

NIGHT & MAN  
BONE WOMAN



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Night Man & Bone Woman  
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# 01 Maiden, Mother, Crone

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Gentle rain ticked down like hyphens, tapping my umbrella. The phone in my palm glowed 9:47 pm, too early for an eleven o'clock shift, too late to pretend I had anywhere else to be.

"Stupid-early again, Liz."

I ducked under the hotel's awning, collapsed the umbrella, and shook the water from its ribs.

A squat granite post stood by the entrance, square-cut, its top worn smooth by centuries of touch. Someone had left a wreath of red poppies around it, petals sagging and darkening in the rain. Three carved faces stared in different directions: a girl, a woman, an elder.

I lingered on that last too long. Shoulders bent, head bowed, still carrying her stone. Rodin's *Fallen Caryatid* came to mind unbidden. My fingers traced the blurred cheek, as if touch explained why she held me.

First night.

I pushed through the doors.

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## 02 Midnight at the Elysium Gate

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Inside the brass revolving door, a world of polished Italian marble gleamed. Beneath my heels, black-and-white rectangles interlocked. The tiled path led to a single marble staircase rising into the lobby. Brass railings and fittings caught the light, luxuries from the roaring twenties, still dazzling, still cold. The place had the hush of money—polite, perfumed, a little bored.

To my right, the Greek Café sat dark, menus framed in glass promising casual dining by day. To my left, Morgan’s Place loomed behind massive oak doors. The doorman gave me a polite nod as I passed. Muffled music and laughter throbbed from the nightclub, a heartbeat sealed behind wood.

My heels clicked on marble, each step echoing beneath the high-vaulted ceiling. The vast lobby was empty, timeless, indifferent. Wax and stone, a faint ghost of perfume and cigarettes, like a museum that kept breathing after midnight.

I glanced at the clock and hurried to the silent front desk, ringing the small brass bell.

A young man in a suit appeared from behind the barrier wall, name tag gleaming: **Tom, Night Audit**. His lips pulled back, a slow deliberate motion, more predator than smile. His gaze did a quick climb—shoes to hem to chest—before it remembered where eyes live.

“Evening, ma’am. How may I attend to your needs?”

*Eyes up here, Tom?*

“Hi... um... Tom. I’m Liz. Starting in the laundry tonight. Could you point me to the service stairs?”

Professionalism dropped six notches. He leaned on his elbows and gestured toward the bellman’s stand to the left of the brass elevators. “Behind the bell stand. The time clock’s at the bottom.”

“Thank you.” I gave him my brightest smile, though the prickling on my skin said it wasn’t imagination. I dashed away, feeling his gaze on my ass the whole way. He gave off that vibe. Greasy.

Behind the bell stand, a small doorway opened onto concrete stairs. Time-worn, with dips carved into each tread by a century of staff feet. Plaster cratered in spots where carts had kissed the wall. Not public-facing, not lavished with polish. The air smelled of wet dust and bleach, cooler too, as if the marble above hoarded the warmth and kept its back turned.

I started down the narrow stairs, my knee complaining at every step. Hot wire under the kneecap, the old song. I pressed a hand into it and breathed. By the bottom, the dull ache had become a steady throb. My basketball injury took me out of college. These days, it mostly complains about staircases.

Urszula Nowak, my new boss, had warned me how empty the night-shift basement was. She hadn't exaggerated. I clocked in at 10:55 sharp and attempted to map yesterday's whirlwind tour onto the echoing maze around me. Halls stretched away, concrete and plaster, painted the color of forgetfulness. A brittle fluorescent buzz was louder than my footsteps, the sound of insects arguing in the wires. Somewhere, a vent coughed. Restroom, locker room, the laundry's somewhere past the vending machines, I think?

I ducked into the locker room and wriggled into the hotel jumper dress. Stiff industrial fabric rasped my skin, cut loose at the hips and shapeless. Brand new. This uniform needed fifty washes before it gave up its grudge. "Soldier on, Eliza," I sighed. No pageants down here anyway.

I lingered a moment, letting my shoulders drop, giving my leg a chance to forgive me for the climb. Upstairs, brass and marble. Down here, concrete and vending machines. The glamour stops at the service stairs.

The employee lounge presented a desolate scene. Four tables, a dozen chairs, a microwave with a hand-lettered NO FISH sign, vending machines humming like bored insects. I peeked in, filed it away for later, and pressed on.

My eyes kept flicking toward the shadows. Isn't this how horror movies start?

The laundry, finally. I flipped on every light—blessed brightness—even if a few panels flickered like extras in a cheap slasher film. Here, at least, things looked normal: big industrial washers and dryers, oversized but familiar, hulks of enamel and steel.

I checked the supplies, tables, and layout. The laundry routine was universal. Drag the bin, load the washer, shuffle to the dryer, fold, repeat. A sacred rite of passage for every teenager drafted into household chores. Nothing creepy here. Still, note to self: buy anti-slasher pepper spray.

Then the stench hit me. Nothing else on earth smells quite like a bin full of used hotel linens. Not sharp—a more low vibration of staleness that seeped into

everything. A humid funk, locker-room after-homecoming with a hint of mop bucket. Dampness lingered like a question I didn't want the answer to.

"Night shift pay tastes sweeter when you've inhaled enough bleach to pickle your lungs." I realized I'd be the only person to talk to. "Well, there's also Washer Number Three; she has a jovial personality."

"Get a grip, Liz. Tomorrow night, bring a paperback."

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Most nights that first week were the same: fold, sort, rinse, repeat. Third-shift laundry had its rhythms, like a bad playlist on loop. Tonight wasn't different.

The industrial washers thudded in sync. Dryers hummed like tired bees. My cart squeaked enough to wake the dead. I'd memorized every shortcut to avoid staircases—my bum knee thanked me—but no one had shown me how to fix squeaky wheels.

I leaned against the counter, tracing shadows the fluorescents threw at the floor—hard angles that twitched when the ballasts thought about dying. Cheap lights, harsh angles. My mind drifted until a movement in the corner of my eye snapped me upright.

Something leapt from the detergent shelf.

An empty bottle. It hit the tile, bounced once, and clattered to a stop near my shoe.

My pulse spiked.

"Okay," I whispered. "Haunted by recycling. That's new."

The vibration from the machines, right? *Right?*

I stared at the bottle as if it had sprouted teeth. When my heart finally slowed, I forced a laugh. "Thanks, Washer Number Three. Perfect timing."

The lights buzzed. The machines hummed. Nothing else moved. Just me, an empty bottle, and too much silence.

I bent to pick it up. Cold slid over my knuckles, like someone breathing against my hand.

The chill held fast, like a thin film on my fingers.

The bottle rack had a gap, a shadow where none belonged.

"Nothing creepy ever lives in gaps," I muttered. "But sure, let's investigate. Because clearly I didn't pay attention during the horror movies."

I pushed the bottles aside. My hand brushed something flat, wrapped in cardboard. A notebook, wedged deep, as if someone hadn't wanted it found.

Plain black cover, scuffed edges. Handwritten titles curled across the front: Cleansing Charm, Binding Knot, Dream's Gate. A book of spells. Or somebody's idea of one. Either way, not standard laundry supplies.

The cardboard rasped my fingertips, and I thought of time capsules and buried secrets, things meant to be forgotten. Inside the cover: This spellbook belongs to Gertrude Morven. Teenage handwriting, proud and loopy. A staff kid? An intern? A prank? A shiver crawled up my arms and disagreed.

Pages mixed neat lists with doodled diagrams and sweeping flourishes. Margins jammed with herbs and powders I didn't recognize. Corners held reminders, question marks, hearts. Symbols curled in circles; arrows pointed to focus points. Instructions read like riddles: Whisper your intent. Let the object feel your wish.

It smelled of old paper and something sharper, a sting like ozone after lightning. Every page felt like a duel between careful spellcraft and the confessions of a distracted teenager.

I flipped until one stopped me: *Levitation: The Gentle Lift*. No ingredients or incantations, just concentration. Perfect.

Focus. Breathe. Imagine the object rising. Start small.

A lone button sat at the edge of the folding table. Scuffed, almost weightless.

"Fine," I muttered, "you're going to float, little guy. Don't fail me."

Hands hovering, I concentrated. Nothing. I laughed at myself. Absurd to think a scribbled schoolgirl's spell will work. Still, I gave it another shot. The button shivered, rocked, slid.

"You're crazy," I whispered. "Mad as a hatter."

But my heart was racing. Because it moved.

One more attempt. I held my breath without meaning to. Slowly, the button lifted half an inch, wobbled, spun, then dropped with a rattle. But it floated. Barely.

I exhaled, a ridiculous giggle escaping. The tiny hover made the laundry a little less miserable. Take the win, Eliza.

After one last spin across the table, as if in applause, the button stilled.

Warmth rose in my chest, not mine, like standing too close to a lamp. "Wait. That wasn't me."

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## 03 Dys Orientation

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Two o'clock, break time. I checked the loads. The washers wouldn't finish before I got back. I slipped the precious notebook into my uniform pocket and wandered down the corridor to the employee lounge.

Male voices stopped me in the hall.

All I had to deal with now was my social awkwardness. I slipped inside and eased the door shut, hoping to stay invisible for a few seconds. ...Shit.

The night-audit guy... Tom. I gave him my best dazzling, confident simulation smile and slid into a chair at the back table. Tom's eyes locked on me. Despite my wishes, the floor failed to open up and swallow me.

He whispered to the dark-haired man across from him. In the tiny break room, the only words I caught for certain were "...new girl..."

*Yep, that's me, the inhuman basement troglodyte known only as "New Girl."  
Thanks for the assist, Tommy.*

*Fuggit—break's too short.*

I fed too many of my precious coins into the vending machine and punched Coke.

When I stood with my prize, I felt four eyes on my ass this time. At least the dark-haired guy did an embarrassed recovery, rediscovering his sandwich. Creepy Tom didn't even register the impropriety.

"Hi, I'm Tom, Night Audit. This is Ash. You're new here?"

"We've met." At least that one scored. He didn't remember giving me directions last week. Short memory... other shortcomings? Or just how little he cares?

*No guilt by association; give Ash half a chance.*

"Hi, yes. I'm Liz. Eliza." I served a soft-serve smile for Ash alone. Short, wavy black hair. Pleasant features. A smile that wasn't predatory. Eyes on mine, not my rack. On the tentative Liz-o-Meter: a seven. Management reserves the right to revise without notice.

"Skotomerkis," he said, dialing up his smile. His smile and green eyes were both pretty. Upgrade! Eight. Maybe eight-and-a-half. "Night Manager. Sorry for the late

introduction. I like to give people a week before the official orientation, see how they settle in. Join us?"

I hovered a beat, debating whether to curl up in solo misery or risk... people. The vending machine hummed; stale coffee scented the air. Nope. Isolation is poison. One friend beats none. I pulled up a chair between them.

Tom squinted. "Day-um. You are tall. Do you play ball?"

"A couple of years at Ruston. Until I blew out my left knee. It never healed properly, and the medical bills... Well, I'm back to working for a living." I flexed it as I sat, testing the dull ache, my familiar companion.

"You're Ash, right?"

"Guilty. And you're... at least five-ten?"

I tapped my nose. "Got it in one."

"I'm sorry. I get the awkward 'how tall are you' questions a lot, too."

"So?" I let my posture relax, arms folded, watching them both. Ash's gaze was steady, measuring. A watchfulness that mirrored my own.

"Oh! Sorry, I'm six-two. But I didn't play any ball. How good were you?"

Hand-waggle. "Medium fish, tiny pond. Adequate for the Lady Techsters, not exactly WNBA. At least I missed the chance to find out. Change of topic, please?"

"Sure, sorry. Um—"

Tom piped up: "See any ghosts yet?"

I... had no answer for that. It's been an unusual night, but no ghosts. I gave him a blank "Huh?" stare and shifted; my knee throbbed. My chest tightened, the old instinct to retreat tugging at me, but the part that hated being alone reminded me: one friend is better than none.

"The Elysium Gate is a supernatural hot spot, supposedly," Ash said. "Ghosts, demons, black magic, the whole New Orleans occult scene. H.R. didn't tell you during your interview?"

"Oh, they did. I assumed it was part of the ambiance. Mystique for tourists. No spooks, haints, or snipes. But I've only seen the break room, time clock, the laundry. Oh, and the ladies' room."

"Not scared?" Tom wiggled his fingers. "Boo."

"Me? I'm afraid of my bills, not ghosts. And more bad shit happening. It's been... a rough couple of years."

"You're scheduled for orientation tomorrow?" Ash volleyed a new subject.

"Eight p.m. I wondered why so late."

"A couple of reasons." He tapped his chest. "That's me. I do the orientations. Also, we work overnights."

"Yeah? How do you stay awake?" I stifled a yawn and flexed my knee. I stole a glance at Ash—he measured the room, then me. Cautious. Balanced. Anchor. He didn't fidget; his voice stayed level. The room's buzz evened out.

"I keep my caffeine stream as free of blood as possible," Tom said.

"I routinely violate conventional causality," Ash deadpanned. "Also blackout curtains and Do Not Disturb on your phone. You'll adapt."

"This shift better be worth the extra three bucks an hour. My social life won't suffer any. It's not like they're swiping right on the goofy, angular girl anyway." I sipped my Coke. Risk sometimes brings reward. Their company, however awkward, beat isolation.

"Welcome to the team, Eliza. Break time's over, folks."

"Aw, Mom, five more minutes?" Tom whined.

"Let's go, Romeo. Gary needs a break too. Eliza, I'll see you dark and not early tomorrow night."

"If you don't find my remains under an enormous pile of used towels and 'do-not-guess-why-they're-damp' sheets."

"See? Sparkling, joyous night-shift attitude."

"You don't understand how awful that bin smells."

"Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

"Breakfast?" A grin tugged at me as I headed for the laundry. "*Pa pousé tro vite la patate douce, cher. Good night!*"

Ash paused on the basement stairs, bemused. Sweet potato?

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Ash wore the house uniform: charcoal jacket, dark trousers, white shirt, black tie. Ownership-approved.

I'd opted for yoga pants and my LA Tech Bulldogs warm-up jacket. Hair pulled back, sneakers still dusty. Fresh-from-the-gym plausible, though I wasn't. The flicker of his gaze yesterday—one beat where the polished surface cracked—had become a challenge I meant to exploit.

We were a study in contrast.

"Good evening, Ms. Dubois."

"Am I underdressed?"

"Not at all. I'm overdressed. I came early for paperwork and to check in with second shift. My apologies."

His smile was relaxed, unforced. Something bubbled up in me, bright and treacherous, before I tamped it down.

*Do not throw yourself at your boss, Liz. You cannot afford to blow this job.*

"Anyway, the orientation tour starts at the front doors. Revolving, brass and glass, dating from the 1920s, like most of the building. A Hekateion stands on either side."

"A what, now?"

"Hecate. Greek goddess of magic, the moon, and crossroads. She picked up odd jobs other gods didn't want. A Hekateion's a pillar with her three aspects: maiden, mother, crone."

"Crone. Thoughtful guys, those Greeks. I met this one last night. As an art piece, she speaks to me."

"Three faces guard three paths. Also phases of the moon, the Graces, the Fates. Three is a powerful number in Greek myth." He touched the carved pillar almost fondly. "She guards crossroads, like the one the hotel sits on. She's thousands of years old. Doubt I'll look that good."

"I know I won't," I muttered.

"Αυτά τα γιόγκα παντς δεν παραπονιούνται," Ash said calmly.

"What?"

"It's all Greek to me," he confirmed.

"Hey, you. Not fair!" Heat rose in my cheeks.

"Oh, you noticed?" Ash grinned.

"Truce?"

"Truce. What was that about sweet potatoes last night?"

I flushed. "Um... not just yet."

"Same here." He held up a finger. "Pinky swear—strictly English from now on?"

"Deal." We linked pinkies. *First touch. Squeee. Stop it, Liz.* "No Greek, no Cajun. Unless I'm furious, then all bets are off."

"So sworn. Shall we move on?"

"Please." I nodded. "Time's wasting."

"Piffle. I told you—causality and I are not on speaking terms. Share a revolving door with me, if you dare!"

"Oh, my stars! This ordeal will leave an indelible stain on my reputation." I took his elbow and dragged him into the brass-and-glass compartment. Moments later, we emerged inside the hotel proper.

"This is the lower lobby. Right: the Greek Café, breakfast through dinner. Left: Morgan's—signature cocktails. Straight ahead and around the corner: Vanderbilt's. Fancy-schmancy. Priced accordingly."

"Morgan's... Well—"

"Careful, worm. And who is this... person?"

The voice came from a regal woman unlocking the nightclub's front doors. Emerald eyes, pale complexion, long wavy ginger hair. Full purple gown, puffed

sleeves, bodice embroidered in Celtic knots. Her ample curves were impossible to miss.

“Morgan,” Ash sighed. “This is Eliza, our new employee.” He added, “Morgan is manager, bartender, master of ceremonies, and ‘potion’ maker. Eliza, Morgan.”

“I see. Is unprofessional familiarity a habit of yours, Ash?”

“I’m conducting an orientation tour,” he replied, perhaps a shade too defensively.

“Accept my card, dear.” Morgan offered a jet-black business card. “I retain a roster of corporate lawyers. You have the power to reduce this wretched creature to poverty if he dares lay one finger on you.”

I cracked a frosty smile and towered over her. “Oh, he’s performed adequately thus far, not that it’s your affair. You’re quite a character, aren’t you? Scamper off now, dear. Lovely to meet you and your—*sniff*—unique sense of style.”

Morgan regarded my smile a heartbeat too long, then cut a glance at Ash’s careful posture. The corner of her mouth lifted. “Spirited. I’ll look forward to meeting you again, Miss Eliza. I have the potion you need; come when you’re ready. Ta ta.” She pivoted on one toe. “Worm,” she dismissed, and stepped into the club, flipping the deadbolt.

Silence stretched a second.

I exhaled, letting tension slip from my shoulders. Sharp. Dangerous. Not to be underestimated. And—annoyingly—compelling.

“Well, there’s our Morgan,” Ash said.

“You’re not frightened of that bossy ball of bustier-burster, are you?”

“Of course not. You haven’t met my mother.”

“I’ll need an eight-hour shift to decide if I’ll detest or adore her act. Don’t make me face another test like that soon, please?”

“You got it. There’s only one of her.”

“What’s the ‘worm’ thing about?”

“Long story. Not mine to share. She has a general disdain for men. In my case it’s almost a term of endearment.”

“You keep a lot of secrets, don’t you?” A chill skittered under my skin. *Why?*

“I have a family here, and people who rely on my discretion—personally and professionally. I’ll share everything I’m free to share. Pinky promise.”

I nodded, pinning that promise to the warmth still in my fingers. Still, caution lingered. Secrets. People depending on him. I can’t charm my way through that web. The chest-warming, smile-inducing tension settled back into wary alertness.

I glanced around the lower lobby, grateful for a new subject. “Who’s the old Greek guy etched on the café door glass?”

“Supposed to be Charon. Not the best likeness. Up the stairs is the main lobby. Front desk, elevators, ballroom, meeting rooms. Here comes Gary. Gary? Got a minute?”

“Eliza, this is Gary—hotel security, retired cop, broader than he is tall. And French. You’ll get along. He worked at Notre-Dame once.”

“Nice to meet you, Gary. I’m Liz. Ash won’t let me speak Cajun anymore.”

“*Mademoiselle. C’est un plaisir de vous rencontrer.*”

I glanced at Ash. He shrugged: “Oh... go ahead. This time.”

“*Merci. Le plaisir est partagé.*”

Gary half-bowed. “Excuse me, you two.”

Once he was gone, I whispered, “Does the ground shake when he walks, or did I imagine that?”

“A little of both. He’s impressive. I can’t tell you how many drunks he’s pitched into the street who never returned.”

“I bet.” I fanned myself. “Why, Rhett Butler, I do declare—he has a presence.”

“Yup. Her name is Yuri. They have kids.”

“Damn it! I imagined climbing that mountain someday. Strictly for scientific exploration, of course.”

“Sure. You won’t be the first with that ambition. And I am very frightened of Yuri. You’ll see why. Put your swooning fan away.”

“She’s *more impressive* than *he* is? Whoo. How do I get *her* number?”

“You’re flexible,” Ash chuckled. “Don’t hurt yourself. It’s impossible to imagine a more married couple than those two. Their eldest is seventeen.”

“I’ll file them both under ‘Off limits.’ Got it. And that’s the front desk?”

“Ayup. Want to say hi to Tom?”

“Do we have to? He was checking out my ass last night. I’m sure he’s harmless, but... you know.”

“Fair. HR already has another auditor. Tom won’t be our problem for much longer.”

Ash’s gaze skittered away, fingers fussing with nothing. A hundred other things he wasn’t saying hovered between us.

“Earth to Night Manager.” I snapped my fingers near his ear; he jumped.

“Night Man,” Ash corrected, pointing to the cracked sign on the front desk. Only half the title had survived the decades.

“Remember that whole ‘at first glance’ attraction thing with Gary?”

“Yeeessss?”

*Here it comes.* “I was checking out your butt last night, too.”

My laughter rang across the lobby as I looped my arms around his neck. Heat crept up my cheeks. Damn it. Still... impossible to look away.

“Honestly, cher. You didn’t think I knew?”

“But Tom—”

“Promise your head won’t swell to the size of the moon?”

“Um. Okay?”

“The difference is I’m not the least bit attracted to Tom.”

Warmth flooded me, deeper than just my cheeks. And I didn’t care.

I held him a heartbeat longer, for no reason except it filled an emptiness I hadn’t noticed. He smelled good, like clean sheets fresh from the dryer.

I let go, suddenly aware of how long that lasted. Dammit. *What happened to calm and professional, Liz?*

“I have another confession,” Ash said. “I’m pretty glad you wore yoga pants today.”

I tried, but couldn’t help it; I laughed again. *You are not making this easier. Stop it.*

“Want to see my office?”

*God help me, I almost said yes.* I shook my head. “Not today, Boss. I still have a job. What time is it?”

“We’ve got time.” He caught the shift. “How about coffee? Ask anything. About me, the hotel... ghosts.”

Coffee. Safe, ordinary coffee. Exactly what I needed. Exactly what I didn’t.

I plucked Morgan’s jet-black card from my pocket like a warning flag. “Promise to behave yourself?”

His smile faltered. “Miss Dubois, if you feel pressured, I apologize. We can end orientation right now.”

Guilt punched me in the chest. *Overkill, Liz. Way overkill.* I shoved the card back. “Sorry. That was... dramatic. I didn’t mean it like that.”

His eyes softened, but he didn’t push.

I breathed. “Coffee sounds nice. Yes.”

“You’re sure? Perkatory, right across the street.”

*No, I’m not. But that’s my problem, not yours.*

“Lead on, Macduff.” I took his arm—a nonverbal apology, and in case he hesitated to take mine.

Ash chuckled. “Lay on. Macbeth’s challenge to start a fight.”

“You know that’s not what I meant,” I smiled.

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## 04 Mocha Shadows

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The shop across from the hotel was called Perkatory. Exterior lit only by a buzzing neon sign in blood-red script: Abandon Sleep, All Ye Who Enter Here. Inside, the décor leaned gothic-grunge; decades of elbows had scarred the counter. A few bleary regulars hunched over chipped mugs as if caffeine alone kept their souls tethered. The espresso machine hissed like a temper, spoons clinked against ceramic, and steam curled in the window's neon glow.

We slid into the quietest booth in the corner, far enough from the counter to dodge the clatter. I set my bag down, pulled out a notebook for show if nothing else, and finally let myself breathe. Ash ordered two coffees, black and strong.

“Ash?”

He glanced up from the menu. One eyebrow went managerial.

“Coffee and... would you like pie? My treat.”

“Cherry, if they have it. And—can I be clear about something?”

Serious Boss Mode sharpened. “What is it?”

“My intentions. I’m ashamed of the Morgan’s card thing; it didn’t go how I imagined.”

Ash sighed. “As stern as Morgan is, she isn’t wrong. Our working relationship won’t ever be comfortable with a personal—”

I stopped him with a fingertip across his lips. “Ash. ‘Boss.’ Don’t be so full of yourself.” I leaned closer, holding his eyes. “Ash Skoto—Skotomerkis. I give my consent.”

“What?”

“This. Us. Whatever has been brewing between us. I consent. Not to everything! But I’m not suing you. Let’s relax and see where it goes. Want to?”

“It’s risky.”

“I know.” The weight of it settled in my chest. Consent doesn’t erase caution. “And I’m careful.”

A server appeared, tray in hand. “Hi. I’m Sally. Coffee?”

“Two, please. Can you leave the pot?” Ash flashed a hundred-watt smile.

Sally blinked, unimpressed but polite. "Sure... and pie? Cherry or apple?"

"Which do you like better?" I asked. "And I love your earrings."

Sally tilted her head, lips tugging. "Depends. Tonight, I'd say apple. And thanks... got them in Tucson."

"Tucson's beautiful. I loved the botanical gardens. Apple, please—two slices. Thank you, Sally."

"Coming right up." She tapped her pad. "And the pot stays?"

"I'll pour. Charge us for... six cups?" Ash offered.

She smirked. "Sure, why not? Six it is." She drifted away, muttering about slow weeknights.

"I don't think I can drink that much coffee," I said.

"Me neither. But once she drops the pie, she won't hover."

"True."

"We're not here for the coffee, anyway. Are we?"

"Not entirely." I slid the small notebook across to him. "What do you make of this?"

He examined the cover; I fielded the pie. "Thank you, Sally."

"You're welcome, dears. We're open all night."

Ash slid the notebook back. "I don't remember any Gertrudes. This came from the hotel?"

"Ash. Spells. Ghosts. Flickers of shadow. 'Routinely violating causality.' Spells that function, not childish scribbles." I lifted a brow. "Lucy, you've got a lot of 'splaining to do. Help me understand this mystical jiggery-pokery."

He leaned back, fingers steeped. "Sounds... lively. And dangerous. Exactly the sort of thing I ought to avoid, yes?"

"You could. Or learn to duck before someone turns you into a toad."

"A toad might improve my posture."

I rolled my eyes, keeping my hands off him. Safe corner. Safe coffee.

"Start simple," I said. "Am I going crazy alone in that laundry, or did I move things with my thoughts?"

Ash leaned in, elbows on the table, curiosity bright. "Let's see. Pick something small. The spoon."

I narrowed my eyes, willing it to slide. Nothing.

"Not yet," Ash said calmly. "Concentration isn't willpower. It's conviction. Coax it."

Again. A tiny tremor ran up my arm; the spoon jittered, a silver tick against ceramic.

"Did you see that?"

"I did." His voice stayed even, but a crease of surprise flicked at the corner of his mouth. "Minor victories first. You'll get stronger with practice."

“So you’re telling me magic works.”

“My mother thinks so.”

“That tells me jack and shit.”

He lowered his voice. “You touched her face last night. She loves red poppies.”

“Excuse me?”

“Red poppies,” he repeated, soft. “She told me once. I noticed when you brushed her cheek before you entered the hotel.”

Heat rolled through me. “That’s... oddly specific.”

“Magic lives in observation, too,” he murmured. “Not just in spells.”

A shiver went down my spine, not from the air conditioning.

“The crone on the Hekateion.”

“The same.”

“Your. Mother. Is. Hecate?” My nails dug into his palm before I realized.

His jaw tightened, but he didn’t pull away. “Yes. Guardian, trickster, teacher. Real.”

My pulse hammered. “I... don’t know how to deal.”

“One step at a time.” His fingers were warm around mine. “And you will. I’ll be here. Just don’t let fear decide for you.”

I let a shaky breath out. “One step, huh?”

“One step.”

“Sorry about your hand.” I flexed my fingers. “Still faint. My heart won’t quit pounding.”

“It’ll settle. Adrenaline, fear, excitement... a cocktail you didn’t order.”

“Yeah.” I took a bite of pie: sweet, warm, grounding. “What’s a Night Man, mister night man?”

He sipped coffee, gaze drifting to the window as if the glass was thinner for him. “Someone who keeps the night in order. Guardian, fixer. Problems that aren’t mundane. Some aren’t supposed to exist.”

“So... a supernatural hall monitor?”

“Something like that.” A smile tugged. “Bigger halls. Looser rules. Stakes higher.”

“And the hotel?”

“Elysium Gate isn’t only a building. It’s a crossroads. A hub. Some call it a hotel; I call it home. Workplace. Occasionally, a battlefield.”

My stomach flipped. “Battlefield. The ‘owners’—Hecate?”

“And Charon,” he said quietly. “They own it, maintain balance. Mortals rarely notice. Fewer survive if they do.”

“And you... deal with them?”

“Every night. Mostly, I guide souls. Psychopomp. Make sure the dead get where they’re going, the living don’t interfere, and the chaos stays contained.”

“That’s... a lot.” I strove for lightness and failed. “Sounds like you work too much.”

“Work doesn’t leave. People do.” He lifted his cup. “Welcome to my world.”

“One step at a time,” I echoed, then couldn’t resist. “You know, there’s a terrible joke.”

“I live for terrible jokes.”

“A bank robber planned the perfect heist, one step at a time.”

He waited.

“Then he shoved his getaway driver down the stairs.” I rimshot my spoon. “Time to get to work?”

He groaned. “Unless you want to watch me violate causality. Look at the hotel.”

“What for?”

“I already did it. We’ve been together this entire evening, right?”

“Yesss...?”

“Ask yourself how.”

“Stop playing. How—what?”

“When you get back, go straight to your locker. Look inside. Ask yourself how it got there.”

My eyes narrowed. “You’ve been in my locker?”

He shook his head. “Call it a welcome gift. Graduation present, too.”

“If it’s lingerie, I’m punching you. Strongly. In the throat.”

He laughed. “Pinky promise. Nothing untoward. Did you enjoy the tour?”

“I enjoyed this coffee. You’re... complicated, nightguy.”

“I did too.” His smile thinned for a beat. “Enjoy small moments. Eternity isn’t everything it’s cracked up to be. The small, bright moments keep you from going hollow.

\* \* \*

My hand rested on the locker’s cold metal. Forehead, then breath, fogging a tiny oval. Dread twisted and—wrong note—something gentler threaded under it, like a dream half-remembered. Serene. My heart doubled, then slowed.

Reason spoke last, serene and steady: love over fear.

I whispered into the steel. “Oh, Grand-mère Marie. Help me pick the right path. Please.” My knee ached, stupid as ever.

I twisted the handle. One step at a time.

Ugly laundry uniform, scowling at me as usual... and something black beside it. With a cat motif.

I laughed out loud. Panic, meet fabric.

Not yarn—woven. A vest. Sturdy, like canvas. Pockets everywhere: front, inside, even around the back waist. Woven black cats, classic witchy style—brooms, arched backs, big ones, tiny ones. Every pocket had one.

I put it on. Perfect fit. Trimmed my waist. Flattered where it had no business flattering. How the hell did he nail my size? How did it get inside?

“I was pleased” didn’t even cover it.

A scrap of paper in the stomach pocket: **From the Desk of Ash Skotomerkis.** Notepad tear-off, with a hand-drawn witch on a broom flying before a crescent moon. Perfect. Sweet.

I hugged the vest to my chest. It smelled of clean linen and...locker funk.

Get back to work, fraidy-witch.

\*\*\*

The basement lavatory wasn’t repulsive, but it wilted beside the lobby’s brass and marble. Compensations: I’d never seen another woman in it. Third shift was small; the nightclub and front-desk ladies preferred the upstairs wonder, buffed for upscale clientele.

A humming startled me—proper jump-scare. The fluorescent flickered; reflections stuttered in the mirror. My skin prickled, a chill brushing me like someone opening a freezer door.

*“Grief is the price we pay for love.”*

I turned. A woman, perhaps seventy, extended a handkerchief.

“Thank you, but I’m not in love.”

*“Are you not? Pain and fear have been your lovers for years.”*

Her voice stayed steady while the air around her shimmered, warmth and chill wrestling for space.

“Who are you?” I asked, suspicion curling like smoke.

*“You called. I answered. Does it matter?”* She tilted her head. *“You are at a crossroads. Choose. Embrace your fear, or embrace your love. You cannot keep both. But your love will be stronger than your fears, if you let it. Have faith. We love you, dear.”*

She passed through the powder-room door.

Not out—*through*. I stared at the embroidered handkerchief in my palm: **M. L.** And who was “we”?

The cold receded fast, replaced by a gentle warmth, like the echo of a hug. The tile felt less unfriendly, as if she’d left comfort behind for me.

I blinked. Either I was losing my mind, or I’d met my first ghost.

\*\*\*

I sat at the folding table, fingers clenched around the handkerchief. Before I could think better of it, I called Ash. He leaned against the laundry doorframe now.

“Are you okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost,” he smiled. “Told you that happens a lot here.”

“I... perhaps I did.” I held up the handkerchief. “She gave me this. And then she walked through a door.”

His eyes lingered on the initials. His mouth softened. “You definitely did. And you talked to her? Good. That’s more than most ever experience.” He tipped his head. “You’re a witch, Liz. I thought you knew.”

“Most?”

“This is a haunted hotel. Not a tourist trap. New employee turnover rate is high.” He studied me. “Overall, you’re brave. I’m impressed with your performance so far. I don’t want you to flee. Rather than run, what you need is more sensitivity. See the hotel as it is, not just laundry chutes and shift schedules. See. Learn. Adapt.”

His gaze lingered a second too long; the hint of an approving smile touched his lips. “Trust me. We take care of each other. You belong here.”

He pushed off the jamb and nodded toward the corridor. “Come on. I want to call Morgan. Let’s see her before your next shift.”

\* \* \*

Morgan’s Place was dark and still a couple of hours before opening. My steps echoed on the bare floorboards. Even the neon looked asleep. Daylight left me foggy, as if my body fought every tick.

“Eliza? Good to see you! Please come in.”

Morgan stood barefoot in a bathrobe, a towel turbaned on her head, damp footprints trailing the dance floor. The bluster queen was nowhere to be seen.

“I’ll get lights before we crash into something. One sec.”

Switches clicked behind the bar; sections of the room blinked awake—left, right, then a soft stage glow pooled over the counter.

“Deadbolt the front door?” she called. “If people see lights, they don’t take ‘closed’ for an answer.”

Bemused, I slid the bolt. Not the entrance I’d expected.

“Drink? The leftover ice will have to do.”

“A beer?”

“How about not?” She handed me a highball. “Vodka cranberry. You like those. I promised you a potion, even if you didn’t know you needed it yet. But first—talk. Booth?”

We took a corner booth. Citrus shampoo threaded through the stale beer. Vinyl sighed under me.

"I have to ask," I said. "The dominatrix thing... is it an act?"

"No, mostly a show for men, though. Think of me like a drag queen after the outfit's off. The costume is a lot of work. Among friends, I'm just me."

"I see. Didn't expect the personality shift."

"You're not a natural submissive, Liz, or you'd never have stood your ground. From that scene with Ash, you swing straight, at least most of the time. Too bad. You're spirited and pretty. I'd enjoy playing with you immensely." She showed me the barest glimpse of the steel hidden beneath the velvet.

"Um, thanks?" My voice cracked anyway. An experiment I wasn't brave enough to collect, even for purely scientific exploration purposes.

She smirked. "Back to business. What drags you out of bed so early, pet?"

"Ash said you're the sorceress to see at the Elysium Gate."

"To what end?"

"I keep seeing shadows, feeling nudges. Empathic impressions. I want to develop my sight. Also—Marie Laveau was my six-times great-grandmother."

Morgan arched a brow. "I'm not Vodou, you know. My magic's more...*wrathful*. Combat-oriented."

"I didn't know."

"Ash didn't tell you? Girl, haven't you ever heard of the Morrigan?"

"No? Should I have?"

"Wrong side of the pond. Never mind. How far back is Granny Marie?"

"Nineteenth century."

"Give me your hand."

Her palm was hot and dry. She tilted her head; her eyes unfocused. Gooseflesh walked my arms.

"Oh, there she is." Morgan's voice gentled, but her eyes were all whites. "Yes, I'm with Eliza. Excellent plan. I agree. I'll manage it. Thank you."

"Morgan, who are you talking to?"

"Your gram. She said to tell you she loves you. Now, behind the bar. Time to mix the potion I promised."

I followed, unsettled. The air smelled of alcohol, wood polish, and sharp herbs from the tall shelf. Odd bottles clinked as she lined them up.

Jars came down, one after another. A cork squeaked free; wormwood bit my nose. She ground leaves in a stone mortar, the gritty crunch loud in the empty bar. When she poured in a syrupy blue, it hissed as if protesting. A sour-citrus note curled into something coppery, like a penny held too long in the mouth.

"Tall girl. Extra of this one," she muttered, sprinkling powder that shimmered like ground mica. She stirred. The liquid thickened, oily rainbows sliding across the top

before settling into murky green-brown. For an instant, red and blue threads coiled through it like veins, then vanished.

“What do you weigh?”

“What?”

“Dosage. About 135?”

Heat rose to my neck. “Athletic. 165.”

“No shame, luv. You wear it well. *Very spankable*. Sure you’re perfectly straight?”

I folded my arms. “Ash.”

“Ah yes, the worm. Hand me the green bottle. What’s his appeal? I don’t see it.”

“He’s steady. I need some of that.”

“That’s worth fighting for,” she agreed. “Pretty enough, too. Shame he’s only a man. Taste test.”

She spooned out a sample.

I sipped. If I’d been a cartoon, smoke would have shot from both ears. “Whoa. Strong.”

“More V8.” A splash, then three drops from a black bottle. The concoction turned a true swamp-green. “Now, Liz—this will broaden your mind. Permanent. If it ever gets too loud, you seal yourself off. Ash knows how to protect your sleep with wards.”

The glass trembled in my hand. “Charming.”

Citrus-bright shifted to metallic to wet earth. The glass pulsed, warm as a heartbeat. Heavier than glass and liquid should be.

I hesitated. Was it congealing?

**“Stop dawdling, witch!”**

Her voice boomed through the room; ancient, commanding. Lights flickered. Bottles rattled.

I chugged like a college kid. Fire tore down my throat. The floor tilted. The ceiling spun.

“All gone? Good pet.”

Morgan’s arms closed around me, strong and steady, as a universe cracked open inside me and kept expanding until it spun away.

\*\*\*

“Here, drink this.”

A fizzing glass pressed to my palm. I guzzled ginger ale.

“Why am I so thirsty?”

“You’ve been out for hours. Ash is coming.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I called him. And because you needed sleep.”

Metal tasted like a penny at the back of my tongue. “Thank you. For... everything.”

“You’re welcome.” She was already steering me toward the back door. “Insist he take you home. Take the night off. I need to dress and open the bar. Scoot.”

I hugged her, gratitude flooding me. Then I stumbled away, head buzzing, edges too sharp.

I didn’t have to turn around to feel her eyes on my ass the entire way. Not just a feeling; I *knew*.

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## 05 Shifting Reality

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On Wednesday, I took my break almost an hour late thanks to a busted washer. Number Seven was anything but lucky.

I missed the front office boys—Ash and even Tom. Mixed bag: a little regret, a little relief. Upside: time with my tiny, precious spellbook. I was halfway through Gertrude's brief chapter on first potions, all three simple and sensible.

I don't know how, but Gary still surprised me. If someone that massive, broad... and, well, hot... creeps up on you, you might already be dead, girl.

"Eliza. *Bonjour, mademoiselle.*"

I jolted and flopped like a beached fish. My notebook almost took flight. "Jeez, Gary!" I clutched my chest, corralling my galloping heart.

Something brushed my sternum, like another heartbeat pulsing with mine. Matching. Calming. Slowing us together. Warm. Kind.

"I'm so sorry!" Gary surged forward, then checked himself, taking two big steps back like he might crush me by accident. "Are you okay?"

Wondering, I reached with the new sense that kept rising in me. What... who are you? A soft breeze—feathery, tender—stirred my hair and slipped away. Sadness ached as it went.

"Eliza? Miss Eliza, talk to me." His hand hovered near my shoulder, the other already on his radio. He looked ready to call for a full rescue squad.

I blinked. "No, no. Sorry, Gary. I'm fine. I've been... seeing ghosts."

He froze, then let out a rough, relieved laugh. "Welcome to the Elysium Gate. We get a lot of that here."

That laugh streaked through me like a missile and exploded.

*No! Bad girl. Off limits.*

To distract my stupid urges, I leapt to the obvious question. "So, Gary, how's the family? Your wife... Yuri, right?" I eyed his wedding band to drive the point home: dark and light metal, folded in layers. Damascus steel?

He nodded, a small smile. "She's upstairs with the kids. We live in Suite 1102. I handle round-the-clock security, and the hotel provides room and board."

“You have children?” Calm now. His voice was still... yummy, but my body was learning the rules.

“Three. Euterpe is the eldest, then the twins, Peleus and Telamon.”

“Unusual names.”

“‘Yuri’ comes from Euryale—Greek rather than what most people assume. The kids go by Ella, Pel, and Tel.”

I exhaled in relief. Shorter names I could remember.

His bass rumble was relaxing. Yuri was a lucky lady. Few men speak in Gary’s natural Stygian register.

“Get you anything, Liz? I came for a bottle of water.”

“I was reading.” I waved Gertrude’s little notebook. “No, thank you. I’m good.”

“What about?” He settled in across from me; the chair protested under his weight. Not built for a man of his size.

I hesitated, then remembered how easily he’d shrugged off ghosts. “Well... potions. Not Morgan-class. This simple Alertness Potion is bound to work—it’s mostly hot tea with caffeine.”

Gary chuckled. “You’re a witch, then?”

So casual. The permanent staff didn’t bat an eye at the supernatural. When it works here, I guess it turns ordinary fast.

“Well, no. I’m learning. I guess.”

“Why so hesitant?”

“One tiny notebook of simple spells, and no one to teach me.”

“Study’s good for your soul. Yuri can help with the simpler potions. Do you want to meet my wife?”

Heat rose in my chest and onto my cheeks. Not a blush—the mysterious touch again. Approval.

“Ash said you’re both private people. I get it. I’d love to meet her, Gary, but... I don’t want to intrude.”

“I’ll give you a crash course on making a strong first impression. Yuri has reasons to guard her privacy. With the kids growing up, she has to embrace a larger world.” He chuckled. “I’ll be an empty nester soon.”

“What’s funny about that?”

“Oh, the trials and tribulations it took for us to have our children. Never mind—endless story.”

I took Gary’s hands. Cool. Unusually stiff. Odd. “You’re sure? Your wife is precious to you; everyone knows it.”

"I'm sure. She'll forgive me. My money says she'll adore you, Liz. Yuri's first rule: be honest. Never lie. She's incredibly perceptive—some say magically so. She'll know. You're upfront; that won't be difficult for you."

"Second rule: the sunglasses. Light hypersensitivity. She never takes them off, even indoors. Some people get twitchy around disabilities; you'll get used to it. Don't stare."

"General tips: respect, calm observation, openness. She's many things, but primarily a sculptor, perfumer, dancer, educator, seamstress. Mother. Wife. *Mon amour*."

"I'm intimidated already." *I bet she keeps a spotless home and fixes engines on the side.*

Gary laughed. "Someday I'll tell you how badly my first week with Yuri went. Honestly, she's charming, warm, and friendly. You'll do fine. Be yourself. When did you want to meet her?"

"Any time off-shift. Or I'll ask Ash for a couple of hours."

"I'll talk to Ash; he owes me favors. How about now?"

"It's the middle of the night!"

"And I work nights. She keeps my hours. Neither of us needs much sleep."

"But..." I racked my brain for an excuse. Nothing came.

"Eliza, you've got this. Let me phone ahead."

\* \* \*

She spoke in a whisper, glancing both ways down the hall. "You must be Eliza. Gary said you're a young witch? Come inside, please, quietly. My children are asleep."

I hadn't expected effortless graciousness. She stood an inch or two taller than me, which is saying something. Wraparound polarized glasses cut a sharp line across her face, hiding her eyes. A silk kimono patterned with pale cranes on midnight blue skimmed a willowy frame. Twiggy, after a good stretching.

My jaw dropped. I snapped it shut—damage done. She smiled, indulgent of my awe, and beckoned with a hand so fine it could have been sculpted from porcelain. She carried an unhurried authority; she never needed to raise her voice to be obeyed.

"Please forgive me. Gary didn't tell me you were so stunning." We stepped inside; she closed the door without a sound. "Right this way."

*Damn it, Eliza. What is the matter with you today? Ash warned you she was even more impressive than Gary. Mouth closed, eyes up, she's off-limits too.*

And the way she moved. Not a walk—more a glide.

She spoke again, still muted but not whispering. "We can relax now. The soundproofing is excellent. We're on the 'adult' side, so the kids won't wake. Care for a drink?"

Speaking of Gary... where did he go? He was right behind me. I swear.

"He went back to work, Eliza. He's confident you aren't an axe murderer. Gary has excellent people instincts. We rely on each other."

"Just Liz, please. Um... vodka cranberry?"

"And I am Yuri to everyone but my sister. Mmm, lovely—I'll have one too. Have a seat. What do you do, Liz?"

"Right now I'm working overnight in the basement laundry."

One of Yuri's eyebrows climbed over the frame of her glasses. "Really. Ash couldn't find you a better position?"

"I hadn't met Ash. And I need the money."

"Sorry, Liz. I don't mean to sound like a snob. I'm only surprised because... his family is quite wealthy, you know."

"Another detail Ash neglected." I frowned. "This 'Man of Mystery' bit gets old."

"Mmm. You haven't known him long. He's open about himself, I find. Other people's secrets... his sense of honor is unusually strong."

My teeth ground. "I know. I know it's not his fault. I think I know anyway."

"You're fond of him. That's why secrets he can't share annoy you."

The cranberry went down the wrong pipe. I coughed, eyes watering, scrambling for a denial that wouldn't sound like a confession. Yuri sat serene, a faint smile betraying no judgment. Only certainty.

She tilted her head, listening to something I couldn't hear. "Mmm. You smother your feelings, but they're fragrant, Liz. They rise like incense. Fondness, irritation, worry, attraction..." She traced a small arc in the air. "Grinding your teeth won't hide them."

My face burned hot enough to light a lamp. "That's... ridiculous."

Her smile deepened—indulgent, not mocking. "No. It's human, and honest. As Gary told you, I value honesty."

I set my glass down too sharply. "Grandma said blunt truth is often the tool of a sadist, not a saint."

Yuri inclined her head, like I'd parried the first thrust of a duel she'd hoped for. "Wise woman. Honesty can wound, yes. Honesty without malice"—she touched her chest—"can heal."

I stared at my hands. "I'm sorry. I only wanted this to go well." My voice dropped into the hush, small beside her poise.

Desperate to regain ground, I reached out with my own feelings. Fumbling, untrained, but earnest. The air prickled over my skin, a faint echo of what I'd felt with Gary.

"But you're hiding something too." I watched my fingers knot and unknot.

*What are you doing, Liz? You're a beggar at her door. Why the foolish pride?*

The pause stretched. A heartbeat, two.

Yuri's smile didn't fade, but her stillness shifted—less porcelain doll, more statue. A slight tilt of her head, as if appraising me anew. "Mmm. Unexpected."

Her voice lowered, a silken thread that didn't need to rise. "You're not wrong. I am hiding something. Several things." She lifted her glass, unhurried. "The difference, Liz, is that my secrets are armor. Yours are weights you drag behind you."

The words sank like stones in deep water. Not cruel. Not kind. Only true.

Her tone dropped a few notes, heavy with purpose. "Shall we agree not all secrets need airing? You're fresh, still green. You haven't learned full control of your body. It betrays you when you think about Ash... or my husband..." The sunglasses glinted. "...and even about me, to a lesser extent. Do I need to continue? Or do we understand each other?"

My throat locked. No menace, but her boundary was clear.

"I... I can't lie to you, Yuri." My fingers tightened around the glass. "I'm distracted. By Ash. By Gary. Even by you, in ways I don't understand."

Her head tilted; I felt the weight of her scrutiny. "Hm. Honest. Brave... and foolish. You know the difference?"

"Yes," I whispered. "I do."

"You're hardly the first. Gary has had young women swoon over him as long as I've known him. There are reasons neither of us needs to fear a straying spouse." She grinned. "He is handsome in either form—damn him. But he's only mine. As for Ash, settle that between yourselves, as we did. I won't betray you."

My heart sped up. She wouldn't have slipped like that by accident. Did she tell me on purpose? What do I do with it?

"I agree," I said finally. "Not all secrets need to be aired. I apologize. Will you forgive me?"

"Of course." Soft, almost warm. The sunglasses hid the rest. "But are you sure you won't go mad if you never ask?"

I froze, caught between relief and something else. Curiosity. Temptation. My throat went dry. I only nodded.

"How do you feel about monsters, Liz?"

The words hit like a chill draft through a cracked window. Monsters. Physical? Figurative? My pulse jumped.

Yuri leaned back, calm as ever. "Answer honestly. It matters less what you call them than how you face them."

"I... suppose... I face them."

"Mm." Approval, unreadable. "Good. You'll need that."

I dared another sip, mouth dry. "Do I need to know, Yuri?"

A faint glint of amusement tugged her lips. "Not yet. Understanding arrives in its own time. Patience is a skill you'll find invaluable here."

Patience. Right. Like I hadn't been losing my mind since I stepped into this suite.

"I feel like we've been speaking in riddles for hours."

"Liz, are you phobic? Any heebie-jeebies that send you screaming into the night?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Fear of misunderstanding everything I see, maybe. That's what tonight feels like."

"Then you're on the right path." She considered. "Fear is a compass, if you can read it. Misunderstanding is patience's teacher."

"Is it something I can learn?"

"Depends on what you mean."

"Shapeshifting."

Laughter bubbled out of Yuri. "Heavens. Gary told me you came for potion hints. That's an enormous leap, Eliza."

"Okay, yes—way out of my league. But not out of... yours?"

Her smile lingered, faint, deliberate, weighing how much to reveal. "Perhaps. Tonight we'll start smaller. Safer."

\* \* \*

I set my glass down and steadied myself. The suite felt quieter now: the hum of night, the faint rustle of Yuri's kimono. Her hand indicated a side table laid out with care—herbs, vials, a mortar and pestle.

"First potion," she said, calm but carrying that subtle authority that made my pulse leap, "is the simplest: alertness. Hot tea is the base. Caffeine is obvious. The key lies in how you merge constituent parts. Concentration. Precision. Attention."

I nodded and reached for the dried leaves. They slipped once, scattering. My heart sank. "I'm sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for." The faint smile again. "The herb has a temper. Learn it; don't force it. Breathe, Liz."

I inhaled, letting the sweet aroma fill my lungs. Slowly, I gathered the leaves, feeling their roughness, noting the variations in color. My fingers still trembled, but the rhythm of the task calmed me.

"Stir slowly," she said. "Feel the mixture. It will tell you when it's ready."

My first attempt was too fast. The liquid bubbled more than it should; a faint scorch rose. Panic flared, but Yuri's steady look held me. "Too fast. Try again. Focus on the process, not the outcome."

Third attempt: measured, patient. Steam curled fragrant and sharp. My chest loosened; the minor success sent a thrill through me.

“Better,” Yuri said. “These victories are the foundation. You build strength one step at a time. Magic is not a race.”

I exhaled, fingers sticky, heart still hammering, and a grin tugged at my mouth. For the first time, I learned something real, something I shaped. Not just theory in a notebook, but magic I created.

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## 06 Laboratory

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Ash leaned against the laundry's doorjamb.

"Stalking me again, boss?"

He shook his head. "Admiring the view briefly, perhaps. I arrived a moment ago. You've grown more perceptive, haven't you?"

I hid a pleased, private smile. "Shadows drifted past that doorway all night. Not scary anymore. Guess I'm out of jump-scares in this horror flick. They're decent company, actually. I've got a lot on my mind."

"Hopefully not all troubled thoughts. I'd like a quick word, Eliza."

"Of course. Just don't tell my boss. He lives to file complaints about my work ethic."

"Ah, yes. Terrifying man. I'll keep this brief."

He held out a plastic keycard. "I've checked you into the hotel. Room 210—far from both elevators and the ice machine. Corner room, quiet. Excellent view... of the parking garage. You can't have everything."

"Checked me into... what? Why?"

"I've adjusted your compensation to include room and board. Historically, the bottom three floors housed employees and their families. That ended before World War II, but it still makes sense. You'll save money on that old Chevy, too."

"Keep your apartment or not, as you choose. Some people can't stand living where they work, but it's an option. No rent."

I hesitated. "This isn't some kind of kept-woman scheme, is it?"

"Don't be offensive. You know the permanent staff already lives on the property."

"Ash... I haven't earned this."

"Don't be proud, either. If you'd rather not live here, keep a toothbrush and spare clothes. Morgan was very clear: the hotel can improve your finances at minimal cost."

"Eliza, I'm welcoming you into our family. Morgan suggested it; Gary and Yuri approve. No hidden strings."

The key felt heavy in my hand. My mind listed reasons to refuse. I hadn't earned this. I didn't belong. It felt too easy. My life is never—

Something deeper stirred.

Warmth curled along my spine, gentle and insistent. My knees loosened, a lightness settling in my chest. I didn't see anyone, didn't hear anyone, but I felt a presence guiding me. Permission. Encouragement.

Still, skepticism tugged back. Why me? What if this goes wrong?

The warmth lingered, pulsing when my fingers brushed the key. Patient, waiting for thought and instinct to align.

I swallowed. Choice. Step forward or step back. Either way, mine.

"One step at a time?" I asked. Ash's hazel-green eyes were patient, kind.

A memory: Embrace your fear, or embrace your love. You cannot keep both.

"Family? Even... ghosts?" A faint chill brushed the edge of my vision. Not frightening—recognition.

Ash nodded. "Even monsters."

Another memory: Stop dawdling, witch!

With a laugh, the tension drained. Molehill, not mountain.

"Well, I accept. May I have a hug?"

Warmth fluttered in my chest—yes. Ash's arms were steady, and the clean scent of him anchored me. But... rawr. Canoodling with someone who smelled this good? Yes, please.

\* \* \*

I spent the next day schlepping boxes from my tiny apartment. The corner "baby suite" felt like an upgrade in square footage, even if the kitchen wasn't great. The bathroom—wow. Glassed-in shower and a huge, luxurious tub.

I planned to inaugurate it with fluffy towels, bubbles, candlelight, and a generous glass of wine.

Moving rule: cut clutter by half. Without my old paperbacks, I couldn't even fill the suite's storage. Having to tote less junk felt liberating.

The early rent check emptied my funds, but without rent and utilities they'd recover soon.

I was free.

One worry lingered: now I relied on my job and the "company store." Homelessness is still a possibility. I had to push through the doubts and start building confidence.

A warmth brushed along my spine, subtle and steady, like a hand resting on my shoulder. I didn't see anyone, but the presence said: trust yourself. Trust this new life. One step at a time.

I flopped onto the bed, arms splayed over the soft duvet. Boxes and lists melted away, replaced by the hum along my spine. Breath by breath, my muscles unknotted.

The presence hovered at the edge of perception, steadying me, promising rest without fear.

The world blurred. I drifted into the new room—city noise and tomorrow dimming to a soft murmur.

\* \* \*

Somewhere between waking and sleep, a shadow brushed the edges of my vision. A flicker, a nudge. It pulled me along, showing me the hotel in ways my waking eyes couldn't see.

The hotel spirit is feminine, a "she." I don't know how I knew. I just did.

I don't remember every step, only dreamlike fragments:

She showed me a place where I touched a wall and a hidden door revealed a secret workshop.

The roof under the city night sky, the railing above the streets below. What she showed me there...was...more than distracting. *Not safe for work.*

The "thirteenth" floor; mechanical, humming, unreachable by elevator. Dusty stacks of accounting ledgers and old tax returns, edges crumbling.

All twelve guest floors, each with its own distinct pulse.

The lobby, front desk, ballroom, meeting rooms—and Ash's office. He was there, head down, signing paperwork, unaware I watched.

My basement: locked storage doors, halls to nowhere. Most lay in shadow. The presence hummed at some doors, ignoring others.

A gentle nudge woke me. Heart racing with wonder, I dashed into the magnificent shower, grinning.

"Did you know the hotel is alive?" I whispered into the empty room. A warm tingle brushed my cheek like a kiss. "Thank you, dear."

Already thinking of Ash. I couldn't wait to tell him.

As for that roof railing... no. Much too embarrassing. I'll avoid rooftops. And humming storerooms.

From the spirit, a laugh.

"Hey!" I sat up, cheeks hot. "You'd better learn some manners! Voyeurism is not part of the deal."

The laughter faded, smug and soft.

\* \* \*

I knocked on Ash's office door.

Muffled through the wood: "Come in."

Massive desk, bookshelves, phones, filing cabinets. Office stuff. And Ash, smiling.

"Ms. Dubois. To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

"Did you know your hotel is alive?"

He pressed his fingertips together, watching me over the steeple. The corner of his mouth twitched. "Of course I know."

"You didn't tell me?" I stamped my foot, more from frustration than anger. Ridiculous on anyone over six, and I knew it.

"The last time we had a frank, super-serious talk, we agreed on one step at a time." I sighed. "May I sit?"

"Of course. Pull up a chair."

I glanced at the door lock. "Are we likely to be disturbed?"

Ash flicked the fingers of his right hand. The latch clicked; a tiny dark fist flipped it closed and evaporated into shadow.

"That's a neat trick," I said.

"We have the room to ourselves. Will you trust me not to turn into Mister Octopus and violate your... anything? Personal space?"

I arched my brow. "As fun as that sounds, I'm not in the mood to wrestle."

"So sworn." He reformed the finger steeple. "What's on your mind?"

"The hotel. A presence—she took me on a tour in my sleep. Basement to the roo—" I cut myself off, cheeks warming. "She showed me everything."

*No distractions, please.*

"She?"

"An impression. I'm sure Elysium Gate is femme. So far she hasn't objected."

"And you've actually seen her? I never have."

"Shadowy. Indistinct. Interested in my welfare."

"As am I." His fingers tapped together once. "How sure are you this wasn't an ordinary dream, Eliza?"

"Because I know what's on the unlisted thirteenth floor. I know where the laboratory is. I watched you work. Want me to name the books on the shelf behind my head?"

He gave a thin smile. "I'll accept the thirteenth as evidence. Not your... peep show. Inadmissible and unethical." His brow rose. "What laboratory?"

"It's there." My pulse quickened. "Want to see?"

"I really need to get some work—" He stopped, lips quirking. "No, I'm intrigued. If the owners complain, I'll violate conventional causality. Besides, they're in Europe. Hand me the radio on your left?"

"What does that... Never mind. Here."

Our fingers brushed as I passed it over. A tingle tried to sit down in my palm; I ignored it.

"Thank you." Ash keyed the radio. "Gary?"

"Boss?" Static crackled.

“Out of the office for an hour. Can you manage things?”

“Got it.”

“Where to?” Ash lifted an eyebrow.

I focused. Half a second later the lock gave a crisp metallic snick. My grin broke loose—triumphant. Most force I’d pushed yet, and at a lovely range.

“Twelfth floor,” I said, popping up from the chair. “Land of foreign dignitaries and wealthy assholes.”

“Hey! I’m a wealthy asshole.”

“I’ve heard. You never told me because you’re an asshole.” I stuck out my tongue.

He pressed a hand to his chest in mock injury, then raised both palms. “Mea culpa.”

Another grin tugged at me, but I didn’t let him see it.

\* \* \*

The twelfth-floor suites had names because there were only seven. Garden Oasis. Bridal Suite. Harbor House. The Presidential. Posh, silly.

“Where to?” Ash asked.

“Back staircase.”

The Hoi Polloi were absent, but half a dozen housekeeping ladies turned rooms, vacuuming, polishing brass and glass. Ash greeted each by name. Smooth. Too smooth. I kept my claws sheathed, but I was taking notes. How many housekeep—

Too many.

Cool air settled across my chest, like a draft through a crack. Is that you, hotel? If warmth meant approval, cool meant my thoughts were straying into ugly jealousy. And she knew.

Warmth again, sunlight over my collarbones.

Okay, Liz. Settle down. Shove the moles back in their holes. I’m being foolish again. Sorry, hotel.

A warm embrace: forgiven.

At the back stairwell, Ash glanced at me. “This one?”

I nodded, pulse picking up.

**EMERGENCY USE ONLY. GUESTS NOT PERMITTED BEYOND THIS POINT. ALARM WILL SOUND.** Doomsday signage: catastrophe, fire trucks, lawsuits.

“Needs a Zombie Apocalypse sign,” I muttered.

Ash chuckled. With an Allen wrench, you could slip the crash bar without waking the Fire Department. A few seconds later, we were through. Apocalypse averted.

He started up toward the utility floor.

“Hold up, Ash.”

Mid-landing between twelve and thirteen, where the stairs doubled back. Nothing on the wall except a window.

Ash paused, expectant. His face gave nothing away.

*Applause or humiliation. Here we go.*

I drew a breath, reached up to the frame above the inset window, and tapped.

Tap. Tap. Hollow—like knocking on a secret.

The air thickened, still and heavy. A rectangle of darkness formed, and from it a smooth black wooden door emerged. Alchemical symbols—from simple elements to complex sigils—seemed burned into the surface from within.

I hesitated, palm hovering over the handle. The wood was cool, humming. No fear. Only certainty that something important was happening. I turned the handle. The door swung inward on silent hinges. The scents of old paper and ozone drifted out.

I peeked in. Shadows pooled along the walls. Rows of tables and cabinets lined with bottles, glass vials, and books.

So many books.

My heartbeat drummed. Spectacular. The laboratory.

“This is so damn cool,” I breathed. “A monument to eternity.”

Ash’s voice chilled. “Nothing lasts forever. She told you this existed?”

*Odd thing for an immortal to say.*

“She showed it to me.”

“I’m in awe,” he said. “I wonder what else the hotel is concealing.”

“Now you know how I feel.” I jabbed his ribs with a sharp elbow.

“Touché. But secrets aren’t that difficult to pry out of me, you know. You could try... seduction. Strong liquor, scanty clothing, a creative attitude...”

“Dream on. Ask her,” I said. “The hotel, I mean.”

I drifted toward the shelves, drawn to the rows of books. Dozens of thin, zero-star notebooks stacked neatly, their pages sparse and unassuming. One- through five-star spellbooks grew larger and more complex. And then—three massive, thick six-star grimoires. Their spines hummed with danger, as if opening one could unmake a fool.

Ash’s voice behind me, smooth with a colder edge: “Be careful with permanence, Eliza. It’s heavier than it looks.”

I blinked at him and chalked it up to Dark Cryptic Man.

Before I could poke, he smiled again, shadow gone. “Still...seduction is always available.”

I sighed and rested my forearms on his shoulders. “Ash. I like you. I owe you a lot. I enjoy your company. I love your laugh, the way you smell. But I told you my first night—don’t push the sweet potato too quickly. I’m damaged goods. Fragile.”

A long, shuddering breath. “And I’m trying. Please understand how much.” I turned away and traced the little star marks on the spellbooks.

Clever system: difficulty and risk encoded plainly. A warning to eager young witches not to summon disintegration beams before they’re ready. The lab wasn’t just alchemical; it was a magical classroom, test, and sanctuary.

*Please. See me.*

My heartbeat sped. The hotel, the witch, my universe held its breath, waiting for his reply. I listened for any shift in air behind me, looking indifferent in case it all went horribly wrong.

“Miss Eliza... I can only imagine how hurt you were by what I said.” He set a perfect all-black rose on the bookcase beside me. “Forgive my ridiculous banter and the delay. Roses are difficult to construct from shadowstuff. Fragile things deserve care, not haste.” He drew a slow breath, wringing his hands. “I care for you. I’ll understand if you want me to go.”

My throat closed around the words I should have said. The rose was flawless, each velvet petal folded from shadow, made for me. Not a joke. Not a trick. A promise.

I wanted to laugh, cry, embrace him, and run. Fragile things deserve care. *He meant me.*

The dread loosened its claws.

I tried for clever, but a broken laugh escaped. “You really are impossible, you know that? Impossible... and too good at apologies.”

“No, I’m not,” Ash said. “I’m supposed to maintain balances, not come this close to destroying... a precious, beautiful hope.”

I hugged my arms to myself. “Hope doesn’t break that easily, Ash. If it did, I wouldn’t be here.”

That surprised me as much as him.

He scanned the shelves, then chose a one-star title at random. “A little light reading. Continue your study.” His gaze softened. “Let’s call it a night. You’ve seen enough for one day. And I’ve done enough damage.”

I nodded. Relief washed through me. My knees ached; my chest still thrummed with awe and dread. The lab would wait. The hotel’s secrets would still be there tomorrow—patient and alive.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “For... everything today.”

His smile was steady, warm, grounding. “Always. Sleep. We’ll tackle the rest another day. I owe you more explanations with less pain. Don’t let me off the hook. You’ve earned them. You’re limping; take the night off. Study. Learn.”

I clutched the one-star book to my chest as we walked toward my suite, letting myself savor the comfort of safety. Just for tonight.

\* \* \*

I sank deeper into the tub, bubbles piled high, candles flickering, a glass of wine balanced in my hand. Every muscle sighed. No commute. No laundry carts. No weight of expectation. Tonight was mine.

Wrapped in a fluffy robe, I collapsed onto the chaise. Wine in hand, with the new one-star spellbook on my lap, I flicked on the TV. A neon-sunset-eyed woman with sky-high hair and a sparkly bolero beamed from a set where craft stores had collided.

"Welcome, my dearly departed enthusiasts!" she trilled. "I'm Calida Noirval, your medium tonight. We'll talk to your ancestors, pets, and even that cousin who owes you five bucks."

I smiled. Over-the-top, borderline comical—but the effort was genuine. She jingled bangles over a tilted cardboard spirit board, muttering a chant like French with humming.

"Mrs. Tindale of apartment 3B," she announced, eyes squeezed shut. "Your tabby, Sir Whiskers, has something to say."

Muffled knocks, sputters of air, and an occasional sneeze. Calida's neon lids fluttered. "Yes! He says—wait, she says—oh, the energy is strong!"

I stifled a laugh and settled back. Tiny local access, terrible set design, awkward delivery—but sincerity warmed me.

She shifted segments. "Now, my special viewers, we're going to attempt a genuine connection—live, for the first time." Her hands trembled as she arranged candles and a crystal ball. The camera zoomed. Even through the TV, I felt a subtle pull. Attention prickled; the room adjusted.

"Spirits, if you're here, please give me a sign." Her voice wavered, determined. The candle flickered. The crystal ball shimmered, catching a sliver of moonlight—or something like it.

Then: three soft, deliberate taps, in rhythm with her pulse. Calida gasped. "I... I have someone!"

The taps continued. "Who are you? Can you tell me your name?"

Another tap—lighter, like acknowledgment.

Her face paled beneath the makeup. "Oh... oh my goodness. That's not a trick. That's... genuine. You're here. I... this can't be true."

I set my wine down, heart racing with delight. Tiny studio, flashy nonsense—and yet. A genuine spirit answered.

Even wrapped in comfort and lavender-scented steam, I felt the room's pulse shift. Magic was at work here.

Calida Noirval, ridiculous and sincere, had stumbled onto something true. Fascinating.

I wished for popcorn.

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## 07 Hesitation

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I'd ordered a small set of Allen wrenches from Amazon. In the meantime, I'd borrowed Gary's with a just-until-third-shift excuse. God bless next-day delivery.

Wearing my favorite witchy vest, with those handy pockets. I slipped through the twelfth floor, senses stretched, keeping clear of housekeeping and customers alike.

The one-star spellbook Ash had picked was necessary for my witchy growth, bless him for the effort. But I'd noticed other titles on the lab shelves that tugged at me, too. The lab itself was well lit, almost cozy, with actual armchairs and even bottles of alcohol sitting around.

My fingers slipped on the wrench twice before I found the right angle. One-eighth inch. Nothing exotic, thank God it wasn't metric. Metal scraped metal, then—click. The screw gave. I froze, waiting. Sirens in my head: NOFD trucks, my face on the news. I pressed the crash bar.

The door yielded, inviting me in. So did the next one, the more magical door, coaxed open with twin taps. Marvelous.

I brewed a cup of coffee at the Keurig (because what self-respecting laboratory doesn't run on caffeine)? And prowled toward the bookshelves. The simplest volumes bore only the author's name, plain as tombstones. I picked one at random, then skimmed further down the row. Levitation. Meditation. Object Apportation. Destruction. What sounded like trouble was about efficient garbage removal. Witchcraft's glamorous secrets, ladies and gentlemen.

And then the real gems. Light a Candle Without Burning Down the House—practical, even if more like a fire safety manual. Five-Minute Hexes (That Almost Always Work). "Almost" was doing some heavy lifting there. Beginner Defensive Magic and Counterspells resembled a book a cautious parent hands a kid on the first day of spell school. And my favorite: Knots and Nots: Binding Spells for the Clueless, whose cover art suggested the author had only a passing familiarity with rope.

My ever-growing stack teetered. I returned several volumes with a sigh. Anyway, I'd be spending a lot of time here studying. Not to mention experimenting.

That covered all of the basic one-star abilities except: body control. The medical shelf offered first aid for cuts, burns, minor injuries. Next to it stand lectures on healthy living and weight management. But tucked beyond them was a final, fascinating section...hedonistic pursuits.

One book winked at me: *On Enhancement of Physical Pleasures—Or Getting the Most Joy from Your Body (and from Your Mate's)*.

I flipped to the table of contents. My eyebrows climbed. And kept climbing. The chapter headings alone! Anatomical diagrams with labels I'd only seen in medical texts, and some I hadn't. The book referenced "tantric energy work." It promised to elevate ordinary coupling into a spiritual experience.

Heat crept up my neck. Perhaps some witch rumors weren't overblown.

Forget Allen wrenches. Mama found a fascinating new toolkit.

I set my coffee down on the arm of the chair, meaning to skim the "joy from your partner's body" section (for research, of course). Then I noticed movement across the lab.

Not a person, or even a rat...one shadow rose from the floor, moving as if late for work. It stretched tall, then snapped back down into a squat, busying itself with a scrap of fabric it struggled to lift.

"Oh. Hello, little...whatever you are."

The thing paused, a pair of bright pinprick eyes blinking up at me, then went right back to hauling its prize. Another one scampered by, dragging a twist of wire twice its size, like an ant carrying off a crumb. A third hopped onto a chair, then toppled off in a clumsy heap. I had to bite back a laugh. They were ridiculous, like soot gremlins from an old cartoon, jittery and determined. Working on some project only they understood.

My feet carried me closer before my brain caught up. What were they collecting?

The pile sat in the corner, half-hidden by an overturned chair. Cloth scraps, tangles of straw, a bent spoon, wire. Harmless junk.

Except underneath.

Pale curves, too smooth. Too familiar. I crouched. My throat tightened.

A femur, unmistakable, its joint end still crusted with something dark. A child-sized radius and ulna, bound with twine like kindling. Two skulls, one cracked down the middle, its empty sockets staring past me.

My coffee cup slipped from my fingers. It hit the floor, liquid spreading in a dark puddle.

The shadowlings kept working. One dragged a jawbone, teeth still intact, and nestled it into the pile. Another patted down a layer of fabric like tucking in a child.

Not random. Methodical. Building something.

Bile rose in my throat.

Ash, I've got to talk to Ash.

I grabbed my stack of books, backing toward the door, my heart slamming against my ribs.

Warmth. It bloomed across my chest, gentle pressure like arms folding around me. My pulse, rabbiting a moment before, slowed. The panic didn't vanish, but it...softened. Held.

The hotel. *She's here.*

Tears pricked my eyes. My breathing evened out. Then, subtle nudges guided me back toward the bones.

*I'm sorry. I don't understand what's happening.*

A vibration hummed through my sternum, too low to hear but felt in my ribs. The warmth surrounded me: safety, security, home. Then it shifted, flowing away from me, toward the pile. Back again—a phantom hand stroking my cheek.

*You want me to go...closer?*

Heat cascaded down my spine, spreading across my shoulders like a shawl. I focused on the sensation, breathing into it, letting her intent wash over me. One step. Another. Closer to the pile.

The air shimmered. Colors swirled—copper, violet, bone-white—condensing into a shape no bigger than my thumb.

A woman. Her edges blurred and distorted, flickering like a candle flame. Her body was a cobbled-together thing of tiny fragments. From a splinter of bone for her spine to wires for limbs, she hovered above the pile. Her movements were rhythmic, deliberate. A dance. Tribal and ancient and...joyful.

A woman made of bones.

She stopped. Her head tilted. Arms crossed.

Those pinprick eyes locked onto mine. Expectation radiated from her, patient but firm. Waiting.

She blew me a kiss. I felt it brush my cheek; warm, affectionate, and real.

Then she vanished.

\* \* \*

I dropped off the Allen wrench set at the bell stand, which Gary had used during 3rd shift for his "office."

"Thank you, Gary. Give your wife a kiss from me."

"Anytime, Eliza," he grinned. "Either borrowing tools or kisses for my wife. Where are you headed?"

"Need to talk to Ash."

"Good. It is important."

"I will!"

The strange shimmer flickered again. Both of the Hugos had it. I'd been seeing it ever since that potion. Flickering at the edges of my vision, impossible to ignore.

I shook my head to clear it and walked over to Ash's office.

"Busy?" I poked my head in Ash's door.

"Not at all, come on in."

Striding in and settling into a chair, using the briefest concentration to swing the door shut without a sound and latch it.

With precision and control, I'm getting better with practice.

"Ah," Ash said. "It's time for The Talk."

I set my small stack of books on his desk and related the events of the last half hour.

He absorbed the full story, and without a glance, flipped the topmost book face down..

Heat flooded my face so fast I felt dizzy. *On Enhancement of Physical Pleasures* stared up from his desk in cheerful serif font. A flush of heat seared my skin. I craved to sink beneath the floorboards, through the foundations, to join the earth's buried dead.

*Stupid, Liz. Please stab me now.*

I pressed my palms to my cheeks—useless; they were already burning—and forced a breath. Focus, Liz. Body control 101, right? This isn't the time for mortification.

Ash, bless his shadowy heart, didn't even blink. His eyes stayed on mine, patient, as if I'd set down a book on plumbing repair. "What was she communicating regarding that bone woman?"

"She wants me to do something. Ash, what if she's waiting for me to make...some kind of macabre body?"

Ash steepled his fingers. "To what end?"

"Her goal is communication, or perhaps movement. I'm not certain."

"Her actions are limited to humming and temperature. I understand her desperation for a body. Consider her desperation to find an easier way to communicate.

"But...human remains?" My skin crawled.

"Let's think it through. Shadowlings come with the hotel. They have existed here as long as the building itself, eager helpers like the shoemaker's gnomes. But they can't carry much. The hotel has a spirit that can't communicate needs well. But she makes herself understood. Barely, mostly."

"It's not like the shadowlings are committing atrocities, mass murder. They're simply looking for supplies. And New Orleans is crawling with old cemeteries.

Perhaps there's one nearby. Perhaps we're built on one, I don't know. The hotel has layers. Its magic is self-reinforcing: the more it cares for its guests, the stronger its abilities become. The shadowlings are part of that system, bound to the hotel but independent enough to gather materials."

"Building a hotel dead atop an old cemetery sounds like a psychopomp shortcut. Mom and Dad might've used. Makes sense; the hotel's been around long enough to develop its own ecosystem. And its own spirit, you've met her!"

"I wonder if the shadowlings will accept alternate materials like plastic, ceramic? What if we make the materials they need with a 3D printer?"

The knot in my chest loosened a fraction. My shoulders sagged as I finally let go of the burden. This wasn't hopeless. If shadowlings worked with substitutes—plastic, resin, even 3D-printed parts, there's no need to handle real bones. Or think about whose femur that was, whose child. I wanted to help her. A plan. A plan felt...better.

"Ash, I've been meaning to ask you for some time now. Please don't lie 'for my own good' or whatever. Are you immortal?"

"Am I allowed to lie for *my* own good?"

I hissed, "That's the wrong answer, isn't it?"

"Yes. I'm simply concerned about how you'll react, how your feelings about me will change." Ash dithered for a moment. "You're right; you've earned the truth. My mother is a mythic Greek goddess, almost as old as civilization itself. My father is the living embodiment of a concept, not a god, but still immortal."

His eyes shut, and he held his breath before continuing. "The earliest king I recall is Philip II of Macedon, 4th century, amid warring city-states of classical Greece. Mom says I'm a half-century older, more or less. I guess I never noticed politics much before Philip."

"So, Charon?" My hands trembled. I laced my fingers together, squeezed until my knuckles went white. It didn't help.

The hotel's presence settled over me again. Familiar warmth, the steady weight of invisible arms. My breathing slowed. The shaking eased.

Ash nodded.

"And you're all 'psychopomps.' That doesn't mean 'crazy,' does it?"

A wry smile, suppressed, twitched at the corners of Ash's mouth. "I'm just another average weirdo. Psychopomps are guides, not reapers. We move souls in safety from one place to another, or help spirits find their footing when they're...unstable. There's no malice in it; we're more like traffic controllers for the afterlife. Efficient, patient, and impartial."

I let the words settle. Let the hotel's calm work through me like warm water, dissolving the ice in my gut. My hands stilled in my lap. My breath came easier. I still had to process it.

Ash leaned back, letting the moment breathe. "You've handled more than most people handle at your age. You're not overwhelmed, and that's worth noticing."

I nodded, still processing, but the fear and awe had softened into...possibility. The Bone Woman. Our shadowlings. The hotel. I'm able to help her and Ash too.

"So," I said, shaking off the last of my nerves, "where do we start?"

Ash's eyes twinkled. "We start where you're standing, and where she's waiting. Step by step. No rush, no risk of burning out."

I glanced at my small stack of books and let a tiny grin creep onto my face. My confidence, though hesitant, started returning.

I reached out and held Ash's hand for a heartbeat. "Thank you for sharing the truth. Let me process, okay?"

He nodded.

I picked up the books and left. Still lots of questions, fewer fears.

\* \* \*

An older woman rose and strode toward me, jewels glittering in her hair, her robe flowing like mist. She clasped my hand. "Come and join us, dear sister; we've been waiting."

"Where...is this?"

"Mmm. The Baths of Caracalla, I think. Third century. Your mind chose it."

"I've never heard of Caracalla."

"No? Your subconscious only knew you needed relaxation. And this is a spa. A particularly...adventurous spa."

Heat prickled across my chest, remembering a certain book, a bubble bath, and—  
Not your business.

"Who are you?"

"Still haven't worked it out? We're in your dream. That's your favorite bikini. Don't the initials 'M.L.' mean anything? How many witches did your mother tell you stories about?"

"M...Marie?"

"Marie Laveau, yes. Nice to meet you again, granddaughter."

Before I could answer, two young women darted past, giggling, one pelting the other with figs. A third appeared to chase them, topknot coming loose, shrieking with laughter. Clothing optional women.

"They're ours, too," Marie said serenely. "Most of us lived in...repressive times. So here we run a little wild. Like a sorority house, the younger ones say."

Sorority house, hmm? A laughing girl cannonball'd into the pool, the splash drenching my legs with warm water. Two others draped flower garlands over a patient, shirtless man—his chest could've been carved from marble, if marble had that warm bronze glow. He flexed on cue. More shrieks. Applause rippled through the crowd, punctuated by wolf whistles.

I tried not to stare.

"Would you like wine?" Marie gestured. A tall attendant poured ruby liquid into a goblet and bowed low as he presented it. The movement showed off...everything.

I shook my head, my grip tightening on my composure like a lifeline.

"Don't be shy," Marie teased. "There's no judgment here. Only joy."

The ghosts swirled around me like a storm of perfume, laughter, and bare limbs. Most of them were wearing less than I was, in my most scandalous bikini. I caught fragments of wicked jokes, outrageous dares, and someone boasting she'd dunked Cicero himself in the deep end.

"Liz, dear," Marie coaxed, "isn't it wonderful to be free? No rules, no shame, no sin. Only pleasure." Her eyes sparkled with a secret joke.

My chest tightened. No rules? At all? I was young, yes; I had my share of adventures, but not this. This felt like being caught naked in the town square, everyone watching, everyone knowing. Like Hester Prynne dragged through the market with the scarlet letter burning on her chest.

Enough.

I straightened, forcing air into my lungs. "This is too much. I'm glad my...grandmothers...are...enjoying themselves, but this concentrated hedonism isn't for me."

Marie's eyes softened, the smile slipping toward something more serious. The sorority chaos still raged around us, but I felt myself pulling back, shutting a door inside.

I lifted my chin. "Thank you, but no. I'll find my way."

Marie's eyes softened further, her hand brushing against mine. "Child, don't mistake joy for sin. We spent our lives caged. Some by corsets, some by pulpits, some by cruel husbands or crueler laws. Death released us, and here—" she gestured toward the riot of laughter, "—we take what they denied us. It looks wild, perhaps even indecent, but it's only balance. We're ghosts! Mrs. Grundy need not apply."

I swallowed, still flushed, but the fire of humiliation ebbed into thought.

"You don't have to follow our ways," she continued. "Your path is only yours. You are young, alive, and your magic will shape itself differently than ours. But remember, freedom isn't wicked. It is the first truth of power."

The echoes of splashing and laughter carried through the arches. For a heartbeat, I saw not indecency but release, a kind of rebellion that didn't need my participation to have meaning.

Marie squeezed my hand once. "Find your way, yes. Don't shut the door too tight. Fear of love or joy will imprison a witch."

"Witchcraft isn't just spells and shadows, child. It is a choice. It is knowing what binds you and learning how to unbind it. The church, their husbands, and hunger chained women in my time. Power meant breaking those chains, quietly or loud, and paying the price. Every witch must decide: Will you bend yourself small to please others, or stand whole and let the world adjust around you? Magic helps, yes, but the core of it is freedom. Freedom to feel, to speak, to act. That is the legacy you inherit, not revelry. Guard it, or it slips away."

Marie's eyes softened, and she cupped my cheek with a hand that was warm, though not quite solid. "Remember what I told you, child. Your path is yours. Step up to your work."

Before I could reply, she pressed a quick, tender kiss to my forehead. "Go on now."

Light blurred my vision, washing out the baths, the laughter, the half-naked ancestors. The marble columns dissolved into curtains. Cool sheets replaced warm stone. Morning light leaked through the blinds, gentle and ordinary.

I blinked once. Safe. Awake. And aware: there was work ahead. A faint warmth lingered where Marie's hand had brushed my cheek, and the echo of laughter from the baths seemed tucked into the corners.

I thought of Ash, so calm and steady, with a thoughtful smile. Perhaps some play, too. Cautiously. Should I explore that idea? For scientific reasons, of course.

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## 08 See Me

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"Who are you?" A blonde girl, late teens, answered the doorbell. Blue jeans and a faded Taylor Swift Fearless '09 tour t-shirt that was too big for her—and almost the same age.

"I'm Liz. Is your mom here?"

"I'm not supposed to speak with strangers. One second." The door re-closed with an audible click.

Moments later, a muffled "Coming!" and the door opened again. Yuri settled her sunglasses in place, securing the latch behind her head.

"Eliza! Come in; great to see you. This is Euterpe, my eldest."

"Ah, Ella. Gary told me. Nice to meet you, Ella."

"Ella, would you watch the boys for an hour?"

"Xbox babysits them, I surf the internet. No problem."

"Come on in, Liz."

We passed through the central suite door into Adult Land. Gary picked up the final lunch dishes.

"Hi Liz. Drink?"

"Coke?"

"Sure, right back."

The shimmer, there it goes again. And Yuri smelled...perfumed, of course, floral, but with a hint of something else I couldn't place. Her cool hand rested on my shoulder.

"Everything all right?"

"Um, not quite, but I'll cope. I came to discuss the laboratory."

"Which one?"

"Oh...well, it's hidden inside the hotel. If you want to see it, I'll take you. There are books, lab equipment, glassware, the whole works. It's magical, full of witchy spellbooks and...well, the bone...you'll see. Gary doesn't even know it's there; it might be important from a security standpoint."

I fidgeted. *Help me...Bone...Bone Woman?*

Gary delivered the Coke, and our fingers touched. Hard, rough, cold. What the f...

Warmth spread across my shoulders, like a traffic signal switching from red to green. My heartrate dropped, pulse slowing from frantic to fast.

But I flinched. Only a twitch but Yuri's eyes missed nothing. Her jaw shifted, with the faintest lift of an eyebrow.

"Eliza." A single dark lens hid her eyes, making it so difficult to read her expressions. "What are you afraid of?"

I swallowed, feeling the faint ripple of air around Yuri, the scent of her perfume sharp in my nose. Perfume, stone, copper, something musky and unusual. My stomach clenched.

"She was already a witch. And Morgan made her more perceptive." Gary's tone held no inflection, only stated facts.

"Then it seems we have no choice, doesn't it?"

"None," Gary agreed.

My fear spiked.

*Bone Woman flooded my whole body with warmth, clamping down, stopping my legs from carrying me straight out the door.*

Yuri's head tilted. "Gary, she's got someone else in there."

I froze, muscles tense, feeling every inch of air shift around Yuri. She knew exactly which emotions I was feeling.

"Damn it, Euryale, she's going to have a heart attack! Let me handle this."

My heart slammed away, a wild drum against the warmth clamping me, but I stayed rooted, sensing every shift in the room.

Gary kneeled with an odd stone-scraping sound, but he held my eyes.

"I don't know who else you have in there, or if it's helping or making things worse. But you know me, Liz. You know I will not harm you. Relax. Breathe. Listen to my story."

"When I met my wife, the world called her 'monster.' People were out for her blood, wishing to bleed her, change her, turn her into something she was never born to be. For their own benefit, never hers."

"That insane dream caused three mortal deaths."

Gary pointed back over his shoulder. "Euryale, my wife, the mother of my children, she's never harmed a soul in this world. Pursued her entire life; we even fled from Europe to rebuild our lives here. Euryale had to leave her only surviving sister behind."

The faint metallic tang in the air sharpened. A chair leg scraped. Yuri shifted her stance. Every nuance amplified, yet Gary's voice held me steady.

"My wife is, without question, the most loving and gentle soul in this world. More gentle than Ash, and Ash is a bloody *le chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*."

Gary glanced back. Yuri nodded, clutching her heart.

"If you want to...if you're certain, you can meet her. The real her. But it could be the hardest thing you've ever done."

"It changed my life for the better in the best ways. But this choice is only yours."

"Do you want to meet her?"

"Take some time. We'll be in the kitchen. We'll understand if you're not here when we get back."

The Coke can sweated in my hand, beads of water sliding over my fingers as though they, too, couldn't decide whether to hold fast or slip away.

The warmth still clamped around my ribs, Bone Woman's steady weight, but beneath it my pulse rattled like a trapped bird.

Gary's words lingered. Life-altering, in the best ways.

I set the soda down. "If I bolt now, I'll never know, will I?" My voice trembled, but I forced the words out. "Show me. I...want to meet her. The real her."

Yuri's head turned, a flicker of something unreadable in that single dark lens.

"Liz, come here." Yuri spread her arms. "My sister."

*The Bone Woman touched my knees—first the right, then the left—her warmth lingering on the old injury. She touched my hands, wrapping them like warm mittens. Then she pulsed around my heart. Once. Twice. Three times.*

And withdrew.

I was alone again, with only the thundering of my pulse and a question: Can I move?

Of all people, Morgan's voice came to me: "*You must drink it all at once. 'Drink deep or taste not,' as the well says.*"

And Marie's close behind, softer but no less insistent: "*Embrace your fear, or embrace your love. You cannot keep both. But your love, your love will be stronger than your fears, if only you let it.*"

The room shrank to the width of my chest. Every pulse, every warmth, every tiny nudge of presence had pulled back, leaving nothing but my space. No one pushed, no one judged. The choice was mine. I inhaled, courage building with each heartbeat.

All or nothing.

My fingers itched to move, my legs to step forward. I claimed the truth waiting for me.

"Close your eyes," Yuri said as her arms encircled me. "Tell me what you feel."

"I feel you're thin, but strong. Cool. Tiny...wait, no breasts."

She chuckled. "All true. But do I feel like a monster?"

I shook my head, even though my pulse still skipped. "Not a monster. Just...different. Powerful. Fragile. And...aware."

Yuri's arms tightened, grounding without pressure. "Good. Choices define a monster, not its shape or strength. It's defined by fear, by what others project onto you. None of that touches me here. Only what you choose to feel matters."

I let the warmth sink in, a tether to steadiness. "So...you trust me to decide how to see you?"

"Exactly. One step at a time. When did your fear begin? When you detected a thing you could not understand. Here I am. If you want to understand someone, you must speak to them."

I nodded, letting the words settle. The cool strength of her arms and the subtle hum of presence around me acted like a gentle anchor. "One step at a time," I repeated softly, testing it on my tongue like a mantra. "So...if I just...ask, and listen...then I won't be afraid?"

Yuri's chuckle was reassuring. "Precisely. Fear shrinks when you seek the truth. Curiosity grows in its place. And even monsters, Liz, are family if you're willing to see them clearly."

I exhaled, tension slipping from my shoulders, ready to take that first step.

"If I open my eyes, what will I see?"

"Euryale and Gary."

Cool lips pressed against my forehead. "Process the moment. Take a step back. See me. This is all I've asked."

I blinked, letting the warmth linger as I drew in a steadying breath. The hum of presence wrapped around me, steadying the storm in my chest.

When I opened my eyes again, they were just as Yuri said: Euryale and Gary. Green skin, light olive shade. Her lips are darker, jade. The fast flicker of a forked tongue.

Sharper now. More real. The room hadn't changed, but my perception had.

I took a cautious step back, then another, letting the space between us settle. The cool press of lips on my forehead lingered in memory, a tether. "That's all you've asked," I whispered, voice barely audible, "and I...see you."

The first step, taken.

"The surrounding air hasn't tasted like terror for a while now. Are you okay?" Gentle hissing, as the snakes of her crown relaxed and moved again.

I let that settle, the tingle from her arms lingering. My mind wandered to Gary's story, to the steady rhythm of his words, and...awe. "He never told me how beautiful your scale patterns are."

The lines, the subtle symmetry, the order beneath the chaos—I saw it now. Not horrifying. Not monstrous. Alive and real. A legend.

A small smile crept onto my face. "I think I understand."

The winged stone creature on her left reached up and grasped Yuri's hand.

I exhaled. "Feel like a snoop in your lives. I'm so sorry about everything."

My eyes flicked between the two of them, my mind buzzing with questions. One tumbled out before I could stop it.

"Soooo...shapeshifters? Can you change into anything?"

Gary's mouth twitched, amused but not unkind. Yuri tilted her head, one corner of her lips curving.

"Not anything. Enough."

"Enough for what?"

"Living. Hiding. For protecting mortals." Yuri's gaze softened. "We're not illusions, Liz. We're ourselves. The skin just...has options."

"I saw evidence, a shimmer whenever I really looked. It was driving me mad. I had no rational explanation."

"Show her, Gary." Yuri played absently with her snakes and with jewelry designed to be worn by serpents rather than hair.

With a grind of stone on stone, Gary rose from his squat. "This is Gary, gargoyle, the form I was born in. While still a fledgling, I learned to—"

I gasped as the dark stone shimmered. Wings and claws melted away, his prehensile tail shrinking. The color softened, shifting from basalt to flesh tones. When done, the familiar linebacker-built man stood where the gargoyle had been: Gary, the night guard.

"I used to call this one Gerard," Gary rumbled, voice still carrying that cavern-deep resonance. "Parisian policeman. But after we fled Europe, I dropped the affectation. Both forms are plain Gary now."

"That's...awesome." My eyes darted between them, dizzy with the truth laid bare. "And beautiful Yuri becomes the astonishing Euryale."

"Other way around."

"Right. Gorgon by fate, human by choice."

Gary leaned back, grinning. "And no, before you ask, we don't do party tricks. Mostly."

They didn't hurry me with questions or explanations. They moved about the suite, settling into small rhythms, letting me match their pace. In the shuffle of cards, in Yuri's chuckle when Gary misplayed, my shoulders loosened. I wasn't just their guest anymore.

"I'm honored that you shared this part of your world. Thank you for trusting me. Your secret's safe with me."

Yuri's snakes rustled as she leaned back, satisfied. Gary nodded once, never in any doubt.

"Eliza, would you like to meet Solace and Ash? My Ash, I mean?" A thin grey snake slipped from Yuri's crown and tasted her lips with tiny tongue flickers, while she scratched beneath its chin with a clawed fingertip.

The tenderness undid me. Ordinary, domestic, and so intimate. My throat tightened, vision blurring until I couldn't see the cards between us.

I had a sister. I looked forward to finding out what that meant. The rest of the hour passed in observation, laughter, and the everyday rhythms of a home.

\* \* \*

A hesitant rap echoed on my suite's door. I set the bowl of popcorn aside and fished for a clean bathrobe. Didn't want to shock the neighbors with my relaxed TV-watching style. Through the keyhole, a flash of blonde hair, cropped short on one side.

"Ella? Hi."

"Miss Eliza." She sounded nervous. "I'm sorry to intrude..."

"Don't be silly. Come on in. What's on your mind?" I tied the robe a little tighter. It would have to do.

"I came by to thank you. For Mom."

Blink. "Um...sure. Have a seat. For Mom...?"

Ella perched on a chair and crossed her legs. Those amazing boots flirted with me again. She ran her fingers through her blonde locks, messy on the unshaved side. Pretty girl, but tomboyish and unconcerned with perfection. I could relate at her age.

"Well...Mom doesn't have many friends. Her eyewear spooks most people; they think she's weird. And she's closed off and reserved by nature, which doesn't help."

"You think she's lonely."

"I know she is. Ever seen someone blossom and return to life after a depression? It's what happened after your visit."

"Sure, Ella. But she's not exactly depressed, you know. Lonely, I'll grant you that. She's...complex. Your dad fulfills her in ways I've only started understanding. Ash says they're the most married couple anyone knows. Are you worried about Yuri?"

"Not worried. I'm just...appreciative. I don't know what happened between you two, but I haven't seen her dancing around the suite, humming, in years."

"We...had a long chat, your parents and I. It cleared up a lot of questions for me."

Ella's eyes sparkled. "I'll bet it did." Ella was sharper than I'd expected. If she sparred with her mom the way teenagers always do, she'd have to be.

"Anyway," I said, "you're more than welcome. I got at least as much from our conversation as Yuri and your dad did. You're going out tonight?"

Ella glanced down at her stockings. "No... maybe a hang."

"Ella? How are you doing? Socially, mentally? Are you using your mom for cover, hiding from something, or is there something else you want to talk about?"

She fidgeted. "Not... I mean, is it true what some kids say about you?"

My eyes narrowed. "That depends. What do 'they' say?"

Ella bit the inside of her lip, arms hugging herself. "They say you're... are you a... witch?"

How did 'they' hear that? The hotel family wasn't large, and I'd bet my last dollar none of them were idle gossips.

I pondered the question for a moment.

Ella almost squealed. "You are!" Euryale's hyper-attentive bloodline strikes again.

I blinked. "No, not really. Like your 'hang' tonight, at best it's a partial truth. Who is he? Or she?"

I was only guessing, based on teenagers and my fashion experiences. I could be mistaken.

Ella flushed from cheeks to knees. "I can't bel—" She drew a soft inhale. "How did you know?"

I leaned forward, fingertips brushing her thigh. "Take it easy. Must be someone pretty special to you?"

"Maybe. I'm hoping." She withdrew a little.

I'll make this easier for her.

"I'm that witch right now, Ella: hoping, maybe. You get it?"

She nodded, knees pulling together.

"Does your mother know?"

Head shake.

"Would she approve?"

Double shake.

"I was seventeen, I remember. Well, Ella, do you have your big-girl panties on? In your place, I'd say—trust your mother. I didn't. I still wish I had."

"It's awkward to ask, but do you need any...you know...supplies?"

Her head shook.

"Sorry, forget I said anything. How about if I start over?"

Head shake.

"I'm sorry I upset you. I'm not exactly the sharpest wand in the bundle. I'd like to be your friend, though. Want to watch Calida with me? I've got popcorn."

"You watch that?" Her voice was tiny, but I sensed the beginning of a rally.

"It's trashy, it's stupid, and I never miss it. Love that show."

Her smile spread like a sunrise. "Me too!"

"On the bed. I'll get extra pillows."

After the show: "Feel better?"

She nodded and hugged me.

"Good. Anytime you need a popcorn buddy, you know where I live."

Her smile brightened. "Already do."

Relief washed through me, physical and complete. I reached out for another hug. Bone Woman's warmth spread across my collarbones, too. *Thank you, dear.*

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## 09 The Calida Show

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I sprawled on the loveseat in my undies. My bathrobe is hanging open because who the hell gets dressed before eight PM when your shift doesn't start until eleven? The expensive wallpaper in my suite looked atmospheric in the TV's flickering blue light. Channel 47. The Calida Show. My guilty pleasure Tuesday night ritual. Last week she'd told a woman her dead husband forgave her affair—then asked for gas money to "complete the spiritual journey." The week before that, she'd channeled someone's grandfather, presented as a Vietnam casualty. The caller had to remind her that Grandpa had died in 2003. In Baton Rouge. Of diabetes.

On screen, Madame Calida adjusted a turban that looked like it had escaped from a Mardi Gras float. Sequins everywhere. A crystal pendant the size of a baby's fist dangled at her throat, catching the studio lights.

"That's twenty bucks on Royal Street," I muttered, reaching for the potion bottle on the coffee table. "Tops."

The bottle contained my novice potion brew using Morgan's recipes and advice. A greenish liquid that smelled like pickles and basil, guaranteed to clear blemishes. Or at least make you too nauseated to care. She'd pressed it into my hands last week. "Try it, Liz."

*Thanks, I think? Was she saying I had zits?*

I unscrewed the cap. Pickle-based, for sure. Store-brand dill pickles.

On TV, Calida purred into her bedazzled microphone. "Yes, darling, I'm getting a strong connection. Precious is telling me... she's in a meadow now, chasing butterflies made of pure light."

"You meant pure bullshit," I said to the empty room.

Her caller crackled over the telephone line. Mrs. Something-or-other from Metairie, crying about her dead poodle. The studio audience plucked from Bourbon Street, drawn by the promise of beer money. Behind the main camera, a guy in a headset gestured with a cardboard sign. 2 MINS LEFT.

I dabbed Yuri's concoction on a blemish near my jawline. Stung like hell, smelled worse. But at least an acidic, bubbling hole didn't eat through my jaw.

Across the room, my vanity mirror reflected both me and the television like a split screen of realities.

On screen, Calida closed her eyes for effect. "Precious wants you to know that she forgives you for stepping on her tail."

My eyes rolled. "Oh, please."

Mrs. Metairie dissolved into grateful sobs.

"Before we conclude tonight's journey into the mystical realm," Calida announced, "let me open myself one last time to any spirits who wish to—"

The studio lights flickered.

I sat up straighter. "What the hell?"

On screen, Calida's breath misted in the studio lights. Audience members hugged themselves, and Calida's fingers trembled on her microphone.

Static prickled across my skin, raising the fine hairs on my arms. Not from the TV. The television broadcast more than simple light and sound.

"That's no parlor trick," I said, awed.

Calida's powdered face went rigid, her eyes darting like a trapped animal's. Whatever walked into that studio, she'd felt it. It...seized her.

The presence pressed against my awareness like cold water seeping under a door. Not hostile. Curious.

I grabbed the remote and turned up the volume.

"Well," Calida said, voice higher than before, "we're experiencing some... unusual spiritual activity tonight. The spirits are more eager to communicate."

The studio audience perked up, twelve bored faces wide awake. Even the headset guy looked confused, checking his equipment as if the technical difficulties were his fault.

Something was in that room with them. Something real.

My pulse kicked up. I'd been practicing magic for months now, studying with Yuri and Morgan, learning to see the world's hidden architecture. A ghost followed Calida around like an ectoplasmic stalker. Or a curious child.

Calida yanked her microphone off with shaking hands. "That's all for tonight, beautiful souls. Remember, The Calida Show airs every Tuesday at 8 PM, right here on New Orleans 47. May the spirits guide your path until we meet again."

The recording light went dark.

"Holy shit," I breathed. "She cut it short."

Last month I'd watched her stretch a goldfish reading to twelve minutes, complete with three commercial breaks and a pledge drive mention. Once, she kept a sobbing widow on the line through four "spiritual connections," demanding a new donation each time to "strengthen the channel."

But she'd bolted.

\* \* \*

The camera stayed live for a few seconds during the shuffle; some intern forgot to kill the feed. Calida ripped off her turban and rushed off-set, acting like a woman who had seen something she knew was important.

The headset guy—Wes, according to the nametag—stood frozen by Camera Two, notebook in hand. Not clapping. Not packing up equipment. Writing.

Who takes notes during a psychic show?

The feed cut to commercial. A lawyer promising to sue your employer. I muted it.

My fingers had gone numb holding the remote. The static prickle wouldn't fade from my skin. Whatever had walked into that studio had reached through the broadcast and touched me, three miles away in my hotel suite.

And Calida had felt it too. I'd seen her face.

I reached for the potion bottle again, then stopped. My hand was shaking. Not from the pickle smell.

You don't fake-summon spirits for years without something eventually showing up. When it does, what becomes of the fraud collecting people's money in their names?

The commercial break ended. The camera cut back to the studio, now empty except for the crew breaking down equipment. Wes stood off to one side, still scribbling in his notebook.

The backstage door opened, and a girl walked through. I sat up straighter without meaning to. She moved through the dingy studio the way swans move through parking lots—in the same space, but belonging somewhere else. Her dress alone cost more than a year of utility bills.

Wes stopped scribbling. The stagehand froze with an armful of cables. Both of them tracked her with a synchronized, involuntary turn of heads. They traded appreciative glances and then returned to work.

I frowned at the TV. I'd seen her face before. In YouTube thumbnails, lipstick swatches, endless "get ready with me" reels. Amelie. Amelie something.

The producer finally noticed the live show feed and cut to commercial. The show never came back. Eventually, a Bible-thumping televangelist came on, sweating through his suit. I killed the TV, grabbed my phone, and typed fast: Amelie.

First hit: Amelie's Artworks. Million-plus subscribers.

Second hit: society pages. Uptown Renaud family. Filthy rich. Who isn't, except me?

I sat in the blue television glow, bathrobe hanging open, pickle-scented potion drying on my jaw. The static feeling had faded, but the unease remained.

A real ghost had walked into Calida's studio tonight. A girl with offensive wealth and innocence had walked out of Calida's dressing room. And a local guy with a notebook tracked and recorded everything.

What brings a genuine ghost to Calida's traveling circus? And why Amelie, same night?

I had hours before my shift in the laundry. Getting dressed and doing my makeup gave me time to think. Time to ask Ash about the Calida Show.

\* \* \*

Practice time.

The hairbrush floated six inches, wobbled, and clonked me on the forehead.

"Terrific. Personal grooming, now with lumps. And not the fun lumps, either."

I pressed my palm against the growing lump on my forehead. The hairbrush lay on the carpet, mocking me. After three months of practice, I still failed at basic levitation and concussed myself.

I sighed and re-read the spellbook's cramped instructions. Practice makes perfect. Or at least, practice makes fewer bruises.

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## 10 The Art of Revelation

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I nudged Mr. Adorable in the ribs. "Ash. Wake up."

One eyelid peeled up, slow and lazy. "Oh, hi. I'm really sorry, Liz. I guess the Calida Show does nothing for me." He shifted. "How long was I out?"

"Judging from the snoring... about half an hour." I smiled and sat up on the couch. His warmth still tingled on my left, regretting the loss of our intimacy—his shoulder near, his breathing deep.

"Was it too loud? I'm sorry." He said with a sheepish smile.

"Not too bad. Like pages turning in an old book, slow and deliberate. Cute, really."

"Is the show over?"

"Yeah. Nothing unusual this time. Want some more wine?"

"Sure." He stretched, catlike. "Don't want me to go?"

"Please don't." I rested my hand on his thigh, felt the muscle tense under my palm. "This is nice. We don't get enough moments alone. We'll talk, if you promise not to nod off again."

He lifted my hand, his thumb stroking the backs of my fingers in small circles. "I bet we'll find some creative ways to entertain ourselves."

"Mmm hmm." I leaned over and closed the distance between us.

His lips parted. His grip tightened on my hand. For a glorious minute we both devoted our full, undivided attention to the kiss—nothing tentative about it, nothing polite. Heat bloomed in my chest, spread down my spine. *This is right*, something whispered in me. *The universe approves. My lips agreed, tingling.*

When I finally pulled away, breathless, I realized something else. The dull ache in my knee had receded to almost nothing.

"Yum! Thank you, Captain Midnight. Expert medical techniques, solid B. First kiss, though? A-plus." I toyed with the soft hairs at his neck, tracing circles.

"Thank you, Deja Thoris."

"Hey! I'm a little flushed after that—" I gave my cheeks a coquettish fan with one hand "—but I'm not copper-colored. I have been studying, though. Want to see my new trick? Or wanna snog me some more?"

"Whatever happened to that wine?"

"Your wish is my command. *Within limits*, buster." I concentrated—pulled, imagined, demanded—and the wine bottle appeared in my hand without a slosh. *Not a drop spilled*. I fought the urge to pump my fist in victory.

I filled the wineglasses, then leaned my head against his shoulder again with a happy sigh.

"Creation or teleportation?" His voice rumbled through his chest into my ear. "Levitating it is easier, isn't it?"

"Amateurs messing with food creation causes problems. Messy, botched organic compounds? It tastes terrible, plus it's emergency room time. You've seen my levitation skills—my weight limit is growing steadily with practice, but my control's often iffy."

"And teleportation of living people?" His fingers traced idle patterns on my shoulder.

"Ever seen 'The Fly?' I won't even attempt that one until I'm freaking positive," I said.

"Did you learn anything useful from the 'enhancing physical pleasures' tome?" His eyes sparkled with mischief.

"None of your damn business, perv." I flattened my hand on his chest, drew in a deep lungful of his scent.

**!! Gentlemen, pay attention !!** *If you smell good—not 'cologne' but 'fresh and clean' delicious—you've rounded second and you're sprinting for third.* At least in my boudoir. I can't speak for everyone.

Peaceful, dreamy relaxation settled over me like a blanket. "Ash? Tell me about your powers. How did you do the vest trick, for example?"

"That one?" He made a thoughtful sound. "Violated conventional causality."

I punched his shoulder. "Come on, give."

"Mmmm. Permission to show? I'll have to get up."

I pouted. "I was getting comfortable! Granted."

"Okay." He extracted himself and stood. "What color are your bathrobes in this suite? Elysium Gate standard issue?"

"Well, yeah."

"No black ones?"

I shook my head. Where is he going with this?

He walked to stand in front of the full-length mirror. "Eyes on me."

Ash in his standard business suit, a little ruffled from the couch. He grinned at me through the mirror.

"Good, close your eyes. Give me a slow ten count, no cheating."

"One... Two..." I heard rustling, fabric sliding. A tink of steel on steel. "Nine... Ten."  
"Open."

Ash stood in a black bathrobe, arms spread. His suit hung folded on a hanger, swaying gently from the doorknob.

"You're a magician."

He shook his head. "I'm the Night Man. Know anyone who climbs out of a suit, folds it, and hangs it up in less than ten seconds?"

"No," I admitted. My mind scrambled for explanations. "Maybe a quick-change artist? But how did *you* do it?"

"Two tricks. The first is shadowweaving. Tug on this sleeve." He held out his arm, the bathrobe sleeve dangling within reach.

I grabbed it. "Solid?"

I nodded, turning the fabric between my fingers. Felt genuine enough.

"It's woven from shadows. See anything unusual about it? Witch senses, look closely."

I focused, letting my vision slip into that other way of seeing. "I don't see... No... this isn't fabric, is it? Oh, Ash, I—"

The shadows rippled at the seams, refusing to settle, like ink dropped in water. Constantly rippling.

Heat rushed to my face. My mouth went dry. "Greek god" is a cliché. Ash made it feel like an understatement. Lean muscle, broad shoulders, a body that made my fingers itch to—

"Okay, knock off the peep show." He smirked. "Eyes closed again."

I heard fabric rustle and footsteps. *So? Sue me, I peeked. The man was fire.*

Ash reappeared in a standard-issue white bathrobe. Far less eye candy.

Awww. Multiple sad face emojis.

"Done objectifying?" He smirked. "It's shadowstuff. With concentration, perceptive people see through it."

"Every suit is that color?" My pulse still hadn't settled.

"Not all of them, but it's often faster to weave shadows in the morning than to change into Armani. I wear real undies, though."

"Boxers, I saw." I raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Morgan?"

"She's never mentioned it. I bet it'd bruise her pride to admit she checked, though." He grinned.

"My vest?"

His expression turned serious. "Don't wear it without at least a bra."

"Noted: be wary of black-fabric gifts."

Ash shook his head. "That vest was strictly for multi-pocket utility. I'd never make you a shadowstuff demonstration model for Vickie's Secret. Pinky swear."

"I kinda wish I hadn't snooped. Your presence is now a terrible distraction."

His eyes went hopeful, almost vulnerable. "You find me distracting?"

"Down, Narcissus. Don't get eager." I wanted to sound stern and failed. "What's the second trick?"

"Right. That's where conventional causality comes in. Want to take a walk with me?"

"Um, sure. You're still in my bathrobe, though."

Ash looked thoughtful, his gaze distant for a moment. "I'll guarantee privacy."

"This will feel strange," he said, stepping closer. "Not hurl-your-lunch strange, but unusual. Trust me?"

The question landed heavier than he had intended. It carried "elephant in the room" weight, onion layers he didn't even know were there.

I hesitated, my mouth half-open, the moment stretching between us. He waited, his hand extended. Not pushing, not pulling, just... there. Patient. The decision was mine.

My pulse galloped. Plenty of reasons to run. But I was dodging the real choice inside his simple question. Gary's sly grin. Yuri's laughter. Morgan's cool steel with something gentler underneath. Ella. Marie. The hotel itself. The Bone Woman. Every one of them held their breath, waiting for me to move.

Words surprised me by tumbling out. "Kiss me before we go."

Ash's eyebrows lifted a fraction, but he didn't joke, didn't smirk. He leaned in, warm and sure, and my world tilted. His mouth tasted of wine and something darker, like smoke swirling at the edge of a firelight. *My toes curled.* Every nerve hummed. When he pulled away, he left me dizzy, a little undone.

"Yes, Ash," I whispered against the corner of his mouth, still catching my breath. "I trust you."

I trusted love. I trust my family. Most of all, I finally trust Eliza.

"Hold on. I've got you."

Blackness closed in, thick as velvet. Shadows writhed like serpents in fog. A chill threaded through my ribs. Ash's hand anchored me, solid and warm against the void. I thought I heard whispers just at the edge of hearing. Half-memory, half-nightmare, and then—

Light.

The Laboratory. I exhaled, clutching him until the vertigo faded. "Okay. We're okay."

"That was a shadowwalk," Ash said, his tone deliberately light. "Similar, but not exactly like witchy teleportation, the kind you're learning. Someday you'll teleport in much the same way. Shadowwalks move in space and time. We're in our past."

He pointed at the wall to our left. "Within ten minutes, a door will appear on that wall. We will enter the laboratory. For the first time." He gestured at the surrounding lab. "Right now we are unlocking the breaker bar on the twelfth floor."

I shivered, goosebumps rising on my arms. "We'd best go back before they—we—arrive. We're standing in our own past."

"Correct." He watched me carefully, gauging my reaction. "Where we're going next is my home. Is that acceptable?"

My heart did a strange little flip. "That sounds... wonderful. You'll bring me back to the hotel before work?"

"Of course. The owners get upset when their best employees skip work to travel with their no-account son."

I squeezed Ash's arm a little harder than I meant. "Sorry. Best employees?"

He kissed my nose, soft and quick. "Yes, but I'll admit I'm biased."

"Me too." I took a breath. "Lay on, MacShadow."

"Reversed-direction swirls this time, but otherwise the same."

The shadows wrapped us again. Colder this time, like wind tugging at my skin, stealing warmth. Then the swirl dissolved into brightness, and my feet touched solid ground.

We appeared in Ash's living room.

I blinked. Or was it a stadium?

The black floor gleamed like polished obsidian beneath my feet, stretching far wider than any penthouse deserved. Chandeliers hung overhead—way, way overhead—dripping golden light from their crystals. A seamless wall of windows opened onto a view of the river, the city lights, and the stars beyond.

I turned in a slow circle, mouth half-open. "This is how the rich assholes live. Why, Rhett Butler... you live at Tara."

He chuckled and pulled me against his side. "Not quite. Mom's posh but not on an American oligarch level. I got the summer cottage."

"It'll fucking do! Somehow we'll scrape by and manage."

Ash grinned. "Sorry, I know it's ostentatious. I inhabit only two or three rooms."

"Poor rich boy, rattling around an empty million-dollar mansion." I trailed my fingers along a gleaming side table, half-expecting it to vanish like shadowstuff. It didn't. "Why don't you show me the kitchen? And find something to wear—you're still in my bathrobe."

Ash gave me a quizzical look. "Why the kitchen?"

My cheeks colored again, heat spreading down my neck. But I didn't turn away.

"I'll know where it is when it's time to make our breakfast."

I leaned in and gave him a warm, soft kiss, my hands sliding up his chest, feeling his heartbeat quicken under my palms.

It took a second or two, but I watched the realization spread across his expression—pupils dilating, lips parting. "Oh."

I nodded, reached for the belt of the bathrobe, and let it fall to the floor.

*Multiple ohs.*

*I'm feeling greedy.*

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# 11 Inaugural Breakfast

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Wine, snoring. Bladder. Toothbrush! I eased sloooowly off Ash's bed and tiptoed to the bathroom. You don't wake up with fresh breath and unmussed hair; that's only in Hollywood.

Jesus. The tile bit into my soles like January pavement. I peed and yanked open vanity drawers until—got it, spare toothbrushes. What a considerate gentleman! Does he have a hairbrush, or do I emulate Bigfoot today? Ah, an entire drawer reserved for combs and brushes et al.

Without turning on the shower and waking the dead, I scrubbed myself presentable and minty-fresh. I cracked the door, and I tiptoed around the bed.

"Did you find everything okay?" Ash sat up, fingers raking through his hair.

I squeaked and dove back under the covers.

"Uh huh."

"My turn. Are you a solo-shower or shared-shower girl, Eliza?"

I pulled the duvet over my head. "Dealer's choice. Your shower accommodates a football team, anyway."

"Mmm. That doesn't sound appealing at all. Relax, I don't bite unless you ask nicely."

I pulled myself deeper under the covers for a moment, then remembered my clothes lay scattered across the sprawling master bedroom. With a sigh, I peeled myself free and began the hunt. Jeans draped over an ottoman, shirt pooled behind the nightstand.

Ash stretched, cat-lazy, that grin tugging at his mouth. "Looking for something?"

"Don't tease; I'm cold." I yanked my shirt over my head. "And I need to find the kitchen. Breakfast awaits, Captain Midnight."

He made a break for his turn in the bathroom, and the shower kicked on a moment later. Cheater.

I winced while crossing the bedroom. Muscles I'd forgotten existed lodged formal complaints. He must have excellent contractors, because we didn't wreck his bed.

The kitchen cabinets opened up like a dream, everything placed right where I'd choose to store it. Bacon sizzled, eggs cracked, toast browned. As I set out the silverware, a moan pushed past my lips. Genuine English Sterling. The man had sophisticated tastes. Except for me. Why was he interested in bones-and-elbows Liz?

Ash wandered in, rubbing wet hair with a towel. Soft gray lounge pants and a fitted tee replaced his usual Dior armor.

I applauded.

"What?"

My grin spread wide. "Even watching television on my couch, you were in a suit. You do understand casual. I was worried."

"I was pretty casual last night."

"Not really. Everyone had a marvelous time. Have some breakfast before it gets cold." I leaned over and kissed him, then took the seat across the table.

He frowned at his plate. "What, no crepes Suzette with Amaretto?"

"No time. Don't be mean."

"You know I'm only teasing. It's our inaugural breakfast."

"Technically, you already slept with me on my couch." I grinned. "Does that count as 'first'?"

"Disappointed? I'm sorry I dozed off during TV night."

"No. Only exhausted. You're a beast." My toes found his shin under the table.

"Multiple ohs? You threw down the gauntlet; what did you expect?" Grin lines crinkled at the corners of his eyes.

"Not a decathlon!" My smile softened. "Don't fish for more compliments. The Russian judge already scored you a ten point oh."

"Honestly, Eliza. Not too much?"

I shook my head. "Perfect fit. Let's postpone the rematch, please. I've got aches in places I forgot I had. It's been a minute since... ah, never mind. A woman has needs."

I forked more eggs onto his plate. He dipped toast into the yolk, and we enjoyed each other's company. Until a shimmer caught the edge of my vision—smoke catching sunlight along the counter's rim. I blinked. Nothing.

"Something wrong?" Ash tilted his head.

"Uh... nothing." But then an image flooded my mind unbidden: a hallway lined with old bookshelves, one ajar, something pale peeking behind a bookshelf. No sound. Just... there.

I groaned. "I need to go soon."

Ash raised an eyebrow but said nothing, still buttering his toast. I pressed the arch of my foot against his calf, anchoring myself to the present. The vision faded, but I knew what it meant: Bone Woman was nudging me toward her next phase.

For now, though, breakfast was ours.

"Ash? The Bone Woman's birth is coming soon. I need some extra hands."

He covered my hand with his.

"That's what family is for. Never be afraid to ask for help."

"Ideally Yuri and Ella, but whoever's available. I need crafters."

"Crafters?"

"To create the form she'll move into. She wants bones and wire."

"I'll clean up then. Go take your shower; the hidden cameras are ready."

"You need to see me naked and wet again? You're insatiable." I kissed him and caught his lower lip between my teeth. "In case I forgot, I had a wonderful time, thank you, Ash."

"Me too, and you. Time's wasting, adorable."

I scampered.

*Adorable? Yum!*

\* \* \*

Bone Woman and I spent hours sketching. I'm no artist, but BW guided me—I'd add a line, she'd flash a green checkmark or red X in my mind.

She wished to be short. We struggled with scale until I taped down a photo of myself and sketched her beside it. Best guess: fifty to fifty-five inches tall, about four and a half feet—reaching my upper ribcage.

Short but wide. Overwide hips, generous chest, long thin limbs, wild hair. Trollish features, enormous nose, sharp teeth. Head too large for her frame. Have you ever seen the Venus of Willendorf? The fertility goddess carving. BW showed me that image while we worked. Not as exaggerated, but the symbolic ideas were similar. Colloquially, baby got back.

Then we moved on to her veve. Each Iwa has its own unique veve, intricate and complex. BW's design began with a spiral at the center—life and fertility's endless cycles. Crossed keys guarded the way between worlds. Serpentine paths wound across the pattern, binding earth to spirit. At its crossroads stood sacred marks, sprouting leaves of renewal while ancestral signs kept vigil for the dead.

Her picture-language stumbled when she showed me the outfit. Victorian bodice adorned with ribbons and bows, a full skirt, cloak embroidered with her veve, stunning French heels. My breath caught. Why did she show me wearing this?

Then I felt a soft kiss brushing my cheek. The image blurred, replaced by an hourglass. *Wait?* Warmth followed, agreement folding around me like arms.

We'd figure it out later.

I gathered my sketchbook and fired off texts.

\* \* \*

Ella spun in a slow circle, eyes wide. "This...has been here the whole time? Mom, being a witch is amazing!"

Yuri prowled through the laboratory, fingertips trailing over equipment, supplies, and the piles of bones. "I'll need more armature wire. My studio holds what I need to begin. That empty spot next to the fabric pile will be perfect for construction."

"Yuri, be yourself. This is a safe space."

She nodded. Her form rippled like heat shimmer, and then she stood before us in her natural gorgon shape, serpents stirring in her crown. "I like safe spaces." She breathed deep, tongue tasting the air. "It tastes...ancient. Beneath the stainless steel and aluminum, there's a dustiness, a faintly organic tang." Her gaze drifted. "Eliza? This lab *grew* here, nourished by powerful magic. Is the Elysium Gate able to give birth?"

I held up my sketchbook, pages filled with Bone Woman's veve and body sketches. "She thinks so. That's why we're here."

Euryale's eyes softened as she watched Ella explore. She murmured, "Nature always finds a way," while Solace, her crown companion snake, settled around her shoulders in a loose coil.

I watched Yuri in that unguarded moment—maternal tenderness flickering across her chiseled features. There's a story there. Solace lay coiled in contentment, tongue flicking, subtle shifts responding to her mood. I wonder if she'll ever introduce me to the others.

"Right, ladies." I taped BW's sketches over the workspace. "Job assignments: Yuri, our sculptor. Ella, you're our internet guru—I'll need chimp skeletons tracked down. Real or high-quality models, no plaster, no plastic. Nothing unethical."

"If we cannot locate the correct bone of the correct size, what then?"

Yuri considered. "3D-printed parts with a steel core will work. Polymer clay, too. Either needs magical reinforcement."

"I've got charms and spells for that," I said. "Once we have a complete model, we reinforce with magic and add BW's veves and binding rituals. With Marie Laveau's guidance, I'll be able to handle the spellcraft."

I held their gazes. "She's eager to meet us and cannot wait to have a voice of her own. Shall we begin?"

\* \* \*

Sorting was low-stress. Ella and I fell into rhythm—bone pile here, fabric there, wire untangled and coiled. But when Euryale slipped back into Yuri-human-form and headed down to 1102 for more sculpting supplies, Ella's voice dropped.

"So... how did the 'hang' go?"

"It didn't. I never went."

"Ella, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. She got really snotty the next day. She's been mean ever since." Flat. Empty.

"Disappointment? Anger? Was she hurt?"

"Or fate had another plan. Only a dream, I told you." She shrugged, but her shoulders stayed tight. "I'm okay. Please talk about something else?"

"Sure. Why'd you ask about witches?"

She turned it back. "Why do you work third-shift at the laundry? Your eyes are penetrating. You've every tool in the kit, Ash is filthy rich..."

"It's tranquil. Peaceful. I have time to think. Why are you ducking my question?"

"Because I didn't know how to ask." Ella picked at her nails. "You're a witch. Is it difficult to learn?"

"The first page in my spellbook is still wet. It hasn't been a breeze."

"Umm..." She picked at the fabric pile. "Teach me?"

I studied her eyes. They were subtly unusual, and the reason eluded me. Singular eyes. She has to be Euryale's daughter. What did she inherit? Is her gaze deadly, too?

"That depends. First, your mother's approval. You two don't get along, do you?"

"Better lately. We reached a truce."

"I had the same with my mom. But sneaking around will wreck a ceasefire fast. I'd suggest more openness. Especially about big things."

"I'll talk to her."

"Yes, you will. And then there's school. College next term, right? That's already a lot on one plate."

"I don't... think so?"

"One last question, Ella. Why? What do you think you'd gain from casting spells and riding brooms, dancing naked under the full moon?"

Her eyes widened. "That's a real thing? Not sure I—"

"For the tourists. What's real is female empowerment, and some casual hedonism your mother won't like. You're... inexperienced. Still working out your preferences?"

Ella spat, "Is this a coven or a census?" Color flooded her cheeks.

"Neither. Ella, the next few years for you will be frightening, thrilling, tragic, joyous. Growing pains. And you're piling more pressure on top. What's in it for you? What are you so hungry to learn?"

She looked down, fingernails picking at a hole in her jeans.

"I don't know. Control? Understanding. A way to stop being the weird kid who breaks mirrors without touching them." She looked up.

"Making mean people sorry. Not wreck them, just... discourage them." Her gaze locked on mine. "What are you hungry to learn, Liz?"

I grinned, slow and pleased. "Good. That's the right question. I'm hungry to learn how to care for our resident Loa."

"Our what?"

"The point is, Ella, I'm still fumbling through this myself. I can't be your teacher. You've got a mother for that role, regardless of whether you're quarreling this week."

I let her sit with that, then tilted my head.

"Tell me something, though. Do you want your 'dream-maybe special friend' to be someone 'mean' you'd make sorry?"

Her head snapped up. "That's not fair." The blush deepened. "I'd never—she doesn't—"

The words tangled and died. She picked at the loose thread, shoulders hunched. For a long moment she stared at nothing until her voice dropped.

"...I don't know."

I watched her, weighing whether to press. Then I sighed. "Life's not simple, and sometimes decisions are difficult. But your mom's sure to be back soon, so clean up your mascara. Still popcorn buddies?"

She blinked fast, swiped at her eye, and managed a shaky smile. "Yeah. Popcorn buddies."

"You're something special, Ella. Don't despair. If not her, there will be someone else who sees it. I do."

Pink crept up her neck, and she ducked her head, the smallest smile tugging at her mouth. "You kinda have to say that, though. I'm your family."

\* \* \*

By the time Euryale returned, we'd finished the fabric and started on the bones. Ella straightened from her pile, wire in hand. "Mom? Permission to study witchcraft?"

Yuri's head whipped toward me.

I raised both hands. "Nuh-uh, not me."

"It was my idea," Ella confirmed. "So many cool spellbooks are in here."

The corners of Yuri's mouth twitched. Her tongue flicked out—tasting the air, tasting truth. I lowered my hands.

"So anyway... whatcha think of witches—multiple—in your family, Mom?" Ella leaned back, elbows on her knees.

I grinned at the audacity but kept my eyes on the bones. Don't interfere, Liz.

"Did you remember to count Alecto?"

"Who—?"

"Never mind. I care less about labels than I care about hearts, Ella, you know that. Liz already turned you down?"

Ella glanced my way. "Well, yeah."

"Why do you taste guilty and sad, Ella?"

I tightened my grip on the wire, pretending fascination with a femur.

"I...didn't handle it well, but Liz turned me down for perfectly valid reasons."

Yuri's gaze slid toward me again. "I'm sure she did. And you're asking me because you'd still like to learn, or because you think I'm an easier mark?"

"My mother is not naïve." Ella's chin lifted. "But her sharpness varies; sometimes it doesn't draw blood."

Euryale hissed—almost audible, razor-edged. "And my daughter's bluntness sometimes doesn't crush bones. It appears I missed the exact moment when she matured. Well, if you are sure you won't give it up in a week's time, study magic. Let me find your drive insincere, and I'll retract your indulgence."

"I...I'm not fully certain my motives are pure, Momma. Liz showed me that." Ella twisted the fabric in her lap, shoulders hunched. "I intend to fulfill your expectations."

"No one's motives are ever snow white, dear. She's a fairy tale. Not hurting people unnecessarily is a goal worth pursuing."

Ella's head came up, surprise widening her eyes. The tension drained from her shoulders.

"And your mother is no monster," I added. "She never was."

For a heartbeat, Yuri went still, carved from stone. Then one of her crown snakes stirred, curling to brush her cheek. She said nothing, but the silence pressed down with weight.

I realized I'd been toying with the same bone for five minutes. *Stop dawdling, witch!*

"Choose two of the starter spellbooks, Ella. Exchange them for others as you learn. Only the starter spellbooks—I'd like to talk to Liz about some of those more advanced titles."

Roh roh. Library approval committee...

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"You know," Euryale said, "I don't know if I need to hold her tighter or let her go."

Ella was perusing titles in the library, fingers trailing over spines.

"How long until college starts?"

Yuri's head snapped around, predator-fast. Her eyes locked on mine. After a moment, she sighed. "That's the thing, isn't it? I cannot guard her forever; it's time to let her make her own mistakes."

"Want my impression?"

Her head drew back, a cobra ready to strike. Then she nodded.

"That girl is absolutely your daughter. She's smarter than anyone gives her credit for, too. A hair too vulnerable, too trusting. But she is quick. *Her first breakup will end*

*her world...* Briefly. If she resists lashing out, she'll live through it. And she'll learn, and she'll be fine."

The snakes along Yuri's crown stirred, slow and restless. She understood the dangerous undertone—her daughter had inherited more than wits. Yet she held her composure, exhaled, and let the moment pass.

"I failed to save either sister." Yuri's voice went quiet. "What if I did not teach Ella sufficient restraint?"

I met her gaze. "Then you teach her enough to survive. The rest is up to her." I wrapped my arms around that strong, cool body and stretched up to kiss her under the chin. Now there's a new sensation. "You did a fine job with her, Yuri. Trust in yourself. Trust the gentle soul you raised."

A snake separated from her crown and descended—scales brushing my hand, cool and smooth. Its gaze was sharp, cautious, but curious. I froze.

"Er...Yuri? Little help? Your snake...wants to eat me, I think."

Yuri's lips twitched. "Curiosity, not hunger. Hold still and don't smell like dinner."

I pondered how to accomplish that. *Think happy thoughts...*

Eventually, a tiny tongue flickered against my knuckle, and the snake withdrew.

"Does that one have a name?"

Yuri's gaze softened. "That one's Chime. She mostly appears when I'm animated. This time, she's only curious."

Since it appeared I'd live another day, back to work. "Ella? Stop playing in the naughty book section. How's it going sourcing monkey bones?"

Ella shot me a guilty glance but stayed at her laptop. "Uh...okay. I've got a few leads. Nothing fake. Some chimps, a couple of macaques...still checking measurements."

I glanced toward Yuri. She was already deep in the wire framework, muttering curses as she twisted armature into place.

"Don't worry about measurements; we'll call for help if we need anything scaled larger or smaller. Order what's available. Yuri, will you be at a breaking point soon? Let's call it a day. I want a nap before work."

"You go ahead, Liz. We'll be okay. We'll look at the advanced texts together."

Ella flushed scarlet.

I clapped my hands together. "Welp, that's my cue. Night, darlings."

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# 12 Threads, Not Chains

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"Chalk? She's showing me a blackboard and a box of stick chalk."

Yuri's coils brushed my calves as she slipped an arm around me. A dozen little tongues tickled my hair. My shampoo? Snake perfume taste test? Stay very, very still, Liz.

"I still have some chalk," Yuri murmured, voice low and velvet. "From the boys. Chalkboards. Homeschool."

I glanced sideways at her. "Sometimes you're a marvel."

A cool kiss brushed my cheek. "You too, witchiepoo."

Bone Woman showed me a swirl of green flashes, yes, keep going.

"Now she's showing me...yellow cornmeal. Bag of it."

Yuri shook her head. "It's been years since I last made cornbread from scratch."

"Restaurants'll have it in dry storage," Ash offered.

"Good. Bone Woman's showing me a campfire... dying fire, sun going down. An arrow pointing at... the burned out fire?" I guessed aloud.

"Charcoal?" Ash guessed.

"Fireplace, no logs. Gray ash!"

Bone Woman spun me a satisfied little green checkmark. Subtle, homey approval.

"I am not gray!" Ash said at once, though his grin stopped short of his eyes. "And hotels don't have real fireplaces. Too many fire codes."

He hesitated. "If I sent the shadowlings to my place...but it's ten miles out..."

"This is a lab," I thought aloud. "Burn something under the fume hood?"

Bone Woman's red X blinked fast and bright. "Danger."

Ella peered over her laptop. "Ask her if calcium carbonate is okay. It'll be in the chemical supply. Or in the chalk."

We turned to stare at her.

She rolled her eyes. "You guys, seriously? Wood ash is mostly calcium carbonate. Plus a hint of potassium. Gray ash means unconsumed carbon left over. Chemistry lab, we make it."

I blinked. BW spun a slow green checkmark again. Approval, encouragement.

"She says Ella's cute, sassy, and a genius," I translated.

"Which she is," Yuri said softly, smiling at her daughter.

Ash cleared his throat. "I'll send the shadowlings for the rest."

A tiny push from BW—keep moving, don't dawdle, Liz. Homey, gentle, insistent.

"And she wants us to pick up the pace," I laughed. "Huddle up, everyone. Yes, even you, Ella."

"Status checks—Yuri?"

"Last of the chimpanzee bones received yesterday, wiring and articulation complete. I have made her look as close to your sketches as possible."

"I confirm. Ella?"

"I haven't had a lot to do since the sourcing, so I've been studying. You and I stuffed the basic wire cage with fabric and straw, did some cosmetic work on her skull, and did her hair scraggly, the way she likes it."

"Confirmed. I need to finish the embroidery on this veve and put it inside her rib cage; it'll be her 'heart.' Marie's been holding my hand throughout the voodoo process."

"Ash?"

"Keeping my hands to myself and staying out from underfoot, as requested." He winked. "Shadowlings near with your last ingredients. But about our rematch..."

"Down, boy, mama's busy. That works. Friends, family, dear hearts. We need to lay out her primary veve on the floor here in the chalk, cornmeal, and ash. Bring her body in and set it in the middle, complete the last lines. Ella, I need your help to participate in the summoning ritual itself."

The color drained from Ella's face. "But...I'm..."

"Sisterhood is more important than the level of your education, or mine. I think." My hands twisted together. "The hotel wants us to attempt it together. Hold my hand. It's a simple call-and-response; repeat everything I say. Marie will be with us."

"Eliza. You're sure it's safe?" Yuri's head tilted, crown spreading.

Warmth ran up my chest and exploded in my heart.

"I'm sure. Yuri, the hotel won't allow any harm to come to us." I reached for Yuri's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Ella's my sister. I'll take care of her without fail."

"I want to thank everyone sincerely. This is real, and it is important to me, to us, and it means everything. We share this. Let's give birth to someone new and wonderful, together."

Ash's gaze lingered on the chalk lines, his jaw tense. "Threads fray, Eliza. Don't mistake them for iron." Cryptic Man strikes, but I've got no time to figure out what the hell he's hinting at.

We knelt and spread the veve, laying out lines of chalk, cornmeal, and ash according to my sketch. The Bone Woman construct rested in the center, a faint green shimmer surrounding it.

"Ella, trace the outer circle," I instructed, taking her hand in mine.

A faint nudge under her fingers corrected a crooked curve. The line straightened almost magically, subtle enough that only I noticed.

Bone Woman's body hovered, small flashes of green spinning along each line, giving gentle approval as each segment fell into place.

When we reached the last segment, Bone Woman paused, green glowing eye sockets standing in for eyes. A single flick of her gaze snapped the last lines into perfect alignment. The veve flared bright emerald green, spreading across the cornmeal, chalk, and ash.

"Perfect," I whispered. The magic hummed through the floor, up my knees, settling in my chest. Bone Woman gave a little ripple of satisfaction, almost like a nod.

Ella's eyes widened. "We... did it?"

"Yes," I said, squeezing her hand. "Together."

"Got the last line of the ritual? When I nod, we both do that one."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Cool. Here we go, Ella."

I raised both hands and turned three times deosil, clockwise. I tucked my chin and chanted:

"Spirits of this place, awake and rise."

Ella's response came stronger than I expected. "Awake and rise."

The crosses, leaves, and ancestor dots around the perimeter of the veve pulsed, a heartbeat, growing stronger. A gentle nudge, Bone Woman saying "Don't stop."

"Bones and ash, corn and chalk, align."

"Align."

I squeezed Ella's hand when the serpentine spirals lit up, spinning.

"Through our hands, a heart takes shape."

"Heart takes shape."

The veve beneath the bone woman's sternum began to glow and thump, linked in time with the ancestor's heartbeats.

"Bone Woman, guide, and bless this frame."

"Guide and bless this frame."

Finally, the central spiral lit, green fire racing inward, surrounding the bone construct that was hovering in the center.

I signaled Ella with a gentle elbow: Now!

Together we chanted:

"By home and hearth, by shadow and light, we call the new life into sight."

The green glow raced inward from every side.

Everything stopped.

Ella's shoulders sagged. "Didn't it work?" The words faded the moment they passed her lips.

I hissed, "Wait. Watch."

A sound echoed in my head, sent by Marie. The first cry of a waking child. Or perhaps mine. *Oh god, don't make me cry now, grand-mere.*

In the center of the veve, the construct twitched, a tiny pulse running through its chest. The green glow under its sternum grew, then steadied, faint but definite. Beating.

Bone Woman's subtle ripple of approval told me everything: miracle, not failure. Life was there, just... warming up.

I nudged Ella. "See? She's breathing. It takes a moment to learn she's alive."

\* \* \*

A series of rapid images ran through my head — frame by frame, but I understood the meaning.

"Family." I exhaled. "The Bone Woman appreciates everything you've done. She wishes for some time alone with me. The two of us. Everyone else, take a break or explore the wing. Won't be long. She's...embarrassed, I think."

In those gentle moments, I gathered everyone close. My arms wrapped around what mattered most.

Ash seized the moment with his usual wreckless charm — hands sliding to my hips, pulling me close for a long, hungry kiss.

"Later," I whispered into his neck. "Yes, later, but please."

Bone Woman sent a single image: a shower knob turned to cold. Rude. Accurate. I laughed.

I dragged a chair over and settled, spellbook on my knees more for the ritual of it than for reading. "I don't know how to teach you to live," I told the new thing, "but I can sit with you."

A finger twitched. A hand jerked; knuckles rapped the floor. The skull wobbled, sockets finding me. The jaw clicked, opening on a thin sound, more breath than word.

"You'll get there," I murmured, like coaxing a kitten. The body — compact, lumpy, awkward — flexed and tested, elbows, knees, spine complaining. When it heaved upright, it stood squat and uncertain, swaying as if the floor tilted.

It scuttled first, then steadied. One slow step. Then another.

"Eh—Liz." Broken syllables, then clearer: "Liz."

Words tumbled, mismatched, braided. "I—walk. I...stand. I...am?"

"Yeah." My throat tightened. "You're here."

The skull cocked. "You...care. Face warm. Why?"

"Because this is strange. And wonderful," I said.

"Warm...like hands. Ash hands...on butt?"

My book hit the floor. "That is absolutely none of your business."

A dry clack of something like laughter rattled from the jaw. "None...business. Then...what is...business?"

"Learning to walk. Learning to talk. Not asking about my butt." I pinched the bridge of my nose.

She considered the list with the slow logic of someone learning a language by osmosis. "Learning. Talking. Asking." Then, softer: "You are the anchor. My mirror. If your face is warm, I feel it too."

I swallowed. "Then your business is living. We'll figure the rest out later."

The glow under her sternum pulsed steadier, a small, agreeing heartbeat.

She straightened. No crab-scuttle now; steps measured, deliberate, like someone remembering how to hold herself.

"Why...ghosts everywhere, but you see only Marie?" she asked, the green fire under her ribs flickering.

"Marie and I share a bond. The others—" I began.

"Others are there," she cut in. "You ignore. You choose a small...window."

"I need to. I limit what I process," I snapped, sharper than I meant.

She watched me without accusation. "You do this with Ash. You do not ask. Why not ask Ash more about...Ash?"

I snapped the book shut. "Because he's insufferable when I do. And because some of us prefer mystery."

"Not for mystery." She tilted her head. "Distance."

"You've been alive five minutes and you're already my therapist?" I asked.

A dry chuckle. Then, blunt as ever: "Why no dress? Dress for my priestess. I chose it for you. You put it away. Not pretty enough?"

My breath caught. "That dress was a dream."

"Dreams are doors. I opened it. You closed."

"That's not fair. I can't afford...anything that is breathtaking." The last word shook in my mouth.

Bone Woman's glow slowed, steady as breath. "Dress is not money. Dress is bond. You accept my gift? Or Ash shapes same from shadow."

The offer settled over me like a warm, dangerous hand. "Nothing that stunning ever comes without a cost. If not money, then my body or my soul."

"Liz. I do not want your body or your soul." Her voice became almost gentle as the thought emerged. "How many times will you learn that form does not define function? I am less monstrous than Euryale, and she is not monstrous despite the label."

I let the words sit between us.

"Do you want a name?"

"You already gave me a name, Eliza. A precious gift."

"Bone Woman? That's not much of a name."

She shrugged. "I am not much of a woman. Light, small. I don't need another, prefer to keep the one you chose. Warm memory. The others will return soon. If you have a question, ask. I answer."

I licked my lips. My heart jolted, a panicked drum against the silence. "All right. One question."

Bone Woman leaned forward, her glow pulsing once, patient.

"You said priestess was a bond. What... kind of bond?"

Her head tipped, vertebrae clicking. "The kind that makes a family from strangers. That holds even when you quarrel. That says: I will answer when you call, and you will answer when I call. Not chains, Eliza. Threads."

My throat closed. "And if I'm not ready?"

"Then the threads are still there. Loose. Waiting. Not broken."

\* \* \*

The faint shuffle of footsteps echoed from the hall. Shadows moved under the doorway before familiar faces appeared. Ella's eyes went wide, Ash smirked, and Yuri coiled tighter, scales whispering against tile.

"Back so soon?" I murmured, rising from my chair. Bone Woman's glow flared, as if giving them a nod.

Ella's eyes flicked to the construct. "She...she's standing?"

Bone Woman tilted her head, spine arching in a fluid, almost human motion. "I move. I learning. I see threads."

Yuri's crown gathered in a tight bob around her skull. "Remarkable."

Ash tucked his hands into his pockets. "Did we miss anything exciting?"

I shook my head. "We talked about life."

Bone Woman's green glow pulsed behind her sternum, radiating warmth that threaded throughout the room. The skeleton figure—short, squat, and now alive—tilted her skull at each of us, gauging, memorizing, understanding.

"You all... threads," she said finally, voice smoother, firmer, though still sometimes tangled with newness. "Not chains. You... bond me without... binding."

Ella whispered, "She's like punk rock mixed with Elizabethan comedy."

Bone Woman paused, her pulse in sync with ours. She then moved closer, her rhythm no longer uncertain.

A cold thread wound through my chest. She was eager to help, but... so alien. I helped free her, but how do you control a toddler who has a handgun? What happens if we can't?

The empty eye-sockets turned my way. Already a connection, already a lack of privacy. What comes next? Meddling?

"Ash? May I speak with you outside for a moment?"

His face lit up. Heat crawled up my neck—I'd done nothing suggestive. Was that just him? Please don't let him be another lifelong regret.

My glare found him. He wasn't slow; his expression shifted. "Yes, Eliza, of course." The cheer drained from his voice.

Ella and Yuri exchanged glances as we left.

A double-tap sealed the door behind us.

"Stop," I said, one fingertip across his lips. "Listen. I'm concerned about the Bone Woman. She isn't inimical; she's friendly. I'm worried about the vast power with no restraints. She's you, but without your seventeen hundred years of growth and experience."

"And Ash, she's made jokes about my personal life, and yours. She knows details I never showed her. That's a knife that cuts without meaning to; not malice, but knowledge that hurts by accident."

"I need to shut her out for privacy, to be alone in my thoughts. Morgan gave me the impression that you teach wards. Do you?"

Ash's eyes softened. He nodded.

"You're her Night Man—she knows you better than she knows me. Will you speak with her?"

He nodded again.

The tension rolled off me like a tide. I pulled him close and whispered, "I'm sorry about the scowl. You did nothing to earn it."

\* \* \*

Ella and Yuri stared at me as Ash and I entered the lab again.

Ella's eyes widened. "Wait... where's the Bone Woman?" Her voice climbed higher. "She won't just walk off, will she? Not without telling us?"

Yuri uncoiled, scales whispering against tile. Her protective crown bob tightened into a messy knot. "She is not a child, though she looks like one. Constructs... do not

sit idle once given agency. They act." A pause, forked tongue flickering. "And they test the limits of their leashes."

Ash's casual smirk vanished. "Threads, not chains. She warned us. She's too literal, and misunderstood that lesson."

My stomach dropped. My warning, dismissed as nerves, is now carved in stone.

"Wait..." Ella noticed the white box on my former chair. "What's in the box?"

No. Oh, no. Premonition tickled my brain. Not that.

I pulled the large box into my hands; it floated across the floor like a polite offering.

Of course. The gown, the cloak, the shoes. A note lay on top, in a hand both ancient and intimate:

*"You're right, Liz. I am a monster. But I was born intending these for you."*

The note blurred. My fingers clenched the box shut before anyone else peered inside.

"Liz—" Ash started, cautious, but I was already backing toward the door.

"No." The word cracked. "Not now. Not...any of this."

Ella half-stepped forward, hand out. "Hey, you don't have to—"

"I do." My glare silenced her. Guilt stabbed through me as hurt flashed across her face. Yuri tilted her head, serpent-silent, tasting the air.

I pounded the wall with a balled fist. The door bloomed open, and I stumbled through, the box clutched like a live coal. The sound of Ash's boots followed—then stopped. Did he perceive my anguish? Or finally realize this wasn't about him?

The hall swallowed me. I walked fast, then ran, breath tearing in my throat. One corner, then another, too quick for the others to follow. The emerald pulse still throbbed in my chest.

Threads, not chains. That's what she said. Then why did it feel like binding? Why did I feel naked under her gaze, my life rifled through like a diary left open?

I ducked into a side corridor, then a stairwell, slammed the door, and sagged against it.

I set the box on the step and shoved it away like a live insect. My throat burned.

"Stop," I whispered to no one. "Please stop. Five minutes. Alone."

For a heartbeat, the emerald pulse stilled.

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## 13 Boxed

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I pressed my back against the cinderblock wall, white garment box on the step beside me, note echoing in my skull. *Monster*.

The stairwell door opened. My whole body tensed.

"Liz?" Steady, calm voice. Gary.

He didn't crowd me. Descended two steps, sat a respectful distance away. No clipboard, no questions. He dug into his pocket and slid a folded tissue across the concrete toward me.

"Thanks." The word scraped out. One more thing today and I'll break.

With a single nod, he settled, saying everything he needed to. No stares, no awkward pep talk. Just Gary being present, keys at his belt, the smell of old coffee from the thermos he set between us.

We sat in silence. The knot between my ribs, wound tight since Bone Woman's words, unraveled.

"Do you need to call this in?" I asked.

He rumbled somewhere in the subsonic range. "For what? Feeling bad isn't a crime. Rough day?"

"Not before its last half-hour."

"You look like hell." One corner of his mouth twitched up.

"Least of my problems." The thermos cap rattled against the rim as I poured. The coffee hit my tongue like burnt rubber. "Ugh, that's terrible."

"Romance, money, or other? I'm pretty useless for romance problems."

I shook my head. "I don't know; everything fell apart at once."

"Classic 'one straw too many' avalanche." His deep bass rumble was undemanding, always comforting.

I pulled my knees up under my chin, rocking, the concrete stair cold through my slacks.

"What's in the box?"

"Chains."

Gary's eyebrow lifted, but he had nothing more to say. We sat together in silence.

In the end, I sighed and picked up the box.

"Thank you for being my friend, Gary." The words stuck. "Sorry for—all this."

He patted my foot. "Sleep on it. Things will be better tomorrow."

"I doubt it. Appreciate the coffee and company. Don't tell anyone you saw me, please?"

Classic lips-zipped gesture. Which looks pretty awkward from a guy his size. I touched his steady shoulder and walked down the staircase.

\* \* \*

Of course, my dreams were strange. I wandered empty corridors, passing numbered doors, jumping at shadows and noises. I chased ghosts, spectres, haints...or simple everyday people wandering lost, some pitiful, seeking anchors. Some dragged chains. Some were children.

A subtle green luminescence glimmered from each, pale even in the deepest darkness. These were the hotel's spirits: transients on a journey, bound for the past or future.

I drifted through walls that breathe silver mist. Phantom children chase butterflies made of moonlight across my bedroom ceiling. Their laughter echoes in color—translucent green.

A woman in Victorian dress waters flowers that bloom backwards into seeds. Her watering tin spills starlight instead of water. The flowers drink light, growing downward through floorboards into earth that tastes of forgotten names.

Transparent soldiers march through my kitchen, their boots silent on tiles that ripple like pond water. They carry rifles carved from crystallized breath. Their eyes hold stories of battles fought in places that never existed.

I reach for them. My fingers pass through their forms, catching only the scent of rain on summer graves.

A bright one scuttles toward me on crablike limbs. I jolt awake, heart slamming against my sternum, fingers digging into my own ribs.

A nightmare? I couldn't recall the last time. The memory slipped away like smoke. What's changed besides the Bone Woman's withdrawal? Had she been safeguarding my dreams as well? Or had she sent this one?

My vision adapts to the darkness of the suite, and I see them. The ghosts. Passing through in every direction, through walls and floors and doors. Wandering, most are forlorn...lost, sobbing, seeking...something.

One stopped at the foot of my bed. Her head tilted, eyes wide. I was the ghost in her world, not she in mine. I reached out to her, but she backed away from my hand. I beckoned, but she remained stationary.

They saddened me. I watched them for a while longer, and my eyes drifted shut again.

\* \* \*

My phone lit up. Ash's name. Three messages, each gentler than the last. No eggplants, no peach emojis, no heat—only concern. I let the screen go dark. The box I'd built had no exits.

I needed him for ward training. I needed him in other ways; his hands, his mouth, the weight of him. I locked my phone.

\* \* \*

"Oh, Corbin! Aren't you pretty! Checking in, Monica. Reservation under Noirval, Calida."

"Yes ma'am. I also see a second room here, under Ripley?"

"He'll be along with the bags. Just between us, put him on a different floor, dear; I want one of the executive suites. Is the Presidential available? Oh no, another on the same floor? Mary Martin? She was a Texan, dear, so gauche. Let's go with William Faulkner; I'll feel so literary. How big is the bed? Separate rooms? Jacuzzi, excellent. If only I had someone to help me explore the mountain of bubbles... Oh! This is my protégé, Amélie Renaud. We'll be quite lonely, knocking around the big empty suite by ourselves. Join us for a drink? Oh, of course, of course, midterms come first. No, no, Wes will be along to handle the bags, thank you...Monica? Mmm, pretty name, too. I'd love to see *much more* of you during our stay. 1203, don't forget. Ta!"

\* \* \*

"Hey, Wes. Mind if I join you?"

Flawless skin is the first thing everyone notices about Amélie. It is her brand, after all.

"You're sure the queen of ego isn't coming? Sure, pull up a booth."

Color crept up Amélie's neck. "She's...busy this morning. Splashing. Giggling. I walked away before I heard more."

"She met someone, then."

"A couple of them, from the sound of it. I'm sure they're of legal age. This is a college town. Right? God, I hope so."

Wes passed her the menu. The server hadn't arrived to take the order. "Want some of my coffee?"

"I'll be fine, thank you."

He looked out the cafe window for a moment and pulled out his notebook. "She goes through a lot of...proteges."

Amélie's hands flew up. "I don't know how. She's...well. Celebrity and raw charisma, I guess. I'd never fall for her act."

Raised eyebrow. "Then you aren't...?"

Her expression sharpened. "Oh, *Hell* no!" Her eyes fell back to the menu. "Sometimes I think I attract some of them, though. 'Famous YouTube channel with millions of subscribers!' What if Calida recruited me to be not just her assistant, but...bait? Intentionally, to pull more pretty girls into her creepy orbit?"

"I'd say that's a valid ethical concern. In your place, I'd worry about prosecution."

"Hey! I'm not pandering or anything!"

"No, but...prosecutors...those guys don't play.."

Her face went pale. "She is truly a criminal, you think?"

He returned a level gaze. "I don't know. If you aren't involved, I'd suggest protecting yourself. Calida has a morally questionable character. I've been covering my ass for years; if she goes down for something ugly, I'll provide the cops whatever they need." He tapped his pen against the notebook. "I'm not going down because of her narcissism. And while you're at it...monitor your mother's money, too. She's often...carefree with other people's cash."

She propped her cheekbone on her fist. "Wes, I'd no idea you were so thoughtful."

"Paranoid. The correct word is paranoid."

His grin was contagious, and he signalled their server. "Buy you breakfast?"

Across the polished table, a couple of strange green glints flickered off the silverware. Wes's brow furrowed; he glanced around, scanning the cafe, but saw nothing unusual. Reflection of something? Amélie stirred her coffee, oblivious.

\* \* \*

I stacked the linens into neat piles—sheets, pillowcases, tablecloths. Then, I floated them into the humming industrial washers. Silk whispered against crisp cotton. The basement smelled of old metal and decades of starch—age and labor, bottled. Towels tumbled in their cages, spun by invisible hands, the mundane chore tinged with a faint shimmer of magic.

The simple laundry routines reworked with magical time-savers left me a lot more free time for study, reading, or surfing the internet.

My boss was pretty undemanding most of the time.

Damn him. I like him when he's...bossy.

I perched on a crate with my warding tome balanced on my knees. The pages vibrated under the fluorescent light, the sigils and diagrams almost breathing. My fingers traced one. The air rippled—stone dropped in still water.

And I noticed them now: the ghosts, ever present, now were impossible to ignore. They drifted among the linens in pale green translucence, like mist caught in a morning sunbeam. Sheets brushed past my legs as faint shapes passed—children's

laughter echoing in the space. A Victorian lady watering starlight into a sink of glowing towels, soldiers stepping over tumbling tablecloths.

Their glow reflected in the silver handles of the washers and trays, catching the edges of my vision, reminding me of Bone Woman without her being here. My pulse kicked up. I breathed through it, counting washers, counting ghosts. These weren't intrusions. They were the hotel's own threads, woven through wash cycles and ward work alike.

A pillowcase floated past, nudged by a playful breeze that wasn't there. I caught it mid-air with a chuckle. Laundry, wards, ghosts...each needed tending, each a piece of the same tapestry. One pile, one sigil at a time.

Ash leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, a faint crease between his brows. "Warding magic is uncertain to work, you know."

"Worth a shot," I muttered, adjusting a stack of glowing linens that hovered lazily into the washer. The pale green shimmer of a ghost drifting past caught the corner of my eye—a trick of the light, I told myself.

"Eliza. Bone Woman *is* the hotel," he said, voice low, almost amused. "You're inside her right now. It's like warding against your own pancreas." He tilted his head, glancing at the faint green glint that reflected off the silver handles of the machines. "You'll grow strong enough to do it someday, with enough determination. But will the patient survive the cure?"

I swallowed. The basement pulsed with energy. Washers hummed, and pale green ghosts moved between the machines. Every piece of fabric and spinning ghost glowed with the same green magic as Bone Woman, reminding me this was more than just laundry. This was a living, enchanted hotel, and I was its newest apprentice, and its newest mental patient.

"I'll teach you." Ash stepped closer. His shoulder touched mine. "I'd be happy to, when you're ready to talk to me again. But warding magic is the least of your problems. You've got to have a frank discussion with Bone Woman, draw some boundaries. Re-establish your privacy before the two of you will move forward."

"What was in the box?" he asked.

My throat closed around the words. "The clothes. The gown, the cloak, the shoes, her veve...everything." My fingers dug into the cart's metal edge. "'Priestess' costume. She...meant it as a gift."

Ash's gaze didn't waver. Soft. Steady. "Bone Woman has her own way of showing care. Not like ours, but...it counts. That's why it's tricky."

The air punched from my chest. "Tricky...no shit? I feel like she wants to bind me here, take away my independence, make me into her priestess-bot. I'd be

Igor-walking around, casting the spells she wanted. "Yes, mistress, your wish is my command."

One corner of Ash's mouth lifted. "Yeah...that's exactly it. But she doesn't understand what she can't take. You've got to remind her. 'These are my terms. Take them or leave them!'"

"I think you hurt her feelings, too," he continued.

"I damn well know I did." Heat prickled behind my eyes. "Ash, she must've been eavesdropping, what we spoke about outside. 'She's frightened of me. I must be a mon— terrible!'"

"What were you about to say?"

I pressed both palms flat against the table. My elbows shook. "She thinks she's a monster, Ash. She thinks I agree with it."

Ash's expression eased, but his eyes stayed locked on mine. "She's not a monster, Eliza. She's...different. Confused, misunderstood. And yes, she will sometimes frighten you, but that doesn't make her terrible."

I shook my head, blinking back frustrated tears. "Different. Confused, misunderstood. That's not enough justification. She...she invaded my head. She knows too much that's mine. And now I feel guilty for hurting her feelings."

He closed the distance between us. "You didn't hurt her, not in any meaningful way. She'll handle being reminded of limits. That's...what she needs. What you both need. Boundaries aren't cruelty—they're honesty."

"The truth is...I cherish the little monkey, too. Even if she's Kong, I still love her to death. I know how to apologize. But I'm unsure if I'm able to. I don't know a damn thing about being a priestess except, you know, in nasty old Gor or Conan books. Draped naked across an evil altar—and don't you get any ideas."

Ash's face changed when my voice cracked. "You don't have to be a priestess, Eliza. Not the way she imagines it. Be...you. Clear, firm, and consistent. That's the guidance she needs. The rest she'll fill in herself."

The table caught me as I sagged. I buried my face in my hands. "Clear, firm, and consistent. Sounds simple. Feels impossible."

"Ask yourself what you love about her. Perhaps that's where the courage is."

I lifted my head. Ghosts circled the linen stacks in slow green spirals. "What I love..." I murmured, letting the words roll over my tongue. "Her curiosity. The way she sees everything, notices threads I'd never notice. Her...honesty, in her own way. Even when it scares me. Even when it hurts."

Ash didn't look away. Didn't rush me. "That's it. That's your anchor. The courage isn't in telling her no. It's in holding onto what you value while setting those limits. It's knowing you care for her without losing yourself."

"Ash Skotomurky, stop being so damned..."

"Aphoristic? Commanding? Dashing! Able to leap tall buildings! Irresistible."

I smirked. "Full of yourself."

His grin broke through, pure mischief. "Guilty. But accurate."

"Now, out, before I invoke the penalty for insubordination." I said, making my meaning clear with a suggestive stare.

Ash's hands went up. He backed toward the door, still grinning. "Yes, ma'am. I'll leave you to your monster-wrangling and laundry sorcery."

Once he was gone, I whispered to the empty room: "It involves cool breezes, midnight, and rooftop railings. And fuuu—there you go again, Eliza." Heat crawled up my neck.

A passing ghost snickered at me. I swear.

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## 14 Apocalypse Couture

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I slipped the bodice over a breezy chiffon blouse in mulberry. Not because I agreed with any implied ownership statement—I didn't—but because the combination was heavenly. All those ribbons and bows... I'm weak. I had to wear it. A thread of sadness wound through me as I smoothed the fabric. This represented my only chance to feel this feminine, this fabulous. Like she'd peeped inside my head and picked the perfect—wait. I guess she had.

Some trepidation fluttered in my chest as I approached the staircase from twelve. Allen wrench wasn't necessary. I turned the tiny internal bolt with a wave of my finger. It's good to be a witch.

I limped up the half-flight, gripping the rail. God, I hated stairs.

But what if Bone Woman was home?

The lab stood empty. Someone had cleaned the floor and returned the junk—wire, bones—to its proper origins. Ella had been here last, judging by her charging laptop and two open spellbooks sprawled across the bench. I closed the laptop and examined the book spines. Either Ella was behaving herself or she was getting better at hiding her indiscretions.

*Yuri, you know she's got the whole internet, right?* Books cannot hope to match the depths of depravity a determined teen will find using only their phone. Welcome to the Age of Information, already in progress.

Now what?

I hoisted myself onto a benchtop facing her birthplace, pulled my legs up, and sat cross-legged. Meditate? A locate spell?

How about... ask? "Bone Woman? Will you speak with me?"

Silence.

I tilted my head and let my hair fall over my eyes, then pulled out my cell and messaged Ash.

\* \* \*

He stepped out of the nearest shadow. Handy trick, that.

"I need to contact Bone Woman. Don't know if she can't hear me or isn't answering. Any ideas?"

Ash's fingertip lifted a dangling ribbon from the bodice, and he gave me a quizzical look.

"I don't want to hide something this pretty in a box." My stomach did a small, traitorous flip, guilt and thrill tangled like the ribbons on the bodice. His eyes lingered, sharp. Of course he noticed.

"I agree." His mouth quirked. "Well, set off a fire alarm?"

I shook my head.

"Before she had a body, how did you summon her?"

"She was just... watching." I twisted a lock of hair around my index finger. "It didn't bother me if she peeked in while I was peeing or whatever, because it was only the two of us. Girls. Or one of us was."

"I see." His voice went sober. "So I am the problem."

"What?"

"You didn't become concerned about privacy issues until..." He paused. "Huh. *Eliza? Are you embarrassed of me?*"

"Oh, don't be absurd."

"You realize Bone Woman's seen a million 'O' faces. Every New Year's, every Valentine's, every honeymoon? She doesn't live in the hotel, Liz. She *is the hotel*."

Heat crawled up my neck. "Look, buster. *Not mine!*"

"Eliza." He stepped closer, voice patient. "She's never seen *us* that way. One night, at my place. Not here. Unless a little casual nuzzling mortifies you. She's only ever inferred events from your... cheerful, relaxed moods afterward. Not from watching."

My jaw dropped.

Ash drummed his fingertips against my knee, thoughtful. "It's possible you owe her an apology."

And... yeah. He wasn't wrong. I'd lived with small losses of privacy, but the moment it touched sex, I'd panicked. And she wasn't even guilty.

"Eliza?"

"Mmmm?"

"Green glow."

I cracked one eye. "You've got to be kidding me."

"Eliza! Ash! My two favorite staff members!"

Bone Woman stood in the doorway wearing a sunhat cobbled from scraps—faded fabric panels stitched with crude twine in bold, uneven stripes. Glow-in-the-dark ping-pong balls filled her eye sockets, throwing mischievous green light across the

lab. The effect was pure scrappy apocalypse couture: half ghost, half scarecrow, all Bone Woman.

"Do I get a hug? Especially from you, big guy. Give Momma some of that Dark, Dark Shadow!"

For someone who'd called herself a monster only yesterday, she sounded pretty chipper.

Ash and I exchanged a glance. What... the...

She hopped onto the lab table with an ominous clatter. The wards and charms, amped by green Loa magic, held firm under the abuse. She flung a long, bony arm around each of us and squeezed in lopsided side-hugs, grinning like a monkey skull that had just learned punchlines.

"So... what's new?"

"Well. That hat, for one thing." Ash's tone stayed neutral. "Make it yourself?"

"Nah, Ella helped me! She was here studying, we got to chatting, and we hit it off. She taught me about this online-commerce thing, so we've got half a dozen packages on the way."

*Ruh-roh.*

She nuzzled her snout into my hair and bent low, peering straight down the bodice. *Looking good, sugar tits* boomed inside my skull, and one of her ping-pong eyes whirled in its socket. Was that supposed to be a wink?

"Told you that outfit rocked the block on you! So, does this mean you've got news?"

Heat crawled up my throat. I nudged her snout out of my décolletage. "News? Uh... not really. I just... missed you."

Bone Woman glanced at Ash. "Tell me this one's not disappointing you. He means well, dear, but you know... he's the squarest cube in the box."

*Twenty-four hours from construction and she's already working on banter? Nobel Prize in Physics by tomorrow?*

"I'm sorry, I'm being too flippant, aren't I? Ella and I joke around too much." She fixed her orbs on me. "Feeling better today, Liz? How may I assist you, kids?"

Ash drummed like morse code on the back of my hand with his fingertips—patience, calm, resolve.

"Let's talk about boundaries." My voice squeaked, but I pushed forward. "Take my breasts, for example. Avoid goggling at or talking about them."

She nodded, ping-pong eyes bobbing. "Only Ash allowed. Bodies, sex, bathroom things: all off-limits in polite talk. If you glimpse by mistake, pretend you did not see. Kissing all right. Gentle teasing about couch wrestling is okay?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Ash? Help me out."

"I won't take offense." He shifted beside me. "Bone Woman, you understand the difference between the three of us and others? Embarrassment is worse with strangers. Sometimes even with family."

"I will take care." Her voice went solemn. "If I make mistakes, you forgive? Human rules are complex. I watch many hours of television, not fully understanding. Eliza, our talk is different because we are both women. Different from woman to man. We share a tub of fabulous bubbles? It looks super fun."

I blinked. "You... bathe?"

"Only to splash and play. Looks super fun."

I lingered with that thought, then flushed crimson. "Ask first. Not always."

"Mmm, I know what you mean. I will ask before joining. Wine time is private. Bubble bath is splash time."

I stared at the floor, mortified. But she *was making the effort*, picking up clues faster than imaginable. Even humans disagree on privacy rules sometimes.

Ash rescued me. "Human rules are complex. Please, ask. Liz's rules, my rules are different. Though men and women largely see the same world, their perspectives differ."

"Will ask." She held up one bony finger. "Pinkie promise. I spoke much with Ella about her parents—monster-monster, but also man-woman. Bone Woman seeks to become good, not-monster. No pitchforks and torches."

"Eliza, okay still thought-talk? I saw your dream this morning, I left quickly and avoided trouble. Is that right?"

I hesitated. "Yeah... that's fine. But don't rummage, okay? If I want you there, I'll contact you. Otherwise, private dreams stay private."

Bone Woman tapped her skull with one finger, solemn. "No rummage. Knock at the door. Not tell Ash your favorite dreams."

I drew a slow breath, the knot in my chest loosening. We hadn't created our own tiny Mr. Hyde after all. I glanced at Ash and tilted my head. Okay, for now?

Ash watched Bone Woman playing with her new hat, considering. He nodded.

"Good." She clapped her hands together. "All agreed. I follow rules." A beat, then her grin brightened. "Now—talk about your stunning new bodice, Liz? Is *perfect* for you."

I hesitated, brushing the ribbons. "Bone Woman. There's something about the outfit. The full set—you labeled it 'priestess.' Does that mean I have rules now? Obligations? Am I a pawn to a loa?"

Her ping-pong eyes spun. "Ah! Priestess rules... yes. Duties include: honor the hotel, keep magic clean, respect life, not just bones, speak truth when needed, and

sometimes assist humans or ghosts in trouble. Not slave. Not pawn. You still choose. Choices matter. Free will always yours."

I narrowed my eyes. "So... rituals? Offerings? Chanting?"

"Sometimes." She shrugged one bony shoulder. "Mostly small. Friendly. Fun. No pitchforks. No eternal contracts. You decide which parts suit Liz. Your life."

Ash gave me a subtle squeeze. "She's serious, but it's not absolute. You retain agency."

I exhaled. "Okay... so guidelines, not shackles. I will work with that."

Bone Woman clapped again, delighted. "Good! Now—bodice. Fabulous, yes?"

I met her glowing gaze. "Feel my delight. I invite you in—feel, enjoy." The words came easier than expected. "I don't have the words, except... it warms my soul. I feel alive."

"You wear the complete outfit. It will make your knees weak, I promise. And you will be my Priestess Eliza, official. Strong. Powerful, important woman."

My fingers stroked the bows and ribbons. "They're already weak."

"Good. Like sex but not sex—pure happiness. You earned it. Enjoy. Wear it, priestess. Honor it, confident, then I am proud of my priestess."

Something like a kiss pressed against my cheek—the Loa's heat, a blessing. The warmth lingered, pulsing. A flicker of sensation in my mind, a whisper. *Offer thanks at sunrise. Light a small candle. Speak intentions aloud.*

I blinked. "Wait... that was—?"

"First duty." Her ping-pong eyes spun lazily. "Tiny. Easy. Morning work. Learn your rhythms."

I exhaled. "Okay... sunrise offerings. I'll do that."

Ash's fingertips brushed mine. "I already put flowers out for Hecate each morning. We can... combine offerings."

Bone Woman leaned forward, resting a bony hand on my shoulder. "See? Rules, not chains. Choose to obey, choose to delight. Still, your life, my priestess."

\*\*\*

The next morning, the three of us stood at the Hekateion, candles flickering in the dim dawn light. I held the match. Ash placed the flowers. Bone Woman hovered like a proud, eccentric guardian. I spoke my intentions aloud, feeling the pulse of warmth again—small, tangible, and mine.

"I honor my family and my home. Bless them, Bone Mother. Bless them, Hecate."

Tiny duty, big heart swell. I'll work with that.

\*\*\*

"I had a talk with Yuri, and she suggested I see you about this." Morgan stood in the doorway of 1102, one hand resting against the frame. "I guess everyone includes

tech savvy among your talents now. But if anyone understands influencers... It's a research project, and you're the girl with the magic laptop fingers. Will you help?"

"Of course, Morgan." Ella beamed. "If Mom consents, I'm available. One second, I need to tell her she's standing Pel and Tel watch today. Come on inside."

"Morrigan." Euryale glided across the common room, embracing the bartender. "It's good to see you."

"Yuri! Sorry I haven't visited in a while." Morgan held up a small bag. "I brought you some scale care, cleanser and moisturizer potions."

"Why, thank you!" Yuri's face brightened. "The usual order of Pour Decisions for your staff?"

"Please. They love the scent, and gratuities are way up this quarter."

"Mom, Morgan wants my help to research influencers. Is it okay if I take it to the lab?"

"Ella, Morgan's family. Of course it's okay. Stay out of trouble."

"Promise."

"Back before lunch?"

One round-robin hug and product bag exchange later, they headed out.

But Ella already knew Morgan didn't consistently play by the rules, and that was half the fun of Auntie Morgan. "It's on the back of twelve. Wait until you see the lab; you'll love it. You'll need a 1/8th Allen wrench for the back staircase—we've got spares in the drawer for you. Or magic through if it's faster. Liz does. I'm still not skilled enough at levitation, still wrestling with paper clips."

\* \* \*

Morgan stopped Ella with a hand on her shoulder halfway up the back stairs. "Wait. Something magical nearby, quite strong..."

"The Lab, the Bone Woman. It's okay; they're on our team."

"Your mother has met them and approves?"

Ella nodded.

"I trust Euryale's perceptions." Morgan relaxed. "Sorry, sometimes overprotective habits from my own insufferable mother."

Ella's head tilted. "Let's see how you feel about me when I'm nagging you for knowledge, learning my potions and elixirs." She grinned.

"It'll be my honor, Ella. Show me this cave of wonders, Aladdin."

\* \* \*

Ella settled onto a lab stool, pulling up browser tabs. "Sure, Calida Noirval, the spiritualist. Have you never seen the Calida Show? It's a hoot. The concerned callers, distraught about their former pet's happiness in dog heaven, really cornball."

"Calida the Hotel Guest." Morgan's voice went flat. "She's checked into 1203, and is running up a legendary bar tab. What do you know about Amélie Renaud?"

Ella leaned back, eyes wide, heel thumping against the rung. "Amélie Renaud's staying here?!"

Morgan squinted. "Should I know the name?"

"She's—oh my God, Morgan—she's huge. Millions of followers. Fashion, makeup, merch, music drops... half the internet copies her eyeliner. A rusty spoon posted by her ensures Etsy sells out by morning."

Morgan's mouth curved, unimpressed. "A courtier with a glass scrying-mirror and a mob of sycophants. Forgive me if I don't quake."

Ella shoved her glasses higher, grinning despite herself. "You don't get it. She's not famous. She's... viral."

Morgan made a face. "That sounds like an illness. She's in tow as Calida's 'protégé,' acting as some kind of media consultant and PA, I suppose. Last night Calida brought in three more influencers—young, female, polished. Calida prefers attractive and vapid."

"Amélie is *not* vapid." Ella shook her head hard. "You've seriously never heard of Paula Renaud? Old money, obscene money. The family fortune is offensively huge. Amélie's been steering a sizable chunk of it for years. She's not only famous; she's dangerous."

"Granted." Morgan swirled her hand, as though weighing an invisible coin. "But why's she playing second fiddle to this... carnival barker?"

Ella pushed her glasses up, eyes bright. "Because Calida's got the spotlight. She's messy, theatrical. If Amélie wants influence outside the Renaud boardroom, she needs a front woman who sells a show. Calida plays the fool, but she makes noise. And Amélie? She's the one keeping score."

Morgan shook her head. "I've been serving their drinks; that's not the right dynamic. Calida's the star, and the influencers are in orbit around her, competing to please her. There's something slimy, improper happening here. Does Calida have... unhealthy appetites?"

Her mouth tightened. "It isn't vanity I'm sensing. There's rot underneath. Not clear, but... like milk turned in the jug before you smell it."

Ella laughed, but it landed thin. "You're not exactly the target demographic, Auntie. Influencers thrive on attention. Calida... knows how to work a room."

"Knows how to drink a bar dry."

"That's not fair," Ella protested, then faltered. Is it? She'd noticed how Calida's spiels left people dazed, giggly, and clingy. But wasn't that just charisma? "If she's got shady business going on, it's hidden well. Amélie's too smart for ugly messes."

Morgan arched a brow. "The sweetest lures snare even the cleverest folk."

Ella crossed her arms, defensive. "You're reading shadows into candlelight. We'll soon find out. For now... I won't have it. Amélie isn't part of anything rotten."

Morgan let it go with a sigh, but the doubt hung between them like the faint smell of smoke long after the fire's out. "Your family has taught you that appearances often lie. Beauty cloaks evil, and plain disguises good. Keep your unique and perceptive eyes wide open, Ella."

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## 15 Are You Experienced?

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Plain white business envelope, "Ash Skotomerkis" with the Elysium Gate Hotel return address in the corner. I rubbed my chin, glancing up at him. "Well, that narrows down the gift list a bit, doesn't it?"

"Open it," Ash suggested, his expression unchanged.

Inside were two tickets. Concert? Play? I turned them over.

"The Calida Experience" in a scripty fantasy font, lots of stars and swirls, with Calida's smiling portrait gazing out from glossy cardstock. Row C, Seats 108 and 109.

"Oh, Ash!" I studied the font more closely. "The Calida Experience? Didn't it used to be the Calida Show?"

"Rebrand. New name, new budget, and new headaches. I'll be wrangling twice the extension cords."

The seat numbers finally registered. "Third-row center!" My voice came out higher than intended. "But you didn't like the Calida Show."

"The tickets aren't mine. I'm working—official hotel gopher for the assistant producer." He shrugged. "Take Ella. She'll love it."

I looked down at the tickets again, then back up at him, warmth spreading through my chest. "You thought of everything, didn't you?"

Ash leaned in, brushing a quick kiss across my temple. "Third-row center deserves nothing less."

"Wait until I show my appreciation." I let the words come out lower, warmer.

He glanced at my eyes, fingertips stroking the nape of my neck. "You have. But if you need more time, I have my appointment book. Shall I slot you in for Wednesday?"

"Don't tempt me. I'll actually book it." I flowed into his arms, lifting on my toes to kiss him properly. When I pulled back enough to speak, I dropped my voice into my huskiest register. "More? Soon?"

"Wednesday," he nodded, suppressing a grin. "Nine to nine oh five."

He ducked away before I swatted him, already retreating toward the door.

\*\*\*

The crowd bottlenecked outside the ballroom doors, a wall of sequins and hairspray pressed shoulder to shoulder. Ella's fingers closed on my sleeve with enough force to wrinkle the fabric.

"Ohmygod. That's Aria Tee."

I followed Ella's gaze to a waifish blonde striking poses near the wall while her friend held up a phone. "Am I supposed to know her?"

"She does reaction streams, movie reviews—quarter million subs, Liz!" Ella bounced on her toes. "So surreal that she's here."

I squinted at the girl, who looked like she weighed ninety pounds soaking wet. "Huh. Online, people look taller."

Ella smothered a laugh just as the ushers swung the double doors open, and the crowd surged forward.

\* \* \*

She drew a sharp breath as we settled into our seats, her fingers gripping the armrest. "Oh, Liz, these seats are perfect!"

I smiled, the plush velvet beneath me confirming what the ticket had promised. "Yeah, his jokes are sometimes corny, but I really do like that man."

"Mom and Dad have known him for ages, and they have nothing but respect for him." Ella leaned closer, lowering her voice. "Morgan, Bone Woman...everyone likes him. I think the entire universe is conspiring against you, Liz."

"Conspiring how?"

"You're fated to see that handsome face gazing up at you from between your thighs." She giggled, eyes shining with mischief. "Not the worst destiny, you know."

I gave her arm a painful pinch. "You are seventeen."

"Seventeen, but not blind!" She gestured toward the front row with her chin. "Did you notice the influencers down there? The type who livestream everything. They'll fight for attention before the show even starts."

"I can't tell an influencer from an impostor, anyway."

"Fortunately, you have a brilliant new sister in your corner now. I am here to help."

I pulled her into a quick side-hug, the affection catching me off-guard with its intensity. "I am fortunate."

Ella watched Ash argue with a tech over an overhead light. "You sure are. And not just because of him."

We settled in to watch the crew bustle through final preparations. The director barked instructions toward the wings. Cameramen slid efficiently behind their tripods. A ripple of murmurs ran through the audience as the blinking SILENCE sign illuminated red above the stage.

I glanced over. Ash caught my eye, blew me a kiss, and darted offstage on some last-minute errand.

"Cameras in three...two...one..." The director boomed across the space. He pointed at the MC. "Action!"

The house lights dipped. The MC strode onto the stage, his smile bright under the spots.

"That's Amélie!" Ella squealed, pointing toward the back.

I turned to see Wes slipping into the production booth with a young woman at his side. She kept to his shoulder, head bowed, blonde hair curtaining her face. The whispers among the seats shifted like a wind change, charged with recognition. Even hunched and hiding, her features were unmistakable—the face from a thousand sponsored posts and lifestyle vlogs.

The house band swelled into a flourish. The SILENCE signs glared brighter.

"From the Elysium Gate Hotel, this is Channel Seven!" The MC's voice rang out with practiced enthusiasm. "We proudly present the very first episode of The Calida Experience, taped before a studio audience!"

A spotlight sliced across the stage right entrance. Calida burst through in a shimmer of motion—arms wide, smile dazzling, already owning every square inch of the room.

"Liz!" Ella's fingers dug into my arm again. "No plastic jewelry. And Channel Seven now? Somebody scored a much bigger budget. She's had a complete upgrade."

The audience oohed and applauded. Calida held her pose, head tilted, and soaked it in like sunlight. She drifted forward with liquid grace, all poise and elegance, until her toe caught the corner of the new stage carpet.

The stumble was brief. A few scattered titters rippled through the crowd, but Calida swept on without missing a beat, her smile intact. The house band punched up a cover note, drowning the moment in brass.

"Thank you, thank you so much!" She sank into her chair with a theatrical flourish. Before the applause settled, she sprang back up. "Welcome to the Calida Experience! I'm Calida, and I will be your guide tonight as we search out and connect to the spirits beloved and important to your lives. Are you ready?"

The audience clapped harder this time, enthusiasm amplified by the camera crew's frantic hand-waving. The broadcast on the monitor looked seamless. The screen filled with crisp angles, swelling music, and a luminous Calida.

Ella leaned forward, her breath quickening. "Liz, she has it—that polish!"

A faint green shimmer flickered across the ballroom wall behind the stage. There and gone, like heat lightning. I glanced at Ella, who'd frozen mid-lean, her smile wavering.

Calida's gaze swept the rows with calculated precision, settling on a woman with powder-blue hair near the aisle. "Mrs. Grundy," she said warmly, extending one graceful hand. "My faithful friend. I feel you carry a memory tonight...something heavy."

The woman sat straighter, her cheeks beginning to tremble. "My nephew. He drowned thirty-five years ago. Lake Pontchartrain."

Calida closed her eyes, head tilting as though listening to whispers only she could hear. "He's been close and waiting. You keep his picture in your kitchen, don't you? Near the phone, where you see him every morning."

Mrs. Grundy gasped, one hand flying to her mouth. "Yes! That's exactly right!"

The audience murmured, impressed. Calida's smile gentled, sympathy radiating from her like warmth from a hearth. "He wants you to know he's safe. He thanks you for the prayers you whisper before bed."

Tears rolled down Mrs. Grundy's face, catching the stage lights. Calida gave her a final sympathetic nod, then turned back to the room, already moving on. "The spirits never fail us, do they?" Her voice brightened, carrying the applause like a wave toward wealthier shores.

"Yes, darlings, the spirits are powerful tonight..." She paused, pressing one hand to her chest. "Corbin—"

A cough interrupted her. She covered it with a practiced smile, but I caught the flash of irritation in her eyes.

*Wait. Who's Corbin?* The name meant nothing to me, but something in the way she'd said it—like a slip, a crack in the performance—sharpened my attention.

Calida lifted her hands, commanding yet graceful, rings glittering under the lights. "Let us commune with the ether and call forth any spirit who wishes to speak with us!"

She paused, tilting her head with that same theatrical listening pose. "Ah...yes...Clara Bow? The It Girl herself! Full of fire and charm."

Two faint shapes materialized behind her. Ghostly. Translucent. Trailing in her wake like shadows that didn't quite match the lighting.

My breath caught. Only I saw them.

Calida nodded as if absorbing secrets from the air itself. "Tell us, dear Clara, what was your favorite escape from the Hollywood buzz?"

A theatrical pause, milking the silence. Then she stage-whispered, "Ah! A simple walk along Venice Beach...barefoot, wind in your hair. You almost see it, don't you?"

The audience leaned in, breathless, caught in her web.

"And what about your famous bobbed hair?" Calida touched her own locks, fingers trailing through them. "Your idea or the studio's?"

Another pause. Another knowing smile. "Your own rebellion, of course! You said it made you feel free as a bird."

"Did you ever regret any of your roles?" Her voice lowered to an intimate murmur, drawing the audience closer still.

A sly smile spread across her face. "Ah, yes...a few. But the audience's laughter made it worthwhile, didn't it?"

"One last question, Clara—what would you tell young women today about finding their own 'It' factor?"

Calida's eyes sparkled as she delivered the answer with perfect timing: "Trust your instincts, darlings. The camera never lies, but neither does your heart."

The audience erupted in gentle applause, enchanted. Behind Calida, I watched the two ghostly figures grow more solid, their forms sharpening from smoke into something with weight and presence. A chill crawled down my spine.

Behind the stage, a spotlight wobbled. The bulb flared bright green for a heartbeat before popping with a sharp crack. Sparks showered across the edge of the stage, and a subtle shiver passed through the crew. Beside me, Ella jerked at the green flash, her eyes widening.

Calida swept her gaze over the audience again, zeroing in on a well-dressed couple near the front. Calida could see their wealth in their tailored suits and subtle jewelry. She also detected their tension in their tight shoulders and clasped hands.

"Ah, and you...yes, the gentleman with the gold cufflinks."

The man shifted in his seat, discomfort flickering across his features.

"I sense you're a man who values precision." Calida's voice rang with confidence. "You work with numbers, perhaps? Finance?"

He shook his head. "I'm in construction."

A flicker of uncertainty crossed her face—there and gone—but she pressed forward without breaking stride. "Of course, of course. Construction requires precision too, doesn't it? You're...you're a perfectionist. Checking your work twice, three times?"

"Not really." His puzzlement was visible even from the third row.

"Ah, well..." Calida's smile tightened at the corners. "I sense you have a strong connection to your father. He guided you in your career choice, didn't he?"

"My father died when I was two."

Nervous murmurs rippled through the audience like wind through grass. Calida's composure faltered—a crack in the polish—before she recovered with a graceful hand wave that didn't quite mask her embarrassment. "The spirits...the ether is shy tonight with some souls."

She cut the interaction short, already pivoting to the young woman beside him in the fur-trimmed coat. The woman had been leaning forward throughout the exchange, vibrating with anticipation.

"And you, my dear..." Calida's tone softened, honeyed and inviting again. "Your heart has known both generosity and ambition, hasn't it?"

The woman nodded, already caught in the spell.

"You've moved mountains quietly, yet you seek recognition." Calida stepped closer, her presence filling the space. "There's someone you've been caring for...an elderly relative?"

"My grandmother," the woman breathed.

"She's so proud of you. And the promotion you've been longing for?" Calida paused, letting the anticipation build. "It's coming sooner than you think."

The woman's eyes filled with tears—joy, relief, gratitude mixing. The audience cooed, the earlier awkwardness forgotten in the face of this apparent insight.

Calida let her warm gaze linger, feeding off the positive energy. She pressed something into the woman's cupped hands—a business card, I realized, catching the glint of gold lettering. Her eyes gleamed as they shared the moment, intimate despite the cameras.

Meanwhile, the two ghosts behind her had grown even more substantial. They circled her now, their forms solidifying, features becoming clearer with each successful reading. Something cold settled in my stomach, heavy and wrong.

Near the production booth, Wes leaned toward Amélie, murmuring something too low to hear. She nodded once, her expression taut, eyes fixed on Calida with an intensity that had nothing to do with admiration.

Calida paused center stage, arms lifted to embrace the applause. "Thank you, darlings, thank you!" Her smile was incandescent under the lights. She gave a slow, graceful bow.

The house band launched into a lively, jazzy flourish. Calida glided across the stage, spinning and stepping to the music, every gesture magnified by the lighting. The two ghosts followed, trailing just behind her, their presence invisible to everyone but me.

As she swept toward the wings, I tracked the spirits with growing unease. They were solid now—almost completely real. And they were following her offstage, drawn along in her wake like moths to a flame.

Sparkles still filled Ella's eyes, her face glowing with the spectacle. But I caught her frowning at another brief green flash from the monitors—a subtle echo that made her shiver and pull her cardigan tighter.

"Technical difficulties," I murmured, but the words felt hollow. The Bone Woman's anger created sparks, glitches, and green fire. Equipment nearby failed.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the MC announced from center stage, "Calida will return shortly for a meet-and-greet session. Please remain in your seats!"

I stared at the stage exit where Calida had disappeared, watching the space where the ghosts had vanished with her. I'd never watched a ghost follow someone and not return.

After twenty minutes, Calida emerged to mingle with the audience. Her energy renewed, her smile was more radiant than before. But the two ghosts?

Gone.

Something about Calida felt wrong—not theatrical fakery, but something deeper. It left a coppery taste upon my tongue.

That's when I knew.

\*\*\*

I practiced magic by fixing my towel-wrapped hair. Efficient, practical—no need to stand there with a blow dryer for twenty minutes.

I grabbed my hairbrush from the vanity table, flicking my wrist as if it were the most natural gesture in the world. "Alakazam!"

The brush rose six inches, wobbled like a drunk butterfly, and drifted toward me in an unsteady arc.

"Come on," I whispered. The brush and I had history. My old enemy enjoyed vicious attacks on my noggin whenever I lost concentration.

It bumped against the loveseat arm and clattered onto my lap.

I snarled at it, positioning the brush again with deliberate care. Up. Across. Gentle. The brush lifted, steadier this time, and began working through my shower-tangled hair in slow, careful strokes.

The sensation was delicious. Like Mom used to do when I was small—sitting between her knees while she hummed and worked out the knots, patient and gentle. Calm. Safe. A memory that made my chest ache if I dwelt on it too long.

Hair brushing is why I melt at a soft tug on my hair during—

Never mind. That's none of your business.

I let the enchanted brush continue its work, my mind drifting. Levitation was a set-it-and-forget-it spell, Yuri had explained. Once set in motion, it continued functioning with minimal concentration. It was sensible. The distraction of a witch in flight caused her to plummet from the sky.

Lo-and-behold, steady practice and repeated error produced results.

\*\*\*

Braving Ash in the lion's den carried certain risks. When we were alone in his office, things...escalated.

I picked everyday cotton. A defiant symbol of "I dressed for me, not for you." Just in case. *Because I was weak sometimes, and he made my toes curl.*

I rifled through my closet, grimacing at the jumble of sportswear and thrift shop basics. What I wanted was something pretty and feminine, like vintage pieces with good bones. Not something rushed and cobbled together.

Cursing my budget, I settled for the second-best option: a lace-trimmed cream blouse, dark jeans, and a soft pastel cardigan. I forced a small, determined smile at my reflection.

Two flights down. I chose the stairs, regretting it halfway when my stupid left knee yammered its familiar complaint—a grinding ache that promised to worsen if I pushed it. The Witch Library contained a complete section on body control, injuries, and healing, but I'd only nibbled around the baby-witch edges so far. My knee insisted with each painful step that I dedicate more time to my studies.

I limped through the lobby, smiling and waving to the first-shift ladies behind the desk, and made my way toward Ash's office.

\* \* \*

"What's on your mind, Eliza?" He smiled, and my stupid heart did that stupid flip again.

I chose a seat at a comfortable distance away, not trusting myself to stay focused if I got too close. My fingers drummed against the armrest. "The Calida Experience."

"I'm glad you and Ella had fun." He was still half-distracted by paperwork on his desk, pen moving across some form. His grin didn't quite land—automatic rather than genuine.

I kept my lips pressed into a thin line. "Well, we did. And thanks again for thinking of us. But..."

He set his pen down and looked up, attention finally focusing. "What is it?"

"You were gone when it happened, but Bone Woman was pitching a fit. Lights flashing green, equipment failing." I leaned forward. "And Calida...there's something wrong there. Something sinister."

His expression shifted to genuine interest now, the paperwork forgotten.

"Two ghosts trailed her offstage, Ash. Not part of her act—actual ghosts. And they never came back."

"Not her performance? Real spirits?" His brow furrowed.

"They left with her. They followed her. And they never returned." I held his gaze. "Have you ever experienced anything like that?"

"An embodiment of unresolved guilt? She is a medium—or claims to be—so perhaps they're drawn to her presence." He rubbed his jaw. "Though their disappearance is bizarre."

"Then why does Bone Woman hate her?" My hands clenched in my lap, nails digging into my palms. "I still don't understand psychopomps, I guess. You follow tradition without explaining its function."

I drew a breath, steadying myself. "Do you require rituals for your work, or are they just...cultural practices?"

"I'm not sure you want to know." Ash held my gaze, his eyes darkening slightly. "My reasons are my own."

I didn't let it slide. "No, really. I've watched you do impossible things. And I've heard whispers—cryptic comments from Morgan, odd looks from Gary." I leaned forward. "What's actually going on with you? You're not only some guy with a bag of tricks. You're more than that."

My hands trembled in my lap. "If you're half of what they say, you live closer to the grave than the living. That's not cool pyrotechnics or stage magic. That's...terrifying. And you act like it's nothing."

A shadow passed over his expression, brief but unmistakable. "You're afraid of me. Still."

"I need to ask you something real." The words came out harder than I'd intended. "I went to see Calida's show thinking it was fun—a television spectacle. But the glitz and glamour were hiding something wrong. Something that left me cold." I met his eyes. "I can't let myself get tricked again."

I asked more bluntly the question I'd been circling since I sat down: "How do I know you don't hide something just as sinister behind the candles and ceremony?"

Ash winced as if I'd struck him.

"You'd know," he breathed. "It's true, Eliza. You'd feel it. Evil leaves a taste in the air, a foul stench. It saturates a person's presence until you can't stand to be near them." His voice was steady, certain. "I don't traffic in it."

I hissed air through my teeth. "Dammit, Ash."

"What?"

"Don't dismiss me with poetic words and vague reassurances." My voice rose. "I trusted Calida because she made it all look harmless—entertaining, even. And I want to trust you, Ash—God, *I do*—but I need more than shadows and riddles." I stood unable to sit still any longer. "What are you really doing here? What are you really tied to?"

A literal thundercloud of shadow magic gathered over Ash's head—dark, roiling energy. The air pressure dropped, like before a summer storm; papers rustled,

shadows lengthened. He threw back his office chair with enough force to send it rolling into the wall and thundered at me:

"You think because you've learned a few tricks, you understand any of this? You're a tourist, Liz. Playing dress-up with powers you barely comprehend while I've carried this burden my entire existence." His voice cracked like breaking stone. "You'll get bored and move on to the next shiny thing—they always do. That's what mortals do."

I took a step back, my spine hitting the bookshelf behind me.

"My mother is Hecate. My father ferries the dead across the Styx." The shadows writhed above him like living things. "I was born for this. Born into duty and death and endless service. You?" He pointed at me, the gesture sharp and accusatory. "You're some human who stumbled into magic and thinks that makes us equals."

The words kept coming, each one landing like a physical blow.

"When you burn out, or die, or simply lose interest because the novelty's worn off, I'll still be here. Still doing what I do. Still carrying a weight you can't even conceive of." His hands clenched into fists at his sides. "You're temporary, Liz. Don't pretend otherwise."

He stood too fast; the movement was violent. His hands slammed onto the desk as if he could hold the words in, stopping them from pouring forth. "You don't understand, Liz. You'll leave. They all leave. And I—"

He cut himself off, jaw locked, fists white-knuckled against the dark wood.

I froze. Every syllable of his words found a hollow space in me. They sank deep, reopening childhood memories of being abandoned, left behind, and *never enough*.

"I'm...*temporary*," I whispered, almost to myself. Testing the word. Feeling its weight.

Ash's eyes flicked away, something that looked almost like guilt crossing his features. Almost defiant, as if daring me to contradict him, and inviting the fight.

I couldn't breathe. The air in the office was thick, too heavy. I had to get out.

I snatched my bag from the chair, my hands shaking.

"Liz—"

I slammed the door behind me with enough force to rattle the frame, the finality of it shaking the walls and echoing down the corridor like a gunshot.

*ASHhole!*

The hallway swallowed me whole.

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## 16 Shattered Shards

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The slam still thudded in my ears. Shadows answered—turning, folding, a black storm gathering overhead. Tiny green lightning knives stitched through the dark, crackling where they met. They listened to me. I hated them for it.

"Not now, Bone Woman. Leave me alone." My voice scraped raw.

One emerald bolt looped through the cloud and rattled the doorframe. I didn't flinch.

Why am I so stupid? The question burned. Why did I throw it away—throw her away—like ashes to the wind?

She'd pressed because she cared. Because she wanted to know me. I'd chosen cruelty over truth, pride over pain. The only person who'd ever looked past Hecate's son and Charon's heir had walked out my door. I'd made her feel small. Temporary. Not enough.

Because mortals die. Loving them ends in grief.

A small, calculating thing inside me approved: better to let her go before I hurt her worse. Let distance be clean. Let loneliness be safe. The voice hissed worse things—better she leaves than breaks for good—and my chest tightened around those lies. They tasted metallic.

"Fuck you," I spat at my storm, at myself.

Silence pooled after. The lights hummed. Papers on my desk trembled but held. The god in me vanished, leaving only a man who'd broken something precious with one thoughtless swing.

The universe didn't grant me time to wallow. My office door slammed open.

A whirlwind of teenage outrage stormed across the threshold. Euterpe Hugo—seventeen, righteous fury incarnate—launched herself onto my desk with every ounce of her 120 pounds. Pens skittered. Papers flew.

"What did you do?!" she shrieked, eyes blazing. "You piece of shit, you *never* talk to my sister like that!"

I blinked, stunned into silence. Her eyes locked on mine—twin shards of intensity—and the air thickened with icy judgment. I leaned back. She was small, human, and terrifying.

"Ella, stop!" Euryale's voice cracked like a whip from the doorway, one hand half-extended. Her face matched her daughter's fury. "Get down off the desk."

The words landed like a verdict, calm and final.

Yuri wrapped one arm around Ella, who trembled against her side. "I'm sorry about Ella. She's upset."

"Mom, *he made her cry!*" Ella's voice cracked between fury and tears. She jabbed a finger at me like something that needed exorcising. "You'd better not let me catch you alone, creep. I'll make you pay!"

"Ella!" Euryale's tone snapped. She wrapped both arms around her daughter and pulled her back. "That's enough. Out."

"Watch your back!" Ella shouted over her mother's shoulder as Euryale dragged her through the door.

The latch clicked. Silence returned, leaving me burned raw by the echo of threat.

\* \* \*

"Liz." The Bone Woman appeared in my suite. "Feel sad, lonely, angry? You are unhappy."

I'd been eating and watching television for days. My reflection showed hollowed eyes in dark circles. Unbathed, hair a tousled mess. Empty Kleenex boxes scattered across the bedroom floor. The Do Not Disturb sign hung on the doorknob.

I was too wretched to lash out at her.

"How do I help?"

My laugh came out bitter. I hugged my knees and rocked.

Bone Woman tilted her head, eyes wide and unblinking—not confused this time, but recognizing something. "You hurt inside. I feel it. I am learning. You do not need ritual now. You need... help. Permission to join your thoughts?"

I closed my eyes, too tired to argue. "Fine."

Her cool hand brushed my temple. "Then I carry some of it. Share the hurt. You are not alone."

A pause. "Liz, you look like hell. The room smells bad. Go wash. I can't take your pain away, but I am here to help carry it. I will clean here while you wash. Self-care, first step."

Blunt, but accurate. I didn't smell floral either. I drew a breath, nodded, grabbed fresh underwear and headed for the shower.

\* \* \*

After the shower, I wasn't happy, but closer to feeling human. My eyes looked better. I brushed my hair as I returned.

The bedroom was brighter—curtains drawn, debris cleared. She'd had made the bed, and a glass of water waited by the nightstand. A little vase stood on the dresser, holding fresh flowers.

"Thank you. They're lovely." I ran a thumb along a daisy petal. The gesture landed like a small, unwelcome kindness.

"You're lovely, too. Ella has been showing me 'shopping.' For her, it's a happiness thing. Do you like shopping, Liz? Focus elsewhere, mind off your troubles." Bone Woman's voice carried awkward earnestness.

I laughed in surprise, releasing a knot in my gut. I sat on the edge of the bed, the water was cool. The room smelled clean. For the first time in days, the sharp ache in my chest eased enough to breathe around it.

"Permission to become your changing room?"

I blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Stand up. This will be fun. I promise." Her tone was eager, maternal and clumsy at once. "Ella taught me. We will shop for clothes. Pretty. You deserve pretty."

I laughed—small, incredulous. "Bone Woman, I'm not about to parade around in vintage couture. I can barely afford a decent bra lining, remember?"

She tilted her head like a child puzzling a lock. "I know. We use what you have. We make pretty from what is." Her hand hovered, palm up, patient. No pressure. "My friend and priestess, Eliza, you have a Loa in your corner. Allow me to share this with you? It's fun!"

I hesitated, then let out a tentative laugh. "I suppose."

Bone Woman's eyes brightened like she'd discovered treasure. "Excellent! Stand still. We begin." She gestured to the modest collection of second-best pieces I'd pulled out earlier. "We make you lovely, Eliza. Not for anyone else. For you. Promise of fun, yes?"

I raised an eyebrow, letting tension ease from my shoulders. "For me, huh? Alright. Let's see how 'fun' this is."

"Do these suit you? Spicier, milder? Lace, strings? Tiny triangles?"

I blinked at the mirrors, taking in the sudden silk elegance of my underthings. My cheeks warmed. "Lace is fine. Not too... stringy. Pretty, not scandalous."

Bone Woman nodded, tilting her skull as if calculating. "I made more for your drawer. Some satin, some cotton. Many colors. Some with ties, pretty-not-naughty. Ella likes 'little-bit-wicked' styles, she calls them. I provided you with two of those. But confidence rises with comfort. We layer, yes?"

Soft skirts and blouses lifted from the closet, hovering as she presented options. "Choose. We honor your taste. No rush. Your style, your power."

"Hold on, let me get my laptop. Half the fun is browsing!"

"The Internet is a goodness for shopping," Bone Woman agreed. "I am better. I don't break the bank."

I blinked at her, startled by the rapid-fire enthusiasm. "You actually know how to shop online?"

She nodded, the skull's jaw tilting in what I guessed was her version of a grin. "I learn fast. Better than your budget alone, I select what matches your energy, your spirit. You approve or deny. No waste, no fuss."

Skirts and blouses hovered closer, each more charming than the last. "Instant fashion," she said, "without the cramped, rushed dressing room panic. You see everything. Decide. Confidently."

I laughed again, breathless, feeling lighter than I had in days. "Okay... okay, show me. I'm trusting you."

Her pingpong eyes glimmered. "Good. Confidence rises. Power shows. Pretty is strength. Eliza is both."

\* \* \*

"Eliza, have fun?"

I hugged her. "So much. It's like a wallet full of platinum cards and Rodeo Drive, without the walking."

"Is good. Why do you shy away from things that make your heart beat faster? I'll never tell."

I chuckled, burying my face in her shoulder. "Because sometimes my heart beats too fast for comfort. And sometimes... I need someone to do the heavy lifting."

Bone Woman tilted her skull, considering. "I understand. But you deserve joy. Not just survival. We fill our hearts with sparks. No shame."

I pulled back a little, grinning despite myself. "Silk and lace can do that?"

She cocked her head, eyes bright. "Confidence. Choice. Play. Energy aligned. Heart lifted. You will see. No hurry. Bone Woman is here. We will have time to expand your wardrobe, grow happiness."

A pause. "Tomorrow, do not skip offerings. I understand why, but remember the promise. We love you, hotel and I. Same."

I let out a slow breath, letting the words settle. "Okay... I'll do my part."

Her skull bobbed once. "Good. I do mine. Little steps. We grow together."

A small warmth spread through my chest. Not joy, not relief—the faintest lift, enough to imagine tomorrow will be okay.

"Yes, yes. Enough magic for now. Fresh air, moving body, thoughts outside these walls. Go, darlin'. Let the world catch up to you."

I blinked at her, a small smile tugging at my mouth. "Right... okay. I'll go." I glanced in the mirror, overwhelmed by options. "What will I wear first?!"

\* \* \*

I strode through the twelfth-floor halls, nodding to the housekeepers I knew. Most either smiled weakly or looked through their carts. Sometimes a pair whispered together after I passed.

Damn, gossip gets around.

Near the floor's rear, Maria almost stumbled into me—one of the younger housekeepers. "Excuse me, Mr. Skotomerkis." She stepped aside but offered bottled water.

"Thanks. What's this for?"

"Well—" She flustered. "I'm certain the others don't have the full facts. Two sides to every story. You're decent enough for me. Just... wishing you good luck."

"Don't rely on everything you hear, Ms. Mendez."

"No, sir, I don't."

As I made my way down the stairs from twelve to eleven, I checked my phone again. No messages, no voicemail. Not from Liz, Yuri, anyone.

Still frozen out. Serving time for my crimes against intelligence and innocent hearts, who'd done nothing wrong.

One foot in front of the next. Trudging through my daily routine because it was easier than facing myself.

\* \* \*

I caught a brief chorus of "good mornings" as I traveled the hallway on twelve. Smiles, even a sympathetic squeeze of my arm from one of the older housekeepers. My stomach fluttered, half-pleased, half-uncomfortable.

The shift in my status among the housekeeping staff struck me as weird and extraordinary.

Gossip travels fast.

Then I saw her.

Maria Mendez, the new housekeeper, stood by the elevator with her mop bucket. She didn't smile or nod. Didn't greet me. She watched, eyes dark, jaw set—measuring me and finding me false.

The elevator doors slid open. I stepped in, hiding my nervousness. Just before they closed, I glanced back.

She was still staring.

I hated how much that dagger stare outweighed the other kindnesses. Worse, how little I'd done to deserve either.

\* \* \*

The bell stand smelled of brass polish and linseed oil. Gary leaned against it with a clipboard, checking notes on tomorrow's arrivals. Morgan breezed in from the street, umbrella dripping, boots clicking on tile. She shook herself like a cat, hung the umbrella, and sighed.

"Long day?" Gary asked.

"Longer for Eliza." Morgan's voice carried, even pitched low. "She looks like someone put her heart through a blender."

Gary's brows furrowed. "I thought better of him. Yuri adores him. But he really hurt Eliza. That's... not leadership."

Morgan set her hands on her hips. "I believed the worm was faultless." She gave a short, humorless laugh. "Careful, Ash. You might be divine, but even gods have reputations."

I froze mid-step—close enough to hear, too far to challenge without making it worse. Their words clung to me. I moved on, eyes on the floor, heart in the basement. The echo followed me into the empty back office, louder than any whisper.

Eliza wasn't the only one I'd disappointed. Only the most important personally.

\* \* \*

The phone buzzed. Magic swirled around the receiver—only one person did that. Hecate. My mother. I swallowed and answered.

"Ash." Her voice was cool, steady. That single word held the disappointment only a mother conjured.

I rubbed my forehead. "Mother, I—"

"Do you realize what you've done?"

The question hung like a blade. I sank into my chair, exhausted. "I lost my temper. I'll apologize."

"No." The word cracked like a whip. "This isn't about apologies. This is about trust. Trust reveals your true character. And the character of that poor woman you nearly shattered."

My chest tightened. "I didn't mean—"

"Temporary." Her voice dropped to a whisper that carried like a blade. "You called her temporary, Ash. A woman who came to you with genuine concerns, and you dismissed her as a tourist. And you stabbed her directly in her deepest insecurities, too."

The words hit like a physical blow. I can't hide anything from my mother.

"She was asking about Calida, about what I do, and I just—"

"You revealed exactly how little you think of her." A pause. I imagined her settling back in her seat. "She was brave enough to walk into your office despite her fears. Intelligent enough to sense something baleful at the show. She cared enough to fear your entanglement in sinister events. And you dismissed her."

"I was angry. She was questioning everything I—"

"She sought to understand you, you fool. She weighed the risk of trusting you with her heart." The disappointment in her voice was worse than any shouting match we'd ever had. "And instead of honoring that courage, you threw your bloodline in her face like it made you superior. Like her mortality made her lesser."

The silence on the line was heavier than shouting.

"I know you think the world will forgive you because you're Ash," she continued, her voice dropping to that dangerous whisper that used to terrify me as a child. "You're handsome and charming, so everyone lets you off the hook. But charm won't fix this, Ash. Not your money, or your family name, or even that smile you think solves everything."

"Then how?"

"Work. Honestly facing yourself—a first in your entire privileged life." She paused. When she spoke again, her tone grew almost protective. Not protective of me. Of Eliza. "That woman has more integrity in her little finger than you showed in that entire conversation. She cared enough to be vulnerable; you responded by making her feel tiny in your born-on-home-plate world."

My throat felt raw. "I know she matters."

"Do you? Because from where I'm sitting, it looks like you're wallowing in self-pity instead of facing what you actually did." Her voice's sharpness tore my excuses to pieces. "You made her feel like she was insufficient, Ash. Like she didn't belong. Like her human heart and mortal concerns were beneath your lofty life. You're a snob of the worst sort."

I closed my eyes, pressing the heel of my hand against my forehead. "She was questioning everything. Making it sound like I was hiding something sinister—"

"Because she sensed something wrong at that show and was worried about you getting mixed up in it!" The words exploded with rare maternal fury. "She was protecting you, you absolute fool. And instead of appreciating that someone cared enough to ask, you treated her like she was attacking you."

"What if I can't fix this?" The words came out smaller than I'd intended.

"Then you're not the son I raised. And she isn't who I thought." Something in her tone made my skin crawl—certainty. As if one future mattered. "I don't think either is true. I think you're scared, Ash. Scared that she saw something real in you, something worth caring about, and you panicked."

"Mother?"

"Fix this, Ash. Before it's too late. Before she decides you're not worth the risk." Her voice softened, but the steel remained. "Losing her isn't about a broken heart. It will *break you. Both of you.*"

The phone went dead, leaving me staring at the receiver with those words echoing.

Words that hurt worse than the whispers in the halls, worse than disappointed looks from colleagues, worse than anything.

Coming from an oracle, they weren't a warning.

They were a prediction.

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## 17 Anchor and Root

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I limped toward my suite, knee grumbling about the long day. The bag strap carved a groove in my shoulder.

Yuri waited at my door, human-formed tonight—slacks, blazer, dark shades masking her deadly gaze.

"He cuts deep, yes?" Not quite a question.

My throat closed. "Like glass."

"My daughter clawed at his eyes. I had to physically remove her from his desk." Yuri's mouth twitched. "She left scratch marks in the mahogany."

Despite everything, I almost smiled. "Go, Ella."

Yuri shifted her weight, angling toward me. "Don't mistake cruelty for strength, Eliza. He lashes out when he's cornered. That venom? It's his terror wearing a sharper suit."

I shook my head, vision blurring. "Doesn't make it hurt less."

"No." She glanced back toward the office wing, then returned her attention to me. "But the wound was his before it became yours. He's carrying ghosts on his back—centuries of them. Pushing you away feels safer than burying you."

Her voice dropped, softened but retained its edge. "I'm not excusing what he did. He fucked up spectacularly. But that wasn't cruelty talking. That was fear."

Her hand settled on my shoulder, warm and solid.

I swallowed, fury and grief tangled too tight to separate. "Yuri, I... can't process this tonight." I fumbled for the door handle. "But thank you. For coming. Mom."

She nodded once. "Then rest. We'll still be here tomorrow."

Inside, the suite pressed in around me—silent, too empty. But Yuri's words burrowed under my skin anyway, persistent as splinters.

\* \* \*

The following evening, the lobby hummed with arriving guests. Music drifted up from the nightclub below, muffled and rhythmic. I stuck to the service corridors, mapping routes that avoided his usual paths.

I'd miscalculated.

The service elevator groaned open, and there he stood—Ash, leaning against the frame like he'd been waiting. Not his usual knife-edge perfection tonight. Sleeves rolled to his elbows, hair falling loose across his forehead.

We stared at each other. Yesterday's wreckage sat between us, occupying space like a third person.

"Liz." His voice came out flat, stripped of its usual polish. Not the velvet purr he used on guests, not the defensive snarl he'd turned on me. Just my name, spoken like he was testing whether I'd let him say it.

I stayed put. "They need you in the lobby. Peak hour."

"I know." He exhaled through his nose, rubbing the back of his neck. "I just... needed to catch you first."

I raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

His gaze slid away, then back. "Because I've been replaying every word. And I can't take them back. But—" His throat worked. "I injured you, and I was wrong. You didn't deserve that."

The honesty disarmed me. No performance, no manipulation. Raw truth.

I crossed my arms, clinging to the last threads of my anger. They kept slipping through my fingers. "Words are cheap, Ash. Yours especially."

"I know." His mouth curved—not quite a smile, more like he'd tasted something bitter. "I shattered your trust. I'll work to earn it back. I don't expect you to hand it over tonight."

That caught me off guard. Humility looked foreign on him, awkward and sincere.

Something shifted in my chest. Not forgiveness—not yet. But the world tilted, gravity adjusting by a single degree.

"Night, Ash," I said, softer than I'd intended. I brushed past him toward the hall.

Behind me, I heard him exhale—the sound of someone who prays they haven't destroyed everything.

\* \* \*

I wasn't ready to teleport people yet.

But I studied the far corner of my suite anyway, measuring the distance. Ten or twelve steps. My pulse hammered despite the absurdly short range. I move objects three times this size without breaking a sweat. Just not... people. Not me.

Choose not to fear. I was already trembling. "Safety first," I muttered, reciting my mantra back to myself. Not that it stopped me.

The air thickened as I reached for it. Shadows stretched like taffy, elastic and wrong. The far corner warped toward me, too eager. The floor vanished.

The world flipped inside-out. Light and dark swapped places like a card trick gone bad. I existed nowhere. I existed between.

Pressure crushed my ribcage. Something sharp—threads? fishing line?—sliced across my skin. My heart slammed against my sternum. My stomach lurched sideways. Panic flooded every nerve.

Too far. Too fast.

*Child, **Release it!***

Bone Woman's voice detonated inside my skull, rattling my teeth. Her presence—not quite a hand, more like a force of will—grabbed me before reality collapsed into void. She yanked harder than gravity, harder than physics.

I crashed onto my knees, retching bile onto the carpet. Fibers bit into my palms, real and rough and solid. My body shook, sweat cold down my spine.

The room remained intact. Whole. But the echo of that in-between space clung to my skin like cobwebs.

I curled into myself, clutching my ribs, gasping between sobs.

*You almost tore yourself apart, she whispered, her voice a lullaby made of rattling bones. You must have my supervision. Do you yield?*

"Yes," I choked out. "Yes, I yield."

Her warmth coiled through my chest, steadying my racing pulse. *Then breathe. Live. Cry if you must. I will catch you, my priestess. But let me show you how before next you tempt the darkness.*

I pressed my face into the couch cushion, heart still hammering, relief and terror bleeding into hot, messy tears.

"I'm sorry."

*My brave, glorious priestess. Already so much more than you were. I am proud of your progress, even when you stumble—you do it with such spectacular Eliza flair.*

\*\*\*

I wasn't lurking. I was passing by. That's what I told myself, anyway.

The lobby stretched empty in the late hour, fluorescent bulbs casting their sickly wash across worn marble. The skeleton crew had retreated to their stations, leaving me alone with my footsteps and the weight of everything unsaid.

His office door stood ajar, warm light spilling into the corridor. I should have walked away. My room, tea, a book—better options, all of them. I wish I'd chosen any of them instead of standing there with a hollow ache gnawing at my chest.

Then his phone rang.

The sound sliced through the still, sharp and commanding. Not the usual hotel line—this was different. Personal.

I don't know why I stopped. Curiosity? Spite? Or I wanted the petty satisfaction of eavesdropping on his latest crisis.

I pressed myself against the wall and froze when I heard his voice—soft, careful, stripped of its usual confidence.

"Mother."

The single word hit like ice water. Mother? As in Hecate, the goddess?

The idea of someone divine carrying Ash as an infant, fretting over scraped knees and lost teeth—it was too bizarre. Too impossible. I'd never processed it completely.

Her voice crackled through despite the static. Low and deliberate, carrying spine-straightening authority.

"Ash. I have observed the aftermath of your... conversation."

This wasn't anyone's soccer mom. This was judgment given form, scales sliding across marble. Each syllable landed with the weight of carved stone. I held my breath.

He began responding—defensive, rushed—but she continued as if he hadn't spoken. She didn't raise her voice. She didn't need to.

"Careless," she said, and the word hung in the air like smoke. "Reckless. You crushed someone important. Your thoughtlessness threatens more than your pride."

Important? Heat flooded my cheeks. She meant me. But how did I matter to someone whose disappointment reshaped mountains?

I pressed harder against the wall, staring at that sliver of light as if it might turn transparent and reveal the scene within. My hands trembled against the cool plaster.

"The woman you disregarded matters to you more than you admit." His mother's words were sharp and deliberate. "She is not some passing fancy to discard when inconvenient. Do you understand what you've jeopardized?"

The pause stretched taut as a bowstring. I pictured him—shoulders rigid, jaw clenched, running a hand through his dark hair. The same gesture he made when the hotel's ancient boiler rebelled.

"You think apologies will suffice?" Her laugh was the winter wind through bare branches. "You've threatened trust, Ash. Not merely hers, but the trust of everyone who relies on you within those walls. Your negligence creates ripples you cannot see."

Trust. The word lodged in my throat like a stone. Everything he'd torn from me. Not faith in him, but in myself, in my judgment, in the fragile sense of belonging I'd built brick by careful brick.

When he finally spoke, his voice sounded ground down, worn thin. "I know. I lost my temper."

"Lost your temper?" Her tone alone threatened to freeze the lobby's heating system. "You revealed your true feelings about mortals. About her specifically. You called her temporary, son. Do you grasp the implications?"

His cruel dismissal echoed again. I wrapped my arms around myself, cold despite my cardigan.

"She is not temporary," his mother said, and something in her voice made my pulse stutter. "Her thread runs deep through the pattern of this place, through your own future. If you sever it through pride and fear, the consequences will be catastrophic."

Catastrophic. The word settled in my bones like lead. *What did she mean?*

"Understand this clearly," she continued, and I swear the temperature dropped ten degrees, my breath misting. "If you cannot repair what your carelessness has broken, we will need to find a night manager capable of more than raw power and inherited charm. Someone with discernment. Empathy. Judgment."

The threat landed like a physical blow. Replace him? Would she do that? Strip away everything he was, everything this hotel meant to him? The Elysium Gate wasn't just his job—it defined him, gave shape to his existence.

And by extension, mine too. These marble halls, the eccentric residents, the strange found family I'd stumbled into—did it crumble if Ash fell?

"The stakes extend beyond your personal discomfort," his mother said, as if she could hear my racing thoughts. "This hotel serves as a sanctuary for those with nowhere else to turn. Morgan, weaving her spells. The bone woman, learning to become. Ella, navigating her gifts."

Each name added weight to the scale, a reminder of how many lives balanced on Ash's ability to hold this place together.

"And her," she continued, her voice softening fractionally. "Eliza, who has found purpose here, who brings balance to your shadows. She is not an obstacle to overcome, Ash. She is an anchor. A heart root. One you nearly severed through foolish fear."

"Anchors drag you down as often as they hold you steady," Ash said, too sharp, before smoothing his voice again.

"Nonsense." The word cracked like a whip. "Your thoughtlessness threatens this entire family. I grant you an opportunity to prove your worth, but it requires clarity, honesty, humility. These are not suggestions, son. They are necessities."

I held my breath until my lungs ached, palms damp with nervous sweat. Part of me wanted to laugh at the absurdity—here I was, eavesdropping on a cosmic scolding. But nothing about this was funny. It felt like tectonic plates shifting beneath my feet, guided by forces beyond my comprehension.

A wild thought surfaced: *she knew I was here*. She'd *arranged* for me to overhear this. She'd crafted this conversation for me as much as for Ash.

"I understand," he said finally, his voice tight as a wire about to snap.

"Do you?" she asked. "Understanding is not acceptance. They exist worlds apart. You must choose, Ash. Will you let your fear destroy what matters most? Or will you find the courage to become worthy of the trust you've received?"

A pause, heavy with implications I didn't quite grasp.

"Do not disappoint me, son. And more importantly, do not disappoint yourself. The consequences of failure extend far beyond your personal discomfort. Everyone you care about, everyone who depends on this sanctuary, will suffer for your choices. Choose carefully." Her voice softened. "I assure you, Eliza is worth every effort. Your entire future hangs from her thread."

The line clicked dead with finality.

Silence flooded back, thick and oppressive. Neither of us moved—him in his office, me pressed against the wall like a guilty child. My heart hammered so loudly I was certain he would hear it through the door.

The floorboards creaked as he shifted. I pictured him there, head in his hands, Hecate's words pressing down on both our shoulders.

He spoke then, rough and small: "Liz..."

He knew I was there.

I pressed my forehead to the cool plaster and didn't move. I wasn't furious anymore. I was terrified—because his failure, born from fear, meant the collapse of everything we'd built.

That thought landed harder than any insult.

It scared me worse than the hurt ever did.

\* \* \*

I dressed vintage—one of Bone Woman's handmade Victorian lace tops, or a convincing reproduction; I lacked the expertise to judge. Long gray skirts swirled around my legs, and I crowned it all with the gorgeous French heels from my priestess attire. It felt decadent to dress up just for myself. The click of heels on pavement, the brush of sun-warmed lace—small luxuries that transformed my walk to the Riverwalk into a ceremony.

Priestess. Everything becomes a ceremony, even which clothing I choose. I smiled to myself, feeling the edges of that title, fitting it to the shape of Liz—the simple basketball player with the wonky knee and bony elbows. Sometimes the title felt tailor made for me. More often, ridiculous.

At the gazebo, I let the river's steady calm soak into me. Sunshine and water made the world feel simple, bright enough to face the darker tangle waiting behind my eyelids.

Hecate had a plan. Of course she did; oracles planned lifetimes ahead. But the more I turned it over, the more it reeked of manipulation: push Ash until he cracked

or shone, risk my family, my job, my witchy lessons, my livelihood. For what? Her promise framed it as "for my good." What did that even mean? Fuggin oracles.

And Ash... his sincerity had filed down my rage, but the sting hadn't faded. I still heard it—the way he'd tossed truth like a blade, leaving me to bleed while he walked away as if brutal honesty excused everything. I wasn't ready to forgive him. But I refused to torch everything I'd built in this strange new life.

So I sat there—skirts gathered, heels dangling, river glinting—and asked what no goddess or demigod had yet bothered with: what did *Eliza* want?

What I wanted, I decided, was to speak with my old friend Ash. I tested the idea, poked it to make sure it didn't hurt too much. On my terms. My rules. Cage the rage. But—so help me—I missed him. Despite the anger, I needed him.

I pulled out my phone and typed before I could second-guess myself.

*We need to talk. My rules. Tomorrow, Perkatory.*

I hit send. A shiver went through me, half dread, half relief. My pulse thudded in my ears, but underneath it beat something steadier: satisfaction.

I'd set the rules. His move.

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# 18 Terms and Conditions

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Sally set the water glass down with a soft clink, followed by a scone that left buttery fingerprints on the white plate. The air hung thick with roasted coffee and fried dough, and though the smells promised comfort, they failed to settle the knot in my stomach. Neon signs buzzed in the corners, casting pink and blue shadows across faded linoleum. The bell above the door chimed with every entrance and exit.

"Jesus, where did you get that dress?!"

I ran my palm over the lace at my hip, grinning despite myself. "Little old woman gave it to me. Isn't it pretty?"

Sally planted one hand on her aproned hip. "Honey, if your boss doesn't show up in five minutes, I'm calling the cops for your protection. The animals here devour pretty morsels like you." She jerked her thumb at a corner booth where three men nursed beers at ten in the morning. "I'll stand guard for a bit. My harsh glares and rude demeanor intimidate them."

Warmth bloomed behind my ribs—unexpected, fierce. Though she barely knew me, this woman was prepared for defense. "You're a treasure, Sally." I tucked a ten-dollar bill under the scone plate. "But here he comes. Please make sure we're left alone?"

Sally followed my gaze to the door where Ash stood silhouetted against the morning light, then nodded. Her bun bounced as she turned away, silver coffee pot already tilted toward another table. The soft clank of porcelain filled the space between us.

Ash's smile reached his eyes when he saw the dress. "May I join you, Duchess Eliza?"

The teasing tone should've irritated me. Instead, I caught myself almost—almost—smiling back. I crushed the impulse. Not the time. Not after everything.

"Sit down, Ash. None of that. We're here for answers. There are rules."

He slid into the booth, hands visible on the table. No dramatics, no shadow tricks. "I wasn't...never mind. Go ahead. What are your terms?"

I pressed my palms flat against my thighs, feeling the lace tighten at my wrists. "We didn't finish last time. One rule, but it's ironclad. Break it, and I walk." I met his eyes, held them. "You keep your temper, keep your hands to yourself, you answer. Completely. No riddles. No deflections."

His smile flickered like a candle in a draft, then stilled.

"You understand?"

He dropped his chin to his chest, shoulders rising with a slow breath. When he looked up, something raw flickered across his face before vanishing. "More than I deserve. Ask."

"Explain the flowers at the Hekateion."

His voice dropped low enough that I had to lean forward. "Flowers are for my mother. She likes red." He traced an invisible pattern on the table with one finger. "The semi-ritual at the Hekateion is simple respect, and the offering is to bless the crossroads the hotel sits on."

My throat tightened. I'd avoided the morning ritual for days, too angry to face it. "I've been remiss on my end of the morning ritual. I will resume it."

Ash said nothing, but his hands trembled against the tabletop. He knew why I'd gone missing. His cruelty and fear had driven me away.

The path of retaliation stretched before me, wide and inviting. A part of me ached to twist the knife, to make him hurt the way I'd hurt.

I picked up my water glass instead.

I said, "I'm going to attempt a different tack. Are any aspects of your powers or motivations evil, Ash?" *Moment of truth. Will he lash out or face it?*

He drew a slow breath, fingers stilling against the Formica. "I won't lie. But the answer is complex; please understand that I'm not attempting evasion."

I waited, scone untouched on my plate.

"I have a set of powers, most of which involve shadow; therefore, dark." He glanced at the window, where morning light struggled through grimy glass. "In the eyes of Iron Age peasants, dark equals evil. To them, the terms were synonymous."

Cold crawled up my spine, vertebra by vertebra. I clutched the scone, its weight barely enough to anchor me. "And to you?"

"Benign." The word came fast, certain. "I use darkness as a tool. Shadows, minor illusions, night vision in the blackest places—there's nothing malevolent about them."

I leaned forward, sunlight catching the lace at my wrists and throwing delicate patterns across the table. "So, walking in the shadows, creating illusions, seeing through shadow... all safe. Got it." I paused, watching his face. "And there's more?"

His fingers found the edge of the table, white-knuckled. "Dreams. Entering dreams." He swallowed. "That depends entirely on the intent. The power itself is neutral; the use or misuse defines its ethics."

My exhale shook. "Intent. That's the trick, isn't it?"

Even in Perkatory's shabby morning calm, I felt danger's edges pressing in—not from him, but from the knowledge itself. The risk of harm exists if he chooses to inflict it.

"I haven't—before you even ask." His voice dropped again, a whisper. "I've never entered your dreams or anyone else's at the hotel. Haven't used the ability for centuries, in fact." He finally met my eyes again. "A fact that demands trust, coming from a man who shattered yours. But it's all I have. I wish I had more to offer."

I studied him. The slight tremor in his hands. The rigid set of his shoulders, like he was bracing for a blow. Words and promises floated between us, fragile as soap bubbles in sunlight. Part of me wanted to trust him. A smaller, wiser part remembered the fragility of trust.

He waited, palms up on the table. Open posture. Relaxed breathing.

Evidence or acting? I couldn't tell.

"You forgot psychopomps."

"Not a power, not really." He shook his head. "For me, sensing the dead's as natural as breathing. I was born with it."

"They come to you," I pressed, leaning forward. "And then?"

He met my gaze without flinching. "They move on when they're ready. I guide them as best I can, offer what comfort I have. No tricks, no coercion. No magic at all. I *am there* for them.

Gary had that same steadiness. You feel safe; he's there to catch you, no matter what. Across the table, Ash echoed that same quiet comfort.

Relief settled into my chest like a warm stone. He was following the rules. He was being honest. I heard it in his steady voice, saw it in the way he didn't look away.

"No boat, no pennies?"

Ash laughed—genuine laughter, the kind that crinkled the corners of his eyes. "Dad's schtick. We keep tour offices in the Honey Island Swamp, east of New Orleans, in Slidell." He gestured toward the river. "Some of the dead we take there, in the hotel van... The tour boat takes them into the swamp. When the dead cross over, they're on the River Styx with Dad."

He paused, studying my face. "But showmanship's not strictly necessary. Any psychopomp helps ghosts cross over wherever they are." Another pause. "You're more than qualified to learn it, Liz. Only if you wanted to, of course."

My stomach did a little flip. Ghosts. Lingered dead. The word conjured images of cold spots and whispered voices—not terrifying, but unsettling. Like finding a stranger's handwriting in your own journal. "Uh...thanks, I think?"

Ash's smile turned knowing. "You don't have to. You see them and you have empathy in spades. Sign up today with a full-ride scholarship!"

I exhaled through my nose, forcing a wry smile. "Option noted. Preferably...from a distance."

"You smiled." His voice went soft, wonder threading through it.

Heat crept up my neck. I focused on my folded hands, the way lace patterns pressed against my palms. "Enough of that. Back to the rules." I looked up, catching his eyes. "I need to know your limits, Ash. Anything you can't do with shadow? What actions cross a line, even for you?"

He nodded, exhaling. "No evasions. I have a flippant answer...no, I'm biting it back. I promised." His jaw worked for a moment. "I've defended myself with blades and knives in desperate situations a time or two. I've killed men who needed killing—killed, not murdered. That's the limit of the violence."

Sunlight warmed the backs of my hands. I watched his face—grim, serious, not a trace of the easy charm he deflected with. He meant every word.

"Things that cross a line..." His voice dropped lower, pulling me toward him. "I can get inside their dreams—unravel their minds. Alter their dreams to sway them, change their thoughts, even..." He swallowed. "Twisting emotions. Love potions. Mind control. But that takes long-term psychic torture. That's a line I've never crossed, and I won't start now."

I let his words settle with a simple nod. The knowledge unnerved me—the sheer scope of damage a corrupted god could do. But it shone through Ash clear and honest, like looking through clean glass. Rules followed. Limits declared.

For the first time since sitting down, the tight coil in my chest loosened.

I let my hands rest in my lap, fingers no longer digging into lace. "That's enough for now. We'll save the rest for another night—perhaps with popcorn."

A faint smile tugged at his lips. "I'll hold you to that."

My hands, needing something to do, reached for the water glass. "That concludes my questions. For now."

"Eliza?" He tilted his head, studying me. "That gown is beautiful. It fits you perfectly, made for you."

"It was." I smiled, holding my hand palm-down about four and a half feet off the ground.

"I see." His shoulders dipped inward, like he was folding around something painful. Some stray, sad thought flickered across his face before he hid it. "Enjoy your shift."

"Ash?"

"Mmm?"

"I appreciate your honesty. And just...being here. I know it was difficult. We both have a lot to consider."

I wasn't ready to forgive. Not yet. But I was ready to listen.

That was enough.

\* \* \*

The ballroom throbbed. Bass rattled my ribcage, and flashing phone lights bounced off mirrored walls like a disco ball on steroids. A large group of teens and twenty-somethings created a huge buzz. They took many selfies, filmed videos, and clutched their merchandise as if it were priceless.

Calida, like a queen, sat on the stage. As she signed autographs and laughed, her charm filled the entire room.

From the balcony, I spotted Ella.

Wide-eyed, transfixed. Clinging to Calida's every gesture like gospel.

Her friends hovered nearby, equally star-struck, phones pointed like tiny searchlights at their idol.

My pulse hit the ceiling. I fumbled for my phone, fingers clumsy with adrenaline.

*Ballroom, come right away.*

A ripple of shadow detached from the balcony rail beside me, coalescing into Ash's solid form. His eyes scanned the room, calculating distances, angles, escape routes.

I leaned close to be audible over the music. "There. Near the stage. Blue shirt."

"The crowd's thick." His breath stirred my hair. "Back corridor or service stairwell?"

I nodded toward the darkened corner where velvet curtains pooled on the floor. "I'll guide Ella's friends away first. Softly. No panic."

Ash melted back into shadow, leaving only a faint gray shimmer where he'd stood. My heart hammered as I moved closer to Ella's circle, forcing my voice into something casual and friendly. "Hey, come on—remember that plan we talked about earlier? Don't miss it."

The girls giggled, uncertain. I kept talking, kept smiling, tugging them away like pulling petals from a flower.

Behind the stage, shadows flickered. Ash worked in the darkness, thin black barriers forming to obscure sightlines. A floating shard of shadow blocked Calida's peripheral vision just as she glanced in our direction—her gaze moved on.

The crowd surged. Music thumped. Lights flashed. Phones everywhere, capturing everything and nothing.

Perfect cover.

Ella never took her gaze off Calida. She squealed at every autograph, leaned forward, and clutched her merch like a talisman against reality.

"Come on, Ella." I kept my voice soft, non-threatening. "Let's step out for a sec."

"Calida!" She breathed the name like a prayer.

"I know. It'll only take a minute."

A shadow blocked the nearest camera flash. Ash's fingers twitched, creating a subtle illusion along the railing—nothing obvious, but enough visual noise to confuse the eye. Ella blinked, disoriented. I seized the moment, linking arms with her.

She hesitated, torn between devotion and logic.

Then—

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Wes.

He crouched near a velvet rope, phone in hand, snapping discreet photos, jotting notes in a small notebook. His expression gave nothing away, but his presence made my chest tighten. If Calida noticed him, if she realized he was documenting everything—

And yet. Somehow. I trusted him.

"Path clear," Ash murmured in my ear. "Stairwell two o'clock."

I nudged Ella forward. "Follow me."

Wes drifted closer, close enough that his voice reached me under the music. "I'll keep her eyes busy. You move the girl."

The teens shifted, flowing toward the edges of the ballroom like water finding new channels. Natural. Unforced. Creating the diversion we needed.

Ella's friends glanced at her, nodded, eased back. Letting us pass.

I whispered reassurances. Ella's shoulders sagged, tension bleeding out.

A group of cameras pivoted. One bright phone beam swept toward us, harsh and revealing.

Ash's eyes flickered. Shadows shifted across the floor, subtle as smoke. The beam landed on a glinting cocktail tray instead, reflecting light back into the cameraman's face. He swore, lowered the phone, rubbed his eyes.

The light spun away.

Wes stepped up without breaking stride. A water bottle—as if dropped by accident—slid across the floor, spilled, rolled toward a cluster of teen influencers. Squeals erupted. Heads turned. Attention scattered.

He caught my eye and pointed: *Go. I've got this.*

Then he vanished into the crowd before anyone reacted.

We moved like whispers through the chaos. Ducking behind curtains, slipping between pillars. The thrum of music faded, the flash of phones dimmed. And the

scents of perfume and popcorn gave way to the hotel's familiar floor-cleaner neutrality.

Ella stumbled once, overwhelmed. I steadied her, fingers tight on her elbow. "It's okay. You're safe. A few more steps."

Ash's shadow formed a thin, opaque wall along the far corridor. Just for a second, enough to block Calida's line of sight as she turned on stage. Each step synchronized. My voice guiding, Ash's subtle manipulation obscuring.

Ella's eyes flicked between us, comprehension dawning. We weren't here to punish her.

We were a rescue team.

The stairwell loomed ahead—dim, ordinary, and empty. The ballroom chaos receded behind us like a nightmare fading in the morning light.

Ella exhaled, tension leaving her body in small, shivering bursts.

"See?" I whispered. "Nothing to be afraid of. We had to step away."

Ash finally relaxed. The shadow dissipated from the hallway wall, bleeding back into natural darkness. His gaze flicked to me—brief, acknowledging. Teamwork.

From the balcony, unseen, Wes scribbled another note. Snapped one last discreet photo. I couldn't see him, but I felt his presence like a warm hand between my shoulder blades. Protective. Deliberate.

He saved us from detection, and without his help, everything would have been ruined.

I squeezed Ella's hand. She was pale but smiling, color returning to her cheeks. "We'll get you home before anyone notices."

She nodded, still half in awe, half relieved.

Ash trailed behind us, eyes alert, ready to intervene if the shadows failed. But the music, the lights, the crowd—they remained oblivious to our silent extraction.

Calida owned the stage. We owned the shadows.

Safe. For now.

But the event's energy still pulsed behind us, vibrating through the walls. A reminder: this wasn't over. Calida would return, stronger and smarter.

But together, Ash and I had saved Ella without leaving a trace.

That minor victory—silent and precise—felt like a war won.

\* \* \*

Once we'd cleared the corridor, I turned to Ella, gripping her shoulders. Her strange eyes met mine—still glassy with infatuation, but clearing.

"Listen—what happened back there? That woman, Calida..." I searched for words that wouldn't sound preachy. "You can't trust her. She's clever, but she uses people."

Flattery, attention, everything you love about the spotlight—she weaponized it to get whatever she wanted.”

Ella blinked. "I... I didn't realize..."

"You did fine." I softened my grip. "But you need to remember: charm isn't the same as kindness. Got it?"

She nodded, gaze flicking to Ash. Something in her look went razor-bright for a heartbeat—*snikt*. Someone had made Ella's list, and she remembered.

"Oh, I'll *definitely* remember that," she said sweetly.

Ash's eyebrow lifted.

*Whups.*

"But Euryale's almost here," I blurted. "We've got to go."

I turned back to Ella, forcing a smile. "Go meet your mother. Stay safe. We were never here, right?"

She mimed zipping her lips, then disappeared around the corner.

\* \* \*

Gary rose from our breakfast table like a mountain gaining sentience. "Excuse me, young man. Wes, isn't it?"

Wes looked up from his coffee. And up. And up.

I hid my grin behind my teacup as Gary shifted into full genial-host mode, one massive hand gesturing toward our table. "My family and friends, right over there..."

We all smiled and waved like accomplices in a magic trick. Ella vibrated out of her seat. Yuri controlled the room without moving a muscle. Ash raised his glass with casual grace. Morgan tipped her head like a cat sizing up prey.

"...we'd love to have you both join us." Gary's voice rumbled through the dining room. "Breakfast is on us. Plenty of room."

Amélie, sitting across from Wes, gave a polite, careful smile. Wes hesitated a heartbeat too long before standing.

I noticed it. He noticed me noticing.

Introductions flowed. Yuri shook hands with authority. Morgan made a wisecrack that pulled a genuine laugh from Amélie. Ella burst out, "I don't believe you're here!" before Gary shushed her with a look.

Ash's "Good to see you again, Wes" was silky smooth. Ambiguous enough to make the man pause.

We settled in. Food ordered. Chatter bubbled. Ella rapidly asked lots of questions about Amélie's video series. Amélie was patient and gracious as she answered them.

Wes leaned back, letting her take center stage. But I caught him sneaking looks at us—Ash, Ella, and me. Recognition flashed in his eyes.

Gary kept the conversation light. "So, you two met at one of Calida's events?"

"Work," Wes said, clipped. Then, softer: "Mostly work. Amélie doesn't need me to make introductions. She shines on her own."

Not flattery. Pride.

It almost made me like him.

Almost.

I stared at Amélie's skin—flawless, smooth, undisturbed like a still lake. Whatever skincare regimen she followed deserved study. Mental note: find *Amélie's Art* on YouTube. Subscribe.

The plates arrived. Ella dove into pancakes. Morgan teased her about powdered sugar everywhere. Yuri smoothed it into a family anecdote, gentle and fond.

It felt like any Sunday breakfast.

Almost.

Wes set his fork down, looking around the table at Ella's unfiltered joy. Ash's steady charm. Gary and Yuri's simple family rhythms. At me.

"This is... different," he said finally.

Gary tilted his head, curious. "Different how?"

Wes gestured at us. "Feels like family. On the road, I rarely get... this. Not even jobs where people feign camaraderie."

Yuri gave him a serene smile. "That's the idea. A hotel only works when the staff knows each other's rhythms. Guests feel it, even if they can't explain why."

Wes nodded, but his gaze drifted back to Ash. "I swear we've crossed paths more than once."

Ash didn't blink. "I get that a lot. I tote extension cords and schlep drinks for you glamorous showbiz types."

Everyone laughed. Everyone except Wes. His gaze stayed steady, searching.

He wasn't accusing us. He was testing the waters.

Morgan cut in, dry as desert sand. "Observant guy. Observant people are useful, so long as they don't hoard what they see."

Wes smirked. "Depends on who's listening."

Ella, oblivious to the undercurrent, burst out: "Well, I'm listening! And I love Amélie's music—tell me how you two started; was it fate or what?"

The tension dissolved into laughter again. But I kept watching Wes. The way he leaned in. The way he measured the pace of our chatter, soaking in how we worked as a unit.

He wasn't shutting down. He wasn't escaping.

He was weighing us. The same way he must've weighed Amélie before bringing her into his circle.

And I thought: He wants to talk. He needs to be sure we'll hear him right.

Ash leaned back, smooth as ever, catching Wes's eye. "Visit me at my office. Anything you or the Experience needs during your stay, I'll be happy to take care of you friendly folks." Polite. Professional. Like he'd rehearsed it in a mirror.

Or for over a hundred years.

Wes chuckled, half-relieved, half-intrigued. Amélie smiled, relaxing.

I caught Ella's glance flicking between Ash and me, bright with mischief. She'd seen it—the tiniest crack in the ice between us.

I pretended not to notice, buttering a roll with more focus than it required.

\* \* \*

"Bone Woman? Are you there?"

*I am here, Eliza. Why are you nervous?*

"None of your business." I muttered it to the empty room, fingers stroking the small packet in my hand. Microwave popcorn. A hand-signed tag: Ash. "I was wondering...how do I reach the roof?"

*Manager key, Ash. Or security key, Gary.*

"What if I...desired secrecy?"

*Your heart is beating racing. A pause, weighted with amusement. I will take you, my priestess.*

I pulled my priestess cloak from the closet—the one with Bone Woman's embroidered veve. Rooftops were cold and windy. I needed both warmth and armor.

"Will you take me now, Loa? It will only take a second."

*Pop.*

She materialized, skeletal claw extending toward me. *Is Liz embarrassed? I learn, fluttery feeling, warm cheeks.* Another pause. *I am sorry, my priestess, I will not tease. Are you ready?*

I gulped. Nodded.

*Pop.*

Cold wind whipped my hair, stealing my breath. The city sprawled below, all lights and shadows and distant sirens. I set the popcorn packet in front of the roof access door, weighing it down with a small stone.

Ash sees in the dark. He could not miss it.

"Ready?"

"Yes, thank you."

*Pop.*

\* \* \*

Later, I slipped into practical, silky lounging pajamas, poured a glass of wine, and stared at my phone.

My hand trembled as I typed.

*Present for you on the roof.*

I paused. Deleted. Retyped.

*Present for you on the roof. What's at the finish line? Don't worry, I'll go easy on you.*

I hit send before I second-guessed myself.

Then I settled back against my pillows, scrolling through the movie listings, heart racing.

A simple invitation: a movie and company, nothing more. My own quiet terms. Still, I hoped.

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# 19 Morning Glory

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I jolted awake, heart hammering against my ribs. The alarm's shrill buzz drilled into my ears—except I'd heard it first in the dream, three seconds before it went off. My skin prickled with goosebumps that had nothing to do with the temperature.

Not the full prophecy. Not that three-star oracular catastrophe I'd shoved into a mental drawer weeks ago. This was lighter. A preview reel my subconscious had queued up. Precognition lite—useful without being intrusive, informing without spoiling the surprise.

The questions tumbled anyway: Could I change what I saw? What if it misfired? What if knowing twisted the outcome sideways?

I didn't want to waste a lifetime chasing those answers.

Record the phenomenon. Table it for later. Future Liz will handle the philosophy. Coffee first.

I shuffled into the kitchen, my robe's sleeve catching the edge of a mug. It tipped. My hand was already there, fingers closing around ceramic before my brain registered the fall. Not reflex—knowing. My body had moved on information my conscious mind hadn't processed yet.

I stood there holding the mug, grinning like an idiot. This wasn't just prophecy. This was proprioception dialed up to eleven, my witch's senses smoothing out life's minor catastrophes before I even knew they were coming.

That's a *genuine* gift.

While the Keurig burbled and hissed, I became acutely aware of everything touching my skin. The apartment's AC chilled my left arm. Sunlight through the window warmed my right. My body was a battlefield of microclimates, each sensation distinct and electric. A stray breeze made my nipples tighten.

I laughed, delighted by the absurdity of it.

The robe vanished with a thought. I drifted upward into the column of morning light—simple naughtiness, greeting the day the way nature intended. Warmth above, coolness below, air currents spiraling across my bare skin. Every muscle shift, every joint angle sang through me in perfect clarity.

I rotated like a rotisserie chicken, then tipped into a lazy three-axis tumble. Sun on my face. Sun on my thighs. Frequent sunning this way will deliver a perfect tan, flawless and free of tan lines.

*This. Is. intoxicating.*

The sheer ridiculousness of it — so self-indulgent, so indecent — sent me into giggles. I lived in the manic high, knowing it wouldn't last, but feeling too good to care.

The Keurig's final gurgle returned my soaring soul to earth. I heard everything. I noticed the water trickling through the grounds, the plastic ticking, and the steam hissing against the cup. I drifted lower, still glowing, still nude in the sunshine, letting ordinary sounds anchor me back to reality.

The coffee finished itself. Cup floating up, teaspoon clinking in sugar, the smell hitting me before taste did. That first sip made me shiver—bitter, sweet, roasted, alive. My senses dialed up to eleven, amplifying every note.

"I cannot *wait* for the laundry to fold itself!"

I hovered cross-legged in mid-air, stretching my back while balancing coffee with care in both hands as sunlight warmed my shoulders. "It's good to be a witch," I whispered, then burst out laughing.

Today felt like my seventh birthday again. My favorite, the one with the pony rides!

\* \* \*

"Ash? Visitor at the front desk. Says he's with the show—Wes Ripley?"

Ash looked up from the invoices, sunlight through the blinds striping the papers in shadow. His office felt smaller than usual. Modest but solid, like everything else about the family business.

"Send him over, Nora. Thank you."

He allowed himself a faint smile while straightening the papers. This ought to be fun.

The knock came moments later. Slow, deliberate tempo. Unhurried. Cautious.

"Come in. Wes!" Ash rose, extending his hand with practiced warmth. "Good to see you. What can I do for you?"

Wes settled into the chair but stayed upright, alert. Nice suit. A step up from last time. Promotion, then. "Morning, Ash. Came by to share some news. Calida's signed a short-term lease on your ballroom. Daily shows."

Ash's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly as he sat back down. The leather squeaked under his weight. See? Hotel management is "fun." *Start each morning with a fresh pain in the ass.* He picked up a pen, rolled it between his fingers. "That's an odd venue choice for her, isn't it?"

"The influencers are doing their job, and the money's rolling in." Wes leaned forward, voice dropping. "Nothing makes her happier than cash."

Ash studied his face, searching for tells. Neutral expression, but the weariness showed in his eyes. "Not even the cameras and adoration?"

"Close second," Wes admitted. His fingers drummed once against his knee before he caught himself. "Her narcissism is getting worse with the show upgrades. More toxic every day."

Ash leaned back. The chair springs creaked in the sudden still. He looked over steepled fingers. "You don't like her much."

Wes's laugh came out bitter and hollow. "Understatement." He glanced toward the door, then back. "There are... improprieties. I'm covering my own ass at this point. Feels like the Sword of Damocles is already hanging over her head. My goal is keeping Amélie and myself clear of the blood splatter when it falls."

The honesty surprised Ash. Either Wes was a consummate actor, or desperation was making him reckless. "Not very discreet about it."

"I remember you pulling an underage girl out of Calida's last event. Imagine my surprise at finding her at breakfast—yours and mine." Wes held his gaze. "I've met your family. Seen your compassion in action. I decided you were a good bet. Was I wrong?"

Ash kept his face neutral, hiding his impressed reaction. Caution was key to protecting his found family. "And you're looking out for a young woman with a hundred times your resources. Speaks well of you. But our objectives converge. Let's leave it there. I'll gladly help protect anyone from that fallout you mentioned."

Wes gave a curt nod, meeting his eyes fully for the first time. "You deserved a warning. Daily shows mean daily chaos."

*And you're betting I'm a man who protects his home. Smart.*

Ash smiled, though his eyes stayed calculating. "Then I suppose I'd better get comfortable."

Wes stood, buttoning his jacket with practiced precision. He paused, his hand on the doorknob. "Take care, Ash."

The words carried more weight than a simple goodbye.

"Thanks. I'll need it." Ash paused. "Join us for breakfast anytime."

The door clicked shut, leaving him alone with morning shadows and the growing certainty that his life was about to become more complicated.

\* \* \*

I sat in the audience for Calida's first daily show. She did her usual act: picking people from the crowd to "talk" to their dead family members.

This time I had space to observe. To watch the other audience members. To study how ghosts behaved in her vicinity.

Calida had brought an entourage. A dozen twenty-something influencers she introduced as "her Nymphs" seated onstage behind her chair in a neat row. They all wore the same thing: a thin white robe over a one-piece swimsuit, and a stiff, wide-brimmed bonnet. The fabric was sheer enough that stage lights shone straight through, revealing the modest swimwear underneath—just enough coverage to avoid network censorship.

The effect was striking. Pretty girls in purest white, showing enough leg to guarantee ratings. But also deeply creepy. A dozen women dressed identically, differing only in hair color. The similarity to handmaidens was impossible to miss.

Twisted. Exploitative.

Six or eight ghosts swirled constantly around Calida, fascinated by her like moths to a flame. The audience couldn't see them—just her predator's smile as she zeroed in on the wealthiest-looking marks. Cartier watches. Diamond earrings. Gucci purses.

I leaned forward, studying the tableau. Something felt off. A rustle in the pattern. A hitch.

I thought I'd imagined it until it happened again.

The Nymphs all twitched. Just their left shoulders, a small jerk like someone had tugged invisible strings. Every thirty seconds. In perfect synchrony.

Then I caught it in the audience—third row, an older woman with rhinestones at her throat. Same twitch. Same timing. A college kid in the fourth row did it too. Tiny simultaneous jerks, clockwork-precise.

My hands started trembling.

I'd thought her last show felt wrong. This was something else entirely.

My premonition clanged like a church bell.

Calida wrapped with a flourish, voice syrupy-sweet, arms lifted like she'd personally banished sorrow from the world. The audience clapped on cue. She glided offstage, smile intact, trailed by six ghosts following her like devoted pets.

I kept my phone low, screen dimmed, and captured a few seconds of the Nymphs' synchronized twitch. Proof. Creepy, damning proof. The tic kept rippling through them like a wave, and no one else even noticed.

I didn't wait for the lights to come up. I bolted, every step out of that ballroom fast and clumsy, nerves jangling. By the time the brass doors closed behind me, my pulse was hammering. I shoved the phone in my pocket and headed for Ash's office at a near-run.

\* \* \*

"Wes, Amélie. Thank you for coming on such short notice."

"You're welcome." Wes's tone was carefully neutral. "Mind telling me the objective?"

"Give me five minutes to get everyone here, and I'll only have to say this once." Ash gestured toward the corner bar setup. "Open bar. Get comfortable. Expect a wild ride."

He smiled, but his eyes looked hollow.

Ash had recovered his professional veneer since our movie night. He was still overcautious around me—polite, calm, but tucked too far inside his own head. I missed the passion that used to blaze in those eyes.

*Okay, I'm horny. I want him like silk wants skin.*

*But you don't feed that need without trust. Without foundation.*

*Stop it.*

Adulting sucks.

"...so thank you all for attending on such short notice." Ash drew a breath, letting his shoulders drop. "It's time we did something about Calida. She's more than a threat now. Her show is dangerous."

He glanced around the table. "I've been getting complaints—noise from her jacuzzi suite, crowd control issues, kids coming home glassy-eyed. Local cops write it off as nightlife. The City Council shrugs. The Bureau won't even return my calls." His mouth tightened. "That's not bureaucracy. That's her influence spreading."

"Liz, tell them what you saw at the show."

"She's brought her 'Nymphs' out in public. I have a disturbing video to show you."

Wes and Amélie exchanged a look.

I kept my voice flat. "Wes, I understand the risks to you. Please tell me these women aren't exactly what they seem."

I pulled up my video on the overhead projector. Twelve identically-costumed women. Twelve identical poses. Every thirty seconds, their shoulders twitched in perfect, unnerving unison. The next clip showed audience members doing the same thing.

Impossible to unsee.

"My theory: this is supernatural. Some kind of spell or curse. Its strength depends on proximity to Calida and length of exposure. These two audience members—" I pointed at the screen "—are superfans. Regular Calida Experience attendees."

"Supernatural effect." Wes's voice dripped with skepticism.

"Yes, Wes." I lifted myself a foot above the floor and floated sideways until I hovered next to his chair, hands on my hips. "Typical of the Elysium Gate. Is that a problem?"

"Eliza." Ash's voice warned gently.

"Well, would he rather meet the Bone Woman? I can arrange that." I gave Wes a look that said I was half-joking and twice serious.

Wes went pale. The room went still.

My chest tightened into sharp focus. "*We aren't walking away from these women. Not the Nymphs, not the audience members, not anyone caught in Calida's web.*"

I clicked off the projector, the last frame of that synchronized twitch frozen like an accusation. Wes swallowed, staring at me like I'd handed him a map to a minefield.

"Then we do what we do best," Ash said. "Build a case. Gather witnesses. Make noise loud enough to wake the dead—figuratively speaking."

"I'll make it literal if necessary," I muttered.

Ash didn't smile. "Not yet. First evidence, then leverage. And Eliza—be careful. If Calida has ghosts orbiting her like groupies, she'll notice anyone poking around."

"Noted." I slid my phone back into my pocket, that clip of the Nymphs still burning behind my eyelids. "We begin with the fans, work our way up. Watch Amélie. She's not just fan bait anymore. She's a target."

Wes held my gaze, nodding once. "I will."

"Good." Ash folded his hands on the table. "We move fast and smart. We're on our own, but we're not helpless."

I touched Wes's shoulder. "Sorry about the theatrics. But you need to understand—the rumors about the Elysium Gate are all true. I used to think it was all tourist hokum too. I was so wrong. It's changed my entire life."

"Big bomb to process, I know. Been there myself." I managed a wry smile. "But you're sharp. You'll be fine."

As I crossed the lobby on my way out, two bellhops ducked behind the front desk.

"Another VIP list," one muttered. "Clogging up the elevators again."

"First day, instant headache," the other replied. "At least Ash will handle it. He always does."

\* \* \*

I lingered in my suite afterward, restless.

"Teach me about threads and wards, BW," I whispered.

Her presence stirred through my bones like a cold draft. *You have a premonition.*

"Yeah. Feels like a freight train headed for a rickety bridge nobody's inspected in a century."

*Then we begin. First, see the smallest strands. Then test the strength of the cables.*

The chalk circle glowed faint on the tile, green lines humming just at the edge of vision. I reached for them.

The circle popped, fizzled, collapsed into dust.

*Too rough. Again.*

Slower this time. I teased a line loose—it slipped away, rebounding with a spark that stung my palm. I hissed, shaking out the ache.

*Closer. But you must coax, not claw.*

Third try. I breathed deep, traced the threads apart like untying shoelaces. The weave gave way with a sigh, dissolving into chalk dust instead of sparks.

There. Her voice softened. *This is how you reverse someone else's working. With respect.*

I wiped my hand on my robe, grinning despite myself. "Respect. Got it. But that freight train can still kiss my ass."

Her voice clicked with approval. *Now that you can take one apart, put one together. Add your own threads. Create a barrier. That is your ward.*

"Like weaving? Or crochet?"

*Build outward from the weakest lines. Then lay the heavy cables to bear the tension.*

I chalked a fresh circle and reached. A shimmer wavered like spider silk. I pulled—  
It snapped. Fizzled. Gone.

*Again.*

Teeth gritted, I went slower. A single strand stretched, wobbling like a struck harp string. I overbalanced and fell on my ass, chalk streaking my thigh.

*You yank. You demand. No wonder it will not hold. Coax it. Invite it.*

I breathed. Reached with steadier intent. One thread twined into another, then another, weaving into a faint net that glowed across the circle. The weakest strands held first, then the heavier ones braced them.

The ward shimmered like heat-haze. I felt it resisting—fabric I'd stitched myself. And I felt the price: stanky underarms, weakness in my limbs.

Yes. Bone Woman's tone was dry but approving. *Now you have a wall. Respect it, and it will respect you.*

I wiped sweat off my forehead, half proud, half exhausted. "Respect. Threads. Cables. Walls. Got it."

Then I cracked a wicked grin. "Coaxing, teasing, enticing—turns out I've been training for this in other ways."

*Of course, Eliza. You are a primal force of nature, my priestess.* Her voice clattered like beads on bone, proud and affectionate. *Magic is like a lover's touch—soft and warm, or rough and hungry. You must sense your lover's needs, moment to moment, and merge them with your own.*

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## 20 The Art of Floating

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The air in the laboratory folded wrong, then spat me out two feet from Ella's workbench.

She shrieked. The soldering iron clattered across the table, and she stumbled backward so forcefully her hip collided with the counter. Her laptop wobbled. One hand flew to her chest.

"Shit. Shit, Ella, I'm so—"

Her knees buckled. I caught her before she hit the floor, and she grabbed fistfuls of my shirt like I was the only solid thing left in the world.

The frantic stutter of Ella's heartbeat slowed under my palm.

"Breathe," I murmured, holding her close. "You're okay. I've got you.."

"When—" Her voice came out in gasps. "When did you learn to do *that*?"

"One of those four-star spellbooks. My fault for not checking the landing spot. I'm sorry."

She was shaking. Beyond adrenaline, a deeper current had been building. Her fingers twisted tighter in my shirt.

"I'm still on one-star," she whispered against my shoulder. "Mom says I don't practice enough, but what if I'm just... not cut out for this?"

I eased back, but she clung harder.

"Don't let go yet. Please?"

The plea hit me like a gut punch. I knew that tone. I'd been that once, sixteen and drowning in the space between what I wanted and what was in my reach.

"You've got me," I said, settling my chin against her hair. "Not going anywhere."

She sniffed—a small, broken sound. "Then why does it feel like I'm stuck at the kiddie table while you're running the entire kitchen?"

"Bone Woman demanded her birth. Forced me to learn rapidly." I stroked her hair, felt her breathing even out. "Your way's better. You get to choose your pace, study what calls to you."

"Why must I wait for everything?"

"Tilt it, love. 'Must I await so many new delights?' You don't get to experience your firsts again. Nostalgia haunts forever; joyful innocence is there and gone."

She huffed against my shoulder. "That sounds like something Mom would say. Be thankful for crumbs."

"Crumbs?" I laughed softly. "Ella, you're standing in a bakery. Magic's everywhere here. You'll gorge yourself soon enough."

Her grip loosened. Not much, but enough.

"Then... just stay with me for a while?"

"You'll have that, little sister." I squeezed her once more. "Now what's the specific trouble?"

"Levitation." She finally pulled back, scrubbing at her eyes. "I can manage a coin for half a second. Books? Forget it. And anything alive just... drops."

I smiled, plucked a nickel from the clutter on her bench, and set it down between us. "Coins wobble because you're treating them like weights. Don't lift them. Help them float."

Her eyebrows pulled together. "That's the same thing."

"It's not. Think rhythm. When Bone Woman steadies me, it feels like a hum through my ribs. Listen for that instead of wrestling gravity." I folded her hand over the coin, felt the tremor still running through her fingers. "Nothing wants to be held down. Support its spirit."

"Nickels don't have spirits."

"Sure. And people are just bags of water. Doesn't mean they don't sing when the right note hits."

She rolled her eyes but inhaled the way I'd shown her. For three breaths, nothing. Then the nickel shivered, rattled against the table like a subway train was passing underneath.

Ella squeaked and jerked her hand back.

The coin hung in the air. Wobbling. Spinning. Then it clattered down.

Her grin burst wide and bright. "Did you see—"

I wrapped my hands around her waist and pulled us both off the ground.

She yelped, then laughed as we rose—smooth and stable, the lab floor falling away beneath our feet. I spun us once, dipped low enough to make her stomach drop, then corkscrewed us barrel-roll-style through the air.

"Lift her spirits," I murmured into her hair. "Help her fly."

We touched down light as feathers.

Or I thought we did.

Ella landed on her feet. I landed flat on my arse, legs sprawled, dignity shattered.

She doubled over laughing, and I grinned up at her from the floor. Even witches have clumsy moments.

\* \* \*

The morning after Calida's second performance, the Elysium Gate lobby didn't hum. It seethed.

Two clerks crouched behind the front desk, playing frantic rounds of rock-paper-scissors to determine who'd face the next guest. Heads popped up like prairie dogs, then ducked back down as the brass doors swung open. Abandoned folios and blinking phones piled higher by the minute. Bellmen had vanished into service hallways, leaving Ash alone on the battlefield.

He emerged from his office anyway—jacket smoothed, expression carved in marble.

The first guest barreled forward before he could speak. Sequined heels, tight voice, eyes flashing.

"Your twelve-hundred-dollar suite was uninhabitable. Music thumping until dawn, strangers pounding on my door because some drunk handed out the wrong room number." She jabbed a manicured finger toward his chest. "If this is your idea of luxury, my attorney will be very interested."

Ash inclined his head. Patient. Precise. "I apologize for the disturbance, ma'am. Allow me to move you to a quieter floor and send breakfast up. On us."

The sharpness in her eyes dulled. Slightly.

He didn't have time to breathe before the next pair arrived—honeymoon couple, red-eyed and vibrating with fury.

"We booked the Bridal Suite for romance!"

"And the couple next door threw a Jacuzzi party till three!"

"The walls vibrated. The pipes howled. This ruins our honeymoon!"

Ash's voice stayed low, sympathetic. "That's not the memory I wish you to keep. Let me move you to the tower corner—thicker walls, best sunsets in the building. Spa access, late checkout, champagne this evening."

Jolene's shoulders eased. Marcus grunted, half-mollified.

A cluster of regulars waited to check out, murmuring to each other. One leaned toward his wife, voice pitched low but audible: "Never seen the Elysium Gate like this."

Unease spread like a draft.

Then came thunder.

Reverend Calvin Dupre—broad-shouldered, voice tuned for the pulpit—planted himself in front of Ash like a storm rolling in.

"Sir, I witnessed underage children entering a suite. Laughing, half-dressed, carrying bottles." His jaw set. "This establishment risks scandal."

Ash bowed his head. "Thank you for bringing it to my attention. We'll review the cameras and remove anyone underage immediately. Meanwhile, may I move you to another corridor?"

A grudging nod. But the words hung heavy in the air, and the whispers grew louder.

Before Ash even exhaled, another guest appeared—small, pearl-strung, fingers twisting together.

"Forgive me, but the party down the hall was too loud. My mother's recovering from surgery. She hardly slept." Her voice cracked. "I don't want to make trouble."

Ash's expression gentled. "You're not making trouble, ma'am. You're helping me fix it. Let me arrange a quieter suite for your next visit and send up chamomile tea right now."

Her relief hit harder than any of the shouting.

The fifth guest made a loud and flamboyant entrance, wearing oversized sunglasses and gesturing with a sharp, pointed manicure.

"This circus is unacceptable! I want a refund, an upgrade, champagne on ice—tonight! Or I'll have your job!"

Both clerks dropped out of sight.

Ash's smile didn't flicker. "I'll certainly arrange an upgrade and champagne. Shall I have bell service move your luggage while I adjust your rate?"

Her momentum faltered. She blinked, disarmed.

Morgan had abandoned her barstool throne and swept in behind the desk, black blazer draped over her curves, lipstick like a battle standard. The angriest guests—especially the men—wilted under her withering stare. She channeled complaints into paperwork and signatures, stopping them from boiling over.

The younger clerks stayed crouched, content to let the veterans absorb the storm.

Ash tugged his cuffs straight, eyes already tracking the next guest. "Morgan, call that extra security company. Gary got swarmed last night.. Get us half a dozen rent-a-cops for tonight."

Morgan arched a penciled brow, already dialing. "Can't handle it, worm?"

Ash's left shoulder twitched—sharp and involuntary. He shot her a wry grin. "Don't you start. Not today."

She said nothing more, rattling off the contract number with brisk ease.

Together, Ash with his polished calm and Morgan with her blunt control, they held the line. The lobby buzzed with whispers. The storm showed no sign of breaking before noon.

One of the junior clerks peeked up from behind the desk, voice barely above a whisper.

"He's been at it since five this morning. No break."

"Yeah," the other murmured. "Guess he's not untouchable."

\* \* \*

We'd taken over one of the meeting rooms—blackout curtains drawn, pizza boxes stacked like bribes on the side table. A flatscreen sat waiting on a rolling stand, speakers humming.

"Counter-frequency," I announced, slapping the laptop ceremonially. "Calida's spell is rhythm. You've seen it—kids twitching in sync hours after the show. If she herds them with a beat, we herd them the other way."

Ella tilted her head from her perch on a chair arm. "Like noise-canceling headphones?"

"Or garbage science," Gary muttered, arms folded across his chest. "You can't fix spellcraft with a playlist."

"Static?" Wes tugged his tie loose. "White noise disrupts brainwaves."

"Headaches don't cure hypnosis." Yuri leaned against the wall, all elegance in silk and tailored slacks. "Repetition breaks repetition. Chanting?"

Morgan breezed in with a tray of sodas, lipstick brighter than the EXIT sign. "If anyone puts monks on those speakers, I'm gone. You'll clear the ballroom faster than I pour gin."

"Metal," Gary suggested. "Scare them out of it."

Ella groaned. "They'd just headbang in sync."

The debate looped—bagpipes, whale song, Ash's thunderstorm track. Nothing stuck.

I raised my hand. "Enough. We don't need weird sounds. We need the ultimate anti-zombie anthem."

"Which is?" Wes asked, wary.

I grinned and hit play.

Bass thumped. Fog rolled. Vincent Price cackled.

Thriller burst to life in all its eighties glory.

Ella covered her face. "Oh, my God. Really? The Olds are going to love this."

And she was right.

Gary moved first—that enormous frame nimble as he dropped into the routine like he'd been waiting decades. Crisp, sharp, every step locked in place.

"Haven't done this in years," he said, grinning like a kid.

Yuri joined him, heels clicking, hair swinging. Even in businesslike slacks, she was fire—hips rolling, arms snapping into perfect lines. She matched Gary beat for beat, the two of them moving with synchronized confidence.

I clapped, delighted. "Where were you hiding *that*?"

"Before Ella," Gary said without missing a beat.

"National ballroom comps," Yuri added, spinning.

Wes and I exchanged a look and jumped in, losing rhythm immediately but laughing too hard to care. Even Ash cracked a smirk from his post by the speakers.

Morgan leaned in the doorframe, soda in hand, watching like she was at a cabaret. "If this is a failure, darlings, it's the best one yet."

Ella groaned louder. "Actual zombies upstairs, and you're doing choreography from 1983. Congratulations. You're officially Olds."

The immortals exchanged grins, sharing a joke she wasn't privy to.

Right on cue, our pizza-bribed volunteers shuffled in—three teens fresh from Calida's audience. Eyes dull. Shoulders jerking every half-minute to that same unseen pulse.

They didn't notice us watching. The spell rode them still, an echo thrumming under their skin.

They chewed pizza. Ignored Gary's chest pops and Yuri's flawless spins.

One muttered, "Cringe," through a mouthful of pepperoni.

Another: "They didn't even remix this."

They grabbed their boxes and wandered out.

The twitch stayed intact.

I stumbled out of formation, breathless, and smacked the space bar. Silence dropped like a curtain.

Somewhere above us, the beat under their skin kept marching.

"No change?" I asked.

"None," Ash confirmed. "Except now you have a dance troupe."

Gary finished with a bow, sweat shining on his brow. "Still got it."

Yuri dipped beside him, hair sticking to her cheek. "We do."

Wes clapped, still catching his breath. "Not bad for the oldies."

Ella groaned into her hands. "Please stop before someone breaks a hip."

I collapsed into a chair, chest heaving. "So much for counter-frequency. But we proved Thriller still slaps."

Ash's smirk deepened. "Congratulations. You've invented the world's first anti-party playlist. Too bad it only works on yourselves."

Morgan crossed to me and set a soda in my hand, lipstick still perfect. "Make the next experiment champagne, sweetheart. Then the hangover will count as data."

The last chord faded. Our big idea had failed—the kids walked out unchanged, still jerking in Calida's time signature. The movements felt like a leash.

And we'd proved we didn't know how to cut it.

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## 21 Permit to Burn

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Day three of the Calida Daily Experience. The lobby felt hollow, stripped of yesterday's frenetic energy. Ash stood behind the front desk, watching a handful of stragglers drift past like debris after a flood. Empty and silent, heavier than noise ever was.

Security had reported the twelfth floor silent for most of the evening. No teens roaming. No racket from 1203. The extra rent-a-cops had done their job—crushed the chaos flat, left nothing but resentment in its place.

Ash'd sent room service up at dawn: continental breakfast, fresh flowers, special pastries. Appeasement offerings. The trays came back nearly untouched, residents on Twelve too annoyed to be bought off with croissants.

A strange calm settled over the hotel, more unnerving than the chaos it replaced. The phone rang.

Ash stared at it, willing it to burst into flames. It kept ringing.

He picked up. "Hotel Elysium Gate, Ash Skotomerkis, how may I serve you?"

"This is Councilwoman Brenda Carter. Is this the manager?"

His stomach dropped. Shit.

"Yes, ma'am. Ash Skotomerkis, manager of the Elysium Gate." He kept his voice smooth, professional. "I appreciate your taking the time. What's the climate like at City Hall today?"

"Stormy." Her voice carried the weight of someone who'd spent the morning fielding angry calls. "Parents are calling about your twelfth floor. Teens running wild, strange behavior. Some of them are posting videos online. I'm hearing words like 'cult.'"

"We've already moved to restore order, Councilwoman." Ash reached for his pen, started taking notes he didn't need. Gave his hands something to do. "Additional security, silent halls, no disturbances last night. Room service to smooth ruffled feathers. The Gate values its residents' comfort."

"I'm glad to hear it, but this isn't a one-off party, Mr. Skotomerkis." Papers rustled on her end. "That performer has a lease for daily shows, right? Families are asking if your hotel is safe for their children. I can't ignore that."

"Understood. You have my word I'll keep a close watch. The Elysium Gate won't be a problem for the city."

"See that you do." The threat underneath was velvet-wrapped steel. "I'd hate for the City Council to consider inspections or permit reviews."

His pen stilled on the paper. "Yes, ma'am. You have my word."

The line clicked off.

Ash lowered the receiver, resting in his palm. The walls pressed closer, the oxygen thinning. He set the phone down with careful precision, his movements measured to prevent a detonation.

Inspections. Permits. Routine words carrying demolition charges. One headline and the Gate becomes the cautionary tale every news outlet in the city wants to run.

He crossed to the window. The street looked peaceful in the morning light, but something wasn't quite right. The scene included typical sights like tourists, a delivery truck, and someone walking a dog. Outside, the world pretended everything was fine.

He turned back to his desk, began straightening scattered papers with mechanical precision. Complaints, calls, and crises consumed his attention. The hotel was a demanding and insatiable master.

For a moment, he pressed both palms against the desk's cool edge, shoulders hunched, and let himself feel the weight.

"One more fire," he muttered. "And this one spreads fast."

\* \* \*

Two front-desk girls exchanged glances as Ash walked past, heading for his office.

"Man's running on fumes," one whispered.

"Doesn't even yell at us anymore."

The other one watched him disappear down the hall. "Poor guy. I thought he liked the circus."

"Turns out it's eating him alive."

\* \* \*

Complaints still drifted through the lobby, less fury now than exhaustion fraying at the edges. A handful of teens slouched in chairs, phones out, shoulders twitching in unconscious mimicry of whatever they'd seen online. Staff moved through their routines with brittle efficiency, ready to snap. Even Patel shook his head as he passed the front desk.

"This isn't the Gate I know," he murmured.

Those words landed harder than any complaint.

I hugged my notebook closer and watched the lobby like a battlefield. If I had any worth to this hotel beyond sorting laundry, long past time I proved it.

I lingered with the front desk girls for a few minutes, letting them vent. Sympathetic ears, warm smiles—not magic, simple human contact. On rough days, that was harder to summon than any spell. Their shoulders eased. The tightness around their eyes softened.

Minor victories.

I smoothed my jacket and slipped toward the bell stand, skirting past a lanky teen sunk deep in a lobby chair. Phone tilted toward his face, casting pale blue light across his features. Calida memes scrolled without end.

As I passed, something tugged at me—a tickle under my ribs, a faint prickle of hair lifting along my arms.

I stopped mid-step.

The teen's shoulder twitched, jerking in that odd rhythm I'd seen ripple through the crowd upstairs.

My breath caught. I'd felt it before it happened.

Not a coincidence. Premonition.

The tickle didn't fade. It sat low in my chest like a wire humming under the bone. I rubbed my sternum, but the sensation sharpened when I focused on it. When I thought about that shoulder twitch, the timing.

I'd known before he moved.

Hair stood up on my arms. My scalp went tight under my ponytail. A faint echo thrummed in my head—not sound, more like the ghost of a note waiting for the downbeat.

This wasn't nerves. This was real.

I *caught* the current itself.

I grabbed my notebook, ducked behind the bell stand. Blinked to the eleventh floor. One sloppy teleport later, I staggered into the hallway outside Ella's room, heart hammering harder than my trick knee ever had. And wobbled for a moment, teleports devoured my blood sugar, I guess.

The door swung open before I knocked.

Ella blinked at me, laptop sliding off her lap. "Whoa! What's the hurry?"

"I think I've got it." The breathless words tumbled out. "I feel it when someone's about to slip under. Not random—it's like hearing the rhythm before the beat drops. I want to test it."

Her eyes went wide. "Seriously?"

"Get everyone. Lab. Now."

\* \* \*

Five minutes later, we assembled.

Ella perched on a stool, notebook open, pen poised like a court reporter. Ash stood near the door, arms folded, expression unreadable as ever. Gary leaned against the wall—solid, immovable oak. Yuri sat with legs crossed, skirt brushing her knees, glossy black heels catching the light. She looked every inch the diplomat she became around mundanes: poised, elegant, inscrutable.

The Hugos' human faces showed we had company unable to see through the veil.

Wes hovered near the doorway, arms crossed, notebook balanced in one hand. Observing. Judging. Waiting to grade my performance.

And in the center of the room, Bone Woman shimmered—green pulse flickering in her ribs and eye sockets. She tilted her skull as I explained, then gave a slow, approving ripple.

"I'll call it," I said. "You back me up. Exactly at the moment I say."

I pointed toward a teen slouched against the far wall, phone out, doom scrolling. "Him. Watch."

The tickle surged under my sternum, climbed up into my throat. Familiar now. Electric.

His shoulder twitched—

"Now!"

Bone Woman's ribs flared emerald. Her power slid alongside mine, two currents meeting, amplifying. The boy's head tipped, eyes blinking like someone surfacing from deep water. For one heartbeat, I felt it—felt him almost shake free.

Then the rhythm swept him back under. Shoulders jerked in time with the phantom beat.

Ella gasped. "Liz, you were right! You called it perfectly!"

"Not enough." My chest ached. "He's still under."

Bone Woman turned slowly toward the doorway. Her sockets burned brighter, locking onto Wes.

"*You twitched, too,*" she said, voice rattling bone-deep.

Wes flinched, back hitting the doorframe. "What?"

Her grin stretched wide—teeth and no warmth. "Little shoulder. Little doubt. Don't worry, darling. I see *everything*."

Ella snorted into her fist.

Wes recovered by writing in his notebook.

Bone Woman chuckled, low and earthy, then turned away. Unbothered by Wes's crisis of faith.

The boy slumped back into his trance, shoulder twitching again. My chest sank with him.

Perfect timing. Zero impact.

Ella grabbed my arm. "But you felt it before it happened! That's incredible, Liz!"

I forced something resembling a smile. "Yeah. Amazing." My tone said otherwise.

Ash's voice cut through, calm and deliberate. "This magic's not operating at the individual level. It's collective. Structural." He studied the teen like he was reading code. "You can't break a tide by shoving one wave."

Yuri smoothed her skirt, crossed her legs the other way. Heel flashed in the light. "Spectacle won't win this war. And people love spectacle."

Gary rumbled in agreement, arms still folded.

Morgan materialized near a lab stool like smoke curling under a door. She perched on the edge, grin sharp. "So we whisper instead of shouting. Plant doubts where no one's looking. That's how you undo a con."

"Excuse me," Wes snapped from the doorway, pale but clinging to bravado. "Are we ignoring the part where the skeleton with glowing eyes spoke to me?"

Bone Woman swiveled her skull. Teeth clattered in something approximating a smile. "Because you're slow to listen, darling. The others already know."

Unease rippled through him. He scrawled faster in his notebook, as if documentation could armor him against the supernatural.

Morgan leaned on her elbow, grin wicked. "You're awfully subdued, Ripley. What's the matter? Never had a lady made of bones call you pet names before?"

Ella snorted into her sleeve. Even Yuri's mouth twitched.

Wes tugged at his collar. "This is absurd. Hallucinations. Tricks of light. Some kind of group delusion—"

Ash tilted his head. "Keep saying that, Wes. See how far it gets you." His voice carried no heat. "Eventually, you'll have to accept the evidence of your own eyes."

The silence afterward felt heavy, expectant. Even the hum of lab equipment waits—waited for Wes to admit what the rest of us already knew.

Denial's a flimsy shield. Calida knows how to slip through the cracks.

I closed my notebook. I'd timed it with precision. Called it. And it didn't matter.

Calida's mesmerizing rhythm wasn't an individual effect. It's collective. Woven through dozens of people at once, each one reinforcing the others.

*You can't break a tide by shoving one wave.*

*Why did that feel important?*

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## 22 Fear in Nice Clothes

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Day 4 of the Calida Daily Experience began like a hangover with lighting cues.

By late afternoon, the ballroom stank. The room reeked of a forgotten party, a sour and sweet mix of old sweat, spilled wine, and too much perfume. The camera crew's shirts had wrinkles on top of wrinkles. Patel stood off-duty near the back wall, still here, clutching a paper sack of beignets like a rosary. He squeezed it, released it, and squeezed again. Never ate one.

Monica arrived in her desk uniform, badge pinned straight, but when Calida's face lit the screens, she didn't applaud. Folded her arms, jaw set, she dared anyone to mistake her loyalty to the Gate for loyalty to the guest.

The teens drifted in pale and twitchy, faces blue-lit by their phones, dark circles carved under their eyes. Doomscrolling had gnawed all of their edges down. They shuffled like they'd forgotten bodies needed water. The influencers followed in a thin, glittering stream—the kind who smell a story turning. City types lingered at the back. Staffers with lanyards. A reporter with a practiced "concerned face." The council aide had perfected invisibility, same corner for four days straight, back to the door, shoulders hunched.

Calida's crew did their last checks with the brittle cheer of people on day four of a convention they regretted booking. The lighting op pressed his temples. A sound tech snapped at a stagehand. Near the curtain, Calida herself hissed: "My head is splitting. Bring the lights down a half-stop before I go blind."

"Yes, ma'am," the assistant said in a tone that meant he'd do it but didn't care.

When he left, Calida pinched the bridge of her nose. "Corbin, get me through this one."

Ash took his post at the far side of the control table, sleeves rolled, mouth a thin line that told me how thin his exemplary patience had worn. He spent the morning sorting out reservation problems, where people checking out late were assigned the same rooms as people arriving early. The system was a confusing mess, with booking information scattered everywhere. Guests demanding refunds. A bridal party screaming in the lobby about their canceled rehearsal dinner. Two management

companies arriving with "compliance questions" that were trivial formalities for their press releases. The hotel phone hadn't stopped ringing. A pulse hammered at his throat.

Wes hovered near the back, recording B-roll with his notebook and gimbaled phone like his salvation hinged on it. He'd written "PRESS" onto a lanyard in Sharpie. Looked the part if you don't look too close. He glanced at me, then at my clothes, and swallowed.

I'd worn the full priestess ensemble. Not vanity—purpose. I'd woken with the tickle already lodged under my ribs, a foreboding that said anchors are necessary today. The white cloak showed off the veve embroidered in emerald green. The stole lay heavy on my shoulders, woven with tiny bone-beads that clicked when I breathed. It felt like plugging myself into a wall charger.

Near the column with the hairline crack I'd been worrying about for weeks, I chalked a small, careful veve in the wings. Crew-only space. Bone Woman enjoyed lurking in dark corners. The green in my chest warmed, answering. I breathed with it.

Ash's eyes flicked to me, to the veve, back to me. No comment. We were both saving our voices for when we'd need them.

"Ten!" the stage manager called.

The video began, showing a close-up of a smiling Calida, playing brief clips of her laughing, and displaying a rapid succession of testimonials. Applause swept through like a reflex, automatic, trained by four nights of repetition. The band started. Calida stepped to her mark, and the light kissed her cheekbones back to life.

If you didn't live here, you might have believed it.

I didn't.

The first song hit. The teens' shoulders rolled into that gentle metronome sway, phones rising, eyes bright and empty. Adults followed slower, glancing around to check if they were doing it right. The staff—loa bless them—pretended not to watch while watching. Patel squeezed the bag, released it, squeezed again.

By the third number, the thrum had settled into my bones. The warmth at my ribs flared and calmed, flared and calmed, like a cat twitching in sleep. I stood in the wings with my hands on the chalk line, letting the green in my chest sync to something deeper than the band's beat.

Calida's patter had a burr tonight. Between songs she kept touching her temple, smiling through it—the smile of a woman who won't let a headache spoil the footage. She was burning fuel she didn't have.

Half a row in the front shifted wrong—too fast. A boy blinked, arms dropping. He wobbled, caught himself, and tried to slide back into the tide. The web tugged. He wanted to obey.

His knees gave.

He went down quick and ugly, the sound small and sharp. Two kids on either side grabbed him, breaking the sway. Help first, rhythm later.

The tickle in me spiked like I'd grabbed a live wire.

Not a node. A hole.

*Bone Woman.*

*I am here, my priestess.* She rattled in my skull, delight and urgency braided together. *Child, push where the hole is. This web is not endless. It tears.*

I reached—not for the boy being held by his friends, but for the space his body had been filling. The negative shape in the net. A thinness appeared in the pattern if you knew how to look: the way spider silk looks when you wet it. My palms found it like finding a snag in a sweater without meaning to.

I didn't hesitate.

The threads quivered under my hands, wild as live wires. My first instinct was to yank—to claw, to rip until something gave.

*Coax, tease, entice... you've been training for this all along.* Bone Woman's voice, warm and stern. *Magic is the tickle of a lover, soft or rough. Find a need, merge with your own.*

I closed my eyes. Breathed. Eased my grip. Gentle at first, then firmer, stroking the weave until it parted willingly under my will.

But Calida, that toxic bitch—she didn't *deserve* gentleness.

I seized and ripped.

Green tore up through me and out into the chalk with a crackle I felt in my teeth. The veve flared emerald-bright, painting my skin from inside. My cloak blazed. Anyone looking would know exactly where the source was. Bone Woman's laugh chimed like bones in glass.

The tear in the weave didn't snap shut.

It widened.

My knees buckled under the backlash, breath hitching—but I held.

The links nearest the hole buckled, went slack, and the net re-knit. Kids helping the fallen boy shouted to each other, and didn't sway. Two behind them blinked like sleepers startled at noon. A confused sound from the back. A young woman to the right clapped her hands to her mouth and sobbed—not delicately. Her sob was the ugly, embarrassed sound of a crumbling facade. Two strangers broke rhythm to pull her into a clumsy hug.

That made another gap.

The pattern created a conflict between empathy and performance.

"Now," I whispered.

The green surged, the push I'd practiced the night before, straight into the thinnest parts of the web. Bone Woman's strength slid in beside mine like another set of hands tearing muslin. Every time the pattern attempted to repair itself, we tore the seam wider. I felt the ripples not as twitches but as clusters—the way a school of fish turns, a flock stutters. Not one body but a hundred.

Onstage, Calida hit a note meant to soar. It scraped instead.

Her smile twitched. She took a half-step toward recovery, forced her shoulders back, pushed her charisma the way a swimmer pushes through a cramp. The house lights pulsed, steadied. The camera monitors flickered to static for a breath, snapped back. Out in the house, applause rose and died too early, mistimed.

The editors will hate this.

"Liz?" Ash's voice, soft, from the shadow of the control table. He didn't move toward me. Held his place. Let me work.

Trust is subtle when it's real.

"I see it," I said—though I wasn't sure I'd spoken aloud. "Not the wave. The web."

The tear ran like a ladder in a silk stocking—once started, it never stopped. A boy at the back rubbed his eyes, said too loud: "I'm tired."

The surrounding kids snapped their heads like owls. Truth was incompatible with Calida's trance.

A girl in the middle lowered her phone, frowning at it, then at the stage. A snort of laughter broke from her at her own ridiculous expression. She kept laughing until her friend giggled. The friend clapped late, then stopped.

Cameras tilted. Influencers whispered into mics, eyes gleaming like owls in lamplight. Politicians' aides texted with their heads down, thumbs frantic. Wes's gimbal drifted—he forgot to frame, held the phone up with both hands like a pilgrim offering a candle to a saint.

"Hold," Bone Woman murmured. "Hold until it fails."

Calida was holding on too. I saw it in the tension in her arms, the way she widened her stance and pulled her light around her like a cloak. She was starving. Four nights feeding an edifice that wanted more than adoration, more than tickets, more than her voice. Holding a net stretched too far meant she was the net.

When we tore it, we were tearing her.

She changed tactics—dropped her voice low, talked as if one-on-one with the crowd, the way she'd done at the start of Night Two when she still had strength to spare.

It wobbled.

A handful of adults exchanged glances, disoriented like waking from a strange nap and unsure why they'd come inside. A teenager near the aisle said, "I feel sick,"

and bent his head between his knees. Two more staffers slipped into the aisle with water. Monica moved forward, skirt hem brushing chairs, one hand already out to catch the boy's elbow before he toppled.

The net let go.

It didn't explode. It sagged.

Off-beat applause. Laughter instead of hush. Worry instead of delight. The ripple we'd made reached a fulcrum I hadn't known existed, and the whole thing shattered like a chandelier falling.

The recoil staggered me—sharp knives of migraine behind my eyes. I clutched my head with a ragged hiss.

Calida's knees bent. She didn't fall so much as crumple, folding into her own light. Her mic skidded across the stage, the rough scrape a permanent blemish on the recording. The band stuttered to a stop. The house drew breath all together and released it wrong.

Chaos broke like a dropped tray of plates.

The sounds rolled in waves: screams, then shouts for water, then confused chatter as people grasped they hadn't chosen to take part. Phones rose. The influencers filmed with glee as the crowd's cries shifted from adoration to panic. Complete train wrecks earn new followers, too.

Staff moved in. The temporary security hires who'd earned their money this week earned it again. Calm hands, clear voices. The expert ones don't grab—they guide.

Calida's "nymphs" froze and blinked. One gasped like a diver breaking the surface. Another pressed her palms to her cheeks as if she felt no edges. A third cried in a childish, relieved way that breaks hearts. Hugs bloomed. Most of the girls recoiled from Calida in horror.

The green dimmed. Bone Woman's presence released my burden. *You did it*, my priestess, she whispered, fierce and pleased. *Not the boy. The net!*

Her touch soothed, dialed back the migraine, and fed strength to my shaking body.

I laughed, a little cracked. "Too deep in the moment."

I said it to nobody and to everyone. The admission tasted of both salt and sugar.

Ash caught my eye across the dim and didn't smile—but the tight line of his mouth loosened a fraction. Beyond him, Patel finally opened the bag and handed Monica a beignet with shaking hands. She took a bite like a sacrament.

Onstage, two crew members knelt beside Calida, speaking fast into headsets. She wasn't dead. But she was done.

For now, done was enough.

The politicians' aides hammered at their phones with both thumbs, drafting statements for morning release. The press already had their footage. Lawyers were going to either withdraw or rewrite their actions. We'd handle messes, literal and metaphorical. Endless work ahead.

But the hum in the walls lightened. The weight tilted back toward upright. The Elysium Gate breathed easier.

A clerk murmured, "They're both going to collapse at this rate."

"Poor things," her partner replied. "Their presence is keeping this place standing."

For the first time in four nights, Ash and I got a full, uninterrupted night's sleep.

*Not together*, to my growing frustration.

\* \* \*

The saucer kissed the table as he set the mug in front of me. Steam curled up, lamplight throwing a warm ring across the rim.

"Happy birthday," he said, flat as a fact and soft as something he'd been rehearsing.

I blinked, half-expecting a punchline. "How'd you even know my birthday?"

He stirred his tea without looking up. "I looked it up on your resume."

"You're stalking me?"

"Due diligence." The half-smile didn't quite land. He set his spoon down with more care than necessary, watching me like he was memorizing details.

The room held honest silence—no TV hum, no clink of kitchenware, no building breathing. When he spoke, his voice was quieter than the lamps.

"I remember calendars poorly. Not because I don't want to, but because I think I will hold everything steady with one tidy action. Lock the doors. Light the wards. Pay the bills. The dead appreciate order. The living want messy—birthdays, arguments, apologies. Things that don't fit in ledgers."

His thumb rubbed the rim of his cup like smoothing a wound.

"I'm not proud of it. It's why I overdo the rest. If I'm perfect at rituals and schedules, I won't get punched in the gut by the things I missed. So, I work harder. Make lists. Put reminders with too many backup alarms. Show up twice. Triple-check. It's overcompensation. Fear in nice clothes."

"You're terrified of forgetting people?"

"Of losing them." His correction was small and precise. "Being the reason someone gets left behind. Going cold toward the living because the living are... difficult."

He leaned forward. Lamplight carved his cheekbones into softer planes.

"Of losing the hotel because I failed to see the rot. Losing my family because I prioritized order over presence. Of losing you because I dismissed you."

The air changed. He'd said that—temporary—weeks ago, and it had never left the room. Hearing him admit he feared he'd been the one to push it in stung.

"What do you mean, 'I've already failed you'?"

"If my presumptions ever left you exposed, then I've failed you. Not metaphorically: failed you. Too messy for a ledger. Because if I fail you, it won't be another name on my list. It will be you, Eliza. And I can't carry that much pain."

It was the sort of admission a man like Ash doesn't hand over lightly—that he had not only practical responsibility but actual, human fear of leaving someone in harm's way. It turned the neat ritual of tea into a hinge: small, domestic, and enormous.

I reached across the table and touched his fingers. They were warm and rough from work and worry.

"That scares you."

He nodded. "It terrifies me."

I'd watched him long enough to recognize it: the way he tallied every debt twice, checked locks three times, kept ledgers that already bled order onto the page. He pushed the scale with both hands, convinced a single second of release will tip the world.

And at that moment I understood.

He was the one who tipped it.

The brooding hours, the lists, the overcorrections—fear masquerading as control, not balance. He'd been alone too long, with only ghosts and ledgers for company.

Poor man. He didn't need another ledger to brood over.

He needed someone to care for.

I tugged him to his feet and passed his arms around my back.

"Hold on tight," I told him. "Start with me. Then care for everyone else you're afraid to lose."

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## 23 A Little Less Mr. Darcy, A Little More Mr. Right Now

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The elevator doors opened onto chaos.

Reporters packed the lobby three-deep, camera lights bleaching the marble floors white. A tripod scraped past the concierge desk, leaving black marks. Microphones bristled like a porcupine's back. Behind them, lawyers in slate suits huddled over folders, whispering with the intensity of vultures circling roadkill.

The check-in line snaked to the elevators. A man in a polo shirt waved his receipt overhead. "Refunds! I want my goddamn money back!"

"This is fraud!" A woman in yoga pants shook her phone at Nora behind the desk. "I'm calling my lawyer!"

Luggage towers rose at the bell stand—designer bags stacked against duffels, a child's rolling suitcase toppled sideways. Near the entrance, two staffers flanked a bride in her rehearsal dress, mascara streaking her cheeks in twin rivers.

Phones screamed from every direction. Nora cradled one handset while pressing another to her shoulder, scribbling with a pencil stub. Behind her, someone slammed down a receiver hard enough to crack the plastic.

Ash stood in the center of the storm.

He rolled his sleeves to the elbows, tie yanked loose, jaw clenched so tight the muscle jumped. He balanced a council aide's clipboard against one hip, two half-signed refund forms in his other hand, and pointed at Patel with his pen. "Channel 4, *outside*. No filming without signed releases."

"Yes, sir."

"Nora—log those refunds separately. I need duplicates flagged."

"Yes, Mr. Skotomerkis."

His gaze swept the room without stopping, cataloging threats, calculating responses. When a guest in khakis bellowed, "My lawyer will bury you by morning!" Ash's expression didn't shift. "Have your lawyer contact mine. Elevators are behind you."

A woman in a blazer shoved a clipboard at his chest. "Mr. Skotomerkis, the city requires immediate documentation of event-management protocols—"

"Put it in writing." He didn't look at her. "Hand it to my assistant."

He flicked his pen toward Nora's desk without looking, already moving on.

I squeezed past a cameraman's elbow. "Ash!"

His head snapped up. For half a second, his expression cracked—relief flooding through like light under a door. Then it sealed shut again, smooth as pulled curtains. He caught my elbow and steered me into the side hallway, moving me with the same careful urgency as someone rescuing a vase from a falling shelf.

His voice dropped low, meant only for me. "Darling, there's simply no time. Lawyers, federal inquiries, refunds—it's complete insanity. I have no choice." His eyes tracked back toward the lobby, hunting the next crisis. "Please understand."

His grip on my elbow loosened before I even replied.

He turned and moved toward the pandemonium.

The reporters surged forward the moment he reappeared, microphones thrust like spears. "Mr. Skotomerkis, how long has this behavior gone unchecked?" "Were minors at risk?" "Will you end the lease?"

His voice stayed level, clipped. "Guest safety is paramount. The matter is under review. We will honor all refunds."

Two more lawyers materialized from the hallway. One slid a subpoena across the desk. Ash signed something else and handed it back without reading it. The other murmured about compliance reviews. He nodded once. "You'll have your forms by the end of business."

I stood half in shadow, half in the lobby's fluorescent glare.

Hours ago, I'd torn Calida's spell apart with my bare hands. Now it was early evening, and I'd just dragged myself out of bed. The veve still hummed faintly in my chest, green threads coiled around my ribs like armor. I'd saved this hotel. Kept the walls from crushing everyone inside.

No one noticed.

Reporters didn't care. Lawyers didn't care. Guests cared about their money and their ruined vacations. And Ash—

Ash didn't have room for me either.

He was holding the hotel together through sheer force of will, one crisis at a time.

No space for me.

\* \* \*

The suite felt like a held breath.

Curtains drawn against the neon outside, only a weak lamp glowed in the corner. Someone had left a teapot on the counter, half-full and cold, cups ringed with dried scum.

Pel and Tel slumped on the couch, controllers gripped in white-knuckled hands. The TV showed a paused game—some alien landscape frozen mid-explosion. They weren't playing. Holding onto the controllers like life preservers, eyes flicking toward me and then away.

Ella sat cross-legged on the rug, hugging a pillow to her chest. She whispered something. Pel grunted. Tel muttered, "Yeah," without looking up. They circled around the truth without touching it, like the floor might give way if anyone spoke too loud.

I curled into the loveseat, notebook pressed against my ribs. The green power still hummed inside me—leftover current from ripping Calida's web apart thread by thread. None of them had felt it. No one in the lobby had felt it either.

I'd cracked the spell. Saved the hotel. And disappeared the second the lawyers opened their mouths.

Ash stared with hollow eyes. "No time."

No time for me.

The man whose world I'd kept from collapsing had brushed me aside with hollow apologies and walked back into the wolves.

Why does this hurt so much?

I knew he was drowning. I knew his calm was iron bent to breaking. But knowing didn't stop the sting.

Ella peeked over her pillow, lips parting like she wanted to speak. Then she hugged it tighter and looked away. Pel mashed his controller buttons, the game already paused. Tel muttered, "Lag," and his brother's laugh came out wrong—too sharp, too forced.

They were giving me space, the only way kids knew how.

Then came the sound: dry scales scraping wood.

Yuri's crown hissed as she coiled into the room. She didn't announce herself—never had to. The space shifted around her coils, furniture nudging aside like water parting for a ship.

"Liz?" Her voice was silk over stone. "What's troubling you, dear?"

I didn't move. Folded tighter into the loveseat, notebook a shield against my chest.

She came anyway. Arched over me until cool scales pressed against my cheek when I leaned into her. She didn't lift her hands, but her presence wrapped around me whole.

"He did it again," I whispered.

Her head tilted, sunglasses catching the lamplight. "Who... oh." Her tongue flickered, tasting the air. "You taste like wet chalk and ash. Thin. Metallic." She settled beside me, coils folding with liquid grace.

I squeezed the notebook harder. "He dismissed me. Again. I saved this entire goddamn hotel, and the next morning he doesn't have time for me? How many hoops must I jump through?"

"Ah. This is about the television show?"

"It's over now, I think. The whole lobby's full of people screaming at him."

"I see." Her coils shifted, lifting me like I weighed nothing, setting me back on the loveseat. She folded herself opposite, inscrutable behind those dark lenses. "He's drowning under the workload."

I said nothing. Then the embarrassment hit, hot and stupid, in my chest.

"Yeah," I muttered, slouching. "He really is."

Her crown hissed—amused, I think. "You already know the answer, but let me ask: you expected praise, didn't you?"

"Some." The word came out small. I felt small. "It was a pretty big deal."

"Yes. And we're grateful to have you, Liz. But the lack of affirmation isn't what wounded you." She leaned closer. "You felt rejected."

"Yes." My throat tightened. "And I know that's foolish. I know Ash is busy. I know he'll have time for me when the storm passes—"

"Those things are true." Her voice was gentle. "But emotions don't play fair. What hurts us, hurts. Lack of time isn't lack of love. Ash is carrying the weight of every soul here. He has nothing left for himself, so of course he has nothing left for you today. That doesn't mean he's heartless."

Her coils shifted, steady as stone. "He needs you to wait. To breathe. To endure, as we all must. His lack of time is the only shield keeping your pain from breaking him. If you love him—" She paused. "Don't show him this version of yourself."

The words landed like stones in water, rippling outward.

My head buzzed. "Yuri? Why do you keep talking about... love?"

She crossed her arms, staring at me through those blank, expressionless lenses. "Oh, please. Don't pretend you're dense. You're the most observant human I know, Eliza Dubois." Her crown twined and coiled, hissing in my direction. "It's time you rose and confronted reality. You are not blind; none of us are."

Silence.

The kind that pressed down heavier than shouting.

Ella tucked her chin into her pillow. Pel restarted the game and died in seconds, muttering about respawns. Tel's laugh was unkind and too loud. They were giving me space, circling wide around the bomb Yuri just dropped.

I sat there, notebook against my chest, the taste of ash still on my tongue.  
No argument left in me.

\* \* \*

Room service had brought the wine in a ridiculous silver bucket.

I'd abandoned the bucket an hour ago. Now I poured straight from the bottle—a cheap house red Ash probably kept in stock for bachelorette parties and breakups. Which I grimly realized qualified me in both categories. Horny *and* wrecked.

The couch swallowed me. My knees stuck out, hair falling into my face. Yuri's words circled like vultures: You taste like wet chalk and ash.

I threw back another swallow. Thin, sour, sharp enough to burn when I gulped instead of sipped.

Ash's dismissal played on repeat: No time. Later. His lips moved, eyes flickered, but the result never changed. When I'd saved the goddamn hotel. Even when I bled for it. I was the only one brave enough to touch the bone piles in the laboratory—

He was silent. Withdrawn. Uninterested.

"He doesn't care," I muttered, sloshing wine into my glass and spilling half across the room service tray. "Bored with me. Or he hated it. One night. Tramp. Of no consequence." My voice cracked. "Compared me with his centuries of lovers and decided I wasn't enough."

The spellbook lay where I'd left it earlier, tucked under a folded napkin like contraband.

I'd grabbed the spellbook on impulse when I fled the Lab earlier—one of the forbidden ones from the high shelf, the kind Ash would've stopped me from touching if he'd been there. But he wasn't there. He never was anymore.

It sat on the counter now, leather cracked and sigils crawling across the cover. I should've returned it. Instead, I ordered wine.

Not my four-star spellbook—oh no. This one was heavy, the leather cracked and stamped with sigils that crawled away from prolonged stares. Someone had filed it on the "do not touch" shelf in the Lab.

That made me want it more.

I tugged it free. The spine sighed, dust motes spiraling upward. Wineglass in one hand, forbidden magic in the other.

Perfect combo.

*Binding Sigil for Recognition and Permanence.*

The pages felt wrong under my fingers—too warm, too eager to fall open to exactly what I wanted to see. I should've recognized that as a warning.

My fingertip traced the words. This enchantment will bind the caster to an organization, weaving them into its fabric so they are vital, their presence a necessity.

The hotel itself would recognize my worth. The staff. Ash. Everyone would see me, finally. I gave my blood, and they brushed me aside. No more.

Almost *too perfect* for my needs.

The lines looked intricate but not impossible. Circles, intersecting diagonals, a spiral like a coiled snake. I had chalk—everyone had chalk down here. Cornmeal too, if I raided the kitchen. Ash had lectured me about sacred numbers. Three was sacred. Three will be enough.

The wineglass tilted in my hand. "I'll do this," I said to the empty suite. "I'll show them."

Some sober part of me knew this was stupid—knew I should wait, ask Yuri, someone. That voice faded to a whisper. I'd faced down Calida's death magic. I'd channeled Bone Woman herself. I could handle one little recognition spell.

The wine made it sound reasonable.

The chalk squeaked across the tile as I bent over the floor, sketching the first lines. Not perfect—the circles wobbled, bent like funhouse mirrors. My head spun. I giggled. The book said intent mattered more than geometry.

Wine spilled toward the sigil. Dark red pooling in the grooves. Maybe spirits liked offerings?

The last line snapped into place—finished by something eager, not me. The spiral closed, glowing...orange? *That can't be right.*

"*Ruh roh,*" I whispered. The warmth of the wine vanished, leaving cold clarity in its place.

The wineglass tipped from my hand and shattered.

The air thickened. Shadows crawled into the lines like lava ink poured into cracks. My hair rose with static. A hum deepened beneath my feet, vibrating through bone.

"I don't—wait. Stop—"

The spiral pulsed once. Then buckled.

Light flared upward—too bright, too fast—burning my eyes. The sigil twisted, warping the floor beneath it. Space folded like crumpled paper.

Something pressed through. A half-formed limb. Talons stretching—too real, too close.

It caught my arm.

One swipe. Searing cold and heat at once, like dry ice branding skin. I screamed.

"*Oh shit oh shit shit—Bone Woman!*"

Her name tore from my throat.

Green light rushed in, cutting across the orange. Threads tightened like vines, crushing the thing back. Its claws scraped furrows in the chalk, screeching like nails on glass, until the sigil shattered.

The thing vanished.

Silence returned—jagged, sharp, ringing in my ears.

I collapsed, clutching my forearm. A deep red, irregular stain spread across my forearm, flat and permanent like a birthmark, a constant reminder of my foolishness.

"Stupid girl." Bone Woman's voice hissed through the room, though her presence gentled the trembling threads around me. "You called what was not yours. You bleed for it."

I sobbed into my sleeve; the scar throbbing with each pulse.

Something cool brushed my cheek—not quite touch, not quite air. "You will carry this reminder, priestess. Until you learn restraint."

I wiped my nose with the back of my hand, humiliated and grateful in equal measure. "I'm sorry. I wanted—"

"I know." Her glow softened, lingering like warmth from a dying fire. "We will talk. But tonight—sleep. Before you do worse."

Her presence dimmed, but the weight of it stayed, heavy and undeniable.

I curled on the loveseat, heart hammering against my ribs, whispering into the empty air: "Thank you. For not leaving me alone."

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## 24 Unworthy

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The suite reeked of stale chalk and wine. A glass had rolled under the sofa, and a veve half-scribbled across the carpet looked like a child's tantrum scrawl. My head pulsed with every heartbeat, too loud, too heavy. Cheapass wine and bitterness don't mix.

Bone Woman had pulled me out of the spiral, but she hadn't erased the taste of it. The memory of my own drunken laughter mixed with magic still clung to the air like stale perfume. My tongue felt thick, coated in shame and fermented grapes. I touched the chalk dust in my hair—gritty, gray—and thought of Calida's glittering stage presence. At least she'd earned her con. I was drunk on my glow, waving power around like a sparkler at a bonfire.

I pressed my face into the pillow. The darkness did nothing for the throbbing or the tightness in my chest that made each breath feel like lifting weights.

The door creaked open.

"I brought croissants." Ella's voice, soft as tissue paper. The faint smell of butter and flour drifted in with her, too rich for my stomach. "Yuri made them."

I didn't move.

She set the plate on the dresser with exaggerated care, the delicate placement you'd use near a sleeping baby or a ticking bomb. Then she crept closer. "Sis... you look like hell. Please let me help?"

I rolled halfway onto my side. Ella stood by the bed in jeans and an oversized hoodie, fingers twisted together like she was wringing out wet cloth. A girl of seventeen still offered croissants and patience as a cure.

My throat closed. She deserved better than I.

"You don't have to." My voice rasped, the words scraping out of my throat. "Not after last night. Never. I made this mess, and you—" I cut myself off, waving a limp hand at the wreckage of chalk and glasses. "You don't need to see this."

Her brow furrowed. "But you cleaned up for me. When I was a mess."

The laugh scraped out of me, dry and bitter. Pain spiked through my skull like someone had driven a nail between my eyes. "And look how I turned out. A shining example, huh?"

Ella took a half-step closer, then hesitated, clutching her sleeves in her fists. "It's not the same. You helped me. Let me help you."

The croissants sat on the dresser, still warm enough to shine with butter. My stomach clenched. The smell—yeast and richness and Yuri's careful work—made bile rise in my throat. Kindness I didn't deserve tasted worse than the wine.

"Ella." I forced myself upright long enough to put a hand on her shoulder. Her hoodie was soft. I felt unworthy of touching her at all, and I hated it. "Not today. Please. I can't... let you see me like this."

Her eyes filled. She nodded anyway. "Okay."

She lingered, weight shifting from foot to foot, caught between leaving and digging in. "You don't need to do this alone," she whispered.

The door clicked shut behind her.

I collapsed back onto the pillow. Her words sat in my chest like hot coals.

Solitude was safer. Keep the door closed, keep the poison contained. If I stayed in here long enough, perhaps she'd stop saving me.

Her voice echoed, even after she left. "...*do this alone.*"

It burned worse than the headache.

\* \* \*

The door closed behind Ella, and I buried my head again, willing the headache to swallow me whole. The soft thrum of green magic remained under my ribs, an insistent, guilty echo of my actions.

*Bone Woman?* I called out with a thought.

Her answer rattled through me almost before I finished forming it. *You called, child?*

"I'm unsuitable," I whispered. "My inclusion was a mistake."

*Ah, there it is.* Her laugh clacked through me like bones in a basket. *Unworthy. You feel unworthy. How many times will you run in that circle before you see how useless it is?*

"I nearly broke everything." Not an accusation, not a plea. The facts laid bare.

Yes.

"It was careless. I was drunk... sloppy." My throat tightened. "And loud. I wanted to shine. I wanted them to look at me. I put everyone at risk."

Silence spread like ink spilled across paper. My words hung in the air, growing uglier by the second.

Her voice moved through it, a metronome. *You were careless. Drunk. You were loud. All true. Also—do you see what else happened?*

I swallowed. "What else is there to see?"

*That you reached for the right thing, she said, calm as bone settling into earth. You saw the seam. Pulled at the net, not the boy. You understood more than you admitted to yourself.*

I pressed my palms over my eyes. "Accident. Instinct. Not wisdom."

*Instinct is where wisdom begins, she countered, calm as earth settling after rain. The mistake was not in the reach. The mistake was the costume you wrapped around it. You wanted the miracle to be noticed. You aspired to be noticed. The ruin was not from your ambition, but your desire for public approval.*

The words stung like iodine on a cut. Clean. Necessary. True.

"I'm supposed to be your priestess." My throat closed again. "And look at me. What kind of priestess is this?"

Her answer came with the warmth of a grin hidden in bone. *Mine. And I am quite proud of you.*

My vision blurred. I blinked, and tears ran hot down my cheeks.

*You are not temporary to me, Eliza. Nor will you ever be. You helped birth me, and that is forever. Her thoughts warmed until they filled me, marrow-deep. But you keep feeding that old wound, the one that whispers "disappointing." You think applause will stitch it shut. Foolish girl. An audience is not a family. Admirers aren't loves.*

I shook my head. "But I craved permanence. And instead I acted like a tourist. I reached for spectacle, not service."

*So you learned. Good. Learn further. Magic is not a toy for shining—it is a responsibility. A net, not a mirror. If you treat it as a stage, it will devour you as quickly as Calida.*

I shoved my sleeve back. The wine-colored blotch on my forearm looked angrier than yesterday—not a bruise, not fading. A brand. I touched it once and winced at the chill radiating under my skin, cold enough to ache.

Her words clicked into place like stones in a wall. Ugly but solid.

She went on, softer now. *You need a symbol. Something to ground you when you doubt. You will doubt again. And when fear whispers you are temporary, you must have a reminder louder than fear.*

My fingers drifted to my sternum, where I used to paint her veve in chalk every morning. "Like... a tattoo?"

*If you wish. Approval crackled in her tone, brittle but certain. Or anything you choose. A ring, a ribbon, a scar. The form is less important than the choice. It is for*

*you and no one else. A small sacrifice, chosen and personal. To remind you: permanent. Not temporary.*

The idea settled in my chest—strange, heavy, unglamorous. Not a trophy to show off. A tether to hold me down when the wind picked up.

*You dither because you are afraid of permanence, she said, voice low as a rattle in a coffin. You cling to "temporary," mistaking it for safety. But priestesses do not live provisional lives, Eliza. Choose, and the mark will be yours.*

Her presence dimmed, though I still felt her weight pressing against my ribs. *When you are ready. Until that day, choose love over fear.*

The words reverberated within me like bells after the ringer went silent.

The croissants sat cooling on the dresser, untouched. I swung my legs off the bed and sat in the wreckage of chalk dust and empty glasses, head pounding, but something steadier underneath the ache.

I wrote in my notebook with a trembling hand: Magic is responsibility. Choose love over fear. Claim your place. Then I folded the page, setting the crease with my thumb as a seal on the vow.

No applause. Not a spectacle. But finally, this was a beginning.

\* \* \*

The tome sat open on my lap, heavy as a ledger. I'd skimmed this section before—basic healing, practical fixes. Today, the words rearranged themselves into promises.

"Oh, my God." My finger traced the heading. "No more cramps, ever. Really?" My pulse kicked up. "That alone makes this worth the tuition."

Another page. Complete control over conception and prevention. The squeal burst out before I caught it. "No surprise babies, no pills, no side effects. Bone Woman, do you even understand what this means?"

*I understand, child, she said. The rattle in her voice hinted at amusement.*

I barreled on. "Hair color changes. Skin tone shifts. I wonder how Ash feels about redheads." I tugged at the hair on my leg and groaned. "And never shave again. Holy hell."

I flipped a page and glanced at my reflection in the mirror across the room. Fingers hooked under my camisole, I squinted at my chest, turning left, then right.

"I think the left one's a smidge smaller." I swiveled and compared them with the critical eye I'd learned from a thousand magazine covers. "Yep. Smaller. Add that to the fix-it list."

Silence. Not the amused kind. The kind that lands like a gavel.

"What?" I said, defensive. "It's right here in the book. Adjust symmetry. Simple."

Bone Woman's reply came slow and steady, like stone being set one deliberate piece at a time. *Child. You chatter about lists, but hear me: this body of bones, this rattle of wire and green light? This is me, as you made me. I leave its wiring as you made it. I am a singularity. Change, and I become less than your gift made me. I am unique. I am mine.*

The breath flew from my lungs as if from a shove.

"You mean you don't want—" I waved vaguely at myself, cheeks hot. "—skin? Or, you know. Add-ons?"

*No. Absolute. Not one stitch. Not a single scrap of false flesh. I alter nothing of this truth; I do not betray myself.*

I let the camisole drop. Heat prickled up my neck. "You make some strong points. I'll... scratch a few things off my shopping list."

The silence that followed wasn't scolding. Understanding settled over me—heavy, patient, worse than any rebuke.

And it clicked. I'd wanted perfect symmetry for Ash's eyes. For permanence through perfection. The same trap, wearing different clothes.

Across the room, the tome on Enhancing Physical Pleasures leered at me from the shelf, gilt spine winking in the lamplight.

"Not. Now." I glared at it. It smirked back.

I snapped the tome shut—heart pounding, hands shaking—and dragged my notebook close. In ugly block letters I scrawled: Not for them. For me. Capability doesn't equal correctness.

One thing that needed fixing had nothing to do with vanity: my left knee.

It throbbed even now, stiff from weeks of stairs and standing shifts and pretending it didn't hurt. My limp had become such a constant companion I barely noticed it anymore—unless I did, and then it felt like failure.

I placed both palms over it, closed my eyes, and breathed. Not for applause this time. Not to look good. For function. For being able to do the work.

The hum rose—not a crackling flare but a steady warmth, green light slipping through bone into tendon and joint. The ache eased by degrees. Tightness loosened like a knotted rope finally giving way. I bent my knee, cautious, waiting for the sharp stab that had lived there for years.

It didn't come.

My vision blurred. I blinked, and tears dripped onto my shin. So ordinary. Not miraculous. A knee long overdue for a fix, finally...fixed.

Yes, Bone Woman murmured, approval soft as a hand on my shoulder. *That is work. Not glamour. No show. The body is the first temple. Learn to keep it well.*

I sniffed and wiped my cheek with the back of my wrist, smearing tears and yesterday's mascara. "One step," I whispered.

Words stared up at me from the page: Because you should. Not because you can.

For the first time since the disaster, I trusted them.

For once, Bone Woman didn't rattle or laugh. She stayed with me, her presence simple and approving, as I set both books aside and lay back with my hand over my sternum where the veve will go.

The tickle under my ribs persisted, but the guilt was gone. What remained felt like a promise.

"Bone Woman?"

*Yes, dear?*

"Will I ever grow up? Or am I a Lost Boy forever?"

*You never notice how far you've already come. Don't surrender. Work. The rainbow's end is forever one more step away.*

\*\*\*

I had a wicked idea in the shower. Give me a break—I was growing tired of waiting. I was in the mood, okay? I smelled clean, I'd taken the extra time to shave my legs... Don't judge. In my shoes, you'd do the same.

Towel dry or blow-dry? I hesitated, staring at the damp strands sticking to my shoulders. Wet hair said, "Just showered, thinking of you." Had to be sexier, right? I nodded at my reflection. Decision made.

This required setup. Where to put the phone, which chair caught the best angle, whether the lamp gave me a soft glow or interrogation spotlight. I shuffled things around, set it up, tore it down, set it up again. If Ash saw me now—the glamorous priestess of the Gate, rearranging a side chair like a stagehand on minimum wage...

Costume—or lack thereof—was another question. "Fresh out of the shower" suggested skin. Only skin. Still, I dithered. Pajamas? Too domestic. Towel? Too obvious. Naked? Oh sure, Eliza, way to skip ten steps ahead and combust your chances.

Bra and panties, then. The middle ground, the Goldilocks zone: not quite a relaxed long-time lover, not quite a total tramp. A woman determined to be seen again. Understatements in undergarments.

I rifled through my drawer and found the set—translucent, delicate lace with elegant, soft concealment. Not innocent. Not a tramp.

I adjusted the straps twice, then a third time, muttering at the mirror. Sexiness wasn't natural to me—I'd learned to construct it. A tower of shaky blocks waiting for the topple.

So I stacked what I had: smooth legs shaved clean, a dab of perfume behind each ear, a swipe of gloss that caught the lamplight. Skin was non-negotiable in this scenario. Gooseflesh time.

I checked the phone angle one last time, then caught sight of the bags under my eyes. Mystery or exhaustion? I dabbed concealer with a fingertip, swore when it smudged, and laughed at myself.

There. Not perfect, but intentional. I was sending a message. Not "temporary." Not "helper." Even "priestess." Just Eliza, skin still damp from the shower, reaching across the void toward the man she...

Deep breath. Slow exhale. Get my heart rate down, give the goosebumps a chance to recede. Only one shot at this. Please, Goddess, don't let me make a fool of myself.

Let's do this. *He's worth the risk, Liz.* Go get him.

My finger hovered over the video call app, shaking. Ten seconds of witchy body control—force that last burst of adrenaline away, shoo! Soft sigh to myself. *Stop dawdling, witch.*

I pressed.

The call connected with that familiar electronic chime, and there he was—Ash's face filling my screen, eyes widening as he took in the sight of me. The surprise was instant, unmistakable, followed by something darker and hungrier that made my pulse skip a beat.

"Eliza." His voice was rough, like I'd woken him from sleep, though the background showed his office desk. "What are you—" He stopped, swallowing. "...oh, Goddess!"

Heat bloomed across my chest, up my neck. Under his gaze, I felt both exposed and in control—a contradiction that made my skin hum.

"Hi." I reached for sultry and landed somewhere between breathless and terrified. "I was thinking of you."

"You're going to be the death of me," he breathed, and there was something raw in his voice that made my carefully constructed confidence wobble. "Do you have any idea what you're doing to me right now?"

I shifted, letting the lamplight catch my collarbone. "I expect so. You play by the rules, Ash? Rule one: don't have a stroke." I cracked a wry grin. "Rule two: you will not leave that chair until I release you. Agreed?"

"I solemnly, absolutely will not move." Paper rustled as he folded something on his desk. His pupils narrowed like a hunter's, then softened the next breath. "I promise."

"Good." I tipped my chin and let the lamp wash the hollows of my clavicle. His pupils dilated. Confidence rocketed through me. *He's not mortified. He relishes this. Let's lift his...spirits.*

"In the shower, I was shaving my legs." I leaned back in the chair and pulled my left leg up—near vertical, knee near my ear, toes pointed at the ceiling. "This is my bad knee, Ash. See? The scar's gone."

I held the pose because drama was part of the show. My calf burned from the stretch, but the pain felt clean and earned—more anthem than apology. The lamp gilded the curve of my shin. Smooth skin replaced the scar; the memory of trouble smoothed away.

"Perfect leg now, isn't it?" I gave it a fond pat, fingers trailing deliberately along my inner thigh.

Contradictions warred across Ash's face. He looked tired, but his jaw had gone slack and his eyes were wide, alert. "You—" He closed his mouth like whatever word he'd been choosing wasn't enough. "You did that?"

"Mmm-hmm. So anyway, while I was shaving, I started wondering." I waved my fingers toward my crotch, knowing they'd be offscreen from his end. "What does Ash prefer down there? Smooth or natural? Landing strip?"

He shook his head. "Oh no no no. I'm not falling into that trap. It's your body, Eliza—beautiful as it is. Dealer's choice."

I pouted, showing him my best doe-eyes. "Tiny clue, a hint?"

I had no strong preference between the options, but *I wanted him to think about it*. A lot. Like every night.

Ash's mouth twitched like he was biting back a laugh, but his eyes had that steady, dangerous weight. "A hint? Fine. Whatever makes you feel confident. Confidence is the sexiest thing you wear, Eliza."

He lifted one hand—pen still between his fingers—and pointed it at the camera like a gavel. "And that is the only safe answer I'm giving, so stop baiting me."

But his grin gave him away—half smug, half undone.

"You're baitable? You must've missed the lures I've been casting for the last weeks, then. Perhaps I'm too subtle." My hands slipped behind me and found the bra clasp. "I now see you demand a more...blunt approach."

I pulled my bra away, dangling it from a single strap, and allowing it to fall out of the video frame.

"What do you think?"

*Subtle, my ass. Somewhere, Victoria's Secret was drafting a cease-and-desist. This lingerie set, to me, was now worth every goddamn dime. I'm going to get it bronzed.*

Ash's breath hitched, slow and audible even through the little speaker. "Eliza."

He folded his hands around the pen, jaw tightening like he was choosing whether to rip the world in half or sign a check. Then the pen tapped against his knuckles once, twice. "You absolute menace."

A smile unfurled at the corner of his mouth. "Okay. That was unfair. That was brilliant and unfair." He straightened in his chair, voice thinning with something like reverence. "You look—God. Stop doing that to me."

One of my fingertips traced the curve of my breast, passing below the nipple. "Who, me?" The surge of confidence hit me again, like a drug.

He held the stare for a beat longer, the gavel-pointing hand lowering, then steadied. "I remain commendably stationary. I remain seated. But if you keep using guerrilla tactics like that, I will have to file an official protest."

I grinned, breathless, a little buzzed on the small, clean triumph of it. "File away, Mr. Skotomerkis, I accept. File your protest in person."

His smile softened, and gentleness threaded the mischief. "Then go. Finish your day. And—Eliza?"

"Yeah?"

"Round two, and I'm not waiting long."

I laughed, the sound bright and pleased. "Noted. And ditto, damn it! I now release you. Paperwork needs a hero."

He shook his head. "And I need another long, cold shower."

The screen dimmed as he turned back to his desk.

Palms flat against my sternum. One day, a veve will pulse there.

I savored the warm glow of being seen and chosen.

I picked up my bra and got ready for work. Tonight, the hotel laundry will be a steamy place. And yes, I dreamed about the next tumble.

*Of the dryers!* You have a filthy mind.

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## 25 Golden Chains

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My rebuilt knee bent without clicking. I pushed off the hotel steps, ponytail swinging, yoga pants clinging to thighs that hadn't run in years. The Mississippi sprawled brown and lazy beside me, morning light breaking silver across its surface.

Four hundred meters. That's the most I promised myself. Perhaps eight hundred if the joint performed as optimally as it now felt.

My calves started screaming at two hundred. By six, my glutes joined the rebellion, and every rubber-soled slap against pavement sent shock waves through protesting arches. The old basketball shoes—ancient, flattened things I'd found under my bed—were punishing me for years of neglect.

But my knee? Silent. Strong. Nary a whisper of complaint from it.

I ground out the full fifteen hundred meters—a metric mile, thank you very much—then staggered to a bench and walked it off like a drunken duck. Sweat plastered my shirt to my spine. My feet were filing for divorce papers.

The knee didn't stop me. That was a miracle.

Back in my room, I sank into bathwater hot enough to boil pasta, propping my battered paperback on the tub's edge. My feet throbbed in open mutiny, but no muscle cream required—perks of being a wicked witch. Speaking of wickedness, the toy box called out to me from the underwear drawer. Not tonight, faithful friends. Liz is tired.

Time to flog this body back into track shape. Eliza's orders, and Bone Woman's. First, I needed to shop for quality running shoes. I considered the idea of Ella as my workout buddy.

\* \* \*

The conference room smelled like burnt coffee and stale glazed donuts—the universal perfume of "we mean business." A doorstop wedged the door open. Cool air from the mezzanine flowed toward the table, where Ash had spread ledgers and folders out like battle plans.

He stood at the head, not hiding behind paperwork. Shoulders back. Voice level. The man you called when storms tore down the fence.

"All right," he said. "No half-measures. We will move on Calida tomorrow morning."

The words landed like a gavel. For weeks I'd dodged, joked, made light to cover the ice in my gut. This time my grin came with teeth behind it. "Good. I'm done watching her bleed people dry. Let's drag those sequins into daylight."

Bone Woman hummed approval in the back of my skull, warmth spreading green through my ribs. She trusted me. And I trusted her back.

Amélie hunched over her laptop, cycling through Calida Experience footage. "She says 'Corbin' here. Twice." She jabbed the screen. "Who the hell is Corbin?"

Wes cleared his throat and slid a thumb drive across the table with two fingers. "Evidence cache. Financial irregularities, falsified contracts, unreported payouts, a mountain of NDA violations. Amélie and I built it together."

Amélie sat straighter than I'd ever seen her, hands trembling but eyes steady as stone. "Enough to keep her in federal court until the heat death of the universe. Long enough for the FBI to notice. The sexual misconduct's documented too."

Gary folded his arms, leaning back until his chair creaked. "They'll notice. But they'll also ask how much the hotel knew. How much we covered up by hosting her shows. If the Gate was complicit, we'll be drowning in subpoenas."

I caught his gaze and held it. "Then we tell the truth. She used us. The Gate isn't her accomplice—it's her victim."

Gary's brow furrowed, then smoothed. He gave one slow nod. "Fair enough."

Ash tapped the table twice with his knuckles, decisive. "Gary, coordinate with the NOPD. I'll reach my federal contacts. I want her off this property with every camera in the city watching."

"On it." Gary's thumb was already dancing across his phone screen.

I glanced around the table. Wes, steady and sharp as a blade. Amélie, fierce in ways Calida never wanted her to be. Gary, the anchor. Ash, the leader he kept pretending he wasn't.

And me? No more hedging.

"Tomorrow," I said, voice level. "We end it."

\* \* \*

The raid came with the sunrise.

Dozens of officers in navy windbreakers flooded the lobby, voices clipped, movements choreographed. The news cameras followed, lenses glinting, boom mics catching every squeak of tactical boots and metallic click of handcuffs.

Calida emerged from the ballroom in a messy state. Her gown was a mess of gold sequins, her mascara smeared, and her hair was a bird's nest. For the first time since I'd met her, she looked smaller than life. Her wan smile cracked when the first camera flash exploded, and broke while they read the warrant.

The crowd outside the glass doors roared. She lifted her shackled wrists halfway, maybe to wave, or to blow a kiss. But the agents flanking her kept moving, and the crowd's jeers chased her through the doors. Perp walked.

I stood at the mezzanine railing, Bone Woman's hum steady in my chest. No victory lap. No fairy-tale ending. Just justice, finally catching up.

Beside me, Amélie drew a slow breath. "The girls," she whispered.

We both looked down. Half a dozen of Calida's nymphs lingered by the ballroom doors, sequined costumes clutched to their chests, faces pale and lost.

"I'll take them." Amélie's voice didn't waver. "They deserve better than being left adrift."

Wes rested a hand on her shoulder, pride and protectiveness radiating from the gesture.

Ash joined me at the railing, his normal presence subdued but solid as oak. "You did well," he murmured.

I let out the breath I'd been holding for weeks. "We all did."

Golden morning light spilled through the atrium windows, harsh and brilliant. Calida shuffled between federal agents, sequins catching sun like the last gasp of a dying star. She looked back once, eyes wide, as if pleading for someone to save her.

No one moved.

A bellman appeared beside Ash with a folded note.

Ash read it, expression shifting through a dozen micro-emotions I couldn't name. "The owners just checked into the Presidential Suite." His eyes met mine. "My parents. Are you free for dinner tonight? I've been... summoned."

\* \* \*

I caught myself in the mirror for the third time, smoothing the skirt. The bodice forced me to stand straighter; silk whispered against my collarbones, and my knees wobbled. Pretty and feminine was my kryptonite. High school had been jeans and sneakers, being taller than most boys and pretending not to care. Now here I was, dressed like every secret I'd never confessed.

"Was this gothic nightmare your idea?" I asked.

Ash tilted his head, examining me. "It's neither Gothic nor Victorian. The dress is a classic A-line in black. The frill and laced bodice make it neo-gothic ornamented, at best. Victorians didn't wear knee-length, Eliza."

I gaped at him. "Where on earth did you pick up couture?"

"In Paris."

"Don't make me pummel you. Which century?"

He didn't answer, only smirked. Typical.

"You look stunning. Join my parents and me for dinner tonight? It's not... wise to refuse a summons from my Mother."

Oh, fabulous. Parents. My stomach clenched like a fist. "Look, Ash, the dress is beautiful. But I've got too many bony elbows and knobby shoulders to really pull it off. It's not shadowstuff, is it?"

"I gave you my word. And at least it isn't wool. Anyone who's worn a Victorian woolen gown knows to be thankful for that."

"Oh, my stars and garters." My hands smoothed the skirt again before I caught myself. "Ash, you don't understand the significance of wearing gowns like this for me."

His eyes gleamed. "I've an inkling, dear. I've seen you taking off prettier things."

"Mmm-hmm. Don't be boorish; that was entirely for your benefit." I hugged him tight, half to hide the flush creeping up my neck, and brushed his cheek with a kiss. "Don't let it swell your head; I still owe you a serious beating. Let's go meet your folks before my blood sugar drops precipitously."

"Your bra strap's showing," he said, deadpan.

"What? It is not. Brat!"

"Tell me more about your garters," he said. "With stars?"

I shot him a glare. "Sweet Polly Purebred knows nothing. Vicious, unfounded rumors."

\* \* \*

Vanderbilt's whispered money through the wallpaper. Soft lights burnished wood paneling the color of burnt caramel. A piano drifted something languid across crystal that caught light like trapped stars. Champagne bottles gleamed in silver buckets, each one worth more than my first car. Real Champagne. From Champagne.

Ash exchanged words with the maître d', who bowed to me—actually bowed—before leading us toward the rear. The Magnates' Table. It overlooked the entire dining room from a raised platform, attended by its own steward and a squadron of specialized waiters who moved in and out like synchronized swimmers.

My knees wobbled again. Silk clung cool against my skin. Ash's hand brushed the small of my back, steadying me. I wished it steadied my pulse.

The seated couple rose as we approached. A distinguished gentleman wore a tuxedo that looked older than Louisiana. The lady wore a sparkling off-the-shoulder gown that flowed to the floor, something out of the 1940s but somehow timeless. Both appeared middle-aged, about sixty, with the polish that came from centuries of practice.

"Ash! Despite your tardiness, it's a joy to see you!" The woman's voice rang like crystal. "And the adorable Eliza we've received so many ebullient reports about!"

I side-eyed Ash. His tiny headshake replied, wasn't me.

"Come join us, please. That dress is beautiful, Eliza. I am Hecate, and this is my husband, Charon."

Servers materialized to hold our chairs. "Thank you," I whispered to my server, sinking into upholstery that likely was vintage-expensive. Others filled wine glasses with dense, bright yellow wine that caught the light like liquid sun.

"Have the police and lobby riots calmed down by now, Ash?" Hecate's eyebrow arched like a drawn bow, voice sharp as scissor blades.

"Yes, Mother. The staff and I handled everything."

"Everything?" Her raptor gaze swiveled to me. "The other matter we discussed?"

"She wants to know if you've forgiven me for my rudeness, Eliza. I don't know how to answer that one, Mother."

Hecate's smile was all enamel and challenge.

My fingernails worked the napkin in my lap, but I kept my voice steady. "He apologized. More than once, with sincerity. That's enough for me."

Ash's hand brushed mine under the table, brief, grateful. His voice followed, clipped but firm: "Mother, Eliza is not on trial."

The wine sparkled golden between us, sharp as sunlight. I refused to blink first.

"Well then, we forgive and forget. Excellent news. I apologize, Eliza. Our family dynamic often falls short of relaxed. Let's forget the recent troubles and enjoy our evening, shall we?"

For everyone's sake, I re-sheathed my claws. Her smile looked genuine now, even gracious.

Bone Woman giggled in my brain. *Oh, I like her!*

Hecate's eyebrow cocked. She leaned closer, examining my eyes like a jeweler studying diamonds.

"Pardon me, Eliza. Is there someone else in there with you tonight?"

*Fuggin oracles.*

"Only an entire metropolitan hotel. Bone Woman, come on out."

Bone Woman materialized in the empty chair with a pop and clatter of bones.

Chandelier light caught her ribcage as she settled, bones shuffling like cards. She twirled her wineglass between skeletal fingers, acting like she belonged at the Magnates' Table.

In a way, she did.

"Bonsoir," she purred inside our skulls, ping-pong ball eyes glowing merrily. "I love family dinners. Such hospitality! Such tension!"

Bone Woman sniffed the wine. "Idun's vintage is of no use to me. Eliza, for your own good, I'd suggest infrequent and cautious sips."

Hecate's lips tightened, not quite hiding her intrigue. Charon exhaled and resumed flipping coins over his knuckles, metal whispering against skin. Ash pinched the bridge of his nose.

I bit my tongue.

The universe held its breath while the Goddess of Magic and the Elysium Gate's Loa embodiment sized each other up.

"I see." Hecate refolded her napkin with precise creases. "The Gate itself. I'm honored to make your acquaintance, Bone Woman."

"Hiya, toots. Warn mortals about that vintage. You're a sneaky bitch, aintcha? Let's have a talk about your inadequate maintenance budget and your scandalous treatment of your boy."

Ash choked on his water.

Hecate folded her hands. "The maintenance budget will no longer be our concern. Charon and I have decided to retire."

\* \* \*

Charon's coins froze mid-flip, balanced on his knuckles like a row of moons. Hecate's words slid across the table as casually as if she'd announced dessert.

Retire.

Ash straightened, composure fraying at the edges. "Mother—"

She lifted one hand, regal, silencing him. "The keys, the ledgers, the legacy—will pass into your keeping. Yours and Eliza's."

My fork stopped halfway to my mouth. The bodice constricted my ribs. Breathing became a challenge.

Bone Woman clapped her hands together, delighted. "Promotion party! Streamers and balloons, darlings."

I reached for my wine. The apple-sweet shimmer trembled against my lips. Interesting flavor—syrupy, golden, with an edge that made my teeth ache.

"Eliza." Ash's voice cut through. "Don't touch the wine."

"Not dry enough. But what else is disappointing?"

"It's made from Idun's apples. Immortality in a glass. That sip won't do you harm, but a full glass is...forever."

I set the wineglass down inch by careful inch, staring in horror at the serpent-venom gleam within it.

"Uh huh," Bone Woman added. "Like I said, she's a sneaky bitch."

Hecate's smile curved like a scythe. "Sneaky, perhaps. But generous. The choice is hers."

The wine shimmered under the chandeliers, daring me. My throat felt dry as paper, palms damp. Forever, offered as casually as an hors d'oeuvre.

Ash's hand settled over mine. "Don't spiral. I've got you," he whispered. "Nothing in haste."

"What if we don't accept?" Ash asked.

Charon's coins clicked once, twice, then stilled. His gaze weighed on me like a ferryman measuring fare.

My knees wanted to knock, but I sat straighter, chin up. Forever thought it rattled me? It's gotta work harder.

Hecate folded her hands, voice smooth as cream. "If you decline, we remain until the Gate rots. And rot it will. Mortals riot in the lobby, politicians sniff at the doors, and yet you will stand aside and fiddle while Rome burns?"

Bone Woman snorted, green fire flickering in her sockets. "Told you, precious. Maintenance budget. About time someone stepped up."

Ash's fingers tightened over mine, steady but trembling underneath.

I managed a smile, brittle as spun glass. "You make it sound like choosing between a crown and a coffin. Where's the middle option? Say... a sabbatical?"

Hecate's scythe-smile returned. "In eternity, my dear, there are no sabbaticals."

"How about you stop intimidating everyone? You want our help running your hotel? Ask us!"

"No, Eliza. Not only the hotel. The entire shooting match. Psychopomps, spirits, escorting the dead to their last rest, release them in joy and happiness to their end. That's the job." She glanced at Ash. "It has some perks."

Ash's jaw flexed, but his voice stayed level. "Perks. A quaint word for eternity on call."

Bone Woman leaned forward, elbows on the linen, chin cradled in bony hands. "Sounds like my dream gig. The kingdom's keys, the darkest secrets."

I stared at the golden wine, then at Hecate. My pulse hammered in my ears. "You don't want caretakers. You want heirs. Stewards of the crossroads. And—" my eyes flicked to Ash "—grandbabies?"

Hecate's smile widened. "Legacy, Eliza. A house needs future generations."

I tightened my grip on Ash's hand, both of us trembling now. "Yeah. And a house also needs consent."

Hecate leaned back, fingertips stroking a note from her wineglass. The sound thrummed in my bones.

"Why are you afraid of your future even now? Haven't you looked yet?"

The note vibrated through my sternum, resonating in places that had no names.

"I've looked." I forced my voice steady. "Futures, dreams, shadows. Rooftops in the cold, railings in the dark, green fire that laughs at me in the mirror."

Bone Woman tapped her glass with one finger bone, producing a counterpoint chime. "She's not blind, sugar. Stubborn, sometimes."

Ash angled toward me, hazel eyes steady, protective. "Eliza doesn't need your prophecy shoved down her throat. She'll choose when *she's* ready."

I drew a breath that tasted of apple-sweet forever. "My future isn't a spectacle for you. It's mine. What I choose."

My entire body trembled. "Lovely to meet you both. I'm sorry; I'm not feeling well. Perhaps it was the wine. Ash, please take me home."

Ash was on his feet before my napkin hit the table, chair scraping carpet. "Of course." His voice stayed clipped and steady, but as his hand touched my arm, I felt tension vibrating through his muscles.

Bone Woman rose too, bones clattering like applause. "Don't mind us, sugar. We'll keep the gods entertained."

Hecate inclined her head, expression unreadable. "Go, Eliza. I'd like to speak with you personally soon. We got off to a poor start. I'll do better."

Charon's coins clicked once, twice, then fell silent in his palm as we turned away.

The golden wine glowed on the table behind me like a tiny, bottled sun. I kept my chin high, refusing to look back until the doors closed on the soft light and the piano's lull.

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## 26 Forever Under Glass

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Instead of heading straight upstairs, I tugged on his sleeve. "Don't take me straight home. Stroll with me. I need air."

Ash didn't argue. He offered his arm like a courtly fool, and I took it, the silk of my dress swishing around my knees as we stepped out into the warm night. The humidity wrapped around us, thick enough to taste—jasmine and hot asphalt and the sweet rot of magnolias past their prime.

"You're in a better mood." I snuggled against the warmth of his side, breathing him in—aftershave and clean sweat and something that was just him. "Crisis averted?"

"I am feeling better." His voice rumbled through his chest, where my cheek pressed against his shoulder. "Reporters cleared out, feds took over, politicians vanished. Amazing how fast City Hall goes silent once the FBI's name hits the air. Self-preservation is a hell of a motivator. And of course my brilliant and delightful witch broke up the cult mesmerism, leaving a lot of them blinking and mildly confused."

I bumped my hip against his. "You forgot to mention I did it in heels."

"An oversight I regret." His lips twitched. "It resembled an uphill trek, both ways, through the snow."

"Buy me beignets and I'll forgive you."

He laughed, the sound loose and relaxed in a way it hadn't been in weeks. "I owe you a lot more than that. You're pretty amazing, Ms. Dubois."

We strolled onwards, relaxed for once. The night belonged to us, not them.

The French Quarter still buzzed, neon and laughter spilling out of doorways, but the streets near the hotel were empty. Shop windows glowed like little shrines—altars to permanence, each one a different prayer.

I slowed at the first one without meaning to. A jeweler's case stacked with wedding bands caught the streetlight—endless circles of gold and platinum. My reflection hovered ghost-like over them, and I lifted one hand, fingers spreading

against the glass. Cold. Solid. Real. The metal gleamed with captured promises, each band a small forever waiting to be claimed.

My throat went tight.

Ash followed my gaze. His hand slid from my arm to my waist, thumb tracing small circles through the silk. "Troubled?"

"How do you suggest I handle your mom?" The words came out lighter than I felt, my voice a little too bright.

He snorted. "Something relaxing. Spa, massage. Martinis and Jacuzzis. No—" He gave me a wicked side-eye. "—not Calida's way. Genuine relaxation. Girl talk. Water jets. Swimsuits...or not. Mom and Dad favor clothing-optional beaches."

I barked a laugh, sharp but real, and the tightness in my chest loosened. "Seriously?"

"If you want something friskier to do in a hot tub, I'm available. But Mom's not that bad." Amusement warmed his voice. "Her scheming persona vanishes after a drink or two. Three faces, you know. Personality-wise, that's pretty accurate. The maiden's still in there. And the mother."

I gave him a look. "And the crone?"

He winced. "She'd swat me for admitting it, but yes. The crone too. You saw her tonight. She merges many facets."

We walked on. The next shop was a tattoo parlor, the buzz of a needle slipping through the cracked door like an angry wasp. Inside, a woman sat rigid while poppies bloomed in permanent red across her shoulder blade. Pain twisted her face, but her gaze stayed locked on the mirror—steady.

Something in me twitched. A flicker of precognition, a nudge. Her reach didn't stretch this far, but I *felt seen*. Not Bone Woman.

Red poppies. Was Hecate dropping hints?

I rubbed my forearm, imagining ink spiraling into my skin—a veve etched to stay. Temporary pain for permanent truth. The body as canvas, marked with intention and meaning that outlasts heartbreak, outlasts doubt.

Ash's fingers tightened around mine, his palm warm. "Thinking about it?"

"Perhaps." My voice came out softer than I'd meant.

Ash glanced between the tattoo artist and me, grinning as he reached for his wallet.

"If a unicorn for your ass is what you want, I—"

"Dreamer." I slugged him lightly in the ribs. Didn't he *know* what unicorns symbolized? I already lacked a rather crucial qualification. A mischievous pixie would fit my bikini line and my personality better, anyway.

I toyed with the idea of a tattoo for Ash—something wicked and personal at the base of his spine, or a sigil only I'd get to trace. Then I looked at him, unfair eyes and dangerous smile, and fanned myself metaphorically.

Nope. Masterpieces don't need touch-ups.

The next shop was a baby boutique. Tiny mannequins dressed in onesies and pastel hats stood frozen in the window display. My feet stopped moving before my brain caught up. A mobile turned behind the glass—elephants and moons and stars carved from wood that would outlast the tiny hands reaching for them. Diapers. Midnight bottles. The weight of someone else's entire world cradled in your arms.

Ash's breathing changed beside me—shallow, controlled. He composed his features into a neutral mask, but a muscle jumped in his jaw.

I managed a crooked grin, forcing my feet to move again. "Forever's a lot of laundry."

His laugh startled me—low, warm, unguarded. I'd heard him chuckle before, but rarely like that. Open. Alive. His shoulders dropped, tension bleeding out of him.

*Not yet.*

I'd made my choice. Come on, universe—try me.

We passed other windows. A bookstore with leather journals thick enough to hold decades of secrets, their spines embossed with gold. An art gallery displaying paintings that would hang on walls long after their creators were dust, oils still vibrant under track lighting. A clock shop window full of timepieces, each one measuring out a life in brass and silver ticks.

I slowed at each one, drawn like a moth to a flame. The architecture felt permanent. Its weathered iron balconies cast shadows, old brick walls survived storms, and cobblestones were worn smooth by countless footsteps.

Ash watched me, saying nothing. His fingers stayed laced with mine, steady and sure.

But the cemetery we glimpsed at the end of Royal Street stopped me cold. White tombs rose like a marble city in the moonlight, each one a promise kept: Here lies someone who mattered. Here lies love that refused to die.

"The dead don't let go easily in New Orleans," I murmured.

"Neither do the living." Ash's voice dropped low, intimate. "That's why we're still here. Both of us."

We reached the Riverwalk at last. The dark water moved under the streetlamps, its surface scattering light like broken and remade promises. I smelled silt and shells, old water and older secrets. The breeze lifted my hair, cool against my overheated neck as I leaned on the railing.

For a few minutes, we said nothing. Only the river breathing and our shoulders brushing. Below us, the Mississippi kept its ancient rhythm, heading for the ocean.

"You're not coming unglued," Ash said finally.

"Not tonight." I tilted my head against his shoulder, feeling his heartbeat through the fabric. "Just... integrating. Rings, tattoos, diapers, tombstones. About permanence. About what lasts and what doesn't. I've only ever known change. Borrowed time, borrowed power, borrowed love. Wanting what endures—that's new."

"And?"

I swallowed, watching the lights ripple on the water. Even they were eternal in their constant motion, never the same configuration twice but never gone. "And I'm still here. That counts, doesn't it? I *want* to be here. With you. Gazing at forever through shop windows like it's something I actually deserve."

He bent his head, and I felt his lips press against my hair—warm, deliberate, lingering. "It counts. I'm here too. That's permanent enough for now."

Peace settled into my bones like the river's rhythm, slow and sure. Forever was still waiting, shining in windows and whispering in wine glasses and humming in the needles of tattoo parlors. The city itself was a testament to permanence—a city thriving where it had no right to exist, rebuilt after every storm. Eternal despite flood and fire and time.

But for now, I had this. One step. And the next. And the next. Each one an act of faith, a small promise to stay.

Forever could wait. I had love. And my family. Before I was born and long after I'm gone, the river flowed at midnight. I had Ash's shoulder warm against my cheek and his heartbeat steady in the spaces between my own.

And that was enough. Permanence wasn't a ring or a tattoo or a tombstone, but a daily choice to remain.

The river kept flowing. The city kept dreaming. And I stayed for everything.

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The ballroom smelled of dust and hairspray, faint perfume still clinging to the velvet curtains like a ghost refusing to leave. Sequins glimmered in the carpet pile, catching what little light filtered through the tall windows. The chandeliers were dark. The cameras were gone. But a handful of Calida's "protégés" lingered, stripped of their robes and bonnets, looking small and lost in the cavernous space.

In street clothes, they looked ordinary. Tired young women clutching tote bags, heels dangling from their fingers, glitter smudged into shadows under their eyes. One picked at her nail polish. Another stared at nothing, arms wrapped tight around her middle.

Morgan crossed the floor, her heels silent on the parquet. Normally she performed with every step—the enchantress-bartender sweeping into a room with hair aflame and eyes that dared you to meet them. Tonight she let the fire bank low. Her shoulders were loose, her stride unhurried. When she reached them, she stopped and waited, letting them see her first.

"You've had enough cages," she said quietly. "I won't build you another. I have honest work in a house that needs hands and hearts."

Three pairs of eyes lifted.

The first—a tall brunette with cropped bangs and nails bitten down to the quick—hugged her elbows tight. "What's the catch?" Her voice was hoarse, almost pleading. Suspicious, tell me the bad news.

"No catch, Maeve." Morgan's voice gentled on the name, embracing it. "Generous wages. Meals. Keys to your own doors. Company when you want it, not when you don't. My mansion is too large for one woman; it offers a haven for many."

A redhead snorted, anger making her cheeks flush scarlet. Her hands curled into fists. "That's what she said, too. Work, family, protection. You're another woman with money. How are you any different?"

Morgan crouched, skirts rustling around her like wings folding. She crouched to look the girl in the eye. Up close, she could see the mascara tracks, exhaustion, and brittle rage that held her together. "Because, Clara, I don't want to own you. I want you to stand on your own. If you decide later to leave, you leave. No debts, no strings. If you stay, you'll have wages, a roof, and protection. But never a leash."

Silence spread like spilled water. One of them sniffled, hiding her face in her sleeve. Her shoulders shook.

Liz, watching from her spot against the wall, folded her arms. "Better deal than wandering off alone, broken and bruised. She means it, or I'd put a stop to it."

The youngest of the group—delicate, with streaked mascara still clinging to her lashes like spider legs—cleared her throat. The sound was a tiny squeak. "You're not going to...make us—"

"Stop." Morgan's voice carried iron, but not cruelty. She held up one hand, palm out. "No. I will never claim what is not freely given. My reputation may be flamboyant, yes, but my rules are clear: no coercion, no impropriety. Those of legal age who choose to linger in my company eventually learn I'm a woman of appetites." A faint smile touched her lips, wry and self-aware. "But that's not what I offer. Tonight I'm offering work and safety. That's it."

Eliza made an approving sound, low in her throat. "Discipline is not abuse. Calida never understood that."

Morgan inclined her head, a slight gesture of acknowledgment. "Exactly. These women don't need a different cult. They need stability."

Maeve shifted her weight, her arms loosening a fraction. "And if we screw up?"

"Then you'll learn." Morgan's tone was matter-of-fact. "My staff make mistakes every day. Broken glass, missed shifts, over-watered plants. No one dies. Guide, not punishment. Unless you ask for punishment, and then—" She let the sentence hang, one brow arched high enough to provoke a nervous, startled laugh from Clara.

"I still won't accept. I'm too proud to become a parasite like Calida."

Morgan rose, brushing imaginary dust from her skirts with brisk, efficient movements. She clapped her hands once, sharp and decisive. For an instant, her poise cracked—something raw and lonely flickered across her face. A woman with a mansion too big and silent, aching for happy voices to fill it. Then her mask slid back into place, smooth and confident. "Right, then. My driver's waiting. You'll ride with me. We'll stop for supper on the way—fried chicken and cornbread, nothing fancy but hot. Tomorrow, you'll choose your bedrooms. We'll start with fresh linens. I'll draw up contracts for anyone who wants them. Those who don't, no animosity. Go home to your parents or loved ones. Your choice."

She glanced over them, her gaze sharp but protective—a hawk guarding chicks. "I can't promise miracles. But I will promise this: under my roof, no one lays a hand on you without consent. No one takes your wages. No one makes you a pawn."

Maeve's arms loosened. Clara's scowl softened at the edges, suspicion warring with desperate hope. Jolene wiped her face with the back of her hand and gave a shaky nod.

For the first time since the show collapsed, the air lightened. Someone took a deep breath. Another straightened her spine.

Liz caught Morgan's eye and smiled. Despite the wicked edge, the woman meant every word. This was Morgan's way of building a rescue—a family forged with wit, discipline, and iron honesty.

"Come along, my dears," Morgan said, ushering them toward the exit. Her voice slipped back into its familiar lilt, a glimmer of mischief threading through the care. "Let's turn tragedy into something positive."

And with that, they followed her out into the night—heels dangling from their hands, bare feet whispering against the parquet. No longer cultists. No longer pawns. Just girls with choices, and someone fierce enough to stand up for them.

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The lab smelled of copper and incense no matter how many times we scrubbed the floorboards. The air was thick tonight. Candles guttered, wax dripped, and

shadows pooled in the rafters like living things. Bone Woman had cleared a space in the center, a blanket spread across bare wood.

I stood at the edge, arms folded tight across my chest. "My breasts are not for public consumption. The lab is my family space. That's the rule."

Bone Woman's sockets glowed green in the candlelight, amused. "Family only, priestess. No tourists tonight."

Ella stood by the workbench, knuckles white where she clutched the edge tight enough to hurt. Her eyes were too wide, darting between me and Bone Woman like she was watching a horror movie. "She's going to burn a veve into your *chest*? You're just... letting her?"

"Relax." I forced a grin, sounding more confident than I felt. My heart hammered against my ribs. "It's basically a magical tattoo. Hurts for a second, then you get cool ink and bragging rights."

Ash's dry voice cut through the tension. "Eliza."

I shot him a look over my shoulder. "Reminder, ladies and germs: minor in the room. Eyes up here, Ash. Don't ogle."

Ella made a strangled noise. "This health class is pure humiliation."

Bone Woman clattered forward, her bone feet clicking against wood. She knelt by the blanket with surprising grace, her bony fingers dipping into a bowl of green-smoldering resin. The smell hit me—sage and sulfur and something ancient. "Lie down, Liz. This will sting, and it will stay. Once done, no un-doing."

My knees wobbled. Ash moved to my side, his hand finding mine. His palm was warm and rough. Solid. I held on tight and lowered myself onto the blanket, the wool scratchy against my bare back. The ceiling spun above me—shadows and candle smoke twisting together.

The first touch hit like a wasp sting with artistic pretensions—fire and frost braided together, sinking deep. I hissed between my teeth, my free hand fisting in the blanket.

Ella yelped. "She's *branding* you!"

"It's fine," I rasped, forcing the words through clenched teeth. "Okay, not fine, but tolerable."

The second stroke bit deeper, like the mark was stitching itself into my ribs, burrowing through skin and muscle to wrap around bone. My laugh cracked into a hiss. Sweat broke out across my forehead. Ash's grip tightened, his thumb pressing into my pulse point. "Breathe," he whispered. "In. Out. You've got this."

So I breathed. And endured. I knew there's no reversing this.

Green sparks crawled across my vision like fireflies in a blackout. The last line smoldered into silence. Pain cut off. The veve glowed once—brilliant, blinding—then sank beneath my skin, settling as if it belonged there.

My body and Bone Woman worked together to repair the surface damage.

And then the Gate surged into me.

A door slammed in the lobby, and my chest jolted like someone had kicked me. A laugh from the bar fizzed across my collarbones, effervescent and sharp. Somewhere upstairs, a faucet dripped—each drop a tap against my ribs from the inside. The hotel wasn't a place anymore. Nerves, blood, and heartbeat defined our union, the hotel and I. One being.

I sat bolt upright, gasping, one hand flying to my sternum. "Oh... my... Loa."

Bone Woman's voice filled me inside and out, resonating in my bones. *Hello, Liz.*

I clutched my chest, feeling her clearer than ever—threaded into marrow and breath, woven through every cell. And then, dizzy and disoriented, *I saw myself from across the lab.* Bone Woman's view. Sockets glowing. For one heart-stopping moment, I was her and she was me, two souls occupying the same impossible space.

I flinched back, a breathless laugh escaping me as my heart raced. "Threads, not chains. We separate at will. Right? You promised me."

*Right*, she purred, satisfaction radiating through the connection. *But oh, it's grand to braid together.*

Ella's eyes were enormous; her face pale. "You two just—swapped! Like—like channel-surfing souls! Freaky Friday!?"

I pressed my palm to the tender warmth at my sternum. The sting was gone, replaced by something fierce and steady—a second heartbeat layered beneath my own. "Okay," I whispered. "That's me now."

Bone Woman rattled her bones like applause, the sound dry and delighted. "Welcome to forever, dear heart."

I was still catching my breath when a sharp thud rippled through me—not in my ears, but across my ribs, like someone had kicked the wall of my chest. I winced, my hand flying back to my sternum.

"What?" Ella squeaked.

"Something hit the lobby." My voice came out stunned, wondering. "Like... a chair tipped over?"

Ash was already halfway to his feet, muscles tensing, but the sound hadn't reached him. He frowned. "I heard nothing."

"Because it wasn't sound." I stared at my hands, then at Bone Woman. "It was the Gate. I felt it."

Bone Woman's sockets gleamed with satisfaction. "That's proprioception, Eliza. The house is your body now. Every slam, every sob, every rattle of old pipes—it whispers through you."

Another ripple passed—lighter this time, delicate. A glass set down too sharply on the bar. I felt it against my collarbones like a tap from the inside. My jaw dropped. "Oh. Oh wow. This isn't gross. It's... kind of sweet. The hotel's alive, and it wants me to notice."

Ash's hand covered mine again, warm and grounding. "You're not overwhelmed?"

"Not yet." I grinned despite the sweat still cooling on my skin, my heart still racing. "It's like... I don't know, like catching echoes. The Gate's not demanding. Just letting you know it's here." I tapped my chest.

Ella crept closer, still wide-eyed, but curiosity overtaking fear. "So you're what, the building now? That's... actually kind of amazing."

"Don't say it like I've turned into drywall." I chuckled, the sound loose and relieved. "But yeah. I feel it breathing. And it feels... good. The Gate's pleased I said yes."

Bone Woman tapped the veve on my chest with one finger bone—a gentle, deliberate touch. "Threads, not chains. You wanted a family, Liz? Now you've got one big, creaky, glorious house for a twin."

I lay back on the blanket, my pulse slowing to match the Gate's steady rhythm. The sting was gone. The fear was gone. What remained was connection—steady, unshakable, mine.

Forever had slipped under my skin, and instead of fear, I felt... relief.

Then the flood hit like a breaking dam.

Dishes clattered in the kitchen, and my teeth rattled in my skull. A faucet dripped in 1107, and my sternum ticked in rhythm, each drop a hammer blow. Somebody slammed their door downstairs, and my ribs jumped, pain shooting through them like a kicked bone. Music blared from the bar. Footsteps thundered across the lobby. Voices, laughter, arguing, crying—pouring into me at once. Too fast. Too loud.

I clutched my chest, gasping. "Okay, nope. Too loud. This house is shouting at me."

Bone Woman crouched beside me, sockets glowing green and steady. "Filter, Liz. Don't drink the whole river—sip what you need."

"That's easy for you to say." The noise buzzed and tugged at every joint like I'd swallowed the building's electrical wiring, live current running through my veins.

Ash's hand squeezed mine, his grip firm. Anchoring. "Breathe. You've got this."

I drew a breath—slow, shaky, deliberate. I pictured the hotel's voices as threads, hundreds of them tugging at once. And one by one, I let them slip away. Door. Drip. Clatter. Music. Until only the steady hum of the lobby remained, a heartbeat beneath it all.

Silence. Blessed silence.

I cracked an eye open. "Oh. Huh. That actually worked."

Bone Woman rattled her jaw in amusement, the sound almost like laughter. "Well, look at you. Didn't even need me to hold your hand."

I let my head fall back onto the blanket, chest still glowing where the veve had sunk into me. "Guess I'm a quick study. Or stubborn as hell."

Ash and Bone Woman spoke together, "Both."

Ella peeked from behind her hands, equal parts horrified and impressed. "Can you shut off the hotel? Like a light switch?"

"Not off," I said, rolling onto my side and propping myself on an elbow. The movement pulled at the tender skin, but it didn't hurt. Just... awareness. "Just... down. Like muting background music. It's still there, but we're twins. Not puppets. Someone hand me my shirt?"

Bone Woman chuckled, the sound resonating through our shared connection. "Threads, not chains. Remember that, Eliza. It's a lesson for life. For connection."

I pressed my palm over the veve, feeling the tender warmth steady beneath my ribs. Forever didn't make my stomach clench anymore.

It made me smile.

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## 27 Only One Step Away

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My phone dinged.

The text message glowed on my screen: "Eliza, dear, this is Hecate Kourotrophos. If you don't mind meeting with me again, I'd love to apologize and start over again. We've so much to discuss, calm and relaxing this time, I promise. Will you meet with Charlie and me in, say, half an hour? The dress code is ultra-casual, poolside. Bring your swimsuit; we have plenty of towels. 1204."

A second message followed: "Please? All my love.—H.K."

My veve flared green before I'd even processed the words. The Confirm/Regrets buttons waited.

I stared at my closet, then back at the phone. Swimwear. She'd chosen swimwear. She'll see everything without my saying a word.

I pressed confirm. Tiny magical fireworks shot up from the screen—green crackle, ozone scent, and the faint perfume of poppies.

Hecate was showy.

I pulled out the basic black string bikini, the one with lots of string and not much coverage. The bottom was more conservative, more flattering. I held it up to the light, considering. Then I waved my fingers, setting my hair into a loose updo that left my neck and shoulders bare.

In the mirror, I adjusted the cups an inch wider. The veve sat dead center on my sternum—green ink stark against pale skin.

That's the centerpiece. Not the breasts. *Show's not for you, Ash. Not this time.*

I grabbed the hotel bathrobe and belted it. Downstairs, I sensed Ash at his desk, papers spread before him. I sent a sensation-kiss across our connection, felt it brush warmth against his cheek.

The effort I'd spent meeting the parents, the owners, the careful dance of interviews and proving my worth—secondary now. Trivial.

Today I was *happy*. Confident. Relaxed.

"Bone Woman?"

*Yes, dear? Ooh, you look fabulous.*

"Thanks. Stay offline for a bit; I'm meeting with Hecate again."

*No problem. Knock it out of the park, my priestess.*

The tiny thread connecting us dimmed as she retreated. I brushed my fingertips over the veve, and it pulsed warm against my sternum.

I conjured a small ring of red poppies—gift and offering, both.

"*She likes red,*" Ash's memory assured me.

My hotel senses confirmed the twelfth-floor hallway was clear of housekeepers.

I blinked.

\* \* \*

Humid air hit me first—chlorine and something else. Honey. Herbs. Divine essence invading ordinary space.

The hot tub churned, jets whooshing and bubbling in rhythm. Steam rose in lazy curls, catching the light from floating drink holders that bobbed in the water.

Hecate reclined in the bubbles, her chili-red one-piece stark against the swirling foam. A wineglass of glowing golden liquid floated beside her, casting amber reflections that danced with the steam. The wine's aroma cut through the chlorine—crisp autumn orchards with an undertone of something ancient and intoxicating.

"Ah, Eliza." She didn't look up from examining her nails, gesturing at the marble steps. "Come in; the water's divine. Your vodka cranberry's waiting."

A second floating holder held a pink drink, ice clinking against the glass.

I untied the robe and let it drop.

Her head came up. Her eyes locked onto the veve.

My skin prickled—not from the steam, but from the weight of her gaze. I swore I could feel her tracing each line of ink with her vision alone.

"Ooh, that's new! Interesting!" Her pupils dilated, studying. "Mind if I have a closer look?"

The pressure against my sternum intensified, like a physical touch through empty air.

I lowered myself into the water, letting the heat shock my skin before melting into warmth. The bubbles lapped at my ribs. "Work in progress, but I'm happy about the results so far." I reached for my drink, let the ice clink. "This is how goddesses hold board meetings? I approve."

"Fascinating application of charm techniques." Hecate swirled her wine, still watching the veve. "You've marked yourself with something eternally... binding."

I endured my potential mother-in-law's intense examination of my chest.

*Yeah. Not awkward at all. Yeesh.*

"Some conversations require naked honesty." Her smile turned knowing. "What we wear is deceiving. Though I see you understand that already."

The vodka burned cold down my throat. I tasted cranberry, lime, and the sharp bite of alcohol mixing with steam and magic.

My permanence wasn't from the wine. The veve, the Gate, and the family defined it.

The Ash.

"I wanted to see you again, Liz." Hecate's fingers trailed through the water, creating ripples that disturbed the floating drinks. "The other night... I forgot what it means to be mortal, to face choices so final. Forgive an old goddess for her eagerness."

Her voice carried across the churning jets. "Charlie? Liz is here."

Footsteps padded on marble. Charon appeared in swim trunks, water droplets from a recent shower still catching light on his chest and shoulders. The scent of divinity mixed with clean soap as he lowered himself into the tub without a splash—practiced grace, eons of navigating water.

"You both have been sampling a lot of that apple wine, haven't you?" I observed. They'd both dropped decades from their apparent ages.

I took a large sip of my drink and did not contemplate inappropriate things about my potential father-in-law. *I didn't! I had the newer showroom model.*

Hecate's laugh bubbled like the surrounding jets. "We choose avatars for a reason, child. This flesh remembers youth, even when wisdom knows better."

"Morning, Eliza." Charon settled deeper into the bubbles. "Thirty centuries I've carried souls across dark waters. Perhaps it's time someone else learned to hold the oar."

Hecate shot him a look over her wineglass. "Charlie! She's our guest."

He shrugged, sending ripples across the surface. "Let Ash do the wooing; I'll handle the business."

"You'd really give this away?" I gestured at the marble and gold around us, steam rising from my skin. "To Ash? To me?"

Silence stretched, filled only by churning jets and the soft clink of ice in my glass. I drank again, longer than intended. The cranberry tartness cut through the tub's sweet heat.

Hecate leaned forward, water lapping at her collarbones. "Still undervaluing yourself, I see." Her eyes found mine through the steam. "Tell me, what holds a family together when the world tears it apart?"

"Love?" I blinked at the sudden shift. "Loyalty?"

"Empathy." She set her glass floating. "The ability to see what others need before they know it themselves. To weave disparate threads into something stronger." The

amber light caught her face. "Some people spend lifetimes learning that skill. Others are born with it."

Charon nodded, his agreement a rumble I felt through the water.

"The Gate requires maintenance. Vision." She gestured at the opulent bathroom. "Someone who understands that buildings are just vessels. What matters lives inside."

A laugh tore from me—half understanding, half overwhelmed. The drink was making my thoughts fuzzy. Or was it the heat?

"You know he hasn't asked me?" The words tumbled out before I could stop them. "You're talking about legacy, and I barely get him to..." My face heated beyond what the tub accounted for.

"To what?" Hecate's voice was gentle, encouraging.

"I want..." The confession stuck. Jets grew louder, filling the silence. "God, this is embarrassing." I pressed deeper into the bubbles. "I want him to touch me. Really touch me. A fanny pat, a hug. Not those careful, respectful kisses." The water lapped at my chin, tasting of minerals and magic. "I want to feel like he actually wants me, not just... accepts me."

Steam swirled between us.

"I miss the *hungry* Ash," I whispered.

"There." Hecate's expression softened. "Was that so difficult? If you've decided on Ash, tell him."

She reached for the ring of red poppies I'd conjured, letting them float beside her glass.

"Truth has weight," Charon observed, his voice deep with knowledge earned from years of ferrying souls. "Even in steam, it settles to the bottom."

Warmth spread through my chest—nothing to do with the drink or the water. The veve pulsed under the bubbles, keeping time with my heartbeat.

"I want this." My hand drifted to press against the tattoo through the foam. The ink felt warm, alive. "Not just Ash, not only the hotel. Everything."

"And what frightens you about wanting?" Hecate's smile had lost its calculating edge, gone maternal and knowing.

The question hung in the humid air. I considered my usual deflections, but the heat had stripped them away along with everything else.

"That I'm not afraid." The admission came easier than expected. "Part of me knows I ought to be terrified of committing to something eternal, but I'm just..." I searched for the word. "Hungry for it. Like I've been starving my whole life without knowing what I needed."

"Ah." Hecate lifted her glass, golden wine swirling. "Now you understand what the wine really offers."

"One step forward," Charon rumbled. "That's what any journey requires."

I touched the veve again, felt its steady pulse against my palm. Through the steam and wine-haze, something crystallized—sharp and clear and true.

"I already took it, didn't I?" I looked between them. "The step. When I got the tattoo..." The veve flared green. "When I fell in love with your son."

Hecate raised her glass, equal parts maternal and divine. "Then, to understand what's already true."

The steam wrapped around us like a blessing. No more running, no more wondering. The warm certainty of knowing where I belonged.

I lifted my glass. Ice clinked against the crystal. "To permanence."

"Might I have a glass of apple wine, please? I know it's no longer necessary—but I'd like to taste it again, to see if it's as sweet as I recall."

Hecate extended her glass, the liquid catching the light like captured dawn. "Welcome to *my family*, dear. I'm so pleased."

The word echoed off marble walls, mixing with bubbling water and three very different heartbeats finding their rhythm together.

\* \* \*

I didn't know what to expect from "game night in 1102," but it sure wasn't Gary pulling a battered box of Liar's Dice out of the closet, corners patched with duct tape.

Pel groaned the loudest. "Dice and cups? What is this, the Jurassic period?"

"Prehistoric LAN party." Tel flopped on the couch. "Next you'll tell us dial-up internet was cool."

"It was!" Yuri shot back from her end of the couch, snakes alert.

The twins smirked.

Ella set out mugs of cocoa on the low table, already grinning. "I can't wait to see this."

Gary poured himself coffee like he'd been waiting years for this moment.

Yuri coiled deeper into the cushions. "Careful, Witchiepoo. My pets read tells better than your eyes ever will."

I rolled my shoulders. "Then you'd better not blink, sweetheart."

Bone Woman got the first cup organized, then flipped it upside down instead of lifting it. Dice clattered across the floor—under the couch, one landing in Ella's cocoa with a plop.

"I WIN!" Her eye sockets glowed smugly.

Everyone groaned.

\* \* \*

To my surprise, I got hot fast.

Two bluffs in a row—both nailed. Pel's face flushed crimson. Tel cursed. I smirked like a cat.

"What can I say? I'm perceptive."

Yuri's snakes swayed. "Or you peek."

"Boomer hacks," Pel muttered.

"Next she'll ask for cheat codes," Tel added.

Gary sipped his coffee, lips twitching.

\*\*\*

Then the couple in 1016 started up.

Loud. Rhythmic. Headboard hitting wall in a steady beat, moans included.

My cheeks went nuclear. My pulse kicked up. I squirmed, shifting on the couch cushions, and tried not to think about making those sounds with my reluctant demigod.

Yuri's snakes perked straight up.

"Bluff!" she hissed before I'd even opened my mouth.

Round lost.

Bone Woman tilted her skull at me. "You're thinking about a different game, Priestess."

"Busted!" Pel crowed.

Tel doubled over laughing. "She's streaming another channel in her head!"

\*\*\*

Ella came in sneaky and precise, calling Pel's bluff like she'd been born to it. Gary beamed, nudged her mug closer without a word. She smiled back—soft and easy.

His was the finest prize.

I watched the moment, a little jealous of its simplicity, and blew my next call completely.

Yuri struck. Again.

\*\*\*

Determined, I tightened my grip on the dice. Tel made an obvious bluff, and I called it clean.

"See? Don't need to cheat."

Bone Woman piped up. "She sees under the cups."

"BW, shut up!"

"CHEATER, CHEATER," the Hugos sang in chorus, cackling until they fell over each other.

\*\*\*

The rules didn't survive long.

The "skeleton knight" piece—Bone Woman's idea—supposedly won when dice rattled correctly. She demonstrated with vigor, spraying dice everywhere again.

Yuri muttered curses. I laughed too hard and dropped my cup. Ella fell off her chair, clutching her sides. Even Gary cracked up, shaking his head, the dad-smile softening everything.

\* \* \*

By the end, we'd forgotten dice under the couch. Cocoa sat half-empty in mugs. Laughter echoed so loud the ghosts must have heard it through the walls.

Pel and Tel mock-argued over who won. Bone Woman declared herself champion. Yuri swore she'd read me like a book.

Me? I leaned back, Ella pressed warm into my side, still giggling.

This is permanence too, I thought. Not gods, not gates. Just family game night in 1102.

Naturally, no one cared who won.

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## 28 The Threshold

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Ash leaned forward, elbows on his knees, the whiskey glass untouched in his hand. "Rules, then. No desk, no ledgers, no interruptions." His mouth quirked, but the usual humor didn't quite surface. "Okay, Eliza. You have me cornered. Ask what you need to ask."

I rattled the ice in my glass, watching the amber liquid catch the lamplight. The words stuck in my throat—too vulnerable, too raw. But I'd cornered him for this. No more dancing around it.

"Your mother and I talked about legacy. Permanence. Even children." I forced myself to meet his eyes. "And I can't even get you to touch me."

My voice cracked on the last word. I pressed on before I lost my nerve.

"Am I difficult? Inadequate?" The words came faster, sharper. "Forgettable?"

*Shit. My eyes were stinging. I'd promised myself no tears.*

Ash's fingers tightened on the glass until his knuckles went white. He set it down with deliberate care, the soft clink against the table too loud in the sudden silence.

When he looked at me, he dropped his mask. No shadow, no careful deception remained. Just Ash, raw and uncertain.

"Difficult?" His voice came out rougher than I'd ever heard it. "No, Eliza..." He drew a shaky breath. "You're the first person I've wanted badly enough to be afraid of."

I blinked, thrown. "What?"

"The other women were just..." He gestured vaguely, helplessly. "Visitors. They came and went. I let them go." Another breath, this one unsteady. "You terrify me with the very possibility of staying forever."

He leaned forward, hands open on his knees, vulnerable in a way I'd never seen him. "I don't hold back because you're inadequate. I hold back because you're the only one I can't risk treating like a fling. If I touch you without meaning forever, that's a lie." His jaw tightened. "And I won't lie to you."

Something hot and sharp twisted in my chest. "Visitors? You *married* those other women." My fists clenched. "Did you care for them, or did you sit in your office balancing ledgers night after night?"

My voice broke on the last word. I pressed my fists against my eyes, shoulders shaking.

"Ash, I'm starving here."

The couch creaked as he flinched. When I looked up through blurred vision, his hands had dropped between his knees, his whole body curled inward. He stared at the carpet like it held answers.

"I wanted to." The words came out rough, unpolished. Nothing like his usual careful speech. "I cared for them. They were kind—they deserved more than a man who kept one foot in the underworld."

He looked up, and what I saw in his face made my chest ache. Exhaustion. Pain. Guilt worn smooth by centuries.

"But I never crossed the threshold with them. They married the legend, and I gave them a roof, not a life." His throat worked. "I watched them age and fade, and justified it as mercy."

The lamplight caught the hollows under his eyes, the tight line of his mouth.

"You're not another visitor I keep at arm's length and call it protection." His voice dropped to barely a whisper. "You were the one who finally reached back. I've waited for lifetimes."

The end table between us felt like an ocean. I watched him fight himself—watched the exact moment something in him broke.

He stood abruptly, then stopped. Extended his hand toward me, palm up. An invitation, not a demand. His fingers trembled.

"I've been starving too." The words came out broken, desperate.

I took his hand. Let him help me up. When he sank down beside the couch, pulling me with him, we ended up kneeling face to face. Close enough that I felt the warmth radiating from his skin.

His hands hovered near my face, shaking. Waiting for permission.

I didn't pull away.

His fingertips brushed my cheeks with devastating gentleness, wiping away tears I hadn't realized were falling. "If you're ready for forever, I am." His voice had gone hoarse. "Tell me, and I'll stop holding back."

"Then ask." My voice came out rough from crying. "You only needed to ask. From almost the day we met, I've been waiting."

I grabbed his wrists, held them. Made him stay close.

"It doesn't need to be weddings, rings, or bullshit." My breath shuddered. "You. Asking for me, like you need me. Like you want me."

Ash's throat worked once, twice. He didn't reach for magic, or ritual words, or even the whiskey for courage. He took my hands in his—warm and steady—and pulled them away from my face until I had no choice but to meet his gaze.

"Eliza." His voice cracked on my name, the mask finally, completely gone. "I need you. Not as an employee. Or a guest. Not as a priestess I'm training."

He swallowed. "I need you. Will you stand with me? Will you be my heart root at the Gate, and at my side? Without you, everything crumbles, even me."

The veve on my chest pulsed, flooding the living room with spirals of emerald light. Power sang through my veins, answering him with every fiber of my being.

"I am the Gate, and the Gate is me. What better anchor is there?" My laugh came out half-sob, half-relief. "What do I have to do, paint my own goddamn veve on you? Have you ever doubted for a single instant how much I needed you?"

Ash laughed—a short, broken sound—and then his control shattered.

He pulled me close, my knees bracketing his. His hands settled on my neck, fingers spanning the glowing veve. Light spilled up through his skin where we touched, illuminating both our faces in green fire.

"I never doubted." He whispered it against my forehead like a prayer. "Not for a heartbeat. What I doubted was myself—that I was worthy of this, of you."

He trembled against me, but it felt like relief, like something unlocking.

"You've been here all along while I played the coward outside the door."

I pressed closer, fisting my hands in his shirt, feeling the veve pulse between us like a second heartbeat. "No more doors," I whispered back. "No more waiting."

"No more." He kissed my forehead, my temple, the corner of my mouth—soft, reverent touches that felt like promises being carved into stone. "You don't have to paint me."

He took my hand and pressed it flat against his chest. His heart raced under my palm.

"I'm already marked. Every time you walked back through my door, every time you risked yourself for me, you wrote your veve here." His eyes closed. "Here. And here."

His other hand guided mine to rest over his heart, holding it there like an oath.

"If you still want me, let's stop pretending. My love is yours."

"Here and here and everywhere." I mapped the planes of his face with my free hand—jaw, cheekbone, the corner of his mouth. The veve flared between us, green light filling the room until the shadows fled to the corners.

For the first time, I felt whole.

A voice floated through the glow, dry and amused: "About fuckin' time. Took him forever to get the hint."

We jerked apart, looked at each other, and burst into helpless laughter. Ash's arms tightened around me as we shook with mirth and relief and something deeper than either.

"Sorry, Mother. Now, go away!" Ash called out between gasps. "Fuggin Oracles."

I grinned, pulled him closer by his shirt, and kissed him like a promise I intended to keep.

When the laughter faded, we stayed there on the floor, foreheads touching, breathing the same air. The green light dimmed to a soft pulse between us—steady, permanent.

"Finally," Ash whispered.

The glow sank back into my skin like a heartbeat finding its rhythm. Beyond the windows, the first streetlamps had winked on, catching in the river's current, turning the water to liquid silver.

Ash held me close, forehead to forehead, breath mingling with mine.

I traced the lines of his chest, grinning against his skin.

A witch has needs.

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## 29 Forever Looks Like This

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The elevator doors slid shut with a soft chime, sealing us in a pocket of quiet. No magic, no spectacle—just the hum of cables and the warmth of his fingers brushing mine.

He murmured about the roof—how he wanted time to describe, in exquisite detail, everything he planned to do once we got there.

The word *roof* alone set my pulse hammering. Heat coiled low, anticipation fizzing through me like champagne bubbles.

I'd told him about that dream once, months ago—the one that looped in my head like a song I couldn't shake. My kryptonite. And Ash, damn him, had remembered every delicious detail.

My answer wasn't words. It was my hands fisting in his shirt, my body pressing him back against the mirrored wall, my mouth opening to his. Consent? Fuck yes. Every nerve sang it.

A draft hissed down from the vent above, cool against overheated skin. Behind Ash, on the fogging mirror, two dripping words formed in lazy, smug script:

### **My grandbabies.**

Ash groaned into the kiss, half laugh, half curse.

I broke away, glaring upward. "Seriously?" My voice echoed off the steel. I stamped my foot like the world's angriest witch-in-heat. "Stop snooping!"

The letters faded into water trails, leaving only our flushed reflections and the cable's steady hum.

\* \* \*

So that's how I ended up on the rooftop minutes later—stomach pressed to the cold steel railing, skirt hitched high, underwear a forgotten puddle at my ankles. The night air slid across my skin, cool where everything else burned.

Thirteen stories below, the street glimmered in gold pools of lamplight. What if someone looks up? The thought streaked through me like lightning, sharp and delicious. I didn't pull back.

Behind me, his hand slid into my hair and tightened—possessive, sure, just enough to make my breath catch. My spine arched into the pull, heat flooding every nerve. Above us, the moon gleamed bright and merciless, stars winking like they knew exactly what was about to happen.

And then it hit me—he remembered. Every detail I'd whispered months ago in the dark, every secret craving I once thought belonged only to fantasy made real. *No stopping now.* I didn't want it to.

I shuddered against the railing, anticipation coiling tight. The world narrowed to the night, his hand in my hair, the edge beneath my palms. The cool midnight breeze teased my swaying breasts. One breath, then another. Waiting.

\* \* \*

Morning light spilled across the sheets. I stretched like a cat with feathers still stuck to my grin, sated and smug. Wake the snoring Ash and ring in round three? Tempting. But the kind man with the hidden, smoldering fire deserved his rest. We'd both earned it last night.

Ash's sheets. Ash's bed. Sheets gathered under my chin, warm and soft, carrying his scent—clean skin, cedar, something uniquely his. My mind wandered where it ought not to: rings, dresses, vows whispered beneath candlelight. *God help me, the whole shebang?* He hadn't asked, silly witch. But the thought snapped into place.

*Babies?* Not for Hecate's satisfaction. But... maybe two?

I kept my mind shuttered tight against premonition's tug, refusing to let fate jerk my strings like some cosmic puppeteer. Still, the itch to peek ahead lingered like a half-heard song.

Speaking of foresight—the rooftop dream. My mind kept playing it on a loop. Not simple fantasy. My subconscious had been waving semaphore flags: *This one. Pay attention to this man.*

I traced my gaze along his back. No claw marks, though there had been moments where I...*almost*... A brief pang of wicked pride twitched through me.

I reached for the veve on my chest, fingers resting over the skin, thoughtful. If I ever inked one for myself, I wanted an open kiss—eternal lipstick marks—right where his neck meets his shoulder. But we already had our link. Ash had been correct about that.

On my forearm, the port-wine stain tingled as I brushed it, a reminder. I'd never erase the reminder, even after I knew how. It chilled, then clawed back like a creature waiting for my next lapse. Hungry. Honest.

This was my ending. My beginning. No lace and doves. Love bites and claw marks, and a man who never blinked at either. He'd keep me steady; I'd keep him dangerous.

I looked at his muscled back, half-covered in Egyptian cotton, in this cavernous, luxurious room that somehow felt like *ours*.

My lips curved into a feline grin. "Not a problem."

\* \* \*

I sat alone in my office, paging through the five-star spellbooks. *Yes, the owners rate their own offices.* Bone Woman's connection had been a serious power-up, but the craft ran deeper than I'd imagined. So many spells, so many rites. So many ways to carry a soul.

The desk phone rang. Not my cell—the house landline. I reached for it with a flicker of trepidation. Owner. That word still sat like a stone on my tongue.

"Eliza Dubois speaking?" My voice sounded steadier than I felt.

"It's Ash. Someone's arrived you need to meet. In your full Priestess aspect." His tone softened. "A ghost. Ready for your first psychopomp assignment?"

My stomach flipped. "As long as you're there."

"Always. Five minutes?"

"Okay, love. Five."

*Bone Woman.* I tugged at her thread.

*Priestess?* Warm amusement brushed against my ribs. *Ah, I see Ash's point. I'll ride with you. Don't fret; you're a natural at this.*

A quick 'port, costume wrangling, hair check.

*Stop dawdling, witch.*

"Okay, okay," I muttered, and blinked into Ash's office.

The salon felt still. Calida Noirval waited by the window, staring out at the river. When did she... oh. Only hours ago. Finally ran out of rope.

No makeup, no cameras, no sequins. Though she'd died an old woman, she looked younger as a ghost, but somehow diminished, too.

"I thought I'd get Ash," she said without turning. "In a way, I'm honored it's you, Eliza."

"The work is mine, too," I said. "Now."

Calida's smile flickered and failed. "Am I supposed to apologize before the boat shows up? 'Sorry for wrecking your lives. Please rate me five stars?'"

"Tell the truth," I said. "Or don't. Your choice."

She turned. The glitz was gone, leaving only the sharpness. "Truth is, I wanted, and I took. The wanting kept getting louder. They kept giving. I told myself I was feeding them. I told myself the voice was mine." Her throat worked. "It wasn't, was it?"

Ash stood behind me, steady as a backstop. I worked by instinct—and Bone Woman’s nudges.

“Not entirely,” I said. “But enough of it was. Who’s Corbin?”

She sighed, bone deep. “My Mephistopheles. When I was old and fading, he offered me a Faustian bargain. Extended life exchanged for...everything. He made me younger, but I had to feed on others to keep it. When the Feds came, he cut the cord. My real years caught up almost overnight.”

“I’m not afraid,” she lied.

I held out my hand. “You don’t have to be.”

The salon light softened. My veve spiraled in the glass, green against the dusk. Calida’s eyes followed it; some stubborn tension eased.

“There’s a ferry,” I said. “And the price. And a shore you can’t imagine yet. But first, admit you’re done pretending.” I kept my hand steady. “Will you come?”

For one heartbeat she looked like the woman who’d owned a stage; the next, like a girl who’d wanted applause and never stopped. She exhaled, trembling.

“Okay,” she whispered. “Okay.”

Her palm met mine—cool, not shocking. A soft click, like a door finally latching in a storm. The floorboards sighed. Somewhere far below, water stirred.

“Close your eyes,” I said. “Think of peace that isn’t empty. Think of applause that isn’t hunger.”

The hotel dissolved into green light. When we reached the shore, she didn’t look back.

I cried, and Ash was there, his arms solid around me.

“Don’t be sad,” he murmured. “She’s happier now.”

A pat line, the kind preachers and morticians wear thin. But as a psychopomp, I knew: it rang almost completely true.

\*\*\*

I leaned against the office doorframe, arms crossed, watching Ash scowl at a ledger like it had personally insulted him. “Hey, Ash. Do owners get vacation time?”

He glanced up, one brow arched. “Mmm. I suppose Bone Woman and the family can hold down the Gate for a fortnight. What did you have in mind?”

“Beaches. Umbrella drinks. No ledgers. The perfect honeymoon—uh, *vacation*.”

Bone Woman’s voice drifted through the wall, dry as ever. *Good. Wreck some other hotel’s roof for a change.*

Ash’s expression softened. He stood, reached for my hand, and laced our fingers together. “Sounds like a plan. Pack your priestess gear and a few evening gowns,” he murmured, voice warm against my ear. “But I fully intend to keep you in bikinis and suntan lotion. Or less. Tahiti? Maui?”

*Fine, Bone Woman sighed. Go. I'll watch the roof. But don't expect a five-star tan rating when you get back.*

I laughed, tugged him up from the chair, and kissed him until the last of his ledger-lines melted from his shoulders. "And I intend to keep you in me," I whispered against his ear, nipping his earlobe to make him shiver.

The world didn't tilt or blaze green or split open. It settled. Simple. Stable. Futures bright.

It's good to be a witch.

\* \* \*

I hadn't decided yet about marriage or babies... only that forever with him didn't sound half bad.

Ash's eyebrow arched, the corner of his mouth tugging upward. "Freudian slip? You said, *'honeymoon.'*"

Heat flooded my cheeks. My mouth snapped shut before I could dig the hole any deeper. For once, I had nothing. Not a quip, not a deflection—just me, caught.

\* \* \*

The surf whispered against the sand, lazy and unhurried. I dug my toes in and watched the tide bury them grain by grain. Salt clung to my lips, sweet over the drink's bitter finish.

"Excellent plan," I said. "Sun, salt, smug waiters who keep the drinks cold."

Ash tilted his sunglasses down, a smile tucked beneath the brim's shadow. "You aren't good at relaxing."

"True." I swirled the straw, ice chiming. "I do, however, excel at laundry. Back before all...this."

"Laundry." He laughed, warm as the sun. "Of all the threads to pull."

"My universe then," I said. "Mean boss breathing down my neck, the spin cycle louder than my thoughts. And then—" I hesitated, hearing plastic clatter on tile again in memory. "That damned bottle."

Ash set his drink aside, the shade sliding from his eyes. "The moment the world leaned."

"Yeah. My first hint of something bigger that had me in its sights. I didn't know if it meant to claim me or crush me."

The tide rolled higher, foam licking at our chairs like time itself had settled in to listen.

"After you told me, I shadow-walked back and looked," he said.

"Mmm?" I brushed hair from my face, already smiling at his seriousness.

"At your laundry bottle. You suspected it was the hotel?"

"Or Bone Woman before her birth."

"I watched it from half a dozen angles," he said.

I rolled onto my stomach, cheek pillowed on my arms. "And?"

"Never saw a thing. Machine vibrations."

"Awww. That's no fun." I reached back with the lotion. "Do my back, love?"

His hands worked broad and slow, cool lotion spreading across my sun-warm skin. Goosebumps rose; my sigh slid out without permission.

"Of course," he said at last, pressing enough to make me arch, "that proves nothing."

I raised my sunglasses to appear annoyed. The heat in my cheeks gave me away. "What?"

"Hecate. Subtle, powerful. Perhaps she nudged it without my noticing."

"Okay, back to square one."

"Ghostly Marie. Poltergeist activity's notoriously tricky. Or Bone Woman."

"She'd tell me."

He paused, hands warm on my sides. "And then there's you."

"Nonsense. I have no habit of frightening myself."

"Because Future Eliza decided Past Eliza needed a nudge to launch her happily ever after."

I smirked and wriggled, making him pause mid-rub. "If Future Me was involved, she wanted to make sure you ended up carrying my luggage."

"You know, I have to agree with Morgan." His hands moved lower, kneading lotion into my thighs and glutes with slow, deliberate care.

"Mmm? 'Bout what?"

"You're very spankable. Smartass." His palm delivered a light warning slap, more withheld threat than punishment, before he moved down the beach towel to work on my calves.

Honestly, there are worse fates to surrender to. If you know, you know.

## Dramatis Personae (order of appearance)

- Eliza (Liz) Dubois—hotel laundress, ex-college basketball player, aspiring witch.
- Tom—Night Auditor, unprofessional, greasy creep, soon unemployed.
- Urszula Nowak—Eliza’s nominal boss, first shift. Never seen on third shift.
- Gertrude Morven—deceased teenage junior witch, creator of a spell notebook.
- Ash Skotomerkis—Night Man(ager), Eliza’s de facto boss. And more.
- Morgan MacBran—a.k.a. the Morrigan. Bartender, potion/cocktails, dominatrix.
- Gary (Gerard) Hugo—Hotel security, ex-cop, gargoyle, shapeshifter.
- Ghosts—ever-present background in a haunted hotel. Few notice them.
- Sally—Perkatory server. Initially gruff but good people.
- Marie Laveau—Ghost, voodoo practitioner Eliza’s 6x great grandmother.
- Spirit of the Elysium Gate—At first, mostly empathy and temperature shifts.
- Euryale (Yuri) Hugo—sculptor, dancer, mother, shapeshifter, gorgon.
- Euterpe (Ella) Hugo—daughter, seventeen, net savvy, later aspiring witch.
- Peleus (Pel) Hugo—Yuri’s other children, twins. Gamer OCD.
- Telamon (Tel) Hugo—Yuri’s other children, twins. Gamer OCD.
- Calida Noirval—local access television spirit medium, mostly a fake. Mostly.
- Hecate—Greek goddess of magic, witchcraft, crossroads, ghosts, and moon.
- Charon—Anthropomorphic personification of a concept, psychopomp.
- Bone Woman—construct, eventual vessel for the hotel’s spirit, someday Loa.
- Wesley (Wes) Ripley—Calida’s assistant. Collecting data on Calida’s activities.
- Amélie Renaud—internet influencer, Amélie’s Artworks. Renaud family scion.
- Monica—Front Desk, 1st shift.
- Patel—Front Desk, beignet guy.
- Maeve, Clara, Jolene—Former Calida ‘nymphs’, rescued by Morgan.
- Corbin—mystery Mephistopheles to Calida’s Faust. Never appears in this novel.