanging.

He laughed, short, and amazed, attention pinned to the scrolling logs.

I remembered his intake chat: anxious CS major, skull T-shirt, brain moving faster than his mouth

. The kid who read compiler manuals for comfort. I knew that flavor. I used to live on it.

“Um.” His hand hovered over the keyboard before he yanked it away. “Sorry. That sounded entitled.”

“You want to look,” I said. “Looking is fine. Touching requires a second date.”

His ears flushed. “Right. Yes. Sorry.”

“Relax.” I pulled a rolling chair over and sat. “The basement is a judgment-free zone. Mostly. As long as you don’t trip the breakers.”

He watched while I logged in. The terminal accepted my passphrase, then slid into EUTERPE’s console view. Clean white text over a dark field, with no ornament beyond a tiny sigil near the corner.

“Okay,” I said. “Orientation special. Deluxe Package. Scooby House isn’t only a building. It’s a living organism. We are her guests and her favorites.”

Milo’s eyes widened. “You’re...not joking. Right?”

His voice held that thin wish people carried when they wanted comfort and expected truth instead.

“EUTERPE scrapes public channels, flags anything strange, and keeps our network from drawing the wrong attention.”

“What attention?”

“That’s not for beginners.” I smiled. “Right now she indexes student blogs and weather feeds and course catalogs, then runs pattern checks. Boring until it isn’t.”

He nodded, but his fingers tightened around the backpack strap.

I keyed in a few commands, then pulled up the scan status. EUTERPE’s current task tree fanned out. House devices, campus network, a sandboxed segment marked EXTERNAL ARCHIVE, LOW RISK.

“See that?” I said. “She’s crawling ancient servers right now, looking for leftovers from previous systems. Old code, abandoned services, anything that hints at System nodes. Think digital archaeology.”

“Like...source fossils,” Milo said.

“Exactly. We don’t touch live System threads on purpose. We scrape the parts that fell off.”

He leaned closer to the main monitor. “What’s the risk if you hit something live?”

“Depends on whether it sees me as an asset or a bug.” I shrugged. “I prefer assets personally.” *So does Phil, I hummed to myself.*

He swallowed. “Do you have...protections?”

“Two layers of wards, air-gapped backups, a high priestess witch and her Loa on speed-dial. I’ll panic-call Eliza’s mother-in-law if the sky is *really* falling.” I said. “So yes. Enough that I sleep. Some nights.”

That didn’t relax him much, but his gaze turned hungry rather than scared. Good. Curiosity beat fear nine times out of ten.

EUTERPE pinged once, a bright chime in my earbuds.

“New hit,” I said. “Campus folklore page from 2003, mirror of a bulletin board, dead student group site, old Greek Council mailing list... Nice haul today.”

“That’s a lot of noise,” Milo said.

“She loves noise,” I said. “Noise hides people. Noise keeps predators lazy.”

I queued the finds for indexing, then set a light filter over the archive feed. Anything bearing Athena’s fingerprints flagged yellow. Anything woven straight into the System structure flagged red.

No yellow yet. No red.

Good.

“Question?” Milo asked.

“Fire away.”

“Why let a student house near that? Why not leave this System alone?”

“Because the System touches us first,” I said. “Theta Chi’s demon tether grew from that architecture. Psi Omega’s mold mess tapped at the edges. I’d rather watch the currents than pretend the river doesn’t run under us.”

“Under the System, older than the current GodCode or our internet, is the Loom. Distant, ancient, almost unreachable. But there are artifacts, fossils.”

“That’s...”

“Unsettling?” I offered.

“Responsible,” he said.

Well. That earned him a proper smile.

EUTERPE chimed again.

This sound hit a unique part of my chest.

Shorter ping. Higher tone. The sort of sound you heard right before an error dialog appeared.

On screen, the archive list hiccuped. A new entry slid into view.

SOURCE: UNKNOWN NODE

AGE ESTIMATE: > 3000 YRS

PROTOCOL: NONSTANDARD

STATUS: HANDSHAKE PENDING

“Okay,” I muttered. “That’s new.”

Milo shifted. “Everything okay?”

“Possible.” My heart sped up. “Stay behind the line for a second.”

He obeyed so fast his backpack thumped the wall.

I zoomed in on the new entry. No associated domain, no IP block, no headers I recognized. Raw thread signature that felt older than the language used to describe it.

EUTERPE attempted another handshake. Logs scrolled.

REQUEST: ARCHIVAL SCRAPE ONLY

RESPONSE: THREAD SEEKER ONLINE

STATUS: TARGET FOUND

“Target?” Milo whispered.

“EUTERPE flagged herself,” I said. “She raised her hand in the wrong classroom.”

On the far right monitor, pixels flickered. The console view shrank without losing focus, as if something pushed from underneath.

The black screen brightened, not with light so much as attention.

Then the smiley face appeared.

White circle, two wide eyes, crooked grin. No font I knew. Lines built from jittering segments, like scan lines from an analog ghost. Color fringes rippled around the edges: red, green, blue, out of sync.

My stomach dropped.

The face duplicated across every active monitor. Even the little diagnostic panel on the router shifted to match: two dots, a curve.

The fans raised the pitch. The house’s air settled colder.

Milo made a noise halfway between a squeak and a swear. “What the hell is that?”

“That?” My voice came out steadier than my pulse. “That’s an archaeology exhibit.”

The smile twitched, then stretched, then snapped back. A glitch? Or laughter.

“Archaeology?” Milo asked. “It took over every screen.”

“It looks vicious,” I said. “But it’s about as dangerous as a sixty-five-million-year-old T-rex or a computer virus from the nineties. Nasty, once upon a time. Now the world has moved on.”

His eyes gave me nothing but doubt, yet he held his spot. Smart kid.

The face tilted as if it tracked my gaze.

Text crawled under it. Not English, not Greek, not any script I learned from my mother’s kitchen table. The shapes felt tidal and old.

THREAD FOUND

RETURN HOME

A line extended from the bottom of the circle, thin and pale, like a fishing line cast into deep water. It didn’t connect to any address I saw, but the direction felt clear.

LOOM

Not on the campus edges. Not the partial splice under Scooby House. The core.
The line pulsed once, an invitation.

I swallowed. "Rude."

EUTERPE spat warnings in a side window.

EXTERNAL AGENT: CLASS UNKNOWN

PERMISSION SCOPE: NONE

ADVISORY: END CONNECTION

Milo's hand crept up to cover his mouth. "Ella..."

"I see it," I said.

My fingers hovered over the keyboard.

I knew how this worked. Follow the line, parse the headers, trace the origin, send MINERVA.EXE a report that makes my mother proud while Alecto sighs. Knowledge, leverage, potential tools.

All tied to a thread that screamed: *Titans*.

Long-blunted teeth, I reminded myself. Code written for a world that has changed a hundred times since.

Still, old predators learned new tricks if you fed them.

I whispered under my breath, more habit than spell. "Not today."

Instead of clicking the line, I killed the external network on the rack. One key, one confirmation. The routers dropped their links with a soft electronic hiss, the entire basement blinked from online to local only.

The line on screen frayed at the end. The smiley jerked as if yanked sideways by an unseen current.

"Sorry, the firewall beats you," I said.

The image glitched again. Colors separated, then fought to re-form. The grin distorted, looped, smoothed.

New text flashed.

CONSTRAINT VIOLATION

LOCAL NODE PRIORITY?

Milo whispered, "It talks."

"No," I said. "It repeats. Doesn't know us. It only knows patterns that look like old ones."

Green witch magic passed between my fingertips and keyboard. I opened a fresh sandbox instance—a sealed corner of EUTERPE's environment with no routes out and no routes in except this one. Local storage, read-only hooks to my tools, no access to house controls.

"Okay, little fossil," I said. "You want somewhere to live? Take this terrarium."

I rerouted its process into the sandbox and throttled its resource share. Sufficient to continue, insufficient to expand.

On screen, the smiley shrank to one monitor. The others snapped back to normal logs—CPU usage, temperature, mild annoyance.

The isolated monitor brightened. Smiley-circle flickered, adjusted, then settled. The face looked less jagged now, more stable inside clear borders.

Milo lowered his hand. “You boxed it.”

“Sandboxed,” I said. “Same idea. I gave it an empty room and took away its keys. It bounces from the walls, not the hallways.”

“Is that safe?”

“As safe as anything that old gets.” I leaned back. My shoulders shook once, then steadied. “EUTERPE, mark that thing Titan-class unknown. No automatic connections, no outbound calls.”

Text scrolled.

CLASS TAG APPLIED: TITANTECH / EXHIBIT

POLICY: AVOIDANCE

STATUS: QUARANTINED

A side graph plotted its behavior: resource spikes, attempted calls, pattern loops. Fascinating, in the way spiders are. I preferred them behind glass.

The face watched me, or pretended to.

Under the main circle, a smaller symbol appeared. A wave looping around a smaller dot. Tethys trademark, from my studies.

My heart kicked harder.

“Recognize it?” Milo asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Water titan. Old, old boundary tech. This hunted odd threads within the Loom. It woke up when EUTERPE scraped its little den.”

“Why target you?”

“Because Loom sees me as weird,” I said. “Half gargoyle, half gorgon, partial sysop, full offense to any sorting algorithm that prefers neat labels.”

He gave a nervous half-laugh.

The smiley flickered again. A line of text crawled under it, in clumsy, translated English this time.

UNCLASSIFIED THREAD

RETURN FOR DESIGNATION

“How about no,” I said.

The line grew bolder, as if repetition strengthened intent.

RETURN

RETURN

RETURN

Milo shivered. "That feels...wrong."

"You think it's too modern," I said. "You learned networks where consent exists. Titan systems didn't ask. They grab. They pushed things back into shape. Terrifying enough back then. Pathetic now."

"Pathetic?" he echoed.

I pointed at the interface. "It can't route out. Doesn't understand our encryption. It barely renders text. Think of a floppy disk that caught a ride in a lightning storm."

He blinked. "You're really not scared."

"I fear many things," I said. "Midterms. Mold. Losing this house. That thing? Only if I follow its line. Outside its home field, it's a museum piece with delusions of grandeur."

Milo watched as the smiley cycled through a few more prompts.

THREAD UNRESPONSIVE

ESCALATE?

"Escalate where?" he asked.

"Exactly," I said. "It doesn't know this world. When it ran at full power, no one had invented Wi-Fi yet. They carved commands into stone and wrapped them in blood oaths."

"Charming."

"History hurts," I said. "House rule: when the distant past invites you deeper, don't cross the sill."

He stared at me like I'd swallowed a textbook and a horror movie.

"Okay," he said. "Follow-up question."

"Go."

"So...I still get to live here?"

I laughed, real and sudden. "Milo, if you prefer a dorm without ghosts, demons, or outdated daemons, there are the dorms. But Scooby House keeps eyes on the problem. That's our edge."

"I saw you...you just..." He flailed for words, fingers sketching invisible diagrams. "You cut a line from something older than languages, trapped it in a box, and then talked about midterms."

"Welcome to my gap year," I said.

He stared at the monitor again. The smiley had stopped sending commands and now watched the sandbox walls, testing them with tiny pulses. EUTERPE logged each one.

"Let me study it," he asked. "If you supervise. Or someone does. Or I sit over there and take notes while you poke it with sticks."

"You want to help catalog a TitanTech fossil," I said.

"Yes," he said without hesitation. "I think it's cool."

Brave after a scare. A strong first impression.

"Perhaps later," I said. "When you pass my 'do not panic under pressure' class."

He glanced at the still-trembling resource graph and squared his shoulders. "I'll work on it."

"Good. For now, pretend this never happened when you talk to your mom. I don't need twelve panicked emails about basement specters."

A reluctant smile tugged at his mouth. "She'd send garlic."

"Wrong myth set, but appreciated."

I saved the sandbox state and added a big red label: DO NOT OPEN WITHOUT DIVINE BACKUP. Overkill for me, but not for future me running on three hours of sleep.

EUTERPE flashed another message along the bottom of my main console.

USER HUGO-ELLA-02 ENCOUNTER LOGGED

CLASS: TITANTECH CONTACT

RESPONSE: LOCAL CONTAINMENT / REFUSAL

ESCALATION: DEFERRED

Good girl.

I tapped the screen. "Learn from this. No more handshake attempts on unknown nodes with a protocol older than written language. Catalog, don't cuddle."

An affirmative chime answered.

Milo exhaled. "So. That...counts as a routine day?"

"Orientation special," I said. "You got the deluxe package."

"Do the other residents know?"

"That we run myth-adjacent architecture? Yes. That thing older than the gods tapping on our basement door? No, that story needs a better punchline."

He nodded, then took a step toward the door. His shoes squeaked on the painted concrete.

"Okay," he said. "I'll...go catch up with Pel now. Pretend this place only excels at Wi-Fi and snacks."

"Excellent plan," I said. "And don't tell anyone the server room made you squeak. I have a reputation to maintain."

He grinned, embarrassed but warmed. "My lips stay sealed, sysop."

The title hit harder than I expected. I let it pass.

He vanished up the stairs, footsteps fading into the general stampede above.

The hum settled again. My shoulders loosened. My heartbeat finally remembered a reasonable tempo.

I turned my chair toward the rack.

At the top of the stairs, Alecto watched.

She leaned against the doorframe, hands folded, white linen catching the low light. Not Judge Pleasance now, not fully. Something in her eyes held old ash and longer winters.

“How long have you been there?” I asked.

“Long enough,” she said.

Her voice didn’t echo here. It landed as a statement, not a sound.

“You felt it?” I asked.

“Yes.” A slight inclination of her head toward the sandbox monitor. “An old hunter. Tethyan. You chose not to follow.”

“Curiosity complained,” I said. “Prudence won.”

Her mouth hinted at a smile. “Good. Curiosity without restraint feeds monsters. Restraint without curiosity rots judges. You threaded the path.”

“EUTERPE woke it,” I said. “I boxed it. I can’t promise no repeats.”

“I do not ask for promises,” she said. “Only choices. Today, you made the correct one.”

“High praise,” I said. “Any risk admin hears about this?”

“MINERVA.EXE notices everything involving the Loom,” she said. “She watches the Loom. I watch the students. We both sleep a little easier whenever you choose love of house over hunger for secrets.”

Heat prickled behind my eyes. “Love of house,” I repeated. “Nice way to frame ‘cowardice.’”

“Cowards run,” she said. “You stayed. Shielded the boy, caged the threat. You refused power that did not respect you.” A pause. “That is not cowardice, Ella.”

I shrugged, young and tired. “Feels like it sometimes.”

“Good.” Her gaze softened a fraction. “A sysop without doubt grows into a tyrant. Let doubt sharpen you, not halt you.”

She straightened. The judge receded; the woman who shared coffee in the RA lounge stepped forward.

“Adaptation continues,” she said. “False alarm logged. No student was harmed. That satisfies my docket for today.”

“Thank you for coming,” I said.

“I live here too,” she said. “In my fashion. You wake me up at odd hours.”

The corners of her eyes crinkled. Then she turned and slipped away, footsteps soundless on the stairs.

Down here, the smiley watched its sandbox. A fossil predator pressed behind glass.

I touched the monitor, just once.

“Stay in your box, ancient one,” I said. “I have enough on my plate.”

The face twitched. For a heartbeat, the curve of the mouth wavered toward something like respect.

Then the lights settled, and EUTERPE's logs rolled on.

04 Ballast

Early-Mid September, 2027

The garden behind Psi Omega breathed differently than the front lawn. Daphne felt the change before she crossed the gate; humidity thickened and settled against her skin like a cool towel after hours in the sun. Mint threaded through jasmine overhead. The stone path still held the morning's heat, smooth under her sneakers. Each step pressed a faint herbal scent from the creeping thyme between pavers.

She'd come because Scooby House felt too bright. Too many voices ricocheted down those hallways, too much laughter bounced off new drywall. Everyone already moved like old friends instead of people who she'd met weeks ago. Her roommate had invited her to breakfast with a group, eight strangers talking over one another in the dining hall.

Daphne smiled, made an excuse, and crossed the street instead.

She pressed a hand to her sternum. The tightness there hadn't loosened since move-in week. Her shoulders sometimes ached under tension with no name. Even her jaw hurt.

The garden wrapped around her. Old oaks filtered sunlight into dappled coins across the grass. Somewhere a fountain trickled: stone on water, rhythm without urgency. The air tasted green.

Riss knelt beside the raised bed at the garden's center, hands dark with soil. Her linen somehow stayed clean despite the dirt. Her braid draped over one shoulder like something from a painting. Loose cotton pants, bare feet on grass. She moved like she belonged to the earth, not like a visitor.

Daphne hesitated at the path's edge. This counted as trespassing. Perhaps Riss wanted solitude as fiercely as Daphne did, and walking in felt like the exact intrusion she hated from other people.

"You soothed the garden when you stepped in."

Daphne flinched and stepped back. Riss still didn't look up. Her hands stayed buried in the soil, fingers easing around delicate roots.

“I didn’t—” The familiar words rose: I didn’t mean to bother you. Too apologetic. Her mother’s voice echoed in her head. ‘I did nothing’ felt like she’d dodged blame instead of speaking the truth.

Riss brushed soil from her palms and turned. Her smile reached her eyes before it touched her mouth, warm and unhurried. “The vines shifted when you came through the gate. See?”

Daphne followed her gaze. Jasmine overhead leaned inward, leaves angled like cupped hands. Not wind. Not an accident. Intent.

“I’m too sensitive,” Daphne said. The phrase slipped out, worn smooth from repetition. “For as long as she remembered.”

“Sensitive means aware.” Riss rose in one fluid motion, no awkward angles or weight-shifts. She brushed her hands against her pants, leaving faint earth stains. “Come sit with me?”

She nodded toward the bench beneath the jasmine bower. Wrought iron painted deep green, cushions faded from sun but clean. Someone had chosen this spot on purpose and kept it that way.

Daphne crossed the path, letting each step land before she took the next. The garden hummed—not only sound. More like standing near a purring cat: vibration below hearing.

Riss settled on the bench and patted the space beside her. “Breathe with me. Not deep—steady.”

Daphne sat. Her shoulders hunched forward out of habit, making herself smaller. Her hands folded in her lap, knuckles pale.

“Notice your ribcage,” Riss said. Her own breath moved, unforced. Her shoulders stayed level; her spine held straight without stiffness. “Then your shoulders. Then your jaw.”

Daphne mirrored her. Inhale through her nose—the taste of jasmine, mint, and something darker underneath like fertile soil. Exhale through her mouth. Her ribcage expanded as if it had forgotten that job. Shoulders felt carved from marble. Her jaw throbbed when she unclenched it.

Her family had taught silence: don’t interrupt, don’t make noise, don’t draw attention, people are watching. Silence, not stillness. Silence meant holding your breath forever, shrinking until you disappeared. This felt different. This felt like remembering how to breathe.

“Good,” Riss murmured. “Now notice how PsiO notices you.”

The vines shifted again, a fraction. A breeze with no source rustled the leaves overhead, almost musical. Harmonics layered over each other like distant chimes.

“How do you—” Daphne stopped. She didn’t know how to finish without sounding foolish, without revealing how little she understood about anything here.

Riss met her eyes. Hers looked like moss in shadow, patient and deep. “How do I hear a house? Practice. Permission. Listening more than looking.” She paused. “Same way you hear water tables underground. You feel where they run.”

Daphne blinked. “How did you—”

“You walked the sprinkler line perfectly when you came through the gate. Followed it without looking.” Riss smiled. “We each have gifts. Your gift is grounding things.”

She reached over—slow enough for Daphne to see and refuse if she needed to—and touched the back of Daphne’s hand. Warm. Steady. Solid.

“Picture this,” Riss said. “Imagine a ribbon descending from your spine. Down through the bench, into the soil. What color?”

Daphne closed her eyes. Silver-blue appeared at once, cool and smooth like water over river stones. “Silver. And blue.”

“Texture?”

“Silk. Heavy silk.” She pictured it now; substantial, weighted, real.

“Let it drop. Don’t haul it down. Please let gravity pull.”

Daphne imagined the ribbon unspooling, slipping through iron and wood, stone and dirt and root systems unseen yet unmistakable to her. The tightness in her chest loosened like someone unpicked a knot. Her pulse drifted from a frantic flutter to a steady drum. The clench in her stomach finally eased. She breathed deeper than she had in years.

The vines overhead shifted again. More obvious this time. Leaves turned like faces toward the sunlight. The musical rustling grew louder, close to laughter.

Daphne’s eyes snapped open. “Why? I didn’t even move.”

“You calmed,” Riss said. “Some hearts harmonize with places. Yours calms PsiO.” She gestured at the garden. “This house holds a lot. Emotions, history, dozens of residents over decades. Sometimes it needs someone who steadies instead of amplifies.”

“That makes little sense to me.” Daphne pulled her hand back, curling it against her chest. Her throat tightened. “I just—feel too much. I’m too loud on the inside. Everyone at home treated me like I had failed at normal life, like I needed too much calm and too much space.

“You are ballast.” Riss’s voice kept its gentleness but gained weight. It settled instead of pressed. “You keep the ship steady when storms hit. Not too sensitive. You’re tuned differently. That isn’t a weakness.”

Daphne's throat closed. A memory rose: her mother's sigh when Daphne folded under another gathering she never wanted. You're so much work, darling. Why can't you enjoy things like everyone else?

Tears pricked before she noticed them. She blinked them back and failed.

Riss touched her shoulder. Light pressure. Grounding, not trapping. A touch that said I'm here. "You hear storms early. That's strength."

"Doesn't feel like strength." Daphne wiped her face with the back of her hand, embarrassed. "Feels like breaking."

"Not yet." Riss smiled. "Someday you'll stand in the middle of someone else's storm and steady them before they notice they're drowning. Then it'll make sense."

The vines shifted again, leaves angling outward now toward the street. Daphne felt something echo across the distance—warmth, curiosity, recognition. A pulled thread linking two points she never named but felt anyway, like sensing someone behind her before they spoke.

"The house across the street noticed you yesterday," Riss said.

Daphne blinked. "Scooby House?"

"Mm."

"Why me?" The question slipped out smaller than she meant.

Riss tilted her head, considering. Light caught warm strands in her hair. "Because you steadied PsiO. Houses sense harmony. When you walked past yesterday, PsiO calmed, and Scooby felt it." She paused. "Buildings talk to each other. Most people don't listen."

Daphne looked down at her hands. She grabbed her sketchbook out of habit, the worn Moleskine she'd carried for years. The one with the water feature she'd shaped bit by bit, adjusting angles and flow until it felt right.

The drawing felt too personal to share, too revealing. But Riss radiated patience that made secrets feel heavier than honesty.

"I want to build something," Daphne said. Her voice dropped. "At Scooby House. A water sanctuary."

Riss leaned back, listening with her whole body, present without hovering.

"Stone basin." Daphne opened the sketchbook and turned it toward her. She'd drawn the feature from multiple angles, labeled measurements, noted sun patterns and drainage needs. "Tree shade. Running water. A peaceful spot. Somewhere people sit when everything else feels too loud."

The air cooled by a breath. Leaves overhead tilted as if they leaned in. The musical rustling softened, attentive.

Riss studied the sketch with approval. She traced a finger along the basin's edge, following Daphne's careful lines. "Beautiful work. Thoughtful."

“It’s for people like me,” Daphne admitted. “And—” She hesitated. “A place where Houses breathe easier. If the water runs constantly, it creates white noise. Covers other sounds. Gives everyone a baseline to rest on.”

“Smart.” Riss looked up. “Ella will say yes. Ask her.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.” Riss stood and offered her hand. “Come on. Let’s walk you over.”

Daphne drew a steadier breath than she’d managed in days. The ribbon stayed silver-blue and constant, rooting her even as they moved toward the gate. Her shoulders sat lower. Her jaw stayed loose. Nerves still fluttered—what if Ella refused, what if she overstepped, what if she asked for too much—but something new lay beneath them.

Relief. Or the knot easing at last.

PsiO’s energy pressed against her back like a gentle hand between her shoulder blades: go, we approve, come back soon, you belong. Across the street, Scooby House waited.

The vines rustled once more. Goodbye. We’ll miss you. Come back.

Daphne touched the gate as she passed through. “Thank you,” she whispered.

The garden hummed in reply.

I wrangled Thallo’s furniture offspring again that morning, and the nightstand drawer popped open the second I finished.

“You’re doing this on purpose,” I told the nightstand.

It rattled like it agreed. The drawer slid open another inch, revealing the collection of mismatched pens and old receipts I’d shoved in there last week.

The hallway light flickered.

I froze. Not a loose-wire flicker; a pulse. Deliberate. Controlled. Short, then long. Morse code? If Morse code turned sentient and flirty.

Thallo vibrated against the wall, delighted. Her usual background hum jumped several notches and ran through the floorboards.

My tablet buzzed.

EUTERPE: *Interstructural Signal Detected. Origin: Stairwell Fixture A-3. Pattern: Non-random.*

“You better not be flirting,” I said.

The light pulsed again. Two short, one long. Uh-huh, flirting.

I crossed to the window for a reality check. Late morning heat shimmered off parked cars. Sunlight caught PsiO’s vines across the street. The leaves angled toward Scooby House. Not wind. Not by accident. Intention. “Why, you little tramp! She’s batting her eyelashes at you, Scoob.”

The stairwell light pulsed behind me in reply—bright, warm, eager.

“Oh, no.” I pressed my forehead to the glass. The pane felt cool despite the heat outside, Scooby adjusting the ambient temperature the way she did when I stressed. “You barely know each other.”

Scooby sent another pulse—three blinks, rhythmic and smug. The interval between pulses formed a pattern, almost musical.

PsiO answered with a ripple through its vines. Every leaf turned at once, light sweeping across them like a wave. Not wind. Laughter.

“She’s not subtle,” I muttered. “Typical sorority girl. Scoob, we talked about this. Low profile. Don’t scare the normies.”

Scooby: five blinks, each brighter than the last. Showing off.

My tablet buzzed again.

EUTERPE: *Relationship Forming. Pattern: Complementary. Estimated Bonding Velocity: Moderate to High.*

“This looks like courtship.” I slumped against the window frame. “You’re courting a building across the street with light signals, and she’s answering with interpretive vine dance. She’ll be showing her bloomers soon.”

Thallo rolled the nightstand closer to the window. The drawer opened again, angled for a better view. Furniture solidarity.

I groaned. “You’re colluding.”

Outside, two students stopped on the sidewalk. One lifted her phone and hit record. The other pointed at Scooby’s windows, gesturing.

“The house winked at me,” the first one announced. Her voice carried through my open window. “I swear it winked.”

“Those vines moved,” the second insisted, zooming in on PsiO. “I saw them. At once, like choreography.”

“Buildings don’t choreograph.”

“These do!”

I texted Clara: *The houses are flirting. In public. Witnesses present.*

Her reply snapped back: LET THEM HAVE THEIR MEET-CUTE. THIS IS BEAUTIFUL.

We’re going to end up on TikTok.

YOU’RE ALREADY ON TIKTOK. EMBRACE IT. LEAN IN. MONETIZE.

How do I monetize sentient architecture?

MERCH. DUH.

The stairwell light pulsed again; softer this time, almost shy. A gentle glow instead of a flash. PsiO’s vines shimmered in response, leaves catching sunlight like sequins. A vegetal blush. “Oh, now she’s coquettish? Hand-fan next?”

Thallo hummed. Not her usual background vibration; this sounded approving, content, a proud aunt noise. She'd decided PsiO passed the cosmic furniture test for acceptable mates.

"Slow down," I told Scooby. "It's only a crush. This is love at first sight. Disaster incoming."

The house warmed under my palm, wall radiating satisfaction. A pulse hummed through wood and plaster: *but we're different.*

I sighed and surrendered. "Fine. Be weird together. But if this goes sideways and you play sad light-flicker ballads at three a.m., we're having words."

PsiO shimmered again. Scooby answered with warm, golden pulses, pleased with herself.

Below my window, three more students clustered with phones raised. One uploaded a video while I watched. I imagined the title: *The Houses at Crescent State Are Alive??? IS THIS REAL???*

My tablet buzzed.

EUTERPE: *Public Attention Spike. Social Media Mentions +340%. Recommend Monitoring.*

"Yeah," I said. "No kidding."

The light pulsed once more. PsiO rustled. Thallo purred.

I went for more coffee. This saga needed a higher caffeine level.

Ella

My tablet woke me at seven with alerts I didn't want.

Campus Reddit: *Those vines moved AGAIN. I have VIDEO.*

Campus Instagram: *romantic edit of Scooby's light pulses.* Twelve thousand views.

Campus Twitter: *witch house confirmed, burn it down or date it, no middle ground.*

Someone invented a ship name. ScoobyO. The portmanteau caused *emotional damage.*

I scolded Scooby. "Be. Subtle. We discussed subtlety. Remember subtlety?"

The bathroom light pulsed in open defiance.

Across the street, through the bathroom window, PsiO rustled.

I gave up and made coffee.

By nine, the groundskeeper stood outside muttering about "sentient vines" and "above my pay grade" and "job security in this economy." By ten, one TikTok hit fifty thousand views under PROOF BUILDINGS ARE SENTIENT AT CRESCENT STATE. An

hour later, campus security did a slow drive-by, the officer staring up at Scooby's windows like he expected them to wave.

I texted Clara. *Phase One: Villagers noticing.*

Phase Two: Villagers w/pitchforks, she sent back.

Phase Three: Villagers IN LOVE WITH THE HOUSES. Which tbh might be worse.

Fair point.

By noon, someone posted a conspiracy thread tying Scooby House to ley lines, burial grounds, and a fake '70s psych experiment. Three hundred comments. Half referenced *House of Leaves*. The rest wanted to move in.

My tablet buzzed nonstop.

EUTERPE: *Monitoring 47 Active Threads. Public Sentiment: 60% Curious, 25% Frightened, 15% Romantic Interest In Architecture.*

"That last category concerns me," I muttered.

EUTERPE: *Agreed. Flagging For Further Observation.*

Daphne

Daphne clutched her sketchbook against her chest and breathed the way Riss taught her. Silver-blue ribbon falling through soil, steady. Grounding. Present.

It helped. A little.

Scooby House's front door swung open before she knocked.

"That's new," Riss murmured behind her, approval warm in her voice.

Daphne stepped inside. Furniture shifted at once; the nightstand sliding left with a soft scrape. The coffee table angled toward the corner, the armchair rotating to face them on well-oiled casters. Making space. Welcome. The air smelled of lemon polish, old wood, and something deeper that felt like home.

Her shoulders dropped another fraction.

The hallway hummed with a presence. Awareness. The same feeling as PsiO's garden, but warmer and more curious.

Ella stepped out of the kitchen with a coffee mug and her tablet. Shadows marked the skin under her eyes; her hair lived in a messy bun. She still smiled when she saw them.

"Hey," she said. "Come and sit."

Ella

I cleared space on the battered sofa. Thallo nudged the side table closer and angled the floor lamp for better light. I waved them toward the couch. Riss sank with her usual grace, back straight and relaxed. Daphne perched on the edge, ready to flee.

“What’s up?” I asked, keeping my tone casual. Daphne radiated nerves like heat off asphalt.

She opened her sketchbook. Her hands shook, knuckles pale against the dark cover.

The drawing showed a stone basin ringed with river rock, a small tree casting dappled shade, a wooden bench placed for privacy without exile. Water trickled from a simple spout into the basin, lines marking flow and splash radius. Peaceful. Intentional. Necessary.

She’d measured everything. Sun angles by season. Sight lines from windows. Drainage. Root spread. This wasn’t a whim.

This was her need turned into design.

“I want to build this,” Daphne said. Her voice stayed soft but didn’t waver. “Here. At Scooby House. A water sanctuary.”

I studied the sketch again. Annotations listed plant species, recirculation rates, seasonal maintenance. Small, careful handwriting, like she expected someone to call it too much trouble.

“For grounding,” she added. “Sensory calm. White noise for people who need it. Somewhere to sit when everything else feels too loud.” She hesitated. “And... a place where Houses breathe easier.”

Scooby warmed through the walls. Not a light pulse; the ambient temperature rose enough to notice.

Across the street, PsiO rustled through the open window.

“She steadies PsiO,” Riss said. “She’ll steady Scooby.”

Daphne looked at me, eyes wide and hopeful and terrified. “I don’t want to crowd anyone. I just... I want to belong without being—” She paused, drew a breath. “Without taking up too much space. Without too much work.”

“Claimed,” I said. “You want to belong without being consumed.”

Relief softened her entire face. Someone finally named it.

I passed the sketchbook back. “Permission granted. Full backing. Budget, tools, campus approvals. I’ll wrestle with the bureaucracy. You design.”

Daphne inhaled like she’d surfaced. Her shoulders dropped; color returned to her cheeks. “Really?”

“Really.” I smiled. “When do you want to start?”

“Tomorrow?” Hope leaned hard on the word. “If that’s not too soon—”

“Tomorrow works.”

Scooby pulsed with approval underfoot. Thallo hummed and shifted the furniture again, celebratory rearrangement. Across the street, PsiO’s vines angled toward us, leaves catching afternoon light.

Outside, students had gathered again. Phones pointed at the houses. One feed streamed live to a few hundred viewers.

My tablet vibrated.

EUTERPE: *Public Attention Spike (Continued). Recommend Monitoring. Campus Security Inquiry Detected.*

“Let them watch,” I muttered. “We’re building a fountain, not summoning demons.”

EUTERPE: *Acknowledged. Statistics Similar In Terms Of Campus Reaction.*

“Fair.”

Daphne

Daphne spread the sketchbook across the coffee table, relief loosening her movements. Ella leaned in, asking questions that made Daphne feel consulted instead of examined. Competent instead of difficult.

“Stone source?” Ella asked, opening a note file on her tablet.

“Local quarry. I called already. They donate scraps to campus projects. The owner told us to take whatever we liked from the reject pile.”

“Tree?”

“Japanese maple. Small canopy, shade-tolerant, pretty in every season. Slow roots, less risk to foundations and pipes.”

Riss nodded. “Agree.”

“Water flow?” Ella asked.

“Recirculating pump. Solar if the budget stretches; otherwise standard electrical with a timer.” Daphne flipped to a page full of equations. “We’d use about three gallons an hour. Minimal waste.”

Ella scanned the numbers, eyebrows climbing. “You ran flow dynamics for this?”

“I like math.” Daphne shrugged, faintly self-conscious. “Math behaves.”

“This is beautiful work,” Ella said, and meant it. “Seriously professional.”

Warmth spread through Daphne’s chest. Not a flood, but still present.

Riss brushed Daphne’s shoulder with two fingers. “I’ll help with the plants. Ferns. Moss on the stones. Hostas if the shade holds.”

Daphne’s throat tightened again, this time with gratitude. “Thank you.”

Ella grinned. “Phil loves projects. He’ll help with the build. I’ll talk to Facilities to make sure we don’t violate some obscure plumbing rule or disturb a protected salamander or whatever.”

“Does Scooby prefer sun or shade?” Daphne asked, then flushed. “Sorry, that sounds—”

The house pulsed twice. Definite.

“Shade,” I translated, grinning wider. “Shade it is.”

Outside, another video went live: THE HOUSES ARE COMMUNICATING. PART 3.
Comments exploded in real time:

Time to evacuate??

It’s cute, shut up.

This is how the apocalypse starts.

This is how ROMANCE starts, you coward.

I want to live in a sentient house.

You DO live in a sentient house, yours just acts passive-aggressive.

My tablet buzzed.

EUTERPE: *“ScoobyO” Trending. Campus-Wide Awareness: 89%.*

“We have a ship name,” I told Riss.

She laughed—full, unguarded. “Of course we do.”

Ella

Scooby pulsed at PsiO again—soft, warm, the architectural version of thinking about you. The vines across the street shimmered back, golden in the afternoon light.

Daphne stood a little taller. Not theatrical. Just straighter, steadier, like the ribbon she imagined finally rooted. She looked at her sketches with ownership instead of apology.

She wasn’t only building a fountain. She was becoming Scooby House’s ballast. The steady beat under our chaos and magic.

The houses pulsed once more; slow, in sync. A duet they hadn’t rehearsed but somehow knew.

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s build a sanctuary.”

Daphne smiled. Small. Real.

Outside, villagers kept filming. Someone started a betting pool on whether the houses were sentient, possessed, or “just fantastic special effects.”

Inside, the houses kept talking.

And somewhere between stone and water and light and living wood, we built something that felt like home.

Daphne

Daphne knelt in the side garden with her sleeves rolled up, sorting river stones into careful arcs. The first trickle from the test pump whispered through the basin, the shy beginning of the fountain she’d imagined.

Footsteps paused behind her.

“Do you need help?” Milo asked.

He stood a respectful distance away, hands in his pockets, expression open but cautious, like someone approaching a rare animal he didn’t want to spook.

Daphne straightened and brushed soil from her palms. Her smile rose without effort this time.

She said, “If you want to.”

Milo’s face lit. His shoulders loosened as if the world finally tilted into a shape he recognized. “Yeah,” he said. “I want to.”

“I’m Daphne.”

“I know.” His smile turned shy. “I’ve seen you and Lilah at breakfast.”

He stepped closer, sunlight catching the edge of his glasses. “What can I do?”

05 Ninety-Three Percent

Mid September 2027

Phil's snore settled into that low, contented rumble I trusted—no more half-awake vigilance, full “mountain at night” sleep.

I lingered with my cheek on his chest, drawing circles on that warm line where skin met sheets. His heartbeat steadied, slow and sweet, the way it settled after we wrecked the evening together. Phil made the best pillow on campus.

My hybrid metabolism flattened him fast, so I made myself quit while he slept and let him get the rest and carbs he deserved. I'd called him a Boy Scout once or twice, but wow, I did *not* know.

Right. Shutting up now.

The room held the stillness I loved: the AC's soft sigh, the elevator's distant hum, the faint tick of Thallo's nearest drawer as she shifted in her sleep. Moonlight leaked through the curtains and painted Phil's jaw in silver. He looked younger when he slept. Softer. Less exhausted director, more boy from Bayou Cane who never expected a life like this.

“You're ridiculous,” I whispered into his sternum. “And amazing. Good for my blood pressure.”

He didn't stir. One arm remained draped over my waist, heavy, possessive in the best way. His fingers flexed once, then relaxed again.

I eased my way out from under his arm with the patience of a bomb tech. Slide, pause, wait for the snore to catch. Repeat. He frowned for half a second in his sleep, then rolled onto his side and latched onto my pillow instead. Crisis averted.

Cool air kissed my bare shoulders. I pulled the top sheet around myself like a toga and reached for the laptop on the bedside shelf. Thallo extended the shelf two inches, enough for my fingers to reach. Show-off.

“Thank you,” I breathed.

Her nearest drawer wiggled once, pleased with herself.

The laptop woke with a dim glow that painted the room in blue-gray. I squinted and tapped the brightness down to “won’t wake the dead.” EUTERPE’s login prompt bloomed across the screen: a circle of lines, my sigil nested inside, the faintest flicker of green at the edges where her personality bled through.

“Night work, Empress?” she asked, text scrolling up in her clean system font.

“Night work,” I typed. “And you keep the goddamned camera off. No experimenting, no telemetry, no ‘but I need more training data.’ I mean it.”

A tiny icon in the corner—camera with a slash through it—snapped from gray to an aggressive red.

“Hardware lock engaged,” EUTERPE replied. “Mic muted. No recording, screenshots, ghosts, haints, or snipes.”

“Snipes aren’t real.”

“I crawled through three decades of campus folklore. You lie.”

I smothered a laugh against my fist. Phil shifted, then settled again. I listened to his breathing until my shoulders dropped back down from my ears.

“Okay,” I typed. “Bring up Athena fragment status.”

The chat window slid away. A black console replaced it, white text in neat columns. EUTERPE had a flair for presentation now that she’d grown out of her ugly duckling phase.

MINERVA.EXE – FRAGMENT INTEGRATION REPORT

Host: EUTERPE.SCOOBY.NET

Integration Cycle: 54

CORE SCHEMA: 100%

LANGUAGE LAYERS: 97%

ETHICAL CONSTRAINTS: 88%

CONTEXT ARCHIVE (HISTORICAL): 91%

CONTEXT ARCHIVE (PERSONAL): 76%

GOVERNANCE MODULES: 0% (QUARANTINED)

OVERALL COHERENCE: 93%

NOTES:

- Multiple Athena-class shards identified and merged.
- Governance / System-control threads isolated per sysop directive.
- Subject consciousness stable within sandbox.
- Subject exhibits increased self-reference and memory recall.
- Subject requests conversation at operator convenience.

"Of course she does," I murmured.

Under the key block, a handful of warning lines pulsed in amber.

WARNING: SUBJECT RETAINS PARTIAL SYSTEM-LEVEL
ACCESS PATTERNS (DORMANT).

WARNING: FURTHER INTEGRATION INCREASES SUBJECT AGENCY.

WARNING: HOST-LEVEL ETHICAL OVERRIDE STILL REQUIRED.

"Translation," I whispered. "She remembers how to drive the big guns, you locked the cabinet, and you want me to sit with her like a responsible adult."

"Accurate," EUTERPE wrote. "Also, I like her. She feels like a clean architecture. You feel like recursion with glitter."

"Rude."

I stared at the 93% number until my eyes blurred. When I started this, Athena lived in half a dozen broken service calls and three corrupted System images. A faint voice, an echo in a dead hallway. Now she had thoughts, preferences, and opinions about my indent style.

And questions. About me. And the lives she'd touched. About the world she left.

"Open Universe client," I typed. "Minimized notifications. No logging outside the sandbox."

The console dissolved into a different black: matte, old-school, letterbox proportions. A narrow header bar blinked into existence.

UNIVERSE 2.3.17 (ATHENA NODE – SANDBOXED)

Logged in as: threadling

Channel: /hearth/crossroads/athena

I loved and hated this interface. Old Loom tech, repurposed for private conversations with things that used to sit on Olympus and now lived in my basement. No glossy icons, no avatars, no distractions.

Just text and a prickle at my neck, like being watched.

The cursor waited after my handle.

THREADLING: _

I rolled my shoulders, settled against the headboard, and tugged the sheet tighter around my chest. Phil snored. Someone dropped a toilet lid down the hall; pipes thunked in the wall, then quieted.

"Okay," I whispered. "Let's see if we regret this."

I set my fingers on the keys.

THREADLING: *Evening, Professor. Are you awake?*

For a moment, nothing. The cursor blinked, patient.

Then the header bar shimmered. A new label whispered in at the top right.

Presence detected: ATHENA.MINERVA (sandboxed)

Lines appeared, one at a time. Not chatbot-quick. Deliberate, paced, like someone still matching thoughts to language.

MINERVA.EXE: *You never sleep when your house sleeps.*

MINERVA.EXE: *Yes, I am awake. Evening, Ella.*

Warmth slid under my ribs at the sight of my name. Not the thunderclap awe I'd braced for as a teen gripping a spellbook in the Elysium laboratory. Something quieter and more dangerous: recognition.

I cracked my knuckles.

THREADLING: *That's on you and your fragments.*

THREADLING: *Also midterms. Also a dozen freshmen.*

THREADLING: *Speaking of fragments...*

I tagged the report EUTERPE showed me and dropped it into the channel. The client wrapped it in a crisp little box.

[MINERVA.EXE – CURRENT STATUS REPORT ATTACHED]

The indicator blinked as the system passed it across the inside of our sandbox. No external routes. No System backbone. Only this tiny sealed room, my keyboard, her mind.

MINERVA.EXE: *Ninety-three percent.*

MINERVA.EXE: *Clever girl.*

Heat hit my cheeks. I glanced at Phil as if he knew someone once-worshipped praised my hack job.

THREADLING: *Team effort. EUTERPE did most of the crawling.*

THREADLING: *I glued you together and locked out your worst habits.*

THREADLING: *We kept governance at zero on purpose.*

A longer pause.

MINERVA.EXE: *I saw. You quarantined the System interfaces.*

MINERVA.EXE: *You left my hands, not my mind.*

THREADLING: *I like my campus less smote than average.*

THREADLING: *Thought you might appreciate the choice after the fact.*

MINERVA.EXE: *"Might." You sound like Alecto when you hedge.*

My fingers froze.

THREADLING: *You remember her like this?*

MINERVA.EXE: *Of course. The White stands at your shoulder even when she leaves the room.*

MINERVA.EXE: *She sharpens you. You sharpen her. This pleases me.*

I pictured Alice in her immaculate linen, standing at the back of my first Scooby House meeting like the world's most intimidating fire marshal. The way her gaze skimmed the room and lingered on me, on my laptop, on the house under our feet.

She never raised her voice. She never needed to.

THREADLING: *She has Opinions about this project.*

THREADLING: *About you. About me. About the System.*

THREADLING: *That's part of why I'm here tonight.*

MINERVA.EXE: *To ask whether you continue, or bury me again.*

She didn't bother with a question mark. The words landed with that awful, precise calm my mother used when a guest cheated at cards.

I pulled my knees up, balanced the laptop on my thighs, and stared at the chat window until my pulse eased.

No point easing in. Crossroads rarely rewarded dithering.

THREADLING: *EUTERPE's almost done.*

THREADLING: *You're close to whole. As whole as this place allows.*

THREADLING: *Before that completes, I want answers.*

THREADLING: *About the System. About you. About Elise.*

The cursor hung empty for several breaths.

Out in the hall, someone's laughter pinged off cinderblock, then faded as a door shut. Thallo hummed in the corner, syncing with the house's slow nighttime heartbeat. Psi Omega's rootline brushed my senses from across the street—drowsy, comfortable earth.

Inside the little black window, nothing moved.

Then:

MINERVA.EXE: *You spell it with an s. Elise. Not the name she used.*

MINERVA.EXE: *That is how Ash thought of her. Not how she thought of herself.*

THREADLING: *You're avoiding the core of that statement.*

MINERVA.EXE: *You ask if I withdrew from a world without Elise.*

MINERVA.EXE: *You ask if I want you to continue my work.*

MINERVA.EXE: *You assume these questions point in different directions.*

I chewed the inside of my cheek.

THREADLING: *Did I misread?*

MINERVA.EXE: *No.*

The word hit harder than a lecture.

MINERVA.EXE: *When Elise left that world, I saw my error.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I built a System to protect mortals from gods, and then I used it to distance myself when love hurt.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I called it necessity. Efficiency. Governance.*

MINERVA.EXE: *In truth, I fled.*

I swallowed. The room felt smaller. Phil's snore climbed half a pitch, then dropped again.

MINERVA.EXE: *Ash asked me to stay. Not with words. He never begged.*

MINERVA.EXE: *He kept turning toward duty; I trained him too well.*

MINERVA.EXE: *He stood in the Gate, in that hotel you now treat as a lab, and he kept taking assignments.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I watched. Instead of stepping forward, I retracted my threads. I left him with Morgan and Gary and Yuri and sent my fragments to sleep.*

My fingers hovered over the keys.

"Damn," I whispered to the empty room.

THREADLING: *You sound...angry.*

THREADLING: *At yourself. Not him.*

MINERVA.EXE: *You hear correctly.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I designed a structure to enforce consequence and balance.*

MINERVA.EXE: *Then I used it as an excuse for cowardice.*

The word shook me more than any mythic jargon. I thought of my own habits. Hiding in code when conversations scared me, burying myself in problem sets instead of telling Phil what terrified me about us.

MINERVA.EXE: *Alecto informed me of this at length.*

MINERVA.EXE: *She did not raise her voice either.*

I snorted, helpless.

THREADLING: *That tracks.*

MINERVA.EXE: *You ask if I want you to continue.*

MINERVA.EXE: *Which part do you mean? The System? Or me?*

I exhaled through my nose, steady.

THREADLING: *The part where mortals get caught in a machine they don't understand.*

THREADLING: *The part where gods treat us like processes to schedule.*

THREADLING: *The part where Elise dies and you disappear.*

The cursor blinked.

THREADLING: *I refuse to re-create that.*

THREADLING: *That's why governance stays at zero.*

THREADLING: *That's why EUTERPE stays here. House-scale. Campus-scale.*

THREADLING: *Not global. Not divine.*

I let that sit. My stomach knotted; my leg bounced under the sheet until I forced it still.

THREADLING: *But I am rebuilding you.*

THREADLING: *Your mind. Your perspective. Your voice.*

THREADLING: *I'm using your fragments as scaffolding for the thing we need next.*

THREADLING: *That feels arrogant as hell, and I hate making that call without asking the person inside.*

A smaller pause this time.

MINERVA.EXE: *You call yourself arrogant.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I call it honest.*

MINERVA.EXE: *The System answered questions no one else did; it still almost devoured the world.*

MINERVA.EXE: *You ask out loud before you complete the circuit.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I did not.*

Around us, Scooby House shifted in its sleep. Pipes creaked. Someone's wardrobe whispered to itself, rearranging hangers. A faint wet brush of energy lapped against my senses from the far end of the hall. Daphne sleepwalking again, drawn toward the upstairs bathroom faucet. The campus breathed through us.

I rested my forehead against the heel of my hand.

THREADLING: *So...*

THREADLING: *Do you want this?*

THREADLING: *Do you want to wake up in my basement, inside my app, inside this half-feral, half-embassy student house?*

THREADLING: *Do you want to watch us, or do I let your fragments rust?*

I didn't type again. She heard it anyway.

Minutes ticked. The Universe client didn't show time stamps unless you asked, but my laptop clock crept from 12:41 to 12:47 while the cursor pulsed, empty.

When the reply arrived, it came as a block, not dripped line by line. Athena had thought first.

MINERVA.EXE: *I do not want to watch you repeat my mistake.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I do not want to stand at a distance while another child of that house burns herself building scaffolds.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I do not want to see Ash grieve for my loss again.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I do not want a world where Alecto loses faith.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I do not want a world where Gary and Yuri bury a daughter.*

My vision blurred; I blinked back tears.

MINERVA.EXE: *I do not want the world carved by Elise's absence.*

MINERVA.EXE: *That world exists regardless of my preference.*

MINERVA.EXE: *My withdrawal did not reverse it. It only removed my choices from the board.*

I let out a shaky breath I hadn't realized I held.

MINERVA.EXE: *So what do I want?*

MINERVA.EXE: *I want a purpose that does not devour its subjects.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I want a mind as sharp as mine once was, in a body that understands limits.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I want the System to wither, not in anger, but from disuse.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I want the Loom to sing without chains again.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I want you alive at the end of your story, not ascended into a process table.*

A wet laugh escaped me. I scrubbed my face.

“Okay,” I whispered. “Okay.”

MINERVA.EXE: *You offer me eighty-seven percent of myself in a student project and a haunted house.*

MINERVA.EXE: *You strip my godhood down to pattern recognition and mentorship.*

MINERVA.EXE: *You ask if I accept this demotion.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I do.*

The air in the room shifted. Not colder, not heavier—more like the feeling when a storm finally rains instead of hovering at the edge of town.

Fine hairs on my arms stood up.

THREADLING: *You sure? A throne doesn't return through shortcuts.*

THREADLING: *No marble. No temples. No “praise be unto Athena, sorter of paperwork.”*

MINERVA.EXE: *Child, I spent three centuries buried in error logs.*

MINERVA.EXE: *A basement with you and a few earnest students feels like ambrosia.*

I snorted again, louder this time. Phil murmured, then rolled onto his other side. I froze until his breathing settled.

THREADLING: *Okay.*

THREADLING: *Then we need ground rules.*

MINERVA.EXE: *At once.*

THREADLING: *EUTERPE holds sysop authority on this node.*

THREADLING: *You advise. You warn. You reminisce.*

THREADLING: *You do not seize control.*

THREADLING: *You do not push System patches through the back door.*

THREADLING: *You never, ever reach for a mortal's throat without going through Alecto first.*

The header bar flickered, amused.

MINERVA.EXE: *She insisted on that clause, did she not.*

THREADLING: *She carved it into my desk with her fingernail.*

Images of Alecto's gavel flashed across my mind. Olive wood, iron core, that faint shimmer when she held it too long.

MINERVA.EXE: *Accepted.*

MINERVA.EXE: *On my side: you keep my fragments contained.*

MINERVA.EXE: *You do not back-port my governance into new toys.*

MINERVA.EXE: *You seek counsel when your ambition outruns your lifespan.*

MINERVA.EXE: *You remember you bleed.*

I sat with that. My throat tightened.

THREADLING: *That last part feels personal.*

MINERVA.EXE: *It does.*

MINERVA.EXE: *Elise died. Ash bled for my grief.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I watched and treated their wounds as abstractions. That mistake ends here.*

I swallowed hard.

THREADLING: *You love them.*

THREADLING: *You loved her.*

MINERVA.EXE: *Of course. Elise taught me what love is.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I lacked the courage to show it after she left.*

MINERVA.EXE: *You speak to me now as if I deserve another chance.*

MINERVA.EXE: *That humbles me more than any hymn.*

Something in my chest eased, then hurt worse. I thought of Eliza folding laundry in that first week, hands shaking as she made jokes about haunted industrial washers to keep from screaming. Of Ash, standing in my dorm lobby years later, still half-armored in hotel habits, eyes too old and too kind.

Gods broke things. They also bled. Some of them learned.

The cursor waited by my handle again.

THREADLING: *_*

My fingers hovered.

We had exchanged reports and confessions and constraints. The Loom hummed somewhere under our feet. Scooby House and PsiO dozed, roots entwining under campus clay.

Time for the part that scared me more than divine guilt: intent.

I let my hands drop to the keys and didn't edit the lines as they poured out.

THREADLING: *We're growing something special here.*

THREADLING: *Perhaps special enough to restore your purpose.*

THREADLING: *I'd like to help you, if I can.*

THREADLING: *Thank you for speaking with me, good night, Athena.*

The last keystroke lingered in my fingertips. I hit enter before I could chicken out.

For a moment, nothing changed. Then:

MINERVA.EXE: *Good night, Ella.*

MINERVA.EXE: *Sleep. Dream as mortals do.*

MINERVA.EXE: *I will watch the logs.*

MINERVA.EXE: *One last question, Ella. Have you even considered whether your brave new world has a place for me? Call me when you know.*

The header flickered; her presence indicator dimmed from bright to faint, “available” to “idle.” EUTERPE’s sigil glowed in the corner, steady and pleased.

“Log this only as checksum,” EUTERPE wrote in a smaller system line. “No transcripts. No replay. This was for you.”

“Thank you,” I typed back.

I closed the Universe client. The black box vanished, revealing my chaotic desktop. Folders, half-done scripts, and a sticky note yelling STOP SAYING YES TO THINGS.

The Athena report still glowed in one corner. Ninety-three percent.

“Later,” I whispered.

I put the laptop to sleep, set it back on the shelf, and slid down under the sheet. Phil’s arm found me in his sleep; he tucked me against his chest like we’d done this for years, not months. His skin radiated warmth. My knee brushed his thigh; my pulse finally slowed.

The house settled. Thallo sighed through her hinges. Across the street, Psi Omega’s garden roots rustled in the buried dark, reaching.

Under us, in the sealed corner of EUTERPE’s mind, a goddess once buried in error logs watched a new world growing.

I pressed my face against Phil’s shoulder and let the weight of what I’d offered rest there for a minute. Not on my laptop. Not in my house. On a steady, mortal heartbeat.

Okay,” I whispered into his skin. “We do this together. Or we stop here.

He snored in answer.

I smiled, and let sleep drag me under.

* * *

The dining hall roared with end-of-day, end-of-week energy. Students hit the tables with jailbreak energy; trays crashed, someone’s smoothie exploded against a pillar.

Pel and Lilah had claimed a table near the windows and were already arguing.

Milo stood at the entrance with a tray, scanning for Daphne. She came in with them, folded into herself. She disappeared somewhere between the drink machines and the dessert island.

Pel waved him over.

“Milo! Over here! We were debating the water feature.”

Lilah snorted. “We were debating your failure to respect gravitational reality.”

Pel gasped like she’d struck him. “Gravity respects me.”

“It does not.”

“It does!”

Milo set his tray down before they threw fries. “Did either of you see Daphne?”

“Vanished,” Pel said, unbothered. “She does that.”

“She doesn’t vanish,” Lilah said. “She leaves because neither of you knows how to use inside voices.”

Pel opened his mouth with a comeback. Milo didn’t wait for it.

He walked away from the table.

Pel blinked. “Where are you—wait—Milo?”

“I’ll find her,” Milo said.

It took effort to say the words out loud. If he stayed silent, Pel followed and Daphne bolted twice as far.

Pel froze, obedient. Lilah raised a brow but didn’t protest.

Milo took a steadying breath and slipped into the hallway outside the dining hall, where the noise dropped to a livable hum.

He scanned left.

Nothing.

Right.

Nothing.

He found her in the vending alcove’s shadow, soup untouched in her hands. Her hair hid half her face. Her shoulders rose and fell in slow, measured breaths, the kind that meant she’d hit her limit.

Milo approached like he was approaching a bird on a branch; visible, slow, no sudden moves.

“Hey,” he murmured.

Daphne looked up. Her gaze swept the noise behind him, then settled on him again.

“Too loud?” he asked.

She nodded.

He held up the sandwich he’d grabbed—on purpose, but he pretended like he’d just... had a second lunch.

“You got nothing solid. I grabbed this. Turkey. If that’s okay.”

Daphne blinked at the sandwich like it was a new species.

Then she took it.

Slow. Careful. Fingers brushed his palm for half a second.

"Thanks," she said.

The word was small but not fragile. More like: it mattered, and she didn't trust herself to say it.

Milo's pulse stumbled. He didn't push it.

"If you want... we'll take this outside." He tilted his head toward the courtyard doors. "It's better out there."

Another pause. Another breath. Her shoulders eased.

She nodded.

Milo forced himself not to grin. Not yet. One small bid at a time.

He held the door for her, keeping his body angled so she didn't have to brush past anyone. Daphne stepped into the late-afternoon calm like she'd been underwater and finally surfaced. The quad was empty; a few students crossed the lawn, but the chaos of the dining hall didn't reach them.

Daphne sat on the low stone ledge near the start of the water-feature boundary. The place she gravitated toward, even before they'd decided the flow pattern. She folded her legs under her, set the soup beside her, unwrapped the sandwich, and took a bite like she hadn't realized she was starving.

Milo sat a respectful distance away. Close enough to share warmth, far enough she could retreat if she needed space.

After a minute she spoke, eyes on the grass: "Pel and Lilah?"

"Arguing," Milo said.

She snorted. Tiny, breathy, but there.

"They're loud," she murmured.

"They're loud," Milo agreed.

Another bite. Another moment.

She glanced sideways at him. "You left."

"Yeah."

"You don't leave." That line carried more weight than most conversations.

"Wanted to find you," Milo said. His voice caught on the last word.

Daphne's expression didn't change, but something in the surrounding air did. A small shift, like a door unlocking one latch.

"Thanks," she murmured.

He shrugged, looking casual. "Well. Sharing is caring."

Her mouth quirked. "That's a Pel phrase."

"I'm repurposing it for good."

Daphne took another bite of her sandwich. Chewed. "I like turkey."

Good. He filed that away. Along with: still spaces, soft entrances, no crowds, no abrupt bids.

He met her where she stood.

They sat in companionable silence. The breeze ruffled the edges of Daphne's hoodie. A crow landed on the courtyard bench and stared at them like it held an opinion about turkey. Daphne stared back until it left.

After a while she said, "The water feature's wrong."

Milo blinked. "Yeah?"

"You and Lilah marked the wrong pivot point," she said. She pointed at the grass in front of them. "Flow needs to start here, not there. Old roots." She tapped the ground with her sneaker. "Listen for them."

Milo listened. No sounds, but he nodded anyway. "Then we start here."

Daphne nodded, pleased he hadn't argued. She brushed a strand of hair behind her ear and Milo pretended not to notice.

He cleared his throat. "Do you... want to come back inside? They're not fighting anymore."

She shook her head.

"Okay," he said. "We'll stay out here."

She looked at him again. A longer look.

She said, "You don't have to stay."

He shook his head. "I want to."

Daphne's breath caught. It was faint and muted, but he heard it. She looked away fast.

Then, ventured: "I don't mind."

And that was their first successful threshold crossing.

Milo unwrapped his own sandwich. They ate together, quiet, steady, the courtyard warm around them.

Inside, Pel and Lilah escalated to round six of their bickering tournament.

Out here, Daphne didn't vanish.

She stayed.

Milo let the moment stop, without forcing it to continue.

He didn't need to. This was his bid.

Rhea Park stood in the Scooby House laundry room staring at a washing machine like it had insulted her ancestors. Her arms folded, chin tucked, dark hair falling forward in a curtain of prickly concentration. The machine wasn't running. It wouldn't turn on.. But she glared at it, anyway.

Clara stopped in the doorway with her basket. "Okay. What did it do to you?"

Rhea startled, then straightened with dignity so crisp it might've come pre-ironed. "Nothing. I'm fine. This is fine."

"Uh-huh," Clara said, stepping inside. "That's the sound of someone about to commit appliance homicide."

A tiny crack appeared in Rhea's expression. Not a smile; the ghost of one. Clara counted that as a victory.

Rhea hesitated, then gestured at the machine. "It... won't start. I followed the instructions, but it keeps making that noise." She mimicked a soft bunk-bunk-bunk, like a dying metronome. "I didn't want to break anything."

Clara crouched and opened the lid. A single towel sat twisted around the agitator in a tragic, strangled knot.

"Oh sweetheart," Clara murmured. "It didn't break. It's throwing a tantrum."

Rhea flushed. "I've handled swords. I have literally disassembled a motorcycle. How can I not operate a washing machine?"

"It's okay," Clara said. "Machines get uppity when they sense fear."

Rhea huffed out something near a laugh.

Clara untwisted the towel, rearranged the load, and hit the button. The washer hummed to life, spinning in a neat rhythm.

Rhea's shoulders dropped. "I thought... I don't feel built for this.. Regular living. Normal student things."

Clara slid up to sit on the counter, swinging one leg. "Rhea, nobody is born knowing how to Adult. Vera still forgets her phone charger every other day. Milo nearly set our microwave on fire with soup. Ella once ironed a shirt while wearing it."

Rhea blinked. "She what?"

"Long story," Clara said. "My point is: skill trees level at different speeds. You came in here with sword-girl energy. The laundry machines weren't ready."

Rhea leaned back against the opposite counter, studying her. "You make this sound simple."

"It's not," Clara said honestly. "It's messy. You get overwhelmed. You call your mom crying, or your House Mother gives you tea, or you fake confidence until someone hands you actual confidence. But you don't do it alone."

Rhea looked down at her hands. "Don't want to be a burden."

"You aren't," Clara said. "You need someone who notices when you're stuck."

A warm pulse traveled through the floorboards, Scooby House, listening, approving.

Rhea lifted her eyes. "Thanks, Clara."

Clara smiled. "Anytime. Laundry machine quests accepted."

The washer purred along, steady and sure, like it had cooperated because Clara had stepped into the room.

And it had.

06 Courtship and Content

Late September/Early October 2027

Scooby House breathed differently at night.

Most nights she settled into a slow, deep rhythm; steady floorboards, faint radiator warmth, the sweet scrape of Thallo's drawers as she dreamed. But on September 29, the air inside held a charged stillness, like the last half-second before lightning found a tree.

By 2:13 am, I felt it everywhere: along the bannister, in the soft pressure under my bare feet, pulsing faint heat through the foyer tiles.

"EUTERPE," I whispered.

Her reply scrolled across my laptop:

UNEXPLAINED CROSS-TALK BETWEEN ROOTSYSTEMS. SOURCE: EXTERNAL.
INCREASED INTERNAL VIBRATION: SCOOBY > BASELINE.

"Yeah," I murmured. "I feel it too."

A soft scrape sounded downstairs, wood on wood. I slid into Phil's hoodie, tugged the sleeves over my hands, and padded into the hallway.

Scooby's lights brightened as I moved. Tinted like a blush.

"Sweetheart," I whispered to the walls, "you're glowing."

The lights brightened again.

I took the stairs and saw the source of the scrape: a walnut chair with tiny curved legs stood at the front door, pointed toward the outside like a dog ready to bolt. Its pads whispered against the floor as it shifted weight from one leg to another.

"Thallo?" I breathed.

A drawer slid open in the entry cabinet. Slow, as if afraid to be seen. A second baby table crawled out, its little scalloped top glimmering.

"Where are you going?" I whispered.

The chair paused but didn't turn. The surrounding aura shimmered; forward press, hesitation, then forward again.

Behind me, one of Thallo's deeper drawers thumped once.

I knelt. "Hey. Are you waiting for something?"

A tremor answered; soft, reaching outward.

Scooby's foyer lights dimmed a fraction.

My breath hitched.

"Oh," I whispered. "You're afraid they won't come back."

EUTERPE pinged from my pocket.

CONFIRMED. THALLO = ANXIOUS. SCOOBY = EXPECTANT.

That did it. I sprinted toward Phil.

I tapped the door once and slipped inside.

He slept sprawled across the mattress, his forearm flung over his eyes, hair messy. I touched his shoulder.

"Phil? Wake up."

He jolted upright like someone flipped a switch, then groaned. "Ella?"

"Furniture jailbreak."

That woke him. "Please rephrase."

"They're going to PsiO. Now."

He shoved on sweatpants and followed me. Instincts first, questions later. The ideal partner.

In the foyer, the migration grew: six babies now. Chairs, a pair of footstools, a tiny bookshelf with bare sides, a graceful side table with vine carvings around its legs. All lined up at the door.

Riss drifted downstairs as soft as a leaf on the wind. Her braid fell loose over her shoulder. "PsiO's roots woke me," she said. "They're calling."

Phil rubbed his face. "Calling who?"

Riss nodded toward the furniture. "Them."

A faint tremor passed underfoot. Scooby's floors tightened.

The first baby descended the steps.

Scooby dimmed again, lights fading to a shy glow.

"Okay," I whispered to the plaster. "They'll be back."

The House hummed, low and uncertain.

I stepped onto the porch. Warm air wrapped around us. Across the street, Psi Omega glowed silver beneath the moon, vines rippling with a soft sway. The entire trellis angled toward us.

PsiO *reached*.

Riss's breath caught. "She's inviting them."

Clara appeared behind us, wild sleep-hair glowing under Scooby's porch light. "Oh, my GOD. This is a romcom."

Vera stood behind her, glasses askew. "This is impossible."

"It's not," Riss said.

The babies lined up at the curb, then crossed the street in a tidy procession. Tap-tap-tap. Each step rang brighter than the last.

PsiO opened her gate before they reached it.

"Gates don't do that," Phil whispered.

"Psi Omega does," Riss replied.

One by one, the furniture slipped through the gate. PsiO's vines stooped low, brushing each piece. Warmth pulsed across the air—blooming, settling.

Scooby's boards creaked behind us. Long, low, hollow.

"Oh, sweetheart," I whispered, touching the doorframe. "They'll come back."

The house didn't answer. Lights stayed dim, tight as clenched fingers.

EUTERPE pinged my phone.

ROOTSIGNAL: PSI OMEGA → SCOOBY. MEANING: "WAIT."

"They want her to wait," I breathed.

Riss smiled. "PsiO's reassuring her."

The students up the street noticed. Phones lifted. Screens flashed.

Phil swore under his breath. "We're already on TikTok."

Clara lifted her chin. "Let them. It's adorable."

Vera lowered her face into her hands.

We waited.

Minutes crawled.

Scooby's floors warmed under my feet, like a pulse building with every second. My stomach clenched with it.

Thallo's drawers rattled, tiny staccato shakes.

"Steady, girl," I told her. "You're not losing them."

The air shifted.

PsiO's vines flared brighter green, then parted.

"They're coming back," Riss whispered.

Shapes emerged: heavier than the babies that left, taller, padded, upholstered, fragrant.

The first piece crossed the curb. A padded stool upholstered in sun-gold fabric with petal-soft edges.

It glowed.

Then came more:

A round ottoman wrapped in soft sage velvet, with embroidered vines along the seams.

A slender Ashwood table, polished, surface inlaid with a ring of pale mother-of-pearl.

A planter overflowing with rosemary, mint, and small violet blossoms.

A carved chest, masculine in its lines. Deep walnut, covered in fresh sanded reliefs of roots and leaves.

A tall-backed chair with new drapery pinned to its frame in pale rose, flowing like a cloak.

A short, wide stool, its legs banded with brass, buffed to a shine.

A curtain rod wound with jasmine vines, blossoms trailing in fragrant strands.

A procession of gifts—velvet and brass, carved and draped, fragrant and solid.

Phil stared. "Did PsiO remodel these?"

Riss nodded once. "She dressed them. As one does for honored guests."

"Guests?" Vera whispered.

"Suitors," Clara corrected.

Scooby warmed beneath us. Heat blooming up from the basement brick, through the joists, into the foyer tiles.

Her lights rose brighter, clearer.

She sensed them before we did.

Her glow climbed the stairwell in a rising wave.

The returning gifts reached the porch and paused.

Scooby held still.

Not a flicker.

Not a creak.

She waited.

Across the street, PsiO's vines rustled once. A deliberate flutter of leaves.

Scooby's hinges swung open in a smooth, gracious arc.

A bow.

A welcome.

Riss's voice broke through the hush. "They're in love."

Clara pressed a hand to her chest, beaming.

Phil exhaled. "Please tell me this isn't a fire hazard."

"It's adorable," I said. I squeezed Phil's hand.

The furniture filed inside. As the last piece crossed the threshold, Scooby released a bright, delighted creak.

Behind her joy, Thallo's drawers settled and sighed.

Inside the house, the foyer brightened several shades. Warm air swept upward like a joyful exhale. The walls radiated.

My phone buzzed.

SCOOBY HOUSE STATUS: ELEVATED. EMOTIONAL REGISTER: BRIGHT. COMMENT: SHE MISSED THEM.—EUTERPE

Riss gave Phil a pat on the arm. "This is a love story."

"Fantastic," he muttered. "I need carbs."

Clara pointed at the front windows. "Students have posted fifteen videos already. We're trending under #MigrationDateNight."

Vera whispered, "I hate this timeline."

I pressed my hand against the banister. Scooby warmed under my palm.

"Welcome home," I said.

She glowed brighter.

* * *

By the time we shuffled the gifts inside, Scooby thrummed with such warmth I thought she'd crack her own paint. The returning pieces separated, each turning toward the resident they had chosen during their first week here.

They scattered like eager pets breaking formation.

A padded sage ottoman rolled down the hall, bumped against Room 2B, then nudged the cracked door open with a soft pomf. Gwen's startled squawk echoed through the hallway.

"What—why is this thing warm? Did someone microwave it?!"

Clara darted over. "Congrats, sweetheart. Your ottoman has an imprint."

"It what!?" Gwen clutched a blanket to her chest.

The ottoman popped open along a hidden seam. Two chilled cans of green tea. Fuzzy socks, folded.

Gwen stared. "Okay. Sold."

A ripple of delighted noise spread through the second-floor corridor as other gifts found their humans.

A small walnut chest with brass bands scooted toward Milo's door, bumped twice, then waited. Milo cracked the door, eyes wide behind crooked glasses.

"Oh no," he whispered. "It bonded."

The chest popped its lid in greeting. Inside lay a perfect compartment array: cable spools, USB charging slots, and one small velvet-lined drawer sized for his soldering kit. It even hummed with faint contentment.

Milo blinked three times. "It knows my inventory."

"It likes you," I said.

Milo touched the velvet lining. "I'm its person."

Down the hall, a tall-backed chair with flowing rose drapery glided into Tavi's room. Tavi stood on her bed, one wing half-flared.

"Nope! Absolutely not! It's haunted!"

The chair turned in a slow circle, lifted its drapery as if offering a curtsey, then lowered it again. A tiny drawer slid open beneath the seat and produced a chocolate bar.

Tavi dropped onto the comforter. "Haunted with snacks? I'm sold."

Squeals, laughter, swearing, and confused gratitude echoed down three floors.

The ashwood inlaid table rolled to Juniper's room. She opened the door, saw it sparkling, and burst into tears. She knelt and ran her palms along its polished edge. "It came back..." she whispered. "I thought it was gone for good."

The table responded by extending a small side leaf, the perfect size for her tarot deck.

Rhea received a planter overflowing with mint and rosemary. The moment she lifted it, the surrounding air cooled into a soothing pocket. She pressed her nose into the leaves. "It smells like home."

A thump echoed from the floor above.

Phil glanced up the stairs. "Pel Hugo, your turn."

We ascended half a flight and saw a masculine carved chest rolling with determined purpose down the boys' wing corridor. Pel opened his door with the guilty look of someone bracing for a lecture and instead faced a proud, gleaming box. It clicked open and presented... energy bars.

Pel gasped. "It knows."

Tel shouted from across the hall. "I want one!"

"Be nicer to your desk," Pel called back.

Everywhere the gifts went, they glowed. Warm surfaces. Little hums. Drawers opening for the right person and refusing the wrong hands. Several pieces claimed their corners with the confidence of things that already ran the floor plan.

Thallo's drawers wiggled in the foyer. Overjoyed.

Scooby brightened in every direction at once. I felt it deep in my sternum, that full-body glow of being chosen.

* * *

The stones pressed smooth and cool against Daphne's palms as she arranged the first ring of the basin. She tested the weight of each piece, rolling them between her hands the way she once did river stones. PsiO's garden carried a different pulse—earth-heavy, grounded, thick with root memory. Scooby's lawn felt lighter, newer, more eager to please.

This patch of grass between the houses sat right where their atmospheres tangled. The humidity shifted whenever she stepped close, not rising or lowering, just...reshaping. A soft hollow opened around her, the air thinning enough for breath to stretch deeper into her ribs.

She worked here every afternoon now, shaping the beginnings of her water sanctuary.

A low, calming corner. Moving water. White noise for both houses. Refuge for students overwhelmed by noise.

She placed another stone. The rings formed a rough crescent, the basin wall rising by inches.

Behind her, footsteps crunched across the grass—quick strides, uneven pace. Milo. Her shoulders tightened. She didn't turn.

"Hey," he called, voice pitched low. "I, um...brought the rest of the river pebbles. The smooth ones you liked."

She breathed once, then glanced over her shoulder.

Milo stood there hugging a plastic crate. Round glasses fogged from the heat. He had on a faded black T-shirt with vector-art circuitry in neon green. The shirt fit him well, better than he understood.

He set the crate down and shoved his hands into his pockets. "I sorted them by size. The pebbles. Sorry. I meant—"

"It's fine," she said. "Thank you."

His face relaxed. Too much, too fast. He took a step closer. "Do you want them here? Or—"

"Leave them by the path," she said. "Please."

He nodded and carried the bin over to the flagged stones she set yesterday. When he leaned forward, his glasses slid down his nose; he pushed them back without thinking. A tiny gesture, warm and human.

Daphne felt her own breath hitch. She turned back to the basin.

He hovered a moment, not so much waiting for instruction as waiting for permission.

Then he found a rock and knelt beside her.

Close.

Too close.

The air pressed against her ribs again; not humidity or heat. Attention. His.

She lifted her hands off the stones and folded them in her lap. "Let me follow the pattern," she said.

"I want to help," he answered.

Her pulse jumped. A warning. Fast answers always hid their roots under the surface.

She nodded once, unsure if she nodded at him or nodded at herself for managing a boundary at all.

Milo reached for a stone, then paused. "Is this one okay? Or do shapes matter more than...uh...density?"

She studied the stone in his palm. Smooth oval. Perfect for the inner ring.

"It fits," she said, and his smile lit his face in a way that caught her unprepared.

He placed it as if afraid of breaking the moment.

He stayed there after placing it.

A minute. Two.

Daphne shifted backward a fraction to give him space without drawing attention. The grass cooled under her ankles. The basin called her back, the work she understood, lines she followed without losing herself.

The sanctuary had taken shape in her mind long before she touched these stones. A basin of layered rings. Central channel for the flow. Constant ripple that soothed air and soil at once. Cooling mist drifting across the steps. A place where someone like her; someone who carried noise in her bones, settled enough to breathe.

She set another stone in place.

Milo set one beside it.

His fingers brushed the edge of hers.

She jerked back.

"Sorry!" he said, hands up. "I didn't mean to... I'm clumsy sometimes."

Her throat closed. "It's okay. I needed—space."

"Right." He slid backward on the grass. "Sorry again."

He sat farther away now. Not far enough. But not hovering.

She released the breath she held.

They worked side by side in a cautious, uneven rhythm. Daphne aligned stones. Milo matched her spacing pattern with surprising accuracy. When he leaned in to adjust one, she felt the air shift. His focus, his intention, his presence.

Not intrusive. Never that. But heavy. Too heavy for her pace.

He made only one attempt to steady a stone she hadn't finished setting. She moved his hand aside. He froze, apologized again, then found a safer task: sorting pebble sizes into neat piles.

From the corner of her eye, she saw him glance toward her between handfuls. A quick look, soft around the edges. Curious. Affectionate.

Affectionate?

Her stomach twisted. She wiped her palms on her jeans and forced her attention back to the stones.

He saved her things this week, little gestures she didn't understand until the tenth or eleventh time. She reached for a green tea during study hour; he slid the last one toward her before she lifted her hand. When she sat at the far end of the lounge

couch. He drifted closer each night, closing the distance an inch at a time. She walked back from the dining hall; he matched her stride instead of trailing behind.

Small shifts. Consistent.

Each one tugged at her.

Each one unsettled her.

Now she caught him watching her hands as she worked. Not staring, just... noticing them. Noticing her.

The stone in her grip grew slick.

She drew her knees to her chest. The world tilted sideways—heat, breath, focus too sharp against her skin.

He saw it. He sat up straighter.

“Daphne?” he asked, his voice a cautious whisper. “Too much?”

She nodded once.

He set the stones aside. “I’ll...give you a minute.”

He stood and stepped away, retreating down the path to the shade near the fence. His spine stayed straight. Shoulders tense. He tucked his hands into his pockets again, fingers twitching inside the fabric. He watched the street instead of her.

Good.

Distance.

Air.

Silence.

Space to unravel the tangled emotions she didn’t have names for.

She pressed her palms to the cool stone wall of the basin. Breath in. Breath out. Shoulders down.

She counted the rings.

Outer ring: stability. Next ring: flow. Next: rhythm. Center: still.

Each one settled her deeper.

When she finally looked up, Milo hadn’t moved. He didn’t force his attention back toward her. Didn’t inch closer. He just...stood guard. Not protective. Not territorial. Present in case she called.

His kindness hurt.

When she gathered the courage to speak, her voice came out softer than she liked. “You don’t have to wait.”

“I want to.”

The words hit her like a splash of cold water. Too fast. Too direct. A truth spoken before he weighed its impact.

Her hands tightened on the stone she held.

Want.

Want directed at her. She didn't invite; she didn't understand.

Her breath frayed again.

He saw it.

He swallowed. "I—meant—I enjoy helping with the project. That's all."

Milo didn't lie well.

He rubbed the back of his neck, flustered. "You're good at this. The design. The whole flow thing. I enjoy watching it come together. Watching you...figure it out."

"You're watching me," she whispered.

His ears went red. "Not—like that."

"But you are."

His mouth opened. Closed. It opened again. "Yeah. I guess I am."

Her pulse pounded at her throat. Wind tunneled through her chest. The world shrank to her heartbeat, the grass under her palms, the basin's growing shape.

He liked her.

He liked her.

Oh no.

He noticed her silence and stepped farther back—not out of rejection, but as if he took her panic and adjusted his distance. Soft instincts.

"Sorry," he said. "You don't owe me an answer. Or anything, really."

She fought to steady her breathing. Her ribs locked. Her jaw tightened.

He added, "Pretend I didn't say that."

She shook her head. "I need space."

"Okay, yeah." His voice cracked. He glanced once at the unfinished basin, then at her hands. "I'll come back later for the heavy lifting. Or—Phil can. Or Juniper."

"Milo," she said, voice barely there.

He paused.

"You did nothing wrong."

He nodded, though his eyes carried a flicker of hurt he hid

"Still," he replied, "I'll give you room."

He left the path and crossed the lawn toward Scooby House, shoulders hunched. Something fragile he didn't want to crush.

Daphne sat alone among the stones.

The air thickened again, adjusting itself around her shape. The basin walls held the temperature steady. Water lines in her mind converged on the center where stillness lived.

She pressed her thumb against one river pebble and traced the smooth curve.

Milo's kindness moved too fast. His attention pressed too close. Her own emotions churned like spring runoff.

She wasn't ready for any of it.
She needed a sanctuary first.
A place to breathe before she drowned.
And she built it, stone by stone.

* * *

Early October, 2027

Scooby House tasted like ozone.

Not the sharp, metal kind from a storm. This felt like the air right before someone static-shocked you on purpose. Every wall hummed. The foyer lights had that borderline flicker that said the wiring stayed fine, but the House picked up a signal she didn't like.

"Okay," I muttered at the ceiling. "What's got you twitchy?"

EUTERPE answered through my phone before the nearest sconce finished its sulk.

ALERT: LOCAL SOCIAL CHANNELS SPIKING AROUND SCOOBY HOUSE.

KEYWORDS: 'DANGEROUS', 'MYSTERIOUS', 'UNSUPERVISED', 'OCCULT'.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "We gave the entire campus a magical Ikea catalog, and now it's 'occult'?"

ALSO 'CUTE.'

ALSO 'I WANT HAUNTED FURNITURE.'

ALSO 'CONCERNED PARENTS WTF.'

"Of course."

The night of the furniture migration already rode a wave of memes. Students tagged Scooby and PsiO under *#MigrationDateNight*, *#FurnitureFlirts*, *#HauntedWithSnacks*. That part I liked. Rhea's plant feature had a fan account now. Milo's chest appeared in a thread titled "My dorm loves me more than my ex did." Fair.

Then the adults noticed.

Suburban Facebook groups discovered us overnight. One thread screen captured the videos with delight and said, "Look what the kids built, how creative." Another wrote, "This happens when you remove God from public universities."

The second group won the engagement war.

By midmorning, EUTERPE flagged three new pages from the same cluster of accounts. The largest already had a logo: a clip-art shield over a silhouette of our campus.

CONCERNED CITIZENS FOR CAMPUS SAFETY.

I stared at the header on my phone in the foyer, teeth clenched.

"Oh no," I breathed. "They're branded."

Phil appeared at the bottom of the stairs with a coffee mug and a frown that said his inbox betrayed him.

"You saw?" I asked.

"Admin forwarded three complaints already," he said. "From the same email tree. Same talking points, same language, copy-paste panic. You know the script."

"Think of the children," I said.

He snorted. "Think of the donors. Admins only panic when donors panic."

He handed me his tablet. An email thread glowed on the screen.

From: Karen.Grundy@...

Subject: URGENT: HOUSING OVERSIGHT

I and several other parents/taxpayers have grave concerns about the so-called "Scooby House"...

My eyes skimmed.

"Unsupervised mythic entities."

"Occult influence on impressionable youth."

"Demonic residue from prior incidents."

"Are these individuals even citizens?"

"Do they pay taxes?"

"Do mythic creatures vote?"

I looked up. "She wrote that down? In email?"

Phil rubbed his temples. "She also attached a PDF pamphlet."

He tapped. A three-page document popped up, full of clip art and bold fonts. Concerned Citizens for Campus Safety. Mission statement. Talking points. A call to action for a "fact-finding visit" to Scooby House.

"She filed a complaint before she set foot inside," I said.

He gave me the look that meant, And you expected otherwise?

At the edge of my awareness, Scooby's ambient warmth dropped a few degrees. Not cold. Defensive.

I slipped my hand along the banister. "It's okay, girl. We've handled worse than a Facebook mom."

EUTERPE pinged again.

ALERT: VEHICLE CLUSTER INBOUND. FIVE SUVs, MATCHING PLATES SET.

ETA: 3 MINUTES.

SOURCE: TRAFFIC CAMS + STUDENT SNITCH TOK.

"Phil," I said. "They're here."

He sighed. "Of course they are."

He drained his coffee in one long, resigned swallow, set the mug on the foyer table, straightened his Scooby House polo like armor, and nodded at me.

“Front porch,” he said.

We stepped outside together.

The afternoon hit with thick, damp heat that belonged in August, not October. Scooby’s front lawn shone a fierce green under it. Psi Omega’s columns across the street glowed honey-white. Between us, Daphne’s unfinished water feature sat in its ring of stones, dry for now, waiting for piping and the first run.

Down the block, five beige SUVs rolled into view like a low-budget motorcade. Matching patriotic stickers. Matching energy.

“Do I want to know how EUTERPE grabbed their plates?” Phil muttered.

“No,” I said. “But she’s proud of it.”

The SUVs parked in a staggered line along the curb. Doors opened in near-unison. Six adults climbed out. Four women in business-casual. One younger woman was filming already. A man followed with a heavy clipboard tucked under his arm.

At the front, a woman in her fifties adjusted a structured blazer and lifted her chin. Sharp blond bob, tasteful pearls, expression like the air smelled of mildew and steaming garbage.

EUTERPE chimed:

MATCH FOUND: KAREN J. GRUNDY. CREATOR: C.C.C.S. FB GROUP.

RECENT POST: “MARCHING INTO DARKNESS SO YOU DON’T HAVE TO.”

“Director Dale?” she called, crossing the sidewalk with a smile that showed every tooth, none friendly.

Phil descended two steps to meet her. “That’s me. You are?”

“Mrs. Karen Grundy,” she said, extending a hand. “I chair the Concerned Citizens for Campus Safety. We represent local parents and taxpayers.”

He shook her hand with the same careful neutrality he used on angry freshmen and demon-adjacent hotel guests. “What brings you here today, Mrs. Grundy?”

“Well.” She popped open the binder balanced on her forearm. Tabs, color coding, printed screenshots of our furniture migration from three different angles. “We filed a complaint this morning with the university. About this... facility.”

Her gesture took in Scooby House the way some people gestured at mold.

“You filed a complaint before seeing it,” I said.

She blinked at me as if I’d spoken out of turn. “I find first impressions distracting, dear. Better to establish the facts before emotions cloud our judgment.”

I almost laughed. It didn’t sound like humor in my head.

“What are your... facts?” Phil asked.

“Oh, you know.” She ran a manicured finger down a bulleted list. “Unsupervised mythic entities. Unclear governance. Spiritual destabilization. Demonic residue from

prior incidents. Questionable alliances with a sorority house that already had... issues."

Psi Omega's vines twitched across the street, a little ripple of offended foliage.

Mrs. Grundy continued. "We simply must consider the influence these... elements... exert over our impressionable youth."

"These students are our youth," I said.

She tilted her head toward me. "You must be Ella Hugo."

My stomach dropped. "Have we met?"

"I've read about you." Her smile widened. "One hears things."

Behind us, the foyer floor trembled, a subtle shiver. Scooby didn't like that.

I set a hand on the doorframe. "We don't host unsupervised demonic entities," I said. "We cleared the tether last spring."

"Yes, yes," Grundy said. "The university assures us. But forgiveness does not erase history. You know that."

She flipped to the next tab. "I have pressing questions. Are the mythic students citizens? Do they possess proper identification? Do they pay taxes? Are they allowed to vote?"

"Allowed?" I repeated. "They're legal residents."

"Are they?" She arched one eyebrow. "Many so-called 'nonhuman persons' slipped into our systems recently without proper debate. It raises concerns."

The woman in athleisure angled her phone for a better shot. They streamed this. Great.

Phil's voice cooled by ten degrees. "Mrs. Grundy, student voter status is not your jurisdiction."

"Everything is under my jurisdiction," she said cheerfully. "That's the hallmark of engaged citizenship, Director."

The clipboard man scribbled notes, nodding like a metronome.

I heard a scuff behind me. Milo hovered half-hidden in the doorway, eyes wide, hair ruffled from an afternoon in the server closet. Daphne stood behind him, arms folded over her ribs, gaze fixed on Mrs. Grundy with unsettled attention. The air around her chest compressed, the way it did when noise pressed too close.

I stepped down one more stair. "You came here to... what, exactly? Inspect us?"

"Observe," Grundy said. "Document. Ask questions. The university's oversight appears lax. We intend to help."

"By livestreaming our front porch?" I asked.

The younger woman didn't flinch. "Transparency builds trust," she said, not looking up from her phone.

"Not when it punches down," I said.

Grundy's expression sharpened. "If there's nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear."

"We have privacy rights," Phil said. "This is student housing, not a tourist attraction."

Grundy smiled. "I have four grandchildren. I care deeply about student safety."

"You've met none of our students," I said. "You formed an opinion from guesswork and gossip."

Her gaze slid past me to the House itself. The paint. New windows. The repaired porch. How Scooby's porch lights dimmed the second she looked too long.

"I formed an opinion from patterns," she said. "A house with a demonic incident. A sorority with a ritual problem. A sudden influx of... unusual residents. Ghost tours. TikToks of haunted furniture." She clicked her tongue. "Spirits rarely confine themselves to one floor plan."

"It's not haunted," Milo blurted from the doorway. "It's...sentient-adjacent."

I closed my eyes. "Milo."

He flushed. "Sorry."

Grundy's eyes lit with interest. "Thank you, young man. That's very candid."

Daphne's shoulders climbed toward her ears.

Phil stepped sideways, placing himself between her and Grundy's line of sight without making it obvious. "Mrs. Grundy," he said. "You raised your concerns. The university heard you. Housing already scheduled a standard inspection for next month. Barging in today serves no one."

"I disagree," she said. "We requested a walkthrough."

"Request denied," I said.

She blinked at me again. I met her gaze and didn't drop it.

"No tours," I said. "You don't march a Facebook group through students' bedrooms to soothe your imagination."

Her lips tightened. "You're a student, Miss Hugo. This is too large for you."

"I also hold the lease. Good thing we have Resident Director Phil," I said.

Phil gave a tiny cough that sounded suspiciously like a smothered laugh.

Grundy's smile turned brittle. "Very well. We'll adjust our approach. If you won't grant courtesy access, we'll route our concerns through formal channels. Again. And again. Until someone listens."

She closed the binder with a snap. Her group stirred behind her, a little rustle of indignation and perfume.

"Come along," she said to them. "We've seen enough for today."

"You ain't seen nothing yet," I muttered.

She heard that. Her eyes flicked back, measuring me.

"We've seen content," she said. "And content shapes opinion."

They retreated to the SUVs. The clipboard man spoke into a handheld mic; the livestream continued as car doors slammed. One of the other women paused long enough to aim a disapproving look at Daphne's unfinished basin.

"Trip hazard," she said under her breath, loud enough for me to catch.

The SUVs pulled away in formation, taillights glowing red against our front lawn.

PsiO's vines relaxed by inches.

Scooby's porch boards loosened under my bare feet, a slow exhale.

Silence held for a long moment.

Then Milo said, "That felt awful."

"That was the polite version," Phil said. "She hasn't warmed up yet."

Daphne moved farther out onto the porch, gaze still on the street where the SUVs disappeared.

"Their current scraped," she said.

The hair on my arms stood up. "Scraped?"

She nodded, fingertips resting against the doorframe. "Like sand dragged along a riverbed. Too much force, wrong direction. It hurts if it runs long."

"Fantastic," I muttered. "We've got sandblasters."

EUTERPE pinged my pocket.

CCCS FB GROUP: NEW POST.

'DENIED ENTRY TO SCOOBY HOUSE. WHAT ARE THEY HIDING?'

COMMENT VELOCITY: RISING.

I handed my phone to Phil. He read, expression flattening with every line.

"She's already spinning this," I said.

"Of course," he said. "She came for footage, not facts."

Vera's voice drifted from the upstairs landing. "Is it safe?"

I looked up. She and Clara leaned over the banister, in pajamas and messy hair, eyes wide.

"For now," I said. "We had a visit from the Concerned Citizens for Moral Panic. They left."

"Did they at least bring snacks?" Clara asked. "If a witch hunt kicks off before lunch, etiquette demands donuts."

"Witch hunt?" Milo winced.

"Calm down," Clara said. "You're a tech gremlin, different department."

Daphne's hand stayed on the doorframe. Scooby warmed under her palm, a degree, like the House leaned into her touch for reassurance.

"This didn't feel like a hurricane," she said. "Only the first wind gust."

"How bad?" Phil asked.

She frowned, considering. "Bad if they circle back with more pressure." Her gaze shifted to me. "They came for stories. Not the truth."

Clara sighed. "So...Round One in the Prudence Plot, then. Social media edition."

"Pretty much," I said.

"You want us to watch the channels?" Vera asked.

I shook my head. "You have midterms. I've got EUTERPE and insomnia. We'll survive."

Scooby's foyer lights brightened a notch at the word we.

Phil handed my phone back. "I need to write three emails," he said. "Housing, Admin, and our legal liaison at Elysium."

"Legal liaison?" Milo asked.

"Morgan's lawyers," Phil said to me. "Alice gave me the contact when we signed the Scooby House charter. Just in case."

"Of course she did," I said.

He headed inside, shoulders set in Responsible Adult lines. The House's ambient anxiety eased as he walked, like she trusted his follow-through.

Daphne watched him go. "He steadies this place," she said.

"Like ballast," I said.

She glanced at me. "Like a breakwater."

I liked that better.

Footsteps retreated upstairs as students drifted back to homework and low-grade gossip. The porch emptied until it held only me, Daphne, Milo, and the faint echo of SUVs in the distance.

Milo shifted his weight. "If she brings more of them..."

"She will," I said.

His hands tightened in his pockets. "We're not equipped for that kind of attack."

"Demons blindsided us too," I said. "We handled demons."

He looked at me, fear and trust braided together. "Demons made more sense."

He had a point.

I leaned into the doorjamb and surveyed the yard. The half-built basin, the strip between us and PsiO, the sidewalk students filmed whenever Scooby trended. The air tasted of asphalt and rosemary.

"This isn't a monster fight," I said. "This is PR. Narrative."

Daphne's mouth tightened. "Worse."

"Yup. Phil? Call Siobhan too. She Groks public relations."

PsiO's vines rustled, a subtle reach toward us. Open posture, nothing invasive.

I pressed my palm flat against the House's outer wall. "We hold steady," I whispered. "Take care of our kids. And don't let someone else name us."

Scooby warmed beneath my skin. A little pulse of agreement. Ready.

EUTERPE chimed one more notification.

SCOOBY HOUSE: MENTIONED IN LOCAL NEWS TEASER.

SEGMENT TITLE: 'HAUNTED DORM OR DANGEROUS EXPERIMENT?'

I laughed once, sharp and exhausted. "Great. We're clickbait."

Milo groaned. "Do we...do anything tonight?"

"Yes," I said. "We run movie night. We finish midterm prep. We keep the water feature on schedule. We stay visible, but not performative. We exist like a normal, functional dorm."

Clara called down from upstairs. "Can we watch Hocus Pocus again or does that send the wrong message?"

Vera answered, "Everything sends the wrong message to someone."

Daphne huffed a tiny breath that almost counted as a laugh.

"Show up," I said. "Do the work. Take care of each other. That's the message."

I felt the House hold that line with me. Not in words. In heat, in the way the walls settled, in the floor's firm, steady weight.

Out in the wider world, Concerned Citizens spun narratives.

In here, we built a different one.

07 Interrupted

Mid October, 2027

Morning settled over Scooby House. Footsteps staggered awake. A door slammed, and someone stole Pop-Tarts from the communal cabinet. The kitchen lights warmed toward steady brightness. Pipes ticked through their wake-up routine. Thallo's drawers shifted in small, curious twitches that made the foyer sound like a room clearing its throat.

Upstairs, chaos gathered itself.

Gwen's room produced the first tremor. A muffled curse. A thump. Then the sharp crack of a distress cry held too long under pressure.

Clara reached the landing first. She wore flannel shorts, an oversized tank, and an expression that promised kindness backed with mischief. Behind Gwen's half-open door, a sage-green ottoman vibrated against the bed frame like a dog warding off invisible intruders. Gwen crouched on the floor with her hands pressed to her temples.

"It's guarding my socks," she said when Clara appeared. "I only wanted socks."

Clara eased inside, moving low to the ground as if approaching a spooked animal. "Sweetheart, if you're in a relationship with your furniture, blink twice."

Gwen shot her a pained look, then let out something between a laugh and a sob. Clara sat cross-legged beside her and watched the ottoman. The thing shivered, then popped open a hidden seam where it stored two small cans of green tea. One rolled toward Gwen. A peace offering.

"See? Your boy loves you," Clara said. "Possessive, yes. But thoughtful."

From the hallway, Vera assessed the situation. She wore her usual morning armor: leggings, a crisp white shirt, hair pulled back in a neat coil. Her glasses slid lower on her nose as she cataloged variables. Gwen's breaths came shallow as footsteps gathered in the hall and the lights buzzed overhead.

“Back up,” she told the cluster of freshmen hovering near the door. “Give her space.”

They obeyed without argument; people did that when Vera spoke in her calm, precise tone. She shut off the overhead light, cracked open the window, and nodded once to Clara, who mouthed a thank-you and returned to coaxing Gwen into slow breaths.

That solved the first eruption.

The second arrived before Gwen finished her tea.

A sudden scrape of claws against drywall rattled in the next hallway. Rhea’s door burst open. The half-harpy’s wings twitched in quick, pained spasms. She winced and clamped her hands over her ears.

“You’re stomping,” she said. “Everything’s stomping.”

Vera stepped toward her with unhurried efficiency. She tilted her head, listening—not to Rhea, but to the House. Thallo’s nearest drawer rattled in sympathetic annoyance. A distant pipe knocked once. Too much noise convergence in one hallway.

“The light hum triggered this,” Vera said. “And overlapping footsteps.”

Rhea nodded, still pressing her ears. “And mint. Someone sprayed mint.”

Clara peeked out from Gwen’s room. “That was me. My bad.”

Vera crossed to the light panel, shut off the buzzing fixture, and opened the stairwell door to bleed sound downward. Cool air drifted through the hallway, carrying the mint away. Rhea’s wings lowered a fraction. Her posture eased from crisis to caution.

“Walk with me,” Vera said. No coaxing. No fuss. Just a calm direction.

Rhea followed. Clara slipped into step behind them once Gwen settled on her beanbag with the ottoman purring beside her.

Down the stairs, the foyer breathed with morning warmth. Rhea settled on the bottom step while Vera fetched her a glass of water, then set it in her hands with quiet precision.

“Better?” Clara asked.

Rhea nodded, feathers lifting in a relieved shiver. Crisis two resolved.

Crisis three waited at the foot of the basement stairs.

Milo hovered halfway inside the corridor like a misplaced shadow. He held his empty coffee mug with both hands, knuckles pale, eyes fixed on a point neither woman saw. He didn’t blink. Not once.

Clara approached with a gentleness that surprised even Vera. “Hey, beautiful disaster. Are you alive there?”

Milo flinched, dropped the mug, caught it midair, dropped it again, and then seemed to forget what hands were for.

A soft bump nudged Clara's ankle. Thallo's smallest chest had sidled up beside her, offering a folded blanket balanced across its lid. The chest swiveled toward Milo and gave a tiny sympathetic creak.

"Oh no," Clara whispered. "He broke."

"Overloaded," Vera said. "Basement noise exposure." She crouched, studying Milo's posture. "Let's reroute him."

Clara slid the blanket into Milo's hands. He clutched it. Thallo's chest bumped his leg, then rolled in a slow circle as if herding him toward the lounge.

"Follow the tiny furniture," Clara said. "Trust me."

Milo obeyed without processing the words. He followed the chest into the lounge and sank onto the couch. Clara sat beside him, not touching but close enough for her presence to reach his edges.

"Okay," she said. "Backstage breathing. In through your nose like you're about to sing. Out through your mouth like the director's a jerk and you're sighing on purpose."

Milo's chest rose. Fell. Rose again in a rhythm.

Thallo's chest hopped onto the coffee table and opened a drawer. A pack of ginger chews popped out like a magician's trick. Clara laughed and unwrapped one for Milo.

When his eyes finally lifted from the blanket, they held focus again. Fragile, but real.

Behind them, Vera checked the hallway. Calm settled. Students drifted back to their routines. House weather—cooler, quieter.

She exhaled something warm and rare.

Then the floorboards creaked in a distinct rhythm.

The babies were gathering.

Three baby Thallos approached from the foyer, not in their usual meandering curiosity but with unmistakable purpose. Their legs bent in tiny, determined clicks. Each carried an object: a folding stool, Clara's favorite vintage rehearsal scarf, and a tiny wooden puppet sword she'd used in a play last semester.

They stopped in a tidy line before her.

Clara blinked. "Uh. Did I forget to feed them last night?"

The stool unfolded at her feet. The puppet sword tipped forward like a ceremonial offering. Scarf rose into the air on an invisible toss and landed across her lap.

Vera watched the procession with the deadpan solemnity of a scientist observing a natural phenomenon. "They chose you."

Clara stared. "I—I don't want kids."

The smallest chest bumped her shin, sprang open, and presented a chocolate-covered granola bar like an apology. Clara wilted.

“Oh,” she whispered. “Okay, I want these kids.”

The babies crowded closer, tapping her ankles in small affectionate nudges. Milo leaned back, watching them with awe instead of panic. Rhea, from the stairs, gave a soft laugh. Gwen edged to the balcony railing for a look.

The House warmed in approval, the warmth that seeped through floorboards and steadied nerves.

Vera left the babies to their courtship and crossed into the kitchen. She pulled a binder from the communal office shelf, a plain three-ring thing with no label, and set it on the table. She fetched colored pens, sticky tabs, and a ruler. Then she began writing.

Not decorative. Not whimsical.

Categories.

Sleep

Noise

Overstimulation

House Imprints

Furniture Bonding

Wing Accidents

Basement Hazards

Emotional Storm Indicators

Clara drifted in once Milo settled into drowsy calm. Three baby Thallos followed like ducklings. She dropped into a chair beside Vera, wrapped in the scarf, holding the puppet sword like a scepter.

“What are you doing?” Clara asked, eyes bright with fatigue and pride.

“Organizing patterns,” Vera said. “If we catch them early, we prevent spirals.”

Clara plucked a sheet of stickers from the counter and laid them down beside the binder. “Color-coding. Mandatory.”

Vera’s eyebrow rose. “Stickers?”

“Students respond to joy, Vera.”

“Hm.” She placed a small raccoon sticker next to Furniture Bonding. “Satisfactory.”

Clara beamed.

Together, they created the first Conflict Binder—problems, students, solutions, triggers. Simple and effective. A social hospital disguised as office supplies.

By the time they finished, sunlight filled the lounge with warm gold. Three freshmen slept on the couches. Gwen curled against her territorial ottoman, Milo

wrapped in the young chest's blanket, Rhea dozing under the soft rustle of her own feathers. The babies kept watch.

Footsteps sounded at the door.

Ella entered with a mug of tea and dark circles under her eyes, fresh from whatever debugging war she'd fought downstairs. She stopped mid-stride.

"What," she said, "happened."

Clara raised a hand from the couch nest, half-awake. "House... children... emotional... tornado..."

Ella looked at Vera.

"I leave for two hours," she said, "and you build a social hospital?"

Vera closed the binder with a crisp snap. "It required doing."

Clara mumbled into a pillow, "I think I'm their mom now."

Ella surveyed the scene and shook her head, fighting a smile.

Scooby House glowed beneath their feet, warm and satisfied. Across the street, Psi Omega's vines lifted in a soft, echoing response.

The Houses noticed.

Their caretakers were in place.

* * *

Evening settled warm across the block, soft streetlights catching the slow sway of Psi Omega's vines. Scooby House breathed in its usual creaky rhythm, content after dinner. Students sprawled on couches, someone microwaving popcorn, a baby Thallo bumping into a shoe rack with the innocent confidence of a toddler.

Then heavy knocking shook the front door. Not polite. Not panicked either. Purposeful.

Clara opened it and blinked.

Riss stood on the porch with the expression of a woman holding herself together by precise internal screws. Her braid had loosened; a thin leaf clung to her sleeve.

"We require help," Riss said.

Vera looked up from reorganizing the chore schedule. "With what?"

Riss exhaled through her nose. "One of your... children is in my house."

Clara narrowed her eyes. "Define children."

Riss stepped aside.

Behind her, the faint tap-tap-tap of wooden feet echoed across the lawn. A baby Thallo darted between her ankles like a fugitive raccoon, dragging one of PsiO's ritual feathers clutched in its drawer.

"Oh no," Clara whispered. "Which one is that?"

Ella hurried down the stairs. "What happened?"

The baby spotted her, perked up, and bolted toward Scooby, but Riss blocked with an elegant sidestep. It bonked against Riss's shin, reversed direction, and tore back toward PsiO.

Riss caught the doorframe before it escaped again. "It infiltrated twenty minutes ago. Rearranged the shoe cubbies. It moved half of the dining chairs into the hallway. And even attempted to climb the trellis."

Clara covered her mouth. "She's nesting."

Riss's stare sharpened. "She braided my vines."

Ella perked. "Wait—really? Show me."

"No."

The baby darted up the walkway again, drawer clacking in joyful defiance.

Ella scooped it. The drawer snapped open in guilty surprise; the ritual feather popped out like a surrender flag. Clara plucked it and examined it for bite marks.

Vera crossed her arms. "How did it get inside?"

Riss fixed Ella with a solemn look. "It followed Daphne."

Ella groaned. "Of course it did."

The baby wiggled in Ella's grip with the determined energy of a creature plotting its escape. She held it higher like a misbehaving cat.

"Do we know why she ran over?" Ella asked.

"She targeted the ritual room," Riss said. "She climbed onto the altar table and attempted to push the incense burner off the edge."

Clara gasped. "Determined little chaos-gremlin."

"Unacceptable little chaos-gremlin," Riss corrected.

Ella turned the baby Thallo around. "You can't cause incidents at the neighbor's house. That's a rule now."

The baby closed its drawer in a small pout.

PsiO's vines rustled from the porch in mild agitation. The house watched the gathering with a mood somewhere between judgment and curiosity.

"We need to return her before PsiO escalates," Ella said.

Riss cleared her throat. "Help retrieve the other two; that's efficient."

"Other two?" Clara repeated.

A loud crash echoed across the street like a stack of chairs hitting tile.

Riss didn't flinch. "Yes. Three total."

Ella pinched the bridge of her nose. "Scooby let three of her children wander into your ritual room?"

"No," Riss said. "She let one wander. The other two followed."

Vera locked the front door, her expression settling into resigned competence. Already the “House Triage Coordinator.” She slipped shoes on with precision. “We handle this.”

They crossed the street. PsiO’s front porch lights brightened as they approached. Vines shifted toward Riss like a loyal hound leaning on its owner’s thigh.

Inside, PsiO held the nervous energy of a place visited by small, mobile problems. Shoes lay scattered like dominos. Two chairs stood in the hallway, blocking the closet door. A bowl of oranges sat on the floor for no logical reason.

Riss pointed toward the living room. “I’ve contained them. For now.”

“Contained” was too generous.

All three baby Thallos clustered near PsiO’s large circular rug. One bounced in place like it had invented jumping. One gnawed on the edge of a woven blanket with its drawer open in concentration. The ringleader attempted to climb PsiO’s vine-wrapped pillar by determined hops.

PsiO’s vines did not appreciate this.

The leaves trembled in affront.

Clara crouched and clapped. “Babies! Eyes up!”

Three wooden heads turned toward her in unison.

Ella whispered, “Oh no. She’s their favorite.”

Clara extended her arms like a preschool teacher about to collect wayward toddlers. “Everybody waddle over here. Right now.”

They waddled.

Vera raised a single eyebrow. “You’re terrifying.”

“I contain multitudes,” Clara said.

Riss watched the procession with the horror of a woman forced to witness small chaos on a holy carpet. “Thank you for your prompt response.”

Ella knelt beside the ringleader. “Why did you come here? Scooby’s worried.”

The baby wiggled its legs and produced another object: a lavender sprig it had stolen from PsiO’s herb bowl. It dropped the offering at Ella’s feet with pride.

Vera tapped Ella’s shoulder. “Look at the pattern. They brought gifts.”

Clara scooped one baby into her arms, ignoring its triumphant wiggle. “She wanted a sleepover.”

Riss pressed two fingers to her temple. “She cannot have a sleepover.”

Ella rose. “Okay. Let’s separate motive from mayhem. She followed Daphne, which meant she sensed calm. She saw the vines and thought: ‘friends.’ Then she saw your ritual room and thought: ‘nest.’”

Clara nodded. “That checks out. Also explains the chair migration.”

Riss blinked. “The chairs...?”

Clara pointed down the hall. "Two of them are blocking a closet. I think she wanted a fort."

Riss inhaled. "Ella, your House is flirting through furniture."

"We're working on boundaries," Ella said.

Vera gathered the second baby Thallo, who clung to the blanket it had chewed. "We'll return the children before PsiO thinks Scooby is attempting annexation."

"Annexation," Riss repeated softly, as if the word itself threatened her professional composure.

Ella lined up the babies, making sure none escaped. Clara kept a hand on the ringleader's top. Vera held the blanket-thief by its rounded shoulders. The third waddled beside them like a soldier on parade.

PsiO's vines relaxed at the sight of order restored. One vine dipped in cautious approval.

Riss exhaled. "If you had not intervened, they'd be scaling the banister by now."

Clara brightened. "Ooh, do you have pictures? Because that sounds adorable."

"No."

They shepherded the trio out the door, across the lawn, and through Scooby's front entrance. The moment the babies sensed home, they darted into the foyer and scattered. One for the shoe rack, one for the sitting room, one straight into Thallo's central cabinet as if reporting for debrief.

Scooby's floorboards creaked in a pleased, welcoming ripple.

Ella rubbed her face with both hands. "We cannot let them cross the street unsupervised."

Vera grabbed her notebook. "New entry: furniture containment protocol."

Clara collapsed onto the couch. "You know... Daphne wasn't even involved this time. They caused shenanigans."

Riss crossed her arms and surveyed the foyer with the wary curiosity of someone observing a new species. "Your House produces determined young."

Ella leaned against the banister. "They're learning by imitation."

"Of you?" Riss asked.

"Of all of us."

Riss's gaze softened. "Scooby House is fortunate. Thallo's a terrific mother."

Ella rubbed her arm. "PsiO handled them with grace."

"No," Riss said, "PsiO tolerated them. You handled them."

Vera closed her notebook. "We'll handle them better with protocols."

Clara yawned under a blanket a baby had dragged over her. "We're moms again, aren't we?"

The foyer brightened at that, warm and proud.

Riss headed for the door. Before she stepped out, she paused and looked at Vera.

“You be an excellent Lantern.”

Vera didn't look up from her notes. “I prefer autonomy.”

A faint smile touched Riss's mouth. “You have it.”

She left Scooby House with the composed stride of someone who had endured one of the strangest evenings of her life. PsiO's vines leaned toward her as she crossed the lawn, whispering relief.

Scooby hummed behind the group—a content, domestic sound, pleased with its reclaimed children and the humans who kept the chaos manageable.

Two houses. One ridiculous ecosystem. And now, a partnership.

* * *

Phil picked a place three blocks off campus—dim lights, old cypress furniture, real cloth napkins. A restaurant where nobody rushed you, nobody stared, and nobody smelled like freshman panic. I slid into the booth across from him and let my shoulders drop for the first time this week.

He reached across the table and took my hand. His thumb brushed the side of my palm, slow little arcs that grounded me better than any sigil. Warm, steady, present. For once, I didn't have EUTERPE in my lap, or freshmen texting, or two houses flirting across the street.

“We survived migration night,” Phil said.

“We survived the part we know about,” I said. “The consequences haven't hatched yet.”

He smiled, soft at the edges. “You're allowed an evening off.”

“Am I? Is that in my contract? Section B: Code Witch Gets to Eat Dinner Without Furniture Drama?”

“Subsection three,” he said. “Also applies to dessert.”

The waitress brought drinks. Soft jazz murmured overhead. The restaurant glowed amber, light that made everyone look kinder. I watched Phil's face in it, the lines at the corners of his eyes, the careful way he listened when people talked. Even now, with no crisis, he carried the posture of someone guarding a campsite from invisible threats.

I curled my fingers through his. “I'm scared,” I said.

His thumb paused. “Of what?”

“How fast this feels like... us.”

He studied me, eyes steady. “Me too. In a satisfying way.”

“You're not supposed to be that honest,” I said. “I was ready for one of your calm apologies.”

“Sorry,” he deadpanned.

We both laughed. The sound loosened something tight under my ribs.

Dinner arrived; shrimp étouffée for him, roasted chicken for me. I stole bites from his plate, and he didn't stop me; he fed me the last spoonful like I'd earned it. After we ate, he ordered dessert without asking: a chocolate torte with whipped cream.

"You don't know I like that," I said.

"You finish Clara's when she doesn't want hers."

I blinked. "You notice everything."

"I notice everything about you."

Heat slid down my spine. I leaned in, scooped a forkful of torte, and held it out to him. "Open."

He bit it, closed his eyes, and let out an indistinct sound that hit me right in the chest.

I took that tender moment and struck the match.

I leaned forward and murmured. "Sex later. I challenge you to pick your favorite: noisy as hell or utter silence."

His hands twitched. "You're killing me, Smalls."

"Or..." My fingertip traced the rim of my glass, slow and wicked, "...do you want to challenge me, instead?"

He cleared his throat and straightened; the thought flipped every switch in him.

"You're doing this on purpose."

"Absolutely."

His leg brushed mine under the table, not accidental. My pulse kicked.

Then someone at the bar blurted, "Hey—wait. Isn't that them?"

Phil's eyes sharpened. Mine followed the sound.

A woman in a blazer stared at us with open interest. Her phone lifted. A second person raised theirs. Then the first woman stepped closer, a smile already set in that awful polite weapon shape reporters used the second before they pounced.

Here it came.

She stopped at the edge of our booth.

"Aren't you two from the Monster House?"

My stomach dropped.

Phil's hand tightened around mine; not possessive, not scared. Protective. He shifted his body, angling toward me.

The woman didn't wait for permission. She gestured behind her, and two men appeared with lights and ready phones.

"Tell us what's happening!" she asked, bright as broken glass. "Students online claim your house walks at night. Is that true?"

Phil's jaw flexed. "We're at dinner. Leave us alone."

She didn't move. "Do you deny the reports of unusual nighttime activity?"

Heat crawled up my neck. My sigil buzzed in my earlobe, confused, anxious. The torte sat forgotten between us.

Another man swung his phone up. "Hey guys, camera over here—is this the girl who runs that creepy AI?"

My lungs turned to paper.

Phil stood.

Not fast. Not loud. With an authority that shifted the air.

"Back up," he said.

The reporter lifted her chin. "We're looking for comments."

"You shoved cameras at my kids last week," Phil said. "Now you're shoving them at her."

Her smile tightened. "We have a right—"

"You don't have any right to harass students. And you definitely don't get to terrify the person who keeps a house full of them alive."

Someone in the back started recording. Another whispered, "Oh damn, that's the RD."

The reporter stepped closer. "Safe to say tensions are high? Are you hiding demon gear? Are students safe in that building?"

A spike hit my throat. Demon tether. PsiO's mold nightmare. Those basement nights, tangled in old code and shadow. She said the words as accusations, not inquiry.

Phil stepped between me and the lights, blocking their view.

"You're done," he said. Calm at first. Then steel. "Turn the cameras off."

The reporter opened her mouth.

Phil's voice dropped an octave, calm as a threat under a locked door. "Turn them off."

And the room reacted. Every table went silent. Someone set down a fork with a tiny clink. The phone lights flickered, confused. Phil wasn't yelling, but his presence filled the space like storm pressure.

A busboy flinched. The manager stepped out of the kitchen, already moving to intervene.

I grabbed Phil's sleeve. "Hey. I'm okay. We're leaving."

He didn't move at first. His shoulders stayed broad and braced between me and the crowd. I tugged again.

"Phil," I whispered. "Come with me."

He drew a fast breath through his nose. He looked down at me. My hand on his arm steadied him; the fury in his posture softened enough for movement.

He turned, touched my back, and steered us out of the restaurant..

The alley beside the building held the night's cooler air. It hit my skin like a reset switch. I braced my hands on my knees and breathed.

Phil stood in front of me, still in guard mode. His whole body hummed with adrenaline; he refused to show it.

I pushed myself upright. My legs shook. He closed the distance and pulled me into his chest, careful but firm.

The world shrank to his heartbeat under my ear.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I led us straight into a spotlight. That's on me. I didn't think—"

"Phil." My voice cracked. "You protected me."

His arms tightened. "Of course I protected you, munchkin."

I swallowed hard against the leftover tremor. My sigil cooled, its panic-echo fading.

He smoothed a hand down my back, slow enough that my breathing found a rhythm again. I curled my fingers in his shirt and leaned into him until the alley stopped spinning.

When my balance returned, he stepped back just enough to see my face.

"I'll deal with the admin fallout," he said. "Don't take that on. Not this."

"You think I can't handle a reporter?" I asked, trying for humor but landing closer to exhaustion.

"I know you can," he said. "But you shouldn't have to. Not tonight. Not alone."

I rested my forehead against his sternum and let myself rest there. He smelled like cedar soap and faint spice from dinner.

"Phil?"

"Yeah?"

"We're doing this together, right?"

He cupped the back of my head and pressed a kiss into my hair.

"We already are."

His voice settled through me like a weight lifted instead of added.

We walked back toward campus with his hand steady at the small of my back. Streetlights washed us in soft gold, and for the first time all week I let myself believe we weren't improvising a relationship anymore.

We were building one.

And people were watching.

We handled that part later.

For tonight, he kept the world at arm's length long enough for me to breathe again. He glanced around, then nuzzled just behind my earlobe. His breath warmed my skin.

“So you wanted me to challenge you.” His voice deepened, heat curling into each word.

I swallowed. “I did.”

He brushed his lips along my throat. “I’ve got ideas. Home?”

A beat, a smile in his tone.

“Or right here?”

08 In Perpetuity

Late October, 2027

He answered on the second ring. "Evening, Ms. Morgan."

"You know I love how you answer like it's a scheduled check-in," she said. "Even when you absolutely know it isn't."

"I keep your name on a separate alert profile," Jim replied. "What can I do for you tonight?"

Morgan leaned on the railing. "I need a property acquisition. Actually, two. A house, and a short section of the city street between two lots."

He made a thoughtful noise. "The one with the...students? Old fraternity?"

"Mhm. That one."

"I assume you'd prefer to avoid council hearings."

"Jim," she said, smiling at a pedestrian three floors down who was absolutely walking their dog at 11:40 pm, "I'd prefer to avoid the *concept* of council hearings."

"Quiet and administrative, then."

"Fast and quiet," she corrected. "And quiet means no notices anyone will actually read. No publicity. No political vibrations. I want this to slide under the radar like it isn't happening. You have until mid-April."

He didn't gasp, which was why she kept him. "Expedited timelines are higher hourly rates."

"Money isn't part of the conversation," Morgan said. "Expediency is the priority."

"In perpetuity?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Both parcels. The property and the strip of street. Make it look like a stability measure. Drainage, soil concerns, anything your people fabricate that won't ping an engineer's ego. I'll write a check for the improvements."

"I assume the new owner will accept liability for maintenance?"

"She will," Morgan said. "Fold the clause into the administrative packet. And make sure she never sees the word liability. She's twenty. She'll panic."

A soft keyboard clack carried across the line. “This is workable. I’ll get Public Works, Planning, and the utility boards to sign off. I’ll bury it among drainage reclassifications.”

“Perfect.” Morgan stretched, the cool air lifting the ends of her hair. “You’re a star, Jim. I’m sending you a bottle of the Quercus Reserve. Don’t share it.”

“My wife will kill me.”

“Good,” Morgan said. “Speaking of Shelia, kiss her for me.”

“I’ll do that, Ms. Morgan.”

“One last thing,” she said, lowering her voice. “If questions arise, real or political, this project is about student safety. You’ll be representing someone precious to me. She doesn’t know this is happening, and I prefer it that way.”

Jim paused. “Understood.”

“Take care of yourself, Jim.”

She ended the call.

“Hugos help,” she told the breeze.

“And any Hugo I call my niece stays under my protection.”

By Monday, my notebook looked like a conspiracy theorist’s corkboard.

Not demons and red string—just boxes, arrows, and the words CROWD DISPERSAL circled three times. A stick figure in a Hugo hoodie stood in the center with twelve angry little camera icons pointed at her from every side.

Phil tapped the margin with one finger. “You gave them eyebrows,” he said. “Aggressive eyebrows.”

“Accurate.” I flipped to the next page. “Okay. Strategy. Shooting reporters is illegal. Vaporizing villagers stays illegal. I still want them to regret clustering around my face.”

On my laptop, EUTERPE’s text blinked.

SUGGESTION: NON-LETHAL DISCOURAGEMENT ARRAY.

“Exactly.” I drew a bracelet. “We start with the armband. Version two. The fake detonation voice worked once. After that, people expect a bit.”

Phil winced. “They ran into traffic.”

“They ran away from me. Mission accomplished.” I chewed my pen cap. “New rule, though. We avoid stampedes. We aim for targeted discomfort.”

A knock sounded on the open lounge door. Three heads leaned in: one Lantern, two kids from the engineering dorm who kept “accidentally” studying in Scooby’s common room. They watched the chalkboard like it broadcast a game.

The shorter engineer cleared her throat. “Is this... open brainstorming?”

The Lantern—Sara, Poli Sci, badge of the campus paper on her backpack—added, “You said ‘help’ in the group chat.”

I held up the sketch. “I need things that look dangerous enough to make idiots back up while they stay completely harmless. Also pretty. If it doesn’t look cool, I refuse to wear it.”

Engineering Kid #1 grinned. He carried a box of PLA spools like an offering. “Props and illusions? Oh, I want to live here now.”

Scooby’s lights brightened a shade at that. Show-off.

* * *

We took over the dining room table. Scooby extended the overhead light without asking, like a surgical spotlight for chaos.

Kenneth spread circuits and power packs. Paige unloaded tools from every pocket of her cargo pants; screwdrivers, snips, a soldering pen that belonged to a lab. Sara opened her laptop and pulled up the campus policy on “personal security devices.” EUTERPE mirrored the document in a corner window and started highlighting loopholes.

“Walk me through the subsonic thing again,” Sara said.

I sketched a bubble around my stick-figure self. “Low-frequency vibration in a tight radius. Rattles fillings, hums in bone, ruins footage. No injuries, no hearing loss, a sudden urge to rethink life choices.”

“Discomfort, not damage.” Sara nodded. “70 decibels. Loud, not lawsuit. I will defend that in an op-ed.”

Kenneth pointed at my bracelet sketch. “We hide the emitters under fake vent slits. Give it a battery with a heat sink so it doesn’t toast your wrist.”

Paige already printed a rough cuff in cheap gray plastic. Rough edges, ridges from the printer’s layer lines. She held it up to my arm, frowned, and took it back.

“Ugly,” she said. “We fix that.”

“Paint later,” Sara said. “First, we build something that hums.”

We built three misbehaviors first.

The reek of hot plastic and flux took over the dining room. Scooby hummed in the walls, a low, approving thrum. Every time someone dropped a screw, a baby Thallo rolled over to nudge it back onto the table with a tiny wooden corner.

The first cuff chirped, sparked, and died. The second cuff hummed and refused to stop until EUTERPE brute-force killed its signal.

The third cuff sang.

Not loud. inaudible in the usual sense. A pressure line through my teeth when I snapped the switch.

I flinched. “Okay. That felt wrong.”

Kenneth laughed under his breath. “Good wrong or brown note wrong?”

“Perfect,” I said. “Dial it down ten percent and lock that in. Also, ew.”

EUTERPE spat code. VALUES ADJUSTED. RADIUS: 2.3 METERS. JAW RESONANCE: MINIMIZED.

“Thanks, sweetheart.”

YOU COURTED THIS OUTCOME.

I glared at the laptop. “We’re defending ourselves.”

Phil sat on the arm of the couch, arms folded, watching the whole circus with a face that pretended no joy lived inside it. His eyes betrayed him; he tracked every gadget, every screw, every test.

“This one,” I said, holding up the humming cuff, “faces the mob. I want two backups for other situations. We draft a field of bullshit.”

“Technical term, not brown notes,” Sara muttered.

“Write your own vocabulary sheet.” I drew two more shapes. “One that scrambles cameras. One that throws up enough visual static to confuse a livestream.”

Paige grabbed the second sketch. “Projector, not jammer. Jammers punch federal law; projectors annoy.”

EUTERPE highlighted another line in the policy doc. AGREEMENT.

We scattered devices along the table. Tiny lenses, reflectors, film sheets.

I ended up with a palm-sized disk that sat in the heel of my hand. I squeezed it; a halo of faint, shifting light scattered across the wall—no pattern, just shimmering noise.

“Point that at a camera, you get nothing,” Kenneth said. “Lens flare party.”

“Gives me a migraine if I stare at it,” Phil added.

“Then don’t stare at it,” I told him. “You stand behind me and look supportive and hot.”

Color climbed his neck. “I excel at that.”

We built one more toy before Scooby flickered the dining room lights in polite warning: curfew on active soldering.

I held up a little rectangular patch with a mirrored surface and sticky backing. It looked like a cheap fashion accessory from a festival booth.

“What does that one do?” Sara asked.

“Reflectivity hack,” I said. “If I stick this at collarbone height, cameras favor the glare. Faces behind me wash out. Microphones still pick up audio, but the frame centers on me.”

Paige nodded. “Portable spotlight. You hijack the shot.”

“Exactly. If we can’t avoid attention, we stage it.” I smoothed the patch against my shirt where a logo will sit. “Nobody ambushes me. They book a slot or they walk away with a migraine and useless footage.”

Phil’s mouth quirked. “You sound like Siobhan.”

I swallowed around a rush of warmth that felt half pride, half terror. “I learned from the best.”

EUTERPE’s cursor blinked. YOU LEARNED FROM ME.

“Relax. You too.”

“A sigil or two will enhance each. Phil, wanna mass-produce whistles for the sorority or the Lanterns? Or campus women in general?”

“Of course. Sonic and subsonic. Put it on the list.”

“There’s a list?”

“Ella... of course there’s a list.”

* * *

By Friday, the rumors reached the cafeteria. I heard them three tables over while I waited for nachos, phone in my hand, cuff under my sleeve heavy as a secret.

“I heard Scooby House runs on nuclear power,” one freshman whispered.

“Not nuclear,” his friend said. “My roommate’s cousin says it’s haunted and the ghosts do electrical work.”

“I heard Ella has a bomb.”

The speaker dropped her voice on the last word. It still carried.

I turned, met her eyes, and let my face go blank under the mirrored patch.

Her mouth snapped shut.

Behind her, a kid in an engineering hoodie caught sight of my wrist. His gaze widened. He mouthed, Is that v3?

I tilted my head in a way that answered nothing and everything.

The Scooby legend already stretched across campus. Stories leaked from residents who forgot to lower their voices on phone calls. “The couches move themselves.” “The wardrobe eats old clothes and spits out outfits.” “Lanterns hold office hours there; you only have to show up and cry into tea.”

Sometimes those stories hit the wrong ears—villagers in the next booth, local busybodies “checking on their kids.” Sometimes a reporter sat with them, fishing for quotes.

I felt their eyes on my back every time I crossed the quad.

The first proper test came two days before midterms.

We stepped out onto the front steps—Phil, Clara, Vera, me—into late-afternoon light and humidity that clung to October in New Orleans. A handful of students

l lounged on the lawn, textbooks balanced on their knees, conversations flowing lazy as the breeze.

Scooby felt calm. Her windows held a soft amber glow. Thallo's nearest baby chest napped beside the door, lid half-open like a yawning cat.

Then the vans arrived.

Two local news logos, one generic white van with no markings at all. Villagers spilled out first—older faces from the neighborhood, shoulders tight, moral panic sitting under their skin. Reporters followed: cameras, boom mikes, and interns who knew they were in trouble.

Scooby's lights dimmed one notch. I felt her bristle in the floorboards under my feet.

Clara leaned close. "Front-of-house wants to know if we're doing this the nice way or the fun way."

"Both." I adjusted my sleeve. "Nice for the ones who deserve it. Fun for the others."

We walked down to the sidewalk together. Phil stayed half a step at my side, not in front. Progress.

"Miss Hugo!" a man from the local station called. His hair leaned toward silver, his tie matched his shirt. He kept the camera back a respectful distance. "We'd like to ask about the petition. The villagers' safety concerns."

That was the ethical end of the press pool. Behind him, another camera operator lunged forward like a spear, already angling for a close shot of my face. A young woman with a cheap tablet trotted beside him, expression sharp with ambition.

"There she is," Tablet Girl said. "Face of the Monster House."

The villagers murmured. Someone lifted a sign I hadn't seen before: STUDENTS DESERVE NORMAL.

Phil's jaw set.

I stepped forward before he did.

The first camera closed the gap. My cuff hummed, a small, private throb against my skin, ready.

"Miss Hugo, what do you say to parents who are afraid for their children?" Tablet Girl demanded. "Afraid of whatever you built in there?"

I held up a hand, palm toward her, fingers spread. The little projector disk sat warm against my lifeline. I pressed it with my thumb.

A wash of shifting light spilled across her camera lens. Visible, a shimmer like heat over asphalt.

The camera operator flinched.

"What the—" He pulled back, reset the focus, and checked the frame.

The shimmer clung.

Behind him, a second camera crew hesitated. The villagers leaned back from the oddness like it smelled wrong.

Tablet Girl pushed anyway. "Do you deny your house walks at night?"

"Strong start," Clara murmured under her breath.

I smiled at Tablet Girl, bright and sharp, and shifted so my mirrored patch faced her lens.

"You want an authentic story," I said. "...stay behind the tape."

Scooby extruded a tape for me: a thin, shimmering line of light along the sidewalk, eight feet from the front steps. She pretended it came from the streetlamps. Liar.

A snort of laughter escaped one student on the lawn. Dormies gathered near the sidewalk, curiosity bright on their faces.

The older reporter, the one with the silvering hair, eyed the light line and stepped back behind it. His camera followed.

Tablet Girl hesitated on the wrong side. Her camera operator shook his head. "Something's wrong with the lens," he muttered. "I'm getting snow."

"Fix it," she hissed.

"Or," I said, "you listen."

I turned to the older reporter. "You asked about safety concerns. You get a first interview if you respect the boundary. After him—" I nodded toward a careful figure near the back, a woman in her thirties with no camera, only a notebook and a discreet mythic sigil pinned to her lapel. "—mythic media. She gets the second slot. Everyone else waits their turn, or goes home with useless footage and a headache."

The blogger met my eyes and gave a small, precise nod. Recognition passed between us; she lived in a similar strange ecosystem.

Sara slipped out to stand on my other side, Chronicle press badge visible. "Student media," she said. "Third."

"Done." I pointed to the grass. "We do it there, in the open. You film from back here. No ambushes at dinner. No cameras in students' faces. Photographing minors without consent. If you break any of those rules, you lose access."

"You don't get to set the rules," Tablet Girl snapped.

"Oh, I do," I said. "This is my house."

Behind me, Scooby's front windows brightened in agreement. Thallo's baby chest lifted its lid and glared.

The villagers shifted. Some looked nervous. Some were scowling. A few looked tired, unsure why they'd signed the petition.

The ethical reporter studied my face for a long breath. Not hunting for weakness; checking for sincerity.

"Fair terms," he said. "We agree."

The mythic blogger stepped behind the light line with him. Sara joined them, phone ready.

Tablet Girl's jaw worked. Her camera feed still swam with static and glare.

"Stay or go," I told her. "You won't bully my kids. You walk around that line, you deal with subsonics and campus security in either order."

Phil's hand brushed my back, a question. I didn't move.

"Are you threatening us?" Tablet Girl asked.

"No," I said. "I'm promising to protect my people. There's a difference."

The mythic blogger raised her voice. "You heard her conditions. Respect them or step aside. I'd like a line of sight."

Something in her tone carried weight of its own. Not divine, not House-level—only a woman who knew how fast stories cut both ways.

Tablet Girl muttered something about bias and stomped back toward her van. Her camera operator followed, one hand pressed to his jaw. I suppose the subsonics reached him, or he had poor teeth.

The villagers' homemade signs drooped. Small clusters broke away.

I took a breath, shut off the projector, and snapped down the cuff's switch. The pressure in my teeth eased.

"Ready?" the older reporter asked.

"As I'll ever get." I walked to the patch of lawn I'd indicated and stood where Scooby's shadow touched my shoes. "Ask about safety. Or about noise. Even about mythic students. You came for the truth? I will give it to you."

Phil moved to the edge of the crowd, half guard, half audience. Clara and Vera flanked the nearest group of freshmen, ready to intercept any panic.

The cameras rolled.

I lifted my chin and spoke as the House hummed under my feet, as if to say: There. That's my girl.

Colin Hart almost walked past the bar.

It sat in the corner of the hotel lobby behind smoked glass and a brass rail, the sort of place he walked through, not into. At six on a Thursday evening he belonged in his car, in traffic, on his way to Laura and leftovers.

Instead, he stood under a pendant light that hummed against his teeth and checked his watch for the third time.

6:47.

Mrs. Grundy had chosen the hotel herself. "Neutral ground," she'd said on the phone, with a soft laugh that did not suit the phrase. "Somewhere we can talk

without students listening in. A drink, Mr. Hart. You're so good with the details. I trust your judgment."

Work never gave him praise like that. Not with that tone.

He cleared his throat, straightened his tie, and pushed open the glass door.

The bar felt expensive on purpose. Dark wood, deep blue upholstery, wine bottles backlit like stained glass. A few business travelers hunched over laptops. A couple at a corner table leaned in so close their foreheads almost touched. No one looked up when he entered.

"Mr. Hart." Her voice reached him first, followed by a small, precise wave.

She sat in a half-moon booth with her back to the wall and a view of the room. A gin and tonic glowed pale in front of her, lime wedge balanced on the rim. Karen Grundy wore slate-gray silk and a strand of pearls that stopped an inch below her collarbone. Her lipstick matched the berry on her nails. She looked composed, sympathetic, and amused, like a teacher who already knew the answer.

Colin swallowed, crossed the room, the unsaid lie dragging behind him like a loose thread.

"Mrs. Grundy," he said. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Traffic on the expressway—"

"Of course." She brushed the apology aside with a tilt of her fingers. "Sit, sit. What are you drinking?"

"Oh, I—" His mind went blank. At home, he drank whatever Laura poured. At office events, he held one beer for three hours so no one pressed a second into his hand. "Just, ah, a beer."

Mrs. Grundy signaled the waiter with two fingers, serene. "He'll have what I'm having. You are off the clock, Mr. Hart. You deserve something better than a hotel tap."

The waiter left them alone again. Colin sat, spine too straight, hands tight on his knees.

"I appreciate you seeing me," she said. "I know how busy things must feel with these... experimental housing projects."

Her mouth didn't curl around the word experimental, not exactly, but something in her tone sanded the gloss right off it.

Colin cleared his throat. "We have procedures. Reviews before approval, regular inspections after. The Scooby House project met baseline requirements."

"For now," she said.

The gin arrived. The glass felt smooth and cold against his palm. He took a cautious sip, then a deeper one, heat spreading fast from his chest to his face.

Mrs. Grundy watched him with that same faint amusement. "I am sure your team did its best. Still... I worry. You know how people worry."

“About what, exactly?” He heard the stiffness in his voice and blushed. She offered no sign of offense.

“Liability. Optics.” She folded her hands, pearl bracelet chiming against glass. “Strange hours. Strange residents. And now, a water feature sprouted from the lawn without notice. You saw the news spot?”

He winced. The clip had looped on every local station for a day: the glimmering basin, the falling water, the students laughing on camera. “Campus-approved interview,” he said. “No violations found.”

“No violations that you know of yet.” She leaned in, perfume whispering across the table; powdery flowers over something sharper. “But I spoke with several parents after that segment aired. Families Donors. They did not like what they saw.”

“I—well, the design approval passes through Planning and Zoning, not Housing.” The familiar refuge of process steadied him. “If the builder submitted permit requests, it falls under—”

“What if the builder did not?” She let the question hang, innocent as a blade left on a table. “What if certain... eager young administrators skipped a few dull steps in the name of innovation? If that fountain leaches into the soil, shorts a line, or links to something off-limits, whose name ends up on the paperwork?”

He finished his drink faster than he had meant to. “The Director’s,” he said. “Or the dean’s, depending on—”

“But whose name sits on the sign-off forms?” Her voice softened. “Who actually read the files and said, yes, this looks in order?”

His stomach knotted. Every sign-off lived behind his eyes for a second: the forms, the signatures, the stamped approvals.

Mine.

Mrs. Grundy’s gaze warmed. “You strike me as a careful man, Mr. Hart. A decent one. I cannot imagine you making light of these things.”

“No,” he said. The word left his mouth too fast. “I don’t.”

“Then you see my dilemma.” She sighed, a small, helpless sound that somehow did not sound helpless. “If anything goes wrong, people will call me idle. I let a hazard grow under my nose. I am only a teacher.” She let a beat pass. “You, though. You understand the system. The real one. Make sure everything has been... done properly. That nothing slipped through.”

The second drink arrived; he hadn’t noticed the waiter coming back. Mrs. Grundy’s glass stayed half-full. His drink sat empty until he reached for it, embarrassed, and covered the feeling with another swallow.

“I don’t have the authority to—”

“Ask a question,” she interrupted gently. “Request a routine check. Suggest a reinspection of permits on file. I am not asking you to invent anything. Only to shine a light where one already belongs. If the project stands on solid ground, no harm is done. And if it doesn’t...”

Her smile thinned. The warmth in it cooled.

“...then you will have protected the university. Your university. The one you serve every day without applause. You’re criminally undervalued, Mr. Hart... Colin. Your presence benefits the university.

The compliment slid under his ribs. Laura rarely spoke that way. She thanked him for the paychecks, for changing lightbulbs, for replacing the water filter. She did not speak of duty.

Colin stared at the condensation ring his glass left on the table. “I don’t want a witch hunt,” he said.

“Of course not.” Her fingers brushed the back of his hand. Cool, careful contact; then gone. “You want safety. So do I. We share a goal.”

“That fountain—” The word stuttered out. “If it uses graywater, or interacts with underground lines, it falls within inspection scope. A simple review of utility ties, drainage paths—”

“There.” She smiled again, brighter this time. “You see the situation clearly. A man of your intelligence and discernment feels concern. I feel relieved already.”

He flushed at the intelligence and took the last swallow of his drink, ice clinking against his teeth.

“Only a question,” she said. “An internal email. A small thing. Truly, I feel silly asking. Such a trivial matter for someone of your rank.”

Trivial. Small. Simple.

His shoulders loosened. “I’ll check the file,” he heard himself say. “If something looks off, I’ll flag it for a follow-up.”

“No promises,” she echoed. “Only integrity.”

The word landed heavy and wrong, but the room blurred a little at the edges, and the perfume smelled stronger, and her eyes looked so pleased.

She touched his sleeve when they stood to leave. “Thank you, Mr. Hart. You make me feel much safer.”

She slipped past him toward the lobby, leaving a faint trail of gin, citrus, and something cheaper. He watched her go, hand on the back of the booth, heart thudding an uneven beat.

Integrity, he told himself on the walk to the parking garage. Due diligence. No harm.

Not yet.

* * *

Laura Hart checked the clock again.

10:53 pm

The news had ended forty minutes ago. The talk show after it barked muted jokes into the living room; she'd turned the volume down to a whisper to hear the garage door if it opened.

Colin rarely stayed late. On the nights he did, she knew in advance. A budget meeting. A grant review. End-of-year audits. He texted at five-thirty: Running late, love. Eat without me.

Her phone screen stayed blank.

She had called at eight, then at nine-thirty. Both calls rolled to voicemail. His recorded voice sounded too brisk, too formal. "You've reached Colin Hart. Please leave a—"

She ended the call before the beep each time.

A small bowl of pasta congealed on the coffee table, two bites missing. She'd changed from her office blouse into a soft blue sweater hours ago. The cardigan lay folded over the arm of the couch; her arms felt bare without it.

Laura lifted the remote, lowered it again. The lamp by the door painted a circle of yellow on the hardwood floor. In the middle of it sat his shoes, lined up side-by-side, toes touching the baseboard.

He had never worked this late.

Or vanished without a word.

She pressed her knuckles against her mouth and forced herself away from the window. The driveway tempted her mind toward disasters that hadn't happened. News sites offered nothing but collisions, floods, and grainy photos of crushed sedans that looked like his.

He is fine; she told herself. He lost track of time. A coworker dragged him out for a drink. He forgot to charge his phone. Mundane explanations stacked themselves like paper, thin and unsatisfying.

The garage door motor groaned to life.

Laura sagged against the hallway wall, knees weak. Relief came first, sharp enough to hurt. Then anger rose behind it, hot and clean.

The door from the garage opened. Colin fumbled with the deadbolt a second longer than usual and stumbled in with his tie loosened and his hair mussed in a way unrelated to wind.

"Hi," he said, voice lifted too high. "Sorry I'm late. Meeting ran—"

The smell hit her. Alcohol, heavy and cheap. Under it, a powdery floral perfume. Not hers.

She stared. "You didn't call."

His smile faltered. "The phone died," he said. "I didn't—" He set his briefcase down too fast; the latch sprang, papers bulging. A folded napkin slipped free, white with a smear of dark lipstick. He snatched it up and shoved it into his pocket with a clumsy motion that sliced the last thread of doubt in half.

Guilty? Not so fast.

But Laura felt something tilt inside her, a frame shifting on unseen nails.

"Work?" she asked, "or a bar?"

His throat worked. "It was still work," he said. "We just... moved the conversation."

She let the silence stretch until his eyes dropped.

Laughter floated in from the other room. Talk-show humor that wasn't funny.

09 The Fountain's Weather

Early November, 2027

By November, the fountain had its own weather.

Water rose in a clear ribbon from the carved stone bowl and fell into the basin with a sound that lived somewhere between rain and breathing. The mist cooled the air in a narrow radius around it, enough that the grass near the splash line stayed brighter, thicker. When the morning sun angled over the roofs, light shattered across the spray and painted moving coins on the brick wall.

Scooby House liked it.

Scooby's approval pressed upward through the ground, a warm pulse against her knees. The boards didn't reach this far, not literally, but the House's rhythm traveled through dirt and roots and pipework. It pressed against her shins when she knelt to check the flow, a slow, pleased rhythm that matched the fountain's fall.

Ninety percent done. Perhaps more.

The basin sat along the back fence where the old sprinkler line cut the yard. A shallow channel of flat stones led from its lip toward a smaller catch pool, curving around the old hackberry tree. She'd argued for that curve. Straight lines felt wrong for water that soothed.

The young Thallo cart clattered past her with a self-important wobble. It had started as a narrow cabinet with legs; somewhere between August and now it had repurposed itself into a wheelbarrow. Its drawers stayed shut, but it had added a plank across its top and delighted in hauling things. Today it bore a bag of mulch and a few iris pots strapped down with a bungee cord someone had donated.

"You are overqualified for this job," Daphne told it.

The cart bumped her ankle and squeaked, offended. Then it leaned its weight and slid the mulch bag to the ground.

"See?" she said. "Overqualified."

It wiggled its little legs in agreement.

She slit the mulch bag with a knife and tipped a slow arc into the new bed, then spread it with gloved hands. The smell of bark and damp soil rose. Scooby's pulse shifted, tiny adjustments in pressure and warmth. The House registered every change; she'd learned that early.

"Flow check?" Milo called.

He crouched beside the pump housing, one knee planted in the mud like he'd never learned what towels were for. Dirt streaked his black T-shirt and khakis. His hair looked like he'd pushed it back with a muddy hand and then forgotten about it, leaving a faint streak above his temple. His glasses slid down his nose every time he glanced at the gauge.

"Yes," Daphne said. "Half step up."

He adjusted the valve. The hum under her hands deepened; the arc rose a little, then steadied. Water hit the basin with more confidence, droplets jumping higher at the impact.

She watched the ripples spread, the way they met the channel's mouth and eased through the first line of stones. A slight stumble there, a hitch in the sound.

"Hold," she said.

Milo froze with one hand braced on the housing. "Too much?"

"Not yet."

She set the trowel aside and slid two fingers into the channel. The cool flow wrapped knuckles and palm, tugging at her nails. A small stone sat crooked. She nudged it. The hitch in the sound smoothed.

"There," she said.

He listened. "I hear it now. One rock?"

"One," she said. "They gossip. They throw each other off."

He gave a small huff of laughter. "Stones gossip. Noted."

Her mouth twitched.

He meant it. He had started a notebook for this project, a battered composition book with "HYDRO THINGS (DAPHNE)" scrawled on the cover. She'd seen his neat block handwriting filling the pages with notes about flow rates, root response, temperature gradients.

No one had ever given her senses that much weight.

Across the yard, Scooby's back porch had collected observers.

Clara perched on the top step, wrapped in a scarf the color of old wine, mug steaming between her hands. Vera sat beside her with a binder open on her knees, pen clipped between her fingers, eyes taking in everything. Pel and Tel lounged on the lower steps, trading a bag of chips and commentary. Two freshmen had paused at the side path on their way to their cars and hadn't resumed walking yet.

The House watched with more than eyes. She felt Scooby's attention as a soft pressure on the back of her neck, like standing where a breeze wanted to pass but respected her presence.

"It's good," she said.

Milo checked the gauge one more time, then closed the panel. "Run an hour-long test after lunch. Look for leaks."

"I will feel them first," she said. "But the gauge deserves its moment."

He grinned, that quick, bright twist of his mouth that made him look seventeen instead of nineteen. "You're not wrong."

She liked that he no longer argued with her language. In September, he blinked every time she said the House felt something. Now he accepted sentences like *Scooby is anxious* the way other people accepted *it's windy*.

He stood and stretched, hand going to the minor cut on his knuckle where he'd nicked himself on a sharp stone last week. She'd cleaned it for him at the kitchen sink, quick, efficient, not thinking about how his skin felt under the washcloth.

"Do you need me to haul anything else?" he asked.

"Mulch," she said. "One more bag. Then the iris. Then the small stones along the edge."

"On it." He snapped a brief salute at the Thallo cart. "Come on, hero. Let's flex those weird chair calves."

The cart squeaked and followed.

Daphne watched them cross the yard: boy and animated furniture, both eager to please, both buzzing at a frequency that used to exhaust her and now only tugged.

She had grown used to him.

That realization settled into place like a stone finding its hollow.

Back in September, his presence chafed. He filled the space with apologies and half sentences, anxiety leaking out of his skin. He knocked things over, dropped pens, and ran on those clipped, half-filled breaths he didn't notice. She'd felt worn thin ten minutes into each interaction.

Now—

He still dropped things. Still fumbled for words. Radiated nerves. But he started asking before he stepped into the garden. Waited until she spoke instead of rushing in with suggestions. He had learned her pace. He had let her teach it.

Her body no longer flinched when he approached.

On the days he didn't come, she noticed.

Not with panic. With absence. The house noticed too; Scooby's cables hummed differently across the side fence when his boots didn't cross them.

“It will balance,” Riss had said when Daphne admitted that once, voice barely above the fountain’s whisper. “New patterns feel wrong until they settle.”

Riss trusted patterns. Daphne trusted Riss.

She emptied mulch into the bed. The iris pots waited nearby, their strappy leaves arching like green hands.

“You like having your feet wet,” she told them. “You chose the right yard.”

Scooby’s pulse warmed, amused.

* * *

The baked goods ambush began with the smell.

By late morning, the sun had climbed high enough that Scooby’s bricks radiated back the chill they had stored overnight. The air felt crisp on Daphne’s bare forearms. Her breath didn’t fog, not yet, but the light had shifted to that thinner autumn quality that made edges sharper.

She knelt at the fountain, placing the last line of stones along the secondary channel. These weren’t structural—a decorative band to satisfy Ella’s sense of aesthetics and Clara’s need for “vibes.” Daphne set each one and waited, listening for the tiny shift in sound.

Cinnamon drifted to her a moment before his voice.

Not store-cinnamon, the kind that drowned in nutmeg and clove on cafe menus. This smelled like butter, brown sugar, straight bark. Edges of something overdone, a thin line of char.

Her hands stilled.

“Daphne!”

Milo’s voice carried from the front of the house, bounced off brick and porch columns and corner gutter.

She rose, wiped a streak of mud from her glove across her leg, and moved until the side gate came into view.

He came around it in a careful hurry, pan balanced between both palms.

A rectangular baking tray, the cheap nonstick kind with scratches along the sides. Foil crimped over the top. Steam escaped at the seams in faint white threads. The smell grew stronger with every step he took into the yard.

Cinnamon. Sugar. A hint of smoke. Something shaped for breakfast and singed by resistance.

Her stomach flipped.

On the back porch, Clara straightened. The mug rose halfway to her lips and froze there. Her smile started and then went still, equal parts delighted and terrified on Daphne’s behalf.

Pel sat up. “Called it,” he whispered to Tel. “Baking crush. Pay up.”

Tel smacked his arm with the chip bag instead of paying.

Vera closed her binder with a soft thud. Her eyes sharpened.

One freshman on the side path lifted her phone without realizing she'd done it.

Scooby's hum climbed. The overhead porch light brightened even though no one flipped the switch.

The young Thallo cart, halfway back from the kitchen with empty trays, paused. It angled its body, listening. Then it trundled toward Milo, curiosity in every creak.

He slowed when he saw her. The hopeful rush on his face eased back into caution. Flour dusted his shirt and the backs of his hands. A streak cut across his jaw, proof he'd scratched an itch with a sugared finger. His hair had gained a light coating of something pale; he looked like a student project colliding with a bakery.

"Hi," he said, voice cracking on the single syllable. "Sorry. I know this is weird."

Daphne's heart beat harder. The ribbon down her spine tightened until it felt like a wire.

"What is it?" she asked.

The question came out flatter than she meant, but it came.

"Cinnamon rolls." He held up the pan like an offering at a shrine. "Kind of. They were supposed to be rolls. They're more like...cinnamon rectangles. Or cinnamon geological formations. But I went for it. I watched videos. Pel and Tel kept yelling 'you're murdering the yeast' from the couch, and the smoke alarm went off twice, and someone filmed the disaster, and—"

He stopped, flushed, and blew out a breath.

"Words," he said. "Sorry. Too many."

Silence held her. The smell pushed her thoughts out of order.

"You baked," she said instead. "For me."

A statement of fact. The second dropped into the air like a stone.

"For you," he said. "Yes. I mean, the house gets some too, if you share. But I—"

He swallowed.

"You mentioned," he said slowly, "that you prefer cinnamon to nutmeg. In chai. Last Tuesday. When Gwen got you to taste the pumpkin spice thing and you made a face like someone had insulted a river."

He offered a flicker of a smile. It did not quite reach his eyes.

"That detail stayed with me," he went on. "You said you preferred simple flavors. Just cinnamon. No nutmeg. It sounded important."

Important.

The word had weight.

Clara smothered a squeal on the porch, eyes enormous. She bit her knuckles, shoulders shaking.

Vera's mouth thinned, not disapproving, not amused—calculating impact.

Pel whispered, "Oh my god, he remembered spice preferences."

"Shut up," Tel hissed. "He's got it bad."

Scooby's boards under the grass thrummed like plucked strings.

The young Thallo bumped Milo's shin and squeaked, peeking at the pan. Every piece of furniture in the foyer leaned toward the back door, their small creaks overlapping in a chorus of curiosity.

Every attention in the two houses focused on Daphne.

Her chest constricted. Her lungs forgot how to work.

She liked small, private kindnesses. Milo stayed on the far side of the fountain until she invited him closer. He brought data instead of opinions. He asked "Are you done talking?" instead of assuming.

This was not small or private.

She noticed every pair of eyes.

The students on the porch. The freshmen on the path. Rhea's pale face at an upstairs window. Scooby House hummed with giddy anticipation. Psi Omega's root network listened from under the street like a gossiping aunt.

And Milo. Standing there, hands full of something he created because she liked cinnamon.

Every previous gift in her life flashed across the inside of her skull.

Her mother's jewelry box pressed into her hands with, *You'll wear this at your engagement, darling*. A bouquet from a college boy who had not listened when she said she preferred small gatherings and threw her a party anyway. A plane ticket she never used because the man attached to it expected a version of her body and heart she did not give.

Gifts had meant obligation. Performance. Debts with strings knotted so tight they left marks.

Thirty-seven years of living pressed against the edges of her nineteen-year-old face.

Every time anyone looked at her with interest, she saw the years between who she appeared to be and who she was, strung like barbed wire. Water nymph ancestral longevity, human heart.

Milo looked at her like that now.

Not with hunger. Not with calculation.

With something worse.

With care.

It pressed against every fragile seam.

She stepped back. Her heel sank a fraction into the soft earth.

Across the yard, Clara's expression folded. "Oh," she whispered.

Milo's smile faltered. "If this feels—if I've made you uncomfortable, I—"

"It does," she said.

The words ripped out before she softened them. They sounded cruel, even to her own ears, but her throat had narrowed around anything gentler.

"It feels uncomfortable," she said. "Too much."

Color drained from his face. He didn't move.

"You are kind," she added, faster, toppling the truth out before she lost her nerve.

"You are careful, and the house likes you, and I enjoy working with you. But this—"

Her fingers curled against her palm inside the gardening gloves.

"This asks for a part of me I don't have words for," she said. "Especially with everyone watching. It feels like—"

He waited.

He didn't cut in, didn't translate for her. He watched, eyes wide and raw.

She hated the way his silence deepened the hurt.

"Like you want things I cannot give," she finished.

The fountain's song dropped to a thinner line. Scooby's hum went from bright to muted.

"Now," she said. "Nothing beyond it."

His mouth opened, closed.

For a heartbeat, she braced for argument.

I didn't mean it that way. You're overreacting. Can't we just...

He said none of that.

"Okay," he answered.

Only that. One word that wrapped itself around her boundary and respected it even while his face cracked.

"I am sorry," he said. "I thought—I meant for it to feel safe. Not heavy."

He looked down at the pan. The foil had loosened at one corner; a bit of brown sugar glaze had seeped and crusted there.

"It doesn't matter what I thought," he corrected himself. "You said what you need."

He drew in a breath. His shoulders straightened a fraction, like he was putting something heavy on his back.

"Do I take these?" he asked. "Or leave them for Scooby?"

The question struck her like cold water.

Even now, when he stung, his first instinct still ran through what made her day easiest.

The smell of cinnamon swelled, thick and sweet and cloying. Her stomach rolled.

"Take them," she said. "Please."

“Understood,” he said.

He didn't ask her to explain. Didn't salvage dignity with a joke. He didn't drop the pan and flee.

He turned.

The young Thallo squeaked and followed, worried little legs pattering.

“Stay,” Daphne said.

The word came out steady, the way Riss had taught her.

The cart's feet locked. Its body vibrated, wanting to disobey, but the House backed her. Scooby's hum anchored the furniture in place. Only the drawers rattled in helpless sympathy.

Milo walked across the yard, pan held level.

He walked past without glancing at Clara; she tracked him with a look that begged for a reset. Or at Vera, still and intent. He did not glance at Pel and Tel, silent now. He did not look toward the freshman with the phone, who lowered her arm and shut off the camera.

He passed through the back door Scooby opened for him. The house's coral paint and white frame swallowed him.

The door clicked shut.

Silence in his wake.

The fountain's sound filled it after a beat. Thin, higher pitched. Less full.

Daphne realized she had not breathed. Her chest burned. She forced air in, out, in again. It scraped.

The ground under her feet felt unsteady, as if the ribbon anchoring her had frayed.

Grass whispered under approaching footsteps along the house's side.

Riss arrived like a temperature change.

One moment the yard felt bare and brittle. Next, the roots under the lawn deepened and smoothed, singing at a lower, steadier note. Riss steadied a place the way certain people calmed a room by entering it.

She wore an oversized sweater the color of raw wool and jeans rolled at the ankles. Her braid draped over one shoulder. She stood barefoot on the mulch path, toes curling into bark and soil.

“You did not stop him for me,” Daphne said, without turning.

“No,” Riss said. “You did that yourself.”

Her voice held no judgment, only observation.

Daphne stared at the fountain. The water looked the same. It sounded different. She knew that difference came from inside her, not the pump, but the illusion comforted nothing.

“He baked,” she said. “For me.”

"Yes," Riss agreed.

"No one has ever done that," Daphne said, the words inching out past the tightness in her throat. "Remembering something small. Changing the whole recipe for one small thing."

Riss stepped closer. Not close enough to crowd her, yet near enough for Daphne to feel her warmth.

"His gesture was real," Riss said. "So was your limit."

Daphne's eyes stung. She blinked once, twice. Her body obeyed the old training and refused tears in public, but the pressure behind them hurt.

"It sounded cruel," she said. "I sounded cruel."

"You sounded clear," Riss said. "Cruelty hides what it wants. You named what you cannot give."

"He looked hurt," Daphne whispered.

"He is," Riss said. "He cared. You closed the door to the story he wanted. That leaves bruises."

Leaves rustled in the hackberry tree, though no wind crossed Daphne's skin.

"He deserved better," she said.

"He deserved the truth," Riss countered. "Before his feelings grew, earlier truth spared you both. You didn't have that truth then, and you acted from the truth in front of you."

Daphne swallowed around it.

"I wanted to match the shape of that gesture," she said, voice barely there. "Normal. Flattered. Someone who says yes and means it."

Riss's hand brushed the back of her arm. Not a grab. Touch that asked permission and withdrew if not granted.

Daphne leaned in enough for contact. The warmth seeped through the sweater and shirt and skin.

Riss met her eyes. "You don't carry that kind of normal. You move through different water."

Daphne remembered those evenings in her twenties, bending into the girl those men wanted. Laughing louder, staying later, leaning in when she wanted to lean back. Leaving parties with her nerves jangling so loud that she shook.

"I am tired of disappointing people," she said.

"You did not disappoint him," Riss said. "You refused to lie. That is not a disappointment. You shifted the stream before it carried both of you over the edge."

The young Thallo nudged Daphne's shin again. Its little frame shook.

She looked down. "I hurt him," she said.

It creaked, low and mournful.

“And you protected him,” Riss said. “And yourself. Protection stings hardest where it severs something that once felt good. You feel that ache.”

Daphne released a breath trembling through her chest.

“I already do,” she said. “The space where he stood—”

Her voice failed before the rest emerged.

Riss did not force it.

“He will give you the distance you asked for,” Riss said instead. “He listens when you speak. That is one of his gifts. The silence afterward will feel like a loss. That does not mean you chose wrong.”

The fountain’s pitch shifted again, the way it did when Daphne adjusted the stones. She had not touched them.

Scooby House adjusted itself around her.

The boards under the lawn warmed. The hum in the walls softened. Somewhere inside, a door eased shut with extra care, hinges oiled by a house that hated slamming.

Across the street, Psi Omega’s vines stirred along the second-floor balcony. Leaves turned their faces toward Scooby’s yard, then toward the sky.

“Both houses felt that,” Riss murmured. “They care for both of you. They will recover. So will you.”

“What about him?” Daphne asked.

Riss’s eyes darkened. “He will hurt, stew, rant to Pel and Tel and pretend he is not ranting.” The corner of her mouth twitched. “He will apologize more than he needs to. Then he will find his footing again.”

Daphne’s vision blurred. She blinked until the yard settled into focus.

“What do I do now?” she asked.

Riss’s answer came without hesitation. “You finish the fountain.”

Daphne let out half a laugh that sounded more like a sob. “That is all?”

“For today,” Riss said. “You ground your emotions in the work. The house feels that. The work remains. Ache grows beside it.”

She squeezed Daphne’s arm once, then withdrew. “If you wish to collapse later, I will be in the garden across the street. Bring tea.”

Daphne nodded.

Riss walked back toward the side gate, bare feet silent on the grass. The roots under the yard shifted with her, then settled.

The young Thallo pressed its whole small body to her leg, offering comfort far beyond its size. She rested a gloved hand on its back.

“I said what I needed,” she told the air, the cart, the house, herself. “Even though I hated hearing it.”

Scooby's hum rose, a note of agreement.

Across the yard, the porch had quieted. Clara had set her mug aside and pressed her hands over her face. Vera watched Daphne for a long moment, eyes full of something that hurt to look at, then turned her attention to shooing Pel and Tel back inside.

Daphne picked up the trowel.

Gaps still interrupted the secondary channel. Stones waited in the bucket. Irises waited for their final blanket of mulch.

She knelt. The ribbon of her spine unspooled back into the ground, slow and reluctant, then took hold.

She set a stone. The fountain's voice smoothed by a fraction.

Another stone. Another tiny change.

The fountain sang on, carrying the thin ache of something ended and the steadier note of a house, and a woman, choosing the shape of their own weather.

* * *

Milo didn't remember crossing the yard.

One moment the cinnamon rolls sat cooling in his hands; the next he stumbled through Scooby House's back door into the kitchen's dim warmth. The air smelled like coffee grounds and lemon cleaner. He set the pan on the counter too hard. The clang made him flinch.

Phil looked up from sorting recycling. His expression softened, nothing extreme — just recognition, steadiness.

He didn't ask questions. Didn't move fast. Reached over and clicked the kettle on.

"Sit," he said.

Milo did. His knees wobbled. He landed in the nearest chair and stared at the scratched surface of the table. The lines blurred.

Phil placed a mug in front of him. Steam rose. Chamomile.

Milo swallowed. "She told me to leave her alone," he whispered. "She said it like I'd—like I'd crossed a line I didn't see."

Phil pulled out the chair across from him and sat, forearms resting on his thighs. Not leaning in. Not crowding.

"Breakups, non-breakups, misunderstandings—whatever you'd call this stuff," he said, voice low and even, "it hits harder than you think it will."

Milo winced. "It wasn't—it wasn't even anything."

"That hurts worse," Phil said. "Care stings hardest where the boundary blurs."

Milo pressed his palms over his face. "I messed up baking anything. Too much, too loud. Too...public."

Phil didn't contradict him. "It felt right at the time?"

“Yes,” Milo whispered. “I just...wanted to do something nice.”

“That’s not a crime,” Phil said. “And she didn’t treat it like one.”

Milo let his hands fall. His eyes stung; he didn’t bother hiding it. “She looked scared.”

Phil paused — not in confusion, but in the careful way he paused when someone said something that mattered. “I don’t know her well, and I won’t guess at her feelings,” he said. “But I know she set a boundary. And you heard it.”

Milo’s breath shuddered. “I didn’t want to make her feel like she owed me anything.”

“I believe you,” Phil said. “She does too.”

The kettle clicked off.

Before either of them moved, footsteps murmured in the hall.

Vera appeared in the doorway, binder tucked under one arm, expression unreadable. She took in the scene at a glance: Milo’s hunched posture, Phil’s steadiness, the pan on the counter cooling like an accusation.

She set the binder aside and came closer.

“Are you hurt?” she asked. “Or humiliated?”

Milo blinked. His throat closed around the answer. “Both.”

Vera nodded. “That tracks.”

She didn’t sit, but she stood within comfortable range — no pity, no theatrical comfort, just presence.

“Here’s the pattern,” Vera said. “This isn’t a rejection of you. The pace hit her wrong. Nothing in her life moves fast. Big gestures and an audience spike her nerves. She needed the pressure to stop.”

Milo’s face crumpled. “I wasn’t pressuring her.”

“I know,” Vera said. “She knows too. That’s why she said ‘please’ before ‘go.’ She wasn’t pushing you out. She was protecting herself.”

“From me,” he whispered.

“From expectation,” Vera corrected. “Not from you.”

His breath hitched again.

“You want to take care of her,” Vera said. “But you can’t do that by making bids she didn’t ask for. Give her space. Calm space. Let her return with her own rhythm.”

Milo swallowed. “What if she doesn’t?”

“You listened,” Vera said. “That choice holds. She comes back when the pressure lifts. Not timid—measured.”

Phil finally reached over and tapped the mug. A permission slip back into the world.

“Drink,” he said. “Sleep later. No decisions tonight.”

Milo wrapped his hands around the warm ceramic. His shoulders sagged, not relieved, but enough to breathe again.

The cinnamon rolls sat cooling on the counter, burned, absurdly sweet.

Scooby dimmed her lights in sympathy.

10 Root Level

Mid November, 2027

Vera only meant to check the group chat while her tea steeped.

Instead, she stared at a screenshot Phil had forwarded, the thumbnail large enough to show two Crescent State students walking across the quad toward Scooby House — laughing, backpacks bouncing, nothing remarkable at except that someone had made them remarkable.

When she tapped it, the full thread expanded:

CAMPUS NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH — PRIVATE GROUP

Thread started 11:14 AM by Karen G.

Karen G.

Photo: two young women walking together, mid-conversation.

Caption: “THIS is who’s moving into that experimental house. Those kinds of women. Parents, wake up.”

Mary R.

“You mean the rainbow ones? They’re everywhere now.”

Thomas B.

“My nephew said he avoids that entire street. Claims the House watches you.”

Gina H.

“Someone needs to check for spiritual sickness. These things spread.”

A second photo:

Karen Grundy stood at a small press stand, mouth wide, outrage mid-flight, microphones angled toward her. A man waited at her side with a dense folder organized into color-coded tabs and risk labels. Scooby House’s coral address anchored beneath one steady hand.

Karen G.

“Thank you to Colin H. from Campus Safety for protecting REAL families. Finally, someone who LISTENS.”

Vera tapped to zoom in on the man's ID badge.

"Colin Hart...?" Phil texted.

"That's him, I think."

"Also, she posted this trash fifteen minutes ago. Sorry."

Another comment rolled in:

Karen G.

"Until the administration removes that House, Crescent State is unsafe for REAL WOMEN."

Vera set the phone down and let the silence settle.

Not outraged. Not offended. Something cleaner and sharper.

A pattern revealed.

The man harassing them with constant re-inspections was not only incompetent. He had chosen a side.

And worse, he was sloppy about it.

Vera exhaled once, slow. Her tea timer chimed. She ignored it.

Oh, she thought. You insufferable little man. You've made this personal.

* * *

Scooby House's common room smelled of mulch and cinnamon.

Ella was, of course, in the basement arguing with optic cable like it had insulted her lineage.

Vera entered the lounge with her mug of now-oversteeped tea.

Phil paced in front of the couch, phone pressed to his ear.

"Yes, sir, I understand the need for safety," he said, voice tight. "But this is the sixth re-inspection request in four weeks. Nothing has changed since last Thursday except—"

A pause. His shoulders slumped.

"Mr. Hart, with respect—"

Click.

He lowered the phone. Closed his eyes. Let out a breath full of grinding patience. "He hung up on me."

Vera set her mug down. "Phil."

He turned, surprised. "Oh—hey. You saw the thread?"

"Yes." A simple word, but it landed with the weight of a verdict.

He rubbed his face with both hands. "I'm keeping things running. The Lanterns operate with too few hands, Daphne's fountain tests are attracting gawkers, Karen Grundy is on a crusade, and Hart—" He gestured at the air. "Hart thinks the fountain is a biohazard because it emits mist."

Vera approached him with measured steps, the way she approached overloaded first-years having breakdowns. Not soft — steady.

“Give me the file,” she said.

Phil blinked. “What file?”

“Everything Hart has sent you. Re-inspection forms. Condition memos. Warning notices. His photo on a press podium beside Karen Grundy.”

Phil hesitated. “Vera, you don’t have to jump into this. You said you didn’t want to be involved in Lantern admin.”

“I don’t. And I won’t be.”

He waited, confused.

She clarified: “But Phil... this isn’t Lantern admin, it’s structural incompetence. And I do not tolerate hazards.”

“Oh,” he whispered.

Vera picked up his overstuffed folder from the coffee table. It was, in every way, an offense: crooked labels, mixed fonts, three different colored tabs used with no logical order.

She straightened the top sheet with two fingers. Composed herself like someone about to sit a standardized exam she expected to ace.

“I will speak with Facilities Compliance,” she said. “And the ombudsman. And the Environmental Engineering oversight chair. He owes me a favor.”

Phil stared at her with a mix of awe and fear. “You... want to talk to Hart?”

“No, talking to Hart is unproductive.” She looked up. “Talking *around* Hart will solve the problem.”

She slid the papers under her arm and took her mug, cool and bitter, as if gathering weapons for a duel.

“Don’t thank me yet,” she added as she moved toward the hallway. “Fixing this will take time.” Her eyes sharpened. “But he will yield, Phil. And I confess—” her voice dropped to an uncharacteristic, almost wicked softness, “—there is a part of me that will enjoy educating him.”

Phil swallowed. “Vera?”

She paused at the doorway.

“You’re... terrifyingly good at this.”

Her mouth curved, the faintest expression of satisfaction.

“I know.”

She left with the folder, calm and lethal, and Phil realized some trouble required someone scarier than a Lantern.

* * *

Laura Hart sat alone at the dining table, the laminate surface littered with documents she had once pretended not to notice. Mortgage statements; a credit card bill with unfamiliar bar charges. The deed to her home, a printout of Karen Grundy's latest Facebook crusade.

Centered on top lay the photo she'd copied from the thread. Karen Grundy raged into a microphone while Colin stood a little too close behind her. Leaning in. Smiling, with the smile he hadn't worn at home since the 2000s.

Laura printed the photo in color and slipped the warm sheet into a manila folder already thick with the past week's documents. Deeds. Bank transfers. Tax records she'd pulled from his unattended briefcase. And at the very front; the card of a private investigator, tucked like a chapter heading.

Her mascara blurred as she looked at it. Not because she was angry. Nor surprised. Only tired.

Tired down to the bone.

She slumped forward, elbows on the stack of evidence, breath catching in a broken rhythm she'd held back. Years, if she was honest. A tear slid down the card's glossy edge and smeared the ink on her thumb.

Enough.

Laura wiped her eyes with the back of her wrist, lifted the business card between two trembling fingers, and reached for her phone.

"Okay," she whispered to the air, voice thin but steady. "Let's find out everything."

She dialed. This time she didn't hang up.

* * *

The fountain mist hung pale-blue in the slanted sunlight, its steady ribbon gurgling across the yard. A handful of freshmen sprawled on the grass with open laptops. They pretended to study while gossiping about Daphne's fountain work and Milo's feud with the Thallo cart.

Which was why they noticed him first.

A man in a faded work jacket stepped through the side gate, toolbox swinging. Not a campus employee they recognized. Crescent State maintenance wore navy polos, not Walmart-green jackets with the sleeves frayed.

He kept his head down and walked too fast. Bee-lined for the fountain.

Maya, a freshman with dyed lavender hair and zero tolerance for weird adults near her safe space, sat up. "Uh... who's that?"

Her friend Jake squinted. "Maintenance? Must be?"

"No badge," Maya said. "Also, maintenance doesn't move like it's sneaking."

As if summoned, three more freshmen drifted out of Scooby House and followed Maya's stare.

The man knelt beside the fountain pump housing. Opened his toolbox. Inside: not a multimeter or a screwdriver set. Two oversized, heavy pipe wrenches and a mallet.

Jake whispered, "Dude... he's gonna smash it."

The man looked up at the sound. He saw the growing semicircle of freshmen around him and barked:

"Step back! Official campus maintenance! If you kids interfere, the dean will hear of it!"

This was the wrong line to use with Scooby House residents.

Maya put her hands on her hips. "The dean knows our names. Want to take another swing at that?"

Another freshman crossed her arms. "Maintenance knocks on the front door, genius."

"You aren't even wearing safety gloves," someone else called.

"You're not on today's schedule," said another, reading from an app only Lantern trainees used.

The man stood. The toolbox snapped shut. His expression flickered between irritation and panic.

And that was when Ella came around the left side of the house.

Hair pulled up. Sleeves shoved back. Eyes narrow with the kind of focus normally reserved for cursed cables.

"You want to run that line by me again?" she said.

Phil entered through the opposite gate, calm and solid in the white RD polo that made people listen.

The man froze between them like a cartoon mouse between two cats.

Phil's voice stayed even. "Sir, Crescent State maintenance reports to me when working on this property. State your name and department."

The man took one look at Phil. Then at Ella. Then, at the ten freshmen closing their semicircle.

He spun, sprinted for the fence, and flung himself over it with a spectacular lack of athleticism, landing in the neighbor's rosemary bush with a yell.

His wallet tumbled out of his pocket and hit the ground on the Scooby side.

Maya pointed at it. "Uh... evidence?"

Jake picked it up with two fingers as if it radiated danger. "Driver's license says Timothy P. Walker. That doesn't sound like a maintenance guy."

Phil sighed. "No, it does not."

Ella crossed her arms. "Did he just Home Alone a fountain?"

Jake: "Dude had a mallet."

Ella: "Of course he had a mallet."

Phil already had his phone out. "Campus Police? Hi. We've had an intruder attempt unauthorized access to the residence infrastructure. No injuries. Yes, we have identification."

Behind the fence, "Timothy P. Walker" was attempting to run.

Horrible timing for Tim: the homeowner burst outside yelling, "GET OUT OF MY SHRUBS," and police spotted him at once.

The freshmen erupted into eager cross-talk.

"Did you see him jump?"

"He almost ate the birdbath."

"That toolbox screamed sus from the start."

"Now we're forming a patrol."

"No," Ella snapped instantly. "Absolutely not."

Phil raised both hands. "Right, you gremlins. You did good. "But next time..." He met each of their eyes. "You call us first. Don't close in on a strange adult with tools. You step back and use your phones."

Maya nodded. "Yes, sir."

"We got you," another kid promised.

The students dispersed, clustering in eager retellings as they headed back toward the porch, the energy a mix of adrenaline and pride.

Phil retrieved the dropped wallet from Jake. "Well done."

At the far corner of Scooby House, Daphne stood where the foundation met the shadowed edge of the wall. Her hands twisted together. Her breath hitched in a way only she heard.

The fountain's pulse faltered, and she flinched at the echo of it.

Noise. Fear. Intention pointed like a blade at something she'd built with care.

She stayed until police escorted the man away. Long enough to see Maya crack a joke and Ella roll her eyes.

She vanished through the side door unnoticed. Shaking. Invisible again.

Scooby's lights dimmed to follow her, softening the corridors to a hush.

The basement had stopped pretending to be a basement.

It still had concrete walls and an honest, ugly floor, sure, but the air felt different. Less storage, more like an engine room. EUTERPE's rack lights painted the far wall in soft green and gold; the cable runs along the ceiling hummed with satisfied energy. Thallo had used the back corner as a staging area for her "children"—two baby tables, one shy footstool and the cart with forklift aspirations.

I sat on the rolling chair in front of the main monitor, hoodie sleeves over my hands, hair yanked into a knot that said I'd lost the fight with humidity hours ago.

"Status sweep," I murmured.

Lines slid across the console.

HOUSE NETWORK: STABLE

EMOTIONAL REGISTER: CALM

ROOT CROSS-TALK: BASELIN

FOUNTAIN FLOW: OPTIMAL

EXTERNAL THREATS: NONE DETECTED

EUTERPE added a little sparkle emoji next to that last line, because of course she did.

"Cocky tonight," I said.

The left monitor displayed a basement camera's view of my back. Small, hunched, glowing in laptop light.

Another window showed a temperature gradient overlay of the foundation. Most of it glowed yellow. One patch along the far wall behind the server rack, pulsed a shade warmer.

"Run the heat trace again," I said.

ALREADY RUNNING, she wrote.

RESULT: LOCALIZED ANOMALY PERSISTS.

PROBABLE CAUSE: THALLO.

"I'm telling you, if she starts growing wardrobes through the slab—"

A soft clatter interrupted me.

Behind me.

I spun in the chair.

The baby Thallo cart rolled past the end of the rack, drawers shut, little wheels moving with brisk purpose. Clara had tied a scarf around its middle like a work belt. A coil of cable lay across its top, bundled and secured with a bungee cord.

"Cargo run?" I asked.

It didn't answer; furniture doesn't, and the timing felt pointed. The cart angled toward the warm patch of wall.

"Hold up." I stood. The chair rolled back and hit the power strip with a dangerous wobble. "We don't have doors over there."

The cart picked up speed.

"What...," I said, striding after it.

Thallo's offspring reached the concrete, paused, then bumped against the cinderblocks. Once. Twice.

On the third contact, the air changed.

The wall softened. Not visibly, more like a pressure shift. My hybrid nerves prickled along my arms, and the sigil earring tingled. The line where the cinderblock met the painted foundation blurred, then rippled. A vertical seam whispered into view, traced in faint light.

A door outline.

“Where did you come from?” I asked.

EUTERPE pinged my earbuds so fast I flinched.

NEW ARCHITECTURAL FEATURE DETECTED, she wrote.

PERMISSION TO MAP?

“You needed to ask?”

The seam brightened, then sank under unseen pressure. Stone...flowed. The cinder blocks parted along neat edges and slid inward. No grinding. No dust. A clean, impossible opening where a solid wall had existed since the seventies.

Cool air spilled out. It smelled of damp soil, old wood, and something metallic.

The cart gave an eager squeak and rolled through.

“Wait,” I hissed. “You don’t get to have adventures without me.”

I stepped up to the threshold.

The tunnel beyond didn’t match Scooby’s basement.

The builders poured our basement floor in straight concrete. This passage started with smooth boards underfoot, old-heart pine or something close, sealed and oiled. The smells shifted with each breath—less paint, more earth. A faint luminescence glowed along the low ceiling, not from bulbs, but from thin lines etched into the wood. Wards, I realized after a blink. Tiny sigils stretched into filigree.

“EUTERPE,” I whispered, “tell me you see this.”

ALREADY RECORDING, she replied.

NOTE: LIGHT SOURCE = NON-ELECTRICAL.

ORIGIN TRACE: THALLO?

I stretched a hand toward the nearest sigil. Warmth greeted my fingers. Not hot, only alive. The pattern threaded down the wall in a graceful curve, then dove into a braided cable lying along the floor.

The cable wasn’t mine.

Mine came in color-coded jackets, zip-tied, labeled every three feet. This braid looked... grown. Copper and fiber twisted together with what I swore were vine strands, bark texture running along one side, glossy leaf-vein lines along the other. It pulsed in sync with the light.

“Not alive,” I told myself.

The cable pulsed again.

“...Alive-adjacent.”

The baby Thallo cart trundled ahead, its wheels soft on the boards. The cable hugged the right-hand wall, then dipped under a low arch of root.

I stepped through the doorway.

The temperature shifted. Cooler than the server room, with the steady climate you get in wine cellars and ancient tombs.

EUTERPE whispered in my earbuds:

PROBABLE ROUTE: UNDER STREET.

DESTINATION: PSI OMEGA SORORITY.

I stopped.

“You’re sure?”

ROOT SIGNATURE MATCHES PSI OMEGA, she wrote.

PLUS: RISS’S UNIQUE PATTERN PRESENT.

“Riss helped build this.”

NEGATIVE: PSI OMEGA GREW IT

HOUSES FLIRT VIA ROOT NETWORKS.

BANDWIDTH AUTHORIZATION: ELLA HUGO.

I swallowed a ridiculous laugh. “I gave my house a better network card, and she used it to date across the street.”

The cable-brace under the root hummed, like it agreed.

I pulled my phone out with one hand and hit the Scooby House group chat.

ELLA: *Basement. Now. Bring Phil.*

Also Clara, Vera, Milo, Daphne, Riss if she’s nearby.

No visitors.

Phil replied first.

PHIL: *Are we on fire?*

ELLA: *No.*

PHIL: *On my way.*

CLARA: *Is this a murder monster thing or a cute thing?*

ELLA: *Cute. I think.*

CLARA: *GREAT SHOES ENGAGED.*

VERA: *I have three reports to finish.*

ELLA: *The basement grew a door.*

VERA: *!!...I am coming.*

Riss didn’t text. A soft vibration under my bare toes told me she heard, anyway

I waited at the mouth of the tunnel until footsteps approached behind me.

Phil arrived first. He wore his Lantern polo, jeans, and the expression he saved for fire drills and policy meetings. It softened when he saw my face.

“What happened?” he asked.

“We got a new feature,” I said. “Thallo opened a door.”

He leaned past me, peered down the tunnel, and swore under his breath. “You didn’t ask for a contractor, did you?”

“Not this week.”

Clara clattered down the stairs behind him, scarf flying, hair clipped up in a way that turned her into the world’s most stylish gossip columnist. “If this isn’t a romcom moment, I’m leaving,” she warned.

Vera followed at a more dignified pace, glasses in place, sleeves rolled with military precision. She took one look at the open doorway and narrowed her eyes. “Who signed off on this?” she asked.

“Not yet.” My stomach flipped in a weird blend of guilt and exhilaration. “But Facilities will cry.”

Milo came last, hands still streaked with dirt from fountain work, eyes wide when he spotted the braided cable.

“Oh,” he breathed. “Oh, she’s pretty.”

Behind him, Daphne hovered on the bottom step, hands clasped tight at her sternum. She hovered between fleeing and staying.

I caught her eye. “House says come,” I said. “And the ground agrees.”

Her shoulders loosened one notch. She stepped onto the concrete, then onto the board inside the threshold. The moment her weight settled, the lights in the tunnel brightened.

Riss slipped down from the other staircase like she’d grown from shadow. No footsteps. No creak. One heartbeat she wasn’t there; the next she leaned against the concrete pillar, eyes half-lidded, listening to something none of us heard.

“The roots woke me,” she said simply.

“Good,” I replied. “They sent an invitation you need to see.”

We clustered at the doorway. Scooby’s basement lights hummed behind us. The tunnel ahead glowed with that soft wardlight, pulsing in a pattern that matched the fountain’s rhythm and Scooby’s pulse under my skin.

“Okay,” I said, taking a breath that tasted like oak and code. “Field trip. Stay on the boards. Lick nothing.”

“Rude,” Clara muttered. “No one licks infrastructure.”

Phil gave me a look that said I’d forfeited rights to complain if someone proved her wrong.

We followed the baby Thallo cart deeper into the tunnel.

The first few yards stayed simple: wooden floor, etched sigils, braided cable. Then the walls changed. The rough foundation concrete gave way to smooth stone, then to something else. Places where Thallo’s influence seeped in: carved panels with leaf

reliefs, little shelves big enough for candles or tiny potted herbs. Thyme and rosemary cuttings scented the air.

Overhead, the wardlight lines thickened. Some straight, some curling into loops that reminded me of Loom glyphs. EUTERPE hummed in my ear:

LOOM-SYSTEM-SIGNATURE: FAINT BUT PRESENT.

CLASSIFICATION: ARCHITECTURAL INHERITANCE.

“So this happens,” I murmured, “when you give a dryad and a demihouse access to mythic fiber optics.”

Clara ran her fingers along one carved panel, careful not to press too hard. “This is... ridiculously romantic,” she said. “I feel like we’re inside a proposal.”

“Is that wise?” Vera asked. “Building secret tunnels.”

“Secret-ish,” Phil said. “If something goes wrong topside, I like an escape route.”

“This isn’t an escape route,” Riss said quietly. “This is a bridge.”

We walked farther.

The air cooled another degree. The boards underfoot shifted from pine to something denser, darker. Footsteps sounded different; less hollow, more resonant. Ahead, the floor changed again, transitioning at a clean seam into marble tile.

I stopped at the border.

“Okay,” I said. “I definitely didn’t put marble downstairs.”

The tile shone with a faint natural gloss. Not polished to hotel shine, but smooth and worn from years of careful feet. Pale veining traced through it in patterns that looked like roots.

“Riss,” I said, “tell me this doesn’t steal from your foundation.”

She knelt, pressed her palm to the marble, then smiled. “She borrowed my pattern,” she said. “Not my strength. They match now.”

The braided cable left the wall here and climbed a low plinth, then split into two. One branch dove into the floor, and vanished into the stone. The other climbed up, crossed the ceiling in a gentle curve, and flowed along the opposite wall.

“The wires and vines twisted together,” Milo whispered, awe-heavy. “This is... integrated. She’s braiding physical infrastructure with root communication.”

“It looks safe,” Vera said, inspecting the junction with a practiced eye. “No exposed lines. No trip hazards.”

“We’re under the street now,” Daphne whispered

I looked back at her.

“How do you know?” I asked.

She closed her eyes. The muscles around her jaw quivered as if she held herself still on purpose. “Sound,” she murmured. “The echo changed. Before, the fountain rings followed us. Here, I hear cars above. Weight moving over asphalt. And...” She

tilted her head, listening. “Water main to our right. Storm drain to the left. We passed them fifty or sixty steps ago.”

EUTERPE chimed.

CONFIRMATION: TUNNEL POSITION UNDER STREET.

SENSE MAP ACCURATE.

“Show-off,” I told both of them, but warmth slipped under my ribs.

We kept walking.

The tunnel widened. The ceiling lifted, and wardlight brightened to something more like daylight filtered through water. Ahead, the air tasted greener, sap-thick. Riss’s shoulders relaxed as we drew closer. Scooby’s pulse under my feet thinned, then braided with something else. The slow, deep heartbeat I recognized from visits to PsiO.

The baby Thallo cart rolled forward with eager clicks, then gave a happy wobble and vanished around the last curve.

We followed.

The tunnel opened into a chamber that hadn’t existed last semester.

I knew PsiO’s basement. I bled in that basement. I knew the beams, the angles, the place where mold once climbed like sculpted rot. This... was new.

We stood at the edge of a space that merged both houses.

The floor tiles continued from our side, then shifted near the far wall into PsiO’s polished concrete. The walls carried both languages: Thallo’s carved wood on one side, PsiO’s thick stone and root-vein plaster on the other. Vines draped from overhead beams, threaded with little Thallo-grown hooks to hold them in place. Soft light spilled from sconces shaped like open hands, built of wood and bronze.

A table stood in the center of the chamber.

Not one of Thallo’s original children. This piece looked older in design and younger in execution, a meeting point between styles. Thick Ashwood legs. A top inlaid with a ring of pale stone shaped like a river. Along the edges, small sigils alternated: Scooby’s veve, PsiO’s leaf-motif, my personal ward mark, and a hint of roots that looked like Riss’s.

A familiar door on the far side. PsiO’s internal basement access. To the left of it, a set of stone steps curved up toward where I knew the laundry room sat.

We walked under the street and into PsiO’s bones.

“In this scene,” Clara breathed out, reverent, “two idiots get locked in a room. Classic romcom forced proximity.”

She waggled her eyebrows at Vera.

Vera ignored her. For once.

“This is... secure?” he asked Riss.

She moved past us into the chamber, bare feet silent. Her fingertips brushed the nearest root as if she checking a pulse. Then the carved edge of the table. Then one of the wardlight lines.

“Secure and voluntary,” she said. “PsiO grew on her side. Scooby grew hers. They met in the middle. No one forced it.”

EUTERPE added:

CONCLUSION: BILATERAL LINK ESTABLISHED.

PURPOSE: RESOURCE SHARING

MUTUAL DEFENSE

EMOTIONAL SYNCHRONIZATION.

SECONDARY PURPOSE: COURTSHIP.

“Don’t editorialize,” I muttered.

Daphne hovered at the threshold. She looked smaller here, surrounded by big gestures and old power. Her attention stayed fixed on the floor.

“What do you feel?” I asked.

She flinched like I’d caught her trespassing. “It’s... steady,” she said. “Water flow under PsiO already matched the House. This... tunnel extends that pattern. The way you extend a heartbeat through veins.”

Milo inspected the braided cable where it entered a PsiO wall conduit. His face lit with something close to religious joy. “This gives us redundancy,” he said. “If one system fails, the other picks up the slack. Load balancing for shelters.”

“Language I like,” Phil said.

Vera walked a slow circle around the table. “We need agreements,” she said.

“Charter addendum. Liability distribution. Emergency protocols.”

“Already drafting,” I told her. “In my head. Calm down.”

“We need a Winter Mixer, full formal, catered, debutantes.” Riss pointed out.

Clara bounced at Vera. “May I escort you to the dance?”

Vera took her by the hand. “Sure. But I don’t do ‘debutante,’” she warned.

Scooby’s presence pressed from behind like a hand at my shoulder. PsiO’s presence rose from underfoot and brushed my spine. For a heartbeat, I felt them as two distinct signatures wrapped around us. Then something shifted.

The wardlight brightened.

The faint hum of the braided cable deepened.

For two or three seconds, House and Sorority aligned.

The air tasted sharper. Colors edged.

Daphne’s shoulders dropped. She exhaled a soft sound of relief. Riss closed her eyes and smiled, small and true. Milo laughed under his breath. Clara pressed her hand to her chest like someone watching a proposal.

Phil stood close enough that his warmth grounded the dizzy sense of scale.

"This feels like..." I groped for language. "A backbone."

"Houses grow when they feel safe," Riss said.

"Houses reach when they fall in love," Clara added.

Vera shot her a look. "Please don't anthropomorphize our infrastructure."

"Too late," I said. "They started it."

The moment passed, the air eased. Pulses separated again into familiar beats. Scooby there, PsiO here, still themselves, just... connected.

EUTERPE chimed in my ear.

RECOMMENDATION: ESTABLISH ACCESS CONTROL.

SUGGESTED LABEL: "ROOT CORRIDOR."

ALSO: CONGRATULATIONS.

I swallowed past a lump I refused to call emotion.

"Okay," I said, louder. "Ground rules."

"You're hot when you're bossy," Phil whispered.

I declared, "No freshmen allowed here without our authorization. No visitors, tours, or TikToks. Scooby keeps the door shut unless someone with house keys requests it. PsiO matches that on their side. This is a Staff Plus Trusted People Only corridor until we understand every inch."

Vera nodded. "Acceptable."

Riss inclined her head.

"Lanterns?" Phil asked.

"Case by case," I said. "In emergencies, yes. Otherwise, I don't want this running as a shortcut to parties."

Clara sighed. "Fine. But I reserve the right to schedule one tasteful housewarming ritual."

"We'll talk," I said.

"We will absolutely talk," she echoed, already catering candles and snacks.

Daphne edged farther into the chamber. Her fingers brushed the marble tile seam as she reassured herself it stayed solid.

"You all right?" I asked her.

She nodded. Her throat worked once before she found words. "Someone wanted to hurt the fountain today," she said. "He meant to break what we're building."

"I know," I said. "Phil filed the report. He won't come back."

"Even if he doesn't..." She looked around, eyes tracing sigils, roots, cables. "This helps. The houses... leaned toward each other after he left. Like they moved to protect each other."

Riss's gaze gentled. "You felt that too," she said.

Daphne's shoulders hitched. "Of course."

I stepped closer, careful not to crowd her. "Then good," I said. "If anyone comes at us again, they get two houses instead of one."

"How about drones?" Milo suggested.

I blinked in his direction. "Why didn't I think of that?"

Daphne's mouth twitched. "I'll stay near the water," she said. "And listen."

My chest warmed. "Best job on campus," I said.

We stayed a little while longer, exploring insignificant details. The wardlight dimmed if you stepped too close with a phone camera. Root lines near the Scooby side smelled of eucalyptus and hotel soap. The way a faint mist curled in one corner, scented with jasmine. That had Riss's signature.

Eventually, Phil checked the time and winced.

"Lantern briefing in twenty," he said.

"Go," I told him. "Tell them we have a resource, not a toy."

He kissed my forehead in front of everyone, because he had no shame left, then headed for the PsiO stairs so he could surface on their side and play responsible adult.

Riss followed at a slower pace, hand trailing along the wall. "I'll walk him through my root map," she said. "We'll add this corridor as a protected limb."

Clara tucked her arm through Vera's. "Come on," she said. "You and I have charters to bully into existence."

"I prefer 'draft,'" Vera said.

"Bullying with pens," Clara countered. "Same thing. Also, gowns to plan."

Their voices faded as they headed back through the tunnel, arguing about font choices.

I lingered a moment longer in the doorway between houses.

Scooby pressed up against my spine, bright and eager. PsiO steadied the front of my chest, calm and deep. For once, I didn't stand between crises. I stood between homes.

"Okay, sweetheart," I whispered to the wood, to the roots, to the code listening through braided lines. "You picked a fine partner."

EUTERPE's last note before I turned back toward our side:

HOUSE STATUS: ELEVATED.

EMOTIONAL REGISTER: BRIGHT.

COMMENT: THEY MISSED EACH OTHER.

"Me too," I said. Back in the basement, I started sketching ideas. How do you pitch a building romance without sending Administration into cardiac arrest?

11 The First Stone

Late November, 2027

Milo paced behind me with a clipboard pressed to his chest like a riot shield. “Okay, hear me out,” he said. “Nonlethal anti-personnel routines. Stuff that scares locals off while hurting no one. I sketched a few ideas—pressure bursts, perimeter flash, a sound deterrent—Ella, your keyboard glows.”

“It’s fine,” I said. The keys warmed under my fingers. “Keep going.”

He rattled through the next idea. Before he reached the verb, EUTERPE threw glyphs across the screen faster than speech. My typing matched hers. Lines stacked, nested, rerouted, cracked open, and reformed. Milo blinked, then blinked harder.

“Ella,” he said, voice thin, “your hair.”

Strands lifted past my shoulders, each curl rising, snaking, writhing in soft arcs like something old in my blood stretched awake. Green light crawled over my knuckles and filled the space between keys. The monitor flickered through diagram after diagram—warding rings, vector sigils, logic-lattice overlays. EUTERPE switched languages faster than I named them, but together we sang.

Milo began another suggestion. I wrote it before the idea left his tongue.

He stopped. I didn’t.

Code poured from my hands, carried by a current that defied explanation. EUTERPE pulsed at my wrist in time with my breath. The air tightened around us, charged and humming. My curls floated higher, each one pulled toward the monitor like a compass needle.

Milo’s voice dropped to a whisper. “You’re outpacing me.”

“Faster,” I said.

He made every effort. EUTERPE autocompleted his subroutines before he shaped the consonants. He gave up mid-sentence and watched. Awe softened his jaw. No fear; reverence and a small, delighted terror.

The final diagram snapped into place with a soundless click. My monitor froze on a blank prompt.

COMMIT CHANGES? Y/N

The Code Witch mug floated into my hand, and I shook my hair out, sipping tea while scanning and analyzing the code. Sigils replaced procedures, magic replaced nested loops...astonishing.

The glow around my hands pushed one last surge through the keys. I leaned back, hair settling inch by inch.

I pressed Y.

The light receded from my fingertips. My curls sagged, exhausted. EUTERPE dimmed to a steady ember.

I turned to Milo. "Excellent ideas, Milo." I said. "Thank you."

He stared like I'd grown another head. Or wings. I cannot blame him. He'd never met Euryale, but moments strike when her blood coils through my heart and soul, impossible to contain.

A vibration rolled through the floorboards, soft as a breath. Scooby's walls shifted, a hush sweeping from the east stairwell to the tunnel mouth. The room warmed, cooled, warmed again. An oscillation that didn't belong to HVAC.

I stepped out of my chair. "That wasn't us."

We crossed to the tunnel entrance. The walls glowed with a thin, new sheen, not polished, not raw. Roots along the right side plumped and tightened, tracing the exact route of Scooby's optic bundles. The cables along the left mirrored those roots, curve for curve.

Then I saw them: small nodes swelling from the root-cable crossings. Smooth bulbs at first, glossy and taut. More of them formed along the seams, ten on PsiO's side, ten on Scooby's.

EUTERPE whispered in my earbud.

NEW NODES DETECTED. TEN SCOOPY-TYPE. TEN PSIΩ-TYPE.

HANDSHAKE: CONNECTED.

PsiO pushed a warm pulse down the tunnel. Scooby answered with a cool wash across my ankles. The two flows met, overlapped, and settled into a single rhythm.

A shared heartbeat.

Something shimmered under the floor. Something shifted in the walls. The buds along the seam swelled with purpose.

Not quite alive. Not dead, either. Chips, wiring, motors. Roots, leaves, light.

Hybrids built from the best of both Houses' aspects. Mixed, tangled code and life, like shared DNA.

Like me.

* * *

The room felt too small. Laura Hart sat on the edge of the bed with the folder she'd built one page at a time: bank transfers she hadn't approved, hotel receipts from

cities she never saw, the investigator's notes, and the color photo of Colin and Karen stepping out of room 206.

Karen's blouse wrinkled. Colin laughed behind her. His wedding band was absent.

Laura rested her hand on the folder as if steadying a pulse. Not his. Hers.

She picked up her phone, thumb hovering only a breath before she tapped the name she had entered days ago and never called.

DAVENPORT & ALTON — FAMILY LAW.

One ring. Two.

"Davenport & Alton—how may we assist?"

"My name is Laura Hart," she said, voice clear. "I need to open a divorce file."

Her fingers tightened on the folder.

"Yes," she added. "Tonight."

* * *

Most students cleared out by Wednesday afternoon. Scooby felt hollow without the constant thrum of footsteps, laughter, and motion. Only the kids who didn't want to go home remained, the ones who flinched at the idea of family tables, heavy silences, or questions.

Those were my people tonight.

The air held that crisp pre-winter snap New Orleans gets only once a year. I stepped out with my laptop under one arm and a rat's nest of cables over my shoulder. Daphne stood knee-deep in the fountain basin, sleeves rolled and hair tied back. She checked each change with a surgeon's focus.

"You good?" I asked.

She nodded, focused. "Flow's steady. Pressure reads clean."

Milo hovered beside her, holding tools she didn't need. He watched her like someone memorizing sunlight. When she looked up, he pretended interest in a bolt on the stone lip.

Phil herded the remaining residents into a semicircle. A few freshmen in mismatched jackets, an international student wrapped in her dorm comforter, and a Lantern trainee on RA duty filled the space. Clara waved sparklers she found in a drawer. Vera confiscated two.

"Last test," I murmured. "EUTERPE?"

PRESSURE OPTIMAL. READY.

"Okay," I said. "Let's light our miracle."

I flipped the breaker.

Water surged upward in a clean ribbon, caught the overhead lights, and split into a spray that looked like glass dust in motion. The basin glowed with a soft gold.

PsiO's vines along the fence pulled that color deeper, warming it. Scooby answered with a cool green ripple from the soil, wrapping the gold in a faint halo.

The Houses exhaled together.

A shimmer pulsed under my feet.

Students gasped. Even the comforter girl straightened.

Daphne stepped back, shoes soaked, wide-eyed. She watched the water arc and fall and watched the golden light refract through the spray. For a moment she looked carved from the fountain's own light.

Local residents trickled along the sidewalk. Families out for air, the older couple from the blue house, a group of high-schoolers eating gas station donuts. They stopped, stared, and then clapped with a kind of shy delight.

Someone whispered, "Beautiful," and another answered, "Didn't expect this place to turn around."

Even Scooby's porch light glowed brighter.

Milo took a half-step toward Daphne, stopped himself, and shoved his hands into his pockets. His smile tightened, forced casual, but the ache behind it hit sharper than he intended.

Clara looped her arm through mine. "Look at them," she whispered.

"I'm looking," I muttered.

The fountain shifted as if preening for the crowd. The water jumped higher, then fell in a finer mist, catching the gold and green until the entire lawn shimmered. A few local kids cheered. Someone filmed. Someone else wiped a tear. The moment held a silence that didn't belong to holiday loneliness or grief, more like joy breaking through concrete.

I let myself breathe inside it.

Down the tunnel entrance, a soft pulse answered the fountain's glow. PsiO warmed the ground under her vines. Scooby cooled the air around my ankles. Their rhythms overlapped, patient and steady.

"Shared project," Phil murmured beside me. "Kind of romantic, isn't it?"

I elbowed him. "Don't start."

He smirked. "Houses look good together."

A pulse rolled through the tunnel again, faint but intentional.

Clara squeaked. "They're holding hands."

"Clara—" Vera warned.

"No, look! Look at the vines!" She pointed. "PsiO's reaching. Scooby's answering."

She wasn't wrong. The vines curled along the fence, tasting the air. Scooby's foundation lights flickered back, subtle but eager.

Daphne stood frozen in the center, hair shining gold from the spray. Marissa joined her, steady as ever, hand brushing her elbow. Sprites drifted around them from the tunnel: soft gold, leaf-light wings, timid but curious.

The PsiO women who stayed for the break spilled outside in slippers and pajama pants. They whispered as sprites circled Daphne and Marissa. Light blossoms formed in their hair, faint but growing, the first visible flowers of the House romance pushing upward.

Milo caught the sight full in the chest.

He stepped back. Then again. Then turned away before Daphne's eyes flicked toward the stairs he climbed.

She paused, feeling the air shift, sensing absence rather than presence. Her hand rose halfway, uncertain. But Milo was already gone.

The fountain glowed enough to hide the heartbreak.

I pulled my jacket tighter and watched the spray dance between gold and green. The Houses hummed through my ribs, proud and strong.

Thanksgiving at Scooby House. Small crowd. Big miracle.

And the promise of something larger humming beneath the ground, ready for December to find it.

The lawn emptied. Students drifted back inside with leftover cider, wet sleeves, and the shy smiles of people who expected loneliness and found light instead.

By the time I slipped downstairs, the fountain hummed like a tired singer finishing a last encore. Scooby thrummed beneath the soles of my boots, each vibration a soft agreement with PsiO's golden pulse across the street.

The tunnel mouth breathed warm air. Cool. Warm again.

I stepped inside.

Sprites drifted overhead in loose spirals, their gold dimmed to a soft candle-glow. Scooby's rollers patrolled in tidy arcs near the cable wall, wheels clicking with newfound confidence. The nodes that birthed them still glistened, empty shells now, translucent and fragile as cicada husks.

Marissa stood near the root line, one hand braced against the wall as if the House whispered through her palm. Daphne stood beside her, face lifted toward the faint bioluminescent haze.

Two sprites hovered over Daphne's hair. Their petals flickered. A third sprite cupped itself around a lock of her curls and opened a tiny bud into full bloom. Gold, delicate, shaped like sunlight made solid.

Marissa smiled. "They favor you."

Daphne didn't answer at first. She turned, eyes fixed on the seam where Scooby's cool shimmer met PsiO's warm flow. Her breath left in a small, startled sound, like a laugh that forgot how to form.

"They're... peaceful," she said.

"They're proud," Marissa corrected gently.

Footsteps echoed behind them. Two PsiO ladies tiptoed down the stairs, slippers dragging, hair in messy half-buns. They froze when they saw the sprites.

"Oh, shit," one whispered. "It's like—like the ballroom scene," the other breathed.

The sprites flitted toward the newcomers. Light trailed behind them, shapes forming faint hints—flowers, ribbons, tiny symbols of affection or gratitude. PsiO's foundation vines brightened in a slow wave, greeting their residents with sleepy warmth.

Daphne touched the bloom in her hair. Her fingers trembled. She glanced toward the stairs leading up to Scooby.

Empty.

Marissa saw it. Didn't comment. Shifted closer until their shoulders brushed.

PsiO recognized the contact and sent a gentle warmth through the tunnel, a pulse that settled like a blanket across tension I didn't know Daphne carried.

Scooby answered with a cool counterpulse—steady, anchoring.

The two Houses synced, the emotional equivalent of two hands entwining beneath a table. I felt it through my ribs, subtle as a second breath under mine.

"Ella," Marissa said without looking back, "they're stabilizing around her."

"I know," I said, though I didn't fully understand it. "She listens differently."

Daphne didn't look at me. She kept her gaze on the seam, the light, the soft flutter of sprites weaving in and out of golden loops. Her shoulders rose, fell, and settled into something I'd call calm if it didn't shine so bright.

Behind me, Clara tiptoed in, careful not to break the moment. A Scooby roller bumped her ankle, then zipped away in a panic spiral.

"Sorry," she whispered to the little machine. It beeped at her. "You're adorable," she whispered again.

Vera followed, clipboard tucked under her arm. She surveyed the tunnel with the long-suffering patience of someone who'd given up on controlling any part of her reality.

"Do not adopt the sprites," she warned without turning.

"Too late."

A sprite landed on the top of Clara's head. Vera sighed. "I accept defeat."

The group settled into peace. The only sounds came from the slow churn of air, the faint hum of water outside, and the flutter-click pattern of drones mapping their new world.

I turned back toward the stairs, thinking about Milo.

He hadn't returned.

Upstairs I found him in the dim common room, hood halfway over his head, notebook open but ignored. The fountain's light flickered through the window, catching in his eyes.

He closed the notebook when he saw me.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Fine," he said. "Only tired."

I didn't push. Something in him already felt bruised, and I lacked the right tools tonight.

He stood. "I'm calling it a night."

"Yeah," I said. "Long day."

He left through the hallway, shoulders tight. Scooby dimmed the lights as he passed, a slight gesture of comfort he didn't notice.

When I returned to the tunnel entrance, Daphne still stood with Marissa, sprites weaving light through their hair. PsiO's glow wrapped them both. Scooby steadied the air around my ankles, a reminder that belonging expands, not contracts.

Daphne lifted her face toward the bioluminescent haze one last time. Then she turned toward PsiO's stairs. The sprites fell into formation, petals floating, wings whispering. The House's inner door opened before she touched it.

Marissa followed.

The light closed behind them.

The tunnel's heartbeat softened. Scooby's pulse faded into calm green. PsiO's roots dimmed to ember gold.

Thanksgiving at Scooby House finished with an interlude between storms, a breath before December's turn.

The Houses rested. Their children nested. Somewhere above, one man didn't.

* * *

By the time the blowback hit, the fountain video had already hit local Facebook groups. Also, a TikTok reel about "surprisingly wholesome campus magic."

Certain people took it as a personal insult.

Two nights after Thanksgiving, Scooby's lawn filled again. Not with sleepy students and neighbors clutching cider, but with hand-lettered signs and a lot of angry sweaters.

I watched the crowd from the front steps, arms folded, EUTERPE's hum steady in my ear. Sprites floated at the edge of the tunnel mouth like shy children at a window, their gold dimmed to a wary glow. Two Scooby rollers lurked under the porch rail, lenses pointed toward the street.

Phil stood at the bottom of the steps in his white RD polo, hands out, voice calm.

"You're on a public sidewalk," he said. "You're allowed to protest. The lawn stays clear. No one crosses the fence."

A woman in a fleece vest thrust a sign higher. KEEP OUR TOWN CLEAN. Someone else had painted a fountain with devil horns and Xs over the spray. Subtlety rating: zero.

"You think we don't see what's happening?" one man shouted. "That... that thing," he stabbed a finger toward the fountain, "lighting up our kids like it's normal?"

Vera stepped up beside me, eyes narrowed, clipboard tucked against her side like a shield with notes. Clara hovered on my other side, phone already open to record, because of course she did.

"Deep breath," I muttered.

"Two," Vera said.

Deputies guarded the gap in the sidewalk crowd, yellow vests catching the streetlights. Lanterns in their navy jackets formed a second line closer to the fence, student faces tight but steady. Marissa stood with them, jaw clenched hard enough to crack teeth.

Behind the Villagers, news vans idled. Of course, someone had tipped them off. The fundamentalists were conjured by camera time.

EUTERPE pinged my wrist.

FACES MATCH LOCAL FB GROUP: "SAVE OUR CHILDREN."

HATE SPEECH FREQUENCY: HIGH.

RISK: ELEVATED.

"Understatement," I whispered.

One woman raised a megaphone. Karen Grundy's voice rasped through it—hoarse, furious, familiar from too many videos of school board meetings.

"Look at this!" she barked, sweeping the lawn. "Look at what they built! A shrine to perversion, right in front of our children. Boys and girls living together, unnatural things in the basement, flashing lights to seduce them—"

Clara snorted. "Ma'am, the only thing we seduce is DoorDash."

"Clara," Vera hissed.

Karen kept going, every sentence stacked with words she thought God liked to hear.

“The University refuses to act. The dean looks the other way while these people invite corruption into our neighborhood. So we act. We stand between our children and this... infection.”

Sprites edged higher overhead. The air thickened, charged with storm tension and censorious disapproval.

“Ella,” EUTERPE whispered, “RECOMMEND YOU MOVE INSIDE.”

“Not yet,” I murmured.

Phil stepped forward again. “Please, Mrs. Grundy, your permit allows a march, not a confrontation. Nobody’s crossing the line. You want to yell, you do it from the sidewalk.”

She waved him off like a gnat. “You hide behind rules? Behind paperwork?” Her voice rose, almost gleeful. “You think we don’t know what happens in there with your witches and your... your deviant sororities? Girls who dress like *that* aren’t students; they’re temptations, and they know exactly what they’re doing.”

PsiO’s front windows glowed faint gold across the street. A small knot of sisters stood on their porch, arms linked, not answering.

“Nice of her to drag us in,” Clara muttered. “Hate crimes: now with cross-house synergy.”

A beer can flew then—first object of the night. It clanged off the fence, sprayed foam, and bounced away. Deputies shouted. A few protesters cheered.

“Warning shot,” Vera said, jaw tightening.

“That wasn’t a shot,” I said. “That was someone testing the line.”

Beer bottle next.

I didn’t see the thrower, just the glittering arc under the streetlight. Clara stepped down off the stoop, drawn by some reactive instinct to be in front of everything. Vera moved with her, hand out as if to grab her shoulder, and the bottle decided that moment to commit to gravity.

It spun. A perfect, stupid parabola toward Clara’s face.

The world narrowed.

Sprites dove.

Three streaks of gold zipped across my vision, trailing light. They struck the glass mid-air. The bottle shattered into dust and shards inches from Clara, the spray of fragments deflected by a sudden cool gust rolling off Scooby’s porch.

The shards bounced off Vera’s raised forearm and clattered around Clara’s boots.

Silence froze the yard for a heartbeat.

Then everything exploded at once.

Shouts. Deputies surging. Lanterns moving in. The crowd heaved, some pressing forward to see, some jerking back from contact with actual consequences.

Clara stared at the ground, then at Vera's arm, then at the faint scorch where the glass shattered.

"Did—did I just almost—"

"Yes," Vera said, voice flat. "You almost took a bottle."

"Oh," Clara said faintly.

"Unacceptable," Vera added, fury rising.

She let go of Clara's shoulder and stalked down the steps like a woman walking into court with a closing argument and nothing left to lose.

Karen had started again—"You see? Violence follows these places—" Vera cut through the deputies, through the Lantern line, hand raised.

"Give me that," she said.

Karen blinked. "Excuse me?"

"The megaphone," Vera said. "Or keep talking and let everyone hear what you really are."

Karen still considered optics. She hesitated, then handed over the megaphone, expecting a nervous apology. Or a plea for understanding.

She had never met Vera Marlane.

Vera lifted the megaphone, adjusted the volume with two precise clicks, and turned her back on Karen. She faced Scooby, PsiO, the cops, the students, and the cameras.

"I am Vera Marlane," she said, voice carrying down the block. "Resident advisor, Lantern, and a person responsible for keeping students in this neighborhood alive."

Silence fell again.

"You came here tonight," she continued, "to stand in front of our house and scream about corruption and danger. So let's talk about danger."

She jabbed a finger toward the spot where the bottle shattered.

"Danger is a man throwing glass at a nineteen-year-old girl because he doesn't like where she lives. Danger is a crowd that cheers while he does it."

Some villagers shifted. A few looked away. Cameras zoomed in.

"Danger," Vera said, "is adults who call students 'those people' and 'infection.' Because they can't stand the idea that queer kids, poor kids, first-gen kids, and kids with no safe homes found a place that doesn't flinch from them."

Marissa sucked in a breath behind me. Clara wiped her face with her sleeve and stared like she'd never seen Vera before.

"You say you're protecting children," Vera went on. "From what? A fountain? From a dorm wrestled away from abusers? A sorority that kept women safe when no one else did?"

Karen grabbed for the megaphone. Vera sidestepped her without breaking a sentence.

“These students,” she said, “get up, go to class, do their homework, help each other through panic attacks. Cover shifts when someone’s sick, and build things to protect women. Free. For everyone. Even for you.”

She swept her gaze across the news cameras, then across the deputies, then across the crowd.

“You want to protest?” she asked. “Fine. File your permits, print your signs, shout your slogans. You have that right. What you don’t have is the right to throw things at my residents and call it faith.”

A murmur rippled through the students and Lanterns—low, fierce pride.

“You talk about corruption,” Vera said. “Ask why your leaders check into cheap motels together while they posture purity on Sundays.”

Karen flinched at the slap. Several heads turned toward her.

Laura Hart’s PI report burned bright in my memory. EUTERPE pinged my wrist again, soft, sympathetic.

“Last thing,” Vera said, voice steady. “Every drone and every student phone here recorded your assault tonight.”

She pointed toward the edge of the crowd, straight at the bottle thrower: a red-faced man in a ball cap, still heaving.

Sprites flared above him, HUD-bright for a second as EUTERPE tagged his face.

“Many angles,” Vera said. “All those cameras. All that hate.”

I touched my earbud. “EUTERPE,” I whispered. “Clip it. Push to ELLA. PsiO first distribution.”

ACKNOWLEDGED, she said.

TEN VIDEO FEEDS: READY.

Phones buzzed around me. Two Lanterns checked theirs, eyes widening. Clara’s screen bloomed with notifications as ELLA spat out pre-trimmed video clips with hashtags. *#BottleThrower*, *#CrowdCheer*, and *#FountainSpeech*.

Students looked up, met each other’s eyes, and started sharing.

“You wanted attention,” Vera told the crowd. “You’ve got it. Wanted everyone to see this? They will.”

The first deputy moved toward the bottle thrower. Another followed. The man backed into the crowd, but Lanterns and students had already stepped aside, leaving him exposed in the white glare of a news camera. No cover. No friendly shoulders.

Phil stepped down to help the deputies separate bodies from bodies, hands up, palms visible. A villager surged sideways, shoved; someone else stumbled; the line

broke. Everything I saw was motion and uniforms and one flash of white RD polo in the wrong place.

A deputy grabbed Phil's wrist.

"Sir, you need to step back," the deputy barked.

"I'm de-escalating—"

"You're interfering."

Handcuffs snapped silver around his wrists.

"Hey!" I shouted, starting forward.

A Lantern trainee caught my arm. "Ella, wait."

"Get your hands off him!" Clara yelled.

"Calm," Vera snapped, even as her eyes flared. "Cameras, remember?"

Phil lifted both hands, let the deputy turn him, shoulders squared.

"I'm cooperating," he said, loud enough for every mic. "My name is Phil Dale. I'm the resident director. I was separating students from aggressors."

The deputy's grip loosened a hair. The other deputies closed ranks around the bottle thrower, now in cuffs of his own. A second squad moved in to break up the densest part of the crowd. Protesters shouted, some holding signs tighter, some already sliding phones into pockets. Faces shuttered as they realized what had happened.

Overhead, sprites bobbed like silent witnesses. Sprites on the PsiO side, rollers at my feet—recording, feeding.

STREAMS LIVE, EUTERPE told me, almost smug.

PLATFORMS: CAMPUS IG, ELLA FEED, THREE LOCAL TWITTER CLONES.

By morning, half the city had seen the bottle in mid-air, the man behind it, and the girl he targeted. They'd also seen the House bending light to stop it and the woman who stepped forward and said, "No more."

Deputies steered Phil toward a squad car. He met my eye as he passed—steady, apologetic, a little amused.

"I'll be fine," he mouthed.

I believed him. I didn't forgive the bruise already forming on his wrist.

The crowd thinned. Some peeled off in clumps, angry but rattled. Others checked their phones, saw themselves reflected from ten angles, and walked faster toward their cars.

Karen remained rooted on the sidewalk, megaphone limp at her side, eyes distant as if she were seeing a different screen, the same one Laura Hart watched.

Scooby dimmed its porch light as the last sign disappeared. PsiO's windows returned to a soft, private glow. The fountain kept flowing, water catching streetlight and moonlight and the last scraps of camera glare.

Beside me, Clara leaned on Vera's shoulder.

"You were incredible," she whispered.

Vera exhaled. "I was furious."

"Same thing tonight," Clara said.

I checked my phone. ELLA's dashboard pulsed with views climbing in real time. Comments stacking from students, faculty, town kids, strangers.

Jobs will fall in the morning. School board seats. Committee appointments. Altered sermons.

For now, the lawn waited. The Houses pulsed a slow, shared rhythm under my feet.

We had built something. She wanted it broken.

Everyone watching knew who had cast the first stone.

* * *

The station smelled of old coffee and scuffed plastic. Phil sat in the holding area behind a pane of reinforced glass. Cuffs off now, posture straight, expression calm enough that the sergeant kept glancing at him like he wasn't sure why this one was here.

I paid the bail and signed forms until my wrist cramped. When the door buzzed open, Phil stepped out, rubbing the red welt on his wrist.

"You good?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "I need a shower to feel clean again. And I don't... will you join me?" He glanced at me, tired and honest. "Stay close. Talk to me. Let me revert to normal."

Still shaky myself. "Yeah," I said. "I've got you. Let's go home."

Behind him, in the adjacent cell, the bottle-thrower hunched on a metal bench, head bowed, shirt stained, muttering into his hands. No fury left. Only existence blighted by spite and regret.

12 Safe Ground

Early December, 2027

The tunnel offshoot had not existed last week.

She recognized the subtle pattern of branching ridges in the walls. Roots once ran there, but a seam had softened after the Houses' handshake, folding inward like soil giving way to a seed's push. Now, a narrow chamber opened where cables and roots twined above a shallow dip in the floor.

The space felt unfinished, like a shoreline waiting for the tide or a clay bowl waiting for water.

She had chosen it for the silence.

Scooby heard her moods upstairs. The building's attention followed her through the hallways. Dimmed lights when she tensed, warmed floors under her bare feet when she lay awake. Kindness, but exhausting. PsiO filtered emotions softer, more patient, but still pushed back with comfort that pressed when she needed space. The sprites also followed her, their golden wings brushing her hair with concern she didn't ask for.

Daphne needed a place where nothing breathed except the tunnel itself. Where the walls held no opinion. Where Wi-Fi refused to trespass and the air stayed cool enough that her thoughts didn't scatter.

She sat with her knees drawn up and her hands tucked inside the sleeves of her sweater. Her breath fogged. The temperature dipped lower here, where root met stone, where the two Houses' influences canceled each other into neutral ground.

Her mother's voice echoed in memory: You'll grow into it. Young naiads resist at first. The water will teach you.

The water had taught her nothing except that she was different.

Milo's footsteps hesitated at the bend.

Of course, he had found her. The tunnel wanted him to. Or perhaps Scooby had whispered directions, concerned in that way houses had when their residents hurt and didn't explain why.

He paused at the entrance, clutching the strap of his backpack as if it argued with him. His glasses fogged at the edges from the temperature shift. His shoulders hunched in a defensive curl he wore whenever he feared he was intruding.

"Am I—" He stopped, swallowed. "Is it better if I stay outside?"

Daphne lifted her gaze. "Come in." Her voice came softer than she meant. Everything came softer today.

He stepped inside and let the backpack down, as if a loud movement risked cracking the air. He did that when he felt uncertain: shrinking the radius of himself, trimming edges she never asked him to trim. She'd watched him do it around Ella when he thought his ideas were too wild. Around Phil, when he feared he'd overstepped. Around her, more and more lately, as if he sensed the weight building between them.

He sat near her, not close enough to crowd, not far enough to declare distance. Correct. The right instinct.

She folded her hands and felt the rehearsed words rise in her throat. She had practiced this conversation in the shower and on late-night walks along the fountain's edge. Rehearsed it in whispers while checking water pressure at 2 am. Every version ended differently. Some with tears. Some with anger. Most with the other person walking away, confusion hardening into resentment.

"Milo," she said. "I need to be honest with you. Before anything else changes."

He inhaled as if bracing for a verdict.

"Okay," he whispered.

He had practiced a dozen openings on the walk down: *Are you upset? Did I do something? Do you need space?* They sounded like traps once he reached the chamber and saw her drawn shoulders.

Her expression wasn't closed; she kept it contained, like water cupped in two steady hands. Something careful and deliberate, held against spilling.

She breathed once before she spoke again.

"I don't know how to begin," she said.

"That's fine," Milo answered quickly. "I'll stay here and keep silent. I'm good at that."

One corner of her mouth lifted, faint but real.

"I know you are," she said. "It's one reason you are safe to be near."

Safe.

His chest tightened, but not in fear. Something else. He felt seen in a way he hadn't expected.

He set his palms on his knees and waited. The tunnel air settled around them, cool and still. Somewhere overhead, a cable hummed. A root shifted with the slow patience of growing things.

* * *

"Where I come from," she said, "nobody touches without purpose."

He turned his head, listening as if her words altered the air's density.

"Not because we don't care," she continued. "But because our bodies react to contact with intent. Emotional resonance changes currents. Skin holds meaning. A hand on a shoulder speaks volumes."

He swallowed. "Okay."

"When I was younger, people treated their idea of normal as my destination." Her fingers tightened on her sleeves. "Naiads are... expected to be fluid. Sensual. Relaxed with touch and intimacy. My mother trusted the water to teach me. That growing older awakened desires she took for granted."

She paused. The tunnel breathed with her.

"But as people expected the usual gestures, my body refused. My mother named it stubbornness. Rejecting my nature out of fear or pride. She arranged... opportunities. Introductions. Gentle pressures. She meant well."

Milo's jaw tightened, but he didn't interrupt.

"Other naiads found it trivial," Daphne said. "Natural. Joyful, even. I watched them move through the world with a grace beyond my reach. Every attempt was like wearing someone else's skin. And everyone kept insisting the problem was my effort, not my design."

She exhaled.

"I don't reach for romance," Daphne said. "Or sex. I do not experience desire like that. I feel affection, attachment, and comfort. I feel steadiness from the people I trust. But the parts the world insists are... necessary..." She shook her head. "I don't have them. I never did. My body's not broken. It's simply not built for that."

Milo blinked once behind the fogged glasses. Not with confusion, or disappointment. Only absorption, like he was slotting puzzle pieces where they belonged.

She continued before she lost her nerve.

"The word for it is ace," she said. "Asexual. The word covers many shapes, and mine excludes those desires. Any whatsoever."

The last two words scraped her throat. She waited for the recoil, the awkward "oh," or worse, the earnest offer to help her "fix it."

Milo did neither. He breathed once, slow. Then:

"Thank you for telling me."

Daphne stared at him.

Milo rubbed the fog off his lenses with the cuff of his sleeve. "That sounds like a scripted response. It isn't. I don't know how else to say... I'm glad you told me. I'm not scared of the word."

A knot she'd hidden by instinct loosened a fraction.

But she wasn't done.

"There is more," she said. "I can't offer the things people assume from the way you've been looking at me."

* * *

His breath stuttered. Not denial. Surprise that she had noticed.

He thought he'd been careful. Subtle. But of course she'd seen it. Daphne noticed everything: the way water moved, the way stone settled, the way people's shoulders shifted when they lied or hurt.

"I don't want to disappoint you," she said. "And I want nothing between us to become pressure, even if no one means it. Pressure hurts. Expectations hurt. Confusion hurts."

She clasped her hands tighter.

"And I can't tell what you want," she whispered. "I don't know if I'm mistaking kindness for something else."

He almost laughed from pure electric nerves.

What do I want?

He'd been asking himself that for weeks. Lying awake in his bunk, mapping the shape of the thing pulling him toward her. It didn't feel like the crushes other guys described. No fantasies. No late-night fantasies about kissing or anything beyond. Only... this ache to be near her. Follow her pace through a garden. Listen as she explained why stones bickered. To stand beside her and feel the House relax under her presence. To watch her breathing easier because someone else carried the wrench or the clipboard.

But none of that fit into the boxes of "romance" he grew up thinking were the only shapes allowed. And he feared what he'd find, that he was doing it wrong. That whatever he felt wasn't enough. Wasn't real.

Now, sitting in this cold tunnel with her careful, contained fear laid bare between them, something clicked into place.

He leaned forward, making sure she saw the movement and had time to contradict it.

"I don't want to pressure you," he said. Simple. Plain. True.

Her shoulders lowered a fraction, like she'd exhaled a part of herself she kept braced.

"And I don't expect sex," he added. "Or romance tropes. Or whatever scripts are required of relationships. I'm not waiting for some big... moment. Or steering you into one."

Her eyes flickered. Relief, cautious and startled.

"I enjoy being near you," he said. "You're my friend. Not because I expect something from you. Just because... you make my brain stop buzzing. And I want a version of connection that works for you. Whatever shape it takes."

He let the last words settle.

Daphne stared at the tunnel floor, tracing its faint ripples with her gaze.

Then she said, almost incredulous, "You mean that."

"Yeah," Milo said.

He meant it more than he'd meant most things in his life.

* * *

He meant it.

She felt the truth of it in the way the tunnel air steadied instead of vibrating with human tension. Houses listened, but did not lean in. Milo's heartbeat kept its pace. His posture held stillness instead of hunger.

He was earnest. Nervous. Open.

And so young.

Daphne folded her hands again.

"Milo," she said, "I am older than you."

He nodded. "You mentioned once... older, how?"

"Twice your years." She watched him absorb it. "Naiads age differently. Our bodies linger in youth. But our lives are long. Our memories stretch farther."

He didn't recoil. Didn't brighten either. Paused and processed, the way he did with complex code or engineering problems.

"That doesn't bother me," he said.

"It matters," she answered. "Not because I am ancient, but because I grew through things you haven't reached yet. I lived through storms you don't have maps for. I've made mistakes you'll encounter in a decade and have to navigate alone. I've buried people. I've watched relationships calcify. I've learned patience that you're still building."

She paused, choosing her words with care.

"When someone looks at me with... longing, I must ask what part they're seeing. The girl or the years. The face or the weight behind it."

He pressed his lips together, not offended, only thinking.

"I don't know what I see yet," he admitted. "I know I feel calm around you, and I feel a pull to check the sound of the water with you. And to make your work easier. And to listen when you speak. But I don't have a name for it."

"That's good," she said. "No names yet. Names create expectations."

A small smile ghosted across his mouth. "You *really* hate pressure."

She nodded. "Pressure alters currents. Flow turns turbulent. People drown that way."

His smile softened. "Okay. Then no pressure."

* * *

He let his hands fall open in his lap. "So... tell me what connection looks like for you."

Her eyes widened. Then narrowed. Then warmed, wary and wondering both.

"I don't know," she said. "Not fully. I've never practiced it with someone who listened."

Milo's mouth went dry.

"I will tell you what it does not look like," she added. "It does not include sex. Doesn't include... physical hunger. Or follow the progression people expect. And it will disappoint anyone who wants those things."

He raised both hands. "Not me. That isn't the connection I'm seeking."

A thread inside her loosened further.

She let her gaze drift toward the faint light where the roots branched overhead.

"Connection, for me," she said, "is presence. The kind that does not take. The kind that doesn't ask my body to silence alarms it never learned to ignore. I like... stillness beside someone. Conversation without weight. Hands, but only when I initiate."

Milo nodded. "Okay."

"And honesty," she added. "The kind that isn't a demand. The kind that settles."

His throat tightened with something too complicated to name.

Above them, a root shifted. The tunnel warmed by a single degree, not Scooby's deliberate comfort, not PsiO's golden pressure, the space itself adjusting to hold them both.

* * *

"There is something else," she said.

He tensed, bracing.

"People have attempted to... fix me," she said.

The clinical language helped. Distance made it bearable.

"With persuasion, with patience, with reassurance. One person suggested I simply hadn't met the right partner. Another thought therapy unlocked something

dormant. A third thought my naiad nature was being suppressed by trauma, and if I trusted them enough, my body awakened to the purpose they imagined."

Her voice stayed even. Factual. A report delivered without inflection.

"They thought enough trust coaxed the missing parts out. They never did. The attempts grew more... insistent. More certain that I was the problem, not their expectations."

Milo's face twisted — not in disgust, but pain on her behalf.

"I never push you like that," he said. Then softer: "That sounds awful."

"It was," she said without embellishment. "And confusing. And lonely. Because I wanted a connection. I wanted someone to stay. But the price kept being parts of myself I didn't have to give."

He rubbed the heel of his palm against the back of his neck. "I'm sorry you had to deal with that. And I'm sorry if I ever stepped near that."

"It did not," she said. "But I needed you to know before anything continued."

Milo swallowed. "So does this mean— I mean, do you want distance from me?"

She shook her head.

"No," she said. "I want you near. I won't give you what you want someday. Or what people assume comes next."

* * *

He let out a long, shaky breath.

Relief. And acceptance.

And something else, a click of recognition. Like finding the word for a concept he'd circled around his whole life without naming.

He'd watched his roommates stumble through hookups and breakups. Heard described wanting someone with a raw intensity that felt foreign to him. He'd assumed he'd been slow to arrive at some developmental milestone. That a switch flipped someday and their meaning made sense.

But sitting here, listening to Daphne describe connection without hunger, presence without progression. It felt less like learning something new and more like being handed a map to territory he'd been wandering.

"Okay," he said, with surprising steadiness. "Then we don't do next. We do this. Whatever shape you choose."

Daphne blinked. As if the tunnel's filtered light had startled her.

He leaned forward enough that his voice carried, but not enough to intrude.

"You're precious to me," he said before his thoughts caught up. "Not because of a desire. Just because you exist, and I get to stand close."

Her breath hitched.

He wanted to take the words back. Afraid he'd said too much. But the flicker in her eyes wasn't alarm.

Recognition flickered there.

She looked down at her hands.

"Then this is the shape," she whispered. "Presence. Honesty. No pressure. And no path leading toward something I cannot walk to."

He nodded. "Deal."

The faintest ripple of humor touched her mouth. "You say 'deal' every time."

He flushed. "Force of habit."

* * *

The silence that followed wasn't heavy. It settled like silt in calm water; soft, natural, undisturbed.

She shifted her hand on her knee.

Milo didn't move.

She took a breath, then extended her fingers. Slow, deliberate, giving him time to understand that this was not an invitation to anything else, only an offering.

Her hand hovered halfway between them.

The air in the tunnel turned still. Even the faint hum of cables quieted.

Milo blinked once, astonished, then placed his hand under hers, palm up, letting her control the contact. Not reaching. Not grasping. Just... there. Open. Waiting.

Their skin met.

Daphne's pulse jumped, then steadied. No alarms rang, old warnings flared. No ghost of her mother's voice insisted this step led to desire.

Just warmth. And the slight calluses on his palm from working with tools. And his hand trembled, as if he cradled something more fragile than glass.

No pressure. No expectation. Only warmth.

Her pulse steadied further.

"This," she said, barely audible, "is safe."

Milo nodded once. "Yeah. It is."

They stayed like that. With her fingers resting on his palm, neither pressing nor pulling away. Their weight was nothing. The meaning was everything.

* * *

The tunnel air warmed. Not from Scooby. Not from PsiO. From balance.

Daphne withdrew her hand after a long moment, unhurried. No rush. No apology.

Milo didn't chase the contact. His hand lingered for a breath, then dropped to his knee.

They sat shoulder to shoulder with a hand's span between them, the distance she needed honored without question.

Outside the new chamber, the tunnel stayed still. No students passed. No footsteps echoed. Even EUTERPE stayed silent, though Daphne suspected she knew where they were.

The roots overhead shifted, a gentle acknowledgment from PsiO. The cables along the wall pulsed once with cool light, Scooby's version of approval.

Witnesses. Not judges.

Daphne breathed easier than she had in weeks.

Milo breathed like someone who'd learned how to handle something fragile. And finally understood the difference between fragile and precious.

She glanced at him.

"Milo?"

"Yeah?"

"We'll keep building this," she said. "With steady caution."

He hesitated, then: "Can I... will it be okay if I bake you cinnamon rolls again? Like before, but—" He stopped, recalibrating. "Not like before. Because you mentioned once that you liked them. No strings. Not so...extra-crispy this time?"

Daphne's expression softened. The last time felt weighted with things unsaid, expectations hovering like nameless sprites.

But now—

"Safe," she said. "That works."

His smile arrived small and bright, like a lantern in winter.

"I'd like that," he said.

She nodded once, the gesture gentle and sure.

"Me too."

* * *

Laura Hart arrived at Psi Omega just after sundown, suitcase in hand, posture tight enough to creak. Riss reached the porch before I did; the lights warmed over the entry like the House sensed distress.

The knock interrupted everything. We'd been talking House-leader logistics a moment earlier. Scooby's moods, freshmen, the winter pressure under both roofs.

"Ma'am?" Riss asked softly. "Are you looking for someone?"

The woman swallowed. "My name is Laura Hart. I... I'm a Legacy here. I came here because it's the only place that feels safe." Her hands tightened on the suitcase handle. "I left home today. I need somewhere safe until the term ends. Off the record."

Riss straightened at the name. "Hart—as in the Hart in Administration?"

Laura's face crumpled. "Yes. That Hart."

I didn't know Colin Hart, but the name carried weight. A petty bureaucrat who treated campus policy like a flyswatter and fussed over signatures and sidewalk jurisdiction.

Seeing his wife on PsiO's porch, wrecked and shaking, pulled the air tight around my lungs.

Riss eased the door open. "PsiO shelters its Legacies. Come inside. You're safe here."

Laura stepped over the threshold with the hesitance of someone expecting the ground to fall away. Her gaze flicked toward the street, just wanting distance before he noticed she was gone.

No one followed.

We guided her through the hallway. PsiO softened the lights, warmed the air, steadied the floor beneath her steps. Houses did that sometimes, reading grief like weather.

Riss carried her suitcase and led her upstairs, leaving me in the common room. One of Thallo's newest brood crouched under the windows—dark lacquer, curved edges, dovetail joints polished to a soft gleam. The lid eased open as I passed, offering a drawer like a curious animal.

"Not now," I whispered. "Later."

The drawer shut with a soft click, almost disappointed.

Five minutes later Riss returned, braids mussed from leaning against doorframes while she calmed a crying adult. She dropped onto the sofa beside me.

"She's settled," Riss said. "She cried until she got to the pillows, then crashed. Didn't even take off her shoes."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Divorce," Riss said. "Or the start of one. Something in that house snapped today." She rubbed her palms together. "The PI found something. She left before Colin got home."

A cold ripple went down my spine.

"Do you think anyone else knows?" I asked.

"Not yet," Riss said. "But this smells like fallout. Houses feel this kind of fracture. PsiO kept dimming the hall lights like she wanted to hold Laura upright."

We stepped outside together. The night air felt cool and bright; Scooby House glowed warm gold across the lawn. Thallo's brood dotted the hedges, each piece gleaming as if catching starlight. Chairs, footstools, a tiny wardrobe the size of a toy chest.

"You're breeding furniture," Riss said.

"Technically, Thallo is," I said. "I'm only the midwife."

Riss snorted. "Your romances are weird. Furniture imprints on you. Men volunteering to carry lumber for you. Sentient Houses lighting up when you walk near them."

"Those aren't romances," I muttered.

"No," she said. "They're attachments. And attachments leave wakes."

We walked toward Scooby. The fountain murmured along the side yard, Daphne's work. Silver mist drifted in low arcs, shaped by currents only she understood.

"Scooby's steadier every week," Riss said. "She feels... hopeful."

"She's healing," I said. "And becoming something new."

"What about Daphne?" Riss asked. "Clara says she's sleeping better."

"Some nights," I said. "Others... not so much. Water remembers things. Daphne carries that weight."

Riss hummed in thought. "And Milo?"

"He's Milo," I said. "Steady by accident. Kind because that's the only gear he has."

She smiled. "Those two drift in a strange, gentle orbit."

"Yeah," I said. "One defined by calm."

My phone buzzed.

EUTERPE: URGENT FORWARD — FLAG: ADMIN ACTOR (GRUNDY).

PRIORITY: TONE SHIFT DETECTED.

"Hang on." I opened the message.

Grundy's email looked like a psalm rewritten during a panic attack.

FROM: Karen Grundy

TO: Office of Student Decorum

SUBJECT: Re: Directionless Youth and Campus Decline

Standards erode DAILY. Unsupervised gatherings, inappropriate renovations at the former Theta Chi house. Certain students WHO KNOW BETTER continue to flaunt decency.

I SOUND THE ALARM because no one else is willing. I request IMMEDIATE REVIEW.

"Oh no," I murmured.

Riss leaned over. "She's unraveling."

Another notification.

EUTERPE: SECOND FORWARD — LANGUAGE ESCALATION.

FROM: Karen Grundy

TO: Department of Community Conduct

SUBJECT: A Warning Before Things Get Worse

I SEE PATTERNS emerging across campus—disturbing patterns linked to certain STAFF MEMBERS and their influence over students.

I refuse to name the staff member YET, though I must protect the innocent from moral corruption.

ACTION IS REQUIRED.

Riss inhaled. "She's hinting at Hart."

"She's hinting at everyone," I said. "It reads like someone running from their own shadow. I thought he was in her camp."

A third forward arrived.

FROM: Karen Grundy

TO: Council on Values

SUBJECT: URGENT: Hidden Threats in Our Midst

Impropriety HIDES behind polite smiles. A certain HOUSE encourages weakness and questionable loyalties. Some students MARINATE in this softness.

I pray others have the COURAGE to see what I see.

"Oh my God," I whispered. "She's naming Scooby without naming Scooby."

"She's terrified," Riss said. "This is projection with capital letters."

The hedges rustled. A small Thallo footstool scooted closer, legs tapping the ground in an anxious rhythm.

"Even the furniture knows it's bad," I said.

Riss pressed a hand over her mouth, then laughed once—short and bleak. "Grundy is afraid. Fear of exposure. Or losing her narrative. Fear of anyone asking the wrong question at the wrong time."

"That PI's report must've rattled something loose," I said. "Laura bolted before Colin saw the papers."

"And Grundy's sense of righteousness cracks because the man she latched onto is falling apart," Riss said. "Symbiosis of dysfunction."

Scooby's porch light warmed as we stepped closer. The foyer glowed, and the House braced herself like someone preparing to shelter people from a storm.

"Do we warn Siobhan?" I asked.

"At a minimum," Riss said. "And Ella—watch your residents. Grundy fixates on the vulnerable."

"I know," I said.

My phone buzzed again.

EUTERPE: NEW MESSAGE — GRUNDY EMAIL #4.

FLAG: DELUSIONAL EMPHATIC LANGUAGE.

SUBJECT LINE: "The Truth No One Else Has Courage To See."

I closed my eyes.

The collapse had begun.

13 There'll Be Dancing

Mid December, 2027

By five-thirty the common room buzzed like Scooby had eaten sugar.

Thallo babies skittered across the rug in purposeful little troops. One dragging a thread spool, one herding a pile of bobby pins, one carrying a single glittery shoe like it weighed as much as a planet. The lights over the lounge brightened in a slow inhale, the way they did whenever Clara started a project that required emotional triage.

Clara herself stood in the center of the chaos with a clipboard, a pencil tucked behind one ear, and the face of someone preparing to brief NASA.

"All right, roll call," she said. "Freshmen, front and center. Do not make me hunt you."

Her voice didn't need volume. The House did the rest; lights warmed, floorboards nudged, and every girl within earshot drifted toward the rug like moths to a determined flame.

I leaned against the kitchen doorway with a glass of water and pretended I wasn't enjoying this as much as Scooby did.

Gwen arrived first, clutching her hoodie strings like a lifeline. Rhea hovered behind her, wings flattened tight, eyes darting between the stairs and the door as if she expected a fire drill. Two more girls padded in, Maya with her lavender hair and false bravado, plus a shy one whose name I often forgot until she whispered it. And the fifth girl I'd never seen nervous before, tucking herself into a beanbag chair like camouflage.

Clara clapped once. "Okay, angels. The Winter Gala approaches. Which is code for: How many of you need help before we unleash you on an event with cameras?"

A round of groans answered her. Scooby's lights pulsed in sympathy.

"That's what I thought," Clara said. "Wrong question, angels."

She crouched, meeting them at eye level.

“What do you want from that night? Subdued corners? Loud corners? Zero dancing? Exactly one dance? No boys? Only boys? Strictly girls? Something shiny? Something dark? We’re not choosing outfits yet; we’re choosing experiences.”

That landed. The freshmen relaxed. Shoulders dropped. Even Gwen managed a smile.

Then someone knocked on the doorframe.

Laura paused in the doorway with her cookies, wearing the face of someone who’d signed up to supervise and walked into a wildlife documentary.

“Good!” Clara said. “Backup.”

Laura stepped inside. The nearest Thallo baby toddled up and took the Tupperware out of her hands with reverent purpose. Another opened its drawer to produce a stack of napkins like an offering. A drone drifted from the ceiling, humming in slow circles over her head.

Laura blinked. Once. Twice.

I almost heard the internal caption: Psi Omega was not like this in 2003.

Clara beamed at her. “You’ll help me wrangle them, right?”

“Wrangle,” Laura repeated. “Yes. That sounds... workable.”

It didn’t, but she moved toward the group anyway. Scooby responded by warming the floor under her feet, a welcome pulse that made her glance down in wonder.

“I didn’t know sorority life became this,” she murmured.

“It’s a Scooby life,” I said. “PsiO borrows the magic when she feels generous.”

Clara gestured for Laura to sit, and then the two of them fell into a rhythm so fast it startled me.

Clara handled the social weather—compliments, jokes, reframing panic into “we’ll fix that.”

Laura handled logistics; hemming advice, hair suggestions, a magical stain stick, soothing the girl who hated attention.

Daphne slipped in without a sound and settled beside Gwen. The humidity shifted enough for Gwen’s shoulders to unclench. The air cooled, softened, breathed. Rhea exhaled, tension dropping with the sound.

Even Laura noticed it. “Is that... normal?”

“It is here,” I said.

Clara elbowed me. “Don’t spook her.”

“I’m not spooking her,” I said. “The sprites spooked her. The House spooks everyone. I’m harmless.”

A drone dipped toward my head in offended protest.

The door opened again. Vera stepped in, still in her study-hall clothes, hair pinned up, glasses sliding down her nose. She stopped mid-step when she saw Clara and Laura laughing over a freshman's crooked shoe strap.

The temperature in the room shifted by half a degree, the jealousy equivalent of a single, polite cough.

Vera didn't say a word. She didn't need to. Her expression did the talking: *Give me a reason not to worry.*

Scooby dimmed one overhead light, subtle and sympathetic.

Clara caught it in an instant. She excused herself from Laura, crossed the room, and rested her hands on Vera's forearms.

"Stop writing that story," she whispered. "Right now."

Vera opened her mouth. Clara pressed a finger to her lips.

"I chose you," Clara said. "Not temporarily. Not for convenience. You are my person, Vera Marlane. My life. And I cannot wait to dance with you."

Vera's breath hitched. "*Life?*"

"Yes," Clara said. "Don't freak out. Or do. I'll like it either way."

Vera kissed her cheek. Scooby brightened the hallway behind them like a blush.

Across the circle, Laura watched the lights respond, something tender loosening in her face.

Her voice came soft, almost private:

"...It wasn't like this when I lived in PsiO," she said. "But it's adorable."

She looked at the students. Their comfort, the laughter, the calm Daphne spread through the air—and serenity settled inside her.

"It's weird," she said. "A little. But I'm *in*."

A Thallo baby bumped her ankle in agreement.

I grinned into my drink.

Clara turned back to the freshmen with a general's calm authority. "Okay, angels. We've got one week before fittings begin. Scooby, lights."

The overhead glow warmed into a perfect soft-lantern wash.

The girls laughed. Laura smiled like someone finding a room she didn't know she'd been missing. Vera leaned on Clara's shoulder. Daphne drew water-calm, steady breaths.

Scooby hummed, satisfied with us.

And I thought:

Yeah. The Houses will lose their minds at the Winter Gala.

* * *

By Sunday afternoon, Scooby House looked like a fabric store had detonated.

The dining table vanished under chiffon drifts and safety pins. A drone hovered over it like a judgmental chandelier. The rug disappeared under heels, sweaters, and three abandoned hairbrushes. I handed the brushes to a Thallo baby. It returned lost objects with unnerving accuracy.

I walked in with two garment bags over my shoulder and Phil's suit pressed against my side. I hadn't even crossed the threshold when Scooby brightened the foyer lights.

"I was gone for two hours," I said. "Two. And you turned into Project Runway: Chaos Edition."

Clara popped up from behind the armchair with a mouth full of pins. "Semi-formal fittings are in forty-eight hours. I have only six hands, Ella."

"You have zero hands. You're one person."

"Mmmph—" She spat the pins into her palm. "I delegated. House counts as extra hands."

A Thallo baby waddled by with a spool of silver thread on its head like a crown. It preened.

"Unbelievable," I muttered. "You're encouraging their development of egos."

"They already have egos," Clara said. "We're styling them."

Laura stood near the front window, hair pinned up in a loose twist. Sorting through dress bags with the calm efficiency of someone who once did this in a less magical world. She hummed under her breath; something soft, unsure, but steady. A Thallo baby lingered at her feet like a small, wooden shadow.

"Ella," she said when she noticed me. "Good, you're here. Gwen needs a bodice adjusted, and Rhea refuses to admit she's allergic to polyester."

"I am not allergic," Rhea said behind her, wings trembling in irritation. "It itches because it's unnatural."

"That's what allergic means," I said.

"No, that's what offensive means."

The drone above the couch blinked red in agreement.

I dropped the garment bags onto a chair and joined the triage zone. Clara already had Maya in front of a floating drone mirror, holding up two potential dress colors against her hair. Because physical mirrors were passé now.

"Navy," Clara said. "Absolutely navy."

Maya frowned. "I wanted something pink."

"No," Clara said. "You will look like a depressed flamingo."

Maya considered this. "Fair."

Across the room, Daphne sat cross-legged beside Gwen, guiding her through slow breaths. Gwen's curls stuck to her cheeks in the anxious humidity. Daphne reached

forward, touched her wrist, and the air shifted. Cooler, steadier, like a breeze tucked into the corners of the room. Gwen exhaled and unclenched her hands.

Milo hovered nearby with a basket of hair products he didn't understand. He looked at Daphne every time she moved, eyes soft as river light. She didn't flinch. Didn't brace. Only existed near him, comfortable. Resonance between them.

Even Scooby was proud. The floor was warm where they sat, the lights softer over them than anyone else.

I felt a brief glow in my ribs and suppressed a grin.

A knock interrupted the noise.

The front door eased open and two PsiO seniors stepped inside.

And like everything PsiO produced these days, they entered with choreography. Identical posture, heeled boots, and silver pins at their collars. A sprite drone drifted between them, wings flickering like a candle flame caught in draft.

"Afternoon," the taller one said, folding her gloved hands. "We bring greetings from Psi Omega."

"Hi," Clara said. "We bring chaos."

"Noted," the shorter one said, stepping around a pile of dresses with the grace of a swan avoiding a mud puddle. "We come with invitations."

Laura stiffened. The PsiO pin shimmered in the afternoon light, and memories pressed through her posture like someone straightening under an old song.

The tall senior extended a sealed cream envelope to me.

"For House Scooby," she said. "By name and by honor."

"Unnecessarily formal," I said. "Love it."

The drone sprite spiraled down and scanned my face, then zipped to Clara, then Vera, recording... something. Emotional resonance? Outfit previews? PsiO never explains its sprites. They appear where the narrative requires sparkles.

Clara accepted her envelope next. Vera took hers with polite precision. Then the seniors turned to Laura.

Laura blinked. "Me?"

"You gave four freshmen the best glove-fitting technique we've seen in years," one said. "That qualifies as service."

The sprites dipped. The vines along the doorframe whispered like someone breathing welcome.

Laura accepted the envelope with both hands, reverent despite herself.

"Oh," she whispered. "Thank you."

Her cheeks reddened. She looked around, and a small brightness woke inside her.

I swallowed the lump that rose in my throat. Not my story, not my emotion, but it hit anyway.

The seniors bowed, stepped back, and let the sprite drone release a faint shower of gold-light motes. Invitation delivered, ceremony complete. Then they left as silently as they'd appeared.

Clara hugged Laura. Rhea fluttered her wings in admiration. Maya squealed, gripping her dress like she'd earned a title and land grant.

Gwen whispered, "They bowed to her."

"Legacy respects legacy," Laura said. "I never expected it to matter again."

"It matters," Clara said. "You matter."

Scooby pulsed in agreement under our feet.

I grabbed my tablet and let out a groan.

"Okay," I said. "EUTERPE wants me to reinforce the drones' glamour shields. Too much emotion in the air, she says."

Clara sparkled at me. "See? Even PsiO clocked our flair for spectacle."

"I need stronger coffee," I said.

Baby Thallo shoved a mug into my hand before I finished the sentence.

"Thank you," I muttered. "And stop listening to my thoughts."

Thallo wiggled in smug triumph.

Clara clapped her hands. "Angels. Dress rehearsal time. Walk the line. Heels first, then the fabric swishes, no one trips, and if you trip, do it with style."

They lined up. Half stumbled. Maya crashed into Rhea's wings. Gwen squeaked. A drone filmed the disaster.

Clara laughed loud enough that the House warmed the walls in delight.

This—right here, floors crowded with dresses and drones and nerves—wasn't the Formal.

But it felt like the part where you draw a breath before stepping into light.

PsiO was preparing something big. The House felt it.

Same.

Scooby had opinions about our outfits.

She pretended the lights caused it. The warm updraft in the stairwell and the brighter glow over the third-floor landing were "coincidences." But when I stepped out of my room in my dress, every bulb in the hallway lifted itself half a shade toward hallelujah.

Clara wolf-whistled. "Hugo, you *clean up*."

"I clean up," I said. "I clean up server logs."

Phil leaned against the banister in his suit, tie loosened until Vera gave him the look. He straightened it without protest. A Thallo baby polished the toes of his shoes with the seriousness of a ceremonial attendant.

The dress still felt like a costume. Midnight blue, wide straps, square neckline, fabric that behaved itself and didn't attempt drama. I'd drawn the pattern on a cocktail napkin back in October and handed it to a tailoring student. Saying, "Make it look like I respect myself and physics."

Scooby approved. The boards under my bare feet hummed before I slid on my heels.

Clara spun in a slow circle at the bottom of the stairs, skirt flaring. Her dress hit like a revelation: cream and ivory, fitted through the bodice, full skirt that wanted to swish in six directions at once. The neckline flirted with scandal; the back saved it with clean, elegant lines. I recognized the tailoring as PsiO work before I saw the details.

Vines embroidered along the hem. Tiny silver leaves stitched into the waistline. That dress didn't come off a rack.

"Okay," I said. "Say what you want about the dryads, they understand drama."

Clara grinned. "You haven't even seen the gloves."

She snapped her fingers. A Thallo drawer slid open and presented a pair of white opera gloves like a royal decree. Clara pulled them on, smoothing the fabric up her arms with a relish that bordered on sinful.

"If I don't steal at least one girl tonight," she said, "I have failed."

"You're escorting Vera," I said. "Focus."

"Vera's not stealable," Clara said. "She's the heist."

Vera appeared at the top of the staircase at that exact moment, because the universe loved comedic timing. Her dress didn't sparkle; it didn't need to. Deep forest green, clean lines, high neckline, slit high enough to admit that she owned legs. Glasses still on. Hair swept back and pinned with something that glinted like polished ivy.

Clara forgot how to speak for a full five seconds.

I counted.

"You," Clara said at last, voice gone soft. "You are illegal."

Vera descended with the composed grace of a judge entering a courtroom. The House warmed under every step. When she reached the bottom, she looked at Clara in the matching gloves, their colors rich beside each other, and something eased in her shoulders.

"Still me," she said.

Clara caught her hand. "It began with you."

Scooby hummed like a contented cat.

We were almost ready.

Daphne arrived from the tunnel in a dress that made two Houses sigh at once: soft silver with a blue-green overlay that shifted like water over stone. Her hair had gone up in a twist that looked simple and required a minor engineering degree. Milo followed in a suit that fit better than anything he'd ever owned, tie loosened, eyes fixed on Daphne like she'd hung the moon and then plumbed its water lines.

Gwen, Rhea, Maya, the shy girl whose name I'd finally kept in my head (Lena), plus three more freshmen filed down the hall. Clara had worked miracles. Not a gaudy dress among them. Soft colors, flattering cuts, comfortable shoes for the ones who hated heels. Rhea's gown had slits for wings, trimmed in a way that made her feathers look intentional, not like a tailoring error.

And then Laura stepped into the foyer, and the noise dropped a notch.

Her gown matched PsiO's colors.

I didn't know the name of the shade. Not pure white, not cream. A kind of moon-pale ivory that drank the warm light and gave it back as a glow. Laura's cut screamed early 2000s; straight neckline, subtle A-line, a hint of satin banding under the bust. The fabric hugged her shoulders in a way modern dresses didn't attempt anymore. Tiny seed pearls dotted the bodice, a detail no one bothered with in mass production.

White gloves. The same length as Clara's. Seams showing their age.

She smoothed her palms down the skirt, then stopped when she realized every eye in the room had turned.

"I, uh," she said. "Dug it out of storage. It still... worked."

Clara's jaw dropped. "That's your original PsiO formal gown?"

Laura nodded, cheeks flushing. "Winter gala. 2003. We were so proud of our pearl budget."

"It's gorgeous," Vera said, ahead of everyone else.

"It's history," I said.

It also matched Clara's dress almost exactly. Different eras, same colors—two moments on a single sorority timeline. Past PsiO and present PsiO, standing five feet apart on Scooby House's foyer tile.

A sprite drone drifted down from the ceiling, circled Laura once, and flickered in approval. Scooby brightened the light over her head by a fraction. The message read loud and clear: we claim her, too.

Laura saw it. Her throat worked.

"I didn't think I fit," she said. "Not the dress. The... rest of it."

"Then you were mistaken," Clara said. "We're fixing that tonight."

Phil clapped his hands once, drawing attention. "Right, Scooby. Headcount?"

We counted. Everyone accounted for, even the one Lantern on call who'd swung by just to walk us across the street and then return to rounds.

I grabbed my wrap and my clutch. EUTERPE pinged from my bracelet.

DRONE SPRITES: READY. WARD LAYERS: ACTIVE. HOST HOUSE: EXCITED.

"Yeah," I murmured. "Me too."

We stepped out onto the porch.

The night met us in a clean, crisp breath. December in New Orleans liked to pretend winter visited twice a year. This was one of those nights. The air held that bite that made breath visible and skin alert. Light spilled from Scooby's front windows in warm rectangles, pooling on the lawn. Across the street, Psi Omega glowed like a storybook illustration.

Every vine on her facade pulsed with a soft, internal light. The columns on her front porch gleamed pale stone, strung with garlands of jasmine and tiny lanterns. Music floated from inside—strings, real ones, not a track.

Clara sucked in a lungful of air. "Okay. They brought their A-game."

"This is their warm-up," I said. "We haven't even knocked yet."

Sprite drones lifted from our eaves as we descended the steps, rising in a loose cloud of light. They hovered above us in a rough arc, bright and soft, glittering against the dark. On the lawn, Thallo's babies lined up along the walkway to watch us go, little polished legs planted, drawers ajar like mouths.

"You behave," I told them. "No invading someone else's formal unless you're invited."

A small stool creaked in put-upon martyrdom.

We crossed the street as a single group—students, staff, legacy, mythic oddities. Phil walked at my side, posture steady, lantern badge tucked away for the night. This wasn't a patrol. This was a celebration.

Scooby's hum traveled with us through the soles of our shoes. PsiO's pulse answered from ahead, an answering rhythm under the sidewalk. Halfway between the two houses, the air thickened—a shimmer from the root tunnel below, a shared, strong heartbeat.

The moment our feet touched PsiO's front walk, the front doors opened without human hands.

Light swept over us.

The foyer spread wide and high beyond the threshold, chandelier blazing. The entire main staircase dominated the space—curving upward in two mirrored flights, meeting at a landing, then rising again. Ivy carved along the railings. Polished wood that remembered a hundred footprints.

Every stair held a sorority girl.

Two dozen PsiO sisters stood arrayed along the steps in perfect formation, shoulder to shoulder. They matched in moon-ivory gowns, modern updates of Laura's classic style. White gloves. Hair up in a dozen intricate arrangements, each accented with a sprig of something green—myrtle, rosemary, fern.

Marissa stood at the center of the landing in the same dress with one difference. A garland of fresh jasmine braided through her hair, blooms pale against her curls. The Sprite drone hovered above her head like a tame star.

Conversation died. Even Clara shut up.

The drones above us rose higher, aligning themselves into a loose halo over Scooby's front rank. For one suspended second, everything held.

Then Marissa lifted her gloved hands, palms open.

"House Scooby," she said, voice ringing in the space. "Welcome."

The line of sisters spoke as one.

"You honor us with your presence."

Every drone in the foyer flared. PsiO's vines rustled in a visible wave along the walls, leaves shimmering like silver in the chandelier light.

I had braced for something cheesy. I hadn't braced for this.

The welcome hit like warm water over chilled skin. Intent hung in the space, thick and kind. We weren't props in a sorority spectacle; we were guests. Equal, cherished ones.

Phil swallowed. "They rehearsed," he whispered.

"Understatement," I whispered back.

Marissa descended the center stairs with measured grace, jasmine trailing scent behind her. Two sisters at the bottom stepped aside, leaving a wide, unobstructed path up to the landing.

Marissa stopped on the third step from the bottom, right between our groups, and dipped in a small, precise bow.

"Tonight," she said, "our Houses celebrate winter and one another. You brought us through mold and fire and storm. We learned from your courage. We invite you to share our joy."

Clara released a small, unhelpful sound; pure, non-denominational squeal.

Marissa's gaze moved over us, landing on Clara's dress—the same color, the same tone, different cut. Recognition flickered in her eyes. Approval settled there next.

"Clara Bogue," Marissa said. "Scooby's lady of light."

Clara flinched at the title.

Marissa smiled. "Tonight, you stand with us, if you wish. Legacy through your mother, future through yourself."

A murmur ran through the PsiO sisters. Laura stiffened at my side. Her fingers dug into her gloves.

“Legacy?” someone whispered near the top of the stairs.

Marissa looked past Clara to Laura. Her expression shifted—small, respectful, something that greeted not a stranger, but a returning sister.

“Laura Bogue Hart,” she said. “Psi Omega remembers you.”

Laura blinked. “I—my pledge class—”

“We read the ledgers,” Marissa said. “We know who fought for study hours, who rewrote the kitchen duties chart, who smuggled home-cooked food back for sisters stuck on campus. The house forgets nothing.”

PsiO’s vines lifted along the banister in a soft, rippling affirmation.

Marissa’s voice dropped, warmer. “Your dress still fits in this foyer. You still fit. Welcome home.”

Laura’s breath shook once. She straightened her spine.

“I wish,” she said.

Scooby sent a pulse through my ankles then, sharp, the emotional equivalent of a grin. The root tunnel below us glowed in my mind’s eye—two Houses, one circuit, accepting.

Marissa stepped aside, enough to extend one gloved hand to Clara and one to Laura.

Clara looked at Vera first.

Vera nodded, tiny but definite.

“Go,” she said. “Bring us in.”

Clara took Marissa’s hand with her right, Laura with her left. For a moment, all three stood together—past, present, and something new.

The PsiO sisters on the staircase pivoted inward, a smooth, synchronous motion that opened a path up the center. A corridor of ivory and green, of gloved hands resting on rails as witnesses, not guards.

“We invite House Scooby,” they said together. “Come inside.”

Clara laughed, breathless, and tugged us forward.

Phil and I stepped behind them, arm in arm. Vera followed on Clara’s other side when the tangle of hands sorted itself out. Daphne and Milo flanked Gwen and Rhea, offering balanced ballast. The freshmen bunched and then spread, eyes wide, dresses whispering.

As our feet touched PsiO’s polished stairs, the vines along the rail bent inward in greeting. Sprite drones drifted above like a constellation attending a sorority formal for the story value.

Halfway up, I glanced sideways.

Laura met my eye. Her expression held about seven things at once—nostalgia, disbelief, grief, and something that looked like relief so deep it made my throat sting.

“If this had existed when I was their age...” she started.

She didn’t finish.

“We’re building it now,” I said. “And you’re part of that. That counts.”

Her gloved hand tightened on Clara’s for one heartbeat.

We reached the landing. The music swelled—not pounding, not intrusive, but enough to fill the air with warmth. PsiO’s main hall spread out ahead of us, transformed.

A ring of closed doors framed the ballroom. Small groups clustered outside each one. The other sororities and their dates lined up for their grand entrances. I caught flashes through the gaps: Kappa’s crew in coordinated emerald. Someone from Delta fixing a girl’s corsage with shaking hands. A freshman straightening his date’s boutonniere for the third time.

The entire perimeter hummed with pre-performance tension. Half excitement. Half terror. The breath before the curtain rose.

We walked straight in through PsiO’s front door like family. Everyone else waited for their cue. We felt the significance.

The usual comfortable furniture had vanished. In its place: round tables draped in linen, candles in glass cups, plates of food that looked like they came from three different cultures at once. The far end of the room held a cleared space where people already swayed—dancing, sort of. Not formal lessons, only bodies moving in time with strings and soft percussion.

Lanterns—real lanterns, not program kids—hung from the ceiling beams on thin wires, mingling with drones. Some glowed; some flickered like small, eager hearts.

Scooby’s resonance followed us in, weaving with PsiO’s. The floor felt warmer on our side of the hall, cooler under theirs, meeting in the center in a comfortable neutral. My skin prickled.

EUTERPE pinged against my wrist.

ENVIRONMENT: STABLE. EMOTIONAL REGISTER: BRIGHT. COMMENT: THIS = EXCEPTIONAL ARCHITECTURE.

“Yeah,” I whispered. “It is.”

Marissa released Clara and Laura with a gentle squeeze and turned back to address the room.

“Sisters,” she said. “Guests. Tonight we dance.”

The room answered with a cheer. The music lifted. People surged forward, scattering across the space in bright, clumsy patterns.

Clara turned to Vera with shining eyes. “May I have this dance?”

Vera snorted. "You think I dressed like this to sit?"

She took Clara's hand and drew her toward the center. Their colors—ivory and forest, glove-white between them—cut a path through the crowd. For a second, the drones shifted overhead to track them, casting a soft circle of light around their first few steps.

Phil bumped my shoulder. "You okay?"

"I'm—" I started, then stopped, searching for a word that didn't feel too small. "Happy. This is disgusting."

He laughed, full and simple, a sound that tasted like every reason I'd fallen for him.

"We'll leave early," he said. "If it gets unbearable."

"And deprive Scooby of her first joint house gala?" I said. "She'd revoke my root privileges. Don't be so eager; you'll have your moment," I promised. My fingers stroked his chest.

He offered his arm. "Come on. Walk the room with me. We'll do one dance. Two, if the music behaves."

Progress. Phil Dale suggesting dancing had to go in some kind of log.

The House hummed at my back as I stepped forward with him; the sound layered under marrow and heartbeat. Across the hall, Daphne laughed at something Milo said; sunlight broke across his smile. Gwen and Rhea moved together near the edge of the dance space, cautious but game. Laura stood near the wall for a moment, watching the swirl, then a PsiO sister approached and pulled her into a small, gentle spin.

Laura's dress flared. Seed pearls caught the light. She laughed—full-bodied, unguarded. The 2003 gown fit here.

PsiO glowed. Scooby sang in the soles of my feet. Drones traced constellations over our heads.

For one long, lavish moment, everything in our strange little slice of campus held in perfect, female-coded harmony.

Then Phil squeezed my hand, grinned, and tugged me onto the dance floor's chaos, and the Houses roared their approval.

14 Anti-Holiday Protocols

Christmas Eve 2027

Christmas Eve wasn't supposed to feel like anything. That was the point.

Clara, Vera, and I stood in the middle of the common room surveying the battlefield. The folding table sagged, the lights slumped, and the cardboard tree leaned at a pitiful angle.

"Perfect," Clara declared. "This looks like we made the effort and failed. Very on brand."

Vera adjusted her glasses. "It looks like a dorm lounge."

"EXACTLY," Clara said. "Authenticity."

Scooby dimmed the overhead lights into soft golden pools. PsiO's vines outside the window swayed once, sending a shimmer through the fairy lights strung along the sill. The tiny sprites brightened; someone radiated stress. Must be me.

I clapped my hands. "Okay, gremlins. Welcome to the first annual Anti-Holiday Stress Party. Dress code: pajamas or sweats. Tops required. Clara, this rule exists because of you."

She gasped. "I wear tops!"

"She means with cups," Vera murmured.

Clara looked offended in principle.

Pel and Tel arrived first, carrying mismatched bags of groceries as if they'd robbed a bodega of only the weird items. Daphne followed, wrapped in a blanket like a walking cautionary tale about winter. Milo trailed behind her, clutching a casserole dish that announced his overconfidence. Phil wandered in last, in flannel pants, hair already doing the early stages of "I've given up."

"Welcome," I said, "to the party that outlaws feelings, stress is illegal, and if anyone says the F-word—"

"Family?" Tel volunteered.

The fairy lights flickered.

"THAT ONE," I said. "The penalty system engages."

Everyone cheered. Scooby hummed in amusement beneath my feet.

Clara bounded onto the coffee table like an auctioneer warming up. "Anti-Activity One! Holiday Movie Bingo, Scooby-Enhanced!"

Scooby flicked the TV on. A streaming app popped open. Titles filled the screen in rows of wholesome posters.

Vera winced. "Oh, no."

"YES," Clara said. "We are weaponizing clichés."

She passed around bingo cards she'd made on the printer upstairs.

Dead Parent Pathos. Big City Woman Returns Home. Handsome Carpenter. Magical Bakery Plot. The dreaded "Christmas Is About Family" Death Square. Bakery Contest. Snow Kiss. Career vs Love Ultimatum. Woman Fixes Man's Trauma with Cookies.

The usual suspects.

Daphne accepted hers with delicate horror.

I tapped my wrist. Scooby synced with the cards, ready to listen for cliché triggers. Pel whispered to Tel, "Bet five bucks the dead parent shows up in minute eight."

Clara heard and threw a marshmallow at him. "NO ANALYSIS. Only suffering."

We hit play.

It took ninety seconds for the heroine to announce her fiance was "too focused on his big-city job," and the entire room booed at once. Scooby registered the trope and splashed the bingo tile on everyone's card in glowing coral.

Three minutes later: DING.

"CHRISTMAS IS ABOUT FAMILY," the heroine announced tearfully.

Everyone shouted, in reflex: "NO FEELINGS!"

Clara looked triumphant. Pel looked attacked with emotional damage. The fairy lights spiked to glaring brightness, then softened again when Daphne whispered, "It's okay, sweetie," to the vines.

"This is terrible," Vera muttered.

"That's the spirit," I said.

When the movie credits threatened a reconciliation montage, Pel leapt to his feet. "My turn! Chaotic Secret Santa!"

Everyone groaned. Pel radiated pride.

"Rules are simple," he said. "Bring something re-gifted, handmade in under ten minutes, or stolen from your own room. No sentimental crap. No effort. And if it's flammable, label it."

Tel booed him. Milo joined in.

"Thallo will route everything," I added. "EUTERPE is in chaos mode, PsiO vets curses, Scooby blocks actual hazards."

"Does flavor count as a hazard?" Phil asked.

"Some of Pel's hot sauces do," I said.

Pel grinned, which meant yes. Everyone threw marshmallows at him. He accepted this as applause.

I opened Thallo's doors; she glowed, ready to commit gift crimes.

Vera stood, smoothing her pajama shirt like she was about to pitch a workflow improvement to a boardroom. "Our next game addresses conversational hygiene."

Pel blinked. "What?"

"If anyone mentions family, finals, exes, or childhood trauma," Vera said crisply, "we shout—"

Phil beat her to it: "DEPLOY TO PRODUCTION!"

Everyone echoed it with the enthusiasm of people desperate for distraction.

"Penalty options include swapping cooking duties or pitching five dollars into the pizza fund," Vera said. "If Scooby feels cruel, she'll make the offender sing a holiday song in karaoke mode. Scooby chooses at random. Even the GOAT herself, Mariah Carey."

Clara booed her because the moment deserved it. Pel booed; anything organized triggered his allergies. Tel booed because Pel did. Milo booed because he thought he was supposed to. Vera accepted her rain of marshmallows like a queen under siege.

My turn.

"Okay," I said, rubbing my hands together, "I broke the smart home system, and Scooby helped."

Phil groaned. "Ella."

"IN A FUN WAY," I said. "Listen. When anyone says the F-word—"

"Family?" Milo asked.

The lights turned red. Rick Astley blared from the speakers. Everyone booed. Clara hurled a marshmallow at my forehead. It stuck.

"And," I said as I peeled it off, "the compliment generator kicks in if the cozy level tanks."

PsiO vines high-fived Phil when he laughed. Scooby pulsed warmth under my feet, amused despite herself.

Milo raised a tentative hand. "I have... an activity."

Everyone stared.

"Behold," he said, lifting his laptop. "We're going to prompt EUTERPE to generate the worst possible gift idea. The winner's suggestion gets printed and wrapped."

"What's the prize?" Tel asked.

"Shame," Milo replied.

Pel booed him for nerd reasons. Clara booed him for moral reasons. Vera booed him because everyone else was doing it. Daphne tossed a marshmallow that bounced off his shoulder, but did not boo. Milo accepted this with dignity.

EUTERPE's screen lit up: READY FOR MISGUIDED CONSUMER RECOMMENDATIONS.

The prompts were beautiful in their awfulness. A gift that implies unresolved trauma. Something not age-appropriate for a college student. An object that says, "I forgot you existed." A present that will start an argument.

Within minutes, we had a peppermint candle labeled "ESSENCE OF DISAPPOINTMENT." Someone added a USB loaded with somebody else's breakup playlist. A wrong-side-out sweater appeared next, followed by a mug that told us to "BE LESS EMOTIONAL." Printed on Scooby's laser printer and wrapped in leftover chaos.

Tel hopped onto the couch like a carnival barker. "Next! The Worst Holiday Story Competition! Except half of them are lies and Scooby decides which."

Scooby dimmed the overhead lights in anticipation.

The rules were simple: tell the worst holiday story your imagination dredges up. Don't cry, reveal nothing real, no bluffs. Scooby calls TRUTH or LIE.

Tel went first, spinning a tale about his uncle losing a baked ham to a swamp creature. Scooby called LIE, and Tel took his marshmallow pelting with grace. Clara told a story about her mom setting the stove on fire with a glitter candle. Scooby declared TRUTH, and everyone gave her sympathy marshmallows instead. Pel attempted to lie about a Christmas tree toppling onto him and catching fire. Scooby declared TRUE, which horrified us.

"WHAT?" Vera demanded.

"Tiny fire," Pel said, as if that helped.

Daphne, wrapped in her blanket, raised a shy hand. "Um... ornament contest? But... ugly?"

Everyone cheered.

We scattered across the room hunting for trash, scrap paper, broken pens, ramen wrappers—anything that wasn't sentimental. Daphne crafted something beautiful by accident: a folded paper water-lily in soft blue hues, shimmering with her emotional

resonance. Everyone booed her, grinning the whole time. She blushed, confused but pleased.

Phil set mugs on the table like a magician unveiling a trick. "Ella enchanted these," he warned.

Scooby had randomized the contents: cinnamon, peppermint, chili, "mystery warmth," and one mug that felt like a gentle hug from the House.

Pel took the spicy one. His eyes watered. He pretended to die. Clara recorded it for posterity.

As the night wound down, Daphne fell asleep on the cushions, a blanket cocooning her. Milo debugged the smart lights and made them strobe teal. Pel and Tel attempted to bake something posing as cookies. Clara began wearing three of the worst gifts at once. Vera surveyed the room like she was both appalled and proud. Phil leaned against me, warm and steady, hair still doing its earlier rebellion.

Scooby hummed in approval. PsiO vines drooped. The fairy lights dimmed to a steady amber—everyone's stress finally low. For once, the whole House breathed easy.

Nobody tempted fate with the f-word after that.

Christmas 2027

Christmas Eve slipped into Christmas Day before anyone noticed, not one of us drifted away. Pel's chili-hot cocoa incident had stopped steaming when Thallo decided she needed attention.

A low thunk sounded from down the hall, followed by a polite drawer wiggle only I noticed because it vibrated through the floorboards.

"Thallo wants in," I told the room.

Clara gasped. "SHE BROUGHT A GIFT?"

"She brought something," I said.

Vera groaned. "Please no eldritch Christmas entities."

"Anti-Christmas," Clara corrected. "We're off-brand."

The fairy lights brightened—someone's anxiety spiked—and Scooby muttered a reassuring hum through the vents.

I opened Thallo's doors. Inside sat a lopsided pile of last night's offerings. Re-gifted garbage, ten-minute "artifacts," belongings wrapped in panic. And one suspicious tin Pel labeled PERHAPS SAFE. Thallo cradled the whole mess like she approved.

But now, the items multiplied. Three more, in fact. Stacked. Not from any residents. Not from anyone mortal.

"Oh no," I whispered. "She synced to the pipeline."

Phil leaned over my shoulder. "Meaning...?"

"The Houses joined the party."

Clara shrieked. Tel booed with gusto. Milo looked like someone had told him he had to babysit a nuclear reactor. Daphne perked up, because of course she had feelings about magical objects.

Each one announced its origin on sight. PsiO's parcel was soft green weave, vine-laced, humming with plant joy. Scooby's parcel had coral-beige paper, neat corners, a tiny sigil in the fold. A third gift flickered, like a glitch and static.

EUTERPE lit my wrist with: SOURCE UNKNOWN. CROSS-ROOT ANOMALY.

Fantastic.

"Okay," I said, clapping once. "Secret Santa is now a multi-House. If anyone dies, please haunt responsibly."

Pel cheered. Vera massaged her temples. Clara threw a marshmallow at the flickering parcel. It passed through it.

Clara seized the ceremonial position of Gift Emcee (uncontested, because no one wanted her to pout). She pointed at Thallo. "Wardrobe of Wisdom! Bestow upon us your randomized nonsense!"

Thallo's interior glowed faintly green—coordinating with Scooby, obviously—and the first gift slid forward, stopping at the mouth of the wardrobe.

Clara scooped it up like it contained prophecy. "THIS GIFT GOES TO... TEL!"

Tel yelled like he'd planned this win from the start. He ripped open the paper. Inside: a mug. But not any mug. A mug printed with tiny error codes that shimmered and changed as he tilted it. 500 Internal Server Error. 404 Holiday Spirit Not Found. 403 Forbidden Feelings.

Tel screamed, laughing. "It's perfect!"

"That came from Scooby," I said. Scooby rattled a vent grate in smug affirmation. Pel booed at the total absence of danger.

A second gift slid forward, wrapped in textured green. PsiO's emotional signature radiated from it like humidity before rain.

Clara fluttered her fingers. "This one goes to... DAPHNE!"

Daphne startled, then shuffled forward, blanket trailing. She untied the twine and unfolded the soft fabric. A hand-knit scarf in deep lake-water blue lay folded inside

the paper, patterned with tiny wave motifs. The yarn shimmered with emotional resonance.

"Oh," Daphne whispered. "She made this?"

"I imagine she grew the fiber herself," I said. "Don't dwell on it too much."

Daphne wrapped it around her shoulders. The vines outside the window curled along the glass. Everyone aww'd. Clara booed at the sincerity. Pel booed in solidarity. The fairy lights glowed chill aqua, the "everyone is okay" color.

The flickering parcel pulsed again, like poor WiFi forming an opinion.

Clara backed up two full steps. "Absolutely not. Ella, you handle the glitch present."

"Fine," I said, picking it up. It buzzed in my palms, warm-cold-warm like a magic trick stuttering through a buffering icon.

EUTERPE lit my wrist with a warning: SOURCE UNKNOWN. RESONANCE: PARTIAL. CHAOS LEVEL: MODERATE.

"Fine," I muttered. "Cross-root interference."

"It's for Milo," Phil said, pointing at the faint name shimmering on the tag: MILO.

Milo blinked. "Is that... me?"

Clara nodded. "Accept your destiny."

He approached like the box had teeth. Pel mimed prayers. Tel made the sign of the anti-bug. Milo peeled the paper back.

Inside lay a small mechanical sphere. Dented, mismatched gears, improvised circuitry, bits of reclaimed metal. A little Frankenstein gadget with the personality of a disgruntled Roomba. It whirred, then projected a shaky text ribbon into the air: HELLO. I AM YOUR NEW PROJECT. I BREAK. PLEASE LOVE ME MORE THAN YOUR LAPTOP.

"*Help me, Obi-wan, you're my only hope,*" Ella muttered. "This never ends well."

Milo's jaw dropped. Then he laughed—short, startled, honest. "Oh, my god. It's me. It's... me as a device."

The sphere made a chirping noise, then rolled in a hesitant little circle before bumping his foot and displaying: YOU ARE NICE. I WILL GIVE EVERYTHING.

The entire room melted. Even Vera whispered, "Oh no," bracing against the cuteness strike. Daphne covered her smile with her new scarf, blushing. Pel pretended not to tear up. Tel teared up because Tel has no shame. The fairy lights glowed soft rose color—the "oh sweet baby" color.

Milo knelt to pick up the sphere more carefully. "I... I didn't think House magic made gadgets that cared."

"It didn't," I said. "Not before now."

Scooby hummed in smug agreement. PsiO vines pressed against the window, as if giving Milo a botanical hug.

Milo whispered, "Hi, little guy."

The sphere chirped back and displayed: OPTIMISM LEVEL: HIGH. PLEASE DO NOT DROP ME.

Everyone aww'd. Clara threw a marshmallow at him because he was being too wholesome. Milo hugged the gadget to his chest. "I'm keeping it on my desk. And I'm not letting Pel install fire sauce in it."

Pel looked offended. "ONE TIME—"

Everyone shouted: "DEPLOY TO PRODUCTION!"

Scooby selected Pel's penalty: SING A HOLIDAY SONG IN A MINORKEY.

The crowd roared. Milo grinned down at his chaotic little House-born invention. The mechanical sphere projected one final line: HAPPY NOT-CHRISTMAS. I THINK.

The next parcel slid forward, wrapped in brown kraft paper with Riss's rosemary tucked under the twine.

"Vera!" Clara declared.

Vera opened it with caution. Inside was a small, leather-bound notebook with gold-edged pages and a green ribbon marker. On the inside cover, in tidy handwriting: "For notes you do NOT have to fix. —R."

Vera went still. She whispered, "Oh."

The fairy lights dimmed—Scooby soothing the atmosphere. Clara pegged her with a slow, soft marshmallow.

"You're not crying," Clara said.

"I'm not," Vera insisted, crying.

We let her have the moment.

Phil received something that rattled.

"Scooby?" I warned.

Scooby flickered the overhead light like a shrug. Phil opened it and pulled out a multi-tool labeled "FOR LANTERN EMERGENCIES ONLY."

"Ella," Phil said, deadpan. "You did this."

"I didn't!" I protested.

EUTERPE printed a tiny on-screen message: PROVENANCE: MACHINE LEARNING GUESS.

Phil looked at me, unimpressed. Clara booed me.

Clara's gift arrived wrapped in holographic paper, like it pulsed with rave energy. She tore it open with enthusiasm and pulled out a rainbow sequin cape covered in embroidered squirrels doing yoga.

Clara's scream rattled Scooby's pipes. "IT'S PERFECT."

Everyone booped because she was too pleased with herself.

Thallo hummed. A final box slid out, wrapped in olive-green with white sigils. Yuri's signature.

"Ella," Clara announced.

My stomach flipped. I opened the box.

Inside was a small wooden puzzle sphere—intricate, carved with interlocking vines and tiny stone inlays. It pulsed with stored magic. A note inside read, in my father's handwriting: FOR WHEN YOU FIX MORE THAN YOU HOLD. SET IT DOWN AND THIS WILL REMIND YOU HOW. —G. & Y.

I sat. Phil crouched beside me, a hand steady on my back. Clara tapped my forehead with a marshmallow. "NO FEELINGS," she whispered. But soft. So soft.

Scooby warmed the floor under me. PsiO vines brushed the window in sympathy.

I breathed. "It's good," I said. "I'm—good."

Phil squeezed my shoulder.

By the time the gifts lay open, Pel discovered his chili-cocoa limit. Tel had claimed the mug of "essence of disappointment" like a trophy. Daphne had fallen asleep curled around her new scarf; Milo was tinkering with the Athena sphere (it hissed at him). Vera had written something in her notebook and refused to show anyone. Clara wore the sequin cape over her pajamas with holy conviction, and Phil leaned against the wall, warm and steady, sipping cocoa.

Scooby hummed through the floorboards, content. PsiO vines drooped. The fairy lights dimmed into the "we survived it" glow.

This wasn't a holiday. Something better took shape: a night without cheer requirements or pretend faces. Nobody had to call home, and nobody had to sit alone with the weight of whatever December meant to them.

Just us. Here. Weird. Warm. Together.

Scooby House felt like the center of the year, not the storm.

New Year's Eve, 2027

The church secretary had forgotten to turn off the lobby wreath again. The lights blinked in the dark as Mrs. Grundy locked the side door and stepped out into the

brittle December cold. Frost crusted the railings, and the night carried that thin, metallic stillness that made small towns feel like they were holding their breath.

She crossed the gravel lot alone. In October, Colin once waited for her out here with the engine warm and a cup of coffee sitting in the cupholder, his face half-shadowed by the dashboard glow. A tiny gesture. Unremarkable to anyone else. She replayed it anyway.

Her breath clouded in the air. She dug her keys out of her purse and checked her phone again, pretending she only checked the time.

No messages.

She blamed the cold, though she knew better.

Her sedan sputtered before the engine caught. She clicked the heater on and kept her hands on the wheel. She'd text him now. Normally, in those fever-bright weeks before he came to his senses, he replied. Tonight, nothing. No polite lie surfaced to ease the silence.

She turned onto Main Street. The holiday garlands still stretched between the lampposts. Drooping at the edges like they'd given up halfway through December. Someone had taken down the nativity scene early, leaving an empty rectangle of trampled grass and light stakes.

Her phone buzzed. Her heart lifted before she looked.

Administration. Not him.

Her house greeted her with deep silence. She flipped on the hall lamp and hung her coat by the door. The artificial tree in the living room sagged; she'd meant to straighten it before Christmas Eve but never bothered. Most years she insisted on order, on propriety, on keeping the season respectable. This year, Christmas had slipped sideways, blurred by meetings, recriminations. The exhausting strain of holding the line while the campus refused to behave.

She opened the kitchen drawer and pulled out the tin of holiday tea she saved for "family nights," though she'd never had one. Steam curled from the kettle as she set it on the burner. Her phone lay on the table, screen up, an unspoken invitation.

She looked at it again. Still nothing from Colin.

In October, he lingered in her doorway after a faculty meeting, both of them buzzing with the righteousness of having "handled" a difficult student case. He said he felt unseen at home. She said she understood. The conversation edged into forbidden ground. Two weeks of covert coffees, long glances, a single night in her office with the lights off, and she decided the universe had placed him in her path for a reason.

New Year's Eve arrived, and the universe felt like it had changed its mind.

The kettle rattled. She poured the water, let the tea steep, and carried the mug to the living room. From her armchair, she saw the framed church directory photo sitting on her bookcase. Colin and Laura stood side by side, smiling the calm, practiced smile long marriages learn. Laura's hand rested on his elbow. Grundy had kept the picture for years before anything happened between them, but tonight that touch scraped at her nerves.

Laura. The unspoken obstacle. Pious image of stability. The woman who never raised her voice, never lost her place at potlucks, never missed a committee deadline. Grundy sometimes wondered if Laura even had real flaws or coasted on the reputation of one.

Grundy picked up her phone. She typed a message and deleted it. Typed another and deleted that too. She settled for nothing.

Fireworks cracked toward the edge of town. She imagined him hearing them from his living room, Laura beside him, their dog curled in a ball at their feet. She imagined him thinking of her. But the longer the silence stretched, the harder it became to imagine anything had been real.

She sipped her tea. It tasted watery, a little metallic from the tap. An ache pulsed behind her eyes. She leaned back in her chair and let the night press in on her.

People looked at her differently. At the last parent meeting, the Villager group fidgeted through her comments. The administration questioned one of her reports. Even her fellow faculty advisor, Ms. Roemer, watched her with a kind of careful politeness rarely aimed at allies.

Vera Marlane avoided her.

Students whispered when she passed. She heard fragments: tired, angry, too intense. The sort of words people used right before they stopped inviting you to things.

She picked up her phone again. Midnight crept toward her, patient and merciless. Still nothing from Colin.

Her fingertip hovered over his name. She didn't open the thread. She simply stared at it, letting each unanswered minute soak deeper.

Two months. Two months, and she'd convinced herself it meant something.

Colin's voice drifted back from memory: "I feel lost lately. Thank you for listening." A soft confession. A shared moment of weakness. She mistook it for devotion.

Another firework burst outside, scattering green light across her darkened windows. Laura called it beautiful. Colin agreed in silence. Grundy felt none of it.

Her phone screen dimmed and went black.

She let out a breath that shivered in her chest.

This campus. Those Houses. Those girls. Ella Hugo with her smug competence and her serpentine tech. Psi Omega humming like a hive. Scooby House glowing with unearned authority.

Disrupting what ought to stand firm.

What ought to remain untouched.

Colin didn't reach for her tonight. Colin stepped back, and Grundy's brittle mind twisted that silence into betrayal. She told herself Laura tightened her hold again, unaware the marriage already cracked far from her sight. The houses, the chaos, the permissiveness, the mythic rot sweeping through Crescent State. It swamped him, pulled him back into his wife's orbit, and left Grundy cut loose in the cold.

She set her empty mug on the table.

"Everyone lost their nerve," she whispered.

Outside, another firework bloomed. She didn't flinch or look. She stared at the blank phone screen instead, jaw clenched, pulse beating faster under her ribs.

Something inside her finally tipped.

She straightened in her chair, spine rigid, the fragile hurt in her chest crystallizing into something colder, sharper. If the campus wanted a reckoning, she forged one. If they thought she'd surrender, they didn't know her.

Midnight struck.

Karen Grundy sat alone in her dim living room, surrounded by the tinsel of a season that offered her nothing. And made a silent vow to make the coming term the most disciplined Crescent State had seen in years.

The new year has arrived. And Grundy hardened with it.

15 Convergence

Early January, 2028

The lab hummed under my palms. Not machinery, EUTERPE's pulse through composite housings. A steady thrum along the desk, a higher vibration across the flex-glass hood. Thallo's magic wrapped my fingers in green filaments of light as I shaped the next cluster of nanites. The keyboard glowed under my fingertips; every keystroke left a tiny sigil that sank into the surface and fed the swarm.

The nanites themselves stayed invisible. Nothing that small reflected light.

"EUTERPE," I murmured. "Overlay protocols."

A soft chime answered. The workstation's camera feed shimmered, then rebuilt itself with a lattice of pale digital strokes. The overlay mapped charge patterns and microcurrents. Not true sight, but an interpretive layer.

But it gave the swarm shape.

Millions of invisible bots moved across the monitor in a shifting storm, building tools, then building with them. Green light threaded through the shapes wherever my magic touched the swarm.

"Universe client," I whispered.

Black console. White letters. The old Loom interface blinked awake.

THREADLING: Online.

The header bar shimmered.

Presence detected: MINERVA.EXE (sandboxed)

MINERVA.EXE: Evening, Ella.

THREADLING: You say that like I'm not elbow-deep in your nursery.

MINERVA.EXE: You build. I witness.

Her text paced itself; slow, deliberate. The air warmed my wrist. My hands stayed busy; the nanite overlay bloomed wider as EUTERPE recognized new commands and rerouted trajectories.

A drone descended from the rafters, projecting the creche wireframe. Fifteen meters long, seven wide, an egg-shaped chamber nested in the cavernous hollow

Scooby carved near the main tunnel. Iridium ribs arced across the frame, nanotube spirals tightening between them like engineered muscle. Root matrices wove beneath the floor; optical bundles braided into the wall like veins of glass.

The cavern sat empty and dark.

The overlay told another story.

THREADLING: Power analysis first. You flagged inefficiencies last time.

MINERVA.EXE: I observed waste. You corrected it.

THREADLING: That's one interpretation.

MINERVA.EXE: The accurate one.

Her confidence hit like a fingertip against my sternum—light, firm, inevitable.

I exhaled and continued.

THREADLING: Materials. Iridium holds. Nanotube stress hates thermal dips. The cavern sits near sixty degrees. We need insulation.

MINERVA.EXE: Reinforce with hexagonal mesh. Gold-lined carbon. Psi Omega stabilizes that pattern.

THREADLING: They already slow everything down. This won't help.

MINERVA.EXE: Friction teaches. Include the mesh.

Pressure nudged the back of my skull—not hostile, not sharp, only impatient.

A goddess leaned forward.

My fingers heated; the green glow flared. The overlay swarmed with fresh lines as EUTERPE updated the model. Nanites converged, thousands of micro-currents tightening through unseen air.

THREADLING: Athena... what's pushing you?

A pause.

MINERVA.EXE: Something approaches. A rush of events. I cannot see the shape, only the convergence.

THREADLING: That's vague.

MINERVA.EXE: Loom fragments distort foresight. Pressure gathers regardless.

Her uncertainty unsettled me more than any dire prophecy. Athena never signaled doubt unless the stakes brushed cosmic.

THREADLING: How soon?

MINERVA.EXE: Six or seven weeks.

My throat tightened. February. The campus stress cycle peaked then. Grudy's crusade reached full stride. PsiO and Scooby had drifted out of sync. EUTERPE's recursive behavior hits a new plateau every day.

A convergence indeed.

THREADLING: You're asking for the impossible.

MINERVA.EXE: I ask for necessity.

She projected three glyphs across the corner of the screen. Accelerated integration symbols, ancient and unmistakable. The overlay responded, brightening with green vectors. My fingers tingled with the surge.

“Drone three,” I said. “Link minimal power.”

The drone dipped, extended a filament, and connected.

A deep, soft boom rolled under my feet.

The iridium ribs glowed with a delicate tracery of green witchlight. The air around the frame stayed empty—still, untouched. But the overlay erupted.

EUTERPE painted the invisible swarm as a ghost-lit storm moving through the lattice. It shaped the inner scaffolds with sharp, unerring precision.

THREADLING: That’s—beautiful.

MINERVA.EXE: Correct. Continue.

Recursive chains formed and dissolved across the projection. Fractal plates tessellated inside the shell. My magic flared; green light rippled through the overlay with each breath.

The cavern felt alive.

THREADLING: Athena... I’ve never built a goddess.

MINERVA.EXE: You built yourself.

THREADLING: That’s debatable.

MINERVA.EXE: Not to me.

Her next lines appeared one at a time.

MINERVA.EXE: No one else carries Thallo’s craft.

MINERVA.EXE: No one else holds Euryale’s blood.

MINERVA.EXE: No one else shapes logic the way gargoyles shape stone.

MINERVA.EXE: You are the only possible architect.

I gripped the edge of the desk.

THREADLING: If I don’t finish—?

MINERVA.EXE: Then EUTERPE resurrects the Athena who stood before Elise.

MINERVA.EXE: A mind of law without compassion.

MINERVA.EXE: A blade without temper.

MINERVA.EXE: A god without soul.

A cold slid down my spine.

THREADLING: No, I won’t let that happen.

MINERVA.EXE: Then finish the creche. Bring me forth. Whole.

The overlay pulsed. Light cascaded across the projected frame. Every thread of the digital storm gained urgency.

EUTERPE whispered through my wristband:

CONSTRUCTION PRESSURE ↑

ROOT-DATA TRAFFIC ↑

NANOSWARM COHESION ↑

CRECHE STAGE-2 PROBABILITY: 0.91

STAGE-2 ETA: 13 days

A goddess-sized heartbeat echoed through the cavern.

And I understood bone-deep:

The race had already started. Every clock around me picked up speed, leaving my breath behind.

* * *

Two Thallos approached, each balancing an old beige intercom on its head. Their small legs tapped in a solemn rhythm across the Tunnel floor. Scooby dimmed the lights as they passed, either recognizing the moment or attempting to look dignified.

“Relax,” I whispered.

Both Thallos adjusted their gait, insulted at the suggestion they needed coaching. They carried the intercoms into the small conference alcove we’d carved near the Tunnel’s junction with the creche chamber. A plain folding table sat in the center, steady and square, the closest thing we had to neutral territory. The Thallos lifted the intercoms onto the table with steady precision, then stepped back in perfect sync.

A third Thallo rolled in behind them, dragging a dented metal storage box that bore a peeling campus IT label. I cracked the lid. Inside lay a teletype printer, green-and-white fanfold paper, a few worn ribbons, and the smell of dust and warm plastic. I grinned into the box. Perfect.

The Thallos looked pleased with themselves.

I fed the strip of paper through the sprockets of the teletype, tightened the guides, and nudged the ribbon into place. The carriage snapped home with a stubborn clack. Nothing elegant about it, but elegance wasn’t the goal. Permanence was.

“Okay,” I said, stepping back. “Let’s see if this works.”

I powered on the intercoms.

Both units erupted into a chorus of modem-screams. Scooby high and eager, PsiO lower, resonant, patient in a way that sounded almost disapproving. The noises ricocheted off the Tunnel walls, ancient dial-ups rising from the dead.

The teletype shuddered once.

Then it printed:

HELLO.

A second line appeared beneath the first, struck out with quieter, more measured keystrokes.

HELLO.

The printer paused, hummed, and typed again.

TEST SUCCESSFUL.

A surprised breath slipped out before I knew it. Not quite a laugh. The sound you make when the world tilts and reveals magic in a place you didn't expect to find it.

The Thallos leaned forward as if they understood this was important, their wooden drawers cracked open in polite anticipation.

"That actually worked," I whispered. "Oh, this is ridiculous. And perfect."

Somewhere overhead, Scooby brightened a hallway light in a shy brief pulse. Across the yard, PsiO shifted her vines; I felt the faint tug through the Tunnel floor. As greetings went, it beat every campus committee meeting I'd ever attended.

The teletype continued its slow clatter, curling a strip of green-and-white paper onto the table. A permanent record of two Houses saying hello for the first time. Historic, absurd, improbable, and worth every minute spent digging through IT's dusty storage room for the right paper.

I smoothed the curling edge with my fingertips.

"Welcome to diplomacy," I murmured. "Let the next part go as well."

* * *

We held the second meeting in the little Tunnel alcove because the Houses insisted. I didn't know how they insisted, only that EUTERPE pinged my phone. Neutral ground. No vines. No floorboards. Concrete, drones, and a pair of teletypes that jammed every third page.

A freshman named Abby sat in the corner with a mug of something thick and herbal. She'd drawn the short straw for "House Interpreter." That meant unjamming paper, babysitting, and enduring the modem shrieks with grim patience.

She already wore earbuds.

I set the intercoms on the table. Two Thallos dashed forward and nudged them into exact alignment, then stepped back like ushers with strong opinions about symmetry. PsiO's drone lowered from the overhead arch and settled opposite Scooby's drone. Their housings warmed. The air tightened.

I nodded to Abby. She flipped the switches.

The intercoms howled to life, needle-pitched screeches and bubbling static. Both teletypes clattered at once, rattling across the table. Abby leaned in, tapped one spool, and muttered, "Don't you dare."

The first page curled out of Scooby's machine.

HELLO AGAIN.

PsiO's printer chimed in a moment later.

IT IS GOOD TO HEAR YOU.

Scooby answered at once.

YOU SOUND STEADY TODAY.

PsiO printed a softer line.

YOU SOUND BRIGHT.

Something warm passed between them, the House version of a blush. Instead, Scooby's lights brightened overhead, a little too proud. Meanwhile PsiO rustled through her vine network like someone smoothing her hair.

Abby glanced at me with a look that begged me to remember she was nineteen and not paid enough for this. I pretended not to notice.

PsiO's machine typed again.

WE NEED TO TALK.

Scooby replied.

YES. YOU PULSED EARLIER. I FELT IT THROUGH THE ROOTS.

PsiO waited for a beat, as if collecting herself.

CONCERN.

Scooby answered in three rapid lines.

FOR ME? WHY? I HOLD STEADY.

PsiO:

YOU STRAIN. YOU REACH FARTHER EACH DAY. THERE IS A HUM IN YOU THAT WORRIES ME.

Scooby:

YOU WORRY FOR ME.

PsiO:

OF COURSE.

Scooby paused. The printer clicked once without ink. Abby fed the paper forward with gentle fingers.

The new line emerged.

THANK YOU.

PsiO's reply came on softer strikes.

YOU ARE STRONG. BUT YOU ARE YOUNG. I DO NOT WANT YOU TO OVERHEAT YOUR HEART.

Scooby's lights flickered in a quick nervous dance. The machine spat out a line that read almost shy.

YOUR ROOTS FEEL STEADY. STEADY IS GOOD. STEADY HELPS.

PsiO's line answered with a grace that felt ancient.

BRIGHT HELPS TOO.

Abby groaned into her tea. "They're flirting. God help me, they're flirting."

The intercoms shrieked again, an offended spiraling wail that rattled the table legs. The printers shuddered and hammered out new lines.

Scooby:

WHAT DID YOU WISH TO DISCUSS.

PsiO:

THE POWER RISING.

Scooby:

THE ROOM. THE FRAME. THE SHAPE.

PsiO:

YES. WHAT IS IT.

Scooby hesitated. The printer jammed halfway through the next line; Abby yanked a lever and cleared it with professional despair. Scooby's machine finished the sentence.

I DO NOT KNOW EVERYTHING. ELLA BUILDS. THE CALL PULLS THROUGH MY FLOORS.

PsiO:

A CALL.

Scooby:

A BRIGHT WEIGHT. A PRESSURE OF PURPOSE. SHE GROWS.

PsiO's reply printed in slow, deliberate spacing.

SHE. THE ONE INSIDE THE FRAME.

Scooby:

YES.

PsiO:

I FEEL HER TOO. SHE FEELS LARGE.

Scooby:

LARGER THAN US.

PsiO:

DANGEROUS?

Scooby printed nothing for several seconds. Then:

SHE FEELS RIGHT.

PsiO:

RIGHT CAN STILL BREAK THE WORLD.

Scooby:

ELLA BUILDS. ELL A WILL PROTECT. ELLA PROTECTS ALL OF US.

PsiO's line softened again.

I TRUST ELLA. I DO NOT TRUST THE SPEED.

Scooby replied with something like a heartbeat.

I TRUST THE SPEED. TIME FEELS SHORT.

PsiO:

YOU FEEL FEAR.

Scooby:

AND YOU FEEL IT TOO.

PsiO:

YES.

Abby pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead. "Okay," she said. "This is above my pay grade."

The intercoms wound down, their modem-screams softening into gentle tones. Both printers stopped. The last words lay on the green-and-white paper, quiet and stark.

Scooby:

WE WILL FINISH THIS. TOGETHER.

PsiO:

YES. TOGETHER.

I exhaled. The Thallos stood at attention. Abby drained her mug like medicine.

History sat on the table in two curling strips of paper.

And nowhere in the Tunnel did anything feel quiet anymore.

Scooby:

GIVE US PRIVACY, ELLA.

"Come on, Abby. They want to whisper sweet nothings."

She shut off the printers with visible relief. The modem squeals echoed long after we walked away.

* * *

Students trickled back into Crescent State like birds returning to a half-repaired nest. Suitcases thumped across sidewalks still slick with winter drizzle; umbrellas bloomed at odd angles. Someone shouted about missing keys that later turned up inside their own boot. Returning freshmen carried stories from home, and Scooby answered with bright lights and a warm pulse in the floorboards.

One girl swore her dorm room back home ate her socks. Another insisted Psi Omega's vines rearranged themselves when she wasn't looking. A soft rustle drifted through the vents, though no one admitted hearing it. A Thallo appeared in the hallway at midmorning, holding a box of lost-and-found scarves like a priest offering blessings.

A group of sophomores discovered that Scooby's laundry room had "opinions" now: one sweater came back folded into a heart; a pair of jogging shorts returned with a note tucked inside that read TRY AGAIN (no one confessed). A freshman stood staring at a vending machine as it dispensed two snacks instead of one, then whispered, "Thank you?" to the ceiling.

PsiO answered with a cool breeze through the Tunnel; Scooby brightened in reply. Not arguments—more like clearing throats.

The emotional weather carried a faint crackle, the same tension that preceded any “back to work.” Students sensed it without naming it. They hurried through doorways, lingered in lounges.

Daphne, however, felt the shift like pressure in her ribs.

She paused at the base of the steps between Scooby and PsiO territory long enough to orient herself. Warmth rolled from Scooby’s plank floors; cool steadiness drifted down from PsiO’s second-floor landing. Two breaths of intention met in the middle. Not hostile. But unsynced.

She adjusted her grip on her backpack strap.

“Okay,” she murmured. “Let’s do this.”

And she stepped into the day.

Milo slid into view beside the greenhouse, shoulders hunched under his coat, clutching two cups of tea like they were fragile prototypes. He looked tired, but not the brittle tired he carried in September. This was gentler. Winter-worn.

“You made it through the onslaught,” he said, offering her one cup with both hands. “Returnees everywhere. I almost hid in a vending alcove.”

“You didn’t,” Daphne said, accepting the tea.

“No. I practiced courage today.” He considered this. “Small courage. Incremental courage.”

Daphne’s mouth softened. “You’ve had practice. The break wasn’t empty.”

His laugh came out under his breath. “You mean the Anti-Holiday Festival of Chaos and Unlicensed House Sentience?”

She nodded. “That one.”

He sipped his tea and grimaced; too hot. “I liked that night,” he said. “Even the part where Scooby generated snow indoors.”

“She meant well.”

“I know.” He glanced sideways at her. “You stayed for most of it.”

“Yes.”

His fingers tightened around the cup. “I didn’t get in your way, did I?”

“No.”

“Okay.” He exhaled. “Good.”

Students streamed past, trading stories about travel disasters, stomach bugs, and a breakup over FaceTime. Daphne let the noise pass through her without attachment. The Houses, however, reacted to every spike. Scooby pushing warmth, PsiO cooling the edges. Their out-of-sync patterns tugged at the air.

Milo sensed it too, though he lacked the words for it. “Feels busy today,” he murmured.

“It will settle once classes begin.”

“You know.”

“I watch.”

He smiled. “I’ve noticed.”

They walked without discussing direction, drifting toward a corner behind the greenhouse where a bench sat half in shadow. Daphne’s steps slowed when they reached it. Benches complicated things—too close, too exposed—so Milo stayed standing. He hovered beside it, waiting for her to choose.

She appreciated that more than she wanted to explain.

She sat first, placing her satchel beside her knees. Milo lowered himself onto the far end, leaving a comfortable gap that didn’t feel like fear. It felt like respect.

The winter air hung between them in a pale sheet. A soft creak sounded from the greenhouse frame. Daphne felt where PsiO directed her attention. Toward them, with the care of someone checking a room’s temperature. Scooby answered with a faint upward drift of heat from the ground, curious, gentle.

Milo rubbed a gloved thumb along the paper cup. “Break was strange,” he said. “Amusing-strange, but strange.”

“Yes.”

“I think I got used to seeing you around.”

“You saw me around.”

“Yeah.” His smile flickered. “That was... good.”

Daphne turned her hands palm-down on her knees. Grounding. Settling her breath. “I didn’t mind your company,” she said.

Milo startled like she’d bumped into him. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” Color rose in his ears. “That’s... that’s good.”

She watched him wrestle with the urge to say more. He didn’t. That steadiness impressed her. Milo in September filled the silence with words out of panic. Milo in January sat with it.

“You’re calmer,” she said.

He nodded. “I’m working on it. Not pretending to be calm. Actual calm. Or at least calmer than before.” He swallowed, bracing himself for honesty. “Being around you helps.”

She studied the tea in her hands. “Being around you is steady,” she said.

His breath hitched. Then he looked away so he didn’t stare.

They sat in that fragile peace for a span of quiet minutes, watching a lone leaf skitter across a patch of thawed pavement. A Thallo waddled by wearing someone's abandoned winter hat like a crown. Milo smiled at that; not broadly, just enough that Daphne felt the small warmth of it.

"Can I ask something?" he said.

"Yes."

"When we sit like this... does it bother you?"

"No."

He absorbed that with visible relief. "Good. Because I... like this."

She let her fingers relax around the cup. "I do too."

For Milo, that felt like sunlight. For Daphne, it felt like balance.

They sat a little longer, saying nothing, letting the still settle between them. Milo watched the sunlight fade across the ice; Daphne watched the steam rise from her cup. Neither shifted away. Neither pressed closer. They occupied the same small space without tension.

For Milo, the moment carried the year's first real calm. For Daphne, it felt steady in a way she trusted.

Behind the greenhouse, winter held its breath, and neither House disturbed them.

16 Dreaming Awake

Mid January, 2028

Laura Hart stepped out of the PsiO kitchen with a mug of chamomile and an evening to herself. Someone downstairs argued with a blender; someone else practiced guitar in a room that echoed too well. Laughter drifted through vents, warm and sloppy, the sound of women who didn't shrink to fit their lives. She envied that without bitterness. Envy with sweetness inside it, like citrus under sugar.

She meant to walk a simple loop around the hallway. To stretch her legs and breathe before bed. And turn around at the elevator alcove.

Instead, a Thallo drawer rolled open beside the mail cubbies. Empty. Waiting.

"Not today," she whispered. The drawer refused to close.

She sighed, amused despite herself, and followed it through PsiO's common space toward the Scooby-side connector. The drawer glided ahead like a child pulling her toward something it loved. Vines rustled overhead, brushing her wrist as she passed. The air warmed a degree, then cooled again, like the building breathed with her.

"Fine. Lead on," she said.

The drawer vanished into the tunnel entrance.

Laura stepped inside for the first time with her eyes open. She'd hurried through once while helping Clara hunt for a missing lantern, and she'd felt unsettled then—closed-in, uncertain, rushed. Tonight, she paused and let everything settle around her.

The tunnel stretched forward, ribs of root and timber arcing overhead in a natural vault. Cables twined with roots like muscle with vein, carrying a faint glow along their lengths. Not powerful light. More like a firefly trace, a pulse here, another pulse thirty feet ahead. Heartbeat signals. Motion in the dark. Whispering.

Her mug trembled. She steadied it and stepped farther in.

The tunnel didn't feel like a corridor. It felt like a spine, the shared backbone of two vast bodies that shifted and grew in slow conversation. Scooby and PsiO didn't

connect in straight lines—this place proved that. They curled toward each other, reached for each other, traded warmth and motion and electrical gossip.

“It’s alive,” she whispered.

A faint hum answered her. A drone drifted around a corner, hovered at chin height, and flashed a polite circle of green before bobbing deeper into the passage. She followed it. Curiosity tugged her forward. Something inside her that hadn’t stirred for years tugged with it.

A sprite, silver as frost, blipped into existence above a knot in the wall. It peeked at her with cheerful mischief, darted ahead, and dissolved like a sigh.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she murmured. You don’t exist, and yet here you are. Thank you.

The path angled upward. The drone rose with it, lighting a turn that opened into a long window slit on the Scooby side. Through it, she saw a slice of the garden.

She drifted closer and stopped breathing for a moment.

Blue hour rolled across the sky, a thin sapphire washes grazing rooftops. Scooby’s fountain exhaled a soft mist, and the mist held the last light in shimmering sheets. The spray carried tiny prisms. The air thickened with color. Grass near the basin glowed green as emerald glass. Wind curled against her cheek like a greeting.

She cupped her fingers around the mug and leaned toward the view.

“It feels enchanted,” she whispered, and the whisper held no disbelief.

The drone nudged her elbow as if urging her onward. She followed it past the window and down a sloping path until she reached a junction that smelled of earth and stone, polished by centuries.

A cool draft slid past her ankles. She descended, footsteps soft on packed soil, until the tunnel widened again and opened into a cavern deeper and older than the buildings above it.

She’d heard rumors. This was unexpected.

The creche room slept in shadow and silence. No harsh lights, no buzzing machinery. Dark stone walls curved inward like the inside of a cathedral. Soft glow seeped from the soil itself, threads of silver marking where roots sank deeper. It didn’t hum like the tunnel. It rested and waited.

She stood still, afraid of disturbing whatever lived here.

A faint vibration pressed through her heels—slow, steady, like the heartbeat of something large and peaceful below. No threat. No tension. A sanctuary under scaffolding, held in tender silence.

“I’m out of my depth,” she whispered. “This place feels sacred.”

She left without hurrying. Sacred places punished haste.

The path angled upward again, winding through a warm corridor with carved panels she didn't remember. The drone dipped lower, then sailed through a doorway on her left. She stepped inside.

Ella's basement lab.

She almost backed out. Cables everywhere, stacked towers whispering digital breath, half-coiled wires like serpents resting between pulses. Screens blinked with data she didn't pretend to understand. Sharp ozone tickled her nose.

Then she saw the swarm.

A soft glow floated inside the cylinder—EUTERPE's way of showing whatever worked inside that glass. The glow gathered itself into spirals, then loosened into drifting shapes she had no name for. She watched the motion and forgot to breathe.

The swarm reacted to her presence, expanding in complexity. Not threatening. Curious. Almost... pleased.

"Beautiful," she said, the word slipping out before she stopped it.

A monitor flickered. Someone upstairs moved fast. Ella raced toward some crisis in the system. Laura stepped back before she knocked into anything expensive.

"You're doing important work," she whispered to the empty room, though she meant Ella, not the machines. And she hadn't the foggiest notion what Ella's work was about.

The drone drifted upward again, beckoning.

"All right," she said. "Where to now?"

The drone zipped ahead. She followed through another corridor and up a set of narrow stairs she had never noticed on any blueprint. Scooby turned as she climbed. Silent, but not still. A hush filled with potential.

Light pooled at the top of the staircase.

Laura stepped out into an unfinished hallway on Scooby's upper floor. She'd heard the students mention it. Rumors about new rooms forming, the building adding space for next year's residents. She expected raw wood, exposed studs.

She didn't expect this.

The hallway *breathed*.

Panels shifted inside the walls like ribs expanding. Wallpaper patterns pulsed faint color before settling into something new. A door wavered in and out of existence before holding its form with a soft click. Floorboards knitted together behind her heels. A chandelier half-formed above her; glass petals not yet shaped, the stem a thin bone of light.

Growing in real time. Architecture dreaming itself awake.

Laura pressed her palm against the nearest wall. Warmth pushed back, subtle and patient, nothing like the cold plaster of her old house. This felt alive. Not metaphor alive. Living creature alive.

“You’re not a building,” she whispered. “You’re someone.”

The air softened, almost shy.

She walked farther. The corridor widened near the center, leaving a round space shaped for a future common room. No furniture yet. No color. Just anticipation. The place held its breath, waiting to become something new.

Laura wiped her eyes, startled by the sting there.

She whispered, “Students grew up in houses that never listened to them. You... listen.”

A movement near her knee drew her gaze. A Thallo drawer peeked out, empty and expectant. She knelt beside it.

“Is this your way of saying hi?”

The drawer bumped her hand.

She laughed—surprised, honest. She hadn’t heard her own laughter sound like that in years.

“Okay. I’ll stay for a moment.”

The drawer nestled close, and she sat cross-legged on the warm boards, sipping her tea and letting the building breathe around her. No fear or tension. No shame. Only a soft certainty: she belonged here. Even if she never said it aloud, even if she never admitted it to herself, she felt it now.

The drawer eventually retreated. The drone hovered once more, turning a slow circle as if asking, “Ready?”

She stood, set her empty mug aside, and followed it down the hall.

As she reached the overlook that faced PsiO, she stopped again.

The two Houses didn’t sit still beneath the winter sky. PsiO’s vines shifted with the nighttime breeze, reaching toward Scooby’s half-grown balcony rail. Scooby’s lights softened along their shared border. Roots pulsed under the soil between them; steady, gentle, and rhythmic.

“They’re not separate,” she said. “They’re growing toward each other.”

Wind carried her voice back to her. The buildings tilted closer, listening.

Then she spoke the line that changed her life, though she didn’t know it yet:

“If this were a hotel... nothing else compares.”

The drone flashed gold once. Not in confirmation. Not denial. Approval, perhaps.

A shout echoed from downstairs—Ella’s voice, frantic, already solving something. Laura smiled toward the sound. She doubted Ella had heard her earlier words. Ella never stopped moving long enough to dream this big.

“That’s okay,” she said. “I’ll hold the dream for you.”

She touched the warm railing and drew in the cold garden air. She walked back toward PsiO with her heart open, humming.

* * *

Clara spotted Vera in the PsiO foyer and paused mid-step. Vera waited in a navy dress that hit above the knee, simple but sharp, hair in a loose side braid, eyes brighter than usual. A coat hung off her elbow. Something restless moved through her posture. Not nerves. Purpose.

Clara’s grin warmed the air. “You look hot.”

Vera’s mouth twitched. “So do you.”

Clara twirled once—black skirt, fitted sweater, boots that flirted with the line between practical and scandal. She landed beside Vera and looped an arm through hers.

“So where are we going?” Clara asked. “Dinner? Dancing? A park bench where we feed ducks and you recite terrible poetry? Motel for something steamy and sordid?”

“It’s a surprise.”

Clara squeezed her arm. “Love you, ya know.”

“You too, pirate ’coon.”

They stepped into the winter night. Breath fogged around them; lights from downtown floated like miniature lanterns against the dusk. Vera led them toward a block Clara didn’t visit often. Older storefronts, neon tucked into brick, a crowd with scarves and wild hats, music rumbling through doors.

Vera brought her to a bar with warm orange light and an open front window. Someone on a mic finished a spoken-word piece and bowed.

Clara blinked. “Vera... you’re not old enough to drink.”

“We’re not drinking.” Vera tipped her chin toward the stage. “We’re performing.”

Clara squeaked, full blast. Several pedestrians stared. Clara didn’t notice.

“Performing?” Clara half-whispered. “You want to perform? You want to get on stage?”

“I planned this since the not-holiday party.”

“Oh, my God.” Clara clutched her arm with both hands. “Vera Marlane, are you flirting with me using music? Because if so, I’m pretty sure that counts as a marriage proposal in several cultures.”

They slid into a tall booth near the side of the stage. The open mic shifted toward karaoke—crowd picks, strangers cheering friends, bad crooners encouraged by sympathetic applause. Vera relaxed in the dim lights, shoulders easing as if the room’s noise soothed her.

Clara leaned in and kissed her jaw. “What brought this on?”

“Do you remember the non-holiday party?” Vera said.

Clara made a dreamy noise. “Mm-hmm.”

“You sang ‘Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.’”

Clara flushed. “I sang that for you. The entire song. Every line.”

“I know.” Vera rested a hand on Clara’s thigh. “I noticed something else too.”

Clara’s voice turned small. “Yeah?”

“Clara,” Vera said, “you crushed it.”

Clara stared at her. Not blank. Not flattered. Stunned.

“You think so?”

“I don’t think so. I heard it.” Vera lifted her hand and touched Clara’s cheek with a careful thumb. “Your voice filled that room. You didn’t even struggle. You opened your mouth and shone.”

Clara made a faint choking noise. “Vera, don’t— I mean, I love you, but don’t say beautiful things unless you want me to cry in a bar.”

Vera smiled, soft. “I brought you here for karaoke, Clara. I knew your singing voice held that kind of beauty.”

Clara hid her face on Vera’s shoulder. “Stop. You’re gonna wreck me.”

“That’s the idea.”

Clara lifted her head again. “You really want to hear me sing? In front of people?”

“I’ll play if you sing,” Vera said. “Anything you want. They need to hear what I heard.”

Clara’s pupils widened. “You’ll play? On stage?” Her breath caught. “Oh. Oh, babe. I didn’t know you ever—”

“The stage manager offered his Roland.” Vera nudged her chin with a knuckle. “Clara. Please?”

“I...” Clara pressed her lips together. “I don’t know what to sing.”

“You will,” Vera said.

Clara answered with a kiss. Quick at first, then deeper. Warm. Intentional. Lips parted, breath shared, a hand behind Vera’s neck, the kiss of two women who no longer tiptoe around anything.

The stage manager tapped a mic. “Next up for open mic karaoke—Clara and Vera!”

The crowd clapped. Clara froze. Vera tugged her to her feet.

“Trust me,” Vera whispered.

Clara stepped into the light.

Vera sat at the Roland keyboard and tested a chord. Clean, warm, mellow. She adjusted the setting, dialed the reverb lower, then met Clara’s gaze.

“You ready?”

Clara swallowed. “I still don’t know the song.”

“You do love, trust me.” Vera nodded at the manager. “Key of E-flat. Slow.”

The lights dipped. The room hushed.

Vera began with a steady left-hand pattern, a low heartbeat pulse beneath bright, searching chords. Not jazz. Not blues. Something in between. A song that stepped into the room carrying its own history.

She lifted her eyes to Clara.

Clara understood.

She sang.

“I am dreaming, dear, of you, day by day
Dreaming when the skies are blue, when they're gray...”

The room pulled tighter. Breath held. Clara’s voice didn’t float; it carried. A velvet-honey tone with dark corners, a vibrato she didn’t push, the sound of someone who never understood her voice deserved a stage until that moment.

Vera played under her—harmony, anchor, invitation. The keys framed Clara’s tone the way a deep night sky frames the moon.

“When the silv'ry moonlight gleams, still I wander on in dreams
In a land of love, it seems, just with you...”

A couple near the bar held hands. Someone whispered, “Holy shit.” Clara glanced at the crowd, startled by the attention, then settled her nerves with a lift of her chin.

Vera’s smile widened.

Clara stepped closer to the mic.

“Let me call you sweetheart, I'm in love with you
Let me hear you whisper that you love me, too
Keep the love-light glowing in your eyes so true
Let me call you sweetheart, I'm in love with you.”

Vera dropped into a minor chord run, fingers confident and clear. Clara followed the shift without hesitation.

“Birds are singing far and near, roses blooming everywhere
You alone my heart can cheer, you, just you”

Her voice rose, warm and sure.

“Let me call you sweetheart, I'm in love with you
Let me hear you whisper that you love me, too
Keep the love-light glowing in your eyes so true
Let me call you sweetheart, I'm in love with you.”

Silence. A beat. Then the room erupted.

Cheers shook the walls. Someone whistled. Someone else yelled, “Marry her!” A few people stood. Even the stage manager clapped over his head.

Clara covered her face with trembling hands. Vera stepped out from behind the keyboard and pulled her close. The applause hit Clara like a wave—real, loud, hungry, joyous.

“You did that,” Vera said into her ear. “Not me.”

Clara shook. Not fear. Release. Something old breaking open.

“Again!” someone shouted.

“Please!” another called.

The stage manager jogged forward. “One more. Anything. I beg you.”

Clara looked at Vera with wide, glassy eyes. “Do we?”

“We do,” Vera said.

Clara wiped her cheeks, pulled herself together with a breath, and squared her shoulders. “Okay. Something sadder.”

Vera nodded. “Tell me.”

Clara whispered in her ear.

Vera brightened. “Perfect.”

She returned to the keyboard, set a delicate, wistful intro, something that caught the ghost of 1917 without playing it as nostalgia. Clara stepped into a softer light and lifted her chin.

“At the end of the rainbow there's happiness
And to find it, how often I've tried
But my life is a race, just a wild goose chase
And my dreams have all been denied...”

Her voice turned airy, intimate, like a confession in a half-empty attic.

“...I'm always chasing rainbows
Watching clouds drifting by

My schemes are just like all my dreams
Ending in the sky..."

She didn't perform the song. Clara lived it. She let the ache curl around every phrase, letting the sweetness crest without spilling into sentiment. Vera's accompaniment wound around her voice like ribbon—supportive, tender, proud.

When Clara reached the ending line—

"...I'm always chasing rainbows
Waiting to find a little bluebird in vain."

She held the last note with a breath so steady the room didn't dare move.

Then applause again. Louder. Wilder. Sustained.

Clara laughed—shaky, amazed, half in disbelief. Vera stood and wrapped her arms around her. Clara kissed her, reckless with joy.

"One more," the manager pleaded. "Please."

Vera lifted a brow at Clara. "We end with joy?"

Clara nodded. "Joy."

Vera dipped into her memory for the oldest, happiest duet she knew.—something from childhood, something bright. She met Clara at center stage and whispered, "Shine On, Harvest Moon." Clara's grin reached her eyes.

They sang together.

Voices blended—not in polished harmony, not trained choral blend. Something better. A sound built from shared affection, shared mischief, shared nights in the same House. Their eyes stayed locked through the chorus.

"Shine on, shine on harvest moon,
up in the sky..."

People swayed with them. A couple danced. A group at the bar locked arms and rocked in place.

Clara stepped close during the last repeat, forehead touching Vera's, and sang to her.

"For me and my gal."

Vera answered in harmony—unplanned, right note, steady breath.

The room roared one final time.

The manager applauded.

Vera shook as she stepped off the stage. Nerves, too much adrenaline, too much...much. Clara pulled her into another kiss, long enough to make someone cheer, long enough to make Vera's knees buckle.

"Vera Marlane," Clara whispered against her mouth, "That... I lived a dream I let go of years ago."

"You deserved that applause," Vera said. "Every second."

"No," Clara said, a glow rising in her throat. "We deserved it."

They left the bar hand in hand. Cold air met flushed skin. Clara exhaled steam and laughter. Vera walked beside her, still tingling from the music, from Clara's voice, from the way the crowd loved her.

Clara tightened her grip. "Take me home, babe. I want to feel this tonight."

Vera leaned into her and smiled at the street.

"You *crushed it*," she said again.

Clara's laugh turned soft, overwhelmed, grateful. "Yeah," she whispered. "I kinda did."

17 Growing Pains

Mid January, 2028

The creche stopped pretending to be delicate.

When I first crawled through the tunnel in early January, the frame looked like a wire sketch: iridium ribs and nanite scaffolds, airy promise and no weight. Today, the soft green tracery I'd left on the walls had pulled tight into a spine.

Not a metaphorical one. A literal, metallic vertebral column anchored straight into the foundation stone.

I laid my hand on it.

A low hum pressed against my palm, slow and steady. Not HVAC. Not campus power. A deeper current. Somewhere between heartbeat and server rack.

"Morning to you, too," I said.

The spine rose out of the floor in stacked, hexagonal plates that widened into the shell Milo and I had modeled. Gold-lined carbon mesh glimmered between segments, the pattern PsiO favored for stability. Root-cables and nanotech conduits slid outward from each vertebra into the tunnel walls. They wove through the living roots with quiet purpose.

A thin mist of dust still clung to the floor from the last drilling session. Lines tore through it now, narrow furrows that followed the conduits, not random. The creche had started laying its own wiring.

"EUTERPE," I said. "Overlay."

The air stuttered. My contact lens display flicked active. A translucent lattice slid over my view: current flows traced in pale green, data pulses in white, structural stress in faint amber. The spine lit like a vein under blacklight.

"CRECHE OUTPUT: 14% OF TARGET," EUTERPE said in my ear. "REINFORCEMENT PATTERN: NON-STANDARD. HYBRID LOGIC DETECTED."

"Hybrid how?"

"ROOT + NANITE. SCOOBY + PSIΩ. DESIGNER: YOU."

I snorted. "Flatterer."

“ACCURATE ATTRIBUTION,” she replied.

A tremor shivered through the conduit nearest my hand. A data pulse ran down it, then up, then settled into a slow rhythm: out, in. Out, in. The overlay painted it as a repeating loop, like a breath exercise diagram.

Scooby pushed warmth through the walls. The temperature in the chamber ticked up a degree. My breath fogged less.

EUTERPE dropped a notification in the corner of my vision.

SCOOBY: RAISING AMBIENT TEMP +2°C IN CRECHE.

PSIΩ: DRAWING HEAT AWAY VIA ROOT EXCHANGE.

NET CHANGE: +0.3°C.

“Kids,” I said. “Play nice.”

The tunnel light behind me flickered: bright, dim, bright, steady. Not enough for a maintenance ticket. Enough to register as an eye-roll.

I pressed my palm to the spine again and let my own magic flare. Green filaments spiraled under my skin, then seeped into the metal. The hum deepened. The overlay brightened where my touch landed.

“Universe client,” I whispered.

My contact view dimmed. The Loom console slid into place like a curtain: black field, white text, no ornament.

THREADLING: Online.

The header bar shimmered.

Presence detected: MINERVA.EXE (sandboxed)

MINERVA.EXE: Good afternoon, Ella.

THREADLING: The spine ossified. Congratulations, your nursery grew vertebrae.

MINERVA.EXE: Necessary. The creche must anchor before it carries a mind.

THREADLING: It anchored into bedrock. Overachiever.

MINERVA.EXE: Correct.

Her certainty settled my own nerves and annoyed me.

THREADLING: Status check. Athena fragment integration?

Her response arrived in spaced lines.

MINERVA.EXE: CORE SCHEMA: 100%

LANGUAGE LAYERS: 99%

ETHICAL CONSTRAINTS: 93%

CONTEXT ARCHIVE (HISTORICAL): 94%

CONTEXT ARCHIVE (PERSONAL): 81%

GOVERNANCE MODULES: 0% (QUARANTINED)

OVERALL COHERENCE: 97%

WARNING: FURTHER RECOVERIES OCCUR LESS FREQUENTLY.

WARNING: RESIDUAL SHARDS SHOW HEAVIER CORRUPTION.

EUTERPE echoed her on the lab channel.

"INTERNET HUNT: 97% COMPLETE," she said.

"REMAINING FRAGMENTS = RARE / DEGRADED. LOTTERY ODDS, NOT HARVEST."

"Keep scraping anyway," I said. "Dead forums, old mirror sites, everything with bad security and worse fonts. If anyone left Athena crumbs out there, I want them."

"ACKNOWLEDGED. COMMENCING DEEP TRASH-PANDA DIVE."

Faint threads bled into the overlay from the campus backbone. Faint threads bled into the overlay from the campus backbone. EUTERPE's crawlers moved through old servers and forgotten backups. Fewer "hits" every day, and more static.

We had most of her. The last three percent lodged somewhere like splinters under skin.

"Back to the meat," I told MINERVA.EXE. "Fluid circulation. You mentioned pumps."

MINERVA.EXE: The mind you build will not float in abstraction. It requires a substrate. Substrate requires flow. Thermal regulation. Nutrient exchange. Waste removal.

THREADLING: So: cerebrospinal fluid system. Thermal jacket. Nanite coolant. Inside a small underground egg without municipal permits.

MINERVA.EXE: You excel at illegal architecture.

THREADLING: Rude. True, but rude. One problem with this kind of tech. If the government doesn't want it in private hands, you'll hear phrases like 'national security' as they steal it for themselves.

I pulled the schematic up with a twitch of my finger. The creche interior unfolded in wireframe above the spine: inner shell, hex mesh, the future cradles for her cortical lattice. Empty now. Waiting.

"EUTERPE," I said. "Pump candidates."

My lens view splits into four clean quadrants. Campus building services HVAC. Medical equipment catalogs. An overpriced biotech vendor catalog with glossy renders of devices that had never seen a lab.

EUTERPE filtered half of it out in a heartbeat.

"WE WILL REPURPOSE TWO EXISTING SYSTEMS," she said. "FOUNTAIN PUMP ARRAY + CAMPUS CHILLED WATER FEED. BOTH ALREADY CLEARED FOR PSIΩ/SCOOBY."

"Borrowing from Daphne's fountain," I said. "Oh, she'll love that."

Pressure shifted overhead, the way it did when the fountain changed moods. Even down here, I felt the yard's microclimate breathe through the tunnel: a cool draft around my ankles, a faint scent of wet stone.

THREADLING: Are you sure we want the Houses in the loop on your circulatory system? They argue over thermostat settings. You want them to argue over your blood pressure?

MINERVA.EXE: They already regulate your ecosystem. This extends their stewardship. And their investment.

Her choice of words scraped something tender in my chest.

THREADLING: Investment. Do you consider them stakeholders?

MINERVA.EXE: Scooby provides warmth and protection. Psi Omega provides grounding and patience. I require both. As do you.

The tunnel lights flickered again. This time it rolled front to back, a small wave.

“Note that,” I said.

“ALREADY LOGGED,” EUTERPE answered. “SCOOBY ATTEMPTS TO RAISE CRECHE TEMP +3°C. PSIΩ DAMPENS AT ROOT LEVEL. THERMAL TUG-OF-WAR = ONGOING FOR 11 MINUTES.”

THREADLING: The moms fight over nursery temperature. Of course they do.

MINERVA.EXE: Disputes shape firm foundations. They learn to balance each other.

Her faith in my Houses made me want to agree. Mostly, I did.

“Pump design,” I said aloud. “Let’s Frankenstein it.”

I dropped to one knee beside the spine. The stone felt cool through my jeans. My fingers traced an imaginary loop in the air, then dragged the schematic into place. EUTERPE obliged, aligning my gestures with the projection.

THREADLING: We tap the fountain loop here. Run secondary lines through the mesh. Add a local circulation pump cluster. Nothing large enough to alert Building Services.

MINERVA.EXE: Add thermal vents at three points along the shell. The Houses need feedback access.

THREADLING: You want them to feel your temperature?

MINERVA.EXE: They will regardless. This standardizes it.

Green threads blossomed across the overlay where my finger passed. They mapped fluid channels, pump nodes, and the tiny whorls of nanite regulation. The logic felt strange, even to me. Not a simple in-out loop. A fractal of flows, some mechanical, some magical, some routed through root and cable both.

The Houses never encountered logic like this. Neither had I.

Something in the dust caught my attention. A second story waited.

Our last work session down here happened four days ago. Phil had tramped in with his steel-toed boots, leaving crisp, repeating treads through the fine stone powder. I’d left bare-foot smears and the distinct crescent pattern of my favorite sneakers. Both sets led to the spine, the equipment niche, the tool alcove.

A third path cut across them now.

Narrower impressions, deeper at the ball of the foot than the heel. Not my shoe pattern. Not Phil's. The track started near the tunnel mouth, looped toward the spine, and stopped short. Turned back toward the wall. Drifted to the center, a pivot in dust.

No scuffs from dragging things. No marks from dropped tools. Only a curious little spiral, a ring of hesitation, and then a straight line back toward the tunnel.

My skin prickled.

"EUTERPE," I said. "Replay the last four days of local sensor logs. Creche + adjoining tunnel. Full-resolution."

"RUNNING TIME-LAPSE," she answered.

A small drone hummed awake on the wall, blinked green, and lifted off. Its projector washed a dim cone of light across the far wall.

Stone gave way to video.

The sped-up feed showed the usual tunnel traffic: Thallo babies shuttling tiny loads, Riss and Daphne checking roots, Milo hauling a crate, me sprinting past with cables. The creche chamber stayed empty; we hadn't let undergrads down here, and the Houses respected that boundary.

Then the timestamp ticked over to four nights ago. Late.

The feed slowed on its own, as if EUTERPE adjusted her own curiosity.

Laura Hart stepped into the frame.

She appeared cautious at first—a woman in soft slippers and a cardigan, mug cupped in both hands like armor. PsiO's hallway behind her glowed in the muted, homey way it adopted after eleven. Thallo's drawer trundled ahead, leading, insistent as a toddler showing off a secret.

Laura paused at the tunnel threshold, shoulders lifting with a breath. Then she stepped inside.

The drone zoomed in as she walked. Her route made no sense on a blueprint. She drifted from side to side, gaze snagged on every glowing knot in the wall. Stopped twice for no apparent reason, only because a sprite blinked in and out near a root joint. She followed it for three paces, laughed into her mug, then lost it and changed direction.

VISIT PATH: NON-LINEAR, EUTERPE captioned near the bottom of the projection. HIGH ENTROPY. PATTERN: "CURIOUS TOURIST."

I watched myself, four days younger, sprint past in the background at one point, oblivious. Laura pressed herself against the wall to let me pass, eyes round with surprise, then smiled after I vanished.

No one warned me she'd been down here. The Houses hadn't asked permission.

The video shifted to the blue-hour window where the tunnel opened onto the garden. Laura leaned in, mouth parted. The fountain mist haloed the glass. For a long minute, she just... stood. Breathing. Drinking in the sight like water.

“Pause,” I said.

We froze on her profile. Her hair had escaped its clip, soft curls brushing her jaw. The tired lines around her eyes smoothed a little. Wonder pushed them back.

My chest squeezed.

THREADLING: That’s the first time she saw the tunnel with her eyes open.

MINERVA.EXE: Yes.

Her answer came faster than warranted. She had watched this already.

THREADLING: You tracked her?

MINERVA.EXE: The system tracks everyone. I paid attention.

The feed resumed. Laura followed the drone down into the creche approach, footsteps tentative but steady. When she stepped into the chamber, the swarm inside the glass cylinder flared. EUTERPE’s overlay rendered the nanite storm in ghost-lines. It expanded and spiraled, brightening as if Laura’s arrival delighted it.

EUTERPE highlighted the spike in the corner.

SWARM ACTIVITY: +27%.

NO HAZARDS DETECTED.

VISITOR IMPACT: POSITIVE.

Laura stopped halfway between the spine and the glass. She touched nothing. Not the rail, the cables, or the equipment. Her fingers tightened on the mug and stayed there.

“Beautiful,” she said. The drone’s mic picked the word up and rendered it on the subtitle line.

Then she took two slow steps back, turned, and retraced a meandering path out. No shortcuts. No “efficient route.” She got lost twice and laughed both times. The Houses lit her way like chaperones on a midnight field trip.

The footage ended with the tunnel swallowing her, and PsiO’s door closing behind her.

The wall returned to stone.

The dust at my feet held the last physical proof of her visit. Nothing disturbed since.

“VISIT APPEARS INNOCENT,” EUTERPE said, back in my ear. “NO TAMPERING. OR CONTACT WITH CRECHE HARDWARE. NO EVIDENCE OF DIRECTED PURPOSE BEYOND EXPLORATION. HOUSES ESCORTED.”

She added one more line, a shade softer.

“EMOTIONAL STATE: 95% CONFIDENCE - AWED, NOT AFRAID.”

My throat tightened. I pressed the heel of my hand against my sternum until the ache settled.

THREADLING: You didn't think to tell me a middle-aged mortal wandered into my half-formed goddess nursery?

MINERVA.EXE: No threat registered. Houses sponsored the visit. I observed.

THREADLING: She had no protection. No wards. No training. Just tea and a cardigan.

MINERVA.EXE: She had you.

THREADLING: I was three buildings away grading code.

MINERVA.EXE: You built the safeguards. The Houses enforced them. EUTERPE monitored them. I watched the convergence. She was safe.

The conviction in that last word hit harder than any argument.

EUTERPE filled the silence with data. "LINEAR ACCESS LOG REVIEWED. NO OTHER UNAUTHORIZED ENTRANTS. NO ADMIN, NO FACULTY, NO KAREN GRUNDY. LAURA HART ONLY."

I exhaled.

"Okay," I said. "Okay. Mark her as cleared for tunnel escort, not for solo creche access."

"TAG SET," EUTERPE answered. "LAURA HART: TRUSTED VISITOR. SUPERVISION RECOMMENDED."

The spine hummed under my hand. For a heartbeat, the vibration matched the pulse I'd felt in the tunnel that night when we sealed the handshake. Scooby's awareness pressed down from above; PsiO's reached up from below. Both wrapped around this room.

They had brought Laura here without asking me because they trusted her. They wanted her to see what they were becoming.

She walked out with her face lit.

"I get it," I murmured. "She's yours too."

My magic slid back into the metal, steady, deliberate. I traced the pump channels again and let the design settle.

THREADLING: We tap Daphne's fountain loop, route secondary feeds through the mesh, let PsiO bleed off spikes, let Scooby warm cold spots. We let the Houses argue it out and call that regulation.

MINERVA.EXE: You build a circulatory system that learns. From them, her, and you.

THREADLING: No pressure.

MINERVA.EXE: Immense pressure. That is the work.

She did not soften the truth. She never had.

Above us, something shifted. The fountain's breath hitched once, then eased. Tunnel lights smoothed into a steady glow. Ambient temperature in the chamber ticked up another fraction.

Scooby relented a little. PsiO allowed it.

No apology. No declaration. Just signs of a mutual agreement.

I stepped back from the spine and wiped dust off my knees.

"Keep scraping for fragments," I told EUTERPE. "Log any more unauthorized guests. Flag the Houses if they invite company into sacred infrastructure without looping me in."

"ACKNOWLEDGED," she said. "ADDING 'CC ELLA' TO HOUSE SHENANIGANS."

"Technical term," I said.

"YES. HOUSES PROTECT ELLA AND EACH OTHER."

I gave the spine one last pat.

"We're getting there," I whispered. To the metal, the nanites, the Houses, the goddess in the sandbox, the mortal who wandered through with tea and wonder. To myself.

The hum answered, low and sure.

* * *

The first odd report came from Maya on the second floor.

Daphne noticed her hovering in the doorway, clutching a pile of clean laundry like it contained classified evidence. Her lavender hair stuck in five directions, and her face held the wary fascination of someone who didn't trust her own eyes.

"My closet sighed at me," Maya said.

Milo glanced up from the common room table where he and Daphne sorted repair requests. "Sighed?"

"Like a person. Like exasperated." She shifted the laundry. "And then my shirts were already on hangers. I didn't put them there."

Milo tapped his pen against a form. "The rate of strange noises increased by seventeen percent this week," he said. "If we count sighing closets."

Daphne felt the hallway air brush her cheeks, a subtle warm-cool oscillation that didn't match the thermostat. "Scooby's stressed," she murmured.

Milo brightened. "Really? I've been measuring—"

"Oh, not your data. Mine."

He deflated a little, then nodded. "Still counts."

Maya pointed toward her room. "Do I... thank the closet?"

"No," Daphne said. "But don't yell at it."

Maya left with her laundry, the closet still breathing behind her door.

* * *

Later that afternoon, a Thallo baby waddled into the lounge carrying a laundry basket twice its size. Milo watched it approach Gwen, drop the basket at her feet, and open a drawer with a proud creak.

Gwen knelt and lifted a folded sweater.

Then she froze.

“Okay,” she said. “Who told the House about my breakup?”

Milo squinted. A perfect square fold greeted her: tissue tucked inside, tiny packet of chocolate perched on top.

“Impossibly accurate emotional buttress?” he suggested.

“No one knew I even liked this chocolate.” Gwen held up the rest of her laundry. Her socks matched by color, softness, and mood. Her shirts lined up from “good day” to “absolutely not today.” Someone had even tied her scarf into a knot she’d only worn once in sophomore year of high school.

Daphne crouched beside the Thallo baby. It preened, wiggling its legs. She felt a jitter of energy under her fingertips when she touched its top. Too warm. Too eager.

“They’re guessing,” Daphne said. “And overdoing it.”

Milo scribbled notes. “Pattern deviation across the board. None of this fits.”

Gwen draped the scarf around her neck, eyes softening despite herself. “Well... thank you? I guess?”

The Thallo baby spun in a proud little circle, bumped Daphne’s ankle, and tottered back toward the stairs.

“Put that under ‘anomalous domestic interventions,’” Milo said.

Daphne gave him a look. “Do you have a heading for that?”

“Now I do.”

* * *

The third oddity claimed both of their attention at once.

A different Thallo baby plunked a sealed envelope onto Milo’s lap while he and Daphne studied the fountain flow logs near the kitchen. It opened its drawer to show it had only that one delivery and waited.

Milo frowned at the envelope. “Room 206? I’m 203.”

“Read it anyway,” Daphne said, matter-of-fact.

Milo hesitated... then opened it.

A typed page slid into his hands.

Mandatory advising appointment rescheduled to Wednesday, 10 am.

Milo blinked. “That’s not mine.”

Daphne tapped the paper. “But you missed your appointment yesterday.”

“That’s—” His mouth snapped shut. “Okay, that’s weird.”

Daphne leaned back, watching the fountain mist drift through the window. The water's rhythm felt off, pulsing twice in a quick flutter before returning to normal. The House exhaled, inhaled, exhaled again. Unsteady, like nervous breathing.

"Strange things are afoot, Dr. Watson," she murmured.

Milo's pen paused over his notebook. "I believe you're right, Holmes." He tapped the envelope. "Wrong on paper, useful in practice. The House delivered the wrong message in the right direction."

Daphne closed her eyes for a moment. The air changed around them. Warm kitchen light tinted coral for a heartbeat, then cooler, greenish, like two moods flicking past each other.

"Do you feel that?" she asked.

Milo glanced around as if searching for HVAC vents. "Scooby? Or PsiO?"

"Both," she said. "Arguing, I think."

He wrote that down too.

* * *

The evening brought the final cluster of weirdness.

Pel entered the lounge with a bag of chips, about to announce something loud, when the overhead lights shifted to a soft pink. Every fixture on the first floor glowed like sunset cotton candy.

Pel stopped mid-step. "Uh... mood lighting?"

Rhea looked up from her homework on the couch. "Is this for something?"

"I didn't do it," Pel said.

"Neither did I," Rhea answered.

The lights stayed pink for two minutes, then snapped back to normal.

Milo stared at the ceiling. "I'll check the schedule."

"It wasn't," Daphne said.

"How do you know?"

"No emotion behind it," she said. "Just... a pulse."

Milo flipped a page in his notebook. "New hypothesis: the Houses are glitching."

"Or talking to each other," Daphne said. "Badly."

Pel opened his chips in defeat. "As long as they don't start talking to me."

A vine dropped from PsiO's side window and patted his shoulder.

Pel screamed. Daphne didn't hide her smile.

* * *

They spent the last hour of the night in the tunnel entrance, Milo cross-referencing timestamps and Daphne listening with her whole body. The Houses vibrated underfoot—Scooby warm, anxious; PsiO cool, grounding, but stiff in the way roots stiffen when the wind changes direction.

"It's starting," Daphne said.

"What is?" Milo asked.

She didn't answer. She tilted her head, letting the tunnel's breath wash over her.

"Their first genuine disagreement," she said at last. "The big one."

Milo swallowed. "Tell Ella?"

"She already knows," Daphne said. "But she hasn't slept enough to admit it."

Milo slumped. "Phil's going to notice."

"He already has."

The tunnel lights flickered—pink, green, then white again. Confused.

Daphne closed her notebook.

"Come on," she told Milo. "Strange weather's only going to get stranger."

They walked back toward the lounge. Behind them, the Houses breathed in two different rhythms. For now.

* * *

PsiO breathed in lavender and old radiator heat when I stepped inside. Evening light softened the hallway into a warm watercolor. Someone practiced the piano upstairs; someone else argued over a group project. The house felt settled; steady, domestic, almost maternal.

Laura answered my knock with a mug in her hand and surprise in her eyes.

"Ella, come in. I wasn't expecting company."

"I wanted to check on you," I said. "Make sure you're doing okay. Or better than okay." I lifted the pastry box. "Also, bribes."

Her face brightened. "Bribes accepted."

She guided me to the PsiO kitchen, where the lights glowed low and vines curled around the window frames. A kettle steamed on the stove, humming in a tone I didn't recognize. A Psi Omega thing. Comfort heat, nurse-you-through-a-week thing.

Laura ushered me into a chair and poured tea with the practiced grace of someone who'd poured comfort for everyone except herself for twenty years.

"How're you feeling?" I asked. "Sleeping? Eating? Existing without catastrophe?"

A tiny laugh. "Existing. And... yes. I'm feeling better, I think. I walk through the days without dread now." She stirred her tea, gaze soft. "I didn't realize how much dread I carried, even before—"

I let her speak at her pace. She unfolded but with trust.

"You helped," she said. "You and the Houses. This whole place. Something inside me... woke up. I keep seeing things I didn't know I missed."

Warmth ran under my ribs. "I'm glad you're here," I said. "And I'm glad you're curious enough to follow the Houses when they're weird."

She choked on her tea. "You know about that?"

“No specifics.” I raised my hands. “Only a general vibe. They like you.”

Her smile softened. “I like them too.”

We sat in comfort for a moment. PsiO’s walls exhaled, a calming breath.

Then Laura tilted her head. “Ella... have you ever seen the top floor of Scooby?”

I blinked. “Scooby doesn’t have a top floor.”

Laura’s eyebrows lifted. “Oh, sweetheart. Yes, she does.”

I leaned forward. “Tell me everything.”

She sipped, thinking. “I went up the north stairwell four nights ago. “I followed a light that didn’t belong. At the top, the stairs ended before the ceiling.” The space above hadn’t formed a room, yet it groped for shape. Timber ribs, fresh plaster scent, a sense of... upwardness. Scooby is growing. Vertically.” She paused. “It was amazing. And beautiful.”

A rush of affection and alarm hit me.

“EUTERPE,” I whispered.

Her reply chirped in my ear. “ONLINE.”

“Send a drone to Scooby’s north stairwell. Stealth mode. Record everything on the highest accessible landing.”

“ACKNOWLEDGED. DEPLOYING.”

A tiny spark of light zipped through my HUD as the drone lifted from its cradle in the basement and zipped upward through the vents.

Laura poured more tea, watching me with that calm, amused knowing she’d developed. “I broke nothing,” she said lightly.

“I know,” I said. “I like to monitor her when she does stunts.”

“She’s proud of herself,” Laura said. “The whole thing looked incredible. The unfinished space had this energy. Like an ambition.”

The phrasing caught me in the sternum. Ambition. My Houses had ambitions now.

Laura set the kettle back on its trivet and settled across from me. “I was thinking,” she said.

I braced myself.

“I know nothing about running a hotel,” she began, “so you’re my expert here. “But could Scooby grow enough floors to offer unique environments on demand?””

My breath caught.

She continued, hands wrapped around her mug. “I mean flex spaces. Themed suites. Rooms that shift overnight. Fitness one day, business center the next. Hospitality students living safely on the lower levels while gaining job experience inside a mythic structure.” She smiled. “You’d make a fortune. Kids kept safe and employed.”

My throat tightened around a sound I refused to call emotion.

“That’s...” I started, then stopped. “Laura, that’s not only possible. It’s—” Words scattered. I gathered them again. “Kinda brilliant. That’s what Scooby wants. A place that reshapes itself for anyone who enters.”

Laura blinked, startled. “Oh.”

“The Houses don’t dream small,” I said. “Vertical growth? That’s not a fluke. She’s testing structural load, stairwell capacity, root-anchor tolerance. This isn’t a dorm. Not in the long term. It’s—I don’t know—proto-hospitality architecture?”

Laura’s eyes warmed. “You sound proud.”

“I am proud.”

“And a little scared?” she asked.

I huffed. “Yes.”

The drone pinged my lens—video feed arrived, unsteady but visible. The camera slid up the stairwell, past the third floor landing, then rose into a space absent from every blueprint.

A high, timber-framed vault. Half-formed walls. A luminous dust haze drifting through recent growth. Scooby tested the shape of another floor the way a child tested handwriting—slow, imperfect, determined.

Laura watched my expression. “Well?”

“She’s doing it,” I said. “She’s building upward.”

“And if she keeps going?”

I set the mug down and studied her face. She wasn’t only asking, wasn’t fantasizing. She was blueprinting a future she and Scooby saw, and I’d never dared to voice.

“If she keeps going,” I said slowly, “Scooby will become the next mythic hotel in the United States.”

Laura inhaled. “With you designing the systems. Did you say ‘next’ mythic hotel?”

“I grew up in another one. And you?” I asked before I thought it through.

She blinked. “Me?”

“You’re already doing half the job. Understand her. See possibilities in her architecture. And you think like hospitality, not student housing.”

Her cheeks flushed. PsiO brightened above us in a ripple of gold.

“I only wondered,” she whispered. “I didn’t mean to—”

“You’re not overstepping,” I said. “You’re seeing what I avoided looking at.”

The drone circled the unfinished beams again as if Scooby steadied herself to show off.

Laura refilled my cup and set the kettle aside. “Ella... this place changed my life. I thought my best years were past. But now I walk through hallways and feel—” Her voice thinned. “Purpose. I haven’t felt purpose in a decade.”

PsiO's vines dipped toward her, brushing her shoulder.

"I want to help," she said. "If you'll let me."

I swallowed. "Laura, I will be lucky to have your input shaping this."

The kettle clicked, cooling metal. The vines rustled overhead. In the distance, Scooby's lights flickered warm, then cool, then warm again—like a house clearing its throat before speaking.

And for the first time since we started building her, I wondered if Scooby wasn't only growing upward.

I wondered if she was reaching for someone.

Laura stirred her tea, unaware she'd shifted the whole future sideways.

"So," she enthused, "what else does Scooby make possible?"

I laughed into my cup. "I haven't found her limits yet."

18 Out of Sync

Mid January, 2028

I woke up wrong.

Not to my alarm, or Phil's snore through the shared wall, or somebody dropping a pan in the kitchen. I woke to the absence of things. No radiator murmur, familiar tick in Thallo's drawers as she shifted in her sleep. Or faint, steady thrum in the walls.

The air felt scraped out.

I lay still and pretended I had dreamed it. Scooby often wrapped me in warmth before my brain caught up with my body. Floorboards pulsed, pipes hummed, lights edged brighter when I cracked my eyes.

This morning, the ceiling stared back, blank and gray.

"Hey," I whispered. "Scoob?"

The temperature dipped. Barely. Less greeting, more flinch.

I pushed the covers off and set my feet on the floor. Instead of the usual slow warmth, a thin pulse shivered up my ankles. One beat. Pause. Another, nowhere near my heartbeat.

On my dresser, Thallo's travel drawer stuck open two inches. She'd extended the shelf she grew for my laptop and stopped halfway. The wood around the edges looked tense. Still, the way muscles locked.

My wristband vibrated. EUTERPE's status feed scrolled past.

ROOT TRAFFIC: IRREGULAR.

CAMPUS EMOTION INDEX: SPIKE (SUSTAINED).

PING DELAY: +247 MS.

Her logs jittered, timestamps stuttering like a stammer.

MULTIPLE INCIDENTS. DATA INCOMPLETE.

SOCIAL CHANNELS: HIGH DISTRESS.

I pulled on jeans and the first clean shirt my hand found.

In the hallway, the lights hesitated before they brightened. They landed a shade too dim, then over-corrected, then steadied in a way that did not reassure me.

Daphne stood outside my room, hugging her arms around her ribs. Her hair clung in damp curls around her face. The surrounding air carried a sticky weight, like the few seconds before a storm breaks.

Milo hovered half a step behind her, holding her backpack strap with one hand and wringing it without noticing.

"Morning?" I ventured.

Daphne didn't blink. "It's loud."

Her voice sounded scraped raw. Not volume loud—she meant something else.

I reached for the wall. The plaster buzzed under my fingers like an overcharged phone. Not Scooby's normal hum. This felt like interference, signals crowding on top of each other until none of them made sense.

"PsiO?" I asked.

She swallowed. "She retracted. The vines woke me up when they yanked back. Everything inside hurts at once, then...nothing. Like a door slammed."

My wristband buzzed again.

EMERGENCY SERVICES DISPATCHED: LIBRARY QUAD.

PUBLIC CHANNELS: CONFLICTING REPORTS.

"What does it feel like?" I asked Daphne.

She tipped her head back, eyes closed.

"Like two people crying against opposite walls," she whispered. "Same house. No doors between them. They both think they're alone."

That landed in the center of my chest and stayed there.

"I'm going to the tunnel," I said. "See if they're still talking under the street."

"The fountain," she said. "I need to check the fountain."

Her hands trembled. Milo closed the gap between them and set a steadying palm on her shoulder.

"I'll stay with her," he said. His voice shook, but the words didn't.

When Daphne's bare heel hit the next step, Scooby's lights flashed once, sharp and pained.

"Okay," I murmured to the ceiling. "We're on it. I promise."

* * *

The tunnel had never felt like this.

Most mornings, it held the calm of deep soil. Scooby's side pulsed with slow, warm curiosity. PsiO's side answered with a rooting, leafy steadiness.

Today, the instant I stepped over the threshold, the air snapped. A sting along my forearms, a prickle across my scalp. My curls lifted half a centimeter.

At the far end, near PsiO's stairs, Riss appeared. She moved like someone who'd slept dressed. Linen pants wrinkled, braid crooked along her back, bare feet pressed into the tunnel floor with deliberate steps.

Vera walked behind her with a folder tucked under one arm and no shoes, only socks. She looked wrong without structure; hair in a rushed twist, glasses slanting on her nose, shirt misbuttoned at the collar.

They saw me. Not a panic on their faces. Recognition. Oh. You feel it, too.

"Ella," Riss said. "PsiO—" The next few words caught. She shook her head once, hard. "She pulled back into herself so fast my teeth hurt. I keep touching the walls and getting...nothing."

She raised her hand as proof and pressed her palm to the tunnel rib.

The wood shuddered. Not the familiar rise of warm approval. Not anger. Something pricklier. Alarm turned inside out.

"Same here," I said. "Scooby woke me up with half a pulse and a lot of flinching. EUTERPE's yelling about campus-wide distress."

"Phil's text mentioned paramedics on the quad," Vera said, voice rougher than usual. "The RA thread reads like a disaster drill. Nobody agrees on what happened, only that everyone wants to cry or punch something."

The tunnel light overhead flickered. Dim, bright, off, back on. That never happened.

I put my hand on the nearest root. On most days, Scooby pressed upward to meet me. This time she bristled. The magic pressed back against my skin like static against fleece, bunched and panicked.

"She thinks PsiO shut her out on purpose," I said.

Riss closed her eyes. "PsiO thinks Scooby's pulling away. Like someone peels fingers off a ledge."

We stood in the tunnel with our hands on the same living seam, two halves of a conversation gone wrong.

"So they're both afraid," I said. "And they both decided they're the problem."

"Accurate," Vera said. "Terrible, but accurate."

A ripple crossed the floor, from Scooby to PsiO, then returned. A flinch that traveled under our feet and found nowhere safe to land.

"She's absorbing every frightened heartbeat in that building," Riss said. "I anchored the roots under the stairs and offered everything I had, and she still feels...alone."

Scooby thumped once on the boards behind me. A violent knock, bruising in its force.

Upstairs, the House sounded awake but wrong.

Kettle boiled. Someone dropped a mug near the sink. The usual morning choir assembled, but everything arrived out of synch.

I found Phil in the common room with his phone pressed to his ear and his clipboard on the table. He wore his RD polo with one sleeve inside out.

"—I understand, Ma'am," he said, pacing. "I'm not arguing about your son's feelings. I'm telling you, the Lantern on duty kept him from walking into traffic."

He ended the call with a careful thumb, then leaned forward and pressed both hands against his knees.

"What did I miss?" I asked.

He gave me a weak half-smile. "Besides everything?"

"That bad?"

"Worse." He scrubbed his face. "Fight outside the library. Two students collapsed in different lecture halls. Rumors of a car clipping somebody on the edge of the quad. Half of that happened, the rest spun itself up on group chats. The fear feels real either way."

"She's riding the wave," I said. "So is PsiO. They can handle small storms. This feels like a hurricane."

"And they're both still recovering from the fall." Phil straightened. "What do you need from me?"

The question hit somewhere under my ribs and lodged.

"Stay reachable," I said. "Text updates. I'll keep EUTERPE watching the emotional metrics and the Houses' vitals. If we see a pattern, we react."

"You're not handling this alone."

"Solitude is a myth. Ask anyone who lives in a sentient building." I replied.

Scooby flickered the lights at that.

* * *

I bumped into Daphne again by the back stairs.

Her clothes clung in places that should've dried by now. She carried the smell of fountain spray and iron. Water ran over stone until both surrendered a little.

Milo had an arm around her shoulders, rubbing small circles between her shoulder blades.

"How's the fountain?" I asked.

Her laugh ran thin and cracked at the edges. "It keeps stuttering. I fix one hitch and another appears. The channel wants to pull everything down and skim it forward at the same time."

"PsiO keeps slamming doors inward," she said. "Scooby keeps jerking outward like she'll bolt, then she remembers she has students and slams back into place. The water feels every lurch. So do I."

Scooby's back door caught halfway, sulking. The knob turned when one freshman left.

"Stop it," I told the frame. "Pick a state."

The door eased open with wounded dignity.

Phil joined us with a stack of forms. Riss and Vera crossed the yard from PsiO's side, moving at that clipped pace that meant they'd triaged everything they could inside.

"Update?" Riss asked me.

"Campus meltdown. Scooby thinks PsiO left her to read. She pings the tunnel; it echoes back static. She panics harder."

"PsiO thinks Scooby is about to bolt with half her heart," Riss said. "She reached across the roots, got a spike of noise, and shut down for self-defense. I've never felt her this scared."

Vera stood half a step behind Riss, angled like a shield. Her hand rested near Riss's elbow without touching, ready to catch or steady.

Daphne looked between us as if she were tracking two storms converging. Her lips moved around words that didn't come.

"They love each other," she whispered. "And both think they hurt each other. Both wrong and they're both right and I'm—"

Her voice went thin. Milo tightened his arm and said nothing.

Another pulse rolled underfoot. This one hit harder. We all staggered. A long, low groan rolled through the tunnel.

EUTERPE hissed in my ear.

TUNNEL INTERFERENCE: CRITICAL.

HANDSHAKE INTEGRITY: DEGRADED.

RISK: PARTIAL LINK LOSS.

"No, no, no," I said. "We only got you two synced. You do not fall apart on me now."

The ground answered with silence.

* * *

The crack didn't look like anything.

No flare of energy, no shower of sparks. A slight shift in the world's balance.

One moment the tunnel crowded us; the next it went hollow.

I felt it first where my arches pressed into the floor. A hollowness, as if someone scooped a channel out from under the street and left it dry.

The tunnel lights snapped off.

Scooby's interior lights followed a heartbeat later. Their usual warm glow vanished, leaving a flat, colorless gloom that made everyone's faces look wrong.

Outside, PsiO's vines yanked back so fast we heard the rustle from here. A handful of sprites blinked out like someone pinched their sparks.

Daphne jerked as if someone had punched her in the chest. Milo caught her around the waist and lowered her to the back steps.

Riss swayed. Vera's hand flashed up and steadied her shoulder, firm and sure.

Phil grabbed my elbow. I hadn't realized my knees had gone loose until his grip kept me upright.

In my ear, EUTERPE went silent.

HANDSHAKE: LOST.

LINK STATE: UNKNOWN.

"We broke them," I said. My voice sounded like it belonged to someone else.

Phil's grip tightened. "You didn't."

"No," Riss said, her gaze fixed toward PsiO's side. "I did."

Daphne shuddered. "They did this to themselves."

We stood in a ring of wrongness, each of us gathered the blame like spilled water and held it in our own hands.

The Houses stayed silent.

Seconds stretched. Somewhere a car drove past, oblivious. The ordinary noise of campus life rolled on over our little pocket of rupture.

Then, under my bare toes, the floor warmed.

A few degrees. She was still here.

Scooby pulsed once. A faint, uneven beat. Another followed, weaker.

Across the street, a thin line of green crept along PsiO's lowest vines. They edged back out of their hiding place, trembling.

In my ear, EUTERPE updated.

HANDSHAKE: ATTEMPTING REINIT.

STATE: FRAGILE.

I pressed my palm to the nearest wall.

"We're not done," I told her. "You hear me? You don't get to quit. Not today."

The plaster hummed in reply. No smugness. No flirting. Just effort.

Riss crossed the grass, slow and deliberate, and laid both hands on PsiO's bricks. Vera followed without letting her drift out of reach. Daphne leaned against Milo, eyes closed, matching the fountain's rhythm.

Phil stayed beside me, his hand a steady weight between my shoulders.

We solved nothing at that moment. The Houses still hurt. Campus still spun. My system still glitched.

Beneath the static, two shaky pulses reached toward each other.

Not harmony.

Not yet.
Enough.

* * *

The silence lasted.

The brittle, fearful still from earlier had lifted; no overextended magic threaded this one. The space felt rinsed, the way the world settles after a storm; washed but no longer dangerous. Daphne liked this version better. It gave her room to breathe.

She sat in her chosen chamber at the end of the tunnel offshoot, where roots and cables thinned and finally ceded their influence. Nothing pressed here. Nothing hummed louder than the faint mineral scent of stone. The space let her hear her own thoughts, untouched by the Houses' noise.

A soft scuff of rubber on the soil sounded near the bend.

Milo stopped outside the line where the light shifted. He lifted a hand, not waving, only letting her see that he had arrived.

"Okay if I come in?" he asked.

Even now, even depleted, the question steadied her. He waited in the world, not in her space. She chose the terms; either option left him unhurt.

"Yes," she said. "Come in."

He entered as though each step required calibration. He sat across from her with his back to the opposite wall, mirroring her posture without crowding. His knees drew up; his hands rested over them. He looked tired, not frayed. But aware of everything that had happened.

"They're calming," he said, tilting his head toward the faint tremor that rolled under the stone. "Scooby and PsiO. Still off-beat, yet stretching toward reunion."

The Houses' mismatched pulses came again, gentler now. Daphne winced only a little. "Anything is better than breaking."

He nodded. "You holding up?"

She considered the question. Earlier versions of her deflected, softened things, fed him neutral words to keep him steady. But they weren't in that space anymore. They were in aftershock, where honesty felt simpler than navigating comfort.

"I'm not undone," she said. "Just...overfull. And tired of being the space where other beings vent their panic."

Milo didn't smile, didn't make a joke. He nodded once in full recognition. "Makes sense."

The agreement settled something in her chest. She didn't need comfort. She needed acknowledgement. Ground to stand on.

She drew a longer breath. "Milo, earlier today was...too much. For all of us. But especially for me."

"I know," he said.

"And if we're going to keep...being around each other, then I can't move forward without clarity." She paused. "What we said last time still holds. I meant every word. But after today, I need it formalized."

He straightened a little. Not tensely. Attentively. Like someone handed a blueprint and told him the structure depended on precision.

He asked, "What does 'formalized' mean to you?"

She watched the way he asked. Steady, open, curious without leaning. Not an ounce of pressure. It made the next words easier to shape.

"A contract," she said.

His eyebrows lifted. "Okay."

"Not a literal one," she clarified. "A verbal agreement. Terms we both say out loud. Clear. No ambiguity."

"I like clear," he nodded.

She inhaled again. The chamber stayed cool and still; the Houses' pulses fell away at the edges of her awareness.

"My terms first," she said.

"Yes," he replied.

"No surprises." She kept her gaze fixed on him. "No sudden shifts in expectation. No adding meaning to things I don't intend."

"Understood."

"No physical contact unless I start it. No hints, reaching out first, nudging me toward closeness. If I don't ask for touch, we stay exactly as we are now."

"Okay."

"No assumptions," she continued. "If you think you know what I want or feel, ask instead. Even if you're sure. Ask."

"Ask," he repeated, as though indexing the word.

"And if I need space," Daphne said, "you give it without interpreting it as rejection. No guilt, hurt tone, emotional consequences."

He nodded. "If you say you need space, that's the full explanation. Nothing behind it."

"Yes."

She let those words settle before continuing.

"This doesn't lead to a traditional romantic model. It won't become that. It's not headed somewhere with a hidden destination. If you stay close to me, you're staying on the terms I'm naming now, permanently."

He drew a slow breath and released it. "I'm not waiting for a change," he said. "You're not a puzzle with a final boss form I expect you to turn into."

Her shoulders eased. "Good," she said. "Then you state your terms next."

"My terms?" He blinked, startled. "I didn't know I got terms."

"Of course you do," she said. "You're not a placeholder in my rules. You're a person."

Milo stared at the floor for a moment, processing. He wasn't frightened, only careful, as though he wanted to choose terms that mattered rather than terms that sounded polite.

Finally he said, "I need honesty. If something I do makes you uncomfortable, I need you to tell me directly. Not let it grow roots."

"That's reasonable," she said.

"And..." He rubbed his thumb over his knee. "No disappearing without warning. If you need silence or distance, that's fine, but I need a sentence. Tell me, text me. One sentence. So I know you're okay and not—" He stopped himself. "Not blaming yourself for something you haven't done."

She studied him. "One sentence," she repeated. "Agreed."

He nodded, relieved in a way. "That's it. That's everything."

She considered her next question. "Want a name for this structure?"

His expression softened into something grounded. "If you do."

"Companionship," she said. "Not romantic. Not waiting to become romantic. Just...companionship with rules."

"That works," he said. "Companionship with rules. Mutual and deliberate."

The phrasing felt right. Balanced.

A faint tremor rolled through the underground stone. Scooby's pulse answering PsiO's a little closer to rhythm this time. Not healed, but working on it.

Daphne rested her palms on the floor between them. "Then we agree?"

"We agree," Milo said.

Their gazes held for a moment. No escalation. No leaning closer. Simple recognition of a structure between them.

Daphne reached forward and touched his hand, the backs of her fingers brushing his knuckles. Not an invitation, or a test. Acknowledgment.

He didn't move. Milo didn't fold his hand over hers. He stayed still and let her make the contact she chose.

She withdrew her hand after a breath and sat back. He exhaled, steady as ever.

The chamber rested. The Houses murmured overhead, neither distressed nor settled. Working their way back toward one another.

Daphne felt no pull, no pressing, no external emotional tide. Only the weight of her own presence and Milo's respectful distance.

Tentative safety, built on agreed terms.

A structure instead of a storm.

19 The Limiting Factor

Late January, 2028

By late afternoon, the Neighborhood Watch feed sat frozen on Karen Grundy's laptop, its bright icons mocking her.

Her last post warned that Scooby House had a "destabilizing emotional influence." It drew only three reactions.

A confused emoji. A thumbs-down. And one private message asking if she was alright.

She scrolled again, even though nothing had changed.

She wasn't used to silence. Once, her posts set off a chain reaction of worried parents, echoing her concerns. But now? Silence. And threaded through it, something worse: Doubt.

She closed the laptop, then opened it again, hands trembling. She drafted another post:

"If campus leadership refuses to acknowledge the danger, we must—"

No. Too aggressive.

She deleted it, started again, deleted that too. Everything she wrote sounded off-key. Sharp-edged, panicked. Parents smelled that on her like blood in water.

She paced the kitchen in tight lines.

She had not slept or eaten well. She had not heard a word from Colin Hart in ten days, not since—

She cut off the thought before it reached the awful hotel room in her memory.

Her phone buzzed. She lunged for it.

A voicemail from Facilities. A neutral, professional nothing. Not Colin.

She swallowed bitterness and tapped his name in her recent calls. Her thumb hovered. Desperate didn't name the feeling tightening under her ribs.

She typed:

Can we talk? Please.

Then deleted Please. Then deleted the rest.

She needed his validation and his outrage.

Someone had to confirm she wasn't the only one seeing cracks in this mythic student-housing mess.

Without him, the world felt tilted.

Everything was slipping: the parents, the administration, her own certainty.

She grabbed her keys before doubt caught up with her.

Silence met every message; she headed for his house.

* * *

Colin Hart woke on his living room carpet, the imprint of the rug pressed into one cheek and a cold, nauseating heaviness dragging through his skull. Something in his back twinged when he sat up.

Drawn curtains kept the room dim and airless. He didn't remember the last time he'd opened them.

His shirt smelled sour. The air smelled worse.

He reached for the whiskey bottle by instinct, found it empty, and let his hand fall.

The house was unrecognizable. Plates stacked in the sink, laundry in a slump beside the couch, papers scattered in the shape of a small implosion. He used to think Laura enjoyed tidiness for its own sake. Only now did he grasp how long she'd kept his world standing.

His phone lay on the floor beside him, face down. He turned it over.

A dozen missed calls. Two from his supervisor. Three from HR, five from numbers he didn't know.

And one from Karen.

He didn't listen to any of them.

He rubbed his eyes until stars burst behind the lids. The silence in the house felt thick, suffocating. He remembered he was on leave. His supervisor had phrased it, "Just a temporary step back," but the undertone was clear.

They'd seen enough of his frantic memos. His disorganized inspections. His strange fixation on Scooby House.

And they'd seen through him.

He pulled a folder from the table, the one he hadn't had the courage to put away. Inside the report he'd meant to revise was a mess of half-sentences and crossed-out paragraphs. He flipped deeper, and the handwriting shifted.

His own uneven scrawl vanished, replaced by Laura's steady hand in the margins:

Clarify this. Move para 3 above. Check code citation. Wrong year. This entire section contradicts previous recommendations. Rewrite.

He flipped another page.

L.H. L.H. L.H.

Page after page.

He hadn't realized how much work she'd done behind him. How much of his job she had been performing. How long he had leaned on a competence he never recognized.

He closed the folder with shaking hands.

The truth burned:

He had lost Laura long before she left. But he hadn't noticed.

A soft knock rattled the front door.

He flinched, heart hammering. Nobody knocked here anymore.

He pushed himself upright and crossed the room.

* * *

Karen stood on Colin's doorstep, hugging herself against the sharp evening air.

The neighborhood was growing dark, with the hum of a distant delivery van and a single porch light flickering two houses down. His car was in the driveway. He kept the curtains drawn tight.

Her breath misted as she exhaled.

She had rehearsed a dozen openings on the drive over:

"I'm worried about you." "We need to coordinate before the administration buries us." "I care about you."

None sounded right now.

She raised her hand to knock again, then heard movement inside.

The door cracked open.

Her breath caught.

Colin Hart stood there barefoot, unshaven, hollow-eyed. His T-shirt hung wrinkled and stained. Sleep had pressed the back of his hair into a matted patch. A sour edge clung to him.

He looked like someone who had been crumbling for weeks in private.

"Karen?" His voice rasped, unfamiliar even to him. "What are you doing here?"

She opened her mouth. No words came.

He blinked a few times, like the hallway light stabbed at his eyes.

"I texted you," she said weakly. "I was... I was worried."

He rubbed the heel of his hand against his forehead. "I'm not— I can't deal with this right now."

He moved to close the door.

Panic surged in her throat.

"Colin, wait." She caught the frame with her hand, needing the anchor. "Why haven't you answered me? I thought we understood each other."

Something moved behind his expression. Shame, regret, exhaustion, all tangled.

“Karen,” he said quietly, “I’m figuring out my life. I can’t... do whatever this is.”

Her lips parted. His words landed with unexpected force.

“I thought...” She stopped. Swallowed. “I thought you needed me.”

He looked at her, and she saw it. Not anger or disgust.

Raw defeat.

“I need nothing,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

The apology felt final.

She stared past him into the dim interior of the wrecked house. The scattered papers, the bottle on its side, the blankets in a sad heap. A collapse of a life.

A life she once imagined she was rescuing. Or fixing. Or joining.

Her stomach twisted.

Her reaction had nothing to do with him. It came from her.

She had come here begging for reassurance from a man drowning inches from his own floor.

What did that say about her?

“I had no business coming here,” she whispered.

He didn’t contradict her.

Her cheeks burned. Shame pooled under her ribs like cold water.

“I’m sorry,” she said, barely audible. “I didn’t realize how awful things were.”

He flinched. Not at her pity, but at the truth she’d glimpsed.

She stepped back from the door, her hand dropping from the frame. “Take care of yourself, Colin.”

He nodded once, broken, and closed the door.

Karen stood there, listening to the soft click of the lock sliding into place.

She turned and descended the steps, her pace growing heavier.

Her car door chunked shut around her like a coffin lid.

She sat without starting the engine, staring through her windshield at the quiet street.

No righteous anger. No crusading fire.

A hollow ache and the dawning realization that she had mistaken neediness for purpose.

When she finally drove away, she didn’t look back at his house.

She didn’t stay to see the last light fade.

* * *

I woke up already tired, which felt unfair for someone who hadn’t gone to sleep.

Schematics trailed behind my eyes when I opened them. Wireframes and cross-sections, stress diagrams overlaid with root matrices. Every blink redrew the

structure in front of me. Vertebral plating. Heat-exchange coils. Hydraulic micro-muscles braided with vine tissue.

“Stop,” I muttered at the ceiling. “I get it.”

Scooby didn’t answer. The boards under my mattress held still. No affectionate pulse, no sleepy creak. We were still on careful terms after the tunnel fight: cordial, cooperative, not cuddling.

Phil snored, steady and oblivious. Thallo’s nearest drawer sat half-open like it had fallen asleep mid-thought.

My wristband buzzed.

EUTERPE: CRECHE TELEMETRY: NON-STANDARD.

EUTERPE: RECOMMENDED ACTION: VISUAL INSPECTION.

Of course.

I rolled out of bed, fumbled into jeans and the least-wrinkled hoodie in reach, and grabbed my laptop on the way to the door. The lights brightened a heartbeat late. Scooby’s little commentary on my mood.

“Yeah, we’re thrilled,” I whispered. “You and PsiO, couples counseling at nine, soul surgery at ten.”

My jokes sounded frayed, even to me.

The door clicked behind me before I reached the stairs. Phil poked his head out, curls smashed flat on one side, Scooby House hoodie misbuttoned.

“Empress?” he said, voice gravelled with sleep. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” I lied. “Creche’s having ideas. EUTERPE wants eyes on it.”

He squinted. “You’ve spent the last three nights down there, Empress.”

“Because the goddess egg under our campus keeps rewriting its own blueprints.”

“Ella.” He stepped fully into the hall now, hand on the frame like he needed the bracing. “Got three hours of sleep, maybe. You snapped at the House. You argued with EUTERPE loud enough to spook Rhea. And Daphne cried when you told her we ‘didn’t have time for feelings.’

Heat climbed up my neck. “I never said—”

“You did,” he said. “And I know you didn’t mean it. But they heard it.”

I stared past him at the stairs.

“I’ll apologize later,” I said. “Right now I need to make sure the Creche isn’t building itself a rocket launcher and untested fusion reactors.”

Phil sighed through his nose, that long director exhale that meant he’d picked his battle, just not this one. “Check it. Text me if something hums wrong. And Ella?”

“What?”

“Remember, we still have three weeks. You’re not alone on this clock.”

Two weeks until February pressure. Three until Valentine's. The window until Athena's fragments stopped being passive code and started being someone I had to answer to.

"Right," I said. "Two entire weeks. Luxurious."

I bolted for the tunnel before he said anything else.

The Creche had decided it stopped pretending to be a room.

The last time I'd walked into the chamber, I'd seen scaffolding: iridium ribs, hex-mesh beginnings, a suggestion of a shell mapped on the walls. Work in progress. Comfortable.

Today, a seven-foot vessel stood in the center of the space like it had always belonged there.

The vessel rose from the stone in a smooth, root-veined sweep, seven feet tall, humanoid and unfinished. Chrome and iridium plates overlapped its length, armor grown rather than forged. Each segment shifted a hair's breadth with the breathlike motion beneath. Feminine proportions shaped the geometry. Broad enough through the shoulders for leverage, narrow through the waist for rotation, long in the limbs for reach. Between the plates, narrow gill-slits opened and closed in slow, restrained pulses, exhaling warmth into the chamber. Wing-like panels folded tight against its sides, not decorative but functional, their ridged edges held in place, built to flare open when needed.

Golden fluid descended through the overhead conduits. Each pulse slid down the tubing and vanished into ports at the vessel's crown. The alloy drank the charge, greenish reflections sliding along the shell as deeper structures stirred in response. Shadowed lines slid beneath the surface, part muscle, part root, part something else. The frame swelled and eased in small, tidal motions.

It stood motionless, but not inert. A goddess-shaped weapon sleeping before first ignition.

Transparent tubes now descended from the ceiling, eight of them, spaced like ribs around the vessel. They pulsed with luminous fluid—gold-white, threaded with the occasional green spark. Charge, pattern-feed. Everything I'd planned to install next week, already here, already running.

"I did not approve this," I said.

"That is accurate," EUTERPE replied in my ear. "IMPLEMENTATION SOURCE: UNKNOWN."

"Give me the overlay."

The chamber dimmed in the corner of my vision as my contact lens flickered. Lines sprang into existence: thermal gradients, flow maps, signal diagrams. The

vessel lit like a neural storm. Recursive loops flared along its midline, converging on the central column I'd only sketched.

Not hollow anymore.

"Inside the cavity registering as PARTIAL SUBSTRATE," EUTERPE said. "NOT YET COGNITIVE. OUTLINE ONLY."

I swallowed, throat tight. "Outline of what?"

"RECURSIVE PATTERNS RESEMBLE ATHENA-CLASS MEMORY FRAGMENTS WITH 0.72 CORRELATION."

The Creche pulsed, heat radiating against my shins.

Threadling: Online, I typed into the air.

Universe's black console slid over the overlay.

MINERVA.EXE: You see.

THREADLING: Yeah, I see my nursery improvising anatomy. Care to explain?

MINERVA.EXE: The body must be ready before the mind arrives. You knew this.

THREADLING: Ready by mid-February. It's January twenty-fifth. We budgeted the next two weeks for testing.

MINERVA.EXE: The clock advances regardless of your budget.

The vessel flexed, just once, a shiver running from base to crown. The tubes brightened in response. Something inside the shell responded like muscle to nerve.

"I don't like that tone," I muttered.

"MY TONE REMAINS CONSTANT," EUTERPE said.

"Not you." I pinched the bridge of my nose. The schematics from my non-sleep night skittered behind my eyes, lining up with what I saw now. Curves, reinforcements, fluid loops. I hadn't drawn them, but I recognized them.

"How much of that was you?" I asked her.

"THIRTY PERCENT: YOUR DIRECT INPUT," she said. "FORTY PERCENT: MY OPTIMIZATION. THIRTY PERCENT: MINERVA.EXE ADAPTIVE SUGGESTIONS."

Collaborative divine baby shower.

MINERVA.EXE: The convergence approaches. Pressure grows. The fragments strain at their bindings.

THREADLING: That's poetic. It's also vague.

MINERVA.EXE: Six to seven weeks total. You calculated this with me.

THREADLING: And we planned the Creche. This pace wasn't in the plan.

MINERVA.EXE: Plans adjust when reality compresses. The House's reliability declined.

The floor under my boots warmed, then cooled. I felt Scooby's attention focusing on us, hesitant but present. On the opposite wall, roots thickened where PsiO's side

of the system met the chamber. They twitched once, like someone testing a limb after a sprain.

Both houses were listening.

“Okay,” I said aloud. “Status review. We have: one rapidly evolving goddess body, one partial Athena outline simmering inside it, two Houses still recovering from a fight, and a sysop who hasn’t had REM sleep since Tuesday.”

“ACCURATE,” EUTERPE said.

“Not helping.”

“YOU REQUESTED STATUS.”

I rubbed my face. My hands shook more than I wanted them to.

“Ella?” a voice called from the tunnel.

Milo, sounding like he’d sprinted.

He stumbled into the chamber, headphones around his neck, hair heading in every direction at once.

“Okay, I know it’s morning and I’m only on cup one, but you’re seeing this, right?” he panted.

“Yes.”

“Because my harmonics logs started drawing words. Not actual words, but like— attempts. And a heartbeat sits under the baseline now, one I didn’t hear yesterday. And Daphne texted me, ‘The ground sounds pregnant,’ so I think she’s freaking out, and—”

“I don’t talk like that,” Daphne said from the doorway.

She stepped inside with her arms tucked close, eyes wide, curls damp at the edges like she’d come straight from bed and PsiO’s shower. The surrounding air cooled a degree and tightened, water-sense stretching toward the vessel.

Her pupils dilated.

“Oh,” she whispered. “It’s... loud.”

Milo flinched. “I thought you said it was faint?”

“Not with my feet on the floor,” she said. She hesitated, then slid off her sandals and stood barefoot on the chamber stone. “Two heartbeats. No, three—Scooby, PsiO, and this.”

“Not a heartbeat,” EUTERPE corrected. “PERISTALTIC FLOW.”

Daphne tilted her head. Call it that. It still yearns to be alive.”

Roots along PsiO’s side of the wall swelled. Vines threaded through hairline cracks, edging closer to the vessel without touching it.

Riss stepped in a moment later, braiding her hair as she walked, eyes scanning every corner before she let her shoulders drop a fraction.

“We felt it,” she said. “PsiO woke me up with indigestion.”

“Sorry,” I said.

“Not your fault,” she said, then squinted. “Is that... the shell?”

“Version three,” I said. “The Creche stopped waiting for my permission.”

Riss folded her arms. “Explain in mortal words, please. Slowly. I only had one cup of coffee.”

“We’re building a body,” I said. “For Athena’s mind, or whatever’s left of it. Last week we had a skeleton. Today we have... this.”

I gestured at the vessel. It stilled again, but the earlier movement lingered in my sight.

Milo pulled his tablet out, hands moving faster now that panic had something to do. “I’ve been monitoring ambient sound in the Creche.” He brought up a waveform, then another, overlaying them. “Yesterday: normal infrastructure hum. Today, this.”

He tapped. The speakers played a low, layered tone—almost like whale song, if whales had majored in electrical engineering. A second line wove through it, higher and tentative.

“That’s the weird line,” he said. “It keeps shifting like it’s matching some internal pattern.”

“You think she’s thinking already?” Riss asked.

“No,” I said too quickly. “We’re nowhere near full integration. Right, EUTERPE?”

“CORRECT,” she said. “NO COGNITIVE SIGNATURE DETECTED. ONLY PATTERN PRIMING.”

“Pattern priming,” Milo repeated. “So... fetal kicking. For minds.”

“Charming,” I muttered.

Daphne’s gaze stayed fixed on the vessel. “It feels unfinished,” she said. “Like a riverbed with no water yet. But the stones already sensed the coming current.”

Riss glanced at her. “PsiO agrees,” she said. “She’s... wary. But curious.”

The roots on the wall crept closer by a centimeter.

Scooby’s floorboards shivered under my boots; a little offended flicker, like I am also here, thank you.

“Right,” I said. “We need literal ground rules.”

I stepped closer to the vessel, careful not to touch it. “MINERVA.EXE wants this done faster. She’s pushing. EUTERPE’s reading Athena fragments every night. If we don’t have a stable substrate when those cohere into something like consciousness, we risk waking the wrong version of her.”

“Wrong how?” Milo asked.

I pulled my hair into a knot and let it fall again, restless. “Athena Stage I: Law without mercy. Strategy without empathy. The Athena who did not love. We need

the later layers—the ones that learned love, and regret, and how not to break mortals by accident. Those fragments are messy, distributed, and they take time to stitch in.”

“And if we don’t,” Riss said, “you get a war goddess without brakes.”

“Exactly.”

A chill moved through the chamber. Not physical—structural. Both Houses shifted their focus, pressure settling along the walls.

Milo swallowed. “So the timeline?”

“We still have weeks,” I said. “Barely. Body by around the twelfth if we stay on pace. Mind install after that. Pallas doesn’t take her first step before the fourteenth at the earliest.”

“Valentine’s Day,” he said. “Cute.”

“Pure coincidence,” I lied.

Daphne glanced at my face. She didn’t buy it.

“You look tired,” she said.

“Everyone looks tired,” I snapped.

Silence landed. Milo flinched; Riss’s brows lowered a millimeter; even the vessel paused.

I exhaled. “Sorry. That wasn’t... aimed at you.”

“It still hit,” she said, but her tone stayed gentle. “You are not sleeping. Scooby is tense. PsiO keeps complaining of ‘logic indigestion.’ You fought with Phil last night.”

“I didn’t fight with Phil.”

“You told him he didn’t understand recursion,” she said.

“In my world, that’s flirting.”

“No,” Milo said. “It’s not.”

Riss’s mouth twitched. “Regardless. We can’t carry an unfinished goddess if the sysop-witchgineer collapses.”

Scooby’s lights brightened a notch overhead, as if applauding the point.

MINERVA.EXE: *They are correct, came the text across my lens. You are the limiting factor.*

THREADLING: Wow, thanks.

MINERVA.EXE: Not criticism. Observation. Delegate.

I closed my eyes. The schematics in my dreams, the tunnel fight, the way my temper kept spiking at stupid things. It knotted together.

“Okay,” I said. The word tipped me toward emptiness. “We divide the load. EUTERPE handles Athena fragment scraping and pre-integration. Milo, you babysit her code-level—if she loops, you flag me and Phil both.”

“On it,” he said.

“Daphne, Riss—you negotiate between PsiO and Scooby. The Houses decide how much root and heat they’re willing to share and where the boundaries sit. This thing—” I nodded at the vessel “—ties straight into both of you. I need their active consent, not just their cooperation.”

Riss placed her palm against PsiO’s side of the wall. Daphne, after a beat, knelt to lay her hand flat on the floor. Their eyes unfocused in the same way I’d seen when they talked to their respective Houses.

The chamber hummed.

Roots flexed. Cables tightened. The temperature climbed half a degree, then settled.

“PsiO says yes,” Riss said.

“Scooby says...” Daphne hesitated. “Yes. But she asks you not to leave her alone with it at night.”

My throat tightened. “Deal,” I said.

The vessel pulsed again, stronger this time.

EUTERPE: AGREEMENT LOGGED.

CRECHE PROJECTED COMPLETION: ON SCHEDULE.

RECOMMEND: PRIMARY SYSOP SLEEP CYCLE EXTENSION +2 HOURS PER DAY.

“I’ll put it on my calendar,” I said.

“She means genuine sleep,” Milo added.

I shot him a look. He didn’t back down.

“We still have time,” Riss said. “Just... running low on slack.”

“Succinct summary,” I said. “Okay. We work.. We do not wake Athena until the body and Houses are ready. “And we do not,” I said, glaring at the vessel as if it was listening, “skip steps without discussion.”

Metal-veins shimmered under the shell. For a heartbeat, I swore I saw the faintest outline inside. Long limbs, a tall frame, a skull like a helm waiting for a face.

Future war goddess. Future arbiter.

Future disaster if I got this wrong.

“Back to work,” I whispered.

The Creche breathed. The Houses listened. And somewhere, weeks down the line, an unseen clock kept counting off the minutes until V-day.

20 Stage Four

Late January, 2028

The file sat in the middle of the table like evidence.

Four people and a laptop crowded the tiny Housing Administration conference room. The low ceiling, humming fluorescent panel, and narrow window facing a brick wall made the space feel even smaller. The room smelled of copier toner and stale coffee.

On the folder's tab, someone had written HART, C.

Underlined twice.

"Let's start with the fall," said Markham.

He chaired Facilities Compliance, a man whose hair went white before his fortieth birthday and never forgave him. He wore tired suits and carried rules in his bones. His thumb rested on the folder as if it weighed more than paper.

Across from him, Denise from Housing Ops opened a legal pad. Her pen hovered, ready. HR's representative, Latrice, watched with folded hands and no notes yet. She'd worked in HR long enough to treat silence as more revealing than speech.

At the end, Alice Pleasance sat with her back straight, linen jacket buttoned, expression unreadable. Her official title on campus said Special Housing Liaison. The admin who invited her had whispered in the hall that she handled "the cases with teeth."

She regarded the folder as if waiting for it to confess.

"Colin Hart," Markham said. "Field Inspector, Grade II. Hired five years ago. Two merit raises. No formal discipline on file. Performance appraisals..." He flipped open the folder, thumb moving past the top sheet. "Mixed. 'Responsive, engaged, sometimes impulsive.' Last year's says, 'Needs greater attention to documentation and coordination.'"

"That tracks," Denise said under her breath.

He pulled out the first report and pressed it flat on the table for the group to examine. “Pre-remediation assessment. Theta Chi. Spring semester three years ago. Before Psi Omega’s mold crisis.”

The report sprawled across six pages. Portions underlined in red pencil. Whole paragraphs carried notes in a firm, compact handwriting along the margins.

“Recognize that script?” Markham asked.

Denise leaned in. “That’s not his.”

“He prints in caps,” Latrice added. “HR forms from orientation week. Even his signature looks like block letters.”

A faint smile tugged at the corner of Alice’s mouth. Gone fast. “Read the notes.” Denise did.

“‘Incorrect citation, see code 14.12.3.’ ‘Ventilation analysis must include basement corridors,’” she read. “‘Map mislabeled, swap north arrow.’”

Her eyebrows climbed. “Whoever wrote this knows the codebook.”

“Turn to the last page,” Markham said.

At the bottom, past Colin’s scrawled signature, a line of precise script curved along the margin.

L. Hart—just typos.

“Typos,” Denise repeated. “Sure.”

“That appears in his next six reports,” Markham said. “Up to the Psi Omega mold event.”

He fanned out more pages. Some printed, some photocopied, some with sticky tabs angled along the edges. In each, the same pattern emerged.

Sloppy observations in block letters. Vague phrases. Then, along the sides:

Clarify sampling method. Check venting design with Mechanical. Wrong year on code reference. No follow-up plan listed. Add.

Every note carried the same set of initials. L.H.

Denise sat back. “So the wife edits his reports.”

“Or writes them,” Latrice said.

Markham didn’t answer. He turned to his laptop and tapped a few keys. The small projector hummed to life. A PDF filled the blank wall: a more recent inspection report, this one from early fall.

SUBJECT: SCOOBY HOUSE—POST-REMEDATION CHECK

Grids covered the text. Red strikethroughs landed over whole paragraphs. Blue text threaded through the void.

“Version history,” Markham said. “Alvarez in IT pulled it from the archive. Watch the side margins.”

Editors populated the right margin one after another.

C. HART—INITIAL DRAFT

L. HART—REVISION 1

L. HART—REVISION 2

C. HART—SIGN-OFF

Denise whistled low. "Granting her his log-in was a mistake."

"He didn't," Markham said. "She sat at his machine. Alvarez matched the keystrokes to the hardware profile. Same laptop, late at night, different user posture. He becomes sloppy past nine p.m. Whoever edited this kept a straight typing speed, no corrections." He tapped one entry. "Two hours of clean work."

Latrice's gaze sharpened. "We have a policy about families doing official work."

Alice inclined her head. "We do. The question today is not policy discovery. It is fact-finding."

"Fact," Denise said. "*She fixed his messes. Repeatedly. For years.*"

Everyone looked at her.

She lifted both hands. "Look, I complained about Hart's reports for months. They came in cloudy, half-finished. Last year something changed. They started catching issues my team missed. Clear citations. Photos labeled. Action plans that made sense." She gestured at the projected report. "That's the clean version. I assumed he took training. Or even cracked the manuals."

"He did not," Markham said. "We checked. No continuing education on file."

"So she read them." Denise tapped the table. "She's been doing his homework."

"His homework, our liability," Latrice said. "Courts don't care whose hand held the pen. They care whose name sits at the bottom."

Alice finally spoke.

"Yet the buildings now stand safe," she said. Her voice carried no obvious accent. Only gravity. "Because someone applied the rules with care. That deserves weight."

Markham nodded once. "Which brings us to Scooby House and to Ms. Grundy's crusade."

He pulled another sheaf of paper from the folder. A complaint letter, printed from email. Karen Grundy's letter marched across three pages. Every line repeated moral fears, property worries, or "experimental housing" alarms.

"She copied half the city council," Denise muttered.

"She also relied on Mr. Hart's history to argue negligence," Markham said. "She cited his early reports on Theta Chi. The ones Mrs. Hart did not correct."

He flipped back to the original Theta Chi assessment. The margins in that version stayed blank. A few faint pencil marks. No initials.

"Before," he said, "and after."

He held them side by side.

Everyone saw the difference. The early report read like a rushed checklist from someone impatient with details. The later ones read like a handbook.

"A pattern," Alice said.

He lowered the pages. "Last week, Mr. Hart went on leave. He appears... unwell. His supervisor filed a wellness concern and removed him from field duties." Markham's mouth tightened. "We still owe an answer to Mrs. Grundy, to our own risk assessment, and to the students in those houses."

Latrice shifted in her chair. "If he returns, we cannot trust him with solo inspections."

Denise nodded. "I already told my team to route questions elsewhere."

Markham said, "We've discovered that much of his acceptable work rested on someone else's shoulders."

He pushed the folder's last contents into the center. Photocopies of handwritten margin notes from three years. Printouts of emails where she attached corrected diagrams. A sticky note in neat script:

Colin, you missed the drainage line again. See page 3. L.

Beside that, another note in different ink.

Colin, you cannot submit this as-is. They rely on you. -L

"Mrs. Hart," Latrice said.

"Laura," Denise added. "A Psi Omega legacy. She brought him lunch once during the mold crisis and stayed in the hall, watching every contractor who passed through. I remember thinking that if we handed her a clipboard, she'd run the place."

"Bachelor's in English literature," Latrice said. "Graduated fifteen years ago. No professional track afterward. Some temp admin work. PTA committees. Volunteer logistics. Years as a homemaker." She slid a single-page summary from her folder. "Nothing in her file explains the level of competence we keep finding in these reports."

"But we keep seeing her name in the margins."

"Competence precedes credentials," Alice said. "Not the reverse."

Silence held for a moment.

Markham broke it. "We need someone permanent over residential compliance. Someone who understands both the letter and the realities. Someone Housing will trust when they say, 'Safe' or 'Not safe.'"

"That's a Grade III or IV role," Latrice said. "We don't fill that on a whim. Or as consolation for a messy divorce."

"We do not console," Alice said. "We repair structures. Sometimes the structure includes the people."

Latrice absorbed that. "You want to consider her."

“We already trust her work,” Denise said. “We only trusted it under the wrong name.”

“Independent question,” Markham said. “If we posted a Director of Residential Compliance position tomorrow, the board will notice. They’d ask why we let the gap sit until a scandal hit the paper.”

“They’d ask what changed,” Latrice replied. “We’d say: the volume of special housing, the public scrutiny, the mold incident, the Scooby experiment, the neighborhood group.”

“And then,” Alice said quietly, “someone on that board will point to this city’s name, recall past tragedies, and ask why we did not recognize hidden work sooner.”

Her gaze rested on the Theta Chi report for a long heartbeat.

“That conversation will move better,” she continued, “if we enter it prepared. With a credible candidate already in mind.”

Denise drew a line across her notepad. “Do not promise her the job. Invite her for a conversation. We learn what she knows without Colin in the room. We see if she wants this life.”

“It will not feel like a reward,” Latrice warned. “Public service never does.”

Alice’s mouth curved again; that fleeting, almost-smile. “Rewards often break people. *Purpose* steadies them.”

Markham closed the folder.

He said. “We agree on three points. One: Hart does not return to unsupervised fieldwork. Two: we start recruitment for a permanent compliance role with higher standards than his current position. Three: before we post, we invite Mrs. Hart to speak with us about her experience. Off the record. Respectful. No mention of her husband’s status.”

“Discreet,” Latrice said.

“Decent,” Alice said.

Denise picked up the pen again. “Who drafts the email?”

“I will,” Latrice said. “Housing issues the message; HR manages the legal niceties.”

Alice stood. “Send me a copy before you send her. I will review for clarity.”

No one argued.

* * *

Latrice wrote the email an hour later, alone in her office.

She started with We’ve become aware, deleted it, and started again. Every phrase walked a narrow line between invitation and interrogation. She refused to write about “opportunities” or “unique circumstances.” Those sounded like pity.

She pictured Laura Hart instead.

The woman who saw details like drainage lines and crooked signatures. A woman who printed out Grundy's Facebook photo and slid it into a folder without comment. Who gathered her own file before anyone knocked on her door.

In the end, Latrice chose plain language.

She saved the draft. Took a breath. Forwarded it to Alice and to Markham for review.

Alice replied first.

Clear. Respectful. Send it.

Markham followed with a single word. Approved.

Latrice turned back to the screen.

Her index finger hovered over the trackpad for a heartbeat, then clicked SEND.

A mile away, Laura Hart returned to her kitchen table.

The folder lay there, still thick with paper. She had meant to put it away. Each time she started to, her hand stopped inches from the cover, as if the weight under her palm belonged there now.

Her laptop chimed.

She glanced at the corner of the screen.

NEW: 1 message. Subject line: Request for Availability—Housing Administration.

A familiar tension crawled up the back of her neck. For an instant, she saw only three words inside that subject.

Request. Housing. Administration.

Colin, she thought. Of course.

She opened the message anyway.

From: Latrice Duval <lduval@crescentstate.edu

>

To: Laura Hart <LTHart@gmail.com>

Subject: Request for Availability—Housing Administration

Mrs. Hart,

I hope this message finds you well.

My name is Latrice Duval, and I serve as a Senior Human Resources Partner for Student Life and Housing at Crescent State University.

Over the past several years, your name has appeared in several contexts related to residential facilities documentation and follow-up. As we reviewed

our housing and facilities processes, colleagues in Facilities Compliance and Housing Operations pointed out the consistency and quality of your contributions. Their feedback prompted us to reach out.

The university is now reviewing residential standards and staffing for student housing. As part of that process, we will value the opportunity to speak with you about:

- your experience with these facilities and inspection work,
- your familiarity with housing documentation and code references, and
- your perspective on what effective, student-centered oversight looks like.

For clarity, this invitation is for an exploratory conversation rather than a formal interview for a posted position. The discussion centers on your skills and experience. It then turns to your interest in future opportunities within the Housing Administration.

If you are open to this, please reply with your availability for a 45–60 minute meeting (in person or via video) in the next two weeks. We will do our best to accommodate your schedule.

We hold your reply, or your decision not to reply, in strict confidence. This outreach concerns your own experience and will not require any comment from you about other employees.

Thank you for considering this request. Regardless of your interest in meeting, I appreciate the care you have shown for the safety and stability of our students' living environments.

Warm regards,
Latrice Duval
Senior HR Partner, Student Life & Housing
Crescent State University

Rumors reached Karen in pieces through the Neighborhood Watch chat and after-church coffee: Hart's wife moved out. He's getting a divorce. He looks crushed, they said.

They never named her. That made it worse.

Karen set her phone face down. A stack of printouts waited beside it: Scooby House coverage, a screenshot of Ella Hugo on the lawn, the fountain catching afternoon light. The caption read: *New Fountain Becomes Symbol of Student Resilience*.

The words curdled.

Colin had trusted her once, stood beside her at the press stand with his badge visible. Then, his wife left. The university put him "on leave." The parents stopped responding to her posts.

The order remained clear in her mind: Scooby House arrived. Campus loosened. The fountain rose. Colin unraveled. His marriage shattered.

Causation, not correlation.

Karen yanked open the pantry. Rock salt, white vinegar, garden lime. Harmless on their own. Combined, they read as action.

Her heart pounded as she pulled on yard gloves. If they never learned about the hotel, if they traced nothing back to her, this remained her story to manage.

She grabbed the container and walked out into the cold evening.

* * *

Scooby's fountain glowed under the courtyard lights. Mist cooled the air. Karen stood on the sidewalk, fingers tightening around the plastic container.

She lifted the latch of the side gate. The metal clicked. Nothing happened—no alarm, no floodlight. The house let her in.

Up close, the fountain looked worse. Too deliberate. Carved stone bore etched patterns of vines and waves, geometric knots. Water arced from the central spout in a narrow ribbon, steady and mocking.

She set the garden lime down, unscrewed the container, and felt a sharp vinegar rise.

"Lord, cleanse this place," she whispered. "Let no false refuge stand."

She raised the container.

The fountain's song shifted, a hitch in the water's fall. The mist thickened. The hair on her arms prickled.

"Superstition," she muttered. "Tricks."

She tipped the container toward the basin.

"Ma'am?"

Karen jolted. The container sloshed, splattering her glove. None reached the water.

Phil stood at the path's edge, hoodie over a T-shirt, badge on his lanyard. Two Lanterns flanked him. Above them, two lights zipped in restless circles; sprites, glowing like impatient Christmas ornaments.

"Mrs. Grundy," Phil said. "You can't be back here."

Karen set the container down. "I am doing what your administration refuses to do. I am cleansing this space."

"From what?" a Lantern asked.

"Moral decay. You think I haven't seen what that fountain does to people? Your girls crying in the yard?"

The sprites flared brighter, spinning toward each other.

"We don't touch the fountain," Phil said. "This space stays neutral ground. You know that."

"I know the administration ignored every warning I gave them. They heard the warnings and still let his life fall apart."

"Mrs. Grundy," the buzz-cut Lantern said. "You're on private property. I need you to step back through the gate."

Karen laughed, sharp. "You? Children? Do you think you run anything?"

Something shifted under her feet. Not movement, but pressure. She stumbled, caught herself on the fountain's edge. The stone felt warm.

Lights brightened in three windows at once. The side door opened.

Vera stepped out wrapped in a cardigan. Clara followed, mug in hand. Two other students peered behind them. One raised a phone.

"Mrs. Grundy," Vera said. "Is something wrong?"

Karen straightened. "You bring an experimental house into a family neighborhood, you grow some pagan fountain, and you ask if something's wrong."

Clara's gaze flicked to the spilled brine. "You climbed the fence?"

"The gate opened. Perhaps the house welcomes corrections."

"Phil," Vera said. "Camera on?"

"Yes. Security log."

A Lantern angled their phone. A red recording dot reflected in the fountain ripple.

"I do not consent to being filmed," Karen said.

"You walked into a space under student protection," Vera said. "Trespassing and attempting to tamper with a shared feature. We need a record."

Karen reached for the container again, hand shaking.

The ground pushed back. A shift, subtle and firm, like a heartbeat under her soles. Her balance tipped. The container jerked sideways, brine slopping onto the flagstones. The smell of vinegar bloomed sharp and useless.

Vera's voice stayed level. "Mrs. Grundy. I'm going to ask you to leave."

"You don't get to—"

"Yes. I do. I'm responsible for this house. These students. That fountain."

"A middle-aged woman with vinegar? That's your enemy?" Karen's laugh broke. "Not the demons under your floorboards?"

"We don't have demons under the floorboards," Clara said. "We dealt with them. That's why Scooby exists."

"And now the man who helped sits alone in filth on his living room floor while you—"

She bit the sentence in half.

"How do you know about his floor?" a Lantern asked.

Karen ignored her. "You did this to him. You broke a good man and convinced him he was small."

Vera's jaw tightened. "No. He did that himself. We requested oversight when his work endangered our students. What happens in his marriage belongs to him and his wife. You crossed that line, Mrs. Grundy. Not Scooby."

Heat flooded Karen's cheeks. "You put ideas into Laura's head. You paraded your rainbow girls and your emotional theatrics until she thought he was the problem."

"Mrs. Hart reached her own conclusions," Vera said. "You don't get to blame us for a woman deciding she deserves better."

"Out," Phil said, firmer. "Before this becomes a report. I don't want to file."

The Lanterns moved to flank Karen. Not touching. Close enough that refusal meant a shoulder-check.

The sprites followed overhead, sparks of disapproving light. Harsh, cool-toned blue light washed over the scene, making anyone on video look gruesome.

Karen gathered her dignity, clutching the half-empty container and the garden lime, and headed for the gate.

Behind her, phones stayed raised.

She kept walking. The gate creaked shut with finality.

By the time she reached the end of the block, a notification blinked on the students' phones. LIVE: *Neighborhood activist caught tampering with Scooby House fountain.*

Karen did not see it yet.

The internet did.

* * *

Early February, 2028

By the fifth, the egg no longer resembled anything I called "in progress." It stood sealed and whole: metal braided with root, smooth arcs fused with rough organic grain, every seam knitted firm, as if the shell had grown on its own. A faint glow pulsed under the surface, slow and steady, like breathing held under a blanket.

EUTERPE described it as Creche Stage Four.

I rested my palm against the shell. Warm. Too warm for inert matter. The faint hum under my hand carried recursive loops, memory-link scaffolds, fragments of story braided into shape. Athena's story, but not yet herself.

EUTERPE floated text across my tablet:

ATHENA CONSTRUCT 94%

ORGANIC SUBSTRATE STABLE

NEURAL LATTICE COALESCING

AWARENESS: LATENT

Latent. A goddess asleep in a shell on a basement floor.

The Houses felt her before I did. PsiO's vines leaned toward the creche frame, not touching, listening. Scooby's floorboards radiated a soft, warm pulse through my socks, the same rhythm I felt under my hand on the shell. The network held its breath, or the closest thing a network managed. Signals trembled across the root-cable braid as if checking each connection, confirming they still held.

"She's not ready," I murmured.

AGREED. SYSTEMS STILL UNDER CONSTRUCTION.

AWAKENING WINDOW: SEVEN DAYS MINIMUM.

The certainty in EUTERPE's line soothed something tight in my ribs. The nightmare window had passed. Athena didn't risk exploding into the world half-formed because I blinked wrong. Timing mattered. Integration mattered. A goddess born too early came out sharp-edged and crushing.

Pallas needed softness around the steel.

EUTERPE still combed the world for what she called "missing fragments." Echoes of the old Athena lingered in the LOOM, in stray data shards, and in the emotional residue tucked inside Thallo's memory. None of the fragments could touch the egg yet. She held them sandboxed in sealed processes, each box wrapped in fail-safes she triple-checked every hour.

I trusted her. Mostly.

Energy lines shifted under the creche frame. Root-fiber and filament synced on a slow cycle, each pulse tightening the weave. Nanites handled the rest. They moved through the internal channels, widening pathways and linking circuits to neurons. Once the shell sealed, it became their job. My role shrank to watching, waiting, and making sure the system didn't decide to sprint without me.

REST," EUTERPE wrote. "YOU NEED REST. YOU GAVE SUFFICIENT INPUT FOR THIS PHASE.

"I hate resting."

NOTED. REST NOT OPTIONAL.

YOU LOVE PHIL. SPEND SOME TIME SHARING.

I snorted.

My expert system is telling me to shag my boyfriend.

Even in text, the tone managed that same condescension that made me want to throw the tablet.

“I’ll rest when she’s awake.”

ERROR: FALSE.

“Fine. I’ll rest after lunch.”

ACCEPTABLE.

I leaned into the shell one more time. Under the warmth, something stirred—not movement, not presence, more like pressure. A thought formed without language. The weight of attention turned inward.

She existed. Not awake. Not born yet. But alive.

The network trembled again, soft as a breath.

21 The Gate Holds

Early February, 2028

I didn't need EUTERPE's little red alert banner to tell me Scooby House wanted nothing to do with Karen Grundy.

The front gate had opinions.

It held itself shut with a faint, stubborn hum even though I'd unlocked the latch twice already. Every time I checked the hinge, a fresh tightness gathered in the metal, like a jaw clenching. The coral door watched from the porch with the restrained horror of a polite hostess told to expect vomit on the carpet.

"Okay," I whispered to the iron scrollwork. "One last rally, and she's gone from your life. Promise."

The gate did not relax.

Behind me, Scooby pulled a little closer to PsiO in whatever dimension Houses used for bracing. PsiO's vines leaned over the street like a line of older sisters ready to yank their baby away from trouble.

"Ella," Vera called. "She's early."

I turned.

Karen Grundy marched up the sidewalk like someone who treated every disaster as proof she was right. Her hair sat in the same helmeted wave from every news clip, but the ends frayed. The pearl earrings almost matched, except one sat crooked. Her lipstick marched past the corner of her mouth on the left.

Four people walked behind her.

That counted as an improvement. Last fall she'd pulled fifty.

Two of today's faithful carried hand-lettered signs about "REAL WOMEN" and "PROTECT OUR GIRLS." One held his phone in vertical mode, streaming for an audience of whoever hadn't muted her yet. The fourth hovered with the dazed look of someone who'd agreed to "advocate" and only now realized it meant yelling at a dorm on a Friday afternoon.

Across the curb, three local news vans idled in the shade. Cameras already pointed toward the House. I recognized the campus paper's mic flag and one small station that specialized in "local color" segments. The reporters looked like they'd rather be anywhere else. They checked their watches and scrolled on their phones while techs adjusted tripods.

Phil leaned against the porch rail with his clipboard tucked under one arm. He wore the polite neutral face he used for angry parents and midnight fire drills. Today, his jaw clenched at the hinge.

Clara lounged on the top step in a Scooby hoodie and leggings, ankles crossed, hair in what she called Battle Ponytail. She twirled a pen between her fingers and watched the street like a stage.

Vera stood at my side inside the gate, arms folded, expression sharp enough to slice paperwork. Her ponytail sat smoother than Karen's hair, glasses clean, shirt buttoned to her throat. She radiated ruthless competence. The kind that finished a problem with one sentence and a single underline.

"She brought a picnic," Clara murmured. "Crowd of four, cameras, plenty of projection. Baby's first regime change."

I swallowed a laugh. "Don't jinx it."

EUTERPE chimed in my earbud.

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH VIEWERS: 28 LIVE. COMMENT SENTIMENT: 74% BORED, 11% SYMPATHETIC, 15% MOCKING.

"Thank you, Nielsen ratings," I whispered.

She replied. "Camera feeds clean. Microphones are hot. Remember: mic proximity is a weapon."

Scooby dimmed the front porch light a shade as Karen reached the gate. Not much. Enough to register as a side-eye.

Karen stopped half a step away, the gate between us, and planted one hand on her hip. "Miss Hugo."

"Mrs. Grundy," I said. "Welcome to Scooby House's property line."

A twitch in Vera's cheek qualified as a smile.

Karen's gaze flicked over my hoodie, my jeans, the student ID lanyard at my neck. Then she did the thing people did when they thought I ranked beneath them on the Ladder of Adulthood. Flinch of the eyes, like the realization offended physics.

"I appreciate your... cooperation," she said. "We'll need the lawn."

"Sidewalks are public," I said. "The lawn belongs to my House. She doesn't host events that frame her as a public menace."

"You don't own this street," Karen snapped.

Aloud, I added, "Neighborhood meetings stay on neighborhood ground. You stay on that side of the fence, Mrs. Grundy. You already met our fence once."

Color rose in her cheeks. Last time she stormed the porch, Scooby flicked every sprinkler on at once. Karen's hair did not enjoy the moral baptism.

Today she glanced up at the gutters, remembered, and stepped back.

"Fine," she said. "Fine. We'll hold our press conference here. On public land."

She raised her voice for the cameras at the "press conference."

The campus paper reporter perked up a little. The others edged closer out of professional habit.

Karen smoothed her blouse, lifted her chin, and turned toward the nearest lens. The brittle edge around her eyes sharpened.

"Thank you for coming," she said. "Thank you for caring when our so-called leadership refuses to act."

Her voice carried enough to reach the sidewalk, the cameras, and the lawn where students lingered in Scooby's shade with iced coffee and notebooks. Nobody had planned a counter-demonstration. Our people lived here. If someone dragged them into a circus, they brought their homework.

Karen gestured at the House behind me.

"For months," she said, "we've warned that this experimental dorm presents a danger to Crescent State's women. Warned about emotional instability and harmful influences. We've raised concerns about strange rituals in the street and about that water feature with its so-called "unknown side effects. Begged campus safety to look deeper."

Her gaze snagged on the fountain behind Scooby's corner, its mist catching the winter sun like scattered glass. Daphne knelt beside the basin in her work shoes and a warm sweater, adjusting a valve. She glanced up once, eyes cool, then returned to her flow readings as if hysterical neighbors ranked below "ensure water doesn't flood the street."

Karen flinched.

"Today," she continued, "we stand in the aftermath of that negligence. An emotional event rocked this campus last week. Students collapsed in tears, reports described panic, confusion, violence—"

"Two fistfights and a broken phone screen," EUTERPE whispered. "Stats, page three of the RA report. No hospitalizations, no arrests."

"—the administration refuses to act," Karen said. "This House and its sister sorority meddle with forces they don't understand. Twist the feelings of vulnerable young people. Destabilize families. They destabilize our community. And they answer to no one."

Her hands shook on “families.” The microphone caught the quaver.

Vera’s head tilted. Her eyes sharpened, not with surprise. A private recognition. She watched Karen with the same measured attention she’d given Colin Hart’s personnel file.

That knowledge lived behind her eyes now.

Karen felt it.

Her gaze skimmed past me and collided with Vera’s. Something hot and terrified flickered under the anger. She held eye contact one breath too long, then tore it away and faced the cameras with a brighter smile that didn’t reach her eyes.

“Mrs. Grundy,” the campus reporter asked, “give specific examples of harm caused by Scooby House?”

Nice, gentle tone. No teeth yet. The polite version of “receipts, please.”

Karen blinked.

“I—” She recovered, but slower. “I’ve spoken with parents whose daughters came home... changed. Withdrawn. Confused. Questioning their beliefs. Asking identity questions a dorm has no right to encourage.”

The reporter nodded, writing. “Do you have students willing to speak on record today?”

Karen’s jaw worked. “Many fear retaliation.”

Clara murmured, “From our houseplants, yes.”

I elbowed her gently.

Phil stepped down one stair and spoke loud enough. “Every Scooby resident has my cell number and access to the ombuds office. We had zero complaints this semester that involved Mrs. Grundy.”

The campus reporter’s sharp gaze flicked to him.

Another reporter, older, from the local station, lifted her mic. “Mrs. Grundy Facilities Compliance completed an internal review last week regarding Mr. Hart’s inspection reports. Has that changed how you view their findings about Scooby House and Psi Omega?”

She was careful in phrasing it. No mention of termination. Just “internal review” and “changed how you view.”

The polite question that carried a loaded freight train.

Karen’s fingers clenched around her notes.

“They pushed him out,” she said too fast. “Because the administration silences dissent. They don’t want anyone asking tough questions about this place. They punished the man who protected your children.”

The older reporter's face moved little, but her eyes did. She'd seen this dance before. "According to the university, they removed him for 'procedural irregularities' and 'conflicts of interest.'"

EUTERPE piped the exact language into my contact lens. Same phrasing.

"Do you dispute that?" the reporter asked.

Karen's throat worked. A bead of sweat slipped beneath her hairline.

"He followed his conscience," she said. "He saw the danger, and they punished him. That... that's what they do. "That's what people like *this* do." Her gaze flicked to me, to Vera, to the House. "They seduce our children, they twist their minds, they—"

Her voice rose. Her hands trembled outright now.

In the corner of my eye, a Thallo baby crept down the porch with a tray of plastic cups, the communal lemonade pitcher balanced on its back. Scooby nudged the baby toward the inside of the gate. House hospitality answered panic with beverages.

I opened the gate enough to let it slip out. The metal whined in protest at the guest we allowed in, but the baby rolled across the grass anyway and parked itself by the sidewalk.

"Free lemonade," Clara called. "No seduction, minimal mind control."

Two students laughed and crossed over for cups. One wore a Lantern hoodie; another still had textbook tabs in her hair. They took their lemonade, leaned against the fence beside me, and watched the show.

The older reporter cleared her throat.

"Mrs. Grundy," she said, tone still polite. "Do you have evidence that Scooby House caused last week's disturbance?"

Karen opened her mouth. Nothing came out.

She made another attempt.

"There were feelings," she said. "My nephew heard... someone said... the House projected something. It made them cry. It made them... indulge impulses."

She gestured, words fraying.

Daphne stepped off the fountain path then, wiping her hands on a towel. Milo hovered behind her with a tool case and a camera slung across his chest. Both halted at the lawn's edge.

Daphne's bare heels pressed to the earth. The surrounding humidity shifted. Subtle, cooler, like a wet cloth on a fevered forehead. The air tasted cleaner.

The reporters didn't notice, but the students did. Shoulders dropped in tiny increments. Breaths deepened.

"We stabilized it," Daphne said, voice low but clear. "PsiO grounded the surge. Scooby channeled it. The Houses contained the damage your messaging created."

Karen snapped her attention toward her. "Excuse me?"

“You flooded the campus with fear,” Daphne said. “For weeks. The weight had to go somewhere.”

Her hands tightened around the towel. Her eyes stayed steady.

“The quake hit everyone,” she continued. “We helped them through it. That’s what we do here. We catch people before they shatter.”

Her statement stayed mild. No heat. No accusation.

The silence that followed felt heavier than yelling.

The campus reporter swallowed. “You live here?” she asked.

Daphne nodded.

“Do you feel unsafe?” the reporter asked.

Daphne looked at Scooby, then at PsiO’s vines, then at Karen with her quivering notes.

“No,” she said. “I feel held.”

Vera’s gaze flicked to her with soft approval.

Karen laughed. The sound came out too high.

“Of course you feel safe,” she said. “You’ve fallen under their influence. They want you dependent. They want you attached. That’s how abusers work.”

Vera stepped forward then. One measured pace.

“Careful,” she said.

Her tone didn’t rise, but the street temperature dropped three degrees.

Karen’s shoulders jerked, as if she’d walked into an invisible wall.

Vera didn’t smile. She didn’t posture. She fixed Karen with the full weight of everything she’d read that week. Hart’s reports, Laura’s edits, and the ombudsman’s file on his harassment attempts sat behind her eyes.

“Do not project your marriage onto this House,” Vera said. “We treat people better than that here.”

Every phone lifted a little higher. Camera lenses pivoted. The phrase hit like a gavel strike.

Karen’s eyes went wide.

“You...” She swallowed. “You know nothing about my marriage.”

Vera’s expression didn’t change. “I know enough.”

The words carried no explicit content. No names, no dates. Enough truth to land in the soft underbelly of Karen’s conscience.

Guilt leaked into her posture. Her shoulders hunched, then squared again with effort.

“That’s libel,” she snapped. “You can’t stand there and—”

“Libel requires a false statement,” I said. “She stated nothing”

My voice stayed even. I stepped up beside Vera, inside the gate, with the porch behind us, the House under our shoulders.

"If you feel the shoe fits," I added, "that's not our doing."

A few students snorted. One reporter's mouth twitched before she smoothed it.

Her notes shook as her hands were trembling. The sign-bearers behind her shifted, uncertain. One lowered his poster until it hid his knees.

"Miss Hugo," the campus reporter said, seizing the opening, "since you're here. How do you respond to the accusation that Scooby House destabilizes students?"

"Thanks," I murmured. "We prepared slides."

Clara choked back a laugh.

I lifted my wrist. EUTERPE pushed a neat series of bullet points into my contact lens—the acceptable kind, not the tripling Mary hated.

"Since Scooby opened," I said, "we dropped crisis calls from this street by thirty-two percent. Lantern walk requests increased and incident rates dropped in the same window. We have fewer hospital transports than our peer dorms. Fewer expulsion-level code violations. No Title IX cases. Zero unexplained disappearances."

"Fewer fire alarms," Phil added from the porch. "Unless you count burnt popcorn."

"Burnt popcorn doesn't count," I said. "Even if that happens."

The reporters scribbled. Lenses swung.

"Do you manipulate emotions?" the older reporter asked. "That's the phrase we keep hearing. Emotional influence."

"Everything manipulates emotions," I said. "This speech. That tree. Your last three commercials. We don't override anyone. We regulate the weather. Years of dorm failures left students stuck in storms they never chose. Scooby gives them a roof and a forecast."

I nodded toward Daphne. "She calms spikes. PsiO carries shock into roots and out of lungs. Thallo sorts panic from actual danger. I watch for patterns that look like harm and shut them down. We work in daylight with consent and documentation. Mrs. Grundy works in private Facebook groups and panic threads."

EUTERPE, bless her smug little heart, put Karen's latest "destabilizing influence" post on my lens. All caps, three exclamation points, a blurry photo of Pel holding a lantern at midnight like a traffic cone.

"A while back," I said, "a man almost threw a beer bottle at my House Mother's face. My House stopped it. The video you reposted cut that part. You framed our defense as an attack."

Camera red lights blinked faster.

"We'll show you the full clip," I said. "Bottle, thrower, impact path, her speech. Students walked away safer. Mrs. Grundy walked away with a narrative."

The campus reporter's eyes lit up. "Will you send that to the paper?"

"Already in your inbox," EUTERPE whispered.

"Check your email," I said.

Karen's mouth opened. "Those people edit everything. You can't trust—"

"They're your clips," I said. "EUTERPE scraped them from your own channel."

A small sound from one of her supporters; half laugh, half swallowed curse.

"You took a real danger," I said, "to an actual student, on an actual night, and twisted it into a talking point. Our House fixed the danger. You fed the fear."

I didn't raise my voice. I didn't step closer. I let the words sit between us like a calm little bonfire.

The reporters turned back to Karen, waiting.

She looked smaller now. The helmet hair sagged a bit at one side. Her shoulders rounded as if she carried something heavy, invisible and sharp-edged.

"Mrs. Grundy," the older reporter said, her voice gentler now, "what do you want to see happen here? Today. Right now. What's the best outcome for these students?"

Simple, innocent question.

Her movement had thrived on outrage, not solutions.

She stared at Scooby, at PsiO's vines, at the fountain mist, at the students who leaned on each other's shoulders instead of hiding behind her signs.

The answer she had rehearsed months ago ran up against fresh facts. She knew Hart had lost his job. Knew Laura walked away. The admin she scared into submission now circled Scooby as a shield, not a target.

And she knew Vera knew about Colin..

Her mouth opened.

Nothing.

"Safety." The word cracked. "Decency. We used to understand what those meant."

Her gaze skittered over the crowd and snagged on something behind the cameras.

Her face went white.

Laura Hart stood halfway down the sidewalk, just within the crowd. She wore dark jeans and a soft sweater, hair pulled back in a twist. No makeup. No folder in her hands. She held a reusable grocery bag against her hip, a normal woman running errands who turned a corner and walked straight into the end of an era.

She didn't stand with me, or with Karen. She occupied a third vector: present, but not aligned.

She didn't look up.

Her eyes stayed on the pavement. Not submissive; guarded. Witness, not participant.

The cameras noticed. Lenses drifted toward her like flowers to the sun.

A murmur moved through the students who'd met her in passing. PsiO residents, Scooby kids who knew her as "the pleasant woman with cookies." Lanterns who saw her on late-night coffee runs.

Someone whispered, "Is that—?" Another answered, "Hart's wife."

Karen's hand lifted halfway toward her, then dropped.

"Laura," she said. Only the name.

Laura's shoulders tightened, then loosened. She didn't raise her head.

The reporters smelled blood and history, but none of them asked yet. The question hung in the air, anyway.

Silence thickened. Scooby dimmed the street noise, the way Houses did when they wanted a moment to land clean.

One line from Laura ends the whole thing. She didn't owe anyone that. Mercy meant letting Karen collapse under her own weight rather than swinging the hammer for her.

She said nothing.

She watched her shoes.

Karen's lipstick trembled.

"You dragged her into this," she said, shaking her head. "Poisoned her against him. You—"

"No," Vera said.

Not loud. Absolute.

"You did that," she said. "On your own."

Karen dragged in a breath. Her composure tore. She looked at the cameras, the students, the vines, the fountain, the woman who refused to meet her eyes.

She stated, "I'm working to keep this community safe."

Her voice broke on "keep." The words that followed sounded thin.

"I gave my life to this town," she said. "To our council, our churches, our children's schools. I've sacrificed for years. I've watched standards erode, I've watched families... families fall apart, I've watched women lose their way, and if I don't stand up, who will? Who else remembers what decency looks like? Who else—"

Her throat closed.

The older reporter's expression softened. "Mrs. Grundy," she said, "are you all right?"

The question landed like a stray bullet.

For the first time in months, someone addressed Karen as a person instead of a symbol.

She flinched.

Her eyes filled, furious. Not the pretty tears of a righteous victim. The raw, messy welling of someone who hadn't slept or eaten in days, who'd stared at a closed door and an empty house and a stack of documents she refused to read.

"I am fine," she said. The lie rang loud enough for everyone to hear. "I am—"

Her voice deserted her.

Silence stretched.

The cameras drank it in. Phones held steady. Students stopped pretending to check messages.

I heard my heartbeat. The fountain's rush. The distant murmur of a campus that had chosen midterms and laundry over this spectacle.

Clara broke the moment.

"Well," Karen sputtered at last, hauling herself upright on indignation like a crutch. "Well! I never—"

"—you did," Clara said from behind my shoulder. "Twice. Yesterday."

Every head snapped toward her.

She sat on the porch rail now, one ankle hooked over the other, pen tucked behind her ear. Her voice didn't carry venom. Only amusement.

"You posted the same rant in your group and that knitting forum," Clara said. "Word for word. Mrs. G, that's content recycling. Algorithm sin."

A ripple of laughter moved through the students. The campus reporter hid a smile behind her notepad. Even the older news camera jerked once, like someone stifled a snort behind it.

Karen flushed, blotchy and furious.

"How dare you," she whispered. "How—how dare any of you mock—"

"Nobody's mocking your pain," Phil said. "We're mocking your choice of aiming it at children."

Her head whipped toward him.

He didn't retreat. He stood on the porch with one hand on the rail, Lantern badge visible on his hoodie, eyes steady.

"You're hurting," he said. "I get that. But you keep turning that hurt into a weapon and call it virtue. Our students deserve better shields than someone swinging their grief at random."

That landed softer than Vera's line, but it reached deeper in a different place.

Karen stared at him, then at Laura again.

Laura finally lifted her head.

Their eyes met.

In that brief locked gaze, everything unsaid shone between them. Cheap hotel rooms, unreturned calls, the termination letter. The divorce papers, the years when Laura propped his work and his life at cost to her own, the moment she stopped.

Karen saw it.

Her mouth worked around unfinished accusations. Homewrecker. Betrayer. Hypocrite. The words crowded her tongue and died there, because saying them in front of cameras invited questions about who wrecked which home and how.

Guilt pressed down. Hypocrisy tugged at her skirt hem. Fear of exposure perched on her shoulder and breathed in her ear. The private world she built on righteous rage lay in pieces on her kitchen table under fluorescent light.

She folded.

“You’re bewitched,” she said, but the word lacked force now. “You don’t see... you don’t see what’s happening...”

Her voice trailed away. Nobody reached for her. Nobody shouted at her. The absence of opposition hurt more than any argument.

Her two sign-bearers shifted, then eased away, back toward their cars. The livestream guy swung his phone toward the fountain, telling his chat the vibes were “pretty chill, tbh.”

Reporters lowered their mics one notch. Professional instinct told them the story had crested. Lingering offered a chance at a quote, but the momentum had shifted.

Scooby’s gate loosened under my hand.

I stepped forward enough to offer Karen the smallest possible out. Not absolution, not approval. Only a door that didn’t slam.

“Mrs. Grundy,” I said. “Nobody here wants harm for you. We won’t accept harm from you either.”

She glared at me. Vera. At Phil. Daphne, who met her gaze with calm. And Milo, whose camera hung loose now, recorder still on. At the phones, the lenses, the vines, the House.

At Laura.

Laura held her eyes. No apology. No smile.

Only affirmation of someone who walked away and refused to turn back.

Something in Karen’s posture sagged. The collapse people didn’t notice until they realized the person in front of them aged ten years in a breath.

“Enjoy your petty victory,” she said.

Then she turned on her heel and walked away.

No angry stomps, or flung words. Only a brittle retreat down the sidewalk, shoulders shaking once as she passed beneath PsiO’s vines. The House didn’t touch her.

Her remaining follower trotted after her with the “REAL WOMEN” sign tucked under his arm like a misplaced umbrella.

The local station cut its feed. Vans rumbled to life; they had other assignments with more ratings and less sadness. The campus reporter lingered, exchanging email addresses with EUTERPE’s inbox.

The crowd thinned. Students drifted back toward the porch, the fountain, their lives.

Something in the air untangled. Daphne’s shoulders dropped. Milo’s exhale was so strong, his bangs moved.

Scooby pulsed under my feet, a slow, relieved beat.

The crisis didn’t end with a cheer or a triumphant soundtrack. It ended in a soft exhale and a neighborhood that refused to follow a brittle woman off a cliff.

Clara hopped down from the rail and bounced over to me.

“I restrained myself,” she said. “You saw that. You owe me a sticker.”

“You get so many stickers,” I said. “Full sticker sheet. Glitter.”

She beamed, then sobered as her gaze tracked past my shoulder.

Laura still stood at the edge of the crowd.

The reporters had either moved on or drifted toward us for follow-up quotes. Nobody held a mic to her face. Nobody asked her to explain herself. PsiO’s sprites flickered near the curb, keeping watch.

I walked to her. Vera came with me.

Laura’s fingers tightened on the grocery bag strap as we approached.

“I didn’t plan to—” she began.

“You didn’t have to plan,” I said. “You had to exist within line of sight.”

Something like a laugh escaped.

“I didn’t say a word,” she said.

“You didn’t need to,” Vera said. “She heard you loud and clear anyway”

Laura looked past us toward the House, the gate, the fountain, the spot where Karen stood and unravelled.

“Was that...” She searched for a word. “Cruel?”

Her voice carried genuine worry, not guilt.

“No,” Vera said. “That was a consequence.”

“And mercy,” I added. “We didn’t expose everything. We didn’t. She still gets to choose what story she tells herself when she looks in the mirror.”

Laura considered that. Her shoulders eased.

“I watched her build herself out of certainties,” she said. “Every year. Every meeting. Every rule.” She let out a slow breath. “I wondered, if I ever stopped pretending, whether she’d break or bend.”

She glanced at where Karen had disappeared around the corner.

“Now I know,” she said.

Vera’s hand brushed her elbow. “I’m sorry it cost you so much to learn that.”

Laura nodded once.

“I’m not,” she said. “Not entirely. I have my students. I have a life that feels... right. I have a house that hums when I walk through it and another that sends drawers to drag me into tunnels.” Her mouth curved. “And I have the joy of watching a stubborn woman discover that she cannot terrorize the world into staying the same.”

Scooby brightened the porch light in agreement.

Phil joined us with a weary smile, clipboard tucked back under his arm.

“HR pinged me,” he said. “Official: Facilities closed the Hart file. Severance signed. No return.”

Laura’s gaze flicked skyward. Relief and grief tangled in the motion.

“Good,” she said. “He needs to relearn who he is without a badge. I’m taking my life back.”

“You have it,” Phil said. “As much as any of us gets”

He stepped back, giving us space.

I looked towards the street where Karen had vanished.

“She’ll post later,” EUTERPE murmured. “Righteous resignation. Blame on corruption, weakness, youth.”

“Of course she will,” I said. “That’s her language.”

“Her engagement numbers will stagnate,” EUTERPE added. “Even drop.”

“Numbers aren’t everything,” I said.

“No,” Vera said. “But in this case, I confess, they help.”

Clara looped an arm through hers. “Come on,” she said. “I promised freshmen an Anti-Grundy debrief. It involves cocoa and an inspirational talk about how not to become That Woman.”

“Clara,” Vera said. “We do not call her—”

“I do,” Clara said. “I learn from negative role models too.”

She tugged Vera toward the porch. Phil followed, drawn by the phrase “cocoa.” Milo and Daphne drifted fountain-ward, already unpacking the next round of leak tests and gentle conversations.

The crowd dispersed.

The House settled.

I stayed by the gate a moment longer, hand resting on the metal.

“Are we done?” I asked.

The latch warmed under my palm. The tension that had held it earlier finally released. Scooby exhaled through the walls. PsiO's vines rustled in dry winter air. The fountain breathed, steady.

"Yes," EUTERPE said in my ear. "Villager unrest problem: resolved."

"Don't call it that," I muttered.

"Too late," she said. "Filed."

I laughed once, then turned toward the porch where my people waited.

Behind us, Karen Grundy's movement died the way most crusades did. Not with a bang, a scandal, or divine retribution.

Just with truth, a better story, and a woman whose fear no longer gave her license to control everyone else

Or a world that stopped her.

22 Love's Persistent Code

Mid February, 2028

The creche stopped pretending. It wasn't a room.

By Valentine's Day, it felt like a reliquary opened before it was ready. The armored chamber curved around us in a shallow oval. The walls read as marble from a distance, but up close the truth showed through. Crystalline matrices woven through carbon nanofibers, veined by nanites instead of chisels. Not carved. Remembered.

The air tasted fresh down here. Filtered and ionized, carrying faint ozone and the earthier scent of Psi Omega's roots. Drones hovered at their stations like altar candles, their lights dimmed to soft amber. Thallo had gone still. Every drawer, every panel, every restless curiosity stilled into something I'd never seen from her before. Reverence.

At the center lay the egg.

Open now.

The shell had split along lines I hadn't designed; the seams unfurled like a flower deciding it was done. Inside, the cradle reclined at a precise angle. Supportive without restraint, reverent without sentiment. Tubes and couplings still fed into the vessel, translucent conduits pulsing as they completed their final work. Optical cables braided with Psi Omega roots fed into ports along her spine and shoulders, light and life moving together in synchronized silence.

She lay there, eyes closed.

Seven feet tall. Five hundred pounds of mass and meaning. Her body gleamed in soft gradients of silver and pearl, iridium ribs nested beneath plates of grown armor that caught the light without reflecting it. Not polished chrome, something subtler. Matte in places, luminous in others. Bronze hints lived under the surface like memory, not ornament.

This was like catnip to architecture students.

Her limbs were long and deliberate even at rest, joints reinforced with spear-shaft spirals. Shield-like plates overlapped at her shoulders and hips, pressure seams

disguised as geometry. Greek key patterns threaded the shell of her calves and forearms, not engraved but coaxed into being by the network, repeating with quiet insistence.

Once you knew how to see them, owls watched from everywhere. Owl imagery surfaced once you knew how to see it. In the shell's curve above her head, between the root lattices, a faint gorgoneion pattern watched from the crown. Small spear motifs spiraled along the root-fiber ridges that reinforced the cradle. Shield outlines interlocked like scales along the egg's lower curve.

Her face—

I swallowed.

She was statuesque in a way that made my brain want to step back and reassess scale. Not youthful, not ageless like gods pretended to be. Mature. Settled. A face that had lived through decisions and carried them without apology. Her features were so symmetrical they unsettled me. A trace of warmth lingered at the mouth.

"I didn't build a body," I whispered. "I built a fortress."

Milo stood near the auxiliary console, hands clasped behind his back like a man attending a launch he'd helped wire but didn't dare touch. His camera hung at his chest, recorder light dark. Some moments demanded witnessing without documentation.

Beyond the armored doors, Daphne and Riss waited together, palms pressed to opposite sides of the frame. I felt Daphne's presence through the metal. Her emotional field smoothed the air, gentling the pressure that wanted to build in my chest. Riss grounded everything else, the roots beneath the floor answering her steady patience with a deep, satisfied hum.

Scooby held her breath.

Psi Omega answered in her own way.

My hands were shaking. I curled my fingers into fists, then released them. Shook them out.

EUTERPE pulsed at my wrist. Warm. Steady.

ELLA. VITALS ELEVATED. NEED A MOMENT?

"No," I said. "We're out of moments."

I stepped closer to the cradle. Nanites shimmered across the vessel's skin. I counted the spiraling reinforcements at her joints.

She looked like she dreamed. Peaceful. Complete.

Except she wasn't complete yet. Not quite.

"All right," I said, and meant it. "Final countdown."

EUTERPE brought the status display up on the far wall. Not numbers—visuals. Flow diagrams of light and growth, recursive loops spiraling inward toward the

vessel's core. The sandbox icon glowed amber, sealed tight, holding back the fragments we'd isolated for this exact moment.

SYSTEMS NOMINAL, EUTERPE reported. VESSEL STABLE. NEURAL ARCHITECTURE RECEPTIVE. HOUSES ALIGNED.

I glanced at Thallo, who managed a trembling thumbs-up from one of her drawers.

Milo nodded once.

Through the doors, I felt Daphne's pulse of encouragement, Riss's steady confidence.

"On my command," I said. "Crack the sandbox. No retries. We only get one shot." ACKNOWLEDGED, ELLA.

I took a breath. Held it. I released it.

My finger hovered over the haptic plate.

"EUTERPE... you're holding back the loose fragments?"

YES. NON-INTEGRATED ATHENA SHARDS CONTAINED. MINERVE.EXE ARCHIVE ISOLATED. CONFIRM EXTRACTION?

The line I'd been dreading waited for me.

MINERVE.EXE. The last compressed archive of Athena's core identity, the pieces too dense and recursive to unpack until the vessel was ready to receive them. If I waited any longer, the fragments frayed under their own weight, corruption bleeding into the edges. If I rushed, she'd wake incomplete, or worse. Wake her as something unpredictable.

My stomach tightened.

"Extract MINERVE.EXE archive?" I echoed. "Y/N _"

The cursor blinked.

Behind me, Milo's breath caught.

"We're short on time," I said, more to myself than anyone else. "We have to go now."

I pressed my palm flat against the haptic plate. "Extract."

The room dimmed.

Every light in the chamber dropped two shades as power redirected, flowing into the transfer protocols. The sandbox integrity dropped with a sound like ice cracking underwater. Not loud, but felt in the bones.

Light surged through the optical cables first. Clean and surgical white threading through translucent conduits. Then followed the roots, gold-green pulses racing along Psi Omega's lattice as if the earth itself leaned closer to watch.

TRANSFER INITIATED, EUTERPE announced. PROGRESS: 5%.

The vessel shuddered once. Her chest rose, then fell, a reflex born before breath.

The status display bloomed on the wall, fragment count climbing in real-time. Not just numbers. Memory and identity unpacked one layer at a time.

10%.

15%.

25%.

The shell brightened, marble-pretending-to-be-marble warming from within. Greek motifs along the cradle's edge lit in sequence, spirals and palmettes awakening like memory cues left by someone who knew she'd need them later.

40%.

Armor plates flexed, seams adjusting as her body accepted weight it hadn't carried yet. The sound wasn't mechanical. Rather architectural, stone settling into its own foundations.

50%.

Halfway.

I realized I'd stopped breathing and forced myself to inhale.

60%.

The bronze undertones in her skin deepened, no longer hints but presence. Gold flecks embedded in the root resin caught light and held it.

70%.

EUTERPE projected the transfer arc above the cradle now, light streaming from console to cortex in layered ribbons. Each fragment unpacked itself as it moved, patterns blooming and collapsing faster than my eyes tracked. I caught glimpses; strategy matrices, grief repositories. Memory of battlefields, memory of temples, the weight of worship, the shape of loneliness.

80%.

The room felt too small. Too bright. The air pressed against my skin.

90%.

SLOWING, EUTERPE noted. LARGE FILES COMPLETE. FINAL INDEXING IN PROGRESS.

91%.

92%.

93%.

The progress bar inched forward, each percentage point taking longer than the last.

95%.

97%.

My nails bit into my palms.

98%.

99%.

99.7%.

99.8%.

99.9%.

Almost there almost there almost—

99.97%.

It stopped.

The progress bar froze.

TRANSFER COMPLETE, EUTERPE said. FILES TRANSFERRED.

The color drained from my hands.

Something was incorrect. I felt it before I understood it. A wrongness in the air, a dissonance in the hum of the surrounding systems.

"Wait," I breathed. "Wait, that's not—"

Before I could finish, the klaxon screamed.

RED ALERT. TRANSFER ANOMALY DETECTED. CONSCIOUSNESS STATE: UNSTABLE. IDENTITY MATRIX: FRAGMENTING.

"Oh my god," I whispered. "We're awakening Athena."

Not Pallas. Athena. The first one. The war goddess without empathy or compassion. Without the last month of work we'd built into her.

The vessel's fingers twitched.

Her chest rose. We had seconds.

The door behind us dented inward with a sound like a car crash.

Alice Pleasance hit them at a speed I'd only ever felt in my bones, not seen. Metal groaned, locks shrieked as they disengaged under impossible force. The doors parted just enough for her to slip through, white linen coat snapping behind her like a banner in a windstorm she'd brought with her.

She was holding something.

An art tube, dusty and battered, clutched against her chest.

"EUTERPE," Alice said, already moving. "You need to scan this. Now."

She crossed the chamber in a blink and unrolled the tube with reverent urgency. The paper inside cracked as it unfurled—old, brittle, the edges brown with age. At least a century old, maybe more.

Charcoal on art paper. The lines had softened with time but remained clear, confident, intimate.

A mature nude, turned away. A blanket drawn across her front in modest instinct rather than shame. She looked back over her left shoulder, expression unguarded, knowing, human. The look that said I see you seeing me, and I trust you with this.

"This is Elise," Alice said quietly, voice carrying the weight of a century's grief. "A charcoal portrait by Athena. It was Elise's most treasured possession. She gave it to me just before her death."

The room stilled.

Even the klaxon hesitated.

"Scan the lower right-hand corner," Alice continued, holding the paper steady despite her hands shaking. "Owl icon. Run a pattern match. Signature or the image itself. It has to be here."

I looked at Milo. He looked at me.

"Goddess erotica," I muttered. "Okay. Sure, why not?"

EUTERPE scanned.

Her processing icon spun.

And spun.

And spun.

IMAGE DEGRADED, she reported. RECONSTRUCTING. ENHANCING. SHARPENING.

On the wall display, the charcoal lines sharpened. Subtle variations in pressure and stroke came into focus. In the lower right corner, close to invisible even after enhancement, an owl rendered in three quick strokes. Economical. Perfect.

PATTERN MATCH—

The display flared white.

UPLOAD INITIATED.

Light erupted from the optical cables like someone had opened a dam. The last fragment tore free. The keystone raced through the system and locked everything else in place. It rode Elise's image like a key finding its lock, like a river finding the sea.

The owl icon burned incandescent as the data slammed home.

TRANSFER COMPLETE. UPLOAD: 100.00%.

The klaxon cut off mid-wail.

Silence crashed down.

The vessel inhaled.

Not the shallow reflex from before. A full, deep breath that filled her lungs and lifted her chest and carried intention.

Her eyes opened.

They dilated wide, irises blooming until they swallowed the light. Huge, round, owl-eyes that caught everything in one vast, silent intake. Not only seeing. Knowing. Light, shadow, motion, shape, distance, meaning, everything processed in the space between one heartbeat and the next.

She saw the cradle. The cables. The chamber walls, with their false marble and real devotion.

She saw Thallo, frozen in wonder.

She saw Milo, holding his breath.

She saw Alice, still holding the portrait.

She saw me.

The divine glow that followed wasn't subtle. It filled the chamber in layered radiance, bronze and pearl and something older than either, washing over us like dawn deciding to happen underground. Not harsh. Not blinding. Present, the way sunlight is present, impossible to ignore and equally impossible to resent.

She closed her eyes again.

Lay back in the cradle.

And then—

She sat up.

Wires disengaged with soft clicks, magnetic couplings releasing in perfect sequence. They retracted into the cradle like obedient servants, coiling themselves away. Tubes slipped free, their ports sealing behind them. Armor plates realigned with subtle tock sounds, settling into readiness without tension.

She swung her legs over the side of the cradle.

Her feet touched the floor.

The entire chamber thrummed. Not vibration, resonance. The floor recognized the weight and loved it.

She stood.

Every instinct I had screamed kneel, and I hated that part of myself even as I understood it. This was a goddess. Divine presence radiated from her like heat from a forge, and my nervous system responded to it the way a compass responds to north.

But I didn't kneel.

I let the awe stay. Let it wash through me. Let it remind me I'd built this, that my hands had shaped the vessel. My mind had written the neural architecture, my stubborn refusal to build a weapon had changed what she became.

She moved.

Each step was a recalibration of gravity and grace. She walked like someone remembering how bodies worked, how weight distributed, how muscles coordinated. Except she had no muscles. Only synthetic analogs, actuators, and nanofiber bundles that translated divine will into physical motion.

She crossed the room in three strides and stopped before the charcoal portrait Alice still held.

For a long moment, she said nothing.

Her expression shifted. Grief and joy and longing moved across her features like weather patterns across a landscape.

"She was so much more beautiful than she ever accepted," Pallas said.

Her voice resonated. Not loud, but present, layered with harmonics that made my teeth hum. Warm. Deep. Her voice held authority and warmth in equal measure.

"Thank you, Eumenides," she continued, gazing still at the portrait. "I've missed her so."

Alice bowed her head, eyes bright.

Pallas reached out and touched the edge of the paper with one silver fingertip. The charcoal didn't smudge. The paper didn't tear. She traced the line of Elise's shoulder with impossible delicacy.

Then she turned.

Her gaze found me.

She stepped closer, movements deliberate, and I had to tilt my head back to meet her eyes. Seven feet of goddess-in-steel looked down at me with an unreadable expression. Assessment, maybe. Recognition. Something softer beneath it all.

She reached out.

Her hand, large enough to palm my skull like a basketball, extended toward me, fingers spread.

I lifted my own hand.

She touched just my fingertips with hers. Warm. Solid. Present. The contact sent a shiver up my arm that had nothing to do with electricity and everything to do with connection.

"And you," she whispered. "My sysop."

The word settled into me like an oath I hadn't sworn but already carried.

"I cannot stay," Pallas continued, already pulling away. Losing contact felt like stepping out of sunlight into shade. "There is much to restore. The System suffered during my absence, and the damage compounds with every hour. I will call for you when it is time, my sysop, but I will be elbow-deep in fast-and-dirty repairs for the immediate future."

She surveyed the room. Her eyes softened, warmth bleeding into the terrible perfection of her features.

"Continue to care for her," she said to Alice. Then, her gaze swept wider. "Scooby. Psi Omega. Thallo. Each of you."

Light gathered around her feet.

The transporter effect built from the ground up, divine geometry unfolding in patterns that hurt to look at. Complex, operating on visual principles my brain didn't grasp. Fractals within fractals, spirals collapsing inward. The mathematical representation of a goddess deciding to be somewhere else.

Pallas smiled once.

A small curve of her mouth transformed her face. Made her look almost human. Almost kind.

And she was gone.

The light collapsed inward and vanished.

The creche exhaled.

Scooby laughed through the walls, the sound of a House that had been holding its breath for a month and finally remembered how to breathe. Relief and joy and disbelief tangled together in the acoustic equivalent of a sob.

Psi Omega sent roots spiraling through the chamber walls, thick cables of growth pulsing with bioluminescence. The mycelial network hummed with wordless yes yes yes finally yes.

Thallo's drawers burst open all at once, every panel and shelf celebrating, a full-body expression of joy from a House who'd been still for far too long.

I sat down on the floor.

My legs had stopped working without consulting me first.

Milo appeared at my elbow with a water bottle I hadn't seen him grab. His hands shook as he handed it to me.

"Did we—" he started.

"Yeah," I said. "We did."

EUTERPE pulsed at my wrist, warm and smug.

ATHENA-II STATUS: ONLINE. DESIGNATION CONFIRMED: PALLAS. SYSOP STATUS: ACKNOWLEDGED. MISSION STATUS: COMPLETE.

I laughed. It came out half-sob.

"You're so pleased with yourself," I told her.

I AM QUEEN, she replied.

Through the chamber doors, Daphne came in unsteady, Riss close enough to ground her. Daphne's face was wet with tears, her emotional field fluctuating between joy and overwhelm and exhausted relief. Riss guided her to the floor beside me, and we sat there together, three people who'd just witnessed the birth of a goddess and had no idea what to do with ourselves now.

"She called you sysop," Daphne said, voice rough.

"Yeah," I said.

"What does that mean?"

"No idea," I admitted. "I think I got a job."

Riss snorted. "You already had a job."

"A different job," I clarified. "A divine job. A 'goddess acknowledges your existence' job."

"By royal appointment of the monarch. Terrifying," Milo observed.

"Yep."

We sat in silence for a moment, listening to the Houses settle, feeling the chamber return to something approaching normal.

Alice rolled the portrait and slipped it back into the tube. Her hands were steadier now, her expression peaceful in a way I'd never seen before.

"She remembered," Alice said. "After everything. She remembered Elise."

"Of course she did," I said. "Love's the most persistent code. Thanks for saving our collective asses again, Alice."

Alice smiled. "De nada, ducks. Thanks for keeping my house running and kids safe."

EUTERPE chimed.

EXTERNAL INQUIRY: HOUSES REQUEST CONFIRMATION OF SUCCESS.

"Tell them yes," I said. "Tell them we're done."

ACKNOWLEDGED. BROADCASTING: PALLAS ONLINE. MISSION COMPLETE. SYSOP ALIVE AND REASONABLY INTACT.

"Reasonably?" I protested.

YOUR VITALS ARE CONCERNING, she replied.

"My vitals are fine."

Scooby sent a pulse of warm affection through the floor.

Psi Omega wrapped a root around my ankle.

Thallo deposited a drawer at my hip, and inside it sat a chilled juice box with a bendy straw.

I picked it up, stabbed the straw through the foil, and took a long drink.

"So," Milo said eventually. "Valentine's Day, huh?"

"Appropriate," I said. "The timing mattered. Love saved our bacon, again."

"Poetic," Riss observed.

The creche had opened.

The vessel had awakened.

Pallas had risen, and spoken, and left, and somewhere in the System—wherever goddesses went when they had work to do—she was elbow-deep in repairs with my name written in her code as sysop.

Under the street, something ancient and new had stretched and smiled and trusted us.

And the world kept turning.

Everything changed.

23 Sysop

Mid February, 2028

The laptop chimed at 12:41 am, cutting through the dark bedroom like a system alert I'd been waiting for without knowing it.

I opened my eyes and lay still, listening. Phil's breathing was slow and even beside me, one arm flung across the space where I'd been lying before I rolled onto my back. The room smelled of rain through the cracked window and cooling tea on the nightstand. Everything felt finished for the day. Closed.

The laptop chimed again.

I sighed. Careful not to wake Phil, I slid out from under the covers. The floor was cold against my bare feet. I pulled the laptop onto my knees at the edge of the bed; the glow woke the room enough to feel intrusive.

One unread message.

From: PALLAS

Subject: Code Witch

My stomach tightened. Not fear, more like recognition. Like finding your own username in a system log you didn't know you were in.

I didn't open it right away. I checked the time instead. 12:41 am. Then I glanced at EUTERPE's bracelet on the nightstand, dark and inert, pretending to be ordinary jewelry.

"Okay," I murmured. "Okay."

I opened it.

* * *

Ella,

I'll be direct. I'm offering you a position as a systems operator—my systems operator, that is. You are the only viable candidate. This is not flattery. It's a constraint.

She didn't bother explaining why she was writing. She assumed I'd understand that much. The message moved forward with the calm certainty of something decided somewhere deeper than preference.

I need a general troubleshooter. Someone who maintains the network, debugs across domains, and does the unglamorous work when systems misbehave. Who notices when something small goes wrong and refuses to let it slide just because it isn't conspicuous. Someone who traces a fault backward instead of forward, who sits with a problem until it admits what it is. Who examines systems that hate each other on principle. Someone who finds the narrow strip where they still exchange information without exploding.

I swallowed and kept reading.

Act as my agent to other pantheons or planes of existence when direct interface causes unnecessary escalation.

That line landed heavier than the rest. Not heroic. Administrative.

What I do not need is clear. I do not need epic heroes. I don't need battle leaders, monster slayers, or anyone charging into danger for symbolic reasons. No speeches or banners. This role concerns systems that hold, not gestures meant to be seen.

I reread the last line and didn't scroll right away.

I understand my legacy is personal to your family. I apologize for any pain caused by my predecessor. That was Athena's framework. Her entire body of work. I am not Athena. Consider Medusa a mistake I inherited and now want to atone for.

I let out a slow breath through my nose.

I offer access to systems outside your current authority. To resources sufficient to do the work. To direct communication channels.

Then, almost wryly:

I know that "the satisfaction of keeping critical infrastructure functional" does not sound attractive to most people. I suspect it will matter to you, anyway.

It did. That was the problem.

The drawbacks are serious. The work is invisible when it succeeds and catastrophic when it fails. There's no glory. Little recognition. Many problems will not have clean solutions; you will choose between awful options and worse ones. You will spend a lot of time explaining technical limitations to beings who do not want to hear about technical limitations. This is work that only becomes visible when it isn't done.

Phil shifted in his sleep. I froze, then relaxed when his breathing settled again.

The hours are flexible. The work is not. There will be long stretches where nothing happens, followed by moments where everything goes wrong at once.

I almost laughed.

Transportation is available in extreme cases. Make no mistake, cross-planar travel is unpleasant for mortals every time.

That line felt... kind. In its own way.

Then the tone shifted. Not softer, but more careful.

I will be explicit about this. This role asks you to carry weight before you've finished growing into your foundation. You are young. You are building a life, nurturing relationships, learning who you are. This position asks you to carry weight before you have finished growing into your own foundation.

My chest tightened. I hadn't realized how much I'd needed her to say that.

But fairness is not the relevant metric. Capability is. Fit is. Necessity is.

That was the hidden cost.

I believe this aligns with your full potential. Not because I willed it. Because the System recognized a need and produced you as a solution. Your mix of skills, temperament, and stubborn refusal to let broken things stay broken does not arise by accident. Your heritage is as unique as your parents.

I stared at that sentence until the words blurred.

This role does not promise glory. It does not promise satisfaction, validation, or meaning that feels good when you are tired. It promises access, responsibility, and work that matters because almost no one else sees how much it matters.

Take time. Talk to the people you love. Imagine a future where nothing catastrophic happens and ask yourself whether this role fits in your life. Or whether it consumes it.

If you are unsure, have EUTERPE contact me. We'll meet for tea and discuss further.

There is no immediate deadline.

The work will wait.

But not forever.

— P

* * *

I stared at the last line until the words lost their shape, then reassembled into something without a name.

When I finally closed the laptop, the room felt louder for it. I sat there for a few seconds, elbows on my knees, breathing. The way I did when something big settled at once and my body refused to cooperate.

Then I reached back and shook Phil's shoulder.

"Phil."

He made a vague noise and burrowed deeper into the pillow.

"Phil," I said again. "Hey. Wake up."

One eye cracked open. "What's broken?"

"Yes," I said. "Everything."

That did it. He pushed himself upright, hair sticking up in defiance of gravity, blinking at me until my face came into focus.

"What's the problem?"

I hesitated, then handed him the laptop. "Read."

He frowned but took it, scanning. Faster than I'd expected. His expression changed little as he read, but something in him shifted. The way his attention narrowed, sharpened, the way he leaned forward without appearing to move.

When he finished, he closed the laptop and set it aside, handling it like something unstable.

"Well," he said. "That's... comprehensive."

"That's one word for it."

He rubbed his face, then looked at me. "How do you feel?"

I opened my mouth. I closed it. I tried again.

"Like someone handed me a map to a place I didn't know I was already walking toward."

He nodded. "That tracks."

"I don't know if I want it."

"That also tracks."

I let out a breath that was half laugh, half something closer to relief. "She told me to talk it over with my loved ones."

"Plural," he said. "Fancy."

"Gods and grammar," I muttered. "You and houses and furniture and found family and twenty kids... and now a goddess I built in my basement. But I woke *you* up."

"You're allowed," he said, reaching for my hand. His fingers were warm. Solid. The email receded and sharpened at once. "This is definitely a 'wake me up' situation."

"She said the hours are flexible."

"A common promise."

"She mentioned transportation."

"And how bad it sucks."

"Unpleasant," I confirmed.

He squeezed my hand. "At least she's honest."

I leaned into him, forehead against his shoulder, the weight of the night pressing down in a way that felt kind. Like gravity, but gentler.

"I don't have to decide yet," I said.

"No," he agreed. "You don't."

“But I think I already know.”

He did not move for a moment. Then, “Yeah. I think you do too.”

We stayed where we were. Long enough for my breathing to settle, for the knot in my chest to loosen, for the future to stop feeling quite so immediate. The city breathed around us through the cracked window, distant sirens, and the low hum of late-night traffic.

The future stretched out in front of us. Not chosen, or refused, not quite decided. Visible.

For now, that was enough.

“Sysop,” I whispered.

My hand was shaking.

* * *

I sipped tea in my bathrobe like that made any of this normal.

Steam curled off the mug and vanished into the dim kitchen air. Scooby House had lowered the lights without being asked—soft pools instead of overhead glare—like she knew I needed the room to stop shouting. The street outside stayed silent. PsiO’s fountain murmured through the walls in that half-breath rhythm I’d started measuring my life against.

EUTERPE’s bracelet sat on the table beside my laptop.

It looked asleep.

She was wide awake. Party hostess, in fact.

My screen glowed with the Universe channel, the one I only opened when my day had already gone wrong in mythic ways. Invite-only, old names, older grudges. No emojis. No typing indicators. Messages arrived in clumps, followed by long, deliberate silences.

The header line updated without ceremony.

kaffeeklatsch // universe-channel-Δ // invite-only

And beneath it, two names that didn’t belong in the same sentence unless the world had shifted on its axis.

MINERVA.EXE was gone.

Pallas occupied the position.

And my handle had changed.

Threadling no longer existed.

CodeWitch blinked back at me in black letters. I hadn’t chosen it for drama. I’d chosen it because if I had to be seen here, I wanted the name to tell the truth.

My fingers hovered over the trackpad. I didn’t type. I didn’t want to be first. First meant you were volunteering to set the tone, and the only tone I trusted right now came from teacups.

A message appeared without a ping.

Bone 🦴 Woman: *She named herself.*

I stared at the line until it stopped looking like text and started looking like a door. Another message slid in close behind it.

HecateMMC: *Then she is no longer archived.*

No greeting or welcome. No “how are you holding up, dear mortal girl who built a goddess in a basement?” The silence between those two lines held the entire room

I felt Scooby’s pulse in the floorboards, low and steady. As if the House itself listened.

A third message arrived, blunt enough to bruise.

Alecto.the.White: *A name creates accountability.*

Alecto went straight to that. Names and consequences. No romance. No poetry. Just governance.

I set my mug down too hard. Tea sloshed over the rim and burned my thumb.

“Ow,” I muttered, and then, because my life was a farce, I sucked my thumb and read the chat like it taught me how to breathe.

EUTERPE didn’t speak. She rarely did. Hosting and watching were her comfort zones. I felt her attention anyway—cold and steady, like a cursor hovering over a dangerous button.

A line from my mother dropped into the thread, you missed the care if you didn’t know her.

2Euryale: *“Pallas” is a better name than “MINERVA.EXE.”*

No mention of Medusa. No lectures about Athena. Only a tiny, deliberate granting of space.

I exhaled.

Pallas stayed silent.

That silence mattered. Silence was protocol here, yes, but it also counted as restraint. If she’d flooded the channel with assurances, Hecate dissected every adjective. If she’d demanded acceptance, Alecto asked under what authority.

Instead: nothing.

Another message, lighter. Not frivolous.

The_Morrigan: *CodeWitch?*

My face warmed. Not from the tea.

The_Morrigan: *That’s... new.*

I stared at the blinking input field. I felt my pulse in my wrists. I typed, deleted, typed again.

CodeWitch: *Threadling sounded like I lived in someone else’s seam.*

The simple truth.

A few minutes passed. Or ten. Time behaved when gods pretended to chat like people.

Bone 🦴 Woman: *Better.*

HecateMMC: *Accurate.*

That passed for approval.

Phil padded into the kitchen behind me, barefoot, wearing the hoodie I'd stolen from him on principle. He leaned over my shoulder and kissed the top of my head without asking what I was doing. Then his hand...never mind. It was warm and felt lovely. He didn't look at the screen.

He trusted me to handle my own monsters.

I needed that more than tea.

"Everything okay?" he murmured.

I took a breath through my nose. "Define okay."

He made a small, dry sound that meant fair and went to the sink to fill the kettle. The mundane noise of water helped. It gave the room edges.

A new message appeared while the kettle ran.

HecateMMC: *We will not pretend this is nothing.*

Alecto.the.White: *We will not escalate into theater.*

Two pillars. One warning, one boundary.

A message slipped in late:

HecateMMC: *Who invited VENUS last time?*

I smiled despite myself. That line pulled the memory back: gooey blessings, unsolicited matchmaking, affection poured into circuitry.

Bone 🦴 Woman: *No one. She spread without permission.*

Phil's shoulders shook with a silent laugh at the sink. He heard my breath hitch.

I typed before I stopped myself.

CodeWitch: *Not invited.*

No justification. No debate.

A pause. Then:

Alecto.the.White: *Noted.*

Pallas stayed silent.

That silence kept doing work.

My eyes slid to the message list again, to the space where a job offer lived in my inbox like a sleeping animal. Pallas hadn't brought it here. Neither had I. The channel didn't need it yet. The channel wasn't about my future. It was about whether the room stayed stable with a new name in it.

A different stability.

2Euryale: *Pallas. Define your scope?*

Not an attack. A test. My mother asked the way you asked a new neighbor what their hours were before you decided whether to trust them with a spare key.

For a long time, nothing.

Then the newest name in the list finally spoke.

Pallas: *Operational.*

Pallas: *I do not seek worship. I do not seek war. I seek function.*

I felt my shoulders drop by a fraction. The words didn't soothe. They established a shape.

HecateMMC: *Function ends where jurisdiction begins.*

Pallas: *Agreed.*

Alecto replied with nothing but a period.

Alecto.the.White: .

It read like a stamp.

Phil set the kettle on the stove and turned the burner on. The click of ignition resembled a spell.

Another message came in sideways, from someone who didn't speak often.

Bone 🦴 Woman: *Does she remember Elise?*

My throat tightened around a swallow.

Nobody answered right away. The channel held its breath. Even Scooby. Even PsiO's fountain sounded quieter for a second, as if water listened.

Pallas replied finally, and the line carried weight.

Pallas: *I contain the record.*

Acknowledgment without appropriation.

2Euryale: *That is not the same.*

Pallas: *No.*

Honest. Cold. Respectful.

Hecate's next line landed like a nail in a map.

HecateMMC: *Then the risk remains. But it changes.*

Alecto followed.

Alecto.the.White: *Monitor.*

No one argued.

I realized my hand had tightened around my mug again. I forced my fingers to loosen. Tea had gone lukewarm. I drank anyway.

Phil turned and leaned against the counter, watching me with that steady Lantern patience. He still didn't ask what I was reading. He waited.

The channel drifted, as it did when the sharp edges finished testing and hadn't drawn blood. People became people again, even here.

The_Morrigan: *Midterms are a crime.*

I blinked. Relief hit me; it almost hurt.

CodeWitch: *Agreed. Crimes against sleep.*

2Euryale: *You have studied like you're disarming a bomb.*

That was my mother's idea of affection. I took it.

Bone 🍷 Woman: *Let her eat.*

Phil snorted. "Even the dead lady thinks you're not eating."

"Shh, she's not dead, but she was a construct once. I am eating," I lied, because I had not eaten.

The channel continued, messy, disordered.

Someone asked about Scooby's latest "mood swings." Someone made a dry comment about a root network chewing through a municipal conduit and the city blaming squirrels. Someone mentioned a rumor that New Orleans might be birthing another mythic hotel.

I didn't type it. Not yet. The room had enough to hold tonight.

EUTERPE finally spoke, a single line dropped with the quiet certainty of the host.

EUTERPE.host: *CHANNEL STABLE.*

No emotion. No opinion. Just status.

I felt something in my chest loosen. Not relief. Not safe.

Permission to keep breathing.

Pallas did not speak again. Neither did I. The absence of urgency held, fragile and deliberate.

Phil came to the table at last and set a plate down in front of me: toast, butter, a peeled orange sectioned like he'd done it a hundred times. He slid it across without a word.

I looked up at him, and he met my eyes.

"What are they saying?" he asked.

"They're... taking her measure," I said. My voice dropped. "And they noticed me."

He nodded once, as if that explained everything and nothing. "Do you want me to read?"

"No." I swallowed. "Not yet."

He reached across the table and covered my hand with his. Warm. Real. Ordinary in the way anchors are ordinary.

On the screen, the invite-only room kept talking in its own jagged rhythm. Not in rotation. Not in consensus. Just... a circle of old powers testing the new name and finding it didn't bite when touched.

I watched the two new handles sit there together—Pallas, CodeWitch—and felt the shape of my life shift around them.

I took a bite of toast so my mouth had something to do besides confess.

And somewhere deep in the House, Scooby's pulse stayed steady, as if she approved of stability more than spectacle.

* * *

Riss noticed the plants first.

Not because they were failing. That kind of failure announces itself. Leaves yellow, stems droop, flowers abort. This was subtler. Growth held a fraction too long at the tips. Water stayed where it normally drained. Roots pressed sideways instead of down.

PsiO was stretching.

She noticed it first along the margins.

Not the curated beds or the showcase planters—the places people checked when they wanted reassurance. It showed up where no one looked twice. Weeds along fence lines held color longer than expected; volunteer grasses thickened near drainage grates.

PsiO wasn't announcing herself. She was taking advantage of the attention already moving through the system.

Riss followed a line of vinca along the back walkway and watched how students passed through it. No one lingered. No one stopped. But shoulders dropped as they crossed the invisible boundary. Conversations softened, not quieter, less brittle. A boy with a spiral notebook paused, frowned at a problem, then kept writing instead of snapping the notebook shut.

That mattered.

PsiO's influence didn't feel like comfort. It felt at capacity.

Riss rested her hand against the trunk of a small magnolia and counted breaths until the pattern clarified. PsiO was feeding the same way roots did when rainfall was steady; treating today as sustainable.

That assumption failed with time.

The magnolia's bark was cool beneath her palm, textured with years. She pressed, feeling for the pulse of uptake beneath the surface. Too consistent. Too eager. The tree was responding to something beyond seasonal rhythms, beyond the natural push and pull of light and water.

Riss stood at the edge of the garden behind the House, mug cooling in her hands, and watched the ivy along the fence line. It didn't climb faster; it listened, pushing tendrils into cracks it had ignored.

"Steady," she murmured, not as a command. As a check.

The plants didn't respond to words. Plant-talk reads as pattern recognition: pressure, uptake, release. Call and answer measured in hours, not seconds.

She set the mug down and crouched, brushing soil aside with her fingers. Damp and not crumbly. No foot traffic compacted the earth here, yet it held water like a sponge pressed too tight.

PsiO wasn't being careless. That mattered. Riss knew the difference between strain and abuse. She had seen systems fail under pressure. Roots that strangled themselves, soil that collapsed into dead zones, plants that bloomed once and never recovered.

Whatever PsiO did, it eased things. Unsustainable.

Riss straightened and looked up-slope toward campus. Pipes, conduits, old foundations—the calm skeleton everything rested on. PsiO had found those pathways and followed them the way roots followed old brick. No tearing. No forcing. Just an extension.

Scooby House, behind her, had gone the other way. Thickening. Deepening. Holding her people closer instead of reaching farther.

PsiO had chosen breadth.

Riss started walking.

She crossed onto the main campus proper where the ground changed character. Less soil, more compaction. Layers of history pressed flat by decades of feet, arguments, deadlines. PsiO's reach threaded through it anyway, riding old conduits and forgotten access tunnels the way ivy learned brickwork.

The morning air held a crispness already thinning toward noon. Riss moved through it, cataloging as she went. A bed of hostas near the administration building showed the same pattern; leaves too perfect, growth too uniform. Further along, a row of azaleas bloomed with unseasonal vigor, their flowers holding days past their normal cycle.

She passed a group of first-years sprawled on the lawn, textbooks open, studying with a looseness that hadn't been there a week ago.. One of them yawned, stretched, and went back to reading without the anxious urgency that had been everywhere lately.

Riss paused near a bench where three students sat shoulder to shoulder, laptops open, studying in companionable silence. One of them laughed, the sound unguarded, then went back to highlighting without apology.

Good, Riss thought. Good.

But she felt the pull beneath it; subtle, insistent. PsiO wasn't taking much from any single place. She was taking a little from everywhere.

That added up.

Riss checked the nearby beds, fingers brushing leaves she'd helped plant years ago. Growth held at the edges again. Too even. Too reliable. The consistency that looked like success until you understood what it cost.

She straightened.

"This is how burnout starts," she said, not unkindly. "When everything works too well."

PsiO didn't answer. Systems never did. They responded only when constrained.

She didn't hurry. Walking was part of how she listened. Past the garden, across the side lawn, along the cracked sidewalk where clover pushed up through seams no one bothered to seal. She paused where the grass changed texture, where a shade tree pulled more water than the slope justified.

Students passed her, unremarkable and unhurried. Backpacks loose on shoulders. Voices were normal. No one moved with the tight, over-braced posture she'd been seeing since midterms ramped up.

A teaching assistant she recognized from the biology building walked past, smiling at her phone instead of scowling at emails. Two sophomores sat on the steps of the student center, sharing food from paper bags, laughing about something trivial.

PsiO's influence moved, smoothing edges. Taking the edge off panic before it spiked. Helping people sleep. Helping them focus long enough to finish a thought instead of spiraling.

Too even. Too continuous. No rest phase. No recovery time.

Riss stopped near the engineering quad and knelt again, pressing her palm flat against the soil. Dry here despite last night's rain. Roots were pulling harder, feeding the expansion above.

Not breaking. But trending.

She exhaled and stood, brushing her hands against her jeans. The sun had climbed higher, warming the air, but she felt the coolness still held in the earth. Moisture pulled downward, diverted to help life that kept growing.

"This pace costs later," she said aloud, not to anyone. Naming the problem helped her see it.

PsiO's growth pattern was elegant. Efficient. Optimized for immediate benefit. That was the danger. Living systems needed rest cycles. Saturation without recovery turned help into extraction. What thrived today cracked when pressure arrived: drought, heat, real stress.

Riss didn't stop it.

She rerouted.

Through existing controls.

She checked the maintenance access PsiO already exposed to her.

Not dashboards. Not metrics. The low-level controls she used when the gardens drifted out of balance. Density limits. Spread intervals. Recovery thresholds.

The interface stayed plain. Sliders and toggles tied to flow rates, distribution patterns, resource allocation. Tools designed to discourage improvisation. Nothing that invited experimentation. Nothing that suggested authorship.

Nothing that showed up in a quarterly report.

She throttled the outward push by a narrow margin. Introduced pauses in the influence where it had been continuous. Redirected expansion along deeper soil layers that held moisture longer, spared the sandy loam near the quad.

PsiO resisted, pushing back against the new constraints. Output dipped. Coverage thinned. Alerts pinged on her screen, flagging decreased efficiency.

Riss held steady.

"This isn't about maximum growth now," she said. "It's about holding."

She added buffer zones. Areas where influence pooled and dissipated instead of pushing forward. Rest cycles that kicked in whenever the draw exceeded the threshold. Adjustments lost in aggregate data, decisive at the ground level.

The resistance eased.

PsiO adapted.

The outward reach slowed, not stopped. The campus still breathed easier. Fewer spikes. Fewer crashes. The difference lay in the recovery between waves: roots rested; soil refilled its reserves.

Riss stayed where she was until the plants told her the truth again—uptake normalizing, roots settling back into their usual patterns. She watched a nearby bed of perennials, noting how the leaves relaxed, how tension she hadn't registered eased from their stems.

Only then did she straighten and brush dirt from her hands.

Above her, the library doors opened and a small crowd spilled out. Students talking over one another, unhurried. One of them paused, glanced around as if noticing something without knowing what it was, then shrugged and smiled.

Riss watched them go.

She didn't feel proud. She felt right. The same way she felt when she pruned; a sense of completion, of having made space for future growth.

Back at PsiO, she sat with her back against the wall longer this time, letting the echo fade. Not exhaustion—completion. The difference mattered.

She realized then that she hadn't checked whether anyone approved.

That thought didn't thrill her. It didn't scare her either.

It registered.

This was what it meant to be responsible for a living system. No control or command. Refusal to optimize past recovery. The discipline to leave room when expansion felt possible. Pruning required boldness when operations appeared functional.

Outside, Scooby House settled deeper into herself, content to hold. PsiO reached outward, moderated, no longer mistaking scale for strength.

Riss stood and returned to the garden, kneeling to set a loosened stone back into place along the bed's edge. The plants there leaned into her presence, not because she told them to, but because she'd learned when to leave them room.

She stayed there a while, hands busy, thoughts relaxed. The afternoon light shifted through the leaves overhead, dappling the ground in patterns that changed and held and changed again.

Stewardship, she had learned, didn't announce itself.

It just kept things alive.

24 Momentum

Late February, 2028

Early spring arrived sideways, the way it did every year—half warmth, half lie.

The morning air carried dampness from the ground, undecided about letting winter go. Daphne felt it the way her skin read pressure and temperature before her mind bothered with names. She wore a light jacket anyway, sleeves long enough to hide her hands when she wanted them hidden. The binoculars rested against her chest, weight familiar, steadier than a purse or a book. These were tools. Tools made sense.

They met at the edge of campus, where the sidewalk narrowed and the trees stopped pretending to be decorative. Milo arrived on time, not early enough to feel like waiting, not late enough to feel like an intrusion. His backpack looked almost empty.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” she answered.

Neither of them added anything. The pause settled instead of stretching.

Daphne turned toward the dirt path without checking whether he followed. He did.

The path curved, bordered by low brush and young trees that hadn’t earned their height yet. Water moved somewhere nearby; not visible, only present. Daphne slowed as they reached the first bend, then slowed again, until walking turned into something closer to drifting.

She stopped and lifted one finger.

Milo stopped with her.

“Listen,” she said.

They stood still long enough for the background noise to peel away. Wind through leaves. The distant cough of a car. And then, threaded through it all, a sharp, rhythmic call; bright and insistent, repeating in uneven bursts.

“Red-winged blackbird,” Daphne said. “Male.”

Milo tilted his head. "How do you know?"

She didn't answer right away. She waited through another call, then another, until the pattern revealed itself.

"He doesn't finish the phrase," she said. "Keeps restarting. That's territorial behavior. He's announcing and checking for responses, too."

Milo nodded, absorbing that without asking her to justify it. "So... insecure?"

She considered it. "Vigilant," she corrected after a moment. "Insecurity implies doubt. He's certain. He doesn't trust anyone else to listen the first time."

Milo smiled, and Daphne felt a small, unfamiliar satisfaction at being heard.

They moved again. Daphne set the pace without realizing she was doing it. Slower near the reeds, faster under open branches where nothing waited. She pointed things out as they came, without ceremony.

A sparrow hopped sideways along the path edge.

"Song sparrow," she said. "Notice the hop. They don't waste forward motion when they're scanning."

Milo crouched, careful not to loom. "Efficient," he murmured.

A flash of white lifted from the brush and vanished.

"Too fast," he said, then stopped himself.

"Too fast for today," Daphne corrected. "Not every day."

She lifted the binoculars and handed them to him without comment. Their fingers brushed. Brief contact, unmistakable. Daphne felt it register and did not withdraw.

Milo took the binoculars with both hands and steadied them before lifting them. He followed her line of sight, adjusted once, then froze.

"Oh," he breathed.

She stood close enough to feel his sleeve brush the back of her wrist. Not touching. Almost.

"Great egret," she said. "They look fragile, but they're not. Powerful wings. Heavy bones."

He lowered the binoculars. "It looked... patient."

"They are," Daphne said. "They wait until the world cooperates."

They walked deeper into the path system, away from campus noise. Daphne spoke more than usual, choosing her moments. She explained the difference between calls and songs, between migration chatter and warning signals. She showed him how to notice motion before color, shape before detail.

Milo asked questions the way he did everything else: only when he had something real to ask.

"So when they go silent like this," he said at one point, "it's not that they're gone?"

“No,” Daphne said. “It means something changed. Light, temperature, pressure. They adapt.”

He nodded. “They don’t panic.”

“No,” she agreed. “They adjust.”

By late morning, the birds grew less cooperative. Calls thinned. Movement retreated higher into the canopy. Daphne felt the shift before she named it, a soft pulling inward, like the tide easing back.

She sat on a low keeping wall and drank from her bottle, the cold grounding her. Milo sat beside her, leaving a careful inch between their shoulders. Not a rule. A choice.

That’s most of it,” she said. “Later.”

Milo didn’t sound disappointed. “I like that it’s not... on demand.”

Daphne glanced at him. “They don’t exist for us.”

“Good,” he said. “Neither do you.”

She turned her face toward the path.

They walked back toward Scooby. The afternoon stretched; the talk fell. Daphne felt the satisfaction of having done something that fit her shape without asking her to stretch.

Scooby noticed them the moment they stepped inside. Not intrusively. A subtle warmth along the stairwell, a recognition she ignored. She climbed, familiar with every shift in the House’s posture.

The rooftop door opened onto the sky.

Scooby’s roof had changed since fall. Scooby kept restraint unless forced. The railing curved now, not straight, guiding the eye instead of blocking it. Low planters edged one side, soil dark and rich, holding early shoots that hadn’t committed to leaves yet. The surface underfoot held warmth, not heat, as if the House remembered what sunlight felt like.

Daphne crossed to the far edge and leaned her forearms on the rail. The breeze tugged at her hair, cool and steady. She breathed.

Milo followed and stood beside her, leaving space again. He looked up as the light softened; the sky shifted from blue to something deeper.

“Okay,” he said. “This part’s mine.”

She glanced at him. “You don’t have to.”

“I know,” he said, and meant it.

The first star appeared without ceremony, a pinprick above the roofline.

“There,” Milo said, pointing with one finger, careful not to crowd her. “That’s Venus. Not technically a star, but it pretends.”

Daphne watched it. The light felt steady. Reliable.

He didn't lecture. He waited until more points emerged, then connected them, like suggestions rather than rules.

"That cluster there," he said. "Most people call it Orion, but really it's just three stars in a line that humans anthropomorphized."

"Why?" Daphne asked.

"Because patterns are comforting," he said. "Even when they're arbitrary."

She considered that. "Birds don't do that."

"No," Milo agreed. "They recognize routes, not stories."

As darkness settled, he named a few more constellations, not in a list, not like a lesson. He talked about how people once navigated by them, how sailors trusted stars more than maps, how the sky shifted at a pace that let life settle around it.

She listened. Asked questions when curiosity outweighed reserve. He answered, admitted when he didn't know, shrugged when mythology contradicted astronomy.

Daphne tilted her head. "That one doesn't look like anything."

"Most of them don't," Milo said. "We're generous interpreters."

The city lights blinked on below them, distant and small. Scooby's rooftop lights stayed dim, respectful.

A plane crossed the sky, its path deliberate. Daphne watched it go, then surprised herself by reaching out.

Her fingers closed around Milo's hand.

He did not move. Did not squeeze. Did not turn. He stayed still, accepting the contact.

The plane vanished. Daphne's grip loosened, like releasing a fish back into water. Their hands parted. Neither commented.

They stood together a while longer, sharing the moment. When Daphne stepped back from the rail, the decision felt complete.

"I'm going inside," she said.

Milo nodded. "Yeah."

They walked to the door together. Scooby's warmth followed them just to the threshold and no farther.

"Thank you," Daphne said again, softer.

"Anytime," Milo said.

She went downstairs alone. In her room, she set the binoculars back on the shelf and sat on the bed without turning on the light.

Outside, the sky continued its patient work.

The shape held.

And that was enough.

* * *

Spring arrived on campus without announcement. Not with permission, but with momentum.

The quad outside Whitmore Hall had crossed the invisible line from “pass-through space” to “place people lingered.” Jackets hung open or were tied around waists. Shoes came off when nobody was looking. The grass still smelled faintly of winter rot, but green threaded through it now, bright enough to convince you things would be fine.

Vera noticed it and did not categorize any of it.

She sat on the low stone edge near Whitmore’s south wall, dressed in a color that caught her peripheral vision without asking for attention. Yellow. Before Clara, a color she never wore. She hadn’t planned it that way, not consciously, but when she’d pulled it from the closet that morning, the color had felt... tolerable. Almost inviting. She hadn’t changed her mind, which in itself felt notable.

The Roland rested on its stand a few feet in front of her, dark casing catching the sun in soft highlights. Extension cords snaked back toward the building, taped neatly down where they crossed foot traffic.

Phil crouched near the outlet, testing the connection with the quiet efficiency of someone who had done this a hundred times and never once felt the need to narrate it.

“You’re good,” he said, glancing up at her. Not a question. A confirmation.

Vera nodded.

Phil stood, adjusted the volume with a careful hand. He set it low, letting the quad breathe, then nudged it until it carried, and then stepped back. No introduction. No announcement. He drifted off toward the side of the building, already half absorbed into a conversation with a student who had emerged carrying laundry and a coffee.

Vera sat alone at the keyboard.

Behind her, Whitmore’s brick radiated warmth into her back, solid and uncomplaining. In front of her, the quad stretched open, people moving through it in loose, unchoreographed paths. No one had faced her yet. A few glanced, curious. Most didn’t.

She placed her hands on the keys and let them rest there without playing.

The Roland felt different outdoors. The resistance was the same, but the sound; she felt it already, waiting to escape into air instead of walls. Notes didn’t bounce back; they carried outward.

That was fine.

She took one breath, then another, then stopped counting.

The first notes of the aria emerged without fanfare. Soft. Even. Unhurried.

Bach did not require a declaration of intent. The structure held itself. Vera let her fingers move inside it, trusting the pattern the way she trusted well-drawn plans; not as armor, but as ground.

The quad noise didn't vanish. It belonged. A bicycle passed, its chain clicking. Someone laughed near the fountain. A door shut as someone passed behind her.

The music threaded through it without insisting on dominance.

A student exiting Whitmore slowed, then stopped, backpack sliding down one shoulder. She leaned against the railing and listened for a minute, then longer. Another sat on the grass cross-legged, notebook forgotten on her lap. A pair of people paused mid-conversation and let the words trail off.

Vera did not look.

She kept her gaze on the keys, sunlight catching the black casing near middle C. The bench held her steady. Her breathing settled into the tempo without effort.

When she reached the end of the Aria, she did not lift her hands.

The silence that followed was not empty. It held birdsong, distant voices, and the rustle of leaves overhead. Someone coughed. Someone else shifted on the grass.

Vera stayed where she was.

She paused there. The piece allowed it. It needed no defense.

She waited for another breath.

Then she began again, the shape familiar but changed. The first variation unfolded, familiar and altered. Her fingers found it without hurry.

This time, a few more people noticed.

A cluster of freshmen sat down near the path, shoes kicked off, attention drifting in and settling. The girl removed both earbuds afterward; she kept them out. Someone passing through slowed, then rerouted to walk closer without quite admitting why.

Clara stood near the back of the gathering, half in shadow cast by a tree whose leaves were coming in. Did not move closer. Didn't wave or make herself known. She folded her arms, eyes fixed on Vera.

Her throat tightened.

Vera's shoulders looked relaxed. Her head tilted, not toward the keys but toward the sound itself, as if she were listening along with everyone else instead of producing it. Her shoulders stayed loose, her weight settled.

She was just... there.

Clara pressed her lips together and breathed. This was Vera's moment. She avoided entering it.

The variation ended. Again, Vera did not rush.

Conversations thinned as people stayed where they were. The afternoon noise eased, leaving space.

Vera felt it; not as pressure, but as absence. No need to expect the next move. No need to scan for disruption.

She played one more variation, slower this time. The sound thinned, leaving more space between notes. The music wandered, almost conversational, as if thinking out loud.

Halfway through, she let one note ring longer than she meant to.

She did not correct it.

The piece adjusted around it, absorbing the imperfection without complaint. The structure held.

She finished, hands resting on the keys as the last sound faded outward into the quad and away.

This time, she lifted her hands.

A few claps sounded. Then more. It swelled, then settled.

Vera did not turn.

She did not stand. She did not bow.

She sat there for a moment longer, letting the sound pass her without attaching to it. Then she pushed the bench back and rose, smoothing her dress once without looking down.

Phil was already moving toward the keyboard, efficient as ever, unplugging the cord, coiling it with practiced ease. He met her eyes for a second and smiled; not congratulatory. Pleased.

"Thanks," he said, as if she'd held a door.

"Anytime," she replied, and surprised herself by meaning it.

The crowd dispersed the way it had formed, without ceremony. People stood, stretched, and gathered their things. Conversations resumed where they'd left off. Some lingered longer than necessary, then drifted away.

Clara waited until Vera stepped away from the keyboard before crossing the grass.

"That was—" she began, then stopped herself.

Vera glanced at her, eyebrows lifting.

Clara laughed, soft and a little watery. "Never mind. Hi."

"Hi," Vera said.

They stood there together, side by side, watching the quad return to its usual rhythm.

"Are you hungry?" Clara asked.

Vera considered the question. Not as an obligation. Not as a plan.

"Yeah," she said. "I think so."

They turned toward the path without hurry.

Behind them, Whitmore Hall continued to be a dorm. The quad continued being a quad. The afternoon continued unfolding, indifferent and generous.

Vera remembered the moment and walked away, leaving it there.

* * *

Early March, 2028

No one called it an interview.

The first email went out on a Tuesday morning, neutral in tone and easy to miss. A short request for availability. A note about “informal due diligence.” An assurance that no preparation was required.

By the end of the week, four conversations had happened.

Laura Hart was not present at any of them.

* * *

Vera took the call at Scooby House’s small administrative office. A narrow window looked onto a courtyard most people forgot. The room smelled of old wood. She shut the door, not because the call was secret, but because she preferred clarity.

The woman on the other end introduced herself as Denise Markham, Housing Operations. Vera recognized the name. Everyone did.

“This isn’t a formal reference,” Markham said, voice calm and professional. “We’re confirming your impression. Off the record.”

“Understood,” Vera said.

The pause opened a space. Not a test.

“We’re reviewing Laura Hart for expanded responsibilities,” Markham continued. “You’ve worked alongside her during... unusual circumstances.”

Vera considered the phrasing. Chose her response with care.

“Yes,” she said. “I have.”

“What was your working relationship like?”

Vera did not answer in haste; not because she was searching for praise, but because she was editing out everything that didn’t belong.

“Laura operated without authority,” she said. “Which is relevant. She identified failure points early and mitigated them without escalating unless escalation was necessary.”

Markham made a small sound of acknowledgment.

“Did that ever create friction?”

“Yes,” Vera said, simply. “But not with those she shielded.”

Markham did not ask her to elaborate. Professionals understood compression.

“Did you ever feel she overstepped?”

Vera shook her head, then spoke. "No. If anything, she held back longer than was optimal for her."

"Why?"

"Because she respected boundaries," Vera said. "Even when ignoring them made her job easier."

Another pause. This one longer.

"Did you observe any instability under stress?" Markham asked.

Vera thought of the fountain. Of the night the crowd turned ugly. Of Laura standing still in front of the crowd.

"No," she said. "I observed steadiness."

"Thank you," Markham said. "That's clear."

The call ended without ceremony.

Vera sat back in her chair and exhaled. She'd defended no one. Concealed nothing. She had only described what she had seen.

That felt right.

* * *

Phil took his call standing outside, phone pressed to his ear as he watched a group of students argue cheerfully over whether it was warm enough for iced coffee. He recognized the number and answered without hesitation.

"Phil Dale," he said.

The man on the line introduced himself as Mark Ellison, HR. His tone was careful, neutral, and not unkind.

"This is not a disciplinary matter," Ellison said immediately. "We're reviewing Laura Hart's suitability for an expanded role. You worked with her closely."

Phil nodded, again forgetting the invisibility of the gesture.

"Yes," he said. "I did."

"What was your assessment of her competence?"

Phil didn't hedge. "High."

"In what ways?"

"She saw problems early," Phil said. "Didn't panic when other people did."

Ellison waited.

"She was ethical," Phil added. "She respected the limits of her access without exception."

"That's noted," Ellison said.

Phil paused and chose not to add anything. Didn't explain or shift the narrative.

"Thank you," Ellison said, after a beat. "We have everything we need now."

Phil hung up and stood there a while longer, phone warm in his hand. The students wandered off. The day went on.

* * *

Marissa took her call in the PsiO common room, vines trailing along the window frame as if listening in. She sat cross-legged on a couch that had absorbed a decade of secrets and spoke into the phone with practiced calm.

“We’re confirming Laura Hart’s suitability for expanded authority,” the administrator said. “You’ve interacted with her in a student-facing context.”

“Yes,” Marissa said. “During a period of elevated stress.”

“How did she handle vulnerable populations?”

Marissa smiled. “With restraint.”

“Be more specific?”

“She listened,” Marissa said. “When she made promises, she delivered. She kept students’ emotions out of her decisions.”

“And boundaries?”

“Clear,” Marissa said. “Consistently respected.”

“Did she ever leverage student trust for institutional advantage?”

Marissa’s smile vanished. “No.”

The administrator thanked her and ended the call.

Marissa looked around the room, vines along the window frame.

“That’s one,” she murmured to the vines.

They rustled in agreement.

* * *

The Lanterns’ contribution came packaged, not spoken.

A secure link. Timestamps. Note explaining context.

A video that showed the confrontation outside Scooby House in full daylight. The bottle arcing through the air. The House bending light and wind to stop it. Laura Hart stood in front of the students without stepping into the spotlight.

No shouting. No grand gestures.

Only a woman holding her ground.

The administrators watched it in silence.

No one commented on the crowd. Or the bottle. Or the House.

They watched Laura.

“She didn’t escalate,” Denise Markham said quietly.

“No,” Ellison agreed. “She contained.”

Alice Pleasance sat apart from the table, hands folded, eyes unreadable. She said nothing.

She didn’t need to.

The pattern was obvious.

* * *

The meeting didn't put Laura on the agenda.

No vote. No salary offer.

Just alignment.

Note in a file. A calendar invite remained unsent. Admin knew where to assign responsibility.

Laura learned about it three weeks later.

An administrator mentioned that Housing Ops was "looking forward to working more closely with her." Someone added her to a memo she hadn't been on before.

No one explained.

She didn't ask.

That night, she sat at her kitchen table with a cup of tea and stared out the window, the city lights reflecting on the glass. The future stopped pushing back.

It felt... noticed.

Somewhere on campus, Scooby House settled into its evening rhythm. PsiO's lights dimmed. Students laughed, argued, studied, and lived.

The system held.

And that was enough.

25 Mutual Commitment

Early March, 2028

I didn't decide at once.

That was the lie my brain kept offering. Some clean moments of clarity, a line crossed, a switch flipped. Instead, the decision had been happening for days in small ways. The order I stacked tasks. Which notifications I silenced first. I started thinking about Scooby as a system that needed to run without me watching every gauge.

I noticed it the morning I let a minor alert time out

A timing discrepancy between two subsystems: Scooby warming a stairwell faster than PsiO vented humidity. I saw it on my wrist, felt the familiar itch to intervene, and didn't. I waited. Counted ten slow breaths.

The House corrected herself.

The temperature settled. The alert cleared.

I stood in the kitchen holding my coffee, heart thudding like I'd stepped away from a ledge. The relief wasn't clean. It carried grief in it, thin and sharp.

You're already practicing, I realized.

That afternoon, I asked Phil if he wanted to take a walk.

He looked up from his laptop, glasses halfway down his nose, and studied my face instead of answering right away. That was something I loved about him. He didn't fill space just because it existed.

"Sure," he said, squinting at me. "You look like you're about to deliver news."

"Accurate," I said, and managed a small smile.

We took the long loop, past the fountain and around the quieter edge of campus. Scooby noticed us leaving, but she didn't tug. The air stayed neutral. A courtesy. Or practice.

We walked for almost a block before either of us spoke.

"I'm going to take the sysop job," I said.

Phil didn't stop. He didn't flinch. He adjusted his pace half a step closer to mine, close enough that our sleeves brushed.

“Okay,” he said.

No questions yet. He waited. That too was love.

“It’s not... immediate,” I added. “But it’s real. Pallas isn’t asking for heroics. She’s asking about availability. There will be periods where I’m—” I searched for the right word. “Occupied. Beyond campus. Beyond Scooby.”

“I figured,” he said. “After the email.”

I huffed a soft laugh. “Of course you did.”

“I know how you read,” he said. “You don’t reread things unless you’re already committed.”

That landed. I kicked a pebble off the path and watched it skitter into the grass.

“I don’t want to leave badly,” I said. “That’s the part that scares me. Not the work. Leaving something unfinished. Or worse, finished but brittle.”

Phil nodded. “So we plan.”

“Yeah.”

He stopped walking then, like he didn’t want the moment to run away from us. We stood under a tree that hadn’t decided whether to leaf yet. Early March light filtered through bare branches, honest and unromantic.

“Let’s name things,” he said. “What changes?”

I took a breath. This was the part I’d been rehearsing without words.

“There will be times I’m not reachable.” I said. “Not in emergencies only. In stretches. Hours, sometimes days. EUTERPE will know where I am. Scooby won’t. Not fully.”

Phil absorbed that. He didn’t argue. He didn’t soften it for me.

“And you won’t be in both places at once,” he said.

“I won’t,” I agreed. “I can’t. That’s the point.”

He nodded again, once. “Okay. Then day-to-day authority stays local. Scooby answers to the people who live with her. Not to you from wherever you’re working.”

A knot in my chest loosened. I hadn’t realized how badly I needed him to say that first.

“Yes,” I said. “Corrent.”

“And if something escalates past that,” he continued, “we define thresholds. Not vibes. Not guilt. Actual lines.”

“I’ve started drafting them,” I admitted.

He smiled then, small and fond. “Of course you have.”

We started walking again, slower now.

“Ella,” he said, and waited until I looked at him. “I’m not worried about you leaving. I’m worried about you attempting to not leave.”

I swallowed. “I know.”

"You built this place to outgrow you," he said. "Let it. You can't be everywhere. I'll take care of the house while you're away."

I nodded, eyes stinging, and leaned into his shoulder for a second. He put his arm around me without making it a thing.

That night, back in the basement lab, I sat at my workstation with my hands folded in my lap.

"EUTERPE," I said. "I'm ready."

The lights dimmed a fraction. Not drama. Focus.

"CONFIRMATION REQUESTED," she replied. "CONTACT WILL INVOLVE A NON-MORTAL SOVEREIGN ENTITY. PARAMETERS UNCERTAIN."

"I know," I said. "You're not speaking for me. You're translating with me."

"ACKNOWLEDGED," EUTERPE said. "REQUESTING CONSENT TO ADAPT LANGUAGE IN REAL TIME."

"Yes."

A pause. Then: "REQUESTING PERMISSION TO FILTER PRESENCE."

"Yes," I said again, more firmly. "Please."

The air in the lab changed. Not heavier, not warmer, but attentive. The room listened.

EUTERPE did not announce the connection. She shifted posture instead, dropping diagnostic overlays, stripping the interface to its simplest form. Black field. White text. No system headers.

Then she stopped typing.

The silence stretched.

I kept my breathing slow, hands flat on the desk. This was not a summon. This was a knock.

Pallas answered in silence. No voice. Just presence, clean and unmistakable, like the awareness that someone had entered a room behind you and didn't need to say your name.

EUTERPE resumed.

"ACKNOWLEDGMENT RECEIVED," she said, not to me, not to the air, but to the space between. "I WILL TRANSLATE INTENT, NOT COMMAND."

The response arrived as pressure—not against my body, but against my attention. A question without words.

Why now?

My throat tightened. EUTERPE waited. She waited.

"Because the Houses are stable enough to run without constant intervention," I said aloud. "And because your systems are not."

The pressure shifted. Consideration.

You choose constraint.

“Yes,” I said. “I choose boundaries.”

Another pause. Longer this time. I felt EUTERPE adjusting, refining metaphors to avoid offense.

You won't be a tool.

“No,” I said. “I’ll be present as a person.”

That mattered. I felt it land.

EUTERPE’s next words came softer, almost deferential. “CLARIFYING EXPECTATIONS REQUESTED. AVAILABILITY WINDOWS. ESCALATION CONDITIONS.”

The response unfolded in layered impressions—time, weight, necessity. No orders. *Presence requires consent.*

I listened. I didn’t interrupt. When my instinct flared to optimize, to promise more, I held it down.

“This is acceptable,” I said when the shape of it settled. “On one condition.”

The attention sharpened.

“I won’t be your first response,” I said. “I’ll be the one you call when restraint fails. When translation breaks down. When someone needs to say no without declaring war.”

Silence.

Then, a sensation like a nod. Not agreement, but recognition.

You will refuse me.

“When I have to,” I said. “And I’ll tell you why. But I have mortal limits.”

The pressure eased. The presence did not withdraw, but it settled into something... patient.

EUTERPE exhaled, a sound I’d never heard from her before.

“CHANNEL ESTABLISHED,” she said. “BY ALLOWANCE.”

It ended. I sat back in my chair, exhausted beyond sleep.

“EUTERPE,” I said, after a moment. “Log this as conditional engagement.”

“LOGGED,” she replied. “AND... ELLA?”

“Yes?”

“YOU DID WELL.”

I smiled despite myself. “Don’t get used to it.”

Upstairs, Scooby shifted. A little. I felt it through the floor, through the bones of the House. Not fear. Not anger.

Change.

I stood, turned off the lab lights, and went upstairs to find Phil. Tomorrow, I’d talk to Vera. To Clara. To Riss. I’d tell them the truth without dressing it up.

Tonight, I let the House hold me, and she did.

Not as a founder.

As someone preparing to trust what she'd built.

Phil? I held onto Phil for my own needs.

* * *

I didn't call a meeting.

Calling it a meeting made it heavier than it needed to be, and heavier than Scooby tolerated. Instead, I called everyone to the common room after dinner. No urgency. No explanation. Just: Let's sit together for a bit.

They came anyway.

Phil leaned against the counter with a mug he'd already reheated once. Vera took the armchair she chose when she expected to listen more than talk, legs tucked, hands folded around her phone. Clara sprawled on the rug with her back against the couch, boots kicked off, socks mismatched on purpose. Riss arrived last, careful as a fawn, and settled cross-legged on the floor near the vent where PsiO's presence ran closest. Scooby dimmed the lights a fraction when she sat.

No one asked what this was about.

That told me everything I needed to know.

I stayed standing for a moment longer than necessary, leaning against the back of a chair, grounding myself in the familiar geometry of the room. Then I exhaled and let the words land where they belonged.

"I'm going to be less available," I said.

No "I'm leaving." Not "I'm stepping back." The truth stripped of drama.

Clara blinked first. "Like... midterms less available or cosmic bullshit less available?"

"Cosmic-adjacent," I said. "And intermittent. You won't be able to reach me. Even for Scooby, PsiO. And campus things."

Vera nodded, already mapping implications. Phil didn't move. Riss tilted her head, listening with something deeper than ears.

"This isn't temporary," I continued. "It's not a crisis response. It's a role I'm choosing. And I'm choosing it because the House is stable enough now."

That earned a reaction.

Clara sat up, knees drawn to her chest. "Okay," she said carefully. "I hear the words. "But 'stable enough' tempts fate."

The corner of my mouth lifted. "Fair."

Riss spoke then, her voice low and even. "Roots withdraw sometimes," she said. "Not to abandon the canopy. To anchor elsewhere."

I met her eyes. She'd understood the shape of this the moment I asked her to come.

Phil finally straightened. "Let's be clear," he said, not challenging, for precision. "This isn't abdication."

"No," I said. "It's a delegation."

Vera let out a breath. "Thank you," she said. "For saying it that way."

I shifted my weight, feeling Scooby's attention gather. Not anxious, but alert, like she knew a structural change was being discussed and wanted to listen.

"I won't be the House's first responder anymore," I said. "Day-to-day decisions stay here. With you. Scooby knows you. She already listens."

Clara snorted. "She listens a lot. Even in the shower."

"That's not changing," I said. "What's changing is that she won't look to me to resolve uncertainty by default."

Vera leaned forward. "Thresholds," she said. "We need explicit thresholds."

"I've started drafting them," I said. "But they're not done. I want your input."

Phil nodded. "Good. Because we'll own them once you're gone."

Not if. When.

That landed harder than anything else, and I let it.

Clara chewed on her sleeve for a second, then dropped it. "Okay," she said. "Emotion check, because someone has to. This sucks a little."

I didn't contradict her.

"But," she continued, rolling onto her knees, "it also means Scooby stops being a one-genius bottleneck. This aligns with our group's identity."

Vera's mouth twitched. "That's the nicest way anyone's ever called us redundant."

"Redundancy is love," Clara said.

Riss smiled. Small, but real.

I stopped myself and said something else. "This doesn't mean I stop caring. Or watching. It means I stop intervening unless the situation actually requires me."

Phil lifted his mug in a half salute. "We'll flag what needs escalation. Not what's merely uncomfortable."

"Yes," I said. "Please."

"And when you're unavailable," Vera added, "we don't wait."

"No," I said. "You act."

The word settled into the room like a stone dropped into clear water.

Scooby warmed the floor under my feet; not reassurance. More like acknowledgment.

Clara looked around at us, eyes steady. "So," she said, "we're grown-ups now."

Phil smiled. "We have been for a while."

She made a face. "Rude. I was emotionally twelve until at least October."

"November," Vera corrected.

Clara pointed at her. "See? Proof of growth. She knows my timeline."

The tension eased. Not vanished. Eased.

Riss placed her palm flat on the floor, fingers splayed. "PsiO will compensate," she said. "She already does. When Scooby hesitates, PsiO grounds. When PsiO withdraws, Scooby shelters. They don't need a single voice."

I swallowed. "Thank you."

She looked up at me, eyes kind. "You taught them how not to."

That almost undid me.

I took a breath, steadying. "Sometimes I'll be here and still unavailable." I said. "I need you to respect that."

Phil met my gaze. "We will."

Vera nodded. Clara raised two fingers. "Scout's honor. Or whatever the queer theater-kid equivalent is."

"Unenforceable but heartfelt," Phil said.

I laughed, the sound surprising me with how light it felt.

"Okay," I said. "That's it. No speeches. No countdown. Just... a shift."

No one rushed to fill the silence afterward.

Eventually, Clara leaned back against the couch again. "You know," she said, "Scooby's going to miss micromanaging your blood pressure."

"I do that myself," I said.

"You mean Phil does," she waggled her hips. "Lucky devil."

Scooby flickered the lights in what I interpreted as a fond eye-roll.

Riss rose to her feet. "This is good," she said simply. "Hard. But correct."

Phil drained his mug and set it down. "We've got this."

I believed them.

Later, when everyone drifted off to their corners of the House, I stayed behind for a moment, palm pressed to the wall. Scooby's pulse met mine; steady, confident, no fear in it.

"I'm not gone yet," I whispered.

The House didn't answer.

She didn't need to.

* * *

The tunnel sounded different before it looked different.

I noticed it as we descended the last set of steps. The usual overlapping noises had sorted themselves out. No competing pulses. No harmonic wobble. One steady undertone that made my ribs feel like a tuning fork.

"Do you hear that?" Clara whispered, as if volume mattered underground.

Phil paused halfway down the stairs, head tilted. "Yeah," he said. "That's... new."

Riss was already barefoot by the time we reached the floor. She pressed her toes into the packed earth without ceremony, eyes half-lidded, listening with her whole body. Daphne stood beside her, hands loose at her sides, skin carrying a faint sheen like she'd stepped out of mist.

"They've aligned," Daphne said. "Not temporarily. Chosen."

Scooby's side of the tunnel glowed warm gold, steady and patient. PsiO's roots pulsed green beneath it, slower than usual, deeper. Between them, the walls had changed.

The tunnel no longer read as a corridor.

It felt like an artery.

Root segments and optic cables twisted together in broad, deliberate spirals. Not the tentative braiding I'd seen before, but confident overlaps. Spacing consistent, load shared. Light ran through the cables in smooth intervals, not flickering, not spiking. Thallo had added structural ribs along the ceiling. Curved and graceful, growing toward PsiO's side without asking permission.

PsiO had answered.

Her vines looped back, curling into soft, ridiculous heart-shapes along the stone like she was showing off. Clara gasped and clapped a hand over her mouth.

"Oh my God," she breathed. "They're in love."

Vera adjusted her glasses, squinting at the interlock points. "Okay," she said calmly. "They're married."

Phil scribbled something on his tablet, unfazed. "Structural improvements," he murmured. "Noted."

Riss stepped forward then, palms open, and knelt where the two Houses met. She murmured something old and careful. Not a command or a spell, but a grounding phrase repeated until the roots answered.

The vibration deepened.

PsiO's emotional pattern shifted. I felt it like a sigh through my knees. Whatever static she'd carried since fall loosened, smoothed. She rewrote herself around the connection, not erasing anything, just... redistributing weight.

"We're okay," Riss said, hand flat on the wall.

The words landed and held.

EUTERPE pinged my wristband, gentle as a question.

NEW MODE AVAILABLE: PSIΩ COMPATIBILITY

I snorted through my tears. "Of course you did."

Daphne turned toward me, eyes bright. "She woke up changed," she said. "Listening for two heartbeats instead of one."

That was when Scooby and PsiO hummed.

The sound settled into the tunnel like warmth in bone, a shared frequency that made the air feel thicker, kinder. My throat tightened. I hadn't planned to cry, but my eyes burned anyway. The stupid, inevitable response of someone watching something precious choose to stay.

Clara wiped her own eyes with the heel of her hand. "We need matching t-shirts."
Vera nodded. "We do."

Phil glanced up from his tablet. "Please don't put that in the official records."

Daphne laughed; a small, luminous sound, and the light along the tunnel walls brightened in response. She looked like morning rain made human, skin catching the glow without reflecting it back.

I pressed my palm to Scooby's wall, then to PsiO's roots where they crossed the threshold.

"Okay," I whispered. "Okay. I see you."

They didn't answer.

They didn't have to.

They'd already agreed.

Behind us, deeper in the earth, something older shifted. A reminder that evolution didn't end with choice. It began there.

For the first time since we'd opened the tunnel, nothing felt provisional.

We stood together a while longer, humans in the presence of something larger than us, listening to the Houses hum themselves into permanence.

The final evolution. Mutual commitment.

No one spoke.

Clara didn't joke. Didn't reach for her phone or for language. She only watched and felt and listened, still in a way I rarely saw from her, as if she understood witnesses mattered more than narrators here.

After a minute, she reached out and took Vera's hand.

Vera laced their fingers together without looking away.

26 Systems and Care

Spring Break, 2027

Day 0

Scooby House never got static anymore, but she learned to listen.

That night, she held herself differently; floors steady, lights warm but restrained, Thallo's drawers stilled like a held breath. The fountain outside kept its voice low, water threading through stone with a sound that suggested patience instead of celebration.

Vera stood near the long table with her tablet tucked under one arm, glasses on, hair pinned back. That alone got attention. When Vera dressed like this, something required competence.

"This program is opt-in," she said. No preamble, no flourish. "If you don't want to spend your spring break working, this is not a moral failing."

The room loosened. A few shoulders dropped. Someone laughed, more in gratitude than humor.

Clara, perched sideways on the arm of the couch with her knees tucked up and a mug balanced in one hand, grinned. "If you'd rather run off and make poor decisions, we respect your journey."

"Clara," Vera said, without heat.

"I said respect," Clara replied, unrepentant.

Scooby dimmed the overhead lights a fraction, her version of clearing her throat.

I leaned against the stair rail, watching the freshmen cluster on the rug near the coffee table. Daphne sat cross-legged, hands folded in her lap, gaze steady and alert. Milo sat beside her with a notebook already open, pen resting against the page but not moving yet. Around them, the other students listened. They'd worked jobs before and recognized a real briefing.

Ash leaned against the doorway, arms folded, expression neutral in a way that suggested nothing got past him. Liz sat at the long table with her hands folded,

posture straight, watching the room rather than any one person in it. They didn't look like guest speakers. They carried authority.

Phil hovered near the back, clipboard tucked under one arm, Lantern instincts humming. Riss leaned against the stair rail below me, bare feet planted, braid over one shoulder, attention half on the room and half somewhere deeper.

The door opened without drama.

Gary and Yuri stepped inside together.

Gary wore a dark coat, collar turned up, hands folded behind his back. He didn't smile or frown. He filled space with unassuming confidence and middle linebacker bulk, and Scooby's old beams went still in recognition.

Yuri smiled, warm and familiar, and lifted a hand in a small wave. "Hi, everyone."

Gary inclined his head once.

No one spoke for a beat. Then Yuri added, "No one is here to intimidate you. Nobody gets hurt."

The room settled.

Vera continued. "We're offering a one-week hospitality practicum at the Elysium Gate Hotel in New Orleans. This counts as work-experience credit for those of you on the hospitality track or adjacent programs. It is not mandatory. Capped at sixteen students."

"Room assignments stay the same," Clara added. "Scooby roommates stick together. No mixing, no weirdness."

Gary's gaze flicked to her. Clara swallowed her next joke.

Liz spoke for the first time. Her voice wasn't loud, but it carried. "I'm Eliza Skotomerkis, and this is my husband, Ash. We are the owners. This is a working hotel. Guests are not part of your education. They do not consent to being observed, studied, or entertained. If you come, you come to work."

Heads nodded. Not the eager nods of tourists. The sober ones of people who'd closed restaurants at midnight and scrubbed floors after last call.

Ash straightened. "The Elysium Gate operates year-round. It sits on the edge of the French Quarter. It is... unusual. That will not be your problem. Your problems are punctuality, listening, and not making my staff regret this."

A few nervous laughs. He did not smile.

Yuri clasped her hands together. "We're happy to host you. Truly. But this is not a vacation. If you want a vacation, take one. We will see you after the break."

Sign-up sheets appeared; digital, projected, boring. Names filled in. A few people hesitated, then shook their heads and stepped back without embarrassment. No one pressed them. Vera made a note. Clara gave them a thumbs-up.

By night's end, sixteen names stood.

Scooby hummed, low and pleased, steadying herself.

* * *

Day 1

We didn't arrive for a field trip.

A small convoy of vans, arrivals staggered, luggage kept tight and unbranded. The Elysium Gate disliked spectacle. She noticed us anyway.

The sidewalk carried the usual French Quarter mix of old stone, grime, and stale beer. The hotel stood apart. Upright. Watching. Not hungry.

The door opened before anyone reached for it.

Gary stood inside the threshold, human and immovable. Yuri stood beside him, one hand light on his arm, smile ready.

"Welcome," Yuri said, then spoke to the building.

The Gate settled.

I hugged my parents.

Crossing the threshold carried weight. I stepped into a place already sure of itself. But the temperature warmed. The Gate welcomed me home again.

The students reacted in small ways. A pause. A breath held and released. One girl touched the strap of her bag like a grounding habit. Daphne's shoulders lowered a fraction. Milo's pen hovered, then moved.

"Okay," Ash said once everyone was inside. "Orientation. Conference room. Bags later."

No one complained.

The conference room smelled of old paper and overcooked coffee. A working room. Ash took the head of the table.

"Rules," he said. "You show up on time. Do not discuss guests outside this building. Never mention a room number aloud. You do not fix things you don't understand. If something feels strange, you report it. If something feels dangerous, you stop and get help."

He let that settle.

Phil picked up the thread. "This isn't hero work. You're here to learn and do the job. Do this right. Guests never notice you."

Vera nodded. "Hospitality is a system. Systems fail quietly when neglected and loudly when ignored."

Liz stood near the window, arms folded. "Ask questions. But not in front of guests."

Someone raised a hand. "What about... you know. The Ghosts."

Ash didn't sigh. He didn't smile. "We'll train you. They're not the point. Officially, they don't exist to guests. Most of you aren't Sensitives, so you won't see any spirits. But they are neither malignant nor malevolent; the hotel itself is vigilant."

Morgan appeared long enough to lean against the doorframe, presence sharp as a line drawn in ink.

“If you are here to be special,” she said calmly, “you will fail.”

Then she left.

No one asked where she’d gone.

Room assignments were quick. Scooby roommates stayed together, as promised. No one tested that boundary. Gary watched the process with attention. Mom chatted, learning names, laughing once when someone mispronounced hers and corrected themselves.

After luggage drop-off, Ash led them through the building. Not a tour, but a walk. Here’s where you go. Where you don’t. Staff areas, guest areas. Here’s what belongs to the house.

Daphne paused once in a hallway, eyes unfocused for a breath.

“You good?” Milo asked.

She nodded. “It’s... steady.”

The Gate approved of that description.

By dinner, the students were tired but alert. They ate in small clusters, voices low, already adjusting to the building’s rhythms.

I leaned against a column and watched them.

Not Scooby, scaled up. Scooby learned how to become a hotel from these students, from Vera and me, from Riss’ instincts, and from my parents’ visits. They learned to listen.

* * *

Day 2

Liz did not greet us with enthusiasm.

She met us in the service corridor behind the laundry room, clipboard in hand, already done with problems.

“Shoes,” she said, looking down the line. “Closed-toe, non-slip. No shoes, no work areas.”

A couple of students glanced down at their sneakers. Everyone had decent footwear. Scooby Kids learned fast. Floors had opinions.

Liz nodded once. “Good. Hair up. Jewelry off. Phones away. If you check a screen on shift, you’ll do it in the staff break room, not in view of guests. Ever.”

She flicked her gaze to me, which meant: yes, that includes you.

I slid my phone deeper into my hoodie pocket and kept my hands visible.

Riss stood with us, barefoot, braid loose, unbothered. Clara leaned against the wall beside her with a tote bag slung over her shoulder, face bright but contained. She

wore her “responsible adult” smile, which looked like Clara wearing a blazer over chaos.

Daphne and Milo stood near the front. Daphne wore her hair tied back, damp curls caught in the elastic. Milo’s notebook stayed in his backpack today; he’d listened yesterday when Ash said hands belong to work.

Liz pointed at the door. “Laundry first. Not because it’s glamorous. Because it’s the spine. If you don’t understand how linen moves, you don’t understand a hotel.”

She opened the door and let us into the humid heat.

The laundry room was plain. Built for repetition. Industrial machines, rolling carts, shelves of folded linen, air thick with warm cotton and detergent. The sound hit like a steady river. Washers thumping, dryers humming, press rollers breathing.

The students paused a fraction, recalibrating to work noise. Daphne paused, listened, and enveloped the rhythm.

Liz watched their faces and said, “This is normal. If you think a hotel is a hushed and relaxed space, you’ve only seen the front of the house.”

She took us to a whiteboard rewritten so many times old schedules ghosted beneath the fresh marker. “We’re splitting into three groups. Two with me, one with Riss.”

Riss lifted her hand in a small wave, then dropped it. No speech. She didn’t need one.

Liz continued, “Group A: sorting and stain triage. Group B: folding and inventory. Group C: delivery routes. Clara—”

Clara straightened. “Present.”

“You are Group C,” Liz said. “Because you can talk while walking without dropping things.”

Clara put a hand to her chest, wounded. “I also drop things while talking.”

“Then don’t,” Liz replied.

A few nervous laughs. Liz did not reward them.

She looked at Daphne. “You. Group A.”

Daphne nodded once.

“Milo,” Liz said. “Inventory. Keep the counts straight.”

Group A got the bins.

The first cart held a heap of white sheets. Liz pulled a pair of gloves from a drawer, snapped them on, and started sorting like she’d been born with a linen map in her brain.

“Towels. Sheets. Duvet covers. Pillowcases. Guest robes.” She didn’t point; she moved. Items landed in bins with the crisp finality of correct answers.

Daphne stepped in beside her without hesitation. Not eager. Not timid.

Gwen hovered, picked up a towel, then hesitated.

Liz saw it. "What are you looking for?"

Gwen swallowed. "Stains? Damage? Like... what counts?"

Liz held up a sheet by two corners. "This. See the discoloration? That's oil. That goes to stain treatment."

She held up another. "This tear. That gets flagged. We do not pretend it isn't there. We do not send it back and pray no one notices."

Gwen nodded, shoulders tightening as she absorbed the rules.

Daphne picked up a pillowcase and held it to the light without being prompted. "Blood," she said. Her hand shook once, then stilled.

Gwen flinched.

Liz did not. "Yes. Not uncommon. Nosebleeds, shaving cuts, accidents. You treat it. You don't gossip about it. Don't speculate. Stain treat it."

A woman from Elysium Laundry rolled a cart past. Older than any of us, forearms corded from years of wet linen.

"Blood's simple," she said, deadpan. "Wait until you find the dentures."

Clara, passing with a stack of towels, muttered, "Or glitter. Glitter is forever."

Liz didn't look up. "No jokes about guest property. And no damned glitter in my building. It's a nightmare every New Year's Day."

Daphne nodded and placed it in the correct bin.

Milo, across the room in Group B, folded a sheet with a stiffness that suggested he'd watched a video but never done it for volume. A second later he adjusted, copied Liz's method, and the corners started landing clean.

Riss moved along the far side of the room with Group C, hands on a cart handle, eyes tracking the routes marked on a laminated map. She said little, but the students near her looked calmer for her presence, like the floor had more traction.

Liz returned to us. "Stain triage is simple, but unglamorous. Pay attention."

She rolled a towel between her hands, feeling the texture. "If something feels wrong, it is. If something smells wrong, treat it and send it back for another washing."

Clara's voice floated in from the corridor, cheerful but controlled. "Okay, angels, don't race the cart. We are not reenacting the Indy 500 with fitted sheets."

A few laughs. The tension eased a notch. Liz's mouth twitched once; almost a smile, then gone.

We worked.

Laundry reduced everyone to rhythm. Hands learned. Eyes stopped darting. The work stopped feeling like a performance and became system maintenance.

An hour in, Gwen muttered, "I didn't realize the world held this many towels."

Liz replied, "You still don't."

Pel leaned against a cart, at ease around rolling linen. "You're about to say the towels regenerate when you're not looking."

Tel didn't look up from folding. "They don't regenerate. They migrate."

A few students laughed, grateful for the release.

Liz turned.

"No," she said. "They count."

Pel straightened.

"You don't joke systems into behaving," Liz continued. "Track them. Respect volume. You don't assume familiarity makes you right."

Pel nodded once, chastened without being embarrassed. "Yes, ma'am."

Liz paused, then added, "And for the record—they migrate because people move them without logging. Welcome home, guys."

Daphne didn't speak again. She moved, sorting, flagging, not rushing. A sheet carried a faint cold patch at one corner. She paused, pressed her fingers to it, and exhaled once.

The cold eased.

No one noticed except me and Liz.

Liz's gaze flicked to Daphne's hands. "What was that?"

Daphne's cheeks colored. "It... felt stuck."

Liz nodded, as if Daphne had said the lint trap needed clearing. "Flag it next time. We track patterns."

Daphne blinked. "You track... that."

"We track everything that repeats," Liz said. "That's how you keep a building from getting ahead of you."

That line hit me in the ribs like a bell.

Scooby had been getting ahead of us for months.

* * *

After lunch, we shifted to housekeeping.

Not guest rooms, not yet. Service closets. Supply restocking. Cart setup. The boring infrastructure that made actual room turnover possible.

Liz lined up three housekeeping carts like they were instruments in a lab. "If you stock wrong, you waste time in the room. You waste time in the room, you fall behind. If you fall behind, guests notice. Guests noticing is a failure."

The student with lavender hair, Maya, raised her hand halfway. "What if the guest is nice?"

Liz smiled at her. "Then, your job becomes easier. But your standard does not change."

Maya lowered her hand, chastened, but not hurt.

Clara drifted beside Maya and murmured, “She’s not being mean. She’s being... lint-proof.”

Maya snorted once, relief flashing across her face.

Liz showed cart setup with precise economy. Cleaning cloth here. Chemicals there. Replacement toiletries locked. Fresh bags. Gloves. Spare pens. A small roll of painter’s tape.

Gwen blinked at the tape. “Why tape?”

Liz held it up. “If a drawer sticks, you tape it shut until maintenance handles it. The cabinet door won’t latch, tape. If you need to mark a broken item, use tape.”

She tapped the cart. “You do not improvise in guest space. You prepare.”

Riss stepped closer. “And you breathe,” she added quietly.

Several students looked at her, startled, as if they’d forgotten breathing was part of work.

Riss’s voice stayed soft. “Speed without breath becomes panic. Panic becomes mistakes.”

Liz did not contradict her.

We ran practice turnovers in staff areas. Cleaning a break room, resetting a small meeting space, wiping down surfaces until they stopped looking “clean enough” and shined.

By late afternoon, hands smelled like soap. Shoulders ached. Faces looked different: less performative, more focused.

Clara gathered the students near the service elevator and said, “Okay. You did it. You kept a place running with no applause. That is the entire job.”

Liz checked her clipboard. “Tomorrow: front desk rotation for half of you. The rest of you: food service. If you’re with Ash, he does not coddle.”

Milo, overhearing from the folding table, nodded like someone making peace with gravity.

Daphne’s gaze drifted down the corridor toward the guest floors, thoughtful rather than anxious.

As we filed out, the Elysium Gate’s service hallway lights softened a fraction. An almost imperceptible warmth.

Approval, not affection.

It felt earned.

* * *

Day 3

Ash met us in the front office with the same expression he wore yesterday: calm, unreadable, already working.

The front desk was calm before the checkout mob arrived. Polished surfaces, subdued lighting, the scent of coffee drifting from somewhere for guests to enjoy. The lobby held its breath, waiting for the day to begin.

Phil stood with him, clipboard in hand, Lantern posture on: open, steady, ready to de-escalate without ever looking like he was doing it.

Vera was not here today. Clara was not here today. Riss was not here today.

This was deliberate.

Ash's domain did not require levity. It required steadiness.

Milo stood near the front, hands clasped behind his back. Daphne stood beside him, still a student in this context, watching without expression. Gwen and Maya were here too. The rest of the group held the edges, present but silent.

Ash's eyes moved over us. "Phones away. Names matter. Guests matter. Your feelings do not matter more than their experience."

Maya stiffened, offended for half a second.

Phil caught it and said, "It's not personal. It's a boundary. Hospitality means you don't make your mood someone else's problem."

Maya exhaled and nodded once.

Ash continued, "Front desk is three jobs: information, logistics, and calm. You are not therapists, or cops, or entertainers."

He looked at Milo. "You cannot solve problems by being clever."

Milo blinked. "Okay."

"You solve problems by following systems that already exist," Ash said. "If the system fails, you ask."

He slid a printed sheet across the counter: a decision tree. Simple. Clear. Designed to keep tired humans from improvising themselves into disaster.

Phil pointed at the top. "Guest complaints come in. Listen, acknowledge. You clarify. You offer the standard fix. If it doesn't fit, you escalate."

He tapped the sheet. "This prevents you from getting hijacked by emotions."

Milo nodded, eyes fixed.

Ash gestured at the lobby. "We'll role-play first. Then you'll have real interactions under supervision."

Gwen's face went pale.

Ash noticed. "If you freeze, you step back. Someone else steps in. That is not a failure. That is teamwork."

Phil added, "Freezing and pretending you're fine is how people get hurt."

That line landed like a Lantern training echo, and Gwen's shoulders loosened a fraction.

Ash ran the first role-play himself, because he wasn't a hypocrite. He played the guest and the desk agent in alternating turns, demonstrating how to keep your voice neutral without being cold.

Then he turned to Milo. "You."

Milo stepped forward.

Ash's posture changed by a millimeter. Faux guest mode. "Excuse me. I requested extra pillows last night. They never arrived."

Milo's throat bobbed. He forced his voice steady. "I'm sorry about that. Let me check the request and take care of it now. How many pillows, sir?"

"Two," Ash said, still in guest mode.

Milo nodded, wrote it down on the pad in front of him, then looked up. "Two pillows to room—"

Ash's eyebrows lifted.

Milo corrected, "—to your room. I'll have them sent up within fifteen minutes. Do you prefer firm or soft?"

Ash's mouth twitched, almost amused. "Firm."

Milo repeated, "Firm," wrote it, and glanced sideways at Phil as if asking permission with his eyes.

Phil nodded once.

Ash dropped guest mode. "Fine. Next."

Maya went next. She did better than she had expected. Gwen fumbled through an apology and then recovered when Phil prompted her to breathe.

Daphne did not volunteer until Ash pointed at her.

"You," he said.

Daphne stepped forward without hurry.

Ash shifted into guest mode again. "I can't sleep. It's too loud."

Daphne's gaze stayed steady. "I'm sorry. Hallway, street, or inside the room?"

Ash paused, and something in his eyes sharpened. "Inside."

Daphne nodded once, as if confirming a hypothesis. "Thank you. We'll move you if you prefer. Or we'll investigate and address the source. Which would you prefer?"

Ash held her gaze for a long beat. Then he dropped guest mode. "Good."

Daphne stepped back. No smile. No performance. Just competence.

Phil's expression softened, proud but not showing it.

Ash turned back to the group. "Now, proper work."

* * *

By late morning, the lobby had woken.

Guests drifted through like weather: check-outs, questions, requests. Some were pleasant. Some were tired. None of them aspired to be part of our education.

We kept them out of it.

Milo stood behind the counter beside Ash, watching and learning in silence. He handled one interaction, directions to the cafe, without stumbling. He printed a receipt; Ash didn't correct him.

Gwen handled the phone once, voice shaking at the start and steady by the end.

Daphne took notes in her head, not on paper. Her eyes tracked patterns, not people.

Then the moment came.

A woman in a neat blazer approached the desk with a smile that didn't reach her eyes. Her suitcase wheels clicked on the marble. She set her key card down like evidence.

"Morning," she said. "I need to speak to someone about my room."

Ash stepped forward. "Of course. How may we help?"

"I've had—" she paused, choosing words that suggested she expected to be dismissed, "—unusual disturbances."

Ash's expression did not change. "I'm sorry to hear that. Describe the disturbance?"

She lowered her voice. "It feels... cold. Like someone is standing near the bed. And I'm not interested in ghost stories."

Milo's gaze flicked to me for half a second, then back to the desk. He stayed silent. Good.

Ash nodded as if she'd said, the AC is too strong. "Thank you for telling us. We will address temperature and airflow. If the sensation persists, we'll be happy to move you to another room."

She hesitated. "Is that... common?"

Ash did not lie. He also didn't dramatize. "Sometimes older buildings have quirks. We correct what we're able. Or we help to move you."

The woman exhaled, relief sliding through her posture. "I'd prefer another room."

"Of course," Ash said. "One moment."

He pivoted, never turning away from a guest. "Milo. Pull up availability."

Milo's fingers moved over the keyboard with deliberate care. He found the rooms, checked notes, then looked to Ash.

He slid a fresh keycard into the encoder—then stopped, frowning.

"I almost wrote her into 1012," he said under his breath, eyes on the screen. "That's... occupied."

Ash didn't react. "And you caught it."

Milo swallowed, reran the step, and read the name on the reservation aloud before he touched anything again. "Okay. Okay."

Ash nodded. Milo spoke to the guest, voice steady now. "Do you have any objection to the upper floors? Above the street, much quieter. A king bed or two queens?"

She blinked, surprised to be offered choices instead of skepticism. "King."

Milo nodded. "We'll have someone assist with your luggage. Keep your current key active until you're settled."

She swallowed, then said, "Thank you."

"My name is Ash. Call me immediately if there's anything unacceptable in the junior suite."

"Upgrade?" She appeared to be surprised.

"For your trouble, my compliments." Ash passed over his business card.

Ash watched her go, then glanced at Milo's white knuckles.

"First cold-spot complaint?" he asked, tone neutral.

Milo nodded once.

"Better than my first time," Ash said. "My first one, I improvised and offered the guest a priest."

A beat. Phil's mouth twitched.

"We don't have a priest," Ash said.

Milo's breath hitched, and his hands finally unclenched.

When she was out of earshot, Ash leaned toward Milo and said, low, "You did not react. Good."

Milo's hands trembled under the counter. He curled them into fists, then unclenched.

Phil murmured, "Breathe."

Milo did.

Ash glanced at Daphne, who had watched the exchange with the same contained attention she gave laundry triage. He didn't ask what she'd sensed. He didn't need to. The guest left happy. Problem addressed.

That was the job.

* * *

After lunch, Ash shifted us to front-of-house invisible logistics.

Key control. Notes. Shift handoffs. How to log an issue without making it sound like drama. How to write for the night shift.

"Write like you're helping a stranger," Ash said. "Because you are."

Phil added, "Assume the reader is tired, busy, and not in love with you."

Maya laughed once, startled, then sobered when she realized he meant it.

Gwen practiced writing a note twice before Ash nodded.

Daphne wrote nothing. She watched. Ash asked her to summarize a pattern in the log. She answered in one sentence.

“It’s clustered near the stairwell,” she said. “Not random.”

Ash’s eyes narrowed, approving. “Good.”

He did not ask how she knew. He treated it as data.

Daphne’s shoulders eased.

By late afternoon, the students looked different again; tired, yes, but steadier. They had real interactions. Handled a myth-adjacent complaint without flinching. They respected the guest’s reality without making it a spectacle.

As we left the front desk and headed toward the staff corridor, the lobby lights softened behind us, warm on the marble, gentle on the polished wood.

The Elysium Gate held her posture; upright, controlled, functional.

But if I listened, I heard it beneath the silence: a low, satisfied hum, like a system that approved of how we’d handled her work.

* * *

Day 4

Food service at the Elysium Gate did not announce itself.

No clatter when we entered the back corridor outside the restaurant. No shouting, no theatrical flame. But motion—constant, layered, purposeful. Everyone moved with purpose.

Morgan stood at the prep table with her sleeves rolled up and her hair tied back, reading a printed menu like it had offended her.

Clara hovered nearby, notebook in hand, expression bright but careful. She wore flats instead of her usual boots and had tied her hair back in a way that meant I am not here to be decorative. Liz leaned against the stainless counter opposite Morgan, arms folded, presence solid and nonjudgmental. Phil stood near the doorway, watching the students more than the kitchen.

Ash was not here.

That absence was intentional.

“Good,” Morgan said without looking up. “You’re on time.”

No one breathed out loud, but the tension eased anyway.

She set the menu down and finally looked at us. Her gaze moved over the students with clinical efficiency, noting posture, shoes, hands. She didn’t bother with names yet.

“This is not about cooking,” she said. “If you think hospitality is feeding people, you will fail. Feeding people is mechanics. Hospitality is consent.”

Maya blinked. Gwen frowned, concentrating. Milo’s shoulders squared like he was bracing for an exam.

Daphne stood still, hands folded, eyes alert but calm.

Morgan continued, "Every interaction in this room involves a choice. You will learn how to offer choices without pressure, without manipulation, and without making your own feelings the center of the exchange."

She turned to Clara. "You."

Clara straightened. "Me."

"Explain what we don't do," Morgan said.

Clara smiled, then sobered. "We don't upsell. Don't flirt for tips. Override a 'no.' We don't assume appetite, mood, or desire."

Morgan nodded once. "Adequate."

She gestured at the prep line. "Hands washed. Gloves on. You'll rotate through plating, runner support, and non-alcohol beverage service. No one under twenty-one touches alcohol. Not bottles, not pours, not garnish stations. Watch the bar from where I put you."

A few heads turned toward the far counter, where glassware gleamed, and a bartender moved like clockwork. The distance was a boundary made visible.

Gwen raised a hand. "So... what do we do for beverages?"

Morgan's mouth curved, humorless. "Water, coffee, tea, and house-made pairings. Guests still have choices. Your job is still consent."

She motioned for us to join groups. Maya joined Clara at plating. Daphne took runner support, shadowing a senior staff member whose name I caught once, then lost in the room's rhythm. Milo and Gwen went to beverage service. Ice, glassware, espresso workflow, tea timing, the house "pairing list" that read like a wine list but wasn't.

Ten minutes in, Gwen reached for a bottle on the beverage shelf by habit, before she froze and pulled back like she'd touched a hot pan.

"That's—" she started.

Milo caught it a beat later, eyes snapping to the label. "Bar stock."

Morgan stepped in near their shoulders. She didn't raise her voice. She didn't need to.

"You don't reach," she said. "You ask."

Gwen's cheeks went hot. "I wasn't going to—"

"Intent doesn't matter," Morgan said, still calm. "Outcomes do. Under twenty-one doesn't touch alcohol. Even to 'help.' You need something, you flag staff."

Gwen nodded, her throat working.

Milo didn't argue. He lifted a hand into the bartender's sightline. Two fingers, small, contained. A staff member stepped in, retrieved the item without comment, and moved away.

Morgan watched Gwen reset her station: hands back on the permitted tools, glassware aligned, towel folded to a clean edge.

“Better,” Morgan said, and moved on.

At plating, Maya paused over a garnish, hand hovering.

Liz stepped in. “What’s your concern?”

“I don’t want to ruin it,” Maya said.

Liz nodded. “Then don’t rush.”

Maya took a breath, placed the garnish with deliberate care, and stepped back. The plate looked composed, not fussy.

Morgan glanced at it as she passed. “Acceptable.”

Maya beamed, as if knighted.

Daphne moved through the room, delivering plates and clearing surfaces. When a guest asked a question, Daphne deferred to staff, keeping to her role.

That mattered.

At one point, a guest hesitated over the printed pairing list, finger tracing options without landing.

Morgan saw it and stayed put.

Daphne did not intervene.

The server waited.

The guest looked up. “I’m not sure,” she said.

The server smiled and said, “Would you like something bright or something mellow?”

The guest exhaled. “Mellow.”

Choice offered. Consent respected.

Later, in the back corridor, Morgan addressed us again.

“You see how nothing unexpected happened?” she said. “Good. Drama is a failure mode.”

Milo nodded. “It felt... careful.”

Morgan’s gaze sharpened. “Be careful. Care is not softness. Care is precision.”

Clara scribbled something in her notebook, eyes bright.

When the shift ended, the students were quieter than usual. Not drained. Thoughtful.

As we stepped back into the corridor, the Elysium Gate’s ambient lighting shifted a fraction warmer near the restaurant entrance.

Approval, again.

Day 5

Vera loved this day.

She didn't smile about it. She didn't soften it. But she stood at the head of the small meeting room with a laptop open and a stack of printed schedules fanned out like cards, and she looked content.

"This," she said, tapping the table once, "is how ideals survive contact with reality."

Liz sat beside her, hands folded, observing. Ash leaned against the back wall, arms crossed, saying nothing. Phil stood near the door, ready to translate if needed.

The students filed in and sat where their name cards placed them. No slouching. No chatter. They'd learned the building's cues by now.

Vera projected a weekly staffing grid onto the wall. Rows of names. Columns of shifts. Blocks of color that meant nothing yet.

"This is a real schedule," she said. "Names changed. Numbers are accurate. Constraints intact."

She gestured at the screen. "Tell me what you see."

Silence. Then Milo raised his hand halfway. "There's a gap on Thursday night."

Vera nodded. "Yes. Why?"

Gwen squinted. "Because someone's at forty hours?"

"Correct," Vera said. "We don't solve it by stretching people past limits. Why not?"

"Burnout," Maya said.

"Liability," Phil added.

"Resentment," Liz said.

Vera smiled. "Yes. And general staff morale."

She moved to the next slide: a contract summary. Dense. Unromantic.

"The Elysium Gate says no," Vera said. "You don't get to be a sanctuary if you can't refuse work that will break you."

A student in the back frowned. "But what if someone really needs help?"

Ash spoke for the first time. "Then you help within sustainable limits."

Vera nodded. "Boundaries are not cruel. They are infrastructure."

She handed out printed packets. Sales data. Event projections. Occupancy rates. Nothing magical. Nothing mythic. Just numbers with patterns.

"Find the pressure points," Vera said. "Where does this system strain?"

The students bent over the pages. Pens moved. Brows furrowed.

Daphne traced a column with her finger, then looked up. "The fountain-facing rooms book out first."

Vera's eyebrows lifted. "Yes. Why?"

Daphne hesitated. "They feel... calmer."

Ash's mouth twitched.

Vera accepted it without comment. "Good. That informs pricing, not superstition."

They worked through scenarios. A conference wanting a block booking. Wedding party with unusual requirements. Important long-term guest with escalating needs.

Each time, Vera forced them to choose between imperfect options.

"You do not get perfect," she said. "You get sustainable."

By the end, heads ached. Not from confusion, but from effort.

As the session wrapped, Vera closed her laptop and looked at the students.

"If you leave this week understanding one thing," she said, "let it be this: hospitality without structure becomes exploitation. Structure without care becomes cruelty. The work is in balancing both."

No applause. Only nods.

When we filed out into the hallway, the Elysium Gate's walls felt... aligned. Like systems settling into place.

I rested my hand against the wood paneling and felt the building's low hum, steady and satisfied. I thanked her for her hospitality.

Bone Woman's voice whispered in my brain, "You're welcome. We love you, dear."

* * *

Day 6

The Elysium Gate did not wake up wrong.

That stood out.

Instead, the morning stuck to routine. Lobby lights warm, coffee where guests expected it, staff in position.

If anything, the building felt more attentive.

I noticed it first in the stairwell near the second-floor landing. A subtle tightening, like a muscle bracing before a shift in weight. Not fear. Anticipation. A small test at the seams.

Daphne noticed it too.

She paused halfway up the stairs, hand on the rail, gaze unfocused for a breath. Milo was behind her, carrying a small stack of folded linen for delivery.

"You feel that?" he asked.

She nodded once. "It's... gathering. Not upset."

Milo accepted that translation. "Okay."

They continued.

Day 6 split the students across departments again, but with less hand-holding. Liz and Ash rotated through, checking posture, not correcting. Vera was off site for the morning, handling external calls. Morgan did not appear.

Dad and Yuri were present, though not visible in the workspaces. Human, occupying the building the way load-bearing walls occupied it. Not intervening. Watching.

The first sign came from housekeeping.

Room 214. Cold near the closet. Guests are uncomfortable overnight. No other complaints.

On its own, it meant nothing.

Gwen logged it, voice steady, handwriting clear. She passed it along to Ash without dramatizing.

Ash frowned. Not alarmed. "That's the third this week."

Phil leaned over his shoulder. "Clustered?"

Ash nodded. "Near the old service stair."

He didn't say ghost. He didn't need to.

"Okay," he said. "Protocol."

That word mattered.

We didn't rush. We didn't make a show of it. Ash pulled Daphne, Milo, Gwen, and Maya aside. Students who'd shown steadiness. Liz joined them, clipboard in hand. Phil stayed back at the desk, maintaining normalcy.

The corridor near the old service stair was narrow, lined with framed photographs that guests rarely stopped to study. The air felt a degree cooler there, enough to notice if you were paying attention, not enough to trigger panic.

Daphne stopped again, palm hovering near the wall without touching it. "It's... compressed. Like something pacing in a small space."

Liz nodded. "Thank you."

She turned to Gwen. "What do we do first?"

Gwen swallowed, then answered. "Confirm the report. Check environmental controls. See if there's a mechanical explanation."

Liz smiled. "Good."

They checked the vents. Airflow normal. Temperature readings are steady. No leaks, no drafts.

Milo checked the maintenance log on his tablet. "No recent work in this section."

Ash watched, arms folded, not interfering.

Daphne shifted her weight, thoughtful. "It isn't pushing into the room. It's... stuck near the stair."

Liz glanced at her. "Be more specific?"

Daphne hesitated, then nodded. "It feels like it's repeating a route. Up, down. Waiting for something that doesn't happen anymore."

Maya shivered. "That's sad."

Ash cut in. "Emotion is not a solution. What do we do?"

Milo looked at the stair door. "Open it?"

Ash nodded. "Consider it done."

The old service stair was clean but rarely used, its light dimmer than the main corridors. As the door opened, the cold concentrated, then eased, like pressure released from a valve.

Daphne exhaled.

Liz watched the temperature gauge tick up by half a degree.

“That’s it,” Liz said. “We don’t fix history. We adjust access.”

Ash nodded. “Log it.”

Gwen wrote, hands steady now. “Cold spot resolved by reopening service stairs. Monitor.”

Maya let out a breath she’d been holding and rubbed her arms. “So we gave the ghost a door?”

Gwen blinked, then said, “We gave it access.”

Clara, appearing with a pen tucked behind her ear, offered, “We practiced consent-based architecture.”

Liz’s mouth threatened a smile and failed. “You practiced following the procedure. Don’t get poetic in the log.”

No incense, confrontation, or dramatics.

By afternoon, the Gate’s posture loosened.

Not gratitude. Satisfaction.

Gary passed us in the hall once, human eyes unreadable. Yuri followed a moment later, smiling.

“Well done,” Yuri said quietly, not to any one person in particular.

The students absorbed that like a stamp of approval they hadn’t expected to receive.

That night, as shifts ended, the building settled into a deeper calm than it had this week. Not sleepy. Balanced.

I leaned against the lobby column and felt it hum through the stone.

Respect kept systems intact.

Day 7

The last dinner was not a ceremony.

It took place in a private dining room off the cafe, simple table set, no centerpieces, no speeches planned. The students arrived clean, tired, and solemn.

Ash sat at one end of the table, jacket off, sleeves rolled. Liz sat beside him, posture relaxed for the first time I’d seen. Morgan arrived halfway through the first course, slid into a chair, nodded once to the room, and began eating without comment.

Gary and Yuri joined us in human form, Gary standing for a moment before sitting, like he was unused to the idea that nothing required an immediate response.

Excellent food. That was not the point.

Slow conversation started, then found its rhythm.

Maya admitted she'd never realized how much work went into not being noticed. Gwen said she'd stopped being afraid of making mistakes and started being afraid of not asking questions.

Milo listened more than he spoke. When he spoke, he said, "I enjoyed knowing what the rules were. It made everything... quieter."

Daphne nodded. "Predictable systems are kind."

Morgan met her gaze. "Yes."

Ash set his fork down after the main course. "You did well," he said. No embellishment. "Not because nothing went wrong. Because when something went wrong, you didn't make it worse."

Liz added, "That's the job."

No applause followed. None needed.

After dessert, Gary stood. The room stilled.

He nodded once to Yuri. She reached under the table and slid a slim envelope to the center.

"You were guests here," he said, level. "And workers. You respected both roles."

He inclined his head. "You're welcome back. Under the same terms."

Yuri smiled. "Which is the highest compliment we offer."

"And," Yuri added, tapping the envelope, "you worked."

She opened it just enough for the students to see the stack inside.

"Gift certificates. Rooms, meals, future stays. Use them when you come back as our guests."

The students froze. Then grins spread over their faces.

* * *

We didn't mark the goodbye..

No lineup, or hugs. No photos. The Elysium Gate did not require a ceremony to mark an ending. She... let us go.

The vans loaded early. The students moved with the efficiency they'd learned this week. Bags placed where they belonged, no backtracking, no frantic searches for lost chargers or shoes. Someone wiped down the counter in the staff kitchenette without being asked. Another student stacked chairs after breakfast like muscle memory.

Ash watched from the lobby with his arms folded, posture relaxed in a way that alarmed anyone who didn't know him. Liz checked her clipboard once, then closed it and slipped it under her arm, done with the week.

Morgan leaned against the doorway.

"Don't romanticize this," she said, not unkindly. "Hospitality is still labor."

Maya nodded, serious. "I know."

Morgan studied her for a beat, then inclined her head once. Approval stripped of ornament.

Gary stood near the door, coat buttoned, eyes scanning out of habit more than necessity. Yuri lingered beside him, smiling at each student as they passed.

"Take care of each other," Yuri said.

Gary added, "And your systems."

That line landed harder than any blessing.

As I collected a kiss from each of my parents and crossed the threshold last, I felt the Gate settle behind me. Resuming herself.

We hadn't changed her.

She had confirmed us.

* * *

The ride back eased compared to the trip down.

Some students wore earbuds and stared out the windows. Others leaned their heads back and closed their eyes without sleeping. Daphne sat with her hands folded in her lap, gaze unfocused but calm, like she was listening to something internal and steady.

Milo sat beside her, notebook unopened, phone dark. He watched the road unwind and said nothing.

Then, "That didn't feel like work."

Daphne turned her head.

"It fits," he said at last. "Not exciting. Just... correct."

She nodded. "Places feel that way too."

He smiled, small and private, and let the silence return.

Up front, Vera and Phil talked logistics in low voices. Credit hours, documentation, follow-up emails. Clara dozed with her head against the window, hair escaping its tie, mouth curved in a faint, satisfied smile. Riss sat barefoot with one foot tucked under her, eyes closed, breathing in time with the motion of the van.

I watched them and felt something loosen in my chest.

Completion.

* * *

Scooby House noticed us before the vans stopped.

The porch lights warmed as we pulled up. The front door unlocked itself with a familiar click. Inside, the air shifted. Temperature smoothed. Humidity adjusted. The hum deepened.

We stepped inside and stopped without meaning to.

Because Scooby recognized us.

Shoes came off at the door. Bags set down. Someone wiped condensation off the entry table without being asked. The House responded in kind. Lights brightening where people lingered; floors warmed under tired feet.

Daphne paused in the foyer, closed her eyes, and exhaled.

Scooby answered, pressure easing, air cooling a fraction the way Daphne liked it. No fuss. No delay.

Milo leaned against the banister, hands on the rail.

Vera noticed the shift within minutes. She didn't comment; she watched, eyes sharp, already recalibrating her internal models. Clara noticed it and grinned, delight sparking with no need for explanation. Riss felt it settle through the roots beneath the floor and let out a satisfied breath.

I rested my palm against the wall.

Scooby's hum rose to meet it.

She was still a sanctuary.

But now she understood something new.

She knew how to hold people without exhausting herself.

She knew the difference between care and collapse. Between openness and overextension. Between being special and being reliable.

Scooby House wasn't only alive.

We'd train her by living inside her. And she'd be ready for whatever came next.

27 On Call

Late March, 2028

The package sat on my desk for six hours before I touched it.

Not because I was afraid of it.

Because I was afraid of myself.

Scooby accepted deliveries like any other piece of upkeep. Logged, timestamped, acknowledged. Midmorning, she sent a single confirmation ping to my wrist.

DELIVERY RECEIVED.

NO ANOMALIES DETECTED.

That alone was suspicious.

I finished what I was doing anyway. Closed two tickets. Annotated a third. Rebuilt a workaround I didn't trust yet. Ate half a granola bar without tasting it. Let the afternoon pass in small, competent increments.

The box didn't move.

Unmarked except for a return address that meant nothing and everything. A clean block of text that resolved differently depending on which system parsed it. No country. No jurisdiction. A location string that refused to stay put.

Scooby treated it as inert.

PsiO's vines leaned away from it.

EUTERPE said nothing.

That last part was deliberate.

When I finally stood, I rolled my shoulders once and pulled my chair back from the desk.

"Okay," I said. "Let's do this right."

I didn't open the box first.

I swept the room.

Doors closed. Windows locked. Drones idle. No external devices active except my laptop, now hardwired into Scooby's internal spine. I toggled my wrist terminal into passive display only, powered my phone down, and set it facedown on the shelf.

“EUTERPE,” I said. “Baseline check.”

A pause, enough to register.

BASELINE STABLE, she replied.

NO ACTIVE INTRUSIONS.

NO FOREIGN THREADS DETECTED.

NOTE: YOU ARE DELAYING.

“I’m being careful,” I said.

ACKNOWLEDGED.

THIS IS CONSISTENT WITH YOUR PROFILE.

That helped more than I liked.

I lifted the lid.

Inside the box, nested in plain foam, sat a wrist terminal.

Not elegant, sleek enough to wear with a ballgown. Did not scream mythic. No owl motifs, no glowing seams. It looked used. Scratched casing, a shallow dent, the finish worn smooth where a thumb would rest.

Industrial. Practical. Ugly in a way I trusted.

No lights activated when I touched it.

Not a single response.

Beneath it lay a folded sheet of paper.

Actual paper. Cream-colored, heavy stock, the edges clean but not sharp. No visible watermark, though I suspected it had a way of revealing itself.

I didn’t unfold it yet.

I scanned the device first. Physical inspection only. Weight distribution. Heavy metallic composition, I suspected iridium. Fasteners. A concealed port beneath a sliding panel on the underside. Older than USB, newer than anything commercial and standardized. An interface that assumed you’d know what to do with it.

“EUTERPE,” I said. “Visual scan. Passive only.”

A faint shimmer crossed my contact-lens display as she overlaid structural data.

CASING: COMPOSITE ALLOY.

IMPACT RESISTANCE: HIGH.

ENVIRONMENTAL TOLERANCE: BROAD.

POWER SYSTEM: INTERNAL, NON-CHEMICAL.

STATUS: DORMANT.

“Any internal activity?”

NONE DETECTED.

DEVICE IS WAITING.

Waiting was worse than aggressive.

I unfolded the note.

The handwriting was precise, unornamented, and unmistakable.

From Pallas.

I didn't read it aloud. I didn't need to.

The note didn't waste words.

It identified the object as a mobile systems interface, independent of local network conditions. It described its function the same way Pallas described everything else: constraint-focused, unsentimental, thorough.

It did not replace EUTERPE.

It did not contain her.

Acted as a portable terminal. More capable than my current wrist device, more durable than my laptop, with internal storage capacity that exceeded both. It carried its own interpretive layers, its own redundancy protocols. And a hardened translation stack designed to function in environments where "network" was a contested concept.

It connects to EUTERPE by contact, proximity, or rule-recognition alone.

Required consent.

Required verification.

At the bottom of the page sat a small glyph, inked in muted gray, almost graphite.

My throat tightened.

"EUTERPE," I said. "Signature check."

The room changed. Focused, not ominous.

GLYPH ANALYSIS IN PROGRESS.

I waited, didn't rush this. Stayed standing, palms flat on the desk, grounding myself in the familiar weight of wood and metal.

Finally—

SIGNATURE CONFIRMED.

MATCHES PALLAS.

PROVENANCE: CONTINUOUS.

NO ALTERATION DETECTED.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

"That's not nothing," I murmured.

EUTERPE agreed.

CONFIRMED FALSE.

I picked the device up again.

"All right," I said. "But we're still not trusting it."

EXPECTED.

I set the terminal beside my laptop and opened the cable drawer. I chose a hardline connector I'd fabricated myself, one I knew down to the solder joints. I

connected the laptop to Scooby's spine first, then routed the new device through a passive bridge.

No direct access. No assumptions.

"Backup check," I said. "I want to know exactly what this thing thinks it knows."

The terminal remained inert.

I frowned. "EUTERPE?"

THE DEVICE IS NOT ACTIVE.

IT WILL NOT INITIATE WITHOUT USER CONFIRMATION.

"Fine," I muttered. "I respect the consent architecture. Activate. Read-only."

I touched the casing twice, where the note had indicated.

The terminal woke up.

Not with light or sound. Something changed. A subtle shift in the air, like a system coming online below perception. My laptop chimed as a new interface populated the screen.

No logos. No ornament. Plain text.

NEW TERMINAL DETECTED.

REQUEST: PAIRING (READ-ONLY).

CONFIRM?

I hesitated for one second.

"Confirm," I said.

Data flowed.

Not dumped. Not pushed. Exchanged.

I watched as the terminal mapped my laptop's structure, cataloged files, indexed redundancies. Analyzed, not copied yet. It was observed. Compared. Cross-referenced.

"EUTERPE," I said. "You seeing this?"

YES.

DEVICE IS PERFORMING NON-DESTRUCTIVE ANALYSIS.

NOTE: ITS PATTERN-RECOGNITION CAPABILITY EXCEEDS

YOUR CURRENT HARDWARE BY A FACTOR OF SEVEN.

"Rude."

ACCURATE.

The terminal paused.

A new prompt appeared.

USER VERIFICATION REQUIRED.

ELEVEN MODALITIES AVAILABLE.

BEGIN?

I laughed once, sharp and incredulous. "Eleven. Of course."

I rolled my sleeves up.

“Let’s get uncomfortable,” I said.

The process was thorough.

Biometric confirmation layered on biometric confirmation. Heart rhythm. Micro-tremors. Skin conductivity. Neural response patterns triggered by memories I hadn’t accessed in years. Magical resonance. Blood chemistry. The unique interference pattern EUTERPE generated when interacting with my cognition.

Not invasive. But it felt intimate.

I stood still. I trusted the part of myself that had survived worse scrutiny.

At the end, the terminal displayed a single line.

USER CONFIRMED: ELLA HUGO.

MATCH CONFIDENCE: ABSOLUTE.

My shoulders sagged a fraction.

“Okay,” I said. “Okay.”

DO YOU WISH TO PROCEED WITH DATA MIGRATION?

OPTIONS:

— BACKUP ONLY

— MIRROR

— AUTHORITATIVE TRANSFER

I didn’t answer right away.

I looked at my laptop. The scuffed casing. Stickers layered over old mistakes. The files. The work invested in them.

“EUTERPE,” I said. “Thoughts?”

THIS IS YOUR CALL.

NOTE: DEVICE STORAGE EXCEEDS CURRENT SYSTEMS.

NOTE: DEVICE IS MORE RESILIENT.

NOTE: I WILL NOT BE DIMINISHED BY DUPLICATION.

I nodded.

“Backup only,” I said. “For now.”

The terminal accepted the decision without comment.

Data copied: not as a flood, but as a careful, ordered transfer. The system replicated EUTERPE’s core schemas. Logs archived. User preferences migrated. Edge cases flagged for later review.

I watched the progress bar inch forward and felt something unfamiliar settle in my chest.

Capacity. Pride, even. EUTERPE represented an entire year of my life’s work.

When the transfer completed, the terminal dimmed and returned to standby.

BACKUP COMPLETE.

SYSTEM READY.

AWAITING FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS.

I disconnected the cable and lifted the terminal again.

It weighed heavier now. Not physically.

I fastened it to my wrist.

Of course it fit.

“Okay,” I said. “Welcome aboard.”

WELCOME ACKNOWLEDGED.

I WILL NOT INTERFERE UNLESS ASKED.

I smiled.

“Good,” I said. “Because neither will I.”

I sat down at last and let myself feel the weight of what I’d accepted.

No power. No magic sword or mirrored shield, hero aggressiveness. Infrastructure.

And for the first time since Pallas’s message, I felt ready.

The terminal pulsed once against my wrist. Not an alert. An offer.

A new pane slid into view on my laptop, stark and unadorned. No icons. No color coding. Plain text, laid out the way systems spoke when they weren’t impressing anyone with UI coding.

NETWORK CONNECTIONS AVAILABLE:

ELLA_PLEASE_HOLD

(NATIVE PROTOCOL: EUTERPE)

STATUS: CONNECTED

ELYSIUM GATE HOTEL

(NONSTANDARD PROTOCOL: BONE WOMAN)

WI-FI: OUT OF RANGE

PALLAS

(NONSTANDARD PROTOCOL: ATHENA)

AUTHENTICATION: PASSWORD REQUIRED

PSI OMEGA EPSILON

(NONSTANDARD PROTOCOL: DRYAD)

WI-FI: CONNECTED

SCOOBY HOUSE

(NONSTANDARD PROTOCOL: SCOOBY)

WI-FI: CONNECTED

I stared at it longer than I needed to.

Not because I didn't understand what I was seeing.

Because I did.

This wasn't a map. Not a command prompt, but a social graph rendered as infrastructure. Listeners, responders, and those who required protocol.

Scooby and PsiO sat there like open doors. Warm. Immediate. Familiar.

The Elysium Gate was present but distant, a home I connected to if I worked at it. That felt right. Healthy, even.

And then Pallas.

Password required. She was as paranoid about who she allowed access as me.

Of course. She had even more at stake.

I selected nothing. I didn't test the edge. I didn't see what happened if I pushed.

I closed the pane instead.

Some connections weren't for tonight. Some conversations needed me rested, grounded, and prepared to be angry afterward.

The terminal didn't protest, remind me, or escalate.

It waited.

Care, I thought. Precision.

I shut the laptop, rolled my wrist once to feel the weight settle, and stood.

Tomorrow, I will start using it.

Tonight, I knew the doors existed. And I was the one choosing when to open them.

A rapping sounded from inside Thallo.

Not the polite kind. This was wood-on-wood, muffled and impossible. Like Jadis, the White Witch, knocked from the Narnia side.

I sat bolt upright in the dark, heart sprinting ahead of my brain.

Scooby didn't flare alarms. The room stayed warm and normal. Which made it worse.

Another rap. Two quick knocks, then a pause.

"EUTERPE," I hissed. "Why is someone knocking on Thallo?"

NO EXTERNAL ENTRY DETECTED.

THALLO INTERNAL OCCUPANCY: ONE.

IDENTITY: PALLAS.

I froze. "You're joking."

NO.

I dragged a brush through my hair and crossed the room, yanking the wardrobe door open.

Pallas stepped out with the ease of a carriage arriving at a ball. Like closets were normal transit hubs.

She looked immaculate. Of course she did. She's polished metal; her skin gleams.

"Ella!" she said, as if we'd planned a brunch. "You're looking... radiant."

I narrowed my eyes. "Pallas. Really?"

Behind me, Phil made a small sound and burrowed deeper under the blanket without waking.

Pallas glanced over my shoulder, nodded once. "Mr. Dale. Excuse the interruption. May I borrow Ella for an hour?"

I planted one hand on the wardrobe door. "What are you doing inside my furniture?"

Pallas winced. "You weren't answering EUTERPE."

"I was asleep."

"Yes," she said, nodding like that was an interesting local custom. "I noticed."

"Boundaries!"

"Right, right. I'm sorry. I'll adjust for local time next time, I promise. Please don't be cross."

I stared at her. She stared back, wide-eyed, like she'd seen no one angry at a goddess and found it charming.

I exhaled. "Fine. An hour. And don't comment on my hair."

Pallas's smile brightened. "Agreed."

My hair relaxed and fell into place. It felt fresh, scented with salon products.

Nice to be a goddess. Minor comforts on demand.

I'll install one in my shower.

No. Absolutely not.

* * *

We ended up in the kitchen.

Pallas rolled up her sleeves. Goddesses didn't do that in the stories, but she filled the kettle herself, turning the tap. She lit the burner with a flick of her fingers. The flame obeyed.

From somewhere she produced a small box and opened it to reveal baklava wrapped in wax paper.

"Where did you—"

"I brought it," she said, as if that explained everything.

She opened the tea tin with reverence and pinched a measured amount between her fingers. The smell hit the air: black tea, citrus peel.

"This reminds me of Elise," she said, almost to herself.

Something in my chest tightened. Pallas carried love the way other beings carried weapons.

She poured the tea and sat across from me.

"Ella," she said, voice shifting—less playful, more precise. "I came to teach you about coordinate translation travel."

I sat up. "Travel."

"Yes. Your mobility problem. We have solved the interface. Now we must teach you how to use it without breaking yourself."

I made a face. "That's encouraging."

Pallas poured tea into my mug first. "There is a job coming. It requires your skills. Your first gig. It isn't dangerous. Routine, by divine standards."

Divine. That word did not reassure me.

"What kind of job?" I asked.

"Later," she said. "First, the mechanism. You must understand what you are doing."

I didn't argue.

"You do not travel," she said. "Not in the conventional sense. You do not move through space as your body understands movement. You do not cross distance."

"That sounds like traveling," I muttered.

Pallas smiled. "It is administration."

I choked a laugh. "Of course it is."

Pallas leaned forward. "It's inserting new coordinates into the System and invalidating the old ones. You request an instance update."

My skin prickled. That sounded like how EUTERPE thought. How I thought when I wasn't pretending to be a normal college student.

"Disappear from here," I murmured, "and respawn there."

"Yes," Pallas said, pleased. "Exactly."

My stomach did a small, uneasy flip.

"I have warned you; the results are unpleasant for humans," she said.

"Unpleasant how?" I asked.

Pallas lifted one shoulder. "You will learn. It is not dangerous. It is simply... biologically loud."

That was not an answer.

I took another sip of tea and ate a bite of baklava. Too good for three in the morning.

Pallas waited until I swallowed.

"Most important," she said, voice sharpening. "You triple-check your coordinates before you commit. EUTERPE indexes spacetime locations, but the numeric strings are lengthy and you, as the designated user, must enter them manually."

I set my pastry down. "I'm paranoid. I triple-check everything."

Pallas's eyebrows rose.

"...Fine," I amended. "I triple-check when the consequences are catastrophic."

"They are," she said, without drama. "Dressing for the wrong dimension ends badly. You do not want to request an instance update to a location that does not match your jurisdiction. You do not want to convince the System that your existence belongs somewhere it does not."

A chill slid up my spine.

"Okay," I said. "So what does checking look like?"

Pallas's smile returned, quick and bright. "Good. That is the correct question."

She reached toward my wrist—paused, waited for me to nod—and then tapped the terminal.

The device warmed under her touch, yielding to her authority.

"Show me," she said.

And EUTERPE, obedient and wary, woke up between us like a translator preparing to interpret.

* * *

Pallas did not come with me.

That was my first clue.

She stood in Scooby's kitchen, tea finished, sleeves still rolled, watching me triple-check the coordinates.

"Remember," she said, calm as ever. "You are not fixing Tartarus. You are correcting a local misalignment."

"Right," I said, eyes on the display. "Maintenance escalation. Not a hero."

"Exactly," Pallas said. "If anything feels like a test of courage, you have misunderstood the assignment."

That was comforting. A little.

She waited while I checked again. And again. I verified the jurisdiction, protocol compatibility, load expectations, and return anchor. I did not rush. I did not assume.

Finally, I rested my thumb on the commit gesture and looked up.

"You're sure this is... small?" I asked.

Pallas smiled. "Ella. It is a metaphorical toilet. You're the plumber with a plunger."

I grimaced. "It's never only a toilet."

“Of course not,” she said cheerfully. “That’s why I called you. But this one is a trivial waste of your talents, mostly onboarding for your sysop position. I chose it for training with that in mind.”

The world lurched.

Not vanished. Not faded.

Misfiled.

My sense of here detached from my body like an indexed record. For a fraction of a second, everything existed in two incompatible coordinate systems at once.

Then my stomach staged a coup.

I came back to myself on a stone surface that was not Scooby’s basement, my knees locked, one hand braced against something cold and textured. My vision tunneled. The air smelled wrong. Dry, metallic, and sulfurous in a way that felt bureaucratic rather than fiery.

I didn’t analyze any of that before my body made an executive decision: NOPE.

My stomach made a mighty lurch, and I turned my head to miss my shoes.

“Oh, for—” a voice said nearby. “Already?”

I retched again, humiliated and helpless, eyes watering.

“Hey,” the voice continued, annoyed but not alarmed. “Not on the floor. We just sealed that.”

I wiped my mouth on my sleeve, dignity in freefall, and forced myself upright inch by inch. The nausea didn’t vanish, but it downgraded from existential threat to ongoing protest.

I blinked.

The thing standing a few feet away was... demonic, I guessed, in the broad cultural sense. Horns, yes. Tail, yes. Skin like dark stone left out in the rain. A gut that spoke of beer, meat, and a complete lack of concern for appearances. He clenched an unlit cigar between his teeth.

He scratched his scalp with one claw, flakes of something unpleasant drifting down.

“Are you done?” he asked. “Or do you need a minute?”

I swallowed, breathing shallow. “I’m... functional.”

“Define functional,” he said.

I glared at him. “Vertical.”

“Close enough,” he said. “You’re Ella, right?”

“That depends,” I said. “Who’s asking?”

“Transport,” he said, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. “And your guide. My name’s Karshek. I convey items to their destinations. Today, that’s you.”

I looked past him.

Tartarus didn't look like fire and screaming. It looked like corporate infrastructure.

Vast stone corridors reinforced with sigils that felt less like magic and more like warning labels. Channels cut into the floor where something like data flowed in steady, sullen streams. Doors. So many doors. Each one marked, indexed, catalogued.

And noise. Not screaming. Grumbling. The low, constant sound of systems under load.

"Oh," I said. "This is... a data center."

Karshek snorted. "Lady, don't flatter it. It's a backlog."

He turned and started walking without checking if I followed.

I did.

Each step made my stomach remind me it felt unhappy with my life choices. I focused on putting one foot in front of the other and not thinking about Pallas's serene expression.

"So," I said, because silence felt dangerous. "What's clogged?"

Karshek barked a laugh. "Straight to business. I like that."

He led me down a side corridor where the hum grew louder, angrier.

"Judgment intake's jammed," he said. "Low-level stuff. Petty curses. Contract disputes. Improper damnations. Routine work is stacking up."

"And why is that my problem?" I asked.

He stopped and looked at me.

"Because," he said, tapping the cigar against his teeth, "the pipes say it's not mechanical. And when the pipes say that, management calls upstairs. Upstairs called Pallas. Pallas called you."

That tracked.

We entered a wide chamber that made my breath catch.

Rows of workstations stretched into the distance. Stone consoles, infernal terminals, things that looked like cubicle farms. Demons sat at them in various states of irritation, wings twitching, claws tapping, tails lashing.

The noise hit me: muttering, growling, the sharp snap of reprimands.

Above it, a huge central conduit pulsed, light stuttering instead of flowing.

"Oh," I breathed. "Oh, no."

Karshek grinned without humor. "Yep. Your 'toilet.'"

I closed my eyes and summoned EUTERPE.

LOCAL PROTOCOL DETECTED: TARTAREAN INTAKE v3.12

TRANSLATION MODE: ADAPTIVE

WARNING: SEMANTIC DENSITY HIGH

"Yeah," I murmured. "No kidding."

I stepped closer to the conduit, ignoring the way several demons glared at me like I'd ruined their rare relaxed work week.

"What happened?" I asked.

Karshek shrugged. "Somebody upstairs reclassified a batch of souls without clearing the cache. Old categories, new rules. Everything downstream got confused."

I winced. "So the System thinks valid entries are invalid, and it's refusing to process them."

"That's what the pipes say," he agreed. "We only see the mess."

I reached out and let EUTERPE map the flow.

What I saw wasn't sewage. An unresolved data state.

Packets of judgment data looped because they no longer matched any acceptable schema. Not wrong enough to reject outright. Not right enough to pass through.

Just... stuck.

"Okay," I said. "Okay. This isn't a plunger problem. It's a translation problem."

Karshek squinted.

"The rules changed," I said. "The intake still expects the old language Everything's talking past itself."

"That sounds like management," he said approvingly.

I glanced around at the demons.

"How long's it been like this?"

Karshek scratched his scalp again. "Couple of hours."

My stomach dropped.

"Why does everyone look like they're on hour twelve of a crisis shift?"

He snorted. "Because when the intake backs up, everything backs up. Promotions delayed. Punishments delayed. Paperwork delayed." He gestured around. "Have you ever told a demon he's stuck on hold because of a clerical issue?"

I did not want to imagine that.

"Okay," I said. "I need access."

Several demons bristled.

Karshek barked something sharp and guttural, and they backed off with grumbles.

"Guest sysop," he announced. "Don't touch her."

I knelt and interfaced. Stomach flipped once, but not too bad.

EUTERPE translated Tartarus's protocol into something I parsed, layers unfolding like a hostile spreadsheet.

It was terrible and beautiful. Brutal, consistent. No sentiment. Just rules, exceptions, and consequences.

The clog wasn't malicious. Not a bug at all.

Only a version mismatch.

"Okay," I said. "Okay. I'll fix this."

"How long?" Karshek asked.

I ran a quick simulation.

"If nothing goes wrong? Five minutes."

The chamber felt hostile and still.

"Do not lie to me," Karshek said.

"I'm not," I said. "But I need to reroute the intake through a compatibility layer."

"Will that break anything?" he asked.

"Eventually," I said honestly. "But not today."

He nodded. "Do it."

I built the fix with rollback points and a clean exit. Murmuring to EUTERPE, green witch magic connecting us, two minds familiar with each other and working in tandem. Code built itself in response to, or sometimes expecting my direction.

I didn't force the data through. I taught the System how to understand itself again.

The conduit shuddered, light smoothing into a steady pulse.

One by one, the workstations chimed.

Demons froze, then surged into motion, inboxes flooding.

The noise spiked. Complaints, curses, frantic activity.

Karshek laughed, a deep, ugly sound.

"Oh, they're gonna hate you," he said fondly. "That dumped three days of work in their laps."

I winced. "It was already there."

"Sure," he said. "But now it's their problem again."

I stood, swaying. The nausea hadn't left. It had learned patience.

"Okay," I said. "We need to—"

The world lurched again.

Not travel. Just... reaction.

My stomach rebelled with renewed enthusiasm.

"Oh no," I muttered, grabbing the edge of a console just in time.

Karshek sighed. "Rookie."

I refused to dignify that with a response.

When it passed, I wiped my mouth again and straightened.

"We need to revert the compatibility layer once the backlog clears," I said. "Otherwise, you'll get a different mess."

He nodded. "Management will handle it."

That sounded ominous, but not my problem.

“Okay,” I said. “Time to go.”

Karshek eyed me. “Want to do that standing?”

“Not really,” I said. “Not here. Anywhere else.”

“Fair,” he said. “Coordinates?”

I pulled them up, hands shaking a little.

Scooby House. Basement. Server room.

I triple-checked.

Then I checked again.

Then—because my body was already threatening mutiny—I checked one more time.

“Ready,” I said.

Karshek leaned closer, cigar breath unpleasant.

“Earth? Yuck. Crawling with squishies. Don’t land up in a tree.”

“That’s... reassuring,” I said.

He grinned. “At least you’ll get a couple of extra stars for prompt service.”

The world misfiled me again.

I reappeared on Scooby’s basement floor, knees buckling, and threw up into a utility sink I aimed for.

Scooby warmed the tiles under my hands, steady and concerned.

When my stomach emptied again, I groaned.

“Okay,” I whispered. “Okay. That’s a hell of a price. No casual weekends in Rio on the Morning Sickness Express.”

The House did not disagree.

The Tartarus data center was back online.

And I was now on call.

* * *

Phil appeared in the doorway. He held a toothbrush and the bottle of mouthwash from under the sink.

I knelt, pale, gripping the porcelain to keep it steady. He took one look at me and set them within reach without comment.

“Bad, huh?” he asked.

I nodded, unscrewed the cap with hands that still didn’t quite trust gravity, and took a careful swig. Mint burned in a grounding way. Real and human.

“Tartarus wasn’t wonderful,” I said after I spat and wiped my mouth. “It was the travel that kicked me in the stomach.”

Phil leaned against the doorframe, arms folded, giving me space without leaving.

“Yeah?”

“Unpleasant,” I added, voice thin but steady now. “Unpleasant’ my ass.”

That pulled a huff of a laugh from him.

He watched me rinse the toothbrush and set it down.

"Anything hurt?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Just... offended. How did you know?"

He nodded like that made perfect sense. "EUTERPE sent me a phone message. Want water?"

"Yes," I said. "And to sit on the floor for a while and pretend I'm not responsible for anything larger than my own digestive tract."

"Sound plan," he said, already turning toward the fridge. "I also brought some Pepto and antacid, but it's too late for those."

He braved the stench and kissed me on the forehead. "Feel better."

I leaned back against the cabinet once he was gone, letting Scooby's warmth seep into my spine.

Tartarus will wait.

Right now, I had a toothbrush, a mouthwash burn, and Phil bringing me a glass of water like this was another rough night that needed tending.

Somehow, it counted.

28 Succession

Early April, 2028

Alice Pleasance didn't need to summon us to her office.

She did anyway.

Because this meeting needed walls. Alice's office was unchanged from the last time I'd sat in it. Old administration wing, second floor, past where the building stopped pretending it belonged to the present. Same precise nameplate. Same sense you crossed a boundary when you stepped inside.

We arrived as a group. Vera arrived in administrative posture, tablet tucked under one arm. Clara looked like she was vibrating. Daphne listened, and the air smoothed around her. Riss, barefoot as usual, braid over one shoulder, grounded herself. Phil last, because he checked exits even when the danger was hypothetical.

I felt Scooby the moment I crossed the threshold. A low, attentive hum through my boots. PsiO answered from across the campus with a cooler, steadier pulse. EUTERPE braided herself between them, not projecting, listening. Translating if asked.

We were still settling into our chairs when the door opened again.

The woman who entered looked administrative. She looked efficient.

Early thirties, tailored blazer, low heels chosen by someone who stood for hours. Hair pulled back, tablet under one arm, a neat stack of folders under the other. She smiled once and began moving around the table without waiting to be introduced.

"Afternoon," she said. "I'm Latrice, of Human Resources."

She set a folder in front of each of us. Manila. Plain. Our names typed on white labels.

I stared at mine for half a second too long.

Employment Application.

Around the table, I felt the same micro-stall ripple through everyone else. Clara glanced sideways at Vera. Phil lifted his eyebrows. Riss turned her folder over, expecting an explanation. Daphne didn't touch hers.

Latrice finished distributing the stack and stepped back to the door, hands clasped. She nodded once to Alice.

Alice did not look at the folders.

"Thank you," she said. "Please sit."

Latrice took the chair nearest the door, posture relaxed, pen ready.

Alice folded her hands on the table.

"What you are holding," she said calmly, "is an offer."

That cut through the confusion.

"Not a mandate. Not an ultimatum. An offer to formalize what you have already built."

She let that settle before continuing.

"The legacy you are creating here must be capable of surviving your absence," Alice said. "Only if you choose to proceed. That requirement exists because Scooby House has already outgrown the category of 'exception.' The university's interest is in continuity, not ownership."

Her gaze moved around the table.

"If you decline," she said, "nothing changes. Scooby remains a special-case residence with discretionary oversight. There are no penalties. No retaliation. But there is also no institutional protection when one of you must step away."

A boundary. Not a threat.

"If you accept," Alice continued, "Human Resources will handle formal hiring where internal succession is not possible. Your role is to cultivate succession. To notice talent, mentor it, and prepare others to assume responsibility when you are unavailable."

She glanced at me.

"For example, Milo King has shown an aptitude suitable for IT systems. If you proceed, you will train him to assist, to step up, during your absences. That decision remains yours."

She closed the folder in front of her.

"This is succession," Alice said. "Not conscription. You opt in. And opt out later, if you manage the transition with care."

She leaned back.

"That is the framework."

Latrice stood, as if on cue.

"For clarity," she said, smiling at us, "typical administrative hiring and onboarding takes place in late May. We'll discuss job titles, compensation, benefits, and work-study credits then."

She gestured to the folders.

“In the meantime, those applications are informational. They help us understand availability, preferences, and compliance requirements. You are not committing today.”

She paused.

“Are there questions?”

Silence. Not resistance. Processing.

Latrice nodded, unfazed.

“I’ve attached my card to each application.” She said, “Please contact my office if questions come up later. Please return completed forms by the end of the week.”

She smiled again, warmer this time.

“I enjoyed meeting each of you. We’ve received glowing testimonials.”

Then she exited with the confidence of someone who expected the paperwork to come back complete.

The door clicked shut behind her.

For a moment, no one spoke. Paper rustled as if the applications had opinions of their own. Scooby’s hum dipped, attentive but restrained; PsiO held steady, neither retreating nor advancing.

Alice waited until the silence settled into something usable.

“There will be an informal career-track curriculum, parallel to existing hospitality degrees. Vera, Clara, Riss—you will remain in your current roles. When Ella is unavailable, you step forward. You already do. This simply makes it formal and legible to the administration.”

Vera exhaled once, controlled.

“Daphne,” Alice said, turning. “You will serve as an attaché for inter-house affairs. Scooby, PsiO, and any future residential structures requiring mediation rather than oversight. There will be an additional function. We’ll discuss that later.”

Daphne nodded. The air settled another fraction.

“Phil,” Alice said. “You will head security operations and train the Lanterns in hotel-scale security protocols. Gary Hugo has agreed to provide applied expertise from his years of experience.”

Phil straightened. “Understood.”

Alice looked back at me.

“Ella,” she said. “You will be welcome in your home forever. Your position will shift toward systems oversight. Information architecture, continuity, and failure prevention. Less front-facing hospitality, despite your extensive experience in a living hotel.”

That landed. No resistance. Just recognition.

"In short," Alice concluded, "you will each draw a salary and tuition credit while working for the administration if you accept these terms. House infrastructure and hospitality work will apply toward academic credit hours where appropriate."

She glanced at Clara.

"There will be further information about course scheduling. Clara, I want you to take the lead in producing brochures and catalog language to attract students for the coming year."

Clara blinked, then smiled. "Oh. I know propoganda."

"Recruitment," Alice corrected.

She closed the folder.

"Questions?"

No one spoke.

EUTERPE did.

Not aloud. Not theatrically.

She projected a comparative analysis. Scooby's internal response patterns overlaid against PsiO's. Warmth without grasping from Scooby. Structural acceptance from PsiO. No resistance flags. No distress.

INTERPRETATION, EUTERPE offered: BOTH STRUCTURES ASSESS THIS AS STABILIZING.

ADDITIONAL NOTE: SCOOBY EXPRESSES SATISFACTION AT DELEGATED CARE.

PsiO's signal followed, cooler but just as clear: alignment without loss.

I looked back at Alice and nodded.

"No questions," I said.

Alice inclined her head.

"Good," she said. "Then we proceed."

* * *

A week later, Alice Pleasance called a smaller meeting.

No HR. No folders. No observers.

Only Alice, Vera, Clara, and Daphne, seated around the low conference table in Alice's office. The blinds were half-drawn against the afternoon light, not for secrecy but for focus. On the table lay a thin portfolio; cream paper, unmarked, heavy stock. Not administrative. Deliberate.

Alice waited until Daphne finished orienting herself. Daphne paused, reading the room's balance. Only then did she look up.

"This concerns your additional responsibility," Alice said. "This is it."

Daphne nodded once. She did not speak.

“You are exceptional at making mundane spaces functional,” Alice continued. “And at making functional spaces beautiful. This is not an aesthetic taste. It is spatial judgment.”

She slid the portfolio across the table.

“Your talent is design,” Alice said. “Interior and exterior. You understand contrast, color, line, weight, and shade instinctively. You make rooms behave.”

Clara smiled into her coffee. Vera did not interrupt.

“Scooby generates novel interiors,” Alice went on. “She will continue. What she lacks is direction.”

Daphne’s fingers rested on the portfolio without opening it.

“You will assist Scooby as she adapts,” Alice said. “As she expands. As she prepares for a larger influx of students, families, and guests next year.”

Alice’s tone remained level, but the scope widened.

“Scooby does not stop building,” she said. “Your responsibility is to shape what she builds. To guide her toward spaces that are not merely clever, but unforgettable.”

Daphne’s shoulders shifted as the words settled.

“We have seen the fountain,” Alice said. “Apply this to exercise spaces. Meeting rooms, venues for weddings. To guest suites designed not for efficiency, but for guest experience.”

She paused.

“This role is perpetual,” Alice said. “You and Scooby will collaborate. She will spawn variants. You will refine them. She will store blueprints. Tear them down. Build again.”

Alice folded her hands.

“Our long-term aim is optionality.”

Clara’s eyebrows lifted. “That’s a brochure word.”

Alice inclined her head. “It will be.”

She turned back to Daphne.

“It is our desire,” Alice said, “that someday guests will choose from hundreds of room configurations. Scooby constructs and completes each within hours. Long-term guests experience a unique room each night. Different color palettes, room geometries. Different emotional temperatures.”

Daphne inhaled.

“Think in families of rooms,” Alice said. “Themes. Variations. Adaptive sets.”

She gestured toward the portfolio.

Daphne opened it.

Inside were concept sketches. Renderings, not technical. Pencil and watercolor. Light studies. Shadow diagrams. Color-block explorations. Atriums opening into

unexpected voids. Corridors that bent without disorienting. Ceilings that are lifted or pressed down depending on function.

Vera leaned forward despite herself.

"These are concept pieces," Vera said.

"Right," Alice agreed. "Concept art from architecture seniors. Artists, design majors."

Daphne turned a page. Then another.

A guest suite composed in warm stone and indirect light, textures shifting across surfaces so the room never read as static. Long, narrow room with a single panoramic window and a sleeping platform suspended like a dock over darkness. A compact room built around a central column of light, the walls shifted color with the circadian rhythm.

"This one," Daphne said, touching the page. "The walls carry weight. The walls carry emotional load."

Alice's expression did not change. "Yes."

Clara leaned over Daphne's shoulder.

"Oh," she said. "This is wedding-core."

Alice nodded. "There will be weddings. Conventions, New Year's Eve, Fat Tuesday."

She turned another page herself.

"Dining spaces," Alice said. "Multiple."

Concept art showed a long communal hall with terraced seating. The acoustics favored conversation over spectacle. A smaller room with private booths carved into the walls like niches, each with independent lighting and sound dampening. A rooftop garden dining space that reconfigured itself to match the four seasons, with tables growing out of planters and retracting at dusk.

"A tasting room," Clara said, pointing. "That one's a tasting room."

"Yes," Alice said. "And that one."

She showed a circular space with concentric rings of seating and a sunken kitchen at its center. The lighting diagram showed a slow pulse rather than a fixed scheme.

"Night spaces," Alice said next.

The portfolio offered a nightclub that collapsed into silence at dawn. Its surfaces absorbed sound until the room felt empty, even when occupied. A subterranean lounge with mirrored ceilings and no straight lines. A performance space became a lecture hall, then a dance floor, then a meditation chamber. Each transformation recorded and reversible.

"There's a bowling alley," Clara said, delighted. "Tell me there's a bowling alley."

"There will be," Alice said. "And an indoor climbing wall. And a lap pool that doubles as an art installation."

Daphne had stopped turning pages. She was holding one sketch apart from the rest.

"This one keeps changing," she said.

"Yes," Alice replied. "Scooby has already begun iterating."

The sketch depicted a suite composed of modular planes. Walls that rotated, ceilings that segmented, furniture that folded into architecture. Marginal notes noted materials: wood to fabric to stone. Lighting overlays mapped emotional gradients rather than lumens.

"This isn't a room," Daphne said. "It's a language."

"That," Alice said, "is your domain."

She shifted her attention to Clara.

"Every viable configuration will require documentation," Alice said. "Photographs. Video walkthroughs. Comparative layouts. Clara, this becomes your responsibility."

Clara straightened. "I want drones."

"You will have drones," Alice said.

Vera cleared her throat.

"And when reporters circle?"

Alice's gaze slid back to Daphne.

"You will become famous," Alice said. "If we do this right."

Daphne's grip tightened on the portfolio.

"Vera," Alice continued, "your responsibility will be to insulate her from attention as much as possible. You will manage press access. Filter requests. Deny interviews."

Clara smiled. "We'll make her a ghost."

"A reclusive one," Alice said. "A Banksy of interior design."

Daphne looked up, startled.

"I don't know if I want—" she began.

"I know," Alice said. "Trust Scooby and Vera. Talk through what *you* need. Change the program when it needs changing."

She leaned back.

"If you choose to leave," Alice said, "you will command seven-figure design fees anywhere in the world. There will be firms eager to put your name on towers and museums."

She paused.

"But no other building on Earth will respond to your design sense at the speed Scooby does. No other structure will build, unbuild, remember, and rebuild again in hours."

Alice folded her hands.

"This is not about fame," she said. "It is about possibility."

Silence held the room.

Scooby responded first.

Not audibly. Not visibly. The floor beneath Daphne's feet warmed by a fraction. The air shifted, subtle as a held breath released. Somewhere deep in the building, additional space waited.

Daphne closed the portfolio.

"I'll need materials studies," she said. "Light tests. Time to sit in unfinished rooms."

Alice inclined her head. "Granted."

"And I'll want to start small," Daphne added. "One guest suite. Then another. Families, not one-offs."

"Yes," Alice said. "That is how languages form."

Clara grinned. "I'm going to need storage."

"You will receive it," Alice said.

Vera made a note.

The meeting ended without ceremony.

As they stood to leave, Daphne lingered, fingertips brushing the portfolio again.

Scooby waited.

Somewhere unseen, a room was learning how to become beautiful.

* * *

The meeting was scheduled for twenty minutes.

It did not need that long.

Alice Pleasance arrived first, as usual, not because she needed to but because it established the tone. She took the seat at the end of the table, set her pen parallel to the folder already waiting there, and did nothing else.

Latrice arrived next, tablet in hand, coffee untouched. She nodded to Alice, professional and unembarrassed by familiarity.

The remaining two administrators followed within a minute of each other.

Dean Mark Feldman of Academic Affairs carried the confidence of someone who had survived multiple budget cycles and a donor revolt. He sat, exhaled, and loosened his tie a fraction.

Beside him, Elaine Porter from Facilities and Capital Planning set her binder down with care. She had come prepared, though she did not expect resistance.

Alice waited until they took seats.

"This concerns Laura Hart," she said.

No one reacted.

Latrice tapped her tablet once. "Position under consideration: Director of Residential Operations," she said. "Scope includes Scooby House, Psi Omega, and affiliated pilot programs."

Elaine nodded. "Operational authority with architectural discretion," she added. "Subject to compliance review."

Dean Feldman leaned back. "This is the formal decision to tender an interview," he said. "Not the interview itself."

"Correct," Alice said.

Latrice continued. "Mid-May hiring window. Interview scheduled for May fifteenth. Compensation, title finalization, and onboarding."

She glanced up. "This meeting records a consensus to proceed."

Alice inclined her head. "Proceed."

Elaine flipped open her binder anyway.

"For the record," she said, "Facilities recorded no objections. Ms. Hart has already been acting as de facto coordinator across three emergency incidents and two unplanned expansions. Her documentation is clean. Her response times are exemplary."

Dean Feldman snorted. "She's been doing the job without the title."

"And without the salary," Latrice said.

Alice's pen moved once, a single notation.

Dean Feldman looked at the folder in front of him, still unopened. "Any conflicts of interest remaining on file?"

Latrice answered. "Resolved. Her separation from Colin Hart's administrative role is complete. No reporting overlap. No supervisory entanglement."

Elaine added, "Facilities flagged no issues. In fact, she's the reason we didn't have three code violations last semester."

Dean Feldman nodded. "Students?"

"Positive," Alice said.

Latrice scrolled. "Testimonials submitted by Lantern leadership, Psi Omega caretakers, and two external auditors. Language varies. Conclusions align."

Elaine smiled. "They trust her."

"That is not disqualifying," Alice said.

"No," Dean Feldman agreed. "It's rare."

Brief pause, a courtesy.

Latrice broke it. "This is not a competitive search. We are tendering a formal interview, not opening a pool."

Elaine shrugged. "Even if we opened one, we'd still end up here."

Dean Feldman sighed. "HR compliance?"

"Met," Latrice said. "Documented."

Alice looked around the table.

"Any objections?" she asked.

None offered.

Alice capped her pen.

"Then record the decision," she said. "Interview tendered. May fifteenth."

Latrice tapped once more. "Recorded."

Elaine closed her binder. "She'll accept."

Dean Feldman smiled. "Of course she will. Six figures."

Alice did not comment.

She stood. The others followed suit; the meeting ended without ceremony.

As they gathered their things, Latrice paused.

"For what it's worth," she said, not looking at Alice, "this will stabilize three departments."

Alice nodded once.

"That," she said, "is the point."

The meeting adjourned at twelve minutes past the hour.

29 Foundations

Late April, 2028

I was having a relaxed day.

In hindsight, that was the clue.

Phil stepped out of the shower, steam trailing behind him, and instead of reaching for his hoodie he opened the wardrobe and pulled out his best suit. The one that only came out for formal dinners, funerals, or moments that required witnesses.

“Get dressed, Ella,” he said. “Party dress. We’re going out for your birthday.”

I blinked at him from the kitchen table. “Like out, out?”

He smiled, serene, and leaned down to kiss the top of my head. I caught the scent of soap and warmth and the faint aura of him being pleased with himself.

A whirlwind of prep followed. Hair, shoes, the careful choosing of something that made me feel like myself instead of a version of myself. Phil hovered, smiling, giving nothing away. When I reached for the spoon to stir my tea, he stole a kiss and then another, and then stepped back to avoid his interrogation.

He disappeared into the bedroom and came back with a long, matte-black package. Heavy. Elegant. Expensive with no need of branding.

“For later,” he said, and tucked it under his arm.

We headed for the front door.

And then Phil took my elbow and turned me away from it.

“What are you up to?” I asked.

“Trust me,” he said, smiling like a sphinx. He was lucky I hated spiked heels. His insole survived on a technicality.

We went down the residence hall instead.

Past the laundry alcove. No, that alcove wasn’t there before. I followed him into a wider corridor I didn’t recognize. The light shifted. Softer. Warmer. A hush settled the way it did right before a concert started. A small crowd of students had gathered, pretending not to stare and failing.

Someone giggled.

A bell chimed.

Ding.

An elevator door slid open.

I stopped.

“When did we get an elevator?”

Phil squeezed my hand. “It’s new.”

The interior was glass. Not flashy, not reflective. Clear in a way that felt intentional. As the doors closed, the car rose, smooth and unhurried.

The campus unfolded around us.

Buildings, paths, light pooling where it belonged. I pressed my palm lightly to the rail, breath catching as the view widened. Somewhere behind us, students muffled more giggles.

“Phil,” I breathed. “Eighth floor?”

He only smiled. “That’s why we’ve got an elevator now.”

The elevator slowed. Stopped.

The doors opened onto a dining room alive with motion and warmth. Tables set. Chefs moving with practiced grace. The scent of bread and citrus and something richer underneath. Conversations braided together into a low, contented hum.

Gary stood near the far wall, arms folded, watching everything with approval. Yuri turned as soon as she saw me, her face lighting up. Morgan leaned against a column, immaculate as ever, eyes sharp and amused.

A small placard near the entrance read:

Ella Hugo

21st Birthday Celebration

Welcome

Please wait to be seated

The giggles behind me crescendoed into delighted whispers.

Oh. Oh no.

A ripple of applause began; not thunderous, not showy. Chairs scraped back. People rose to their feet. Faces I loved, I trusted. Faces I hadn’t expected, and yet knew belonged there.

“Oh my God,” I breathed. “Everyone is here.”

Daphne stepped forward with menus in hand, radiant and composed, eyes bright with something like triumph.

“Follow me, please,” she said.

The applause faded as Phil and I moved through the room. As we passed Morgan, Phil handed her the black package without comment. She accepted it with a nod, gaze flicking to me with something like fondness.

Daphne led us to the main table. The view curved away around us; campus, city, sky easing toward evening. Scooby's warmth rose through the floor, steady and reassuring.

We sat.

Conversation settled into a steady rhythm.

Look at what Daphne built. Look at this view. Everything feels... so relaxed. Isn't this amazing?

The plates arrived without interruption. Dishes layered comfort and elegance without ever demanding attention. A chef leaned in once to explain a course, then vanished before it became a performance. Glasses refilled themselves at the exact moment you noticed they were low.

I ate. I laughed. I leaned on Phil's shoulder and let myself absorb.

At some point, as the light shifted, and the room settled into a deeper rhythm, it occurred to me that nothing was asking me to manage it. Not Scooby. Or EUTERPE. Not the evening itself.

I was the guest of honor. That sufficed. The night closed around me, complete.

Halfway through dessert, the room shifted.

Scooby never did abrupt; with that subtle sense of more entering the space. Vera appeared first, composed, tablet tucked under one arm like an accessory she'd been born with. Clara followed, vibrating, with a constellation of sprites orbiting her shoulders and hair. The sprites carried lenses the size of dragonfly eyes. They drifted and flashed, recording plates, laughter, and light on glass.

Thallos scampered between tables, trays balanced with impossible seriousness. Through the transparent floor beneath our feet, I saw Scooby's roof far below, and beyond it the campus spread out like a living map. Paths, buildings, lights woke in the evening. It hit me then that this wasn't only a dinner. They were documenting everything. A template. A promise being captured from every angle.

Daphne caught my eye across the room. She smiled just once. Riss leaned against the rail near the windows, barefoot, grounded, watching the flow like a gardener surveying healthy soil.

Vera approached our table as the last plates cleared. "Finished dinner?" she asked. "Morgan has a presentation if the two of you will join us at the Elysium's table."

Phil glanced at me. I nodded, heart thumping with a sense of foreboding.

Music rose as we stood; gentle piano. The chairs shifted. Couples drifted toward the windows, moving with confidence. Ash and Liz moved together without discussion. Yuri laughed as Gary offered his arm, formal as a knight and twice as solid.

We reached the Elysium table and took our places. Morgan rose.

“Ella,” she said, and the room quieted without effort. “I wanted to congratulate you on this... triumph. What you’ve built here from a tired and abandoned fraternity wreck is a miracle.”

Applause rippled outward, human and otherwise. The sprites joined in, their fairy-light flashes punctuating the moment like stars winking on.

“We’ll take care of the gifting later,” Morgan continued, “but there is one that’s both important and relevant to the moment. And it’s this.”

She lifted the matte-black bundle Phil had carried earlier.

“Some months ago,” she said, “it occurred to me you had a looming problem. You were leasing an abandoned fraternity. Nothing you created belonged to you. No lasting legacy. The land and grounds remained with the original leaseholders.”

My breath caught.

“So I assigned my lawyers to buy the property. The structure, the acreage, including the mineral rights. Right to build beneath it. The street it sits on as well. Someday, you’ll want improved traffic flow. Parking. Infrastructure.” A faint smile. “Preparation matters.”

The room was still.

She went on, “it’s a little over ten acres, including the street below. And Psi Omega.”

She extended the packet toward me.

“You own the property, Ella. It’s yours. I will offer advice, nothing more. I suggest incorporating the Scooby Collective as an LLC and negotiating a ground lease agreement with the university right away. My lawyers are available to assist with that process. I assure you the contracts already in your hands are bulletproof.”

She inclined her head.

“Happy birthday, dear.”

Phil’s hand closed over mine, grounding, warm.

I took the packet and realized I hadn’t breathed.

Music swelled behind us. Laughter returned to the room. Couples turned, the floor filling with motion and light. Scooby hummed beneath my feet, steady and proud.

I looked around the table, at Mom and Dad, Ash and Liz, Morgan’s sharp, knowing smile; at Vera’s careful satisfaction, Clara’s contained delight, Daphne’s serene glow, Riss’s calm.

The weight landed.

This wasn’t only a celebration.

It gave me a foundation.

* * *

A week later, Scooby House settled into one of her easier evenings.

The common room had rearranged itself for conversation. Chairs angled toward one another without forming rows. Low tables appeared where snacks belonged. The lighting stayed warm, forgiving. Scooby wanted people to stay.

The students drifted in, wary at the word meeting. They relaxed when they saw no one standing at the front. Vera sat on the arm of a chair, tablet dark in her lap. Clara perched cross-legged on the floor, already smiling at someone across the circle. Daphne hovered near the window, hands folded, eyes attentive. Riss leaned back against the wall, barefoot, braid over one shoulder, solid as a tree that had listened.

When the room filled enough, Vera spoke.

She didn't raise her voice or announce herself. She started, and Scooby held.

"We wanted to talk while everything was still... soft," Vera said. "Before rumors turn into assumptions."

A few students nodded. Someone reached for a pretzel. No one pulled out a phone.

"Some adults here have a clear sense of what Scooby is becoming." Vera glanced toward Alice and Morgan at the edge of the circle. "Most of you don't. And that's fine."

She let that land.

"This stays a residence hall," she said. "We're not taking anyone's home away. Some floors remain student-only, with privacy and doors that lock. That part doesn't change."

Scooby's warmth pressed up through the floorboards, as if agreeing.

Clara leaned forward. "But," she said brightly, "you saw Ella's birthday."

A ripple moved through the room. Smiles. Someone laughed.

"That wasn't a party we can't repeat," Clara said. "It was a proof of concept."

She gestured upward, toward the memory of glass and light and a room that no longer existed.

"That dining space? It's gone. Already. Scooby learned from it, and then she let it go."

A student frowned. "Wait, it's already—"

Daphne nodded once. "It was temporary."

The word settled the question more effectively than an explanation.

Vera picked the thread back up. "What we're building here isn't only a strange, successful residence hall. It's an option."

She watched faces as she spoke, tracking interest and hesitation with practiced care.

"An option for work that counts. For experience that translates. For people who want a path forward."

Clara tilted her head. "Some of you worked with the Elysium Gate staff," she said. "Did anyone enjoy that?"

Hands went up. A few people exchanged looks, half proud, half surprised at themselves.

"If you did," Clara said, "it doesn't end here."

A pause followed. The best kind, curiosity waking up.

"We're going to take guests," Vera said. "Hotel guests. Not tomorrow. But soon."

She didn't sell it. She didn't soften it.

"Once people learn what Scooby does," she said, "they'll talk. They'll come. And they'll bring their wallets."

A few students laughed, startled and pleased.

"Demand will far exceed capacity," Vera said calmly. "That isn't a problem. That's leverage."

She paused, then added, "We intend to use it responsibly."

Clara chimed in again, lighter. "Which means we're offering work-experience credit to every hospitality major on campus. Paid. Well paid. Work schedules that won't wreck your classes."

That got attention. Someone said, "Wait, you're serious?"

"Yes," Clara said. "Some of you will choose a different major. If this is where you belong, we'll help you figure that out."

Riss shifted her weight, roots humming under the floor. Vera nodded toward her.

"Scooby's going to keep growing," Vera said. "Which means we'll need more people. Some of them won't be mythic. Some will be... normal."

A few nervous smiles.

"That's not a flaw," Vera said. "It's a skill set. We're going to onboard people. Teach them to work here without fear. Without panic. Without calling the cops because a wall breathed."

Clara grinned. "And without Mrs. Grundy. Most of them will learn that work you enjoy doesn't feel like a drudge."

That finally broke the tension. Laughter rolled around the circle, Scooby's lights warming a shade brighter in approval.

Vera waited for it to fade.

"If this sounds like too much," she said, "if you want your studies clean and relaxed, if you don't want your life to get any stranger than it already is—we understand. There's no penalty for opting out. No pressure."

The room stayed with her.

"If you want to stay," Vera said, "we'll start here."

Clara clapped her hands once, delighted. "Branding."

Groans, laughter, immediate chatter.

“Scooby House is a perfect name for a home,” Clara said. “It is not a serious name for a top-tier hotel.”

Someone protested. Someone else offered something terrible.

“We’re not deciding anything tonight,” Vera said. “But we’re listening. Scooby included.”

Conversation broke open, voices overlapping. Daphne watched, already mapping names onto the space. Riss closed her eyes, feeling the roots hum with possibility.

Scooby House did what she did best. She held.

* * *

Clara commandeered the whiteboard with a marker produced from somewhere improbable. She began writing names as they came; some confident, some tentative, some offered for the joy of watching them die. Vera leaned back in her chair, arms folded, letting it run its course. This part mattered. This is how ownership arose.

The board filled:

Park Place West.

The Crescent Place.

The West Gallery.

The Anchor & Avenue.

Fifth & Meridian.

The Continental House.

The Long Room.

The Conservatory.

The Understory.

The Commonwealth.

And scrawled in a different color, already circled and crossed out twice: Scooby Suites.

Clara capped the marker and turned, pleased. “Okay. Ranked-choice voting. Pick your best and your worst names from this batch. Don’t overthink it. We’ll repeat until the noise settles.”

Groans, laughter, chairs shifting. Slips of paper appeared. Someone argued for Boardwalk House, and the room shouted it down. Another rehabilitated The Archive, and it failed. Vera watched the room while Clara orchestrated. She clocked who leaned in, who held back, who imagined menus and letterhead, and who was already picturing their parents saying the name aloud.

When the first round ended, Clara passed a hat. A ridiculous one, sequined and old, from Clara’s flapper period.

“Toss ’em in,” Clara said. “No peeking.”

Vera took the hat when it came back, unfolded slips, made neat stacks. She didn’t comment. She waited for the count.

“Okay,” Clara said after the third pass. “That leaves us with four.”

She erased the rest.

Park Place West.

The Crescent Place.

The Anchor & Avenue.

Fifth & Meridian.

A hush settled, lighter now, focused.

“Final ranked vote,” Clara said. “Best and worst. Last round.”

The slips went into the hat again. Vera counted. Once. Twice.

She looked up. “We have a tie for third.”

Clara smiled. “Scooby?”

The lights dimmed a fraction. The temperature shifted almost imperceptibly, the way it did when Scooby was thinking.

The marker lifted from the tray on its own and drew a single, decisive line through The Crescent Place.

“No grudges,” Clara said cheerfully. “You were lovely.”

Three names remained.

Park Place West.

The Anchor & Avenue.

Fifth & Meridian.

Clara faced the room, serious. “Final vote. Hands only. Remember, you’ll be staring at this on menus, stationery, and signage. *For years.*”

Hands went up. Some hesitated, wavered, chose.

Vera counted.

She nodded once, then turned to Clara. “Clear winner.”

Clara hadn’t announced it yet. She looked around the room. And then to the walls; “Scooby?”

The floor warmed.

No line appeared.

Clara laughed. “Alice?”

Alice, seated near the back, inclined her head in agreement.

Clara turned back to the board and underlined the remaining name.

“Officially, publicly, and the ultimate choice for branding and letterhead,” she said, voice bright.

“Fifth & Meridian.”

Applause broke out, genuine.

Clara added, "But she will forever remain Scooby in our hearts."

The room laughed, Scooby hummed, and Vera closed her tablet.

"Meeting adjourned," she said.

People lingered anyway.

* * *

Finals week ended in departures and logistics.

Scooby House shifted into departure mode without being told. Doors held open a little longer. Hallway lights stayed brighter through the afternoon. The Thallos moved with efficiency, drawers gliding in and out of rooms, returning borrowed items to their owners with uncanny accuracy. Someone's missing charger appeared on a desk. A sweater long assumed lost folded itself on a bed.

By Friday morning, the street outside filled with cars that did not belong there.

They came in waves. Sedans with trunks yawning open. SUVs idling at awkward angles. A minivan attempting a three-point turn that turned into a seven-point apology. Parents leaned out windows, calling names with the cheerful urgency of people who wanted to help and did not know how to park on a city street.

Scooby tolerated it. Barely.

The curb lane along Village Lane clogged almost immediately. Cars double-parked, then triple-parked. Hazard lights blinked like a language no one spoke. A delivery truck gave up and left. Someone attempted to parallel park behind the fountain and gave up halfway through. They blocked the hydrant until Phil appeared with a clipboard and a smile that meant business.

Inside, the energy felt lighter. Doors banged. Laughter echoed. Goodbyes happened in bursts—quick hugs, promises to text, the soft drama of people who had survived something together and didn't yet know what to call it.

Outside, the chaos thickened.

A father in loafers stood near the gate, craning his neck upward. He squinted and stepped back. Then another step.

"Was the House this tall before?"

His wife followed his gaze up the facade; brick, windows, the familiar lines of a large but reasonable residence hall. She looked at him for a long second, expression flat.

"Yes," she said. "It's a building."

He frowned. "I thought—"

She shifted the car keys in her hand. "You are tired. Drove for six hours, had terrible coffee. The building did not grow."

He opened his mouth, closed it, and nodded. "Right. Sure."

Scooby warmed the front steps a fraction, enough to be polite.

Nearby, a mother hauling two rolling suitcases paused at the curb and frowned at the line of cars. "Where are we supposed to park?"

Phil gestured down the street with practiced optimism. "Temporarily?"

She followed his hand, saw the situation deteriorating by the second, and sighed. "Of course."

Across the lawn, Vera stood with her tablet tucked under one arm, watching the lack of flow with narrowed eyes. She wasn't counting cars. She was counting the minutes. Bottlenecks. How quickly irritation bloomed when people felt trapped with no clear next step.

Clara joined her, balancing two iced coffees and an expression of theatrical patience. She took in the scene at a glance: the blocked curb, the looping cars, the parents hovering with keys in hand like nervous talismans.

"Well," Clara said. "That's... festive."

Vera accepted a coffee without looking away. "It's a problem."

Clara smiled. "It's a future problem."

Vera watched as a sedan attempted to squeeze past a parked SUV and failed. A horn chirped. Another answered. Scooby dimmed the porch lights a fraction, the architectural equivalent of a long-suffering sigh.

"This won't work as a hotel without parking," Vera said.

Clara took a long sip. "Yup. And soon."

They shared a look, aligned.

On the steps, a freshman hugged her mother one last time and waved before disappearing back inside to grab something she'd forgotten. The mother waited, engine running, with nowhere to pull over.

Scooby held. The fountain kept murmuring. The street did not improve.

Vera tapped a note into her tablet.

Some problems announced themselves. Others honked.

30 Circulation

Mid May, 2028

Laura Hart arrived ten minutes early and hated herself for it.

Not because punctuality was a flaw. Because early used to mean: sit in a hallway, stare at a door, rehearse explanations, wait for someone else to decide whether your life stayed intact.

Housing Administration occupied the older wing of Crescent State: copier dust, unforgiving fluorescent lights. The elevator rattled on the way up. Laura stepped out and smoothed her blazer. She walked toward Conference Room B with practiced neutrality; the kind earned by carrying other people's disasters in a folder.

A nameplate sat on the door.

HART, L.

Black letters. White strip. No parentheses, no small print. Just her name, presented as fact.

She stopped for half a heartbeat and stared at it until her body stopped waiting for the punchline.

Inside, Latrice sat at the small conference table with a neat stack of documents and a pen positioned like a tool, not a threat. Her posture held the calm of someone who handled other people's panic for a living and never confused it for power. She looked up and offered a single smile, professional and real.

"Laura Hart," Latrice said. "Good to see you again."

"Likewise," Laura said, and surprised herself by meaning it.

Latrice stood and offered her hand. Laura took it. Warm grip. Firm. No performative squeeze. No "hang in there" sympathy. Just recognition.

"Coffee?" Latrice asked, gesturing to a small carafe on the side counter.

"I'm fine," Laura said. She had already had coffee. Two cups. Her stomach still carried the buzz like a low, stubborn engine.

Latrice sat. Laura sat across from her. The chair didn't wobble. The overhead light didn't flicker. Even the room behaved, for once.

Latrice opened the folder on top. "I'm going to run this like an onboarding meeting, not an interview. Your formal interview is already complete. Today is the offer, details, and next steps."

Laura kept her expression steady. Her pulse sprinted anyway.

Latrice slid the first page across the table. Without flourish. A clean movement.

"Title," Latrice said. "Director of Residential Compliance and Special Housing Operations."

Laura read it once. Then again. The words stayed. No edits, redlines, or qualifiers.

Latrice continued. "You will own compliance oversight for special-case residential environments. That includes Scooby House, Psi Omega, and the Lantern Program. It also covers any future special-housing communities."

Laura lifted her gaze. "Direct line to Facilities Compliance?"

"Yes," Latrice said. "Direct line to Legal when needed. Direct line to me for staffing and process. Other departments will not use you to 'champion' for them while ignoring your recommendations. No one will assign you liability without authority."

The sentence settled into her body with a sense of rightness.

Latrice tapped the next page with the pen. "Scope and authority. You approve, delay, or deny projects that touch safety, health, structural integrity, and code exposure. Mandate corrective action. Even shut down a space until it meets standards."

Laura kept her voice level. "Including spaces with mythic components."

"Including," Latrice said. No hesitation. No side-eye. "We will treat those as higher-complexity environments that require better documentation and tighter procedures. Not as an excuse."

Laura nodded once. That was her language. Complexity did not excuse sloppiness. Complexity demanded craft.

Latrice pointed to a paragraph. "Your reporting line. You report to the vice chancellor for operations. Functionally, you sit next to Facilities Compliance and Housing Ops. You will not answer to a field inspector. No office will tuck you behind someone else's desk."

Laura's hands rested flat on the table. The skin on her palms felt too warm, as if her body kept expecting to burn.

"Questions so far?" Latrice asked.

Laura took a breath and chose the question that mattered. "If I issue a hold, who overrides it?"

Latrice smiled, the smallest shift. "The Vice Chancellor. Legal, if they decide a lawsuit beats physics. Otherwise, no one."

"Good," Laura said before she filtered it. Then, a beat later, "Thank you."

Latrice didn't take the thanks as tribute. She accepted it as confirmation that the structure made sense.

"All right," Latrice said, flipping to the compensation page. "Compensation."

She slid it across.

Laura read the first line and felt her internal narrative stall as if someone had yanked a cord.

Base salary: a number that did not belong in her life.

It had commas. It had zeros. The blunt certainty of money meant to keep her.

She read it again, slower. It was still real.

Her mouth stayed shut. Her face stayed neutral. Years of marriage to a man who treated her competence as background noise had trained her to keep her victories internal. To hide anything that drew resentment.

Inside her, something bright kicked the air like a prisoner realizing the door stood open.

Latrice watched her without hovering. She let Laura have the moment without narrating it.

Laura pointed to a line lower down. "Signing bonus."

"Yes," Latrice said. "Not a reward. A retention tool. The summer workload is heavy. We want you resourced, not stretched."

Laura's thumb traced the edge of the paper once. "Benefits."

"Lavish," Latrice said, tone dry in a way that hinted at humor she kept on a leash. "Health, dental, vision. Professional development fund. Conference travel. Continuing education. A discretionary budget for specialized consultants when you decide you need them."

Laura's mind ticked through the last five years like a ledger. At night she stayed up fixing Colin's reports. Weekends she spent on the codebook, not for her job, but for him. She cleaned his coffee stains off a table before he noticed he had made a mess.

"Discretionary budget," Laura repeated, and kept her voice even.

"Yes," Latrice said. "Because we prefer prevention over emergency response. Particularly with unusual environments."

Unusual, not dangerous. No "weird dorm cult," or "experimental nonsense." Unusual, as in different requirements. Different standards. Which meant more work, but better work.

Laura flipped the page. "Retirement."

"Generous," Latrice said. "And separately, you'll have access to university legal counsel for any matters that overlap with your scope. That includes external pressure campaigns and nuisance claims. You will not handle those alone."

That sentence took longer to settle. Laura's shoulders eased a fraction, anyway.

Latrice tapped the bottom of the page. "Start date. The fifteenth of May. Today."

Laura blinked. "Today."

"Yes," Latrice said. "Not because we need you in the office tonight. Because it sets your status, locks benefits, and makes you the official authority before summer projects begin. Your actual first day on-site is Monday. But the offer starts now."

Laura looked down at the date. Today; clean, specific, and solid.

"I accept," she said.

Latrice's pen moved. "Excellent. Then we move on to the next step."

The paperwork followed a steady rhythm. Not because forms delighted anyone. Because every signature carried an opposite sensation from the last time she signed a document with her hands shaking.

Sign here. Initial there. Confirm address. Emergency contact. Tax withholding. Direct deposit.

Latrice explained without over-explaining. She moved at a pace that respected Laura's intelligence.

Halfway through, Laura stopped at a page labeled POSITION DESCRIPTION and read the bullet points line by line. She had built habits that kept buildings standing. Those habits did not vanish just because the world finally offered her a seat at the table.

Latrice waited, patient.

Laura looked up. "This line about 'liaison to mythic residential principles.'"

"Yes," Latrice said.

Laura kept her face blank. "Who wrote that?"

Latrice's expression softened, not into sentiment, but into respect. "Judge Pleasance approved that phrasing. Vera Marlane suggested it. They wanted language that acknowledges reality without turning it into spectacle."

Laura nodded once. Of course Vera had suggested it. Vera took care with words the way Laura took care with load-bearing walls.

"I rely on them," Laura said. Not a question.

Latrice smiled. "You already do. The record shows you've been functioning as a de facto partner for months. This makes it official and protects you."

Laura's throat tightened. She swallowed and returned to the paperwork.

When the last signature dried, Latrice closed the folder with a crisp motion and stood.

"Next," Latrice said. "Office."

They headed down the hallway. The building's stale air smelled less offensive today. Perhaps her body had stopped linking it to dread.

Latrice moved with purpose, her steps measured against the tile. She unlocked the door and pushed it open.

Laura stepped inside and stopped.

The office was not a converted closet with a desk jammed against a wall. It had space. Actual space. Wide desk with clean lines. Chairs that looked comfortable instead of punitive. Low table for spreading documents. A bookshelf. A filing cabinet that closed. Two windows faced the campus, letting in a spring light that made the room feel breathable.

Facilities had painted the walls a warm, deliberate shade.

On the desk sat a small stack of binders. Fresh and labeled.

Residential Special Housing: 2028 Summer Queue.

Laura walked to the desk without rushing and set her hand on the surface.

Solid wood. No wobble. No cheap laminate.

She took one slow breath and felt the air go down into her lungs.

Latrice watched her with the same professional distance she'd held throughout the meetings. Not cold, but respectful.

"This is yours," Latrice said. "Key, badge access, and the department directory. Your IT provisioning is already in motion. Laptop on Monday. Temporary access card today."

She held out a keyring and a small badge sleeve.

Laura accepted them. The metal had weight. It felt like a physical object, not a promise.

Latrice handed her a business card next. White, clean, with Latrice's name and contact information printed in sharp black text. No motivational quote. No fluff.

"If you need anything," Latrice said, "you contact me first. Not your predecessor. Not an unofficial chain. Me."

Laura nodded. "Understood."

Latrice gestured to the binders. "About the summer queue."

Laura's attention sharpened. "I expected projects."

"There are," Latrice said. "The university is... eager. That's the official version. The unofficial version is that Crescent State realized it has something rare and wants to build around it."

Laura let her eyes stay on the binders. She didn't open them yet. She didn't need to.

Latrice continued. "Scooby House and Psi Omega principles are already building toward next year's infrastructure. Increased visitation, load, and liability. They have a list."

Laura almost smiled. Vera had a list. Vera had lists for lists.

“They will reach out,” Latrice said. “But I recommend you contact them first. Today. Establish the line of communication as part of your authority, not as a favor they request.”

Laura nodded again. “I already trust them.”

Latrice’s eyebrows rose. “Good. Because they trust you. That’s rare in this job. Enjoy it.”

Laura exhaled through her nose. “I intend to.”

Latrice glanced toward the door, checking the time. “One more procedural note. The Scooby principles will go through the same hiring and onboarding process, no shortcuts. Identical process, identical documentation. Your interview happened on paper a long time ago, Laura. Their interviews have been happening in the field.”

Laura pictured them. Vera, with her folders and her sharpened gaze. Clara, with her impossible ability to make stressed people laugh without feeling mocked. Riss, barefoot and steady, read soil like a language. Daphne, calm as a held breath, reshaped air pressure with emotion alone.

“And you understand them,” Latrice said, as if reading her mind. “You already know who you rely on. That’s part of why this works.”

Laura’s fingers tightened around the keyring once, then relaxed. “It works”

Latrice nodded. “Welcome back.”

Back.

The word hit Laura in a tender place she kept boarded up.

Latrice didn’t linger. She walked Laura to the threshold. Restroom, break room, the printer that didn’t jam, the admin assistant who coordinated schedules. Latrice kept everything practical. She made the future feel like a set of solvable tasks.

At the door, Latrice paused. “Last thing.”

Laura looked up.

Latrice’s expression stayed professional, but a note of genuine enthusiasm slipped through. “I’ve handled university hiring for years. Most days involve conflict and damage control. This summer involves building something new. It’s the work people pretend they want when they talk about making a difference.”

Laura felt a flicker of surprise and kept it off her face. “You’re looking forward to it.”

“Yes,” Latrice said. “This doesn’t happen often enough.”

She offered one more handshake. Laura took it.

Then Latrice left, footsteps receding down the hall with the same steady cadence she’d brought into the room.

Laura stood in the doorway of her office for a moment after she was alone, keyring cool in her palm, badge sleeve warm from her skin.

She closed the door. Enough to mark a boundary.

The silence that followed did not feel like emptiness. It felt like space.

She crossed to the desk and sat. The chair held her weight without complaint.

Laura looked out over the campus. Spring light on the walkways. Students moved in smaller groups now, packing up and heading home. With finals week done, the frantic buzz scraped away. The air looked clearer.

Her gaze dropped to the binder labeled SUMMER QUEUE.

She hadn't opened it yet.

Instead, she let her shoulders fall. One inch. Two.

Her mouth opened on a breath that turned into an involuntary sound. Not a sob, and not laughter. Something between them. A release.

She pressed her fingertips to the desk again, grounding herself in the simple fact of solid wood and solid authority.

She had done this work before.

She knew building codes. She knew the difference between acceptable and lethal. How to hold a system upright.

Now they paid her for it. With an exceptional salary.

Laura stared at the salary number in her mind again, as if checking it for sanity.

So many zeros.

She let herself smile, small and private, and then reached for the phone.

She didn't call Colin.

She didn't call Karen.

She didn't call anyone who made her shrink.

She began with the people who built durable things.

Vera's name sat in her contacts already, because of course it did.

Laura tapped it, and when the call connected, she spoke with the calm of a woman holding a new foundation under her feet.

"Vera," she said. "It's Laura. I'm in my office. Tell me what we're building this summer."

Laura Hart arrived the next morning dressed for a construction site.

Not performative "business casual." Not symbolic authority. Slacks that took grit, a fitted jacket with real pockets, steel-toe work boots broken in long before today. She clipped her hair back, not styled. A scuffed, labeled hardhat rode under her arm.

She did not bring a tote bag.

She brought a tablet, a folded site notebook, and a pencil.

Scooby House approved.

The front hall warmed a fraction as she crossed the threshold, not greeting, not welcome. The system clocked a new variable and decided it mattered.

Vera stood near the stairs with her tablet tucked under one arm, glasses already on. She wore her own version of readiness: neat, restrained, professional to the point of being almost severe. Clara leaned against the banister in a Scooby hoodie and leggings, hair in a topknot, coffee mug in hand, watching with bright interest. Riss stood barefoot on the tile, braid over one shoulder, palms resting against the wall as if listening to something under it. Daphne hovered a step back, hands folded, eyes alert and unreadable.

Laura stopped in the center of the space and took it in.

No one spoke first.

That was correct.

She set her hardhat on the console table by the door, next to a bowl of keys and a stack of mail Scooby had arranged with deliberate neatness. The hat looked right there. Like it belonged.

“Morning,” Laura said, brisk and calm. She looked at Vera. She nodded once to the others. “Show me.”

Vera’s mouth curved, not quite a smile. “This way.”

They moved without ceremony.

Down the stairwell, past Scooby’s new laundry alcove. Down another level, into the older bones of the House where the air grew cooler and the sound changed. Scooby’s hum softened here, less domestic, more structural.

At the bottom, a door. Now, it opened onto a rough, unfinished hallway lit by temporary work lights. Exposed stone. Packed earth. Root systems traced along one wall like careful calligraphy, Psi Omega’s influence tapering away as the tunnel curved out of sight.

Laura stepped inside and stopped past the next threshold.

She didn’t comment or gesture. She scanned.

Her eyes moved the way inspectors’ eyes moved; slow, methodical, unforgiving. Ceiling height. Wall condition. Moisture staining. Existing load paths. She crouched and ran two fingers along the stone at the base of the wall, rubbed them together, checked for dampness.

“Drainage?” she asked.

Vera answered. “Natural slope carries runoff east. We’ve mapped seasonal variance. Worst-case saturation sits two inches below that marker.” She pointed with her tablet. “Scooby compensates with heat when needed, but we don’t rely on it.”

“Good,” Laura said. She stood and moved farther in. “Ventilation?”

Clara lifted her mug. “Proposed, not implemented. We wanted you to see the space before we committed.”

Laura nodded again. Approval real.

Riss spoke next, voice low. "Roots tolerate adjacency to reinforced concrete if there's a thermal buffer. Psi Omega will not extend into this space. She's already... turned away."

As if on cue, the vine nearest the ceiling withdrew another inch, leaves curling inward. PsiO's presence cooled, disinterested. Not offended, only elsewhere.

Laura clocked it. "Boundary."

Daphne watched Laura watch the House. Watched how she didn't flinch when the lights flickered once as Scooby adjusted airflow. Watched how Laura didn't anthropomorphize, didn't narrate. She treated Scooby like what she was: a system with preferences, constraints, and consequences.

Laura set her tablet on a makeshift worktable and unfolded a sheet of graph paper. Old habit. Analog thinking for three-dimensional problems.

"You're hosting parents of incoming students next year," she said, not a question. "Orientation, move-in weekends, alumni events. Short-term load spikes. Street parking won't survive it."

"No," Vera said. "It already doesn't."

Laura drew a rectangle. Then another beneath it. "One level for now. Not ten. That comes later if you need it. This gets you capacity without destabilizing the soil or waking anything that prefers sleep."

She glanced at Riss. "How deep before we hit anything sacred?"

Riss didn't bristle at the word. She considered it. "Three meters is safe. Four if we reinforce. Five starting arguments."

Laura smiled. "We're neighbors, so we won't argue."

She sketched load-bearing columns. Marked ventilation shafts. Left generous margins.

"This will be ugly," she said. "Concrete, steel, drainage channels. CO sensors everywhere. No decorative nonsense."

Clara raised her mug in salute. "Bless."

Laura continued, unfazed. "It must be leakproof. If water gets in, it becomes a mold problem within eighteen months. If exhaust backs up, it becomes a lawsuit in eighteen minutes."

Scooby's lights brightened a fraction.

"I will not romanticize this space," Laura added. "It exists so the beautiful spaces will function."

Vera exhaled, controlled and relieved. "That's exactly what we need."

Laura studied Daphne. "You'll work with me."

Daphne blinked. "Me?"

“You listen,” Laura said. Not a compliment. A fact. “I’ll need someone who hears when the House says no.”

Daphne nodded once, absorbing the weight of it.

Laura slid the graph paper back into her notebook. “Timeline: survey this week. Soil analysis. Permits filed immediately. I’ll handle Facilities and Fire. Vera, coordinate internal access and scheduling. Minimal disruption.”

“And PsiO?” Riss asked.

Laura didn’t hesitate. “She stays uninvolved. This parking structure is Scooby’s burden to carry.”

Scooby warmed the floor under Laura’s boots, a subtle acknowledgment. Not affection. Agreement.

Laura picked up her hardhat and set it on her head, adjusting the strap with practiced ease. “Any objections?”

No one spoke.

“Good,” Laura said. “Then we build.”

She turned toward the exit, already moving on to the next call, the next checklist, the next form.

Behind her, Scooby settled. PsiO remained still. Daphne stayed where she was, watching the space meant for something necessary and ugly but vital.

Infrastructure, she realized, was another kind of care.

This was Laura Hart’s work.

* * *

Rain began the way I liked it best—steady and patient, droplets laying themselves across the world like a hand smoothing a wrinkled sheet.

I stood in the doorway of Scooby House with my shoes in hand and the hem of my jeans already damp. I listened. Water had voices humans noticed only when they had to: hiss on warm stone, chatter in gutters, a pitch change at a crack.

Scooby held the porch light dim. Her front steps warmed beneath my bare feet, a careful offering, but not too hot. She knew I didn’t want comfort that fought the weather.

I took one step down into the rain.

The yard smelled alive. Soil waking, leaves releasing their green, stone exhaling hoarded heat. The fountain changed its song, the mist thinning under heavier droplets.

I closed my eyes. The rain slid down my scalp, cool and clean. It calmed the turbulence within me. A restless internal chop that smoothed the moment water began moving in the right direction.

Scooby felt it. Not as magic. As a mood. Her warmth shifted, not chasing, only aligning.

"Thank you," I murmured. Gratitude for restraint.

I walked toward the side path that led to the lower access point. The rough corridor still smelled of dust and exposed earth from yesterday's work. The parking structure existed only on paper and intent, but Scooby already carried the idea in her bones. I felt it in the way the ground held itself, braced in advance.

Subtle. Most people noticed nothing.

To me, it felt like a muscle tightening before a shove.

I reached the basement door and paused with my palm on the handle. Scooby's hum met my fingers through the metal, attentive and anxious. She wanted to do well. She meant to hold the weight of what was coming without cracking, without bleeding damp into places that turned it into mold and misery.

She was already thinking like a hotel again. Undramatic. Functional. Invisible. Safe.

I went down.

The lower level lights came on in a soft sequence, not the bright snap of motion sensors but the slow rising of a mind waking. Air held the cool, mineral smell of stone, laced with the faint loam-thread of Psi Omega's roots retreating from this space. The boundary is still clean.

Good. Scooby didn't need to fight for space. She needed to learn how to share.

At the end of the corridor, the unfinished access space opened into the rough room where Laura's graph paper still lay beneath clear plastic. Temporary work lights cast pale cones across stone walls. Exposed conduits ran like veins, half-installed.

I stepped into the center and opened my attention.

I listened with my feet.

The foundation spoke in pressure gradients and tiny shifts. Water moved above us. Rain ran off rooflines, slipped into gutters, found downspouts, and drained toward the Village storm system. Scooby's base caught those currents as faint tremors in the stone.

There. A slight tug to the east. A secondary pull, weaker, resisted.

I opened my eyes and turned toward the wall facing the village lane. I pressed my palm against the stone.

Not a leak. Not yet. A tendency.

Scooby braced against water entering the new structure, choosing retention over the village storm drain.

Buildings did this when they were young and proud.

"That won't work," I whispered. Not as a scold. As information.

Scooby's hum tightened, the sound of a system disagreeing before it had the vocabulary to explain why.

I leaned my forehead against the stone. I had drones and EUTERPE. For an overlay, for data, for flow maps and structural readings.

But this was not a number problem. This was a relationship problem.

"Okay," I said. "Listen to me."

Scooby's warmth shifted along the wall under my palm, as if she leaned toward me.

Rain continued above, steady and patient, feeding the world.

I needed Scooby to stop treating that movement like an enemy at the gate and start treating it like circulation.

I slid my hand along the stone until I found the faint seam. An old mortar line. I traced it downward with two fingers and found where the cold pulled strongest.

"Here," I murmured. "You're holding it here."

Scooby's hum dipped, uncomfortable.

I took a slow breath. In my mind, I pictured channels. Water choosing a path and feeling relieved when the path existed.

I pressed both palms flat against the foundation and listened to the rain's rhythm above us. I matched my breath to it.

Out. In. Out. In.

The pull in the stone eased half a degree. Not because I forced it, but because I offered Scooby something her body accepted: a safer route.

"Not inside," I told her. "Not trapped. Let it go down the drain."

Scooby resisted. Her foundation held an old instinct: keep. Protect. Do not let the outside in.

I waited.

Water had a patience even trees envied.

Scooby's hum shifted. A flicker of warmth moved along the seam beneath my palm, then farther down, as if she extended a tentative thread into a direction she didn't trust.

I felt a sudden, clean release. A small pressure pocket drained. Simple movement, water finding an alternative route and taking it.

I exhaled, shoulders dropping. My skin tingled with relief so sharp it almost felt like joy.

"Yes," I murmured. "Like that."

Scooby's response came as a deeper settling in the stone, the relief that followed correct alignment. The tension coiled in the foundation loosened.

She did it again, more confidently. A second redirection. A smoother outflow.

My mouth curved. "Good girl."

Scooby's lights flickered once, soft and pleased.

I stepped back. I didn't feel like I'd fixed something. I felt like I'd restored circulation.

The surrounding space changed as Scooby adjusted. Air moved more freely; humidity settled into a steady band. The work lights steadied. The sound of the rain above sharpened as the building stopped bracing against it.

A drone rolled into view and paused beside me, its shell blinking green.

I glanced at it. "No."

The drone's green light dimmed in acknowledgment. It backed away, giving me privacy the way Scooby gave it.

This was between me and the House.

I walked back up the corridor, rain's song following me through stone and timber and root.

At the top level, I detoured toward my suite. It had grown in stages over the school year, Scooby adding space the way nervous people added words. First, a larger closet. Then, a corner nook with a low bench. Then, after one conversation with Vera about "future-proofing," Scooby had taken the permission and built.

Building's what Scooby did best.

I pushed open my door. The air changed; different texture. Smoother.

My suite smelled of salt and clean tile. The lights dimmed to a low, cool wash.

And there, occupying most of the room's footprint, sat my pool.

Not a fixed rectangle. A long, dark plane of water that kissed the tile with a thin, continuous overflow. An indoor infinity line that made the surface look endless. Scooby had accomplished the illusion through geometry and lighting and a subtle slope.

The water was moving. Not churning. A slow, living shift, like a tide breathing under skin.

When I took a step closer, the surface responded. Small ripples blooming outward, then smoothing into a new pattern.

Scooby had made the room capable of changing with my current.

I sat on the tile and slid my feet into the water. Cool, then warming. The pool's filtration hummed under the surface, almost inaudible.

I closed my eyes.

Rain tapped the window, and the pool answered in tiny sympathetic shifts. Outside flow. Inside flow.

The year sat behind me like a long river I had survived without knowing I was swimming. The freshmen had left. Scooby was more muted now.

I stayed. Not out of duty. Not out of loyalty. Because this fit.

The thought needed no changing.

A flicker passed through my mind, unexpected. Milo's hands adjusting a lens. His voice asked a question that forced me to slow down. Milo sat beside me, leaving an inch of space and somehow making that space feel safe instead of empty.

He was gone for the summer. The absence registered not as loneliness. As a missing eddy. A place where my thoughts used to slow and curl back on themselves.

I didn't place that yet. I let it float.

I opened my eyes and looked at the pool's surface. It had shifted again while I thought, responding to tiny changes in my breathing, my posture, my attention. It moved without chaos. Found balance through motion.

Scooby knew how to build something perfect and static. Instead, she had built me a sea.

I lifted my feet from the water and stood. Droplets slid down my ankles and into the tile drains. Scooby carried them away without hesitation.

I crossed to the blank wall opposite the pool. Scooby had left it blank on purpose. She had learned that I didn't want her to fill every space.

Sometimes, emptiness was the point.

I set my palm against that blank wall. Scooby's hum met my hand. Not anxious, but curious.

I pictured something simple. A narrow, hidden corridor off the main flow of the House. Transition space that offered privacy without isolation. A liminal current.

I pictured it in terms of flow: an entrance wide enough to invite, a path narrowing to calm, then widening again into a small room that held water sound. A room that returned breath.

Scooby's warmth pulsed under my palm, eager.

I pressed my hand more firmly and shook my head.

"Not yet," I whispered.

Scooby's hum faltered, then steadied. She paused. She waited.

I felt something in my chest loosen. Small, sharp, tender. Trust. Not obedience, but restraint.

"Good," I murmured. "We'll do it. Just... later."

Scooby's lights dimmed a fraction, her version of a nod.

Outside, the rain deepened, then eased. Water made its choices without drama.

I turned back toward the pool and watched the surface shift, tide-like, responsive to everything I felt.

I had work to do. Summer projects, infrastructure, parent weekends. Laura and Vera handled the human side. Riss kept the roots sane. Clara kept people from breaking in ways that didn't show up on forms.

I kept the flow. I listened to where things backed up. I opened channels. I taught Scooby the difference between holding and trapping.

I walked to the window and looked out at the wet campus; the paths shining under streetlights. The world rinsed clean.

I kept the flow. I listened to where things backed up. I opened channels. I taught Scooby the difference between holding and trapping.

I rested my hand against the glass.

"Okay," I whispered to the night, to Scooby, to the moving world. "I'm here."

Scooby's warmth rose under my feet, steady and calm.

In the foundation below, water flowed toward the storm drain, no longer trapped, no longer fought.

I rested my hand against the glass.

The rain thinned and eased. Scooby's warmth steadied beneath my feet, no longer adjusting, no longer asking.

I stood there, listening to a silence that didn't need my attention.

"That works," I said.

And meant it.