

# Everhart

Third Draft

Dante Von Carlo

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## 1 THE RIFT IN REALITY

Beneath a sky streaked with molten copper and bleeding crimson, the world of Aetherion exhaled shadows and whispered the forgotten truths of a bygone age. The continent, vast and horseshoe-shaped, curled around a heart of mystery—its cities and villages forged in iron and brass, where steam hissed from towering spires like restless phantoms escaping into the dusk. Once a beacon of invention and enlightenment, these towns and ports now clung to the edge of reality itself, straddling the fragile line between the known and the unknowable, where the veil thinned and the unseen stirred.

Beyond the tangible world lay the Xai—the Xytherion Dimension—a realm of unfathomable power, a place where time unraveled and reality twisted upon itself. Few could glimpse its mysteries without succumbing to madness, and even fewer could wield its energy without consequence. The Xai seeped into Aetherion in unseen tendrils, its influence felt in every shadow, in every whisper carried by the wind. But when its presence surged, when rifts tore through the fabric of existence, the horrors that lurked within found their way into the waking world. These breaches, these rifts, were the bane of Aetherion's existence, each one a bleeding wound in the skin of reality.

The Obsidian Order stood as the realm's last line of defense against the chaos. They were warriors clad in darkened steel, armed with weapons forged from the fragments of the rifts themselves—Obsidian Blades, honed to cut through the eldritch horrors that slipped through the cracks of existence. Among their ranks, two warriors had once stood as legends: Naevira Moondrift and Sebastian Greave. Bound by love, yet divided by fate, they had faced the creatures of the Xai together, sworn to protect Aetherion from the creeping

corruption.

Yet power had a way of seducing even the strongest of souls. It began with a crystal—a shard of the Xai discovered in the ruins of a shattered rift. A Xia Crystal, an artifact of unspeakable potency, had called to Sebastian, its power whispering promises of knowledge, of control, of dominion over the very fabric of existence. Naevira had seen the change in him—the way his eyes glowed with an unnatural hunger, the way his voice trembled with something beyond human comprehension.

She had loved him once. She had trusted him once. But love had turned to fear, and fear had driven her away.

Naevira's secret was known to none but her closest kin. When she learned of the lifes growing inside her, she had fled the Order, vanishing into the mysterious valleys of Aetherion. There, hidden among the ruins of an age long forgotten, she bore three children—triplets, bound by fate to a legacy of power and peril. Her parents, sworn to protect them, sheltered them in secrecy, shielding them from the storm that would one day come for them.

And the storm did come.

Sebastian found her on the eve of a storm, beneath the skeletal remains of an airship long crashed into the cliffs of the wastelands. The wind howled through the jagged metal, a shrieking dirge to their love now shattered. Naevira stood firm, the moon casting a silver halo around her, illuminating the defiant set of her jaw, the sorrow in her eyes.

"You ran from me, Naevira." Sebastian's voice was raw, a mix of grief and fury. "You had no right."

Naevira clenched her fists. "I had every right, Sebastian. You changed. That crystal, that power—it's consuming you."

He took a step closer, his fingers twitching at his sides. "It's the only way to save you, to save us. The Portal Sphere—"

"The Portal Sphere is a curse!" Naevira's voice cracked, but she did not waver. "You don't see it, do you? You're blinded by it. This obsession will destroy you!"

Sebastian's face twisted with anguish. "I lost you, Naevira. I lost everything. But I can bring you back. I can bring us back."

She shook her head, her breath trembling. "You don't understand. You're not saving me, Sebastian. You're damning yourself. And I can't—" her voice broke, her heart fracturing with it, "I can't let you do this."

The air grew thick, charged with an unseen energy. The very ground beneath them quivered as a rift flickered to life, a wound in reality splitting open with an unearthly groan. The Xai reached out, beckoning, and Sebastian turned

toward it with a desperate gleam in his eyes.

“Step aside,” he pleaded, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Naevira stood firm. “I won’t.”

Lightning cracked through the sky. The wind howled as the rift widened, a monstrous shadow clawing its way through the breach. Naevira reached for her blade, knowing there would be no reasoning with him now. The man she had loved was gone, consumed by his own ambition.

Then, the Xai took her.

A scream ripped through the night as the rift swallowed her whole, her form vanishing into the abyss. The last thing she saw was Sebastian’s outstretched hand, his expression one of pure horror and loss. And then, darkness.

Sebastian fell to his knees, a guttural cry tearing from his throat. He had fought to save her, but in the end, he had lost her to the very thing he sought to control.

And so, the world of Aetherion teetered on the precipice of a war unseen, a battle not of armies, but of ideals, of secrets long buried, and of the fate of reality itself. The tale of the Moondrift triplets, though yet unwritten, was bound to this destiny. Their blood carried the echoes of the past, and their fate, whether they wished it or not, was entwined with the shadowed legacy of the Xai.

The rift had been sealed the moment Naevira was swallowed into the abyss, leaving only lingering echoes of its dark energy. Now, it was Sebastian’s quest to reopen it, to bring her back at any cost, even if it meant unraveling reality itself.

Leif “Lee” Everhart sat near the smoldering embers of the campfire, his fingers idly tracing patterns in the dirt. The cavern was vast and silent, save for the occasional drip of moisture from the stalactites above. Shadows flickered against the uneven walls, warping with every shifting ember, creating monstrous silhouettes that danced in the dim firelight. The air was damp, carrying the scent of earth and decay, a constant reminder that this place had remained undisturbed for centuries.

He had always admired his father, Alistair Everhart, the charismatic archaeologist who had an uncanny ability to find treasures and lost artifacts. But tonight, admiration was tempered with unease. There was something different about this place—an unspoken tension that clung to the air like a tangible force.

Alistair had brought Lee along on this expedition despite the protests of his old friend, Cog Claremont. The moment they arrived, Cog’s unease was palpable. He paced near the cavern’s entrance, throwing cautious glances

toward the boy, his hands twitching at his sides.

“You shouldn’t have brought him, Alistair,” Cog said, his voice hushed but firm. “This isn’t some simple dig. This is something far more dangerous.”

Alistair let out a sigh, his eyes reflecting the flickering firelight. “He’s my son, Cog. He has a right to see what I do.”

“Does he have a right to die for it?” Cog snapped, his weathered face drawn with worry. The shadows deepened around him, exaggerating the worry lines etched into his skin.

Silence stretched between them as Lee watched from his spot, feeling the tension coil like a serpent around his chest. His fingers clenched into the dirt, his breath shallow as if the very air around him was suffocating.

Later that night, as the fire burned low, Alistair made an attempt to lighten the mood. “You remember when we were younger, Cog? We did some stupid things, nearly got ourselves killed more times than I can count. And somehow, we always managed to scrape by.” He chuckled, though there was little mirth in his voice.

Cog shook his head, rubbing his temples. “Those days are gone, Alistair. This isn’t some reckless adventure anymore. This is different.”

Alistair sighed, staring into the depths of the cavern as if seeing ghosts from long ago. “The world almost tore itself apart when the rifts kept opening. I still remember the chaos, the terror in people’s eyes when creatures slipped through. We thought it would never end... then suddenly, the rifts just stopped. But I never believed it was over, Cog.”

Cog’s jaw tightened. “It never was.”

The weight of his words settled over them like a shroud, thick and suffocating. Lee shivered despite the warmth of the fire. He had heard the stories before—the horrors that had once plagued the world. But hearing it now, in the eerie hush of the cavern, made it feel real, like those nightmares still lurked just beyond sight, waiting to return.

Finally, Alistair set his drink down and fixed his old friend with a firm stare. “Alright, Cog. Enough dancing around it. Why did you call me here?”

Cog exhaled sharply and ran a hand through his graying hair. “I didn’t.”

Alistair’s brow furrowed. “What?”

Cog shifted uneasily. “I wasn’t the one who wanted you here. It was a man named Sebastian Greave.”

The name alone sent a chill through Alistair. He leaned forward, his voice sharp. “Sebastian?”

“He needs your help to find something,” Cog continued, his voice edged with something close to regret. “Artifacts. More specifically—pieces that make

up the Sigil Latchkley.”

Alistair’s expression hardened. “No.”

Cog swallowed, his gaze lowering to the fire. “Alistair... you don’t have a choice.”

“I always have a choice,” Alistair said, standing. “I know what Sebastian wants, and I won’t be part of it.”

Cog’s voice dropped to a whisper. “He knows about me, Alistair. He has my wife.”

Alistair’s breath hitched. His old friend, so hardened by years of exploration, looked utterly defeated. He clenched his fists, rage and helplessness warring inside him. The fire crackled between them, an unsettling reminder of how fragile their position had become.

But then Cog added, “He doesn’t know about Lee.”

Alistair’s blood ran cold.

Lee, hidden in the shadows, felt his heart pound so hard it threatened to burst from his chest. Fear crawled up his spine, wrapping around him like a suffocating fog. He had never seen his father afraid before—but there it was, plain as day in Alistair’s clenched jaw and tense shoulders. The cavern seemed to shrink around him, the walls pressing inward, the shadows thickening like an impending storm.

The night air grew heavy, and then—

A mechanical whirl filled the sky.

The silhouette of an airship loomed over the treetops, its hull illuminated by the pale glow of lanterns. Alistair’s heart pounded as he turned to Lee.

“Hide,” he ordered, his voice urgent but quiet. “Stay in the caverns. No matter what happens, don’t come out until I tell you.”

Lee hesitated, wide-eyed, but he obeyed, disappearing into the darkness just as the airship descended.

Sebastian Greave emerged first, a tall, imposing figure wrapped in a long black coat. Behind him stood a hulking brute of a man with a red tattoo on his neck shaped like a dragon and danced as he moved. The air crackled with an unnatural energy as they stepped forward, their presence bringing an even deeper chill to the cavern’s already frigid air.

Alistair stood his ground. “I told you, Sebastian. I’m not helping you.”

Sebastian tilted his head, a smirk playing at his lips. “You say that as if you have a choice.” His voice was smooth, almost amused, but there was a dangerous edge beneath it.

Alistair’s gaze flickered to Cog. He knew, in that moment, that refusal meant putting not only his old friend’s wife at risk—but also his own son.

## EVERHART

With a quiet curse, Alistair took one last look toward the cavern where Lee was hiding. Then, with a deep breath, he stepped forward.

The airship began its slow ascent into the night, carrying Alistair away toward an uncertain fate.

Lee, hidden in the shadows, clenched his fists. His father was gone. The night stretched endlessly before him, the distant hum of the airship's engines fading into silence.

But he would not stay behind forever.

He would find him. No matter what it took.

## 2 A DESPERATE PATH

Lee sat in the cavern, staring at the dying embers of his fire, his mind struggling to process the events that had just unfolded. His father was gone, taken by men whose intentions remained a mystery. He had barely glimpsed them—one of them must have been the infamous Sebastian that Cog had mentioned. But there was also a large man and a woman, who had the look of a pilot. The airship had vanished into the distance, leaving behind only an oppressive silence.

The cavern felt impossibly empty without his father. Lee had never been alone before, not like this. Fear clawed at his chest, an icy sensation creeping into his limbs. What was he supposed to do now? Should he stay put with the supplies or set out in search of help? After some deliberation, he decided to remain where he was, hoping against reason that they would return for him.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, the temperature in the cavern plummeted. The stillness around him was broken only by distant rustling sounds—branches snapping, faint movements in the underbrush. His nerves were on edge, his imagination turning each sound into some lurking beast. He forced himself to gather firewood, building a small blaze that flickered against the cave walls, offering little comfort but enough warmth to keep him from shivering.

That night, exhaustion finally overtook him, and he collapsed into an uneasy sleep within his tent. Then came the dream—or at least, he thought it was a dream.

A silver fox stood just outside his tent, its large white eyes glowing in the dim firelight. It gazed at him, unmoving, and yet he heard its voice clearly within

his mind.

"You must move on. They are not coming back. But the creatures will soon be upon you."

A chill ran through Lee's spine, and before he could react, he awoke in a cold sweat, gasping for breath. It had to have been a dream. Hadn't it? Yet the words lingered, pressing into his thoughts like a warning he couldn't ignore.

He sat up, staring at the embers of his dying fire. The night air felt heavier now, as if unseen forces stirred beyond his line of sight. He couldn't shake the feeling that staying here was a mistake. He needed to move. He needed to find his father.

With reluctant determination, he packed what supplies he could carry and set off toward the only place he knew—a town they had stopped at before heading toward the cavern. It was a long journey downhill, and he spent the better part of the day trudging through uneven terrain, his legs aching, his stomach growling in protest.

By the time he reached the outskirts of the town, dusk was settling in. Smoke curled from chimneys, cobblestone streets glistened under the dim streetlamps, and the air was thick with the scent of metal and soot. Small factories lined the roads, their smokestacks piercing the sky, casting long shadows that merged with the creeping darkness.

He barely had time to take it all in before he was cornered by three boys in ragged clothing. Their faces were smudged with dirt, their grins sharp and predatory.

"That's a nice bag you got there," one of them sneered. "Bet it's got something good in it."

Lee backed up instinctively, clutching his satchel tightly. "I don't want any trouble."

"Well, that's too bad," another one chuckled. "Because trouble's what you got."

They lunged at him. He tried to fight back, but he was outnumbered, their fists raining down on him before he could react. He hit the ground hard, his vision swimming as pain flared through his ribs.

Then, a gruff voice cut through the air. "That's enough."

The boys froze. A burly man with thick, grizzled facial hair loomed over them, his arms crossed over his broad chest. His presence alone was enough to send the gang scattering into the shadows.

The man crouched down, offering a hand to Lee. "You alright, kid?"

Lee winced as he sat up. "I think so."

"Name's Magnus. Come on, let's get you patched up."



With no other options, Lee followed the man through the winding streets, eventually arriving at a modest house, where the glow of a fireplace flickered within. Inside, the scent of heated metal and ash filled the air. Magnus led him to a wooden table and motioned for him to sit.

A woman stood near the hearth, arms crossed, her gaze sharp despite the exhaustion shadowing her face. She had an air of quiet displeasure about her, as if Magnus' presence alone irritated her, and the sight of a guest only deepened that resentment. Her fingers twitched near a small table where an empty glass sat. She didn't drink in front of the family, but the signs were there—the faint, sour scent of alcohol clung to her clothes, and her weary expression spoke of long, tired nights.

"That's my wife," Magnus muttered, barely looking at her. "Don't mind her."

The woman scoffed, turning away. "You always bring home strays?"

"Boy got into trouble," Magnus replied simply, tending to Lee's bruises. "Needed a place to rest."

The tension in the room thickened, an invisible weight pressing down on Lee. He noticed a boy about his age leaning against a chair, arms crossed, eyes narrowed. There was something calculating about his stare, as if he was already deciding whether Lee was worth his time.

"That's Bram. My son," Magnus said with a grunt. "And over there is Helena." He gestured toward a young girl peeking from behind a wooden beam, her gaze flickering between them all.

Lee hesitated before speaking. "My father... he was taken by some people. I need to find him."

Magnus studied him for a long moment, then nodded. "You're staying here tonight. We'll figure out your next steps in the morning."

Lee wanted to protest, but exhaustion weighed him down. For now, at least, he wasn't alone.

The next morning, they ate a modest breakfast of toast and goat's milk. The air was still thick with tension—Magnus and his wife, Edna, barely looked at each other. Bram and Helena sat at the table, watching Lee intently as he ate. Bram's gaze was sharp with suspicion, while Helena's was filled with curiosity.

Now that Lee could get a better look at them, he guessed that Bram was around his age—perhaps a little older—while Helena looked to be a few years younger. It was Helena who finally broke the silence, her voice soft but eager.

"Where are you from?"

Lee hesitated, swallowing a piece of toast before answering. "Ashenheim."

My father and I live there. He's an archaeologist, works for one of the museums. We were hired by an old friend to find an artifact, but... something happened."

Helena tilted her head. "What about your mother?"

Lee froze. A shadow passed over his face. The words caught in his throat, refusing to come out.

Magnus, sensing the shift, spoke up. "Give him some time, Helena."

He stood, stretching before motioning for Lee to follow him. "Come on, kid. We need to talk."

Lee followed Magnus into a side room at the back of the house. The walls were lined with medals, trophies, and old faded photos. For the first time, Lee noticed the way Magnus moved—how he carried a slight limp, how each step seemed to cost him something.

"Hurts to move too fast," Magnus muttered, catching Lee's gaze. "Old injury."

Lee didn't ask but kept looking around. Magnus took a deep breath and got straight to the point. "What exactly happened up at that old dig site?"

Lee recounted everything—the betrayal, the airship, the strange people who took his father. "I was supposed to stay hidden, so I only got a look at their backs," he admitted. "One of the men was huge, and he had a red bird tattoo on his neck."

Magnus's expression darkened. He inhaled sharply. "The Red Falcon."

He rubbed his bad leg absently, lost in thought for a moment. Then, he finally spoke. "I had a run-in with them once. I used to be a prizefighter—a damn good one." He gestured to the trophies. "Had a nice little fortune built up, too. But the Red Falcon? They wanted me to throw a fight. I refused. And I paid the price."

He tapped his leg again.

"Went back to blacksmithing, like my father before me. Money dried up. My wife... she changed after that. Married a winner, but after the accident, well..." He trailed off.

Magnus straightened up. "We'll go up to the dig site and see if your father returned."

Later that morning, Magnus hired an old friend to take them up in a small airship. It was more of a favor than a business transaction—a simple taxi ride up to the site. When they landed, the place was eerily quiet, the remnants of their previous camp still visible.

Scattered around the clearing were broken crates, some with their lids pried off, revealing nothing but dirt and torn fabric inside. A few tattered tents stood, their fabric fluttering weakly in the wind. Nearby, the remnants of a fire pit were

visible—charred wood, half-burned embers, and the faint outline of where people once sat.

Magnus knelt down, pressing his fingers into the ashes. They were cold.

"Nobody's been here since that night," Magnus confirmed, scanning the site with a critical eye. "If your father had returned, there'd be some sign."

The realization hit Lee hard. His father wasn't here, and there was no telling where he could be.

The pilot motioned for them to head back, and as they climbed aboard, Magnus tried to lift Lee's spirits. "We'll try again soon. In the meantime, you could use a few lessons in defending yourself."

The pilot nodded. "Magnus could teach you a thing or two."

Lee just looked down, feeling defeated, but eventually agreed.

That night, back at Magnus' home, the lessons began. Magnus showed Lee how to block and avoid punches, emphasizing movement over brute strength. "Defense is just as important as offense," he explained. "You have to move and be sharp."

Then he called Bram over to spar with Lee. Bram looked all too happy to oblige. At first, his punches were slow, following Magnus's instruction. But as they moved, Lee could feel the shift in Bram's stance—his smug confidence, the way he was testing him. Bram smirked, eyes flashing with something mischievous.

Lee barely had time to react before Bram threw a sucker punch, slamming his fist into Lee's stomach. Lee gasped, the air knocked from his lungs as he crumpled to the ground.

"That was a cheap shot," Magnus scowled. "Get out of here before I knock the sense into you."

Bram just smirked and walked away, leaving Lee doubled over, gasping for air.

Later that night, after the tension had settled and Lee had caught his breath, he sat on his cot, rubbing his sore stomach. He reached into his bag and pulled out a small book. Helena noticed and crept closer.

"What's that?"

Lee hesitated before answering. "A book someone special gave me when I was younger. It's called *The Messenger*, about a clockwork bird sent on a journey to deliver an important message."

Helena's eyes lit up. "Will you read it to me?"

Lee considered for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah... I'd like that."

As he turned the pages and began reading, Helena sat close, listening intently. The warmth of the moment softened the ache in his stomach, if only

just a little.

### 3 THE SMITHY AND THE STRUGGLE

The days turned into weeks as Lee spent more time with Magnus Emberstone and his family. At first, he visited the dig site every few days, searching for any sign that his father had returned. Each time, the empty camp and untouched supplies were a stark reminder that his father wasn't coming back. The realization settled in slowly, like a weight pressing on his chest, making it harder to breathe with each passing day.

Magnus, seeing the toll it was taking on him, did his best to distract the boy by teaching him more about fighting. It became a regular part of their routine, and Lee was grateful for the distraction. However, this new attention from Magnus only fueled Bram's growing envy.

Magnus wanted Bram to follow in his footsteps as a blacksmith, forcing the boy to continue honing his craft at the forge instead of spending time training. But Bram longed to fight. Every time Magnus called him over to spar with Lee, he was all too eager, relishing the opportunity not just to prove himself but to vent his frustrations. The cheap shots didn't stop, and each time, Lee grew more wary of their sessions, sensing the frustration behind Bram's punches.

Each night, Lee would read the same story to Helena. He soon realized that she struggled with reading. Wanting to help, he began pointing at the words as he read, sounding them out for her. Slowly, she started reading the words herself, stopping at those she didn't recognize. Lee patiently helped her sound them out, and over time, Helena's reading improved. She beamed with pride each time she finished a full sentence without help.

Edna, though still bitter about Magnus' treatment of Bram, secretly appreciated Lee's kindness toward Helena. Though she never said it aloud, her

harsh demeanor softened ever so slightly when she saw Helena reading with Lee.

As the weeks passed, Lee's visits to the old dig site became less frequent. He couldn't shake the feeling that he was overstaying his welcome. Though he was grateful to the Emberstones for giving him shelter, he increasingly felt like an intruder in their home. One evening, he mentioned to Magnus that he should move on to continue searching for his father.

Magnus studied the boy carefully. He knew the likelihood of Lee finding his father was slim, and he wasn't sure if the boy had anyone else to look after him. So instead, he made a decision.

"You're learning the ways of fighting," Magnus said. "Might as well learn an honest trade, too."

The next morning, Magnus led Lee to the forge, which faced the bustling main street of the town. Bram was already there, tending to the furnace. Magnus explained that he was taking Lee on as another apprentice which caused Bram to glare. He walked him through the different tools of the trade—the hammers, tongs, anvils, and vises—and the various items they crafted for the townspeople: nails, hinges, and farming tools.

"It's honest work," Magnus said. "Not as flashy as being a prizefighter, but steady."

Bram scoffed at that but said nothing.

Magnus gave Lee his first task: hammering nails on the anvil. At first, his swings were clumsy, his grip uncertain. But as the hours passed, he found a rhythm. His arms ached, his shoulders burned, but he refused to quit.

Over time, Magnus introduced more complex tasks. Lee learned to heat metal in the furnace, carefully pulling it out when it was glowing a bright orange, then shaping it on the anvil. Magnus taught him how to properly hold the tongs, ensuring a firm grip as he worked. Sparks flew as he pounded the metal, the rhythmic clang ringing in his ears. Slowly, his movements became more precise, his strikes deliberate rather than frantic.

Each day, Lee learned something new. He crafted small hooks, then hinges, and eventually moved on to making simple blades. Magnus watched his progress carefully, correcting his stance, adjusting his grip, and offering words of encouragement when needed.

Bram, however, remained resentful. He worked beside Lee, but there was a competitive edge in the way he swung his hammer, as if trying to prove that he was the better apprentice. He hardly spoke to Lee, but his glances were sharp, filled with irritation.

Each evening, after working at the forge, Lee continued his self-defense

training. Though he improved in both blacksmithing and combat, he still dreaded sparring with Bram. The other boy always fought too rough, often delivering blows harder than necessary. But over time, Lee began to sense Bram's movements, to anticipate his strikes. He was starting to hold his own—but he held back. He could see the desperation in Bram's eyes, the desire to prove himself, and Lee couldn't bring himself to beat him outright. So he played along, letting Bram believe he had the upper hand.

At night, Helena continued her reading lessons. She was getting better each day, and soon, she was reading more than just the clockwork bird story. Lee had a few other books in his bag, and they worked through them together. The routine kept Lee's mind occupied, helping him push away the nagging thought that he may never see his father again.

For now, life was stable. But deep down, Lee knew it wouldn't last forever.

Many months passed, and Lee continued to keep himself busy with a steady routine—apprenticing in the blacksmith trade by day and practicing self-defense at night. His skills in both crafts improved significantly, and he felt stronger with each passing day. The repetitive rise and fall of the hammer, the heat of the forge, and the weight of the metal had hardened his body, giving him strength he never thought possible. When anxious thoughts about his future crept into his mind, he focused harder on his work, channeling his frustration into the clang of metal and the precision of his strikes.

The tension between him and Bram still lingered, but they mostly kept their distance. Bram resented Lee's growing skills, and despite their sparring matches, he refused to acknowledge any advice Lee offered. One day, in an attempt to break the silence, Lee told Bram he was becoming too predictable in their fights. Bram's response was a glare, followed by a growled, "Shut up. Then why do I always win?"

Lee knew the answer. For the longest time, he had held back, feeling guilty if he bested Bram. But that guilt was slowly fading.

Bram had a few friends who came around from time to time. Lee could tell by their mannerisms and the way they talked that they weren't the kind of people he wanted to be around. Sometimes, when Magnus wasn't around, Bram would sneak away to meet them. He warned Lee not to tell anyone, or he'd regret it.

One day, Magnus had to leave town to attend to business in a neighboring village. He left Lee and Bram with a clear instruction: finish forging a pile of nails before the day was through. But as soon as Magnus was gone, Bram

abandoned the smithy, heading off to meet his friends. Lee was left alone to finish the work, his anger simmering with every swing of the hammer. He didn't mind the work itself, but the unfairness of it gnawed at him. While he was here sweating over the forge, Bram was out doing whatever he pleased.

That evening, needing to clear his mind, Lee went for a walk around town. He hadn't gone far when he saw Bram and his friends gathered in a dimly lit alley. Among them were the same boys Lee had encountered when he first arrived—the ones who had tried to rob him and the boy who had sucker-punched him was there too.

The group noticed him immediately. One of them turned to Bram with a grin. "This is the kid Magnus is training, huh?"

Bram's expression darkened. The same boy laughed. "Bet he could take you in a fight now."

Bram bristled. "He's never beaten me in a real fight."

Lee had no intention of backing down. He stepped forward, his jaw set. One of the other boys snickered. "Go on, Bram. Show him who's boss."

Bram swung first, a quick, angry punch, but Lee ducked effortlessly. Bram chuckled nervously and shot a glance at the others. "Got lucky," he muttered.

Lee didn't flinch. He could see it in Bram's eyes—he was rattled. Bram threw another punch, this time trying to grab Lee's collar to pull him down, but Lee sidestepped, shoving Bram away and moving into a steady stance.

Bram's frustration boiled over. He lunged with a flurry of strikes, his movements wild with anger. Lee kept his cool, dodging each one and slapping Bram's arms away. Then he saw an opening—Bram had left an opening like he often did. Lee struck fast, landing a punch squarely on Bram's nose.

The world seemed to pause. Bram staggered back, blinking in shock. He touched his fingers to his nose, and when they came away red with blood, his expression twisted with rage.

Blinded by fury, Bram lunged again, aiming for Lee's midsection, hoping to take him down. But Lee had trained for this. He twisted his body, using Bram's own momentum against him, avoiding the grapple. Bram stumbled, barely catching himself before hitting the ground. He scrambled back up and charged again, but Lee was ready. He stepped back, delivered a solid kick to Bram's stomach, and followed with a sharp punch to the side of his face.

Bram hit the ground hard, his head striking the edge of the stone street. He didn't move.

A voice rang out. "Enough!"

A man had been watching from the shadows. But he hadn't intervened—he had simply observed, waiting to see the outcome. Now, as he stepped forward,



the other boys panicked and scattered. The man checked to see if Bram was ok.

"He'll be ok, but he'll have a headache for a few days, I'm sure." The man said.

After a few moments, Edna appeared, her eyes landing on her son lying motionless, blood trickling from his temple. She let out a shriek and rushed to his side. The man helped lift Bram, supporting his weight as they hurried him back to the house.

Lee stood frozen in place, his mind reeling. He had won. But at what cost?

When he finally entered the Emberstone home, the tension was suffocating. Magnus wasn't back yet, but Edna made her feelings clear with just one look.

"Get out," she hissed, her voice venomous. "You've done enough."

Lee hesitated. He wanted to explain, to defend himself, but the fire in Edna's eyes silenced him.

Wordlessly, he gathered his few belongings and walked toward the door. As he stepped outside, he heard soft footsteps behind him.

"Wait!"

Helena's voice cracked with emotion. She ran up to him, her face streaked with tears. She threw her arms around him, clinging tightly. "Please don't go," she pleaded, her voice barely above a whisper.

Lee swallowed the lump in his throat. He gently pulled away and gave her a sad smile. "It's time."

She hesitated, then reached into her pocket and pulled out the first book he had read to her. She pressed it into his hands. He turned it over, studying it, then shook his head and handed it back.

"You keep it," he said. "Keep it safe until I see you again."

Helena took the book with trembling hands, holding it close to her chest. She gave him one last tearful hug before stepping back.

Without another word, Lee turned and walked away, disappearing into the dimly lit streets of the town, leaving the only home he had known since losing his father.

## 4 THE JOURNEY TO BRASSHAVEN

Lee traveled down towards the sea, the scent of salt and brine growing stronger as the temperature dropped. A gentle breeze carried the cries of gulls overhead as he followed the winding path downward. When he finally reached a clearing, he stood in awe at the sight before him.

Brasshaven.

It was just as he remembered it from when he and his father had first arrived on Aetherion from Ashenheim, but now, from his vantage point above the port, it looked even grander. The sprawling harbor was alive with movement. Ships of all sizes, both steam-powered and sail-driven, came and went, their hulls slicing through the shimmering blue waters. Docks stretched out like long fingers, reaching into the bay, with carts, vendors, and workers moving in a chaotic rhythm of industry. Beyond the sea vessels, a massive cliffside tiered upward, leading to the airship docks where great vessels hovered, their enormous balloon-shaped ballonets keeping them aloft. Some airships were tethered like ocean ships, while others hovered just above, waiting for their cargo.

The air was thick with the scent of oil, salt, and smoke, blending with the unmistakable aroma of grilled fish and freshly baked bread from market stalls. Deckhands hurriedly tied ships to bollards, hauled crates up ramps, or leaned lazily against wooden railings, smoke curling from short cigars clamped between their lips.

Lee shivered. The closer he got to the water, the more he felt the evening

chill creeping through his clothes. He had brought only the essentials, and he knew he would need warmer garments soon. But first, he needed to figure out what he was doing here. He had some money from Magnus, though not much. He would have to be careful about what he spent.

As he walked along the pier, weaving through the bustling crowd, he came across a red-painted building—a general store with an illustration of a candy cane on the hanging sign. Stepping inside, he was met with the rich scent of smoked meats and the earthy aroma of burlap sacks filled with flour, sugar, and dried goods. Shelves were lined with canned food, ropes, boots, and all manner of supplies fit for a traveler.

His eyes landed on a hooded cloak—thick wool, sturdy, and well-made. He brought it up to the shopkeeper, a grizzled man who eyed him with suspicion.

"You sure you can afford that?" the shopkeeper asked, arching a bushy eyebrow.

Lee hesitated. "How much?"

"Twenty cindrel pieces."

Lee checked his coin pouch. "I only have thirteen."

The shopkeeper shook his head. "Sorry, kid. This is a fine garment. Too much for you."

Disappointed, Lee placed the cloak back on the rack and turned to leave.

"Hey, kid," the shopkeeper called after him. "If you need something warm, try the second-hand store out back. Down the alley."

Lee hesitated at the word "alley," remembering all too well the last time he'd wandered into one alone. Instead, he took the long way around, coming upon a smaller, dustier shop with a crooked wooden sign.

Inside, rows of old coats, shoes, and travel-worn bags filled the space. He found a cloak—it smelled of age and dust, but it would do. As he browsed further, the bell above the door chimed. Two boys entered, a few years older than him, each carrying burlap sacks. They dropped them onto the counter with a heavy thud.

They were dressed in white shirts with loose ties and leather vests, their long, unkempt brown hair falling over their shoulders. At first glance, they appeared to be identical twins, though there was one distinction—Vic wore a pair of goggles perched atop his head, the lenses glinting in the dim shop light.

"These are damn heavy," Vic grumbled.

"We should charge extra for the lugging," Jasper added.

A small, elderly woman shuffled out from the back. "That you, Vic? Jasper?"

"Yeah, it's us," Jasper replied.

"Did you bring what I asked?" she asked, her sharp eyes flickering between the sacks.

Vic smirked. "It's all here, straight from Brassveil."

"Good. And don't sass me next time." She handed Jasper a small bag of coins. "Where's your ship heading next?"

"All over the Gulf," Jasper replied with a shrug.

"The Gulf of Valtoria?" the woman pressed.

"Is there another gulf around here?" Jasper scoffed.

The old woman narrowed her eyes. "What did I just say about sass? If you ever stop in Rusthaven, bring me a box of those shoes Marci Hemstem makes—five pieces a pair."

"Ten," Vic countered.

"Pirates!" the shopkeeper scoffed. "Seven, and not a piece more."

Vic rolled his eyes and jotted it down in his notebook. The deal struck, the boys took their payment and left.

Lee stood frozen in thought. If their ship traveled all over the Gulf of Valtoria, perhaps he could use it to track the ship that had taken his father. This could be his chance.

He started toward the door but stopped when the shopkeeper called after him. "Hey, you planning to pay for that?"

Lee blinked, looking down at the cloak he still clutched in his hands. "Oh—yes, sorry. How much?"

"Ten cindrels."

Lee sighed, starting to put it back.

"Did I say ten? I meant eight," the shopkeeper corrected, giving him an amused look.

Lee hesitated but handed over the coins. He threw the cloak over his shoulders, its musty scent making him wrinkle his nose, then hurried out the door.

At first, he lost sight of Vic and Jasper, but then he spotted them heading toward the airship docks. He followed at a careful distance as they walked up the gangplank of a tired-looking airship with a white ballonet.

The forward gangplank was being raised, but Lee saw that the aft one was still down. Without thinking, he sprinted up, ducking between some barrels on deck. His heart pounded in his chest. He wasn't sure why he was hiding, but something told him this was the right move.

The ship began to move, but just as suddenly, it stopped.

Lee barely had time to react before he felt eyes on him. He turned his head

and found himself face to face with Vic and Jasper.

"Well, well," Vic muttered, folding his arms. "Look what we have here."

Lee just stood there behind some barrels, unsure of what to do. His heart pounded, his palms were slick with sweat, and the blood drained from his face, leaving him ghostly pale. Whether it was the shock of being found so easily or the fact that Vic had a pistol pointed at his nose, he wasn't sure.

Jasper motioned sharply. "Hands up where I can see them."

Lee obeyed immediately.

"Now come out nice and slow," Jasper added.

Lee stepped around the barrels, sweat trickling down his temples. "Please don't shoot me," he pleaded.

Vic squinted. "Hey, wait a minute. Ain't you that kid from Neenah's shop? I see you ended up buying that old cloak after all."

Lee blinked in surprise. He hadn't realized they even noticed him back at the store.

"Oh yeah," Jasper muttered. "So, what? You followin' us? You a spy? Come here to plant explosives or something?"

Lee shook his head frantically. "No! Not at all!"

Vic gestured with the pistol. "Drop your bag and kick it over."

Lee hesitated, then slowly lowered his satchel to the deck and pushed it forward with his foot. "It's all I have," he murmured.

Jasper knelt down and rifled through the bag, his fingers sifting through meager possessions. He sighed. "Nothing interesting. So tell me, kid, what's the deal? Why sneak aboard our vessel?"

Lee opened his mouth to explain, but Jasper cut him off. "You know what? Save it for the Captain."

Vic and Jasper led Lee into a storage room cluttered with crates, sacks, and coiled ropes. Vic kept the pistol trained on him while Jasper went to fetch the Captain.

A few moments later, footsteps approached, and in stepped a tall man with the same long, wild brown hair as Vic and Jasper, though his face bore a long, regal mustache and a pointed beard. He wore a modified naval coat, rich with pockets, holsters, and knives strapped both inside and out. Beside him stood an older man with round spectacles resting on a broad nose, his head bald except for tufts of gray hair that wrapped around the sides and back. He wore a well-worn leather coat, streaked with oil and soot.

The Captain's sharp eyes bore into Lee. "Who are you, and why are you on my ship? Are you a saboteur? Who sent you? Where's the rest of your crew?"

Lee swallowed hard, his voice shaky but honest. "My name is Leif Everhart. I'm sorry I hid on your ship. I'm not here to hurt anyone. Nobody sent me. I'm alone."

The Captain's expression didn't soften. "Then why are you here?"

Lee hesitated before explaining. "I came to Aetherion with my father, Alistair Everhart, to work with an old friend on recovering an artifact."

Vic's eyes widened slightly. "An artifact, sounds mysterious."

Jasper elbowed him. "Shut up."

The Captain ignored them. "What kind of artifact?"

"I don't know," Lee admitted.

"Continue," the Captain commanded.

Lee told them everything—his father's abduction, his time with the Emberstones, his journey to Brasshaven, and how he had followed Vic and Jasper in hopes of joining their crew so he could search the Gulf for his father.

The Captain exchanged a glance with the older man before stepping aside to confer with him in whispers. Vic sighed dramatically and lowered his pistol. "My arm's gettin' tired."

"Fine," Jasper grumbled, taking the gun. "You're such a baby."

"Put the gun away," the Captain ordered as he turned back to Lee.

Vic threw up his hands. "Seriously?!"

The Captain exhaled and met Lee's eyes. "You can lower your arms now."

Lee cautiously did so.

"You said you apprenticed under a blacksmith? Magnus, was it?" The Captain's tone was calculating.

Lee nodded. "Yes."

"Follow me."

The Captain led Lee through the ship's lower levels, past corridors of pipes and machinery, until they entered what had to be the engine room. The space was filled with an organized chaos of gears, valves, and tools. A long workbench at the far end was piled with mechanical parts, and in the corner, a small forge glowed faintly with spent embers. An anvil and a set of smithing tools rested nearby.

"Can you start the furnace and show us your smithing skills?" the Captain asked.

Lee squared his shoulders. "I'm still an apprentice, but I can try."

The Captain handed him a broken wrench. "Fix this."

Lee nodded and got to work. Once finished, the older man tested the tool and nodded approvingly.

The Captain gave a curt nod. "Not bad for an apprentice. As you can see, our engine room and workshop are in need of order and care. Would you want to continue your apprenticeship here as a member of the crew?"

Lee straightened. "Yes, sir."

The Captain's expression eased slightly. "We are a trade vessel, Lee. The Skyraker travels across the Gulf of Valtoria, stopping at every town, city, and port to conduct business. We haul goods, supplies, and sometimes messages between settlements. If your father is anywhere within the Gulf, there's a good chance we might hear about him or find a lead."

Lee's heart quickened. This was exactly the opportunity he needed.

"Along with other duties, you can stay on the ship until you find your father. Fair trade?"

Lee nodded eagerly. "Yes."

The Captain clapped his hands together. "Then let's make proper introductions. I am Captain Roland Cloudgear. These are my boys, Jasper and Vic, and this man to my right we call Uncle Calder. My daughter Dahlia is at the helm, probably impatiently waiting to fly off. And this vessel is the Skyraker."

Lee bowed his head slightly. "It's a pleasure to meet you all."

"You'll stay in the cabin with Jasper and Vic. There should be an extra cot. Report to Uncle Calder—he'll oversee your duties in maintenance and repair."

Lee nodded. "Yes, sir."

The Captain smiled slightly. "We're shoving off soon. Welcome aboard the Skyraker, Lee Everhart."

## 5 ABOARD THE SKYRAKER

As soon as they departed, Uncle Calder began his duties of showing Lee the ways of the Skyraker. For the first time, Lee had a chance to take in his surroundings. The ship itself was a sight to behold, a marvel of both engineering and artistry, with brass railings polished to a dull gleam and thick wooden decks reinforced with iron beams. The hull was constructed of dark oak with riveted steel plates bolted along its seams, giving it the durability of a warship while maintaining the grace of a cargo vessel.

The engine and maintenance room was a beating heart of controlled chaos, a labyrinth of steam pipes, gears, and rotating pistons. Lee could feel the pulse of the ship beneath his feet, the vibrations of its powerful Xia Crystal-powered generator sending rhythmic tremors through the floor. Steam hissed from valves as copper pipes carried heated energy to various compartments of the vessel. Gauges and pressure valves lined the walls, their needles trembling with every adjustment to the ship's power. The scent of oil and molten metal filled the air, mingling with the constant hum of whirring machinery.

Lee's eyes widened as he examined the heart of the vessel. "What powers all of this?" he asked.

Uncle Calder chuckled, clearly pleased with Lee's curiosity. "It's a Xia Crystal," he answered, pointing to a central generator encased in steel plating. "Not much is known about these crystals, but they hold a vast amount of energy. This generator harnesses that energy and converts it into heat, producing the steam that powers the pistons and turns the propellers. It also sends steam to the ballasts, allowing us to rise and descend. It's a delicate balance—too much pressure, and the seals will burst. Too little, and we don't



stay aloft."

Calder spent hours explaining the inner workings of the ship, detailing every function of each valve, gauge, and pipe. Lee listened intently, though his mind reeled at the complexity of it all. The Skyraker was a machine that required constant care, and Calder made it clear that the ship's survival depended on regular maintenance. Many of its parts were old, some barely holding together. The crew was spending a fortune on repairs, and having someone capable of fixing even half the issues would save them valuable resources.

"You won't start today," Calder finally said, clapping Lee on the shoulder. "Get some rest. You'll need it."

Calder led him up a narrow flight of stairs and down a dimly lit hall to the crew's sleeping quarters. As they rounded a corner, they encountered a girl standing squarely in their path. She had a freckled face, large brown eyes, and long, wavy brown hair much like her brothers and father. She wore a navy jacket similar to her father's, though it was slightly oversized for her petite frame. Lee guessed she was about his age.

She studied him for a moment, then smiled. "I'm Dahlia."

Lee returned a polite nod. "Nice to meet you."

Dahlia snapped to attention, gave him a quick salute, then nodded at Calder before striding past them down the hall.

Lee turned to Calder, confused. "What was that about?"

Calder chuckled. "She wants to be a sky captain like her father and uncle."

"You're a sky captain?" Lee asked.

"Oh, no," Calder said, shaking his head. "I'm their great-uncle, just a mechanic. Both her father and Uncle Bruce were in the royal navy. Now they have their own vessels. Though, between you and me, I'm not sure Bruce still has a ship... or his wits. Anyway, here's your cabin."

Calder patted Lee's shoulder and left.

The room was small but comfortable. Bunks lined one side, while a single cot was positioned near a porthole window. Exhausted, Lee lay down on the cot, his mind racing. He couldn't believe it—he was on an airship, heading toward the unknown. But he knew one thing for certain: he was going to find the ship that took his father.

As sleep overtook him, the steady hum of the Skyraker's engines filled the room. The wind howled outside, rattling the small window. The rhythmic snoring of Vic and Jasper echoed through the cabin, but another sound caught Lee's attention.

A faint fluttering.

Turning his head, he saw the silhouette of a bird perched on the window

sill. The moonlight revealed its sleek, gray feathers and its milky white eyes, staring at him unblinking. For a few seconds, they watched each other in silence.

Then, without a sound, the bird took flight, disappearing into the night.

Lee hesitated, rubbing his tired eyes. Had it been real, or was his mind playing tricks on him? Either way, sleep soon claimed him, and the last thing he heard was the distant call of the wind outside the airship.

Lee woke to the thunderous sound of the twins snoring in near-perfect unison, a jarring chorus that made further sleep impossible. With a groggy sigh and a flutter of nerves about the day ahead, he slipped quietly from the cabin and padded down the corridor. The Skyraker creaked gently beneath his feet, its polished wooden panels and brass fixtures glowing faintly in the low light. Though the ship was expertly maintained, subtle signs of age revealed themselves—warped floorboards underfoot, the occasional metallic rattle in the bulkheads. He remembered the captain’s warning about restricted areas aboard, though he still wasn’t sure exactly where those places were.

Following a cold draft, Lee climbed the stairs leading up to the main deck. As he reached the top, a gust of brisk morning air greeted him. Pulling his cloak tighter around himself, he stepped outside. To his right, an open door led to an observation balcony. He stepped through it, and before him lay a town veiled in thick mist.

From this height, rooftops peeked through the haze like small islands in a white sea. The ship was docked at one of the sky piers, suspended high above the rest of the settlement. The quiet hum of the Skyraker’s engines and the occasional creak of the wooden structure beneath him filled the air.

“Welcome to Aethermoor,” a voice said from behind him.

Lee turned to see Captain Cloudgear approaching, carrying two steaming mugs. He handed one to Lee, who took a cautious sip. The warmth spread through him, the tea infused with honey and something faintly floral.

“Thank you, sir. Good morning.”

The captain nodded. “This is a special blend from the Empyrean Highlands. Supposed to have health benefits,” he said before taking a sip himself. “Although, I sometimes wonder if that’s just what the shopkeeper claims.”

Lee smiled and took another sip.

“Did you sleep well?” the captain asked.

“Yes, sir,” Lee replied. “Thank you again.”

The captain took a slow breath, his eyes fixed on the misty horizon. “Before the others wake, I wanted to speak with you about your father and the people who took him,” he said. “Do you remember anything about the airship or its

crew?”

Lee hesitated, taking a deep breath. “I was supposed to be hiding,” he admitted. “But I do remember a large man with a red bird tattoo on his neck.”

The captain’s eyes flickered with interest, his mustache twitching slightly. Lee continued. “The airship was a bit larger than the Skyraker, with a black balloon, gold trim, red fins, and nose cone. One of the men—my father’s friend called him Sebastian.”

The captain exhaled deeply and looked toward the town. After a moment of thought, he turned back to Lee. “We’ll need to tread carefully when asking about that ship and its crew,” he said in a measured tone. “If they’re as dangerous as I suspect, drawing too much attention could be risky.”

Lee frowned. “But how do I find them if I can’t ask anyone?”

“There are ways,” the captain assured him. “You don’t always need to ask directly to get the information you want. Just watch, listen, and learn.” He took another sip of his tea. “Let’s not be hasty.”

Before Lee could press further, Uncle Calder’s voice interrupted them. “Good morning, gentlemen!”

The captain raised his mug in acknowledgment, and the conversation ended there.

Once everyone was awake, they gathered for breakfast in the galley. Uncle Calder had prepared a hot meal of eggs, bacon, and toast. The table seemed too refined for a skyship crew, its polished wood gleaming under the dim lantern light. Even the plates and utensils looked new.

Vic whistled, twirling his fork. “Must be a special occasion.”

“It is,” Calder replied. “We have a new crew member.”

Jasper smirked and set his pistols on the table. “Hope he’s not afraid to get his hands dirty.”

Dahlia rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “Have some decency.”

Lee noticed that Dahlia had been watching him throughout the meal, studying him in the same way she had the day before. Unlike her brothers, her gaze wasn’t filled with mischief or teasing—it was more curious, as if she were silently sizing him up. When Jasper slid his pistol across the table toward Lee, she frowned.

“Ever shot one of these?” Jasper asked.

Lee hesitated before shaking his head. “No.”

“We’ll show you,” Vic said.

“Just make sure it’s away from the ship and other ships,” Dahlia warned,

shooting her brothers a sharp glare. "This time."

After breakfast, the captain issued orders. "Vic, Jasper—take the deliveries to Old Man Baker and Kinder's place. Dahlia, you're with me for supply runs. Uncle Calder, get Lee set up in the maintenance room."

Dahlia gave Lee a small nod before standing and following the captain. As she passed, she gave him a quick but measured look, as if she were silently assessing whether he could be trusted.

That day, Lee worked alongside Calder in the engine room. While Calder focused on organizing tools, Lee was tasked with arranging the foundry and repairing smaller mechanical parts. Calder introduced him to arc welding, demonstrating how to mend delicate copper tubing. "Copper melts at a lower temperature," Calder explained. "It needs a gentle hand."

Lee picked up the technique quickly, his steady hands proving useful in the fine work. He could feel the subtle vibrations of the ship through the floorboards, a reminder of the machinery working tirelessly to keep the Skyraker aloft.

That evening, as the Skyraker departed Aethermoor, Vic and Jasper led Lee to the upper deck. The sky was painted in hues of deep blue and violet, the distant cliffs glowing in the fading sunlight.

Jasper pulled his pistol and aimed at the rocky walls of the cliffs below. With a sharp crack, an iron ball shot from the barrel, striking stone. Vic followed suit, their laughter echoing over the wind.

Jasper handed his pistol to Lee. "Your turn."

Lee hesitated but took the weapon. Holding it gingerly, he aimed at the cliff and squeezed the trigger.

The pistol's kickback sent his shot wild, missing the rock entirely.

"You need a firmer stance," Vic advised. "Or it'll knock you off balance."

Jasper smirked. "Ever use these on people?" Lee asked.

Vic and Jasper exchanged glances. Jasper turned back to the cliff, firing another shot. "Nope," he said after a pause. "Never had to. 'Cept for those who looked at our sister funny."

Lee's eyes widened slightly. Dahlia, who had just arrived on deck, crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow at her brothers. "If you two are done scaring him, maybe let him learn without the dramatics."

Jasper grinned. "Relax, Dahlia. We're just having fun."

Dahlia shook her head and walked away. Lee let out a quiet breath, feeling slightly more at ease knowing she was watching out for him.

## 6 PLAYING THE GAME

Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months. Lee kept busy working with Uncle Calder, learning the ways of the ship's mechanics. There was a great deal to understand, and Calder was grateful to have someone willing to learn. It seemed everyone in his family had aimed to rise in the ranks of the royal navy, but nobody had taken an interest in how these beautiful flying machines actually worked. For most, it was all about glory—or money, if you asked his great-nephews. Lee, however, was eager to learn, even if he wasn't perfect. He made mistakes—or as he liked to call them, "slight oversights"—but he never lost his enthusiasm.

Unfortunately, his patience was beginning to wear thin. He was happy to be learning the inner workings of the ship, but he was rarely allowed to leave it. When they docked, the entire crew would sometimes go out for supplies or a meal at one of the taverns, but that was the extent of his shore visits. He wasn't sure what Vic and Jasper did during their excursions, and whenever he asked, they only responded cryptically: "business."

When Lee asked the captain why he wasn't allowed to explore the ports and towns they visited, Cloudegear's answer was always the same: "You're still training, lad. In due time, you'll assist with other endeavors." Perhaps it was true. Or perhaps there was another reason. It was difficult to tell.

He didn't see much of Dahlia. She spent most of her time onshore with her father or working on the bridge. He, on the other hand, was confined to the lower levels with Calder, ensuring the Skyraker remained in peak condition. Still, when their paths did cross—usually during meals or when she helped bring supplies aboard—she was always kind to him.

The captain sensed Lee's growing frustration. He knew the boy was impatient for news about his father, the men who had taken him, and the ship they were searching for. To show his appreciation, Captain Cloudgear decided to do something for him.

That evening, as they gathered for a meal of fish and potatoes, the captain stood up and cleared his throat.

"It's been a few months now," he said. "And though we haven't yet found the information you seek, we wanted to show our appreciation."

Dahlia handed him a package wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. Cloudgear passed it to Lee. He fumbled with the knot but couldn't loosen it. Vic smirked and handed him a knife.

Lee nodded in thanks and sliced the string. Inside were a new pair of pants and a tan shirt, along with a leather vest outfitted with pockets, loops, and compartments suited for a maintenance engineer. His name was embroidered on the front, and the sleeve bore the insignia of the Skyrazer.

Lee's throat tightened, and his eyes stung slightly. He barely managed a quiet, "Thank you."

The captain placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "You're part of our crew now."

"Here, here!" Calder cheered, raising his cup. The others clapped and patted Lee on the back.

That night, after a long shower, Lee tried on his new clothes. The pants were slightly long and loose in the waist, but the suspenders fixed that. He rolled up the legs and adjusted the shirt's sleeves to keep them from getting caught in machinery. The vest, however, fit perfectly. Looking at the stitched name, he felt something unexpected—pride.

When he entered the sleeping quarters, the twins were playing cards.

"Well, look at you," Jasper said with a grin. "I guess it's official now."

Vic nodded. "It looks good on you."

"Pull up a chair," Jasper said, patting the seat beside him. "We'll teach you how to play a real game."

They were drinking something strong from a silver flask. Vic passed it to Lee. "Here, try this."

Lee took a small sip and immediately regretted it. His throat burned, his eyes watered, and his face twisted in discomfort.

"Yeah, it's got a bit of a kick," Vic chuckled, taking it back.

Jasper shuffled a deck of black playing cards and dealt six. "This game is called Knights and Jesters. It's easy to learn."

As they played, Lee quickly caught on. He won a few hands, which seemed

to amuse the twins more than anything.

"You're a natural," Vic said. "Ready to play for real?"

Lee hesitated. "For real?"

"Only kids play for fun," Jasper said. "Adults play for money."

The twins placed a small pile of coins on the table. Lee had only a few pieces to his name. "I'd rather not lose what little I have," he admitted.

"You were doing great," Jasper assured him. "Just keep playing smart."

At first, Lee held his own. Then his luck turned. The bets grew larger, and he noticed Vic and Jasper weren't always truthful in their body language. He called them out, but Vic only smirked.

"It's called bluffing, kid."

By the end, Lee had lost everything. Frustrated and humiliated, he stormed out of the room.

"Stick to fixing things!" Vic called after him, laughing.

Lee stomped onto the top deck, leaning over the railing to let the cold night air cool his anger. Jasper joined him, resting his arms on the rail.

"That wasn't fair," Lee muttered.

Jasper chuckled. "Life isn't fair. It's a game. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. You just have to play it smart." He glanced at Lee. "That's why the captain sends us to negotiate—we know how to read people."

Lee frowned. "Can I learn?"

Jasper shrugged. "Maybe. I'll talk to the captain. But you'll need to earn back what you lost."

Before Lee could respond, a soft voice interrupted them. "Are you alright?"

Lee turned to see Dahlia.

She motioned toward the flight deck. "Come on."

Lee followed her inside. "Sometimes I walk away from the wheel when the skies are clear," she admitted. "But I don't trust these westerly winds."

"I was learning how to play Knights and Jesters," Lee said sheepishly.

Dahlia smirked. "And you lost, didn't you?"

"Maybe."

"I see. That's one way to learn."

They sat in silence, watching the horizon.

"It's peaceful up here," Lee said.

"I like it," Dahlia replied. "I'm not good at talking to people. I'd rather navigate an airship."

Lee looked at the control panel. "You know what all these gauges mean?"

Dahlia's eyes brightened. "Of course! That's speed, altitude, temperature—" She stopped, suddenly self-conscious. "Right. Anyway, yes."

EVERHART

Lee smiled. "I should get to bed."

As he stood, Dahlia said, "If you want to learn navigation, let me know."

Lee hesitated, then nodded. "I'd like that."



## 7 THE CHASE AND THE FIGHT

Time passed as Lee grew more adept at life aboard the *Skyraker*. His days consisted of target practice—when no other ships were around—and games of *Knights and Jesters* while traveling. Though still struggling with pistol accuracy, Lee had become quite skilled at the card game, enough to win back his losses and then some. Impressed by his ability to grasp strategy and deception, the twins decided it was time to teach him another valuable skill—negotiation.

Convincing Captain Cloudgear to allow Lee to accompany them on shore business took some effort, but they finally succeeded under the condition that they kept an eye on him. Lee observed closely, learning the tactics of deal-making firsthand. The twins demonstrated how to read people—how to ask the right questions to understand motivations and limits. They used humor to keep negotiations friendly while remaining firm, never revealing their bottom line too soon. They listened more than they spoke, always working to create value in their deals. Every new customer, especially the untrustworthy ones, was required to sign agreements, which the twins diligently recorded in their journals.

Sometimes, business took place between vessels in mid-air, docking alongside one another for small exchanges—a crate here, a few boxes there. In the world of air trade, relationships and reputation were everything, and Captain Cloudgear was as much a broker of information as he was a merchant. Despite all the trading, however, there had been no sign of Lee's father.

One particular deal stood out. A crew from a weathered ship arrived looking tense and uneasy. They carried a crate marked with a faded blue emblem—a dragon with a forked tail. Lee curiously leaned in, but the crew reacted with

visible discomfort, prompting Captain Cloudgear to send him off to assist Uncle Calder. Later, the captain pulled him aside and, with an unusually stern voice, said, “Remember that place I told you never to go? That’s what I meant.”

Despite his curiosity, Lee didn’t ask further questions.

Life on the *Skyraker* continued with its familiar rhythm—assisting Calder in the engine room, ensuring the ship ran smoother and faster, and occasionally visiting Dahlia on the bridge. She enjoyed explaining the intricacies of piloting an airship, and though Lee wasn’t personally interested in flying, he appreciated their conversations. Their discussions sometimes veered toward family, but neither ever brought up their mothers. Dahlia spoke of her uncle Bruce’s wild tales, stories she suspected were exaggerated, though her brothers swore they were true. When she spoke of the royal navy and her dreams of joining its ranks, her excitement turned to anger when pirates came up. Lee suspected she had a personal grudge against them, though he never pressed the subject.

Things changed one evening at a local tavern, the Cap-n-Baggers. The twins were engaged in a round of *Knights and Jesters* with a particularly unskilled group, making it difficult to lose a few hands as they usually did to keep things friendly. Lee, uninterested in gambling or drinking, decided to take a walk outside.

That’s when he saw him—a large man with an unkempt beard and a mohawk, wearing a blue jacket over a leather vest. But it was the tattoo that caught Lee’s attention—a red falcon inked on his neck. It was a face he recognized from that fateful night.

Heart pounding, Lee decided to follow.

Keeping his distance, he trailed the man down an alley. As he peered around a corner, he heard the large man growl at two unseen men. “Any signs of the asset?”

“No,” one of them replied.

Lee’s pulse raced. He wasn’t thinking clearly—should he confront the man? Find the twins? Continue following? His hesitation cost him. His foot nudged a glass bottle, sending it clattering against the alley wall.

The man with the neck tattoo’s head snapped up. “We have a guest.”

Lee ran.

Gunfire cracked behind him as he sprinted back toward the tavern. He burst through the door, breathless, and locked eyes with Vic and Jasper. “We need to go.”

The brothers had already sensed trouble, standing as some of the other players grew tense. One of the locals snarled, “You owe us.”

Vic smirked and flipped the card table, sending coins and cards flying. As

the players scrambled, the trio bolted for the door.

Outside, more men shouted. "There he is!"

Lee, Vic, and Jasper ran through the streets, darting around corners as chaos erupted behind them. "Get to the ship!" Jasper barked. "Tell them to start the engines—I'll catch up."

Lee and Vic didn't hesitate, sprinting toward the Skyraker. They scrambled up the gangplank, gasping, "Start the engines! We have to go—now!"

Dahlia, wide-eyed, threw the throttle forward. As the ship began drifting away from the dock, Lee turned back and saw Jasper running full speed. With a last powerful leap, Jasper grabbed onto the edge of the ship, and Vic and Lee hauled him aboard just as the vessel climbed into the sky.

Below, the large man with the neck tattoo and his men shouted, fists raised.

For a moment, they thought they were in the clear—until they heard the buzzing.

Two small aircraft—buzzards—were closing in fast. The captain's expression darkened. "Full throttle!" he commanded Dahlia. "We need to outrun them."

Lee, go assist Calder with the engines!" Cloudgear barked. "Vic, Jasper—I don't know what you did, but if those buzzards reach us, you'll have to shoot them down."

Lee dashed below, assisting Calder in balancing the steam pressure and adjusting the valves to push the Skyraker to its limits. Above, gunfire rang out.

Calder turned to Lee and handed him a pistol. "Go help them."

Lee hesitated but took the weapon and ran to the deck. The buzzards were fast, their pilots attempting to angle for an attack on the Skyraker's balloon. Vic and Jasper fired at them, but they were agile targets.

As one of the buzzards swung around to the port side, Vic shouted, "Aim for the rear rudder!"

Lee steadied his hands, took a deep breath, and squeezed the trigger.

Bullets struck the tail, sending the buzzard into a downward spiral. A strong crosswind caught it, spinning it out of control before it plunged into the sea.

The second buzzard lined up its approach. Lee saw the red falcon emblem on its tail. Steeling himself, he fired again. Vic and Jasper joined in, and their bullets tore through the rudder. The second aircraft wobbled, veering off-course before spiraling into the ocean below.

Silence.

The Skyraker soared into the night, leaving their pursuers behind.

Lee exhaled, his hands trembling.

Jasper clapped him on the back. "Not bad for your first dogfight."

The air was eerily quiet after the chaos that had just unfolded. The only sounds were the steady hum of the Skyraker's engines and the rhythmic chopping of the propellers slicing through the sky. Vic and Jasper sat on a few crates, both letting out long sighs of relief. Jasper turned his pistol over in his hands, his fingers tracing the contours of the weapon, while Vic's eyes scanned the sky, searching for any more signs of pursuit.

Lee remained rooted in place, his breath still uneven from the rush of the battle. His hands trembled slightly from the weight of what had just transpired. He had never fired a weapon at another human being before, and though they had been in a fight for survival, the reality of it all was sinking in.

The sound of hurried footsteps broke the silence, and Captain Cloudgear emerged onto the deck, followed closely by Uncle Calder. Both men bore looks of stern disbelief as they surveyed the aftermath.

Calder approached Lee first, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder. "Best hand that over, lad," he said, nodding toward the pistol in Lee's grip.

Lee complied wordlessly, his fingers uncurling from around the handle as Calder took it from him.

The captain's voice cut through the tension. "Would someone care to explain why two buzzards just attempted to put holes in my ship?" His tone was calm, but the simmering anger behind it was undeniable. "And how exactly did you three manage to take them down before they caused real damage—to the Skyraker, and more importantly, to its crew?"

Jasper was the first to speak. "It was my fault."

"No, it was mine," Vic interjected. "I started this mess."

Lee swallowed hard. "Actually... it was me."

Jasper added, "I got greedy."

Vic nodded. "And I might have insulted someone."

Lee exhaled. "I followed someone I shouldn't have."

Jasper sighed. "Everything was just bad timing."

"That's for sure," Vic muttered.

Lee looked down. "I was just... curious."

The captain's face darkened, his usual restraint cracking. His voice rose, uncharacteristically sharp. "Enough!" he barked. "You two were supposed to be keeping an eye on Lee!"

The twins winced but said nothing.

"What, exactly, were you doing instead?" Cloudgear pressed. "Let me guess—you were playing games? In a particular part of town? With a particular sort of people?"

Vic and Jasper glanced at each other, guilty as charged.

Lee felt his frustration rising. The captain had made it sound like he was helpless, like he needed watching over. His fists clenched at his sides. He wanted to ask why, to demand answers, but he held his tongue—barely.

The captain pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled deeply. “Go to your quarters,” he ordered the twins. “I’ll deal with you later.”

Calder followed them silently but cast a glance over his shoulder at Lee before disappearing below deck.

Lee couldn’t hold it in any longer. “Why were they supposed to watch me?” he demanded.

The captain looked at him, his expression suddenly unreadable. “Who did you follow?”

Lee hesitated before answering. “One of the men who took my father. The one with the red falcon tattoo.”

Cloudgear inhaled sharply, closing his eyes as if bracing himself. When he exhaled, his voice was steady but cold. “That is exactly why the boys were to keep you close,” he said. “We stay away from those people.”

His words sent a jolt of anger through Lee. “Then how am I supposed to find my father?” he snapped.

“You put this crew in danger,” the captain countered.

Lee’s jaw clenched. “Have you even been trying to find him?”

Cloudgear’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Yes,” he said. “Quietly. Carefully. Through people I trust—which is a short list. And no one knows anything.” He let out a slow breath. “I was trying to be discreet. But now, thanks to this, we probably have a bullseye on our back.”

Lee’s pulse pounded in his ears, but before he could speak, Cloudgear placed firm hands on his shoulders and locked eyes with him. “Lee... I don’t know if your father is still alive.”

The words hit him like a hammer. His breath caught in his throat. His vision blurred as heat rose behind his eyes.

“No,” Lee choked out. “You don’t know that.”

Cloudgear’s face was unreadable. “We’ll talk more when you’ve calmed down.”

Lee didn’t wait. He turned and walked away, his mind reeling.

That night, the Skyraker docked at a secluded sky pier, likely one of the captain’s hidden havens. They had to stay under the radar. If the Red Falcon was hunting them, secrecy was their best defense. But Lee couldn’t shake the feeling that Cloudgear wasn’t going to search for his father—not really. The captain had other priorities, and Lee wasn’t one of them. He felt more like a

prisoner than a crew member.

He had to move on.

Waiting until the twins were asleep, Lee quietly packed his bag. Just as he reached the door, Jasper's voice broke the silence. "Leaving without saying goodbye?"

Lee sighed and turned. The twins were both awake, watching him.

"It's okay," Vic said. "We get it."

For a moment, they just looked at each other. Then, Vic and Jasper extended their hands. Lee took Jasper's first, but instead of a handshake, Jasper pulled him into a rough hug. As they parted, Jasper pressed something into Lee's hand.

A pistol.

"Take this," he said.

Lee hesitated. "I don't—"

"Just hold onto it," Vic cut in. "Give it back when we meet again."

Lee nodded, slipping it into his pack before slipping out of the room.

That night, as Lee attempted to slip away, he was stopped by a voice—Dahlia.

She stood in the dim light of the bridge, her face a mask of conflicting emotions. "You're really leaving," she said softly.

"I have to," Lee replied. "I can't just sit here and do nothing."

Dahlia's grip tightened around the bell rope. "If you go, I'll have to report it." But there was hesitation in her voice.

Lee stepped closer. "Dahlia, please. If you were in my place, wouldn't you do the same?"

Her jaw clenched, and she looked away. "It's not that simple."

"It never is," Lee said, his voice barely above a whisper.

For a long moment, she didn't speak. Then, finally, she released the bell rope, letting it swing freely. "I don't agree with this," she murmured. "But I won't stop you."

Lee gave her a small, grateful smile. "I'll see you again."

Dahlia crossed her arms, looking both exasperated and worried. "You'd better."

Then, without another word, Lee turned and made the jump, disappearing into the night.

## 8 INTO THE SMOKE AND IRON

Lee walked along the winding hill path as the sun began its descent, casting golden hues across the valley below. The world stretched before him, vast and open, the hills rolling like waves in a sea of emerald and violet, dotted with wildflowers swaying gently in the evening breeze. The distant mountain range stood like silent sentinels, their jagged peaks shrouded in the wisps of low-hanging clouds. It was peaceful—too peaceful for Lee, who had grown accustomed to the ever-present hum of airship engines and the chatter of the Skyraker crew. Now, all he had was the sound of his own footsteps and the distant chirping of insects hidden among the tall grass.

Despite the beauty around him, an ache sat in his chest. He missed them already. The thought of Captain Cloudgear, Uncle Calder, Dahlia, and even the mischievous twins, Vic and Jasper, lingered in his mind. He told himself this was necessary—he needed to find his father, and the Skyraker was not the vessel that would lead him there. Still, doubt gnawed at him like a persistent shadow.

As he walked, the fresh scent of nature slowly gave way to something heavier—the acrid, metallic tang of smoke. He crested a final hill, and there, sprawled beneath him in the dimming light, was Ironhaven.

The city was a far cry from the coastal ports he had grown accustomed to. A dense layer of soot and smog clung to the skyline, belching from towering chimneys that reached toward the heavens like skeletal fingers. The sky had darkened, but the city below pulsed with artificial light—gas lamps flickered on every street corner, and the glow of molten metal spilled from factory windows, casting eerie shadows across the cobblestone streets. The buildings were hulking structures of iron and brick, their surfaces stained with the residue of

industry. Steam carts rumbled down narrow roads, their gears whirring, while workers in soot-covered coats trudged through the streets, their faces weary, their backs bent from long hours of toil.

Lee hesitated for only a moment before descending the hill into the beating heart of the industrial city.

The closer he got, the more oppressive the air became. The rich scent of oil and coal clung to everything, mixing with the stench of unwashed bodies and the sharp tang of burning metal. Voices shouted over the hiss of steam and the clang of hammers on anvils. Lee wove through the crowd, keeping his head low. He had enough experience to know that newcomers in a place like this often attracted the wrong kind of attention.

His stomach twisted with hunger, and he scanned the streets for somewhere to eat. A squat building on the far end of the square caught his eye—a tavern, its wooden sign barely legible through the layers of grime. "The Rusted Tankard." It would do.

Inside, the tavern was dimly lit, the air thick with the mingling aromas of burnt food, pipe smoke, and stale ale. The wooden floor was sticky beneath his boots, and the tables were a mismatched assortment of splintered wood and rusted iron. A man sat at a battered piano in the corner, plunking out an off-key tune that no one seemed to be listening to. Most of the patrons were workers, their clothes stained with grease and soot. They drank in silence or muttered in hushed tones, casting occasional glances at Lee as he made his way to an empty table near the back.

A woman approached, her head partially shaved, the rest of her dark hair pulled into a messy bun. Her eyes were sharp, her demeanor weary. "What'll it be?"

Lee hesitated. "Just whatever the special is... and something to drink."

"You want ale or something stronger?" she asked, eyeing him with a skeptical tilt of her head.

Lee was shocked at the offering.

"Trust me, you wouldn't want anything else from this place," she said condescendingly.

"Ale's fine," he answered quickly, not wanting to test his luck with anything harder.

She nodded and disappeared into the back. Lee took the moment to scan the room. A few of the men at a nearby table were watching him. He avoided their gaze, keeping his hands near his satchel. When the server returned, she placed a bowl of stew and a tankard in front of him. "Five pieces."

Lee reached into his pocket, pulling out seven pieces and setting six on the



table. He hesitated with the last coin. "I'm looking for a place to stay. Something longer than an inn."

The woman gave him a long, considering look before swiping the coins off the table. "There's a woman west of here, her name is Evangeline, she's a herbalist who runs a shop. She's picky about who she lets in. You might have a chance if you don't smell like you just crawled out of a gutter."

Lee offered a nod of thanks and ate quickly, eager to put distance between himself and the curious stares. He gave himself a quick sniff and agreed that he could probably wash up at some point.

Back on the street, Lee moved with purpose, his boots tapping against the uneven cobblestone. The city's maze of alleys and streets threatened to swallow him, but he kept his focus westward. He passed merchants standing by their shops, steam carriages sputtering down narrow roads, and factory workers exchanging tired farewells. The further he walked, the fewer people he encountered.

Then, the unmistakable sound of footsteps trailing him made his blood run cold.

He quickened his pace, heart hammering. The sound of his pursuer's steps grew faster. Spotting a sign ahead—an anvil and hammer—he veered toward it, shoving the door open and stepping inside.

The warmth of the forge hit him instantly, along with the familiar scent of burning coal and molten iron. The glow from the forge bathed the workshop in flickering orange light, casting long shadows against the walls lined with tools and half-finished projects.

A man stood at the center, his back to Lee, muscles tensed as he struck hot metal against an anvil. His dark skin gleamed with sweat, his arms thick with years of labor. The force of his hammering sent sparks flying, illuminating his chiseled features when he finally turned.

"What do you want?" he asked, his voice deep, measured, but edged with suspicion.

Lee straightened his posture. "I know my way around a forge. I can help."

The blacksmith set his hammer down and studied him. His eyes were like iron—cold, unyielding. "I don't need an apprentice."

Lee glanced at the cluttered workbenches, the unfinished projects, the clear signs of a workload too heavy for one man. He stepped forward and pointed to a small pile of objects. "I can handle the smaller tasks. Let me prove it."

The blacksmith grunted, then jerked his chin toward a worktable. "Show me."

Lee set his bag down, rolling up his sleeves. He selected a project—a set of iron hinges—and got to work. The blacksmith watched him, arms crossed, offering no help, no advice. The only sound was the steady rhythm of hammer on metal.

After half an hour, Lee presented his finished work. The blacksmith inspected it, running a thick, calloused thumb along the edges.

"Not bad," he admitted. "Not good either. But it'll do, at least for this client. Come back tomorrow."

Without another word, he turned back to his own work, dismissing Lee entirely.

Lee took that as a victory.

He stepped outside into the cool afternoon air, exhaling a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. The footsteps that had followed him earlier were gone. Whether they had lost interest or were waiting for another opportunity, he couldn't be sure.

Either way, he was in Ironhaven now.

And his journey was far from over.

Lee continued to navigate the city streets. He kept walking down the west end of one of the main streets. The large factories and populated areas thinned out as he made his way along the sidewalk. The air was slightly less thick with smog in this part of the city. The shops and houses were a bit more well-maintained, and some looked almost freshly painted. The occasional encounter with the city folk was met with a quick glance or strange look of disgust as they scanned him up and down. Lee just kept moving.

He made his way down to the corner of the street where he found a sign that read "Wildflower Apothecary." It was a small white house with purple shutters set back from the sidewalk, with a decent-sized front yard filled with wildflowers and plants. At first, it seemed disorganized as if the plants and flowers simply overtook the piece of land, but as Lee opened the little gate and walked up the pathway, he could tell that these plants were organized by type. The smell was intoxicatingly beautiful, almost euphoric. He made his way to the door and knocked a few times. That's when he noticed the "Open" sign and decided to walk in.

"Hello?" he called out.

"Come in," said a woman's voice. "I'll be right there."

Lee took in the sight of the shop. There were shelves upon shelves of jars, small boxes, and vials. He walked past the shelves, touching the labels as he read them. He recognized some of the contents from his time on the Skyraker, such as Grimroot, Wraithvine, Ashmire Thistle, and Umbrafern. Many of these

were part of the trade, used for medicinal purposes or as spices in fine cuisines. However, some items were unique to Lee, such as Cogflower and Ambermoss. He picked up the jar and turned it in his hand, wondering what it was used for.

"That Ambermoss produces a calming effect in moderation but can also cause mild hallucinations," said a voice behind him. He turned to see a strikingly beautiful, middle-aged woman with golden blonde hair tied in two long braids. She wore a simple blue and purple dress with a white apron stained with different-colored herbs. Her face was kind, her warm blue eyes framed by thin-rimmed glasses.

"Are you in need of something to calm your nerves?" she asked, her gaze flicking from the jar to Lee's face with a knowing look.

"No," Lee replied, placing the jar back on the shelf. "I'm looking for Evangeline."

"You found her," the woman smiled. "What can I do for you?"

Before Lee could answer, the door to the shop burst open. An entitled, heavy-set woman walked in, everything about her overindulgent. Her makeup was too thick, she wore too many layers of clothing for the climate, and her high-heeled shoes were far too tight—her feet spilled out like the top of an overfilled muffin. She looked at Evangeline, gave a quick sneer in Lee's direction, and then spoke with an arrogant tone.

"Evangeline, I must have the Hearthspire you promised. Tell me you got some in." There was a desperate undertone to her voice.

Evangeline sighed. "Yes," she said, stepping into the backroom before returning with a small cloth bag. Lee had never heard of Hearthspire. The twins on the Skyraker had dealt with all sorts of exotic herbs, but this one had never come up. That meant it was either rare or incredibly expensive.

Evangeline was about to hand over the herbs but stopped. "That will be twenty pieces."

The woman huffed. "You mean twelve pieces, my girl." She took out twelve and slapped them onto the counter.

Evangeline's lips tightened. "Mrs. Applebloom, we agreed on twenty pieces."

"I'm changing the offer," the woman said curtly.

Before Evangeline could respond, Lee cut in.

"Twenty-two," he said flatly.

Both women turned to look at him.

"I'll take it for twenty-two," Lee repeated, pulling out his money and setting twenty-two pieces onto the nearest table.

Mrs. Applebloom's face twisted in disgust. "Who are you?"

“Leif Everhart,” he said, keeping his voice even. “And I’ll take that off your hands for twenty-two pieces.”

Evangeline hesitated, but before she could move, Mrs. Applebloom snapped up twelve more pieces and slammed them onto the counter.

She held out her hand. “I believe that makes twenty-four.”

Evangeline sighed, handing over the bag. Mrs. Applebloom snatched it up, glared at Lee, and sneered, “Good day, Mrs. Thorncroft Emberwood.” Then she stormed out, slamming the door so hard the jars on the shelves rattled.

Evangeline rubbed her temple before looking at Lee with new consideration. “Obviously, you didn’t come here for Hearthspire. What do you really want?”

“I need a place to stay,” Lee answered.

Evangeline’s expression softened slightly. “I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “I do have a small cottage behind the main house where my mother used to live. It’s fifty pieces a month. Can you cover the cost?”

Lee nodded. “I have the first month’s rent. I’ve got work at the blacksmith’s, so I can keep up.”

“That would explain your current—” she gestured at his soot-streaked clothes, “—let’s just say, status.”

Lee smirked. “I know. I need a wash.”

Evangeline gave him a bemused smile. “Let’s go meet my husband. We’ll close up early.”

Lee followed Evangeline down a small, winding path beyond the apothecary. As the city faded into the distance, the landscape changed. Wildflowers lined the trail, their colors popping against the deep green of the surrounding trees. The air was cleaner here, filled with the rich scent of damp earth and blooming flora. The cottage itself was warm and inviting, its white walls framed by ivy, a small pond nestled to the side, and fruit trees swaying in the wind.

As they approached, a tall man with wild blonde hair and a stubble beard stepped out. He wore a ranger’s vest, thick suspenders lined with pockets, knives, and small tools. His piercing green eyes studied Lee before he extended a calloused hand.

“I’m Elijah,” he said in a voice that rumbled like distant thunder.

Lee shook his hand firmly. “Lee Everhart.”

Then a girl’s voice called from inside.

“Mom, is that you?”

“Yes, dear,” Evangeline called back. “Come meet someone.”

A girl emerged—slender, with long blonde braids like her mother’s, but her piercing blue eyes were intense, calculating. She wore ranger-style clothing in earthy tones, fitted for movement, and stood with confidence. For a moment, she simply stared at Lee, her gaze unwavering.

Then she wrinkled her nose. “You smell.”

Lee’s face flushed red. He fumbled for words before glancing at his soot-covered clothes.

Elijah clapped a hand on his shoulder, chuckling. “Let’s get you cleaned up.”

As they walked away, Lee heard Fiona’s voice behind him.

“He better not stink up the whole place.”

Evangeline just laughed. “Oh, he will.”

For the first time in a while, Lee smiled.

## 9 SETTLING INTO THE UNKNOWN

While Lee was getting cleaned up, Evangeline pulled her husband aside in the warm glow of their cottage's kitchen. The flickering light from the hearth cast shadows across the wooden beams as she voiced her concerns about allowing Lee to rent the small cottage. She wasn't sure if his story about his father checked out and didn't know if she could fully trust him yet. His presence, while helpful in the shop earlier that day, still raised questions.

"He's still just a boy, Elijah," she murmured, lowering her voice so that Fiona wouldn't overhear. "Not much older than our own daughter. It worries me." She bit her lip and glanced toward the doorway where Lee had gone to clean up.

Elijah leaned against the counter, arms crossed. "He seems harmless enough," he reasoned, his voice calm and measured. "If we do let him stay, I'll make the rules clear—especially about keeping his hands to himself." He smirked slightly, but Evangeline remained unconvinced.

"He looked at her like he'd been struck by an arrow from Cupid himself," she sighed, shaking her head.

Elijah chuckled and wrapped his arms around his wife. "I'm more concerned with Fiona putting an arrow between his eyes if he stares too long."

Evangeline gave a soft laugh but still looked unsure. "I just don't know, Elijah. Maybe it's not him I'm struggling with. Maybe it's the thought of someone living in my mother's cottage. It's been empty for so long..." Her voice trailed off, and Elijah gently cupped her cheek, wiping away a tear.

"The boy seems capable, and he probably has got nowhere else to go. I say

we give him a chance, and if he proves himself unworthy, we'll handle it," Elijah said.

Evangeline took a deep breath and nodded. "Alright. But we'll take it one step at a time."

When Lee came out of the washroom, he was dressed in some of Elijah's old clothes. The sleeves and pant legs were rolled up, the fabric slightly loose, but it was the cleanest he had felt in weeks. He ran a hand through his damp hair, feeling somewhat renewed.

"Come," Evangeline said, motioning toward the dining room table. "You must be starving."

Lee hesitated before sitting down. The warmth of the room, the smell of roasted meat and fresh bread, the laughter that Fiona and her father shared as they set the table—it all felt so foreign to him. It reminded him of something long lost.

As they ate, Elijah asked him about his journey, about his time with the Emberstones and Cloudgears. Lee shared his experiences but carefully omitted details about the secret crate aboard the Skyraker. He wasn't sure how much he should trust them just yet, but he could see Elijah's genuine interest and the flicker of concern in his expression when he mentioned his run-in with the Red Falcon.

"Those men aren't the kind you want to cross paths with," Elijah muttered. "You'd best be careful."

Lee nodded but said nothing more.

After dinner, Elijah led Lee to the small cottage at the back of their estate. The wooden door creaked slightly as he pushed it open. The inside smelled faintly of lavender and dried herbs, the remnants of its previous occupant still lingering in the air. A cozy armchair sat beside the fireplace, next to a reading nook lined with dusty books and empty teacups. Shelves lined the walls, some holding forgotten trinkets, others covered in cobwebs.

Lee took it all in, his fingers trailing over a small wooden table by the window.

"So, what do you think?" Elijah asked, ducking slightly to avoid hitting his head on a hanging beam.

Lee turned, a small smile playing on his lips. "I like it. It's cozy."

Elijah grunted. "Good. Then it's yours. But listen here," he said, stepping closer. "You respect my family, you pay your rent on time, and you stay out of trouble."

Lee met his gaze and nodded. “Understood, sir.”

Elijah extended his massive hand, and Lee shook it firmly. “Good. Now get settled in. You’ve had a long day.”

The next morning, Lee made his way back into Ironhaven to see the blacksmith. The moment he stepped into the smithy, the scent of burning coal and molten metal filled his nostrils. The blacksmith, a towering man with arms like tree trunks, was hammering away on an intricate piece. The rhythmic clang of metal against metal echoed through the workshop, and Lee instinctively knew better than to interrupt.

Instead, he quietly walked to the side, noting the pile of unfinished tools and equipment. He grabbed an apron, set up the small foundry in the corner, and got to work.

For hours, he repaired smaller pieces—hinges, nails, hooks, and simple mechanisms—keeping his head down and focusing on the task at hand. It was a familiar rhythm, one that brought him a sense of calm. When he finally finished, he glanced at the blacksmith, who was still engrossed in his work.

Without a word, Lee hung up his apron and left, feeling that he had done what was expected.

His next stop was the Wildflower Apothecary. He entered to find Evangeline at the counter, carefully measuring herbs into glass vials. She looked up as he approached, then wrinkled her nose and put up a hand.

“No offense, Lee,” she teased, “but you stink.”

Lee blinked, then glanced down at his soot-covered clothes and sweaty hands. “Yeah... I suppose I do.”

“Meet me out back,” she said, nodding toward the backdoor.

Lee stepped outside and waited near the garden path, where Evangeline later met him. She led him to the well, showing him where he could freshen up before they walked home together.

The days that followed became routine. Every morning, Lee would return to the smithy, where he found a small bag of coins waiting for him—payment for the previous day’s work. He never spoke to the blacksmith; the unspoken agreement between them was simple: show up, work, and leave.

He remained in the designated corner, never venturing deeper into the workshop. He had no idea what the blacksmith worked on so intently, but Lee had the sense that he shouldn’t ask.



## EVERHART

After his workday, he would clean up at the well behind the apothecary, then walk back to the cottage with Evangeline. Occasionally, he was invited for dinner with the family, where he found himself laughing at Elijah's stories and Fiona's sharp wit. Other nights, he ate alone in the quiet comfort of his small home, listening to the sounds of the forests behind the cottages along with the distant sounds of Ironhaven's factories humming.

And though he had no idea what lay ahead, for the first time in a long while, he felt a semblance of stability.

And maybe, just maybe, a place where he could belong.

## 10 BALANCE IS EVERYTHING

Lee was never one for prying into others' business, but he often wondered what Elijah and Fiona did during the day. He never saw them in the mornings, and yet, by late afternoon, they always returned home with quiet efficiency, often bringing fresh game or other provisions. Their clothes, sturdy and well-suited for the wilderness, along with the assortment of tools and knives they carried, hinted at something more than simple hunting. Lee couldn't shake his curiosity—were they rangers? Scouts for a guild? Guardians of the forest? He had to know.

One evening, after another hearty meal of roasted Velmoryn, a small deer-like creature with spiraled antlers and feathery fur, Lee gathered the courage to ask. As the last of the dishes were cleared, he turned to Elijah. "Sir, may I ask you something?"

Elijah leaned back in his chair, lighting a cigarillo. "Go on, boy."

Lee hesitated but then pressed forward. "What is it that you do?"

A smirk played on Elijah's lips as he exhaled a curl of smoke. "I was wondering when you'd ask." He motioned toward the eastern window. "Behind this cottage lies the Moonveil Grove. It's a vast and mysterious stretch of land—hills, valleys, rivers, and forests thick with creatures both ordinary and strange. That land needs protection. As a ranger, it's my duty to keep the balance."

Lee furrowed his brows. "Balance?"

Elijah studied him for a moment, then put out his cigarillo. "It's better if I show you. But first—training." He stood and strode to a closet, pulling out a bow and quiver. "How good are you with one of these?"

Lee took the bow hesitantly. "I've never used one."

"Then let's start," Elijah said, handing him the bundle. "Meet me at the target range just beyond the tree line."

Lee made his way to the target range, the bow awkward in his grip. He barely had time to take in the setup before he realized Fiona had followed him. She stood with her usual scowl, arms crossed, watching him with a mix of disapproval and mild amusement.

Elijah arrived shortly after, nodding to his daughter. "Show him how it's done."

With practiced ease, Fiona grabbed an arrow, nocked it, and let it fly in one fluid motion. It hit dead center on the stuffed target in the shape of a deer. Before Lee could even react, she had loosed another arrow at a second target, embedding it nearly in the same spot.

Lee swallowed hard. He hadn't even had time to process the first shot.

Elijah sighed. "Love, can you slow it down?"

Fiona gave him a hard look, then rolled her shoulders before grabbing another arrow. With deliberate slowness, she pulled the bowstring back, her stance solid. "Like this?" she asked dryly, her voice laced with sarcasm.

"Yes," Elijah said, ignoring her tone. He turned to Lee and pointed out her stance. "Feet parallel, shoulder-width apart. Weight slightly forward. Core tight, spine straight. Draw to your cheek. Aim along the arrow shaft."

Lee nodded, attempting to mimic her form. He lifted the bow, positioned his feet, and drew the arrow back. His arms ached almost immediately, his grip too tight.

"Let it fly," Elijah instructed.

Lee released. The arrow soared—far over the target. His face burned with embarrassment.

Fiona's smirk deepened. "This is going to take a while."

Elijah shot her a look but waved a hand toward the range. "Gather your arrows. We keep practicing until it's too dark to see."

Over the next several nights, Lee practiced relentlessly. His fingers became raw, his arms sore, but he refused to give up. He wanted to prove himself—not just to Elijah but to Fiona, whose disapproving eyes followed him whenever he missed a shot.

One evening, just as he was about to take another shot, a voice came from behind him. "You're too stiff."

Lee nearly jumped. He hadn't heard her approach. "What?" he asked, startled.

Fiona stepped beside him, arms crossed. "You're overthinking. Loosen up." Without warning, she grabbed his left arm and adjusted it. "Stop gripping so hard."

His face warmed at her touch, but he swallowed and nodded.

"Focus," she instructed. "Look at the target. See where you want the arrow to land. Then let it fly."

Lee exhaled, relaxing his fingers. The arrow sailed through the air, striking just above the bullseye.

"Yes!" he shouted, pumping his fist. He turned, expecting some acknowledgment, but Fiona was already walking away.

A small smile tugged at the corner of his lips. Maybe, just maybe, he was starting to earn her respect.

As time passed, Lee incorporated archery practice into his routine. Every evening, after his work at the smithy, he would take his bow and arrows to the clearing just beyond the tree line and practice. He wasn't sure how much skill he needed to gain before Elijah would finally take him deeper into the Moonveil Grove, but he knew that improving his accuracy would be essential. He had to prove himself capable. Though he was far from an expert, but he was getting better. His arrows no longer flew wildly into the trees, and he hit the target more often than not. However, hitting the bullseye remained a frustrating challenge, especially at greater distances.

Fiona, of course, took great pleasure in making things more difficult for him. She would appear seemingly out of nowhere, using her uncanny stealth to startle him just as he was about to release an arrow, sending it flying wildly into the underbrush. She found his frustration amusing, giggling at his exasperation before vanishing like a ghost.

Lee wasn't sure if she was testing him or just being a nuisance, but despite himself, he couldn't stay mad. In fact, her presence had started to sharpen his awareness. He began to pick up on subtle details he'd never noticed before—the shift in the sounds of the forest when someone approached, the way insects would fall silent, the disturbance of leaves under careful steps. He even picked up on her scent before he saw her, a faint blend of pine and something floral that made his face warm when he noticed it.

One evening, after a shared meal with the family, Elijah finally invited Lee to join him on a patrol of the Moonveil Grove.

“You’ve been patient,” Elijah said, setting down his mug. “I think it’s time you see what being a ranger is really about.”

Lee barely contained his excitement. At last, he would get to see what lay beyond the borders of his small world. He quickly informed the blacksmith that he would be gone for a few days, promising to make up the work when he returned. As expected, the blacksmith gave no reply, merely continuing his work as if Lee hadn’t spoken. It was an odd arrangement, but Lee had long accepted the silent understanding between them.

Before their departure, preparations had to be made. Evangeline sent Lee to visit a seamstress who operated a shop near the Wildflower Apothecary. There, he was fitted for proper ranger attire—sturdy boots, a fitted tunic, durable trousers, a belt equipped with various pouches, a pair of arm guards, gloves, and, most importantly, a hooded cloak. The outfit was more than he could have afforded, but the seamstress, as a favor to Evangeline, gave him a generous discount. She also provided him with a leather satchel, smiling as she handed it over. “You’ll need this, trust me.”

Elijah supplied the rest of his gear—a canteen, flint and steel, a small tent, a rain blanket, dried meats and fruits, and, perhaps most importantly, a compass.

On the morning of their departure, they gathered outside the cottage. Lee now stood among them, clad in his ranger’s gear, looking the part even if he didn’t yet feel it. Fiona, standing beside him, smirked. “You still look too stiff,” she remarked, brushing past him roughly enough to knock him off balance. He steadied himself and scowled, but she had already turned away.

Elijah and Evangeline shared a long embrace, her forehead resting against his as she whispered, “Be careful.”

“Always,” he promised.

With a final wave, they set off down the path, leaving behind the familiarity of home.

At first, they traveled in silence. Fiona led the way, her movements as fluid as a shadow. The hum of Ironhaven’s factories gradually faded behind them, replaced by the rustling of trees and the calls of unseen birds. The further they ventured, the more vibrant the world around them became. The scent of damp earth and pine filled Lee’s senses, a welcome contrast to the metallic tang of the city’s air. It was as if the deeper they went, the more alive everything became.

Finally, Elijah spoke. “Lee, what do you know of the Xai?”

Lee frowned. “My father told me about it once. He said it’s a realm of great power, a world beyond ours that remains connected to it. He called it the Xytherion Dimension.”

Elijah nodded. “That’s right. The Xai overlaps our world, though it isn’t entirely compatible with it. There are places where the two planes touch, forming rifts—tears in the fabric of reality. These rifts allow... anomalies to pass through.”

Lee’s stomach tightened. “Anomalies?”

Elijah stepped over a fallen log and continued. “Creatures that don’t belong in our world. Some are harmless. Others... not so much. The Moonveil Grove is one such place where these rifts occur. It’s our job to ensure that balance is maintained.”

Lee swallowed hard. He had assumed being a ranger meant tracking game and protecting the forest from poachers—not dealing with creatures from another realm.

Elijah stopped and turned to him. “I’m part of the Obsidian Order. We are the first line of defense against things that should not be here.” He pulled an arrow from his quiver and held it up. The tip was black, made of a glossy, volcanic stone. “Obsidian has properties that allow us to send these creatures back where they came from.”

Lee examined the arrow carefully. “Why obsidian?”

Elijah exhaled. “No one knows for certain, but it’s believed that obsidian exists in both worlds. It forms a bridge between them, strong enough to force a creature back through a rift.”

Lee processed this in silence. He had so many questions, but one stood out more than the rest. “Are we going to hunt these creatures?”

Before Elijah could answer, Fiona called from up ahead. “Yes!”

Elijah shot her a disapproving look. “Not necessarily,” he corrected. “This is a patrol. We don’t always find anything. Most of the time, we scout, track game, and gather herbs for Mrs. Evangeline Thorncroft Emberwood.”

“Boring,” Fiona Emberwood muttered, standing atop a rotting tree stump.

“Seriously, Fiona?” Elijah sighed. “Go find some Ashmire Thistle.”

She huffed but leapt off the stump and disappeared into the underbrush.

Elijah turned back to Lee. “This is only a patrol. We observe, we gather, and if necessary... we defend.”

Lee nodded, gripping the strap of his satchel. He wasn’t sure what he had signed up for, but as they ventured deeper into the forest, he knew one thing—this journey would change him forever.

Moonveil Grove was unlike anything Lee had ever seen. The deeper they ventured, the more the forest unfolded its wonders before them. Towering

ancient trees stretched their limbs into the sky, their thick, knotted trunks covered in moss and lichen. Their interwoven branches formed a vast emerald canopy that dappled the ground with shifting patches of golden sunlight. The air was rich with the scent of damp earth, fragrant blossoms, and the faint musk of unseen creatures moving through the undergrowth.

Small streams trickled between the roots of great oaks and whispering pines, their waters crystal clear and cold. Tiny fish darted beneath the surface, their scales flashing like slivers of moonlight. The sound of the forest was alive with music—birds singing in a chorus, their melodies carried by the soft breeze, while insects chirped their own rhythmic counterpoints. Every step through the grove felt like stepping into an enchanted world.

Elijah and Fiona moved with an effortless grace, their footsteps silent against the leaf-littered ground. They barely spoke, yet their communication was seamless—a flick of Fiona's fingers signaled a pause, a sharp glance from Elijah sent her forward to scout the path ahead. Their movements were like a dance, practiced and instinctual, leaving Lee to follow in their wake, struggling to match their silent precision.

When they reached a clearing where a river carved a path through the landscape, they paused. The trees opened to reveal a sky painted in hues of orange and violet, reflected in the water's surface like a shimmering mirror. Lee exhaled, taking in the scene, his senses absorbing every detail—the way the reeds bent under the soft wind, the rustling leaves, the occasional plop of a frog leaping into the stream.

"It never gets old," Elijah murmured, breaking the silence. "This place holds an energy unlike anywhere else."

Lee could only nod, his eyes wide in awe. There was something mystical about the air, something beyond words. He could almost feel it thrumming beneath his skin, as if the very ground pulsed with an unseen force.

Then, suddenly, Fiona stopped in her tracks.

Elijah tensed. He put a finger to his lips and motioned for Lee to stay where he was. Moving with practiced stealth, he crept toward Fiona, who stood frozen, her body taut like a bowstring. Lee moved slightly to the side to get a better view, and that's when he saw it.

Her eyes. They were glowing.

A bright, unnatural blue shimmered within them, her pupils narrowed to slits. She barely breathed as she stared toward the far edge of the clearing, her gaze locked onto something unseen. Lee followed her line of sight, squinting through the shifting foliage. At first, he saw nothing, but just as he was about

to whisper a question, something lunged from behind a rock.

The creature was grotesque—a twisted mockery of a beaver, its fur matted and sickly, its eyes dull and glassy like dead pearls. Its limbs were longer than they should have been, its incisors jagged and too large for its mouth. It moved with unnatural speed, bounding toward them with eerie silence.

Lee barely had time to react before two arrows pierced the air. Both struck true, embedding deep into the creature's body. It let out a wretched, gurgling hiss before splitting apart, a swirling gray mist escaping from within. Elijah rushed forward, pulling a small pouch from his pack and sprinkling a fine powder over the remains. Within seconds, what was left of the creature sizzled and dissolved into nothing.

"Scan the area," Elijah commanded. Fiona was already moving, bow raised as she swept her gaze through the trees. Lee followed suit, his heart pounding, though he had no idea what to look for. For a full minute, the three of them remained still, searching, listening. Finally, Elijah and Fiona exchanged a nod, and they relaxed.

Lee let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. "That... thing... what was it?"

"That was what happens when a rift forms near a living creature," Elijah explained, his voice grim. "It was a beaver once, before an anomaly from the Xai dimension took over its form."

Lee swallowed. "And Fiona... your eyes..."

Fiona huffed. "You ask too many questions." Without another word, she turned on her heel and disappeared into the trees.

Elijah sighed, adjusting his pack. "We'll set up camp here before we move on to the next patrol area. Fiona, sweep the perimeter."

The girl scowled but obeyed. Lee stepped forward. "I'll go with her."

Fiona groaned. "Ugh. He's going to slow me down."

"I can keep up," Lee shot back.

Elijah smirked. "Fine. Pick up some firewood on the way back."

Fiona immediately took off, forcing Lee to chase after her. She was nimble, her movements effortless as she leaped over roots and ducked under branches. Lee, on the other hand, had to work twice as hard to keep up. He could hear her laughter every time he stumbled, her voice taunting him from ahead.

As they ran, the sun dipped lower, casting long shadows. Fiona picked up the pace, clearly trying to shake him, but Lee refused to back down. He could barely see her now, only catching glimpses of her blonde braid whipping through the trees. Then, suddenly, she slowed just as she reached a fallen tree



spanning a small creek. Instead of climbing over, she sprinted across the slick trunk, balancing effortlessly.

Lee hesitated. He could go under the tree and hop across the rocks, but that felt like admitting defeat. Instead, he took a deep breath and followed her lead, stepping onto the log.

The moment he set foot on the damp bark, he knew he had made a mistake.

His boots slid, and before he could regain balance, he felt himself falling. The world spun, and he barely had time to brace himself before crashing onto the rocks below. A sharp pain shot through his right arm, and he let out a groan.

Fiona reappeared above him, arms crossed, smirking. "Nice one."

Lee gritted his teeth. "Shut up."

By the time he stumbled back into camp, holding his arm close to his chest, Elijah took one look at him and let out a heavy sigh. "What happened?"

Fiona pointed at Lee. "The fool broke his arm."

Lee sank onto a log, wincing. "I fell."

Elijah knelt, carefully examining the injury. "This isn't good. We'll have to cut the patrol short." He met Lee's gaze. "Try to rest. We head back at first light."

Lee exhaled in frustration. His first real journey into Moonveil Grove, and he had ruined it. As he sat by the fire, cradling his aching arm, he swore under his breath that next time, he'd be ready.

## 11 A TEST OF PATIENCE

The days following Lee's injury were some of the longest and most frustrating of his life. A fracture in his forearm had left him nearly useless in the forge, unable to wield a hammer properly. Evangeline had given him Dreamthorne sap to numb the pain, its cooling sensation spreading instantly over his bruised and swollen skin. She had also brewed a concoction with additional herbs to ease the pain internally, though she warned him to use it sparingly, as too much would cause drowsiness. He complied, but each movement sent a fresh wave of discomfort through his bones. His arm was kept in a sling, preventing unnecessary motion, but his pride suffered just as much as his body.

He barely spoke to Elijah or Fiona on their journey home, unwilling to let them see the embarrassment burning in his chest. He hated to think of what they must have thought of him. Weak. Foolish. A burden. As soon as they brought him back to Ironhaven, they left again, continuing their patrol of Moonveil Grove without him.

He dreaded the inevitable conversation he had to have with the blacksmith. After all, without work, he had no way to pay his rent, and the last thing he wanted was to impose on Evangeline's kindness any more than he already had. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to the forge.

The smithy was as dark and smoky as ever, the air thick with the scent of molten metal and burning coal. The large worktable where his smaller repair projects typically sat was now overcrowded, tools piled atop one another in organized chaos. The blacksmith, a towering figure of muscle and silence, was bent over his own work, hammering away at something intricate. Lee hesitated before clearing his throat to get the man's attention. No response. He cleared his throat again, louder this time.

It was then that the air seemed to shift, as if the heat from the forge itself rippled through the space between them. Through the smoke, the blacksmith barely turned his head, acknowledging Lee only with a side glance.

"Sir," Lee started, his voice steady despite the nervous twist in his stomach, "I injured my right arm. I won't be able to assist you properly for some time."

The blacksmith regarded him with unreadable eyes before uttering, "You have two arms."

Lee blinked. "I—I can't use my right hand," he clarified.

The blacksmith simply turned back to his work.

Frustrated, Lee sighed and turned to leave, but before he could step outside, the man's deep voice cut through the air.

"If you walk out that door, don't bother coming back."

Lee froze, his hand tightening around the door handle. His pulse hammered in his ears. He had no other options. His arm throbbed painfully, but he knew that if he gave up now, he would have no way of supporting himself.

He turned back toward the forge. The pile of tools on the worktable taunted him, waiting to be repaired. His right arm might be useless, but maybe—just maybe—he could find another way.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped forward and removed the sling, wincing as he flexed his fingers. He ignited the small forge, watching the coals glow as the fire roared to life.

Picking up a broken tool with his left hand, he placed it into the flames and waited for it to glow red-hot. Once ready, he used his injured arm—not to wield a hammer, but to steady the tongs just enough to keep the metal in place on the anvil. He lifted the hammer with his left hand and struck it against the heated metal.

The first strike sent a painful vibration through his arm, forcing him to grit his teeth against the discomfort. He adjusted, using smaller, more controlled hits. Slowly, the rhythm of the forge returned to him. It was awkward, and it took longer than usual, but he refused to stop.

Hours passed. Sweat beaded on his brow, and his fingers ached, but one by one, he worked through the pile of broken tools, forcing himself to adapt. The blacksmith said nothing, only continuing his own work as if Lee didn't exist.

By the time he finished, exhaustion weighed heavily on his limbs. He barely had the energy to tell the blacksmith he was done.

The blacksmith merely grunted. "I'll check your work later. Be here in the morning."

Lee nodded weakly and stumbled home, collapsing into his cot. He barely remembered taking the herbal concoction Evangeline had given him before drifting into deep, dreamless sleep.

The next morning, Lee dragged himself back to the forge, soreness clinging to every inch of his body. When he arrived, a small bag of coins sat on the worktable—his payment. But as soon as he picked it up, he could tell it was far

lighter than usual.

"The quality was poor," the blacksmith stated flatly, not bothering to look up from his work. "Had to fix some of your mistakes myself."

Lee's face burned with frustration, but instead of arguing, he went to work on the new pile of tools.

For weeks, this pattern continued. Each day, he forced himself through the pain, working as best he could with his left hand. His arm slowly healed, and though the blacksmith never praised his efforts, the weight of the coin purse gradually increased.

After six weeks, he finally removed the sling for good. His arm had regained its strength, and he could wield the hammer with both hands again. The forge no longer felt like a battle he was losing—it was his domain once more.

With his recovery, he decided it was time to return to archery practice.

Each evening, he trained at the targets, alternating between his dominant and non-dominant hands. At first, it was awkward, but his determination pushed him forward. He moved around the targets, striking from different angles, improving his stance, his breath control, his focus.

Evangeline occasionally came out to watch him, offering quiet encouragement, but Elijah and Fiona were absent more often than not. He told himself it didn't matter. He had work to do.

He even turned down Evangeline's dinner invitations, claiming he was too busy. Truthfully, he didn't know why he felt the need to distance himself from them. Maybe it was pride. Maybe it was frustration. Maybe it was something he didn't quite understand yet.

But as he loosed another arrow into the night, hitting his mark dead center, he knew one thing for certain.

He wasn't done proving himself yet.

Over time, Lee had transformed the simple target range into a dynamic training ground. What had once been a static practice area now teemed with moving targets, swinging pivots, and an intricate system of pulleys that allowed him to control the course's difficulty. He constructed obstacles from fallen logs, strategically placing stumps and deadwood to create elevation and cover. The setup forced him to adapt, requiring swift movement, agility, and quick thinking. As he ran the course, he practiced switching his dominant hand mid-shot, forcing himself to be flexible and ambidextrous. The clumsiness he once felt was fading, replaced with growing confidence and control. Each evening, he timed himself with a minute glass, measuring his accuracy and speed. It was no longer just practice—it had become a challenge, a test of his abilities.

One crisp evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon and bathed the forest in golden hues, Lee sensed a presence behind him. He didn't need to turn around to know it was Fiona. She had been observing him from a distance, studying his movements. He continued to run the course, hitting each target with steady precision. Without a word, Fiona retrieved her own bow and

seamlessly joined him, running parallel to him through the obstacles. Their movements, though separate, became synchronized—ducking, leaping, and firing arrows in fluid tandem. They kept their own pace, careful to stay out of each other's line of fire.

Fiona's skill was evident. She was faster, her shots precise, her technique honed from years of training. She preferred longer-range shots, striking distant targets effortlessly, while Lee relied on brute force and accuracy at mid-range. They were different in their approach but equal in their determination. For the first time, Fiona let a few compliments slip between her usual silence, though Lee pretended not to hear.

From the cottage's porch, Evangeline and Elijah watched with quiet admiration. The warmth of their tea steamed against the cool evening air as they observed the two moving in perfect harmony through the course.

"He's come a long way," Evangeline murmured, taking a slow sip from her cup.

Elijah nodded. "His determination is remarkable. His skills have improved tenfold. He's not just training anymore—he's pushing himself beyond his limits."

Evangeline glanced at him, hesitating before speaking. "You should talk to him, Elijah. I think he believes he let you down."

Elijah exhaled through his nose and gave his wife a small smile. "I will."

Evangeline's eyes lingered on Fiona as she darted through the course. "And how is she doing?"

Elijah's smile faltered. "She doesn't complain. She never does. But you and I both know the headaches aren't getting better." Elijah clenched his jaw. "She won't say it, but I can tell they're worse. The herbs help, but they aren't a cure." He hesitated before adding, "Keeping her busy with ranger work helps too."

Evangeline leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder. "Oh, Elijah."

He kissed the top of her head and reassured her. "She's strong."

"I know," Evangeline whispered, though the worry never left her eyes. She turned back to watch their daughter and Lee, noting how, despite their silence, they communicated through movement—an unspoken understanding forming between them.

Elijah finally stepped down from the porch, making his way toward the target range. "Hold up, you two!" he called, walking toward Fiona. She was slightly out of breath but had a satisfied glow about her. "Give me a few moments with Lee."

Fiona gave a nod, slinging her bow over her shoulder before jogging back toward the cottage. Lee, still catching his breath, walked over to Elijah.

"You look good," Elijah said, nodding approvingly. "Your arm's healed, and you've taken your training to a whole new level."

Lee exhaled. "Thank you, sir."

"I'm sorry I haven't been around to talk with you, especially after our last

outing,” Elijah admitted.

“Sir, I—” Lee started, but Elijah held up a hand to stop him.

“No need to apologize. Accidents happen. But next time, you need to make better decisions and know your limits.” His tone wasn’t harsh—just firm, a lesson rather than a reprimand. Lee nodded, understanding.

Elijah placed his hands behind his back and started walking. “As you may have noticed, we’ve been gone longer than usual. The Moonveil has been demanding more of our time.”

Lee followed, listening carefully.

“There have been more sightings—similar to the creature you saw.” Elijah’s voice was laced with concern. “Other rangers have encountered them as well. That’s why Fiona and I have been away so often.”

Lee hesitated before asking, “Sir... why did Fiona’s eyes glow when she saw the creature?”

Elijah sighed deeply, pausing to pick up a stone. He threw it at a tree before continuing. “It’s a side effect of an accident from when she was younger. I’d tell you more, but Fiona wouldn’t want me to.”

Lee considered this. “But... she can see the creatures before they show themselves.”

“Yes,” Elijah confirmed. “She sees the aura they emit. It helps us track them. We don’t always know what they’ll look like, and Fiona can detect them before anyone else.”

Lee absorbed this new information, then decided to bring up something that had been weighing on his mind. “Sir... when I told you about my father, I never mentioned the man behind it all.” He hesitated, then said the name. “Sebastian Greave.”

Elijah stopped walking. His expression darkened slightly. “You know him, don’t you?” Lee pressed.

“Only by name,” Elijah admitted. “I’ve never met him. But I know enough to say this—he’s dangerous.”

Lee’s heart pounded. “Do you know where I can find him?”

Elijah shook his head. “No, I don’t. I wish I did.” He studied Lee. “Why didn’t you mention this before?”

Lee looked away. “I wasn’t sure if I could trust you.”

Elijah placed a firm hand on his shoulder. “I understand. But I hope you trust me now.”

Lee nodded.

After a long pause, Elijah’s voice shifted. “I want you to join us on our next excursion into the Moonveil.”

Lee looked up at him, surprised. “You do?”

“You’ve healed, and from what I see, you’ve been fine-tuning your skills. It’s time you come with us again.” Elijah gave him an encouraging smile.

Lee straightened. “I felt like I let you down before. I know I can do better. I was hoping you’d ask me to come along.”

EVERHART

Elijah clapped him on the back, nearly knocking him over. “That’s the spirit! We leave in a few days.”

## 12 THE HUNT BEGINS

The three rangers met at the edge of Moonveil Grove: a seasoned guardian, a girl with a sense like no other, and a determined boy eager to prove himself. They checked and rechecked their gear in silence, each one moving with quiet efficiency. Fiona went first as she often did, stepping onto the path that led into the dense forest. Lee was about to follow when Elijah placed a firm hand on his shoulder and handed him a smaller quiver of arrows.

"These are different," Elijah said.

Lee pulled one out, examining it in the morning light. The obsidian tip gleamed darkly, absorbing the light rather than reflecting it, but when turned at just the right angle, a faint purple hue shimmered on its surface. It looked brittle, almost fragile, but when he pressed a finger against its edge, it was sharp as a razor.

"It may not look like much, but this is what keeps the anomalies at bay," Elijah said. "Obsidian is the key to sending them back. Use them wisely."

Lee nodded solemnly, slinging the quiver over his shoulder before stepping into the forest.

The Moonveil was as breathtaking as ever. The towering ancient trees created a cathedral of gnarled branches and golden leaves, their knotted trunks covered in moss and lichen. The crisp autumn air carried the scent of damp earth, fallen leaves, and distant blossoms. Small streams wound their way through the underbrush, their crystalline waters reflecting the sunlight that managed to break through the thick canopy above.



Lee inhaled deeply, savoring the rich scent of the woods. He remembered the overwhelming beauty of this place from his first journey and felt a renewed sense of purpose. He wasn't just a visitor anymore. He had trained, prepared, and earned the right to be here. He belonged to this world now, alongside Elijah and Fiona.

But something was different this time. The sounds of the forest—the endless chatter of birds, the buzzing of insects—seemed subdued, as if nature itself was holding its breath.

Elijah was the first to break the silence. "I do love this place," he said, breathing in the crisp air. "The scents, the sounds, the fresh air. If Ironhaven ever decided to expand in this direction, they'd have to go through me first."

Lee chuckled, shaking his head. "I believe it."

Elijah smirked and glanced toward Fiona. "Ever heard how Moonveil Grove got its name?"

"I haven't," Lee admitted, intrigued.

Elijah cast a glance at Fiona, who had slowed her pace to listen. "It's an old story, one passed down through the rangers."

Before Elijah began to tell his story, he called up ahead to Fiona. "Don't forget to look out for Varek. We're meeting with him soon."

Fiona responded with a sarcastic, "yes, I know."

Lee asked who he was.

"Another ranger that we sometimes share a patrol," Elijah pointed along the northern border of the forest. "There are others that are part of the order who share responsibilities in this region."

Now Elijah began to tell the tale of how Moonveil got its name. He cleared his throat. "Before Iron Haven was the large smelly, and noisy industrial city it is today, it was known as the village of Eldermere and next to it was an ancient woodland known as the Grove of No Name."

*The grove had endured for centuries—an enigmatic expanse of silver-barked trees and whispering leaves, untouched by time, avoided by all who treasured their sanity. Eldermere's folk spoke in hushed tones of ghostly lights flitting between the trunks, of phantoms that danced beneath the boughs on moonless nights.*

*No one entered willingly. Those who wandered too deep returned changed—hollow-eyed, speaking in riddles... if they returned at all.*

*But on one fated night, beneath the swollen eye of a full moon, a young wanderer named Elric Thorne crossed the threshold. Whether guided by reckless curiosity or a fate etched among the stars, he stepped beyond the gnarled roots into the grove's heart.*

*There, a silver mist rose thick and alive, curling around the trees like sentient breath. The ground thrummed beneath his boots, and the air hummed with a sound not quite song, not quite voice—yet unmistakably melodic.*

*And then he saw her.*

*A woman stood at the mist's center, radiant and still. Her gown shimmered with light and shadow, her hair a cascade of silver silk, her eyes gleaming with ageless wisdom.*

*"You seek the truth, child of men," she said, her voice drifting like wind through leaves.*

*Elric swallowed hard and nodded. "I only wish to understand. What is this place? Who... are you?"*

*A sorrowful smile crossed her lips. "I am the last keeper of this grove. Once, many of us walked between the worlds, and this place was our sanctuary—hidden from mankind's gaze. But time is unkind. I am all that remains."*

*She lifted her hand, and the mist parted to reveal a lake, dark as obsidian, reflecting the night sky like a mirror. Moonlight spilled across its surface in ribbons of silver, shifting like a veil drawn over the water.*

*"This grove was never nameless—only forgotten," she whispered. "It was once known as Moonveil, where the veil between worlds grew thinnest. A refuge for those who moved in light and shadow alike."*

*Ghostly figures flickered in the mist—tall, graceful beings with eyes like starlight, gliding silently among the trees. Then, as suddenly as they appeared, they vanished.*

*"The name faded when my kind did," the woman said. "But you have seen. And you will remember."*

*As dawn's first light kissed the treetops, she and the mist dissolved together, like dew touched by the sun. The grove, once feared and forsaken, now bore a name once more—a truth resurrected.*

*When Elric returned to Eldermere, he spoke of Moonveil Grove. From that day forward, none dared call it nameless again.*

*And even now, when the moon is high and mist coils through the trees, wanderers say they still hear whispers—soft and melodic—reminding the world of what once was.*

A hush fell over them. Lee glanced at Fiona, who was staring ahead, her expression unreadable. Then she scoffed, breaking the solemnity. "I thought his name was Kael."

Elijah sighed, shaking his head. "Just keep your eyes on the path ahead, would you?"

Lee smiled as they quickened their pace.

By early evening, they had reached the heart of the Grove, the trees towering

over them like ancient sentinels. As they rounded a bend in the path, a figure stepped from behind a tree—a tall man with a long red beard and a hooded cloak.

Lee instinctively tensed, but Elijah and Fiona showed no alarm.

"Hello, old friend," Elijah greeted, striding forward.

"A mighty fine day for a stroll through enchanted woods," the man replied, clasping Elijah's forearm in greeting.

"Varek, I'd like to introduce you to Lee," Elijah said.

Varek nodded, his sharp eyes assessing Lee in a single glance. "A pleasure to meet you, son."

Lee nodded back. "Likewise."

Varek turned to Fiona, his face splitting into a grin. "And of course, the most beautiful maiden of the forest."

Fiona rolled her eyes. "Hi, Varek."

Elijah and Varek stepped aside to talk privately, leaving Lee and Fiona to scout ahead. Lee took the lead, pushing past her.

"Hey," she protested, quickening her step to match his. "What's your problem?"

Lee kept his eyes on the path. "Is it because last time you slipped and broke your arse?" Fiona teased.

Lee exhaled sharply. "It was my arm. And no. Well... maybe. Why are you so cold toward me?"

Fiona hesitated. She could have given a snarky response, but something about the way Lee asked made her pause. Why was she so distant with him? He had proven himself time and time again. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe she wasn't ready to let him in.

"I don't know," she admitted.

Then she froze.

Lee stopped, turning to her. "What—"

Her eyes were glowing faint blue.

"You see it?" he whispered.

"Yes," she murmured, barely breathing. "Stay still. It doesn't know we're here."

Lee's heart pounded in his chest. They were upwind, but that could change any second.

"On three," Fiona whispered. "Move to your right and crouch behind the brush."

Lee nodded.

"One, two, three."

They stepped off the path, pressing themselves into the underbrush. Lee peeked over the hedge. What he had thought was a boulder was the back of a massive creature, its thick hide a mixture of tufts of fur and bare, gray skin. His breath caught in his throat.

Fiona nocked an obsidian arrow, and Lee followed suit. His hands trembled, not from fear, but from anticipation. This was it. Their real test.

"One... two..."

A distant shout echoed through the forest.

"Oh no," Fiona muttered.

The beast's ears twitched. Then, with terrifying speed, it turned and charged.

The ground trembled as it barreled toward them, its massive claws gouging deep trenches in the earth. Lee and Fiona leapt aside just in time, their arrows snapping as the creature's bulk crashed through the brush.

They had seconds.

Lee grabbed another arrow, fumbling with the quiver. Fiona let loose a shot, striking the beast's hind leg. It roared in fury, slowing but not stopping.

Up ahead, Elijah and Varek turned just as the beast broke through the trees.

"Take the shot!" Fiona shouted.

Lee let his arrow fly. It struck true, but it wasn't obsidian. The beast barely flinched.

With one swipe of its massive claw, it sent Elijah hurtling through the air.

"No!" Fiona screamed.

Lee grabbed an obsidian arrow and sprinted forward. Fiona was already moving, vaulting onto the beast's back. Lee followed, both of them driving their arrows deep into the base of its skull.

The beast let out an ear-splitting wail before collapsing into a heap, its body dissolving into a mass of fur and shadow.

Fiona didn't stop to celebrate. She was already running to her father, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

Elijah lay in a heap, his body covered in deep gashes, his breath shallow.

Lee's chest tightened. They had won the fight, but now the real battle began.

They had to get Elijah home—before it was too late.

Time was of the essence. Every second felt like a grain of sand slipping through their fingers as they carried Elijah through the dense woods. His labored breathing was shallow, and though he fought to stay conscious, his strength was waning. Varek kept one hand pressed against the deep gashes along Elijah's side, trying to stem the bleeding with cloth already soaked in

crimson. Fiona and Lee, working with quiet urgency, fashioned a makeshift stretcher from sturdy branches and strips of cloth cut from their own gear. There was no time for bickering, no room for hesitation. The only thing that mattered was getting the elder ranger home alive.

The journey back was grueling. Each step jostled Elijah slightly, causing him to groan in pain. Lee kept looking over, half-expecting him to fade away before they could reach safety. But Elijah held on. Whether through sheer willpower or the resilience of a seasoned ranger, he refused to succumb.

When they finally emerged from the tree line and reached the cottage, the scene erupted into chaos. Evangeline took one look at her husband and sprang into action. She didn't waste time on questions; there would be time for that later. With one sweep of her arm, she cleared the dining table and ordered them to lay him down. Her voice was sharp and commanding.

"Fiona, boil clean water. Lee, fetch linen from the closet. Varek, help me with these bandages."

Lee didn't hesitate. He ran, nearly knocking over a chair as he grabbed every strip of clean linen he could find. Fiona moved with equal urgency, her hands shaking only slightly as she set water to boil. Varek, calm despite the frantic atmosphere, assisted Evangeline in cutting away Elijah's torn and bloodied clothes. The wounds were worse than they had feared—deep gashes that ran across his torso, his skin bruised and battered from the force of the attack. Evangeline's face was a mask of control, but Lee could see the fear in her eyes as she worked.

She moved swiftly, applying a thick paste made of aegisroot to the wounds. The sharp scent of mint filled the air, the herb acting as a natural antiseptic. Her fingers worked with precision, stitching the gashes closed while Elijah barely stirred. Fiona prepared a strong tea using emberleaf, known for its regenerative properties, and they forced Elijah to drink, though he was barely conscious. Every moment stretched unbearably long, but finally, Evangeline let out a slow breath.

"He's stable," she announced, voice heavy with exhaustion. "But he's lost a lot of blood. If he makes it through the night, he'll have a chance."

With their combined effort, they moved him to the bedroom, ensuring he was as comfortable as possible before Evangeline finally stepped away. She sank into an armchair by the hearth, rubbing her temples. Lee and Fiona sat nearby, drained, while Varek, half-asleep, leaned against the wall.

"He saved me," Varek finally spoke, his voice thick with emotion. "He had time to draw an arrow, to defend himself—but instead, he pushed me out of

the way.” He looked down, guilt flashing across his features. “I owe him.”

The room was silent as Varek gathered his things. He turned to Evangeline, voice firm. “I need to report this immediately. They need to know what happened.”

She nodded, her eyes filled with understanding. “Go. And check back soon.”

As soon as the door shut behind Varek, Lee found himself staring into the fire. He could still hear the creature’s horrific wails, still see the green glow of its eyes in his mind. “It was massive,” he finally said, almost to himself. “Like a bear, but larger—mutated. Its eyes...” He swallowed, shaking his head. “It moved so fast.”

A whisper cut through the quiet. “It was his fault.”

Lee barely registered the words at first, but then Fiona repeated them, louder this time. He looked up, confused, meeting her glare. “What?”

Her voice rose. “It was his fault.”

Evangeline straightened. “Fiona, what are you—”

“IT WAS HIS FAULT!” Fiona’s voice cracked as she jumped to her feet, pointing a shaking finger at Lee.

His stomach twisted. “What do you mean?”

“You used the wrong arrow,” she accused. “You had an obsidian tip, but you shot it with a regular one instead. That’s why it didn’t stop! That’s why my father got hurt!”

Lee felt his breath catch. He remembered grabbing an arrow in the chaos, remembered loosing it straight at the beast. But in the moment—the confusion, the panic—had he really grabbed the wrong one?

“I—” he started, but Fiona wasn’t done.

“You had a chance, and you failed!” She was shaking, her face red, tears streaming down her cheeks. “You—”

“You hit it first,” Lee cut in, his own voice rising. “And it didn’t stop. Your obsidian arrow barely scratched it!”

Fiona grabbed at her hair and screamed. “NO! NO! NO!” The sound was raw, filled with something far deeper than anger. Pain. Despair. She was unraveling before him, her body trembling as she gasped for breath.

Evangeline stepped between them, her voice sharp. “Enough!”

Fiona fell to her knees, clutching her head, her sobs turning ragged. “It’s my fault,” she choked. “I should have been faster—I should have—”

Evangeline knelt beside her daughter, pulling her into a tight embrace. “No,” she whispered. “It’s not your fault.”

She rocked Fiona gently, whispering soothing words as she gestured toward Lee. “Grab that container on the shelf.”

Lee numbly followed her instruction, handing it over. Evangeline managed to coax Fiona into drinking the contents, her sobs slowly quieting. Lee stood frozen, watching as Fiona curled into her mother’s arms, still shaking but no longer screaming.

Evangeline looked up at him, her voice calm but firm. “Go get some rest, Lee.”

He hesitated but then turned toward the door. As he stepped outside, the cold night air hit him like a slap. He inhaled sharply, closing his eyes for a brief moment before heading toward his small cottage. His body was exhausted, but his mind raced with everything that had just happened.

He had thought he was finally finding his place among them. Now, he wasn’t so sure.

## 13 A NEW PATH

Lee barely slept that night. His thoughts raced, tangled in a web of guilt, worry, and unanswered questions. Every time he closed his eyes, he relived the battle with the beast, watching Elijah thrown through the air, hearing Fiona's accusations echo in his ears. He tossed and turned, unable to escape the images burned into his mind.

When dawn finally broke, a dull haze sat over Ironhaven, the morning light barely piercing through the thick industrial smog. Lee rubbed his eyes and sat up in his small rented cottage. His body felt heavy, as if the weight of the past few days had physically settled into his limbs. He had hoped for clarity with the coming morning, but all he felt was exhaustion.

Needing to clear his head, he forced himself up and readied for the day. The smithy was waiting, and for now, he needed the stability of work, something that didn't require him to think beyond the metal in front of him.

The blacksmith's forge was unchanged—hot, loud, and filled with the steady rhythm of hammer against steel. It was a comfort in its own way, a reminder that some things remained constant. The smell of burning coal and iron greeted him as he stepped inside.

As usual, the blacksmith, whose name Lee had never asked until now, was hunched over his work. His powerful hands maneuvered molten metal with precision, creating something intricate and unknown. Off to the side, the table Lee usually worked at was stacked with tools needing repair. A small, familiar bag of coins sat beside them, the payment for his previous efforts. The weight of it was reassuring.



Lee went straight to work, heating and hammering the broken tools back into shape. He let himself fall into the rhythm, using the effort to block out his thoughts. He worked without speaking, just as he always had. Hours passed, and when he finally straightened his aching back, the tools were finished.

Before he could reach the door, a deep, gravelly voice stopped him. "You do good work."

Lee turned, blinking in surprise. The blacksmith barely looked up from his project.

"Thank you, sir," Lee said, hesitating.

The man glanced at him, his eyes sharp and assessing. "It was nice to have the help."

Something in his tone told Lee that this was a goodbye. A part of him had expected it. He had grown stronger, faster, and more skilled. He had outgrown this place.

"What is your name?" Lee asked.

The blacksmith studied him for a moment before replying, "Ezekiel...Ezekiel Hammerfell."

Lee gave a small smile. "Lee Everhart."

The older man nodded. "Safe journey, Lee Everhart." And with that, he turned back to his work, the conversation finished.

The walk back to his cottage felt different. Ironhaven was still the same, filled with its usual characters—shopkeepers calling out deals, factory workers finishing their shifts, and street vendors pushing steaming food carts. But Lee felt like a stranger now, an observer rather than a part of the city.

One vendor, an old man with a cart of golden crepes, called out to him. Lee had always ignored him, but today, he stopped and bought one. The vendor grinned, handing him a steaming brassclaw crepe filled with crab meat. Lee took a bite. It wasn't great, but he ate it anyway, savoring the experience.

Regret came swiftly.

By the time he reached his cottage, his stomach rebelled. He barely made it behind a tree before the crepe made a violent return. As he wiped sweat from his forehead, he heard a soft voice behind him.

"Are you alright?"

Lee turned to see Evangeline watching him with a knowing look. He groaned. "I tried the crepes."

"I told you not to try the crepes." She sighed, shaking her head. "Here, I brought you some fresh bread."

He took it gratefully, following her inside when she asked to talk.

Inside the cottage, Evangeline looked around. Lee hadn't changed a thing. It was still her mother's space, untouched. She hesitated, running her fingers over the worn wooden table before sitting down.

"How's Elijah?" Lee asked.

"He's stable. I think he'll be fine if I can keep the infection at bay," she said softly. "Fiona has been resting as well."

Lee nodded, unsure what else to say.

Evangeline took a deep breath and pushed forward. "Lee, there's something I need to ask of you."

He sat up straighter. "Anything."

"There's a place north of here, at the forest's edge where the great plains begin." She traced an imaginary map on the table. "Nomadic clans make their home there, migrating with the seasons. They raise livestock—horses, goats, dromasteeds—even verdantine." She paused, watching him closely. "Winter is coming, and they're making their way back to Runebound Valley."

She reached for a bag at her feet. "One of the clan elders, Mira Duskweaver, has requested herbs she can't find on the plains. I need someone I trust to take these to her." She exhaled deeply. "And, Lee... I think you should continue your journey."

He had expected it, but hearing the words still hit hard.

Evangeline's eyes shimmered. "You've grown, Lee. Stronger, wiser. But I know you came here searching for your father. You won't find your answers in Ironhaven."

Lee swallowed past the lump in his throat and gave her a soft smile. "I'll do it. I'll take the herbs."

Her breath hitched, and she stood, wrapping her arms around him in a fierce embrace. "Be careful," she whispered. "And stay strong."

He closed his eyes for a moment, holding onto the warmth of her words before she pulled away, wiping her eyes. "These are for you," she said, handing him another bag. "Supplies for the journey."

"Tell Elijah and Fiona... thank you."

She nodded. "I will."

Lee watched as she walked to the door, pausing only to glance back at him one last time before stepping out into the night.

Alone once more, Lee looked around the small cottage. It had never truly been his home, just a place to rest. But now, it was time to leave.

Tomorrow, he would head north. His journey was far from over.

Lee woke before dawn, his body still weary from a restless night. The windstorm had howled through the trees, rattling the windows of his small cottage and keeping him from the deep sleep he desperately needed. But there was no time to linger. The journey ahead was long, and he needed to make it to Duskwatch before nightfall. Traveling the roads at night, alone, was a dangerous proposition.

He gathered his belongings, securing the bags Evangeline had given him, and stepped outside into the crisp morning air. The remnants of the storm still lingered, the ground damp with the scent of rain and pine, and the sky streaked with the first hints of morning light. He pulled his cloak tighter around himself and set off down the worn dirt path.

As he walked, Lee's mind wandered. He thought of the people he had met and the lessons they had imparted. The Emberstones had taught him combat and the art of metalworking. The Cloudgears had introduced him to the mechanics of steam engineering and the delicate art of strategy. The Emberwoods had instilled in him the skills of a ranger, survival techniques, and even the basics of herbal medicine. Even the enigmatic blacksmith, Ezekiel Hammerfell, had given him an unspoken lesson in patience and persistence. Each of these people had left their mark on him, shaping him into something more than the wandering boy he once was.

The road was well-traveled, two parallel lines of hardened dirt carved out by the wheels of countless carts and carriages. Some were pulled by sturdy horses, their riders wrapped in thick cloaks, while others were propelled by the marvels of steam-powered engineering. Lee had encountered these mechanical contraptions before, but they still fascinated him. The rhythmic chug of their engines, the hiss of steam venting from their brass exhausts—it was a sound that spoke of innovation and progress, yet seemed foreign on these old roads.

One such steam-powered cart came roaring past him, the driver honking a shrill klaxon to announce his presence. Lee barely had time to leap out of the way as a cloud of dust kicked up in its wake. As he coughed and waved the dust from his face, his eyes caught movement in the distance.

A silver wolf sat at the edge of the tree line, its white, opaque eyes locked onto him.

Lee froze. He recognized those eyes immediately. It had been watching him for some time now, appearing at the strangest moments, always just out of reach. Yet it never acted aggressively, never approached—only observed.

He considered reaching for his bow but thought better of it. Instead, he

sighed and muttered, "Oh, it's you again."

The wolf did not move, nor did it react in any way.

Before he could dwell on it further, another steam-powered vehicle approached, though this one was moving at a more reasonable pace. The driver, a man with large brass goggles resting on his forehead, pulled up alongside Lee and called out.

"Need a lift?"

Lee hesitated for a moment, eyeing the driver. He had the look of a tinkerer, an artificer, his coat adorned with various tools and trinkets. His vehicle was different from the last—sleeker, with polished brass plating and intricate gears turning just beneath the surface. Something about him seemed trustworthy, or at the very least, not threatening.

Lee nodded and climbed in. As the vehicle hummed to life and pulled away, he glanced back toward the spot where the wolf had been.

It was gone.

Gregor Varn, as the driver introduced himself, was a traveling artificer, heading to the city of Thervon. He was talkative but not overbearing, sharing stories of his travels and the various oddities he had encountered. Lee offered little in return, but he did mention his destination and his errand for Evangeline.

"You're heading to the nomads?" Gregor asked, raising an eyebrow. "Interesting folk, they are. Never stay in one place too long, but they know the land better than anyone. You'll find them fascinating, I think."

Lee only nodded, his mind still turning over the image of the silver-eyed wolf.

They arrived in Duskwatch by late afternoon, the small town bathed in the golden glow of the setting sun. It was quieter than Lee expected, with only a few townsfolk lingering about. The streets were paved with loose cobblestone, and the buildings, though sturdy, had a weathered look to them. A few shops lined the main street, their signs swaying slightly in the evening breeze.

Gregor pulled the vehicle to a stop outside an inn. "This is where I leave you, young adventurer," he said, offering Lee a small smile. "I've got business in Thervon, and I need to keep moving."

Lee climbed out, adjusting his bags. "I appreciate the ride. I wish I could repay you."

Gregor waved him off. "No need. Just pay it forward."

With that, the artificer revved the engine, and the steam-powered vehicle whirled off into the distance, leaving Lee alone once more.

Inside the inn, the warm glow of lanterns greeted him. The scent of roasted meat and fresh bread filled the air, making his stomach rumble. The innkeeper, an older woman with sharp eyes and a welcoming smile, set him up with a modest room for the night.

He secured the door behind him, dropping his bags onto the floor. He ate some of the food Evangeline had packed for him, grateful for the familiar taste, then arranged his belongings in a way that would make it difficult for any potential thief to take anything without waking him.

As he lay in bed, staring at the wooden ceiling, he felt the weight of solitude settle over him. It had been a long time since he had been alone, truly alone.

He thought of his father.

He thought of Helena Emberstone and the nights they spent reading together.

He thought of Vic and Jasper Cloudgear, their mischievous grins and endless card games.

He thought of Dahlia, of Uncle Calder and Captain Roland.

He thought of Fiona.

A deep sigh escaped his lips as he rolled onto his side, closing his eyes. His heart ached with longing for the people he had left behind, for the connections he had made and the ones he had yet to find again.

But this was the path he had chosen.

And tomorrow, it would take him one step closer to whatever lay ahead.

Lee woke with the first golden rays of dawn spilling through the inn's small wooden shutters. The night had been restful, his body grateful for the warmth of a bed after so many nights spent in the wild. A soft knock on the door signaled the arrival of the innkeeper with a simple breakfast of porridge, honeyed bread, and a steaming mug of herbal tea. He ate quickly, his mind already focused on the long journey ahead.

With his pack slung over his shoulders and his bow secured across his back, Lee stepped out onto the cobbled streets of Duskwatch. The town, though small, had a charm of its own. Mist still clung to the ground in the early morning, curling around the lantern poles and wooden shopfronts. A few vendors were already setting up their stalls, and the smell of fresh bread mingled with the scent of damp earth. Following the innkeeper's directions, Lee made his way west, leaving behind the clustered buildings and entering the wilder lands beyond.

The road he traveled was little more than a winding dirt path, bearing the

shallow ruts left behind by carts and the occasional steam-powered vehicle. It twisted through rolling hills, the dense tree line of the forest slowly thinning as he moved forward. He could feel the shift in the air, the scent of pine giving way to a fresher, sweeter aroma carried by the wind. The flora changed too—tall grasses swayed lazily in the breeze, interspersed with wildflowers of every shade imaginable. Snowdrops and hellebores peeked from between the rocks, their delicate petals standing out against the rich greens and yellows of the plains. The sky overhead stretched endlessly, a canvas of soft blues and drifting clouds.

As midday approached, Lee found himself in the heart of the Runebound Valley. The mountains loomed in the distance, their peaks capped with snow despite the valley's temperate climate. The grasslands before him stretched as far as the eye could see, broken only by clusters of trees and winding streams that shimmered under the sun. The air was crisp, filled with the chorus of insects and the distant calls of birds of prey circling high above. Two large avian creatures glided overhead, their massive wings casting fleeting shadows across the land. They called to each other in sharp, echoing cries, their voices carried by the wind.

Lee took a deep breath, savoring the purity of the valley's air. His journey had been long, filled with trials and hardships, yet there was something freeing about standing in this vast expanse, where the land felt untamed and full of possibility. However, his moment of peace was cut short when he noticed movement on the horizon. A dust cloud was rising, and with it came the rhythmic pounding of hooves.

A group of five riders approached swiftly, their forms growing clearer with each passing moment. Lee instinctively tensed, his grip tightening on the strap of his pack. The riders wielded long rifles in one hand, their other hands holding the reins of their powerful steeds. Their dark hair whipped in the wind, some worn loose while others had tied it back with leather straps. Their clothes were a mix of tanned leather and sturdy linen, designed for both protection and mobility. Feathers and beads decorated their garments, marking them as people of the plains.

Lee remained where he stood, refusing to appear as a threat. He raised his hands slowly, palms open to show he was unarmed. The riders formed a circle around him, their horses kicking up dust and their rifles ready. Their sharp eyes studied him with curiosity and caution.

One rider, a younger man with a long ponytail, was the first to speak. "Who are you? What business do you have here?"

Lee met his gaze steadily. "My name is Lee, and I've come to deliver supplies to Mira Duskweaver." He reached into his pack and lifted the bundle of herbs wrapped in cloth. "Evangeline sent me."

A murmur passed among the riders. Another, younger than the first, stepped forward, eyeing the package. "What's in it?"

"Herbs," Lee replied. "Medicinal supplies."

The younger rider reached out, attempting to snatch the package from his hands. Lee, acting on instinct, held firm. In the momentary struggle, the younger rider lost his balance and tumbled from his horse, landing on the packed earth with an indignant curse. Laughter erupted from the others, but it was quickly silenced when the fallen rider leapt to his feet, face burning with embarrassment and rage.

He drew a knife from his belt and advanced on Lee. "You think you can make a fool of me?" he spat.

Lee took a step back, hands raised in a placating gesture. "I meant no offense. I was only trying to keep the package safe."

But the rider was already upon him, slashing with quick, reckless movements. Lee dodged, grabbing the wrist of the attacking hand and twisting, forcing the blade away. In a swift motion, he flipped the young rider onto his back, pinning him down with a knee to his chest. It was the same maneuver he had used before on Bram Emberstone, but this time, there was no audience of cheering warriors—only the tense silence of the other riders.

Before Lee could speak, pain exploded at the back of his skull. His vision blurred as his grip slackened. The last thing he saw before darkness claimed him was the smirking face of a rider with feathers braided into his hair. Then, everything went black.

## 14 THE HOLLOW SKY TRIBE

Lee opened his eyes slowly, his head throbbing as if it had been struck by the very beast he had helped take down in Moonveil Grove. A dull ache spread through his skull, and as he tried to shift, he quickly realized that his arms and legs were bound. He took a deep breath, forcing himself to stay calm as his vision adjusted. The dim interior of the tent came into focus—wooden beams arching over him, draped with thick woven fabric. Rugs of various animal pelts softened the floor, and faintly, the scent of burning herbs filled the air.

A figure loomed nearby, perched on a stool, watching him with an amused expression. It was the rider with the feathers in his hair—the same one who had smiled before Lee blacked out.

"You're a feisty one," the rider remarked.

Lee's mouth was dry, and his words came out in a hoarse murmur. "What happened?"

"You were knocked out," the rider said, pacing idly. "Things got... out of hand when Takaanu tried to take your bag and then attacked you. We also had to knock him out." He smirked. "The elders weren't too happy about what happened."

Lee tested his restraints. His wrists were tied with sturdy twine, but there was some give. He looked around, noting a modest yet comfortable space—low wooden tables, a small iron stove, dried herbs hanging from the ceiling. The place felt lived in.

"Why am I tied up?" he asked, locking eyes with the rider.

The young man shrugged and pulled a pistol from a satchel. "We went



through your belongings—security reasons." He turned the weapon over in his hand, inspecting it like a curious child. "And we found this."

Lee narrowed his gaze. "That was a gift."

"A weapon like this is dangerous," the rider said. "I hope to return it to my friend," Lee added, his voice firm.

The rider studied him for a long moment, then tucked the pistol into the back of his belt. "Then I'll hold onto it for you."

Before Lee could argue, the tent flap was pushed aside, and an old woman stepped inside. She had long, graying dark hair, sharp yet kind eyes, and a presence that commanded attention. She wore a flowing blue dress with gold trim, her fingers adorned with rings, and around her neck, a collection of polished stones hung from a delicate chain.

"So this is him," she said in a whisper before her voice took on a sharper edge. "Ronan, why is he tied up?"

The rider—Ronan—stiffened slightly. "Just a precaution, Grandmother."

Mira Duskweaver sighed in exasperation. "Precaution? He's a boy, not a bandit. Untie him."

Ronan hesitated for only a second before pulling out a knife and slicing through the twine. Lee rubbed his sore wrists, nodding to the elder in gratitude.

"My apologies, Lee. We don't usually treat visitors this way," Mira said kindly. "We are a nomadic people, but we respect hospitality. What was done to you was wrong."

Lee exhaled. "Thanks."

"And thank you for delivering the supplies. Evangeline is a dear friend, and I trust her judgment. When I heard she sent someone, I knew you'd be worth meeting."

Lee frowned. "How do you know my name?"

Mira smiled, but her response was cryptic. "All in good time." She turned and walked toward the tent entrance, gesturing for Lee to follow.

Stepping outside, Lee took his first real look at the valley settlement. The sun was dipping below the horizon, casting a golden hue over the rolling plains. Small clusters of white, dome-shaped dwellings stretched across the land, their fabric walls rippling slightly in the evening breeze. Smoke curled lazily from fire pits, and the scent of roasting meat mixed with the fresh aroma of the open grasslands.

In the distance, herds of horses and dromasteeds grazed, their massive, muscular frames moving with calm, practiced ease. A few children ran between the tents, laughing, while older men and women tended to the animals or

prepared for the night's meal.

Mira walked ahead, hands clasped behind her back. "We live simply here," she said. "Moving with the seasons, following the land, respecting its gifts."

Lee nodded, his eyes scanning the camp. He spotted some of the riders from earlier, including the one he had accidentally pulled from his horse. The boy was glaring at him, a bandage wrapped around his head. Lee felt a twinge of guilt—but also a spark of amusement.

They reached a larger tent at the heart of the camp. Mira held the flap open, motioning for Lee to enter. Inside, a fire pit glowed in the center, surrounded by a ring of seating cushions. Dried herbs and charms dangled from the wooden supports, filling the space with a soothing, earthy scent.

"Sit, child," Mira instructed.

Lee lowered himself onto one of the cushions, noting the unusual design. It was sturdy yet flexible, molded to his body in a way that was oddly comfortable. Mira and Ronan sat across from him, both making a small hand gesture before settling into their seats.

Lee hesitated. "Should I be doing that too?"

Ronan smirked. "It's a sign of respect before sitting. You'll pick it up."

Mira steepled her fingers. "Now, tell me of your journey."

Lee recounted his tale—the abduction of his father, his time with the Emberstones, the Cloudgears, the Emberwoods. He spoke of Ironhaven, the forge, and the Moonveil Grove. When he described the monstrous beast that nearly killed Elijah, Mira's expression darkened.

"This is troubling news," she said gravely.

"You've heard of these creatures before?" Lee asked.

Mira exhaled slowly. "Not in many years. But they are waking again."

Lee exchanged a glance with Ronan, who suddenly seemed far more serious.

"I will consult with the other elders," Mira continued. "But first, you must rest. You will stay here for a while."

Lee blinked. "I thought I was just delivering supplies."

Mira smiled knowingly. "Perhaps. But fate brought you here, child. And I believe you still have much to learn."

Lee followed Ronan out of the great dwelling, his body still stiff from the previous day's events. The evening air was crisp, carrying the scent of burning wood and the faint aroma of dried herbs from the cooking fires scattered across the settlement. The sun had nearly dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in deep oranges and purples. Around them, the nomadic people of the valley moved about their evening routines—tending to livestock, sharing stories

around small fires, and preparing their homes for the night.

Before they reached the smaller dwelling Ronan was leading him to, he suddenly turned and studied Lee. There was a glint of curiosity in his eyes.

"I'm astonished that you were able to defeat the beast with just a bow and arrow," Ronan admitted, folding his arms.

Lee shrugged. "The tip was made of obsidian."

Ronan nodded slowly. "Still... the beast was moving fast. And you jumped onto its back to hit the mark behind its head, right?"

Lee hesitated, then nodded.

Ronan looked around as if ensuring they were alone. Then he motioned for Lee to follow him. They veered off the path and headed toward an open field where a makeshift archery range had been set up. Wooden targets lined the space, their bullseyes barely visible in the fading light.

"Show me," Ronan said, handing Lee a bow and arrow.

Lee took the bow and tested its weight. It was slightly shorter than what he was used to, but the string was firm, and the grip was well-worn. He drew back the string, aiming for the center of the closest target. When he released, the arrow shot through the air and struck with a sharp thunk. Without hesitating, he switched hands and fired again. The second arrow hit slightly off-center, but still close to the mark.

"Impressive," Ronan murmured.

"I had a lot of practice," Lee replied, setting the bow down.

From the corner of his eye, Lee noticed a group of children playing an unfamiliar game on a dusty field. They wielded short clubs, passing a round ball between them as they darted back and forth. One boy ran forward, dodging an opponent's swing, before launching the ball into the air. Another player timed his movement perfectly, swinging his club and striking the ball toward a net secured between two wooden poles.

Lee frowned in curiosity. "What's that?"

"It's called Skornfut," Ronan explained. "It's a traditional game we play among the clans. We practice throughout the season, and when we reach the eastern valley, we have a grand tournament against the other nomadic tribes."

"It looks fun," Lee admitted.

Ronan smirked. "Maybe you'll get a chance to play."

He led Lee to a storage shelter where he would be staying. The space was small, packed with sacks of grain, bundles of dried herbs, and stacks of folded blankets. Ronan pulled out a cot and arranged some bedding.

"It's not much, but it'll do," Ronan said.

Lee smiled slightly. "It's perfect."

That night, he fell into a deep sleep, his body finally surrendering to exhaustion.

The next morning, Lee woke later than expected. Sunlight filtered through the small opening of his tent, and the air was warm with the scent of damp earth and fresh bread. His head still throbbed slightly, but he noticed a fresh bandage wrapped neatly around his forehead. Someone had placed his belongings against the wall—though his weapons were missing. Beside him, a bowl of nuts and dried fruit sat next to a tall vessel of water.

His thirst was unbearable, and he drank deeply, the cool water soothing his dry throat. Then he reached for the food, chewing slowly as he took in the quiet morning sounds of the settlement. His clothes had also been changed. A clean, loose-fitting linen shirt and simple pants had been left for him. They weren't quite the style of the nomads, but they were comfortable.

When he stepped outside, the brightness of the sun made him squint. As his vision adjusted, he realized that people had stopped what they were doing to stare at him. Some murmured among themselves, while others simply observed him with open curiosity. Feeling slightly awkward, he raised a hand in greeting.

From the side, a young woman with striking brown eyes held his gaze a little longer than the others. She had a small, knowing smile on her lips as she watched him. Unlike the others, she didn't turn away when he caught her staring. Instead, she tilted her head slightly, as if she were studying him.

Before Lee could react, Ronan approached with an amused expression. "Did you sleep well?"

"Yes," Lee said. "Though I think I overslept."

They strolled along the outskirts of the settlement, Ronan continuing his line of questioning about Lee's past. When Lee mentioned the red falcon tattoo he had seen on one of the men who took his father, Ronan's expression darkened.

"I've seen that symbol before," Ronan admitted. "I just can't remember where. Maybe some of the traders who pass through here."

As they continued walking, they came upon an open area where children were training in Skornfut drills. The kids were lined up, taking turns running past a swinging club aimed at their legs. Some dodged skillfully, while others stumbled, rolling back onto their feet before trying again.

Lee smirked. "That probably helps them become better runners, doesn't it?"

Ronan nodded. "Exactly. It teaches speed and agility, which is important in

both hunting and battle.”

Lee found himself intrigued by the game. Just as he was considering asking more about it, Ronan gave him a sly grin.

“You should play in a match later today.”

By afternoon, Lee found himself at the playing field, standing among a group of players. The teams wore different-colored bandanas—blue for Ronan’s team and yellow for their opponents.

Ronan introduced him to his teammates, including Lyra Sunshadow, a tall, athletic player with braided hair. Among the spectators, Lee noticed the brown-eyed girl again—watching him with a soft smirk.

“She’s been staring at you all day,” Ronan muttered with a grin. “That’s Kaida. Try not to embarrass yourself.”

Lee pretended not to hear him.

The game was fast and aggressive. Lee watched from the sidelines at first, observing how the players dodged and weaved, their movements swift and calculated. Eventually, Ronan called him in.

Lee tied a blue bandana around his head and picked up a club, preparing to defend their goal. As he stepped onto the field, he noticed a familiar face—Takaanu, the boy who had attacked him before. Their eyes met, and Takaanu smirked in challenge.

The game was intense, but Lee quickly adapted. He intercepted a pass from Takaanu, knocking the ball loose. Before the boy could react, Lee scooped up the ball and sprinted toward the goal.

The spectators roared in excitement. Lyra ran beside him, shouting, “Throw it up!”

Lee tossed the ball into the air, and Lyra struck it cleanly into the net. Their team erupted into cheers, clapping him on the back.

From the sidelines, Kaida clapped along with the others, her gaze lingering on Lee. She smiled at him in a way that made his stomach tighten slightly.

The next play, however, didn’t go as well. As Lee attempted to block an opponent, he felt a sharp pain in his side—Takaanu had deliberately struck him. He crumpled to the ground, clutching his ribs as the other team scored, securing their Alistairy.

Kaida was the first to rush to his side. “Are you alright?” she asked, crouching beside him, her brow furrowed with concern.

Lee groaned and chuckled. “Yeah, I’ll live.”

Kaida smirked, her expression playful. “You better. I haven’t had my turn

to beat you in Skornfut yet.”

Lee blinked, but before he could respond, she stood up, tossing her hair over her shoulder.

Ronan chuckled. “I think she likes you.”

Lee wasn’t sure how to respond—but he knew one thing: this wasn’t the last time he’d be seeing Kaida.

## 15 BONDS IN THE SADDLE

Lee woke the next morning to a faint golden light pouring in through the seams of the fabric walls. The scent of sweet hay and the earthy tang of leather lingered in the air. His body ached faintly—reminders of his recent scrimmage and lingering bruises—but Mira’s concoction had done its work. The fog in his head was gone, and his ribs no longer throbbed with every breath.

After a quick wash with chilled basin water that shocked him fully awake and a modest breakfast of stewed oats and berries, he stepped outside to find Ronan approaching with two pails of oats. Morning mist clung low to the valley floor, the sunlight filtering through it like a silken veil.

“You look well,” Ronan said, his breath fogging in the cool air. “Come on, if you’re going to stay with us for a while, you should earn your keep.”

Lee smiled and grabbed one of the pails. “Fair enough,” he replied, falling into step beside Ronan.

The horse pasture sat on the southern edge of the encampment, where rolling hills cradled the nomads’ herds. The air was fresh, tinged with the sweet scent of trampled clover, the musky aroma of horses, and the distant smoke from morning cook fires.

A dozen or more horses grazed lazily, tails flicking against the occasional fly. They varied in color—chestnut, dapple gray, obsidian black, and creamy tan. Unlike the towering draft horses Lee had seen in Ironhaven or the Emberstone farms, these horses were smaller but sturdier, built for endurance and agility rather than brute strength. Their coats gleamed in the early sun, well-groomed and cared for.

“These are valley-bred,” Ronan explained, as he leaned over the fence and whistled. Two horses trotted over in response. “This handsome boy is Silverwind.” He patted the nose of a gray gelding with a white blaze running

down its face. "And this is Windwhisper."

The tan mare nudged Ronan's hand, clearly searching for treats.

"Would you like to say hi?" Ronan asked.

"Yeah, of course." Lee extended his hand slowly. The horse sniffed him, then leaned forward to accept a scratch under the chin. Her coat was soft, warmer than he expected.

"Hey!" came a familiar voice. Windwhisper nickered in response.

Lee turned to see Lyra walking toward them, her long braid swinging behind her. The horse trotted over to greet her, nuzzling her shoulder affectionately.

"That one is my cousin's favorite," Ronan said, smirking.

"You two are related?" Lee asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Unfortunately," Lyra replied dryly, giving Ronan a look. Then she turned her attention to Lee. "Do you know how to ride?"

Lee shook his head. "No. I've never had the opportunity."

Lyra looked him up and down, clearly gauging his posture and build. "Well, we'll fix that."

After the horses had been fed and watered, Ronan led a dark brown gelding toward Lee. Its mane was thick and unkempt, and one of its ears bent slightly at the tip. It had a mischievous gleam in its eye.

"This is Briarhoof," Ronan said with a grin. "Don't ask where he got the name. He's a wanderer and a troublemaker."

Lyra laughed. "He might be a good fit for you."

Lee chuckled and gently stroked the horse's mane. "He seems... approachable."

With Ronan's help—and Lyra occasionally correcting his grip or posture—they showed Lee how to brush the horse, check its hooves, and prepare the saddle. Mounting took a few attempts and plenty of embarrassment, but eventually, Lee found himself seated, somewhat shakily, atop Briarhoof.

"You look like a sack of potatoes," Lyra teased. "Sit tall. Straight back. Loosen your arms—don't strangle the reins."

Lee sighed, adjusting awkwardly. "Easier said than done."

They set out on a gentle path toward one of the distant herds. The day had begun to warm, and the sounds of the village faded behind them—voices, laughter, the clank of cooking pots—replaced by birdsong and the soft rustle of wind-blown grass.

As they crested a small hill, the sound of fast-approaching hooves caught their attention.

"Can I join you?" came a familiar voice.

It was Kaida, riding a black mare with white patches across its flank. Her hair was tied back, loose strands catching the light. She guided her horse up beside Lee with easy grace.

"Hey," Lee said, trying not to seem too thrilled or too nervous. "Nice horse."

"This is Bramble," Kaida replied, patting the mare's neck. "Is this your first



time riding?”

Lee nodded. “Trying not to spook him.”

Kaida smiled. “Don’t worry about ol’ Briarhoof. Takes more than a wobbly rider to scare him.” She gave Lee an appraising glance. “You’re sitting too stiff. Try relaxing. Horses pick up on how we feel.”

Lee looked puzzled. “Really?”

She leaned closer, her expression softening. “Really. You’ve got to trust him, and yourself.”

Lee met her gaze, her eyes deep and warm like polished chestnuts. He blushed and quickly looked ahead. Kaida did the same, a faint flush blooming in her cheeks.

They continued to ride until they reached an overlook, the valley stretching below like a painted canvas—golden fields, scattered herds, and clusters of yurts glowing in the afternoon sun. The air was sweet with grass and wildflowers, and somewhere nearby, a hawk cried from the cliffs.

Kaida guided Lee through simple maneuvers—stopping, turning, trotting. Briarhoof responded patiently, even when Lee fumbled.

“You’re a natural,” Kaida said, smiling.

Lee grinned. “He’s doing most of the work.”

They rode the perimeter of the camp together, while Ronan and Lyra lingered behind, giving them space. Lee found himself sharing parts of his story—his journey, the people he’d met, the beast they had fought in the Moonveil Grove. Kaida listened, eyes wide with fascination.

“That’s incredible,” she said. “You’ve lived more in a year than I probably have in my whole life.”

“What about you?” Lee asked.

Kaida hesitated. “My family... we were part of another tribe once, but were exiled before I was born. Mira took us in.” She smiled faintly. “She saved us.”

“Do you ever see your old tribe?”

“During the eastern valley meets,” Kaida replied, her tone dimming. “It doesn’t bother me, but... my mother hates seeing them.”

Lee sensed it was a tender subject and didn’t press. Instead, they rode in silence for a while, comfortable and unhurried.

As the sun dipped low and cast long shadows over the hills, Lee glanced at Kaida. Her laughter, her calm guidance, the way she talked to the horses—all of it lingered with him like the scent of wildflowers carried on the breeze.

He wasn’t sure what tomorrow held, but today, here in this valley, with Kaida riding beside him and Briarhoof steady beneath him, he felt a kind of peace he hadn’t known in years.

The morning air shimmered with a faint chill, as though the valley had not yet shaken off the grasp of the night. Thin tendrils of mist curled along the grassy floor, illuminated by rays of gold slicing through gaps in the jagged cliffs that surrounded the Hollow Sky encampment. Smoke drifted lazily from

cookfires as the tribe stirred to life, their day unfolding like a song they had all sung a thousand times.

Lee stood outside his tent, inhaling the rich blend of aromas: damp earth, charred wood, simmering meat, and herbs drying in the sun. Somewhere nearby, a child's laughter rang out, followed by the low, rhythmic thud of a drum used to call the animals for morning feeding. Despite the unfamiliarity of the place, it was beginning to feel... natural.

In the days and weeks that followed his arrival, Lee found himself almost inseparable from Ronan, Lyra, and Kaida. The trio had become his guides—not just through the physical terrain of the western valley, but through the customs, mindset, and philosophy of the Hollow Sky Tribe. Though currently settled in the verdant lowlands for the season, they shared with Lee what it meant to live untethered. Their people were wanderers by design, following ancient migration routes that took them across valleys, plateaus, and wind-swept plains in pursuit of better grazing for their animals and the continued survival of their way of life.

Everything they did reflected that migratory spirit. Tents were collapsible and efficient. Tools were compact, multipurpose, and carefully maintained. Every item had to be worthy of the burden it added to the journey. Lyra explained that even sentimental objects had to earn their place. There was no room for excess when you walked with the wind. Lee, who had lived out of a backpack since the catastrophe with his father, felt an odd kinship with that philosophy.

Each member of the Hollow Sky had a role—no one idle, no task beneath another. Lee quickly realized he wasn't just being taught; he was being woven into their daily life. Observing Ronan, it became clear how deeply integrated each person's identity was with their duties.

Ronan, tall and broad-shouldered with sharp eyes always surveying the horizon, had several responsibilities. As Mira Duskweaver's eldest grandson, he was expected to lead. But he had also earned his place as one of the tribe's guardians, trained from a young age in both physical combat and diplomacy. There weren't many outside threats in these parts, but that didn't mean danger didn't exist—territorial disputes, wild beasts, and internal tensions could stir unexpectedly.

Ronan's presence around Lee wasn't coincidental. Lee could sense the subtle way he kept watch. His posture relaxed, his tone polite—but his gaze always calculated. Whether it was duty or suspicion, Lee couldn't tell. He didn't resent it. If their roles were reversed, he'd likely be doing the same.

Ronan was also the captain of the tribe's Skornfut team—a high-energy game played on foot, blending endurance, teamwork, and precision. The game resembled a mix between soccer and rugby, played on a field marked by stone pylons and boundary totems. It was fast, aggressive, and often bruising. Watching Ronan lead drills was like witnessing a general marshal his troops—intense, exacting, and deeply committed. But off the field, he was measured and

kind, his words sparse but meaningful.

Lyra, Ronan's cousin, brought a different kind of energy. She was a blaze wrapped in grace—a beautiful, athletic young woman whose bond with the tribe's horses was something near mystical. Her role as horse trainer ran in her blood, passed down from her grandmother's line. Often, Lee would find her brushing the coats of the tribe's horses or whispering to them with an almost spiritual calm.

Despite her soft-spoken moments, Lyra had a competitive fire. She was the only woman on the Hollow Sky's Skornfut team—a rarity, considering the rough nature of the sport. While others had tried, few could match the level of aggression and speed required to compete with the men. Lyra, however, didn't just match them—she outpaced many. Her speed was uncanny, her reflexes lightning-fast, and her tactical mind unrelenting. She could read the field like an open book and exploit weaknesses with unnerving precision.

She took to training Lee during their spare moments. On the field, she taught him how to weave around defenders, use his size to his advantage, and how to pace his breath so he could last the entire match. Off the field, she brought him to the horse pens and taught him how to ride with better balance and speed, though she often teased him when he faltered. When she discovered he was ambidextrous with a bow, she raised an eyebrow in admiration—but quickly masked it with a mock-challenging grin.

Then there was Kaida.

With her warm eyes and radiant smile, Kaida possessed a quiet strength that drew people in. She was younger than Ronan and Lyra, but her wisdom felt older, as though she'd lived a life far beyond her years. Kaida served as a teacher to the tribe's children, passing on lessons in language, spirituality, and tribal history. Her voice was soft but compelling, and when she spoke, even the rowdiest children seemed to settle.

Lee learned that Kaida's family had been banished from another tribe long ago. Though the details remained vague, Mira had taken them in, offering a second chance. Lyra had been tasked with protecting her from ridicule, and their bond was sister-like in its closeness. Kaida always carried herself with optimism, but Lee noticed how carefully she navigated social boundaries, never overstepping, always mindful of her place.

She spent afternoons with Lee in the kitchen tent, teaching him how to prepare meals using the tough meats of their livestock, softened by spices native to the region. The smells of sizzling fat, wild thyme, pepper root, and roasted nuts filled the air during those sessions. She showed him how to tend to the animals as well, from cleaning to feeding, always explaining the spiritual importance of respecting the creatures they depended on.

Lee found himself smiling more in Kaida's presence. She had a way of making heavy thoughts seem lighter. Still, he noticed how Ronan and Lyra were cautious about letting her be alone with him. Protective instincts, maybe. Or something more. He didn't push the issue but stored the observation away.

One evening, as dusk painted the sky in strokes of copper and mauve, Lee was summoned to the tribe's common dwelling. The structure was larger than the rest, its tall frame draped with fabrics dyed in tribal patterns of twilight blue and blood red. The scent of sage and tea leaves hung heavy in the air.

Inside, Mira Duskweaver stood alone near a small firepit. Her flowing robe rustled like dry leaves as she turned to greet him, her long white braid adorned with beads that clicked softly as she moved. Her staff—a beautifully carved piece of wood topped with an obsidian hawk—rested in her hand.

"It's just the two of us," she said with a smile.

Lee nodded, stepping in. "Hello, Mira."

"Come, sit with me," she said, gesturing toward a mat near the fire. A kettle steamed gently between two cups.

As they settled, Mira poured the tea, its spicy, floral scent rising with the steam.

"How are you getting along with Ronan, Lyra, and Kaida?" she asked, her eyes warm and probing.

"They've been incredible. I've never met people like them. They've taught me so much already," Lee replied, savoring the tea. He raised his eyebrows in surprise. "This is... really good."

Mira chuckled. "A blend of herbs Evangeline gave you. She's doing well. Elijah is healing, and Fiona... well, she's still processing."

Lee's brow furrowed. "How do you know that?"

"I just do," Mira said mysteriously, sipping her tea.

She leaned in slightly, her tone shifting. "Your journey isn't finished, Lee. And I believe it aligns with ours, at least for now. I'd like you to come with us on our migration eastward. Help us pack. Travel with us. Learn more."

Lee stared into the fire for a moment before nodding. Something inside him whispered that this was the right path.

Mira smiled, then added with a knowing glint in her eye, "I think your new friends would be pleased. Especially Kaida. That girl sees you for who you are."

Lee flushed, and Mira laughed gently. "We leave soon. The wind's already shifting."

As the flames crackled and the shadows grew long around them, Lee realized something had shifted within him, too. This place—these people—they weren't just a stop on his journey.

They were becoming part of it.

## 16 THE GHOSTMANES OF THE CHASM

The nomadic lifestyle of the Hollow Sky Tribe was not a matter of choice—it was a covenant with the land. Every migration, every trail carved across the vast stretches of wilderness, was guided by necessity and age-old wisdom. The tribe didn't wander aimlessly—they moved with intention, in tune with the changing rhythms of the earth. Grass, water, climate, elevation—all were measured and observed. And when the signs aligned, it was time to move.

The western valley had sheltered them well through the spring rains, its low slopes buffering the wind and its meadow grasses fattening their herds. But now, as the days stretched longer and the sun burned hotter, the lowlands began to dry. Dust replaced dew. The once vibrant grazing grounds dulled to yellow. It was time to move east, toward the higher pastures—cooler, greener, and brimming with fresh vegetation.

Packing up an entire village might have seemed a chaotic ordeal to an outsider, but Lee quickly discovered that the Hollow Sky had perfected the art of efficiency. Every structure, tool, and essential was designed for transport. Tents collapsed into tight bundles of fabric, rope, and polished wooden poles. Water was portioned into narrow clay vessels wrapped in leather to prevent breakage. Meat had been dried and salted over the past few weeks in preparation for the journey, and root vegetables were packed in breathable woven sacks to preserve them longer.

There was a rhythm to the teardown. A silent choreography. Families packed their belongings with swift hands and purposeful steps. Children helped where they could, guiding animals or fetching supplies. The air smelled of sweat,

sun-warmed canvas, and the rich scent of trodden earth. Within hours, the camp was gone, leaving behind only faint impressions in the grass.

The caravan set off under a pale morning sky. Horses carried riders at the flanks, while the Dromasteads—lumbering beasts with camel-like bodies and branching antlers—hailed the heavier loads. Their slow, rhythmic grunts were the heartbeat of the migration. Bells tied to their harnesses chimed softly with every step, harmonizing with the low whistles of herders and the occasional bark of a trained dog herding livestock.

Lee rode alongside Lyra, joining the herders who managed the tribe's flocks—goats, sheep, and long-maned cattle with curling horns. Dust rose beneath the hooves of animals and riders alike, carried eastward by the wind. Lyra rode with effortless grace, her eyes scanning the herd while occasionally calling out sharp commands to the dogs.

Ahead, Ronan and a small group of guardians took the lead, scouting the terrain for obstacles, threats, or other travelers. Periodically, a rider would peel off to check the rear or the flanks before galloping forward to rejoin the front.

The migration settled into a pattern. Travel began at dawn and carried on until dusk, with brief midday stops to water the animals and rest. At night, they made a simple camp—no large tents, only sleeping mats and cooking stones. The air was filled with the scent of smoke and simmering stews, and the sky stretched wide above them, painted with stars and streaked with the glowing bands of the Celestial River.

Weeks passed in this rhythm. They crossed grassy plains, shallow riverbeds, and rocky outcrops dotted with wildflowers and thorny brush. Occasionally, they passed other nomadic tribes—distant cousins in the wide network of roaming peoples—always greeted with respectful distance. Each group honored the unwritten law of shared land: space, peace, and independence.

But even the most practiced migration is not without peril.

One crisp morning, as pale sunlight filtered through low-hanging clouds, Lee was shaken from sleep by a sudden commotion. The distant clamor of voices carried on the wind—shouts of alarm, barking dogs, and the unmistakable tension of fear.

He bolted upright, heart pounding. The herd.

Grabbing his coat, Lee ran toward the eastern edge of the makeshift camp, where the livestock had been grazing before sunrise. Lyra was already there, crouched beside a set of tracks, her face grim.

“Something got into the herd,” she said, not looking up.

A few sheep were missing. Blood painted the grass in long smears leading

toward the mountains. One of the herders pointed to a set of tracks—large, clawed, and unnaturally wide.

“A Ghostmane,” she muttered.

Lee frowned. “What’s that?”

“Large wolf-like predator,” Lyra answered. “Twice the size of a normal wolf. Meaner. Smarter.”

Ronan arrived seconds later with a contingent of guardians, his expression unreadable. He studied the tracks silently, then looked up toward the mountain foothills. “They’ve tasted our livestock. They’ll keep coming.”

He issued orders quickly. Half the riders would stay back to protect the caravan and the herd. The rest would form a hunting party to track the predators. Ghostmanes didn’t attack randomly. If they weren’t deterred—or if their pack leader wasn’t dealt with—they’d return again and again.

Lee approached on Briarhoof, gripping the reins tightly.

“I’m coming,” he said to Ronan.

Ronan hesitated, weighing the risk. “You sure?”

“If I could take down a beast in Moonveil, I can help,” Lee replied.

A long pause. Then a nod.

“Hold position,” Ronan called out before riding back to his tent. He returned moments later, tossing Lee his bow and quiver. “You’ll need these.” His expression was firm. There was trust there—but it came with expectation. Lee caught the weapons and nodded.

They set out in formation, riding fast and low across the valley. Wind tore at their cloaks, and the smell of cold stone and pine crept into the air as the mountains drew near. The blood trail split into two paths—northwest and northeast—each leading up into the foothills. Ronan scowled, weighing the choice.

“We stay together,” he decided. “Northwest path.”

But as the riders surged forward, Lee noticed something. Two of the guardians—Takaanu and another rider named Thalen—split off and disappeared up the northeast trail. He quickly caught up to Ronan and relayed what he’d seen.

Ronan cursed under his breath and wheeled his horse around. “Fools,” he growled. “Let’s go.”

The northeast path was narrow and treacherous, winding through jagged rocks and thick underbrush. They found the horses—abandoned, reins trailing in the dust.

“They went in on foot,” Ronan muttered, jaw clenched. “Idiots. When Lyra

finds out they abandoned the horses, she'll skin them."

He ordered the remaining riders to stay and guard the horses. Then, turning to Lee, he tossed him a short spear. "If you can't shoot, stab."

Together, they advanced into the chasm—its walls rising steep on either side, shutting out the sky. The silence was unnatural. No birds. No insects. Just the sound of their footsteps and their breathing.

"They're called Ghostmanes because their tracks disappear," Ronan whispered.

"Like a ghost," Lee replied, his grip tightening on the spear.

Suddenly, a roar echoed through the chasm.

They ran toward the sound. The path opened into a narrow clearing. A body lay on the ground—Thalen—unmoving. On the opposite side, a shallow den held a smaller beast with cubs. And in the center, half-cloaked in shadow, loomed the great Ghostmane. Its silver-white fur glowed faintly in the gloom, and its eyes burned like pale lanterns.

Lee readied his bow, slowly nocking an arrow.

But then—light.

"Stop!" a voice rang out, reverberating through stone and bone. A glowing blue figure appeared, hovering above the ground. A woman—tall, ethereal, hair and robes swirling as if underwater.

"A mountain guardian," Ronan whispered.

"Leave this place," she commanded. "This creature only protects its family. Leave now."

Then another voice—angry, sharp.

"No. It killed Thalen!" Takaanu emerged, rifle raised. "This beast deserves to die!"

"Stand down!" Ronan shouted.

But Takaanu fired.

The Ghostmane lunged—and in a blur, Lee released his arrow. It struck true, embedding deep in the beast's skull. The wolf collapsed in a heap.

The guardian screamed. Her body shifted grotesquely, growing claws and fangs as she attacked. Ronan's spear passed through her. Bullets and arrows had no effect.

Desperate, Lee reached for an arrow tipped in obsidian—a gift from the ranger Elijah Emberwood. He loosed it, and it struck the spirit, pinning her to the cavern wall. She shrieked, struggling to free herself.

Lee stared her down. "Tell the other beast to stop—or we'll all pay the price."



The guardian froze, eyes wild—then turned to the den. The surviving Ghostmane withdrew.

Ronan and Takaanu dragged Thalen's body back. Lee moved backward, arrow aimed at the pinned spirit.

When the others arrived, Ronan stepped forward. "This wasn't how it was supposed to go. We don't want war with spirits."

The guardian glared, still pinned. Lee raised his bow. "We don't know what this arrow does to you, but we're not eager to find out."

The spirit shifted back to her womanly form and gave a reluctant nod.

Ronan reached forward and removed the arrow. The moment it left her, she rose into the air, swirling like mist, then turned and vanished into the stone.

"We need to leave," Ronan whispered. "Now."

And so, beneath the pale light of a fading afternoon, the riders returned to camp, carrying Thalen's body and the weight of a warning from the mountains.

The mood in the camp was heavy—an invisible weight pressing down on every conversation, every footstep, every breath drawn beneath the pale morning sky. Smoke from the cookfires drifted lazily above the tents, but the usual scent of roasted herbs and simmering broth was lost to the cold bitterness in the air. A hush had fallen over the Hollow Sky Tribe. No one sang. No one played. Even the animals, as if aware of the loss, grazed in solemn silence.

Thalen was dead.

The news had spread like wildfire, scorching its way through the hearts of the tribe. What made it worse was the recklessness that led to it. Takaanu's defiance had not only cost them a tribesman—it had nearly torn open the fragile truce they held with the guardian spirits of the mountain.

After a brief but tense meeting with Mira, it was decided: Takaanu would be exiled. There was no ceremony for his departure, no farewell from his kin. He was simply ordered to leave. His tent was stripped of insignia, and by dusk, he was gone—vanished into the wilderness, his name spoken only in whispers and angry curses.

A group of men, including Lee, was assigned to dig Thalen's grave just beyond the ridge where the land overlooked the quiet mountain range. The soil was rocky, reluctant to yield, but they worked with clenched jaws and sun-reddened hands, their silence filled only by the scrape of shovels and the thud of earth being moved. The smell of turned dirt—rich, wet, and raw—hung in the air.

The rest of the tribe prepared for immediate departure. Tents were collapsed

in hushed movements, supplies bundled with extra care, as if to honor the dead with discipline. Even the Dromasteads moved with a sluggish solemnity, their antlered heads drooping low as they were loaded.

When the grave was finally complete, the tribe gathered at its edge. Thalen's body was wrapped in ceremonial cloth woven with threads of silver and dyed with ashblue pigment—colors reserved for warriors. Mira stood at the head of the grave, dressed in her deep blue robes, her ornate staff planted firmly in the ground beside her. She said little, but her words were heavy with meaning.

“We walk paths woven by fate and forged by choice,” she said, her voice strong, though her eyes glistened. “Thalen’s journey does not end here—it continues beyond this place, where all warriors ride beneath the moonlit stars. May his spirit be swift, and his memory eternal.”

She raised a small pouch of crushed herbs—sage, bitterroot, and moonleaf—and cast it into the grave. A soft flame danced above it for only a second before vanishing. Then, as one, the tribe stepped forward and placed a handful of soil onto the wrapped body, murmuring farewells and silent prayers.

Once the last of the tribe had paid their respects, Mira turned to face the eastern mountains. Kaida stepped forward beside her, carrying a small clay bowl filled with water from the last river they had passed. Together, the two women performed a ritual facing the peaks—bowing, whispering, and releasing the water into the earth. It was a gesture of peace—an offering of forgiveness and truce to the spirit guardian who had been wronged.

The wind shifted slightly, as if acknowledging the act.

The caravan moved eastward with quiet determination, leaving behind the grave, the echoes of the guardian’s shriek, and the weight of grief they dared not carry forward. The days that followed were long, but distance helped dull the edge of sorrow. Each mile put space between them and the loss, and slowly, the hush began to lift.

Still, Lee noticed that Ronan had changed.

He was quieter now, riding at the front of the caravan with his hood drawn low, eyes scanning the horizon with a haunted look. He didn’t speak unless spoken to. Even his laughter, which had once rung out across Skornfut fields and herder paths, was now silent. Lee could feel the guilt radiating from him. Ronan hadn’t pulled the trigger—but he had led the hunt. He had chosen the path. He had trusted Takaanu, even briefly.

Lee considered saying something—offering words of comfort, of camaraderie—but he held his tongue. Now wasn’t the time. Sometimes the best thing a friend could do was watch, wait, and be present. Kaida and Lyra seemed

to feel the same. They gave Ronan space, but Lee noticed the way they watched him when they thought he wasn't looking. Protective. Patient.

What the tribe needed now was a distraction. Something to remind them that life still pulsed forward.

It came a few days later, when the land began to grow green again. The grass thickened beneath their feet. Clusters of white and purple wildflowers swayed in the wind. Birds reappeared overhead, their songs clear and sweet. They had nearly reached the eastern valley.

One afternoon, another tribe appeared on the horizon—campfires flickering, tents dotting a ridge just south of their path. The Twilight Seekers, as they were known, had migrated from the northern plateaus and had camped nearby. The elders of both tribes met beneath a grove of tall pines, exchanging stories and updates. Mira shared the events surrounding the Ghostmanes. The Twilight Seekers had faced similar troubles—Ghostmanes, yes, but also bandits who prowled the edges of the Great Divide.

An older man from the Twilight Seekers, a tall figure with graying hair and muscular build, requested to speak with Ronan. He, too, was a protector of his people. They walked together along the outskirts of both encampments, their silhouettes framed by the sinking sun. They shared stories, the quiet voices of warriors who had both won and lost.

At the end of their walk, the older man introduced Ronan to one of his daughters—a quiet woman with stormy gray eyes and a patient smile. They spoke for hours, wandering past the livestock pens and along a small stream under the stars. Lanterns flickered in the distance, casting their light like distant fireflies across the grass.

Lee made to follow, but Lyra gently caught his arm.

“Let them have some time together,” she said softly, a rare warmth in her voice.

The next few weeks passed in a strange blur—quiet but not solemn, calm but not dull. The Hollow Sky and the Twilight Seekers traveled together, their caravans moving in tandem like two schools of fish flowing toward the same current. Traders crossed their paths often, bringing bundles of fur, jars of honey, leather satchels, dried herbs, even fine tools and rare dyes. The smell of unfamiliar spices and the sound of new songs filled the air.

Lee, Kaída, Lyra, and Ronan still spent time together, but things had shifted. Ronan was often with the woman from the Twilight Seekers. Lyra didn't mind. In fact, she seemed relieved. Kaída, on the other hand, was around Lee more than ever—riding alongside him, cooking beside him, sharing stories under the

stars. Her laughter returned, and Lee often found himself smiling without realizing it.

But Lyra was never far. Always watching. Always listening. Whenever Lee leaned closer to Kaida, he could feel her gaze—protective, uncertain. It made him hesitate, unsure of where the boundaries lay. Still, Kaida's presence brought him comfort, and he treasured every shared meal, every quiet moment.

At last, they arrived.

The Eastern Valley unfurled before them like a dream—lush and wide, the grass so vibrant it shimmered in the light. A broad river split into glittering branches across the land, feeding streams that twisted through fields of flowers and trees. Hills rolled gently, dotted with scattered stones and lone trees that stood like sentinels.

The air was crisp and clean, carrying the scent of wild mint, sweet grass, and cool water. The sky stretched endlessly above them, dotted with slow-moving clouds that cast shadows like drifting sails. Other tribes were visible in the distance, each keeping respectful space, their fires curling into the sky like quiet greetings.

Mira stood atop a low rise and surveyed the land. She closed her eyes for a moment, lifted her staff, and nodded.

"This is the place," she said.

Ronan turned, his eyes clearer than they had been in weeks. He raised a hand, signaling the others. "Unpack."

What followed was a flurry of purposeful activity. Tents rose from the earth like blooming flowers. Fences were erected for the horses and livestock. Fires were lit, and the smells of roasting meat and spiced grain filled the valley air. The sounds of laughter—true laughter—returned. Children played with sticks and hoops. Elders sang old songs beneath trees. Peace had found them again.

Smoke curled from distant camps, and one by one, tribes began sending signals—friendly greetings in puffs and spirals. The Hollow Sky returned them in kind.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in hues of orange and indigo, Lee stood atop the same rise where Mira had stood. The valley stretched before him, alive and beautiful. A soft hand slid into his.

He turned. Kaida smiled up at him, her eyes full of light and promise.

And for the first time in a long while, Lee felt like the future might just hold peace after all.

## 17 THE FESTIVAL OF THE EASTERN VALLEY

The great Eastern Valley had finally opened its arms to the sixteen nomadic tribes and their sprawling caravans of people, animals, and history. With each passing day, the valley bloomed more fully—its rolling green hills kissed by morning mist, its skies painted in sweeping hues of sapphire and rose, its rivers winding like ribbons of silver across the fertile land.

The migration was over.

After a week of setting up permanent seasonal camps, the land had begun to hum with life. Vibrant canvas tents dotted the valley, surrounded by herds of livestock and laughter. The soil, dark and rich, breathed beneath their feet as if in gratitude. Now, the time had come for celebration.

Every year, where the rivers converged and the crossroads met, a festival was held to honor the journey's end. The arrival of the tribes was not just a time for relief—it was a spiritual moment, a renewal of tradition, and a rebirth of camaraderie between clans. Merchants from nearby villages arrived in wooden carts adorned with streamers. Music drifted from every direction. Dancers practiced barefoot in the grass while cooks prepared their fires, filling the air with the scent of roasting meats, wild herbs, and sweet bread.

And most importantly—the Skornfut Tournament.

All sixteen tribes would compete in the games for the honor of being crowned grand champions. It wasn't just sport—it was a test of spirit, teamwork, and pride. Even outsiders from distant towns came to watch the games, some setting up camp just to be near the energy of the tournament.

Lee woke early on the morning of the first match, stirred not by noise, but

by stillness. The valley was cloaked in a misty hush, and the world had the feeling of something sacred about to begin. He pulled on his cloak to fight the morning chill and padded barefoot through the wet grass, each blade leaving a cold kiss against his skin. The scent of dew and earth clung to the air, mingled with the smoke from distant cooking fires not yet stirred.

He made his way up a small hill where a large stone sat like a throne overlooking the valley. He climbed onto it, pulled his cloak tighter, and sat cross-legged, watching the sky begin to lighten behind the jagged silhouette of the mountain range. Shades of indigo turned to lavender, then gold.

It had not been an easy road, Lee thought. Since the loss of his father, everything had felt uncertain—like he'd been walking through fog. But this place, this tribe, this new chapter... it felt like fate, or something close to it.

He heard soft footsteps in the grass behind him, followed by a familiar voice. "Mind some company?"

Lee turned to see Ronan, two steaming mugs in hand. The warmth of the rising sun had yet to touch them, but the sight of the hot drink was welcome.

"Not at all," Lee replied with a tired smile.

Ronan handed him a mug and sat beside him, his breath visible in the cool air. The steam curled upward, scented with mint and barkroot.

They sat in silence for a moment, watching the golden halo of the sun crest over the mountains and spill warmth into the valley below. Then Ronan spoke.

"We never really talked about what happened with the Ghostmanes," he said quietly.

"There's not much to say," Lee replied, eyes still on the horizon.

Ronan placed a hand on his shoulder. "What I really want to say is... I'm glad you were there. If you hadn't been, I might've lost more than one man that day. Maybe even myself. That spirit... it wasn't in a forgiving mood."

Lee stayed quiet, humbled.

Ronan gave a dry chuckle. "Thank the gods for those obsidian arrows. They work on more than just the monsters from Xia, apparently."

Lee smiled faintly but still said nothing. The praise made him uncomfortable. Instead, he changed the subject.

"Are you holding a practice this morning?"

Ronan nodded. "Light drills. First game is late this afternoon. If we win, we'll play again tomorrow."

He looked over. "You're not allowed to play, unfortunately. Tournament rules. But would you help us train?"

Lee grinned. "Of course."

As the sun broke fully into the sky, the two men rose and returned to the valley where others were just beginning to stir.

That morning, they held a light Skornfut practice. Ronan didn't want to exhaust the team before the game, so they kept it easy—passing drills, positioning, quick bursts of movement. Lyra was a blur on the field, fast as ever. Though the loss of Takaanu had hurt their roster, the Hollow Sky still had their two anchors—Ronan and Lyra—and the team's energy was focused and sharp.

Later that afternoon, the Hollow Sky Tribe took to the field to face their first opponents: the Sunscar Tribe. A smaller group from the southern steppes, the Sunscar had faced a hard journey and were visibly tired, but their spirits remained high. Lee joined Kaida on the sidelines as the match began.

The game was a flurry of movement—mud flying, bodies colliding, cheers erupting from the gathered crowd. The roar of the spectators, the rhythmic beat of the tribal drums, and the yells from team captains filled the air with pure adrenaline. The field smelled of churned grass, sweat, and celebration.

Despite the Sunscar Tribe's resolve, they couldn't hold back Lyra's relentless attack. With graceful, almost effortless moves, she weaved through defenders, scored goal after goal, and rallied her team to a solid Alistairy.

Cheers rang out as the Hollow Sky were declared winners of the first round.

As the energy of the game subsided, Lee and Kaida wandered into the heart of the festival. The air was alive with music and laughter. Colorful tents flapped in the breeze, decorated with feathers, beads, and painted tribal symbols. Performers juggled flaming torches and balanced on stilts. Children ran wild between booths, faces sticky with honeyed treats. The smells were intoxicating—sizzling meat skewers, hot cakes drizzled with syrup, roasted nuts, and herbal teas brewed in copper kettles.

Kaida stopped at a small stall manned by a gypsy woman with fiery red hair, wearing a dark leather corset over a patchwork dress. Her wares were hung from strings and hooks—delicate necklaces made of copper hearts, silver keys, and colored glass. Kaida's eyes widened at one in particular.

Without a word, Lee stepped forward and bought it.

As he handed over the coin, their hands brushed—just briefly—but a spark leapt between them. A literal jolt of static. Lee blinked, brushing it off. But before he could walk away, the gypsy gripped his arm.

Her brown eyes faded into a luminous, transparent blue.

"Things will only get harder," she whispered, voice echoing as if from deep within a well. "But you must stay on the path."

Lee froze.

She blinked, and the light in her eyes vanished. "Thank you," she said sweetly, releasing him like nothing had happened.

Kaida, unaware of the moment, smiled as he handed her the necklace. "It's beautiful," she whispered, placing it over her neck and leaning against him for a heartbeat longer than usual.

That night, the festival came alive with music, fire, and joy. Ronan and Lyra joined them later at a circle of lanterns and dancing. Musicians played flutes, drums, and a strange stringed instrument with a mournful, joyful tune.

Kaida eventually pulled Lee to the dance circle. Though hesitant, he followed, letting her guide him through the steps. She laughed as he stumbled, and he smiled at the sound.

Lyra sat nearby watching, sipping from a flask. Across the firelight, she noticed a woman watching her—slender, with golden earrings and dark, wavy hair. Their eyes met. The woman gave a shy smile and quickly turned away, pretending to adjust her scarf. Lyra blushed and looked down, fiddling with the rim of her cup.

"Now it's your turn," Kaida said suddenly, grabbing Lyra by the hand and dragging her into the circle.

Lee stood back and watched as the two women danced. Lyra glanced across the fire again, and sure enough, the woman was watching—this time with a softer expression. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, meeting Lyra's gaze with curiosity.

Lee smiled... but then his thoughts drifted back to the gypsy.

*"Things will only get harder, but you must stay on the path."*

What did she mean?

He looked back out over the valley. Lanterns glowed like stars on the ground, and above them, the real stars were just beginning to emerge. He squeezed Kaida's hand, but the weight of those words lingered in the back of his mind like a chill that refused to fade.

Whatever lay ahead, the warmth of this moment—the music, the laughter, the people—would have to carry him through.

The morning after the festival came too quickly.

Lee awoke with a groan, his head pounding like tribal drums and a sour pit lingering in his stomach. The once-welcoming sunlight now pierced through the flap of his tent like sharp spears. He squinted, pulling the blanket over his eyes as he tried to piece together what had happened the night before.

He remembered the music, the dancing, Kaida's laughter, and the sweet



flavors of something he had drunk—something with spices and fruit and... maybe more than a little fermented nectar. Whatever it was, it hadn't agreed with him.

He tried to eat something from a nearby basket, a piece of bread wrapped in cloth, but the mere smell of it was enough to send him stumbling out into the morning light. Each step felt sluggish as though the earth pulled at his legs. His skin was pale, and a dull chill ran down his spine despite the warmth of the rising sun.

By instinct, he made his way to Mira's tent.

The old woman took one look at him and waved him inside without a word. The air in her tent was thick with the comforting scent of dried herbs—lavender, mint, and burnt sage. She didn't scold him. She didn't even smirk. Instead, she moved with calm precision, selecting a handful of herbs from her shelves, placing them in a stone bowl, and grinding them with care. She added crushed beans, then brewed the mixture in a blackened metal kettle over a small flame.

"This will help," she said as she handed him a warm cup. "You need to keep this down, no matter what."

Lee sipped cautiously. The taste was bitter, earthy, with a hint of something sweet beneath the surface—honeyroot, maybe. He grimaced, but swallowed.

"Next time," Mira added, her eyes gleaming, "enjoy yourself in moderation."

Lee gave a half-hearted smile, the warmth from the cup gradually returning color to his face. He nodded as she said, "Tonight, when the sun sets—we need to talk."

He was still too focused on keeping the liquid down to question her. Mira simply patted his shoulder and turned back to her herbs.

An hour passed, and the concoction began to work its magic. The pounding in his skull eased, and the nausea lifted just enough to make him crave food. He found Ronan sitting under the shade of a cedar tree, surrounded by several Skornfut teammates. They were finishing a midday meal, their laughter light and easy.

"Did you have a good time yesterday?" Ronan asked with a grin, clearly amused by the pale look on Lee's face.

"I think so?" Lee said, scratching his head.

Ronan chuckled and handed him a plate filled with roasted vegetables, dried meat, and flatbread. "Eat. You'll need your strength. The match is this afternoon."

Lee sat and ate in silence, savoring the simple flavors and the sun's gentle

warmth. The sounds of the camp—children playing, goats bleating, the wind rustling through the trees—soothed him like a lullaby.

That afternoon's Skornfut match was more than just a game. It was the clash of two tribes who had journeyed side by side across mountain and meadow. The Hollow Sky Tribe versus the Twilight Seekers—each seeking a place in the semifinals.

Lee met Kaida near the edge of the playing field. She wore a soft blue tunic and had the necklace he'd given her resting just below her collarbone. Though her face was bright, she, too, looked a bit worn from the prior night's celebration.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I could ask you the same," she teased, nudging him playfully.

The field was alive with energy. Drums beat in rhythm with the clatter of footsteps. The crowd shouted and cheered as the game began.

It was a close match—intense but full of joy. Players from both sides grinned as they jostled and dashed across the dusty field. The crowd roared with every goal, the thudding of feet on earth echoing across the valley.

Lee noticed familiar faces in the crowd. The woman who had been watching Lyra the night before stood at the far side of the field, her gaze fixed once again on the warrior woman. Another girl—Ronan's quiet companion from the journey—watched him from afar, her expression unreadable.

When the final whistle blew, the Twilight Seekers emerged victorious. Lyra walked off the field, face flushed and glistening with sweat, her jaw tight. Ronan, always the composed leader, shook hands with the opposing captain and offered congratulations.

On the sideline, Lyra chugged from a waterskin before turning back toward the field. Kaida stepped closer.

"You should go talk to her," Kaida said, nodding toward the woman across the way.

Lyra nearly choked on her drink. "What?"

Kaida raised an eyebrow. "Just go."

Lyra blinked, then glanced at Lee, who shrugged and smiled. "Might be worth it."

Still stunned, Lyra turned and walked toward the woman, heart pounding.

With Ronan and Lyra occupied, Lee and Kaida drifted back into the heart of the festival, weaving through stalls and dancing circles. They avoided anything too exotic to eat or drink this time. As the evening deepened, they climbed a secluded hill on the outskirts of the valley and found a large boulder,

still warm from the day's sun.

They sat in silence for a long time, fingers intertwined. The sunset painted the valley in shades of amber and rose. Birds chirped softly from the trees as if whispering lullabies to the coming night.

"It's beautiful," Kaida whispered, resting her head on his shoulder.

Lee breathed deeply. "Yeah."

He looked down at her, her eyes reflecting the fading light. "Kaida?"

She looked up. Their eyes met. The world fell away.

They kissed—soft, unhurried. A moment both simple and monumental.

When they broke apart, she returned to his shoulder, and he wrapped his arm around her. Words seemed unnecessary.

But the peace didn't last.

"It's another beautiful night," came a gentle voice behind them.

Both Lee and Kaida turned, startled. Mira stood there, her silhouette haloed by the last traces of dusk.

"Would you mind if I borrowed Lee for a while?" she asked Kaida.

Kaida looked like she wanted to protest, but Lee gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

"I'll see you soon," he said.

Kaida nodded and descended the hill.

"She's a lovely girl," Mira said softly as she approached.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," she added, "but there's something important I need to show you."

Lee felt a tightness in his stomach. A strange mix of anticipation and dread. Something told him this wasn't just a lesson—it was a turning point.

Mira set to work. She placed a small kettle over a rock-ringed fire and used twigs and dry moss to ignite the flames. As it began to boil, she prepared a second setup: a thin metal bowl placed on a velvet pillow, beside a wooden dowel.

"We live on one plane," Mira began, "but it's not the only one."

Lee nodded slowly.

"You've heard of the Xytherion Dimension, yes?"

"I have," he replied.

"It's not another world—it's a neighboring layer of this one. A veil-thin dimension that mirrors our own but twists and evolves differently. When energy flows from there into our plane, it warps. Corrupts. Not by malice, but by incompatibility."

She added herbs to the boiling kettle. "We're all made of energy. The trees,

the stars, even you and me. Some people can access energy from the Xia, the flow between planes. When used carefully, it brings power. But too much, and it fractures the balance between worlds.”

She poured the steaming liquid into a ceramic cup and handed it to Lee.

“Drink. Then close your eyes.”

Lee drank, the brew warm and sharp, like mint and pepper. He shut his eyes.

Mira struck the bowl.

Gooooonnggg...

The deep, resonant sound rolled through Lee’s chest like thunder beneath his skin. The vibrations didn’t stop at his ears—they settled into his bones, humming with a strange warmth that made his vision blur and bend. The cool night air seemed to warp, thickening around him like water. The ground beneath him remained solid, but the world around it began to dissolve.

His mind tumbled forward, as if the boundary of reality itself had pulled away like a curtain.

Then his eyes snapped open.

And everything was... different.

The valley had not disappeared—it was still there—but it now existed beneath a second layer, like a ghost image over a painting. The sky above had shifted to a violet haze, marbled with streaks of glowing magenta and silver clouds that moved in slow, deliberate spirals. A green sun burned low on the horizon, casting the entire landscape in an otherworldly glow. It wasn’t cold, nor hot—the temperature felt exactly neutral, and yet the air hummed against his skin, alive with a static energy that tickled the fine hairs on his arms.

The trees were taller here—twisting, alien structures with translucent leaves that shimmered like stained glass. Some bent toward him as though curious. The grass beneath his feet now pulsed faintly with light, each blade glowing a gentle aquamarine, bending ever so slightly in rhythm with an unseen current.

He inhaled sharply. The scent of the air was intoxicating—cleaner than anything he had ever known. There was a sweet tang, like crushed mint and citrus, mixed with something metallic and cool, like rain on steel.

Every sound was heightened—sharper. He heard the flutter of strange wings above, and when he looked up, he gasped. Massive floating creatures drifted across the sky. They had elongated bodies and translucent skin, trailing long luminous tendrils that moved like jellyfish through water. They weren’t birds, and yet they soared, graceful and slow. Their cries echoed like low singing whales, a haunting melody that resonated in the back of his mind.

The livestock grazing in the fields were there too—but overlaid by a new

form. Ethereal, semi-transparent animals with elongated limbs and oversized eyes. One resembled a goat, but with a body like flowing water and horns of glowing crystal. Another had the trunk of an elephant, but it hovered inches above the ground as it grazed on shimmering flowers that didn't exist in his world.

Far off in the distance, past the luminous plains, Lee saw a city—or something like it. Ivory towers reached high into the purple sky, taller than any mountain, twisting like spirals of bone and glass. Roads of glowing blue light webbed between them, carrying pulses of energy like blood through veins. Above it all, a thin green column of light shot into the heavens—pulsing, alive.

Lee stared at it, breath shallow. It wasn't just light—it was a beacon, a signal, a wound in the sky.

"What... is that?" he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

But Mira didn't answer.

He turned back, awestruck by everything. The colors, the textures, the alien familiarity of it all. His heart pounded in his chest, but he wasn't afraid—not exactly. It was like standing in a dream you somehow knew was real.

He took a step forward instinctively and felt the ground soften beneath his feet. The world itself was reactive. Responsive. He reached down and touched the grass—it rippled beneath his hand like water, yet no moisture remained on his skin.

The emotions surged next—waves of sensation, hard to categorize. Wonder, certainly. But also melancholy, like this was a place he had always known but forgotten. There was a weight behind his eyes, tears threatening to rise—not from sadness, but from the magnitude of beauty around him. From the realization that something so vast and alive could exist beside his own world, unseen all this time.

He turned again to look behind him—and saw layers.

A great tree stood nearby. But it wasn't just a tree. There were three versions of it layered on top of one another—one from his world, sturdy and real; one from this new dimension, glowing and twisted; and another from somewhere else altogether, flickering like a shadow between frames of existence.

He stumbled backward, overwhelmed.

And then Mira spoke softly beside him, though her voice felt miles away.

"This is Xytherion," she said. "You see now what lies beside us. Not above. Not below. Beside."

Lee was speechless. His mouth opened but no words came out.

Mira continued. "This world is not malevolent. It is not kind. It is... other."

And when the energy flows from here into ours, it warps. Not from evil—but from imbalance.”

She let the moment linger.

“It is breathtaking, isn’t it?” she whispered, and Lee could only nod.

Finally, he forced himself to speak again. “It’s like... a dream.”

She smiled. “One that speaks the truth.”

Then he looked again at the green light in the distance—the beam that pulsed skyward like a heartbeat.

“What is that?” he asked again, more firmly.

This time, Mira didn’t speak. Instead, she drew another small bowl from her satchel, placed it carefully on the pillow, and struck it.

The world folded inward like silk being drawn through a ring.

Gooonnnnggg...

The vision faded. Lee returned, heart racing.

She handed him another drink. “Mint,” he said absently.

“Why did you show me this?”

“Because it’s time,” Mira said. “You need to understand. And there’s something else.”

Lee met her gaze.

“Your father,” she said quietly. “He’s alive.”

His eyes filled with tears. “Where?”

“We don’t know exactly. But he’s moving. Hiding. We received a sighting through the Xia. That’s how we... communicate.”

“We?”

“I’m part of a network. Guardians. We use the Xia to exchange knowledge. And they believe you’re important, Lee. Your journey isn’t just about finding your father.”

Lee rubbed his temples, overwhelmed.

“You can’t stay here,” she said gently. “There’s more for you to do. I don’t know what it is—but I know it’s bigger than any of us.”

“I know,” Lee whispered. “I don’t know how, but I know.”

“It’ll be harder this time.”

“I’m ready,” he said softly.

Mira reached over and rested her hand on his.

“I’m sorry, my boy. But this is only the beginning.”

## 18 PARTING PATHS

For two days, Lee wandered alone.

He wasn't avoiding anyone—not exactly. He was simply overwhelmed. The visions Mira had shown him refused to leave his mind. Every time he closed his eyes, the surreal colors of Xytherion pulsed behind his eyelids: the spiraling purple sky, the spectral creatures, the green column of light splitting the horizon like a divine signal. It felt like a dream, and yet he knew it wasn't.

He had seen it. Touched it. Felt it.

And now, it was changing him.

He had so many questions. How could two realities share the same space without destroying each other? Why was their energy incompatible? How did Mira and the other guardians learn to tap into it, even use it as a channel of communication? He thought of his father. Alive. Out there. Somewhere.

Every answer led to more questions. And each question widened the gap between the life he had come to know and the path he now felt bound to walk.

The realization that he had to leave hit him like cold steel. He couldn't stay with the Hollow Sky Tribe. Not anymore. And that truth carved a pit in his chest. Ronan and Lyra had become family in a way he hadn't known he needed. Their shared meals, training, laughter—those moments had stitched themselves into the seams of his spirit.

And then there was Kaida.

Lee found himself thinking of her more than anything else. The light in her eyes when she smiled. Her fierce loyalty. Her laughter. Her warmth. The way her hand fit into his like it had always belonged there. The kiss they shared on

the hill still echoed in his chest. Leaving her would be the hardest part.

But it had to be done.

He decided to speak with Ronan and Lyra first.

He found them in the paddock, tending to the horses. The smell of sun-warmed hay and saddle leather filled the air. Lyra was brushing a sleek black mare with long silky hair, while Ronan leaned on a fence post feeding it bits of carrot.

Lee approached slowly, his heart heavy. "Hey," he said, his voice catching. They both turned. Ronan raised an eyebrow, and Lyra's expression softened. They said nothing at first—just waited.

Lee reached out to pet the horse's neck, letting the warmth of its hide steady him.

"I need to talk to you about something," he said, trying to inject confidence into his voice, but it came out too rigid. Too practiced.

They didn't interrupt.

Lee looked down. "I don't know how to say this, so I'm just going to say it."

He inhaled sharply, then let the words fall. "I have to keep going. I have to leave. My journey's not over."

For a moment, silence.

Then Lyra smiled softly. "We know."

Lee looked up, startled.

"Mira told us to expect it," she said, still brushing the horse. "She said you'd stay with us until we reached the eastern valley. And now... here we are."

Relief and sorrow clashed in his chest. He stepped forward and pulled her into a hug. She froze at first—Lyra wasn't one for physical affection—but then her arms wrapped around him in return.

Ronan stepped forward and placed a firm hand on Lee's shoulder. "It's been an honor having you with us."

"When are you leaving?" he asked.

"Soon," Lee answered. "I just... need to talk to Kaida first."

At her name, both Lyra and Ronan exchanged a glance.

"Well," Lyra said, glancing past Lee's shoulder, "you're about to get your chance."

Lee turned—and his heart dropped.

Kaida was walking toward them, her steps purposeful. Her dark eyes were locked on his, and her face was a storm.

"I guess we'll give you two some space," Lyra murmured, and she and



Ronan quickly moved away.

Kaida stopped just a few feet from him, arms folded tightly.

“What’s going on?” she demanded, her voice shaking.

Lee swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Come sit with me,” he said gently, gesturing toward a low wall nearby.

“I’ll stand, thank you very much,” she snapped, her voice brittle. “You’ve been avoiding me for days. Ever since you met with Mira. And don’t tell me you’ve been sick—I can tell when someone’s lying.”

He felt her pain and anger. Her voice was trembling with more than rage—it was heartbreak.

He nodded slowly. “You’re right.”

He took a breath and started, voice quiet. “Mira showed me something... something big. About where I came from. About what I have to do. My journey... it’s not over.”

Kaida’s face crumpled. Her eyes shone with unshed tears.

“What do you mean? Why now?” she whispered.

“I wish I could explain it better,” Lee said, reaching for her hand.

But she pulled away. “Don’t.”

His throat tightened. He wanted to tell her everything—that she mattered more than she knew. That she made this place feel like home. That leaving her would tear something from him he couldn’t get back.

Instead, all he managed was: “I wish things were different.”

Kaida’s eyes filled. She ripped the necklace from around her neck—the one he had given her during the festival—and hurled it to the ground before turning and running.

Lee stood there, stunned, the weight of it all pressing in from every direction. He knelt and picked up the necklace, brushing dirt from the copper and silver.

A moment later, Ronan appeared and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“I take it that didn’t go well,” he said with a grim smile.

Lyra walked up behind him. “Excellent job, Ronan. Very inspirational.”

Ronan rolled his eyes.

Lyra gently took the necklace from Lee’s hand. “I’ll make sure she gets it. Once she calms down.”

Lee nodded, unable to speak.

He spent the next hour packing. Each item he rolled or folded felt heavier than it should have. Every object was a memory—a shared laugh, a quiet conversation, a promise.

When he stepped out of the tent with his pack slung over his shoulder, Mira was waiting for him, along with Ronan and Lyra.

The old woman smiled and wrapped him in a tight hug. "It's been a pleasure having you with us," she said, then leaned in and whispered, "Look for Gideon Steele in the capital."

She winked.

Lyra embraced him next, tears in her eyes. She didn't speak, but her hug said enough.

Then Ronan stepped forward, grasping Lee's hand in a firm shake. "You'll always have a place with the Hollow Sky."

He started to turn away, then paused and reached into his coat.

"Oh, before I forget." He handed Lee a familiar object.

Lee looked down.

The pistol.

He swallowed hard. "Thank you."

He looked at all of them, standing together beneath the golden light of the afternoon sun.

"I'll never forget you," he said.

He turned and began walking east.

The tribe watched him go. Children waved. Elders nodded in quiet farewell. The banners of the Hollow Sky rippled in the wind, their shadows stretching across the grass like fingers unwilling to let go.

His feet felt like stone, and the trail ahead felt impossibly long.

Then—

"Wait!"

He froze.

Kaida was running toward him, her hair wild in the wind, her cheeks streaked with tears. She wore the necklace once more.

She stopped in front of him, panting, eyes raw and red. Without a word, she stepped into his arms and kissed him.

It was desperate. Fierce. Real.

When she pulled back, she clung to him, burying her face in his shoulder.

"Be careful," she whispered. "Don't be stupid."

He nodded, unable to speak.

She stepped back, smiled through the tears, and turned away.

Lee stood there, watching her retreat toward the camp.

And with that one moment, that one final embrace, something inside him shifted.

It didn't make leaving easier.  
But it made moving forward possible.

Lee had grown used to traveling alone.

But this time, the silence of the road didn't ache the way it used to. The sharp emptiness he once carried in his chest had softened, tempered by purpose. The grief and confusion that had once clouded his vision were now pushed aside by something else—direction.

He didn't know exactly where his path would lead, but he knew the direction: east. That alone was more than he'd had in the past. Mira's words echoed in his thoughts like a distant song. "Look for Gideon Steele in the capital."

And so, Lee moved forward, his boots crunching softly on dirt paths winding through sparse woods and sun-dappled meadows. The road curved like a lazy serpent, and although there were fewer travelers now, Lee welcomed the solitude. The scent of damp earth and summer wildflowers clung to the breeze, and birds chirped overhead, hidden within the green canopy of leaves.

For hours he walked, passing only a few quiet cottages nestled beneath large, sagging trees. The road narrowed, the forest grew thicker, and the air became cooler, filtered by a canopy of ancient oaks and weeping willows. Then, through the dense brush, a sign emerged:

"The Village of Willowmere."

The sign was once a work of art—delicately carved, painted in vibrant reds and golds. But now the paint had faded, chipped away by years of weather. Thick ivy curled around its edges, like nature slowly reclaiming it. It swayed slightly in the breeze, creaking faintly, as if sighing under the weight of time.

Lee approached the village with cautious curiosity.

The road dipped slightly, leading him across an old wooden bridge. Below, a lazy stream gurgled softly, its banks overgrown with moss and cattails. As he crossed, the village revealed itself in full—an arrangement of crooked homes and small shops nestled beneath towering trees. Ivy blanketed the wooden buildings like green lace. The paint had long since dulled, but Lee could still make out the shapes and patterns of brighter days.

A stillness hung over the village—not abandoned, but quiet. Gentle wind whispered through the trees, and the scent of burning wood drifted faintly from chimneys. Lee passed a baker's storefront where golden loaves were cooling on a tray in the window, and a cobbler's shop with boots and shoes displayed on a rack that creaked every time the breeze shifted.

In the village square, a man crouched beside a wooden cart, tightening the wheel's hub with practiced hands. Sweat glistened on his brow as he wiped it with a linen cloth.

Lee approached him. "Excuse me," he said. "Would you happen to know the best way to get to the capital?"

The man looked up, squinting. "On foot? That'd be that trail over there," he said, pointing to a side path winding into the woods. "It'll take days, maybe more."

Lee nodded, already bracing for the long march.

"Or," the man added, "you can take the train. Runs right through here. Station's just down the hill."

A train.

Lee's heart skipped with relief. "Thank you."

He followed the man's directions, the whistle of steam already echoing in the distance like a call from fate. As he broke into a jog, trees gave way to an open clearing. There, perched on a raised platform of stone and timber, was the train station—and the machine itself.

Lee stopped in his tracks.

It was magnificent.

The locomotive was a fusion of raw power and elegant design. The engine was a long cylinder of burnished steel, its smokestack billowing white plumes into the sky. Its front face bore an elaborate crest, polished brass gears surrounding a carved eagle. The engineer's cab was square and functional, yet somehow ornate. Behind it, half a dozen passenger cars stood in line like soldiers, each with riveted siding and tall windows veiled by curtains.

The air smelled of coal smoke, warm oil, and old metal. The platform buzzed with life—merchants unloading crates, porters carrying bags, and travelers bustling about in long coats and wide hats.

At the ticket booth, a man in a brown vest shouted above the clamor, "Train fares here! Last call for the capital!"

Lee stepped up. "Is this train heading to the capital?"

"Sure is," the man replied without looking up. "Leaves in ten minutes."

Lee reached for his coin pouch. "How much for a seat?"

The man glanced at him, noting the bow and quiver slung across his back. He frowned. "No weapons allowed."

Lee blinked. "Why not?"

"No room in the storage. And besides, it's regulation." The man shrugged. "You can sell it. There's a pawn shop just around the corner."

Lee's heart sank. That bow had seen him through so much. But arguing would mean missing the train—and missing the train meant days lost.

Reluctantly, he jogged to the nearby shop, where a squat man with enormous spectacles examined his weapon with greedy interest.

Lee detached the obsidian-tipped arrows first and tucked them into his satchel, speaking quickly. "It's well-balanced. Took down a beast in the Moonveil."

The shopkeeper sniffed. "That so?" He named a low price.

Lee raised an eyebrow. "That's less than the string is worth."

The shopkeeper relented with a sigh and added a few more coins to the offer. Not great, but enough for a ticket.

Lee accepted, snatched the coins, and sprinted back to the platform just as the whistle blew.

He shoved his way aboard, collapsing into a window seat as the conductor moved down the aisle checking tickets. The train lurched once, twice—and began its slow, shuddering roll forward. The platform slipped away behind them. The trees became a blur.

And then they were off.

The train picked up speed, its rhythmic chug echoing through the forest like a beating heart. The countryside zipped by in streaks of green and gold. Lee sat back, watching the world rush past. His hand rested on his satchel, fingers curled protectively around the obsidian arrowheads.

He thought of Kaida. Of Ronan. Of Lyra and Mira.

He thought of the kiss on the hillside, the way Kaida had looked at him just before she disappeared into the crowd.

He missed them already.

But he wasn't lost anymore.

About halfway through the journey, the car quieted as many passengers dozed. Lee closed his eyes briefly, letting the rhythm of the wheels lull him.

Then he felt it.

A shift of weight behind him. A light touch on his satchel.

He didn't move.

He waited.

Another nudge—barely noticeable. Lee opened one eye just enough to see a young boy, maybe twelve, with patched trousers and dirty cheeks, slowly lifting the flap of his bag. His fingers trembled.

Lee slid a hand beneath his cloak and quietly cocked the pistol.

Click.

The boy froze.

“Can I help you?” Lee asked, eyes still half-lidded.

The boy’s face went pale. “I—I’m sorry,” he stammered. “Please... don’t hurt me.”

Lee slowly sat upright, hand still hidden. “That’s a good way to get shot.”

“I didn’t mean anything. I was just... I’m hungry.”

Lee studied him. The boy was rail-thin, his clothes tattered. His shoes were barely holding together. Lee doubted he’d even bought a ticket.

He sighed and reached into his pack, pulling out a small wrapped bundle of jerky and two coins. He handed them over.

The boy blinked in disbelief. “Really?”

“Don’t thank me,” Lee said, his voice flat. “Just don’t let me see you again.”

The boy nodded and slipped away, disappearing into the next car.

Lee leaned back in his seat, staring out the window as the horizon widened. Trees thinned. Rolling hills gave way to distant rooftops. Smoke stacks. Stone towers.

In the distance, under a canopy of dusk-colored clouds, he saw it:

The Capital.

It rose like a fortress carved from time itself—sprawling buildings, glimmering lights, domed spires reaching toward the sky. Trains converged in the distance, leading to great arches and steel gates. The closer they came, the louder the hum of civilization grew.

Lee straightened his coat and pressed a hand to his satchel. He thought again of Mira’s voice:

“Look for Gideon Steele.”

And for the first time in a long while, he was ready.

The train hissed and exhaled steam as it came to a halt at the eastern edge of Cael’varan—the capital city, the “Sanctuary of the Sky Flame.” Lee stepped off the last platform onto stone that was worn smooth from the countless feet that had passed before his. The sky above was tinged gold with the setting sun, yet the city glowed brighter than the horizon—alive with motion, fire, and steam.

He paused at the grand square just outside the station, letting the sheer scale of it all wash over him.

Cael’varan was no ordinary city. It was a sprawling metropolis of metal and magic, an elegant tangle of industry and refinement. Towering buildings of polished stone and brass rose like ancient giants, crowned with domes, iron

spires, and rotating turbines. Clocktowers ticked in unison, chiming on the quarter hour with a melody that echoed down narrow corridors of timeworn cobblestone.

Airships passed overhead like great floating whales, their hulls sleek with chrome and their sails woven from silver thread. Thick steam coiled from vents beneath the roads and from chimneys that poked through tiled rooftops. The scent was unmistakable—burnt oil, coal, roasted nuts, and ozone. Beneath it all, a faint metallic tang clung to the air, like rain on copper.

Bridges connected different districts, stretching across deep stone-lined chasms carved by the old rivers that once ran freely. They now slithered through aqueducts and subterranean channels, caged like beasts. Every bridge had its own guardians—lampposts carved to resemble flame-winged angels or giant cogs with runic inscriptions.

The streets were alive.

Ladies in gowns of blue and emerald walked alongside gentlemen in tall coats and feathered hats, clicking their boots on polished stone. Shopkeepers stood beneath colorful awnings sweeping stoops or hanging lanterns. Steam-powered carriages groaned down the avenues while automated message birds flapped overhead, their brass wings rattling in rhythm.

Lee moved among them like a ghost, cloaked and careful, his eyes scanning every face.

Gideon Steele.

That name was his only anchor in this new storm of noise and motion. But yelling it in the square would be a mistake. He didn't know who Gideon was—or what kind of attention the name might draw. He couldn't afford to take chances. So instead, he blended in.

He slunk down a narrow street and started walking with purpose, pretending he belonged, pretending he wasn't just some outsider carrying obsidian arrowheads in his bag and a hundred questions in his head.

As he rounded a corner into a shaded courtyard, the air changed.

A crowd had gathered around a man standing on a short iron ladder, his voice a loud and rhythmic chant. He held a steel-gray banner in one hand, marked with a striking symbol: two hammers crossed over flame, encircled by a broken chain. His free arm pumped the air, gesturing like a preacher to his congregation.

Lee edged closer, keeping to the shadows.

The man's words were passionate, calling out injustices. Though Lee couldn't hear it all, one name cut through the noise again and again:

“Maera Flintfist! Maera Flintfist!”

The crowd answered with cheers and raised fists.

Then—motion.

A line of soldiers stormed into the square, their black and crimson tabards flashing beneath polished brass armor. Their insignia—a golden sun pierced vertically by a sword, surrounded by a ring of fire—glinted in the afternoon light.

The rally broke.

People scattered in all directions like birds taking flight. The man on the ladder held his ground for a moment longer, screaming about oppression. He was quickly tackled by the soldiers—struck down with brutal efficiency, his banner trampled underfoot. Lee winced but turned away. Getting involved would be suicide.

He ducked into an alley just as a child scurried past him, laughing.

Lee turned to see what he’d been running from and spotted a large propaganda poster glued to the wall. A regal-looking man with golden cuffs and a sharp jawline stood before the same flaming-sun insignia. At the top it read: “Keep the Fire of Divine Justice Burning.”

Someone—clearly the child—had painted a curly mustache and devilish beard over the face. Lee chuckled, but it faded fast. He kept walking.

The further he wandered, the more the city shifted. The pristine cobblestones gave way to cracked bricks and puddles of oil. The shops grew smaller, signs faded and crooked. The people here were different—coal-dusted workers, hands thick with calluses, eyes dimmed by long hours and short pay.

He pulled his cloak tighter.

Lee knew from his days with the Cloudgears that truth and whispers lived not in the light, but in the cracks of the city. So he followed the workers as they filtered out of the factories, arms sore, boots dragging. Most went home—but some drifted toward something else: a tavern, its wooden sign marked only with a crude mug and a fading inscription.

Inside, the air was warm and thick—a stew of sweat, smoke, and ale. The walls were lined with brass gears and rusting pipes. A small bar stretched across the back with stools that looked like they’d fall apart with a sneeze.

Lee sat at the far end, his stool wobbling beneath him. A group of workers he had followed in joined others and immediately began trading laughs, slapping backs, and drinking from tall glasses of frothy brown liquid.

The bartender noticed him.

A stocky man with a handlebar mustache, he walked over with a towel



thrown over his shoulder. "What'll you have, young man?"

Lee cleared his throat. "I know I'll catch flack for it, but... got any water? And maybe something light?"

He tried to sound casual. "Been traveling. Need to keep my wits about me."

The bartender grunted. "Sure, sure."

He returned with a murky glass of water and a short glass of something dark and strong. "Two pieces," he said.

Lee paid, then took a sip of the water. It tasted like wet iron and moldy bark, but he swallowed it down anyway. Then he picked up the smaller glass, sniffed it—his eyes widened from the sharp sting of alcohol and spice.

One of the workers grinned. "Go on, then! Down the hatch!"

The others turned to watch.

Lee, knowing the moment had become a test, tossed it back in one motion.

Fire.

His throat erupted in heat. His eyes watered. He coughed violently, gripping the bar.

Laughter filled the room.

"Yeah! Got a kick, don't it?" one man hollered.

The bartender chuckled and slid him another glass of water. "On the house, kid."

Lee nodded, wheezing, trying to cool the burn in his chest.

After a few minutes, the bartender came back. "So," he asked, "what brings you to this side of town?"

Lee hesitated. "I'm... waiting for someone."

The man leaned in slightly. "Maybe it's someone I know." He tapped the bar twice—a subtle code, offering information for a price.

Lee slid two coins over.

"I'm looking for Gideon Steele," he whispered.

The bartender froze.

Then he pushed the coins back across the bar, slowly, eyes narrowed. "Don't say that name too loud around here, kid."

His voice was low and sharp.

Lee nodded slowly, heart sinking.

He got up to leave, but as he turned toward the door, the bartender caught his sleeve.

"Come back in an hour," he whispered.

Lee blinked.

The bartender gave a curt nod, then turned back to polishing mugs like

nothing had happened.

Lee stepped out into the alley, his thoughts racing.

Whatever Gideon Steele represented—it was dangerous.

But it was also exactly what Lee needed to find.

## 19 SHADOWS OF CAEL'VARAN

The city of Cael'varan spread around Lee like an iron and stone labyrinth, and even after walking it for only an hour, it felt almost alive—breathing with steam, buzzing with tension, and always watching.

He didn't stray too far from the small tavern tucked down the darkened alley. Instinct told him it was no accident he'd found someone there who recognized the name Gideon Steele so quickly. Cities this big didn't give up secrets easily, and he knew better than to tempt fate twice. But while he waited, he wandered.

Emerging from the alley and stepping back onto the main street, Lee kept his head low and his stride steady. Cobblestones clicked beneath his boots as he passed shops glowing with warm lamplight. Street vendors called out to the crowd, selling roasted almonds, brass trinkets, and glowing orbs filled with colored vapor. The scent of fresh bread and machine oil battled in the air, each fighting for dominance.

Lee kept his ears open. Everywhere he went, he caught snippets of political unrest. People whispered or shouted in tense tones. Some wore gray sashes pinned with broken-chain symbols. Others bore red ribbons or fiery sun motifs. Propaganda plastered the walls like ivy—rows of identical posters promoting the Sanctum of Dominion, each one featuring the same regal man from before, his eyes fierce and lips frozen in a calculated smile.

Then there were the chanted slogans:

“Hands united, voices unchained!”

“Order, faith, and the fire within!”

Each echoed from different corners of the city. There was no mistaking it—Cael’varan was a capital on the edge of something.

Lee didn’t ask questions. Not yet. He needed information, but this wasn’t the time or place to draw attention. He just observed, blending in as best he could with the sea of pedestrians, merchants, engineers, priests, and street kids that filled the city’s arteries.

When an hour had passed, he returned to the alley and ducked once again into the small, smoky tavern.

Gone were the factory workers and their raucous laughter. Now only a handful of patrons lingered in the dim haze—silent drinkers slouched at the bar, shadows wrapped around their faces like scarves. A new bartender stood behind the counter—a hulking man with forearms the size of loaves and a jaw that looked chiseled from stone.

Lee took a seat at the far end of the bar, just as before.

The stool wobbled again.

The bartender approached. “What’ll it be?”

Lee hesitated. “Where’s the guy with the handlebar mustache?”

The bartender’s brows lowered. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The tone was short. Measured.

Lee nodded slowly. “Water, then. Just... water.”

He was about to rise from the stool when a hand touched his shoulder.

It was soft, but commanding.

“Stay,” a voice purred beside him.

Lee turned.

A beautiful woman slid onto the stool beside him with the grace of a falling feather. Her long, raven-black hair shimmered in the low light. She wore a dress of black velvet and lace, the slit up the side revealing a long, pale leg that she didn’t mind Lee noticing. Her deep sapphire eyes locked onto his with an intensity that felt almost unnatural. Her lips curled, painted just enough to seem kissed by wine.

“Hi there,” she said, the words silked in seduction. “Mind if I join you?”

Lee’s heart thundered. Every instinct in him screamed danger. But he found himself unable to speak. He simply nodded.

The woman leaned in closer, her perfume wrapping around him—rose and smoke. Her voice dropped to a whisper.

“You’re new here, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I—yes, I am.” The words came out wrong, hesitant, and awkward.

She smiled as if she already knew.

From beneath her black gloves, she lifted a single finger and gently pushed up under Lee's chin to guide his gaze back to hers.

"From your scent and your boots," she said, "I'd say you're either a stable boy or from far west. Nomads, perhaps?"

Lee blinked. "I traveled east with the Hollow Sky Tribe."

Her laugh was soft and mocking. "Oh, and they let you keep your head? How quaint."

"They're good people," Lee snapped.

She tilted her head and smirked. "I'm only teasing... ponyboy."

"Don't call me that."

"My apologies," she purred. "What should I call you?"

Before he could answer, she turned away and flagged down the bartender. "Two drinks. Heavy and hard."

"I'm not much of a drinker," Lee mumbled.

"Fine," she said, winking. "Make one light and limp."

The drinks arrived. She lifted her glass and extended it toward him. "To our health."

Lee hesitated.

"Don't leave me hanging, handsome."

He clinked glasses.

They drank.

Within seconds, the room began to spin.

His vision blurred. His thoughts turned thick, heavy, slow. His grip slipped, and the stool beneath him tipped. The last thing he heard was her voice through the haze.

"That was fast."

"You used too much!" she barked at someone.

"It's too late."

Darkness swallowed him whole.

Lee awoke with a snap of pain in the back of his skull.

The light above him was blinding. He squinted hard, eyes watering as he tried to make out his surroundings.

He was tied to a chair. Leather straps bound his arms and legs. Two syringes were sticking out from opposite sides of his arms—one filled with a red fluid, the other an amber-yellow liquid.

"What's going on?!" he shouted, heart thundering in his chest.

Two silhouettes lingered beyond the light—one tall and straight-backed,

hands folded behind him. The other—a woman—sat lazily on a table with legs crossed and arms resting behind her.

“I’m the one asking questions,” said the man in a voice smooth and refined.

He stepped closer, his face still hidden by the glare of the lamp.

“That needle in your left arm contains a truth serum. The one on the right... well, let’s hope we don’t have to use it.”

Lee fought the restraints but couldn’t move.

“You drugged me!”

“Mm,” the man mused, “we tested your reflexes, trust, tolerance, and discretion. You passed half.”

The man placed a hand on the red syringe and gently pressed the plunger. Lee flinched as the serum entered his bloodstream. It was cold—like liquid snow spreading through his veins.

The woman leaned forward. “What did you think of me, darling?”

“You were... beautiful,” Lee admitted.

He paused, then added bitterly, “But also a horrible person. You tricked me. And I hope your drink tastes like piss.”

“Hey!” she snapped.

“Quiet,” said the man.

“Tell me your name,” he asked, his voice calm.

“My name is Leif Everhart,” Lee replied. “My friends call me Lee. But you can call me Leif.”

There was a pause.

“Fair enough,” said the man.

He walked in slow circles behind Lee, never showing his face.

“Tell me everything. From the beginning.”

Lee didn’t want to speak. But the serum was working, and before he could stop himself, the words came pouring out.

He spoke of arriving in Aetherion as a child with his father. How his father vanished without explanation. His time with the Emberstones, learning how to fight and forge. The years aboard the Skyraker with the Cloudgears, where he learned engineering, firearms, and strategy. He told them about the battle in the sky, his time with the Emberwoods, killing the beast in Moonveil.

He spoke of the Hollow Sky Tribe, of Kaida, of the Ghostmare, of the spirit, of his first kiss.

He told it all.

When he was finished, silence hung like a curtain.

“Wow,” the woman finally said.

“Wow, indeed,” the man echoed.

Then, for the first time, he stepped fully into the light.

Lee didn’t catch every detail—but he saw a scar across one eyebrow, eyes that were sharp and unreadable, and a bearing like a soldier who had long since abandoned medals.

“That’s all we needed to know.”

He reached for the second syringe.

“Wait—no—what is that?!”

The fluid slid into his veins.

Darkness took him again.

The air was cool, tinged with the faint metallic taste of the city, and laced with the musty scent of brick and tar. A soft wind whispered across Lee’s skin, causing goosebumps to ripple along his arms. He stirred with a groan and instinctively reached for his cloak—but it was gone.

So was everything else.

His heart thundered in his chest as his eyes adjusted to the dim blue light of early dawn. The surface beneath him was cold, hard—a stone floor. And then, he realized something far more pressing: he was sitting on the edge of a high platform, a ledge, far above the street below.

He scrambled up, breath catching as he staggered toward the edge.

A drop of hundreds of feet met his gaze. The whole city of Cael’varan sprawled out beneath him in a jumble of tiled rooftops, steam vents, and distant bridges. He was standing inside what looked like a half-constructed room at the top of a building—three walls, no ceiling, and no front wall at all.

“What’s going on!?” he yelled, voice cracking against the wind. He spun and tried the door—locked, of course.

Behind him came a voice, sultry and too casual for the situation.

“That’s not the way down.”

Lee turned to see her—the raven-haired woman from the tavern. Her elegant dress was gone, replaced by a sleek, skin-tight black outfit, clearly tailored for agility. Her long hair was pulled back into a high ponytail, and a half-burnt cigarillo dangled from her lips. She stood near a rigged line—a cable attached to a mechanical grip in her gloved hands.

She exhaled smoke, flicked the cigarillo into the night air, and adjusted her grip.

“This,” she said, gesturing to the cable, “is the way down.”

Lee’s mouth opened to protest when she added sharply, “You don’t want

that door to open. The men behind it? They're not fond of you. Mask on."

She tossed a black half-mask his way and leapt off the ledge, gliding across the gap between buildings with the ease of a shadow.

And then the door began to rattle.

"We've got movement—this way! I think they went this way!"

The urgency snapped Lee into motion. He shoved the mask on, gripped the second handle, and—without hesitation—jumped.

The wind tore past him as he zipped along the cable, the distance far longer than he'd anticipated. His stomach lurched. The city spun below. Then came the rooftop. Too fast.

He let go, rolled across the gravelly surface, and came to a skidding stop just feet from the edge.

"Good," the woman in black said, already on her feet. "Because we're about to have company."

A metal door burst open behind them, and a half-dozen soldiers in padded uniforms and crimson sashes poured out, batons drawn.

"Stop! In the name of the Sanctum!"

Lee raised his hands, trying to explain, but the first soldier swung without hesitation. Lee ducked instinctively, his reflexes from skornfut practice kicking in. A second baton came from the side—he dodged again. But the third caught him behind the ear.

Pain exploded, and the world wobbled.

It lit a fire in him.

No more playing defense.

The fourth soldier lunged, and Lee side-stepped, grabbing the attacker's arm and twisting it back. He kicked another in the stomach. His blows were solid, but the soldiers' padded armor dampened the impact. They just kept coming, coordinated and relentless.

Lee changed tactics. He ripped the helmet off one of them, caught a loose baton, and cracked it across the soldier's exposed temple. He crumpled. Lee ducked another swing and used the baton to trip the next one, slamming him into the rooftop's air vent.

Meanwhile, the woman was holding her own with a folding staff, spinning it with fluid precision, striking joints and faces. Her movements were too elegant for someone who claimed to just be a seductress.

She motioned to Lee, "Move! Next roof!"

They ran together, leaping the next gap.

The moment they landed, Lee's gut twisted. The hairs on the back of his



neck bristled.

Then—gunshots.

Cracks echoed across the rooftops, sharp and chaotic.

They dove behind a rooftop furnace vent as bullets sparked off metal. Lee glared at her, ready to scream, but she grabbed his wrist and yanked him forward to a better hiding spot.

“You little—!” he began, but she silenced him with another pull.

They crawled and rolled between chimney stacks and crates, dodging sporadic fire from an unseen marksman. The shots were wild—whoever it was couldn't track them well in the shadows. Still, each shot felt too close.

“We need to get to that alley,” she whispered, pointing across a cobblestone road. A wrought iron fence blocked the far side.

She grabbed a discarded tin plate, slipped it onto the end of her staff, and raised it slowly above the rooftop.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Three bullets tore through it.

“Reloading,” she whispered.

“Now!”

They sprinted. Feet thudded against the rooftop. Down the fire escape, across the road, over the fence. Lee landed hard, rolled to his feet, and didn't stop running.

They weaved through tight alleyways and over bridges as the city blurred around them. Slowly, the sound of pursuit faded. By the time they reached the southern edge of Cael'varan, only the chirping of crickets remained.

The woman crouched behind a marble column across from an old library, and raised a hand to silence him. Lee was about to unload on her when she cocked her head, listening.

A long silence. Then—crickets again.

She nodded.

“It's clear.”

She dragged him around the back, opened a concealed iron door, and slipped inside.

The library's back rooms were dusty and dim, filled with the soft scent of aged paper and leather bindings. They climbed a narrow stairwell, turned a corner, and entered a cozy room with high-backed chairs, velvet curtains, and a low-burning lamp on a table.

And sitting in the center of it all—calm, legs crossed—was the man from the shadows.

The one who tied him up.

The woman finally removed her mask, shaking her hair free. She looked tired now, breathing heavy from the chase. Lee yanked his mask off, too, chest still heaving.

He looked at the man with pure fury.

“Give me one reason,” Lee growled, pointing at the lamp on the table, “why I shouldn’t bash that over your head. And then throw her off the bloody city wall.”

The man stood, adjusting the cuffs of his coat.

The light caught his face—older, mid-forties, with a lean, commanding presence and eyes like sharpened steel. A pale scar ran through one eyebrow, and his hair was streaked with gray. Calm. Cold. Calculated.

“My name,” he said simply, “is Gideon Steele.”

Lee’s jaw was locked tight.

Gideon Steele extended a hand, offering calm and civility. Lee stared at it, narrowed his eyes, and turned away with a sharp shrug.

“Nope.”

He took a few paces toward the far wall, then turned back, rage flaring in his chest like dry timber catching fire.

“Three times!” he barked, stabbing a finger in the air between Gideon and the raven-haired woman now lounging on a leather chair, her legs draped lazily over the armrest. “You drugged me three times.”

He pointed directly at her, eyes wide and accusing.

“And you,” he growled, “you almost got me killed.”

The woman blinked slowly, amused. Her outfit had changed again—tight, elegant, black as night. She looked every inch the shadow she had been on the rooftops. She arched an eyebrow but said nothing, letting Gideon handle the heat.

Gideon remained seated. “My apologies, Leif,” he said with quiet composure. “There are agents everywhere. If you were a plant—an operative from the Sanctum or the Accord—it would’ve endangered not just me, but the entire network. We had to be sure.”

Lee’s face twisted with disbelief. “You tested me? By throwing me into a gauntlet of rooftop soldiers? How did I even get up there in the first place?”

“We needed to observe how you react under pressure,” Gideon said calmly. “Mira told us you were coming. She believes you can help us... that you’re part of something bigger.”

He glanced at the woman and asked, “How did he do?”

She flicked an invisible speck from her sleeve. "He's alright."

"Alright?" Lee echoed. "That's it? After everything?"

Gideon stood and approached him again, hand lowered this time.

"My apologies again. Leif, this is my daughter—Arabella."

She leaned back in the chair and offered a coy smile. "But you can call me Bella."

Lee met her gaze flatly. "And you can still call me Leif."

Her smile faltered.

The tension in the room coiled like a spring. Gideon, sensing the strain, moved to the cabinet in the corner where a small collection of bottles and decanters waited on a polished tray.

"Leif," he said gently, "please. Sit. Let me explain."

Lee didn't sit. But he also didn't leave.

Gideon lifted a bottle. "Drink?"

Lee narrowed his eyes. "Water. And don't even look at me with anything cloudy."

Gideon chuckled. "Right. Of course."

He retrieved a clear bottle sealed with a metal cap and poured the contents into a glass. Lee took it with caution. He sniffed it.

Bella stood, walked over, and grabbed the bottle. She took a long swig directly from it, made an exaggerated gulping noise, then opened her mouth to show it had gone down.

She curtsied with the flourish of a ghostly gown. "See? Not poison."

Lee stared, unimpressed. "You're exhausting."

Still, the water was clean and crisp, refreshing enough to make him realize just how thirsty he really was.

Gideon poured something darker for himself and took a sip, then sat back in his chair. "Leif, I won't pretend you should trust me—not after what we've put you through. But hear me out."

Lee crossed his arms.

"There are two major powers in Cael'varan. Two factions fighting for control under the guise of protecting the people. You've seen their banners. Their slogans. The Sanctum of Dominion... and the Iron Accord."

"I've seen their soldiers," Lee muttered. "And I've seen their boots."

"They're both dangerous," Gideon replied. "Different words, different philosophies—but they both crave the same thing."

Lee lifted his head. "And what's that?"

Gideon met his eyes. "Power. But not just political power. Power from the

Xia.”

Lee’s breath hitched. The memories flashed—Mira’s ceremony, the ethereal vision of Xytherion, the column of green energy in the distance, the ghostmare, the corruption.

“You already know the danger,” Gideon said. “Mira told me she let you see it.”

Lee sat down slowly.

Gideon continued, “We’re trying to stop that power from falling into the wrong hands. We’re not a faction. We’re not rebels. We’re... an alliance of sorts. A last defense.”

Lee ran a hand through his hair. “So why drug me? Why the rooftop?”

“Because we don’t recruit people. We don’t hold interviews or pass out pamphlets. We survive. We protect. We adapt. And we had to be certain you weren’t being followed or manipulated.”

He sighed and finished his drink.

Bella smirked, watching Lee silently.

Gideon spoke again. “You’re not safe with us. But you’re needed.”

Lee looked down at the floor, his voice low. “So what exactly are you doing?”

Gideon’s eyes lit up. “I’m glad you asked. But first—both of you—go clean up. You look like hell.”

Bella grinned. “I still look great.”

Lee glared at her.

The washroom was carved into a hollowed-out corner of the old library. Pipes twisted like vines along the ceiling, hissing with steam. A rusty furnace clunked nearby, heating the limited water supply.

Lee stripped down, leaving his battered clothes in a corner. The moment the hot water hit his skin, he sighed deeply. His muscles eased, his thoughts slowed. The last two days had been nothing short of a battlefield. Just standing under the water, letting it beat against his shoulders, was a moment of peace.

Until the door creaked open.

He turned, alarmed.

“Move over,” Bella said casually, stepping inside.

She was entirely nude.

“What—?!” Lee spun to face the tiled wall.

Bella stepped into the shower behind him. “Don’t use it all. These old systems only have so much hot water.”

“What are you doing?” he hissed, face reddening.

“Washing,” she replied, unimpressed.

“But why now? Can’t you—? This is—”

“Use your words, ponyboy,” she teased.

Lee pressed his forehead to the wall, mortified. “Stop calling me that.”

He tried to ignore the sound of water splashing behind him. But the room was small. Intimate. And he was very, very aware of how vulnerable he felt.

He dared a glance over his shoulder.

“Don’t make it weird,” Bella snapped, catching him.

He threw his hands up, still facing the wall. “Too late.”

A moment passed. Then she reached around and turned off the water and grabbed a towel.

“I’m done,” she called as she stepped out. “Thanks for not making it weird.”

Lee exhaled. “You’re so weird.”

Her voice came from the next room. “Takes one to know one.”

Lee dressed in the spare clothes left for him—plain but clean. He met Bella outside the room. She wore a fresh black tunic, her damp hair tied back in a loose braid. She walked past him without a word, tossing him a smirk over her shoulder.

He followed her back to the main chamber where Gideon waited, already seated again, maps and papers spread across the table before him.

“Now,” Gideon said, “let me show you what’s coming.”

## 20 A STORM OF KEYS AND POWER

Gideon stood at the center of a sea of maps, charts, and yellowing tomes, all splayed out across the wide circular table that dominated the library chamber. Dust shimmered in the low lamplight, drifting through the air like tiny flecks of falling ash. The scent of aged parchment and wax hung thick in the room, mixing with the faint perfume of old wood and pipe smoke.

Lee stepped forward slowly, eyes shifting over strange cartographic symbols, ancient runes, and detailed topographies of mountain passes and river bends. Whatever this was, it was much bigger than he'd anticipated.

Bella sank into a velvet chair near the hearth. She struck a match with a flourish, lit a cigarillo between her lips, and exhaled a long, curling plume of smoke toward the ceiling. The orange glow of the ember briefly illuminated her profile—sharp, smug, unreadable.

“Please,” Gideon said, gesturing to the empty chair beside her. “Sit, Leif.”

Lee glanced at Bella warily and then settled beside her, stiff-backed, every muscle tense.

“I suppose we start at the beginning,” Gideon said, adjusting his coat as he picked up one of the maps. “You’ve already encountered it, but I’ll say it clearly. The Xytherion Dimension, or simply ‘the Xia,’ is not a theory. It’s a neighboring plane of existence—one tied directly to our own.”

He moved to the bar and poured a drink into a short glass, then carried two more over—one for Lee, one for Bella.

“There are other planes too,” Gideon continued, “but the Xia is... different. For reasons even the scholars can’t quite explain, it overlaps with ours in a very

specific way.”

He picked up two glasses filled three-quarters with water and held them out.

“Everything—every object, every person, every speck of dust—has energy. That energy radiates, interacts. If one plane gently channels energy into the other,” he tilted one glass slightly and let water pour slowly into the second, “it stabilizes. Powers growth. Evolution. Enchantment.”

Then he tilted further, causing the second glass to overflow.

“But if too much pours in too quickly, it disrupts balance. One dimension is drained; the other is flooded. And neither survives.”

He set both glasses down and patted his hands dry on a cloth.

Lee watched, brow furrowed.

Gideon returned to the center of the room. “Now imagine someone could open a hole in the veil separating those two dimensions. Imagine the Xia bleeding directly into our world. Wild. Unfiltered. Mutated.”

Bella exhaled another line of smoke. “It’s not just dangerous. It’s apocalyptic.”

“Xia energy,” Gideon said, “can be harvested. It can power trains, airships, even whole cities. The crystals—Xia fragments—found near thin points in the veil are mined and refined. We’ve used them for generations. But we never fully understood their consequence.”

He turned to Lee.

“Some can use Xia intuitively. Mystics. They feel it, tap into it, sometimes without knowing. Some build devices to capture it. But there was one who learned to extract it—intentionally. To weaponize it.”

Lee’s jaw clenched.

Gideon’s voice lowered. “She created a pathway called the Portal Sphere and a relic of terrible power known as the Sigil Latchkey to control it. It functions like a siphon, drawing massive amounts of Xia energy into this world. Enough to reshape the land—or tear it apart.”

Lee rubbed his forehead. “Then why not destroy the latchkey?”

Gideon’s smile was grim. “Because it can’t be. Not without triggering it. The Sphere is sealed, protected. The woman who made it foresaw the damage it could do. Before she succumbed to corruption, she built the key in four pieces.”

He moved back to the table and rolled out a smaller parchment, revealing a diagram of an ancient stone tablet shattered in four.

“She split the key into four fragments and scattered them across Aetherion. Only by reuniting them can someone activate the Sphere.”

Lee stared at the parchment.

Gideon looked at him meaningfully. "Which is exactly what two very powerful factions are trying to do."

He paced slowly now, hands behind his back, eyes scanning the shelves of books as if they too listened.

"The Sanctum of Dominion is led by High Chancellor Vareth Aelthorn. They serve the aristocracy, the merchants, the church, and the rural elite. They speak of 'divine order' and 'sacred law'—but their goals are rooted in control, conformity, and spellcasting restriction."

Lee thought back to the posters he'd seen on the walls of Cael'varan. The imagery. The slogans. The crowds.

"And on the other side?" Lee asked.

Gideon nodded. "The Iron Accord, led by Maera Flintfist. A populist rebellion born in the foundries, mills, and poor districts. She calls for equity, transparency, spellcaster freedom. She has the ear of the people—but not the infrastructure of power."

He paused. "Both sides believe that finding the key fragments will give them the upper hand. The Sanctum and the Accord each have a shard."

Lee's voice came low and steady. "And the others?"

"Still out there," Gideon replied. "One is somewhere in this city."

Lee leaned back in his chair. Bella blew a smoke ring.

Gideon studied him. "There's more. The man who took your father—Sebastian Greave—he's no common thug. He works for the High Chancellor directly. He specializes in locating rare relics and applying... pressure. Your father was taken because of his knowledge. His skills in locating the arcane."

A cold pressure spread in Lee's chest. His throat tightened.

"So he's alive," Lee said.

Gideon nodded. "We're certain. But they move fast, and he's likely being kept on the move."

Silence settled over the room like a heavy cloak.

Then Gideon stepped back toward the table and placed his hands on its edge. "But there's hope. Neither one has all of the pieces, so they can't activate the Sphere. If we can acquire even one piece. We can control the board and protect the world."

He looked directly at Lee.

"We need your help to find one. Mira said you'd be ready. That you're the kind of person who changes tides."

Lee stood, turning his back to the others. He approached the wall of books, his fingertips lightly brushing along the leather-bound spines. The titles were



worn, the gold embossing faded by years of dust and wisdom.

He let his hand rest on one, and slowly turned back to them.

"If you help me find my father," he said quietly, "then I'll help you find a key fragment."

Gideon smiled—not with victory, but with respect.

"Excellent," he said, looking to Bella.

She winked at Lee.

Gilded rays sliced through the narrow window above Lee's cot, spearing his eyelids with unwelcome warmth. He blinked groggily, wincing as the world slowly resolved into view. The tiny storage room Gideon had set aside for him was barely wider than a broom closet—stacked with old scrolls, leather-bound tomes, rusted lanterns, and what might have been a jar of pickled eyes.

The scent was a mingling of parchment, dust, lemon oil, and something vaguely... woody. A faint vanilla-like aroma hung in the air, almost like the sweet rot of old cedar. Lee groaned, pulled his legs over the edge of the cot, and rubbed his face.

He could smell something far more enticing wafting in from the corridor beyond—crisp sausage, scrambled eggs, and baked bread, hot and dense and soaked in butter. His stomach growled, dragging him out of the room and into the hallway.

Books lined every wall, ceiling-high and stacked in tottering columns. Ancient world atlases leaned against modern journals of spellcasting theory. It was like walking through a maze of knowledge. Gideon must have some kind of arrangement with the librarians to use this place as a safe house. It made sense—the shadows, the secrecy, the silence.

He followed the scent to a small kitchen tucked behind a larger reading room. The warm glow of gas lanterns flickered over the stone walls. A round wooden table sat at the center, where Gideon sipped from a steaming mug and read the morning paper with his glasses perched halfway down his nose.

Bella was at the stove, sleeves rolled up and hair loosely tied back. She wore a simple gray skirt and blouse under a fraying apron—so unlike the leathered shadow of the rooftops that Lee momentarily paused in the doorway, uncertain he had the right woman.

"You sleep any longer," she said, not looking up, "we'll have to start calling you Lord Sloth."

Lee groaned. "And a wonderful morning to you, too."

Gideon peeked over the paper and offered a thin smile. "Ah, there he is.

Ready to get started?”

Lee nodded, and Gideon poured him a cup of bitter, dark brew. Lee took a sip and grimaced.

“Try this,” Gideon said, drizzling a generous swirl of honey into the cup. “Cuts the bitterness. Like truth in politics.”

Bella brought over three plates stacked with greasy sausage, runny eggs, and warm bread. Lee didn’t hesitate. It wasn’t gourmet—Kaida’s meals back with the nomads had spoiled him—but it filled his stomach with something that felt vaguely like comfort.

After the meal, the conversation turned.

Gideon leaned forward, folding the paper away. “As I mentioned, we’ve reason to believe one of the fragments of the latchkey is here in the city.”

Lee’s brows lifted.

“One of our inside sources—a maidservant employed by Lord Baron Eryk Alwyn—reported a strange artifact being placed in a vault at the Celestial Gallery of Crownspire.”

Lee glanced at Bella. She nodded. “We know this Baron. Proud, rich, slippery. He collects artifacts like other men collect mistresses. Uses them for status, leverage, and occasionally blackmail.”

“They’re political currency,” Gideon explained. “You host a gala, you show off your collection, you make quiet deals behind stained glass and polite smiles. Art is the mask. Power is the game.”

“The maid described the object as a small, polished slab with markings that shimmer under candlelight. A piece that fits neatly with other fragments.”

Lee sat up straighter.

Gideon checked his pocket watch. “Alwyn knows what he has now. Word has spread. Both the Sanctum and the Iron Accord want it. He’s stalling, waiting for the highest bidder. We don’t have the luxury of waiting.”

Bella stood. “Which means we take it first.”

Gideon nodded. “You’ll scout the gallery. Look for a way in—without drawing attention. Blend in. No heroics.”

Bella glanced at Lee. “Good. ‘Cause I wouldn’t want Lord Sloth pulling a muscle.”

Lee rolled his eyes.

As she walked past him, she tossed over her shoulder, “No shower. Dirty clothes. We’re going in as chimney rats and roof monkeys.”

The city’s upper terraces gleamed in the morning sun. Ivory spires and

turquoise domes shimmered like a mirage against the skyline. But from the roof of a soot-streaked warehouse, the view was less glamorous. Bella and Lee lay flat on their stomachs, peering through binoculars at the opulent exterior of the Celestial Gallery of Crownspire.

The building looked like a cathedral turned fortress—tall, gilded, flanked by twin towers and capped with a copper dome that caught the light. The front gate was flanked by guards in polished armor, their halberds like steel needles.

“They rotate every thirty minutes,” Bella muttered. “Patrols around the back are faster. Less secure, but more mobile.”

Lee studied the stonework. The gallery had a central tower and two wings. Guard towers lined the top. A narrow ledge circled one of the towers like a catwalk. “How many entrances?”

“Three public. Two side staff doors. And a vault access beneath the east wing—sealed and heavily guarded.”

They watched for an hour. Foot traffic was light. Noblemen came and went with guards. A tall woman in a pale green robe emerged from the front steps. She was stern, angular, and carried herself with the haughty grace of a diplomat.

“That’s the curator,” Bella said. “She lives for etiquette and cataloging rare butterflies.”

A young man trailed behind her. He carried an armful of books, his robes askew, glasses lopsided.

“Who’s he?” Lee asked.

“Not sure. Assistant, maybe. He’s too young to be anything else.”

They exchanged a glance.

“Follow him,” they said in unison.

The assistant led them through the winding cobblestone streets to a coffeehouse tucked behind a clockmaker’s shop. It was warm, bustling, and reeked of roasted beans and ink. Through the large glass windows, they saw the boy sit at a corner table, lost in a tome titled *The Old Gods of the Sixth Century Stormbound Age*.

They stood outside, blending in with a crowd of idling students and bookish types. Lee noticed how the boy suddenly sat up straighter, nervously fiddled with his collar, and kept glancing toward the door.

A trio of young nobles entered the café. One of them—a tall, androgynous person with dark curls and a silver brooch—drew the assistant’s rapt attention. He flushed, stammered into his cup, and stared long after the group passed him by.

Bella followed his gaze and smirked.

"Well, well," she said. "Looks like someone has a crush."

Lee frowned. "What are you thinking?"

She turned to him, smiling like a cat in a jewelry shop. "I'm thinking, you've got a date to plan."

Lee blinked. "Wait, what? Me?! No way."

"Oh yes." Bella grabbed him by the front of his shirt. "We're going to win this guy's heart, or at least his vault access."

Lee groaned. "This is going to be humiliating."

Bella winked. "Welcome to espionage, ponyboy."

Back at the safehouse nestled beneath the grand library, the scent of old paper and aged wood hung in the air like a relic of the past. The dusty scent was familiar now, oddly comforting. Bella stood near the old hearth, explaining their findings in her usual confident, biting tone. Lee sat slouched in a cushioned chair, one hand supporting his head, legs crossed, visibly drained by the thought of what was next.

"I see," Gideon murmured as he paced, hands clasped behind his back. The shadows from the lamps danced across his angular face. "It seems we have some work to do."

Lee scoffed quietly, barely hiding his sarcasm.

Gideon, unbothered, continued. "I have intel of my own. The Lord Baron is hosting a gala at Crownspire in just under three weeks."

That drew a reaction. Both Bella and Lee leaned forward.

"That," Gideon said with weight behind the word, "is our window."

"I'll get more on our lovesick assistant," Bella offered, twirling a pen between her fingers. "The heart knows no subtlety, and I plan to exploit every ounce of it."

Lee muttered, "Won't it be too late by then?"

"What, for them to fall madly in love and elope?" Bella teased.

Lee gave her a flat stare.

She smirked, undeterred. "He's too timid to make a move. He's just signaling. Trust me."

Gideon chimed in, thoughtful. "And that book of his?"

"The Old Gods of the Sixth Century Stormbound Age," Bella replied.

Gideon chuckled. "Hardly a riveting read, but Leif, you're going to become an expert."

Lee groaned. "I can't wait."

Gideon turned serious, his voice calm but commanding. "Training begins now. Bella, I want you to teach him shadow walking, close takedowns, and unconventional weaponry. Lee, you and I will study the Stormbound gods until your dreams are haunted by thunder and lore."

Over the next several days, the library basement became a crucible. Bella transformed one room into a combat space. The padded floors were worn down quickly, covered in marks and scuffs. Shadows gathered in the corners, perfect for the kind of work she was training him for.

She drilled him on takedowns designed for silence. Each movement used the opponent's weight against them. Pivot, slip, roll, strike. It wasn't brute force—it was finesse. He learned to flow around his opponent like smoke. Though he struggled at first, he quickly adapted. Bella, to her credit, offered praise where it was earned.

Next came the weapons: pistol-crossbows, curved knives designed for slashing in tight spaces, and even garrotes. She explained the value of compact, quiet tools.

"You're not a soldier," she said, adjusting his stance. "You're a ghost."

Meanwhile, Gideon brought him tomes and scrolls about the Sixth Century Stormbound Age. By flickering lanternlight, they read aloud to one another about Vaelorin, god of tempests, and Thelanos, the whisperer in the winds. The mythologies were dense, their language archaic. But Lee began to see patterns.

The stories echoed more truth than he expected. He thought of Mira, of spirits and obsidian arrows, of unseen forces pulling at the threads of reality.

"What if," he asked Gideon one night, "these gods weren't myths at all?"

Gideon merely smiled. "All myths begin in truth."

One evening, Gideon left to meet a contact. Bella waited until the door creaked shut before motioning Lee toward the training room.

She wore tight black combat gear. Her eyes glinted mischievously. "Time to learn something... rare."

"I'm not sure I'm ready."

"Then it's the perfect time."

She walked him into the center of the shadowed space. "Everything I taught you so far is practical. Shadow walking, though? That's special."

She lifted her shirt slightly to reveal a belt with embedded Xia crystals. Tiny shards glimmered faintly.

"With these, I can slip between the cracks in the light."

As she stepped backward into the dim, she vanished.

Lee spun around, searching. "What the..."

The dim light from the sconces along the far wall flickered faintly, casting erratic shadows across the mats laid out in the training room. The air was cool, touched by the earthy scent of old stone and the faint musk of leather and oil from the weapons rack. Lee stood still in the center, breath steady but shallow, his senses sharpened by anticipation. Bella had vanished.

A moment ago, she'd taken a step back, smiled in that mischievous way that always put him on edge, and slipped into the shadows. One blink, and she was gone. No sound. No trace. Just the lingering image of her pale features framed by raven-black hair and the flicker of her eyes—deep and unreadable.

"Bella?" Lee called out softly, his voice cracking the silence.

Nothing.

He pivoted slowly, his boots brushing over the mats with a soft hiss. He moved to the edge of the room, scanning every corner, every dark recess where her form could be hiding. The shadows thickened there, like ink, clinging to the walls as if watching him.

Then—contact. A fleeting touch. Something soft and warm ghosted across his jawline. He flinched, spun toward it—nothing.

His heartbeat picked up.

Another touch, this time across his neck. A whisper of fingers trailing the skin just below his ear. It sent a shiver down his spine.

"You're not fighting," a voice murmured in his ear, then vanished like smoke on the breeze.

He turned, fists clenched, breathing heavier now—not from fear, but from the unknown, the pull of something more primal. "Bella..."

No response.

Then a kiss—gentle, electric—brushed against the nape of his neck. He spun again, and this time she was there. Her silhouette appeared from the shadows like she had grown from them, ethereal and graceful, eyes glinting in the low light.

He stared at her—panting, unsure of what came next, unsure of what he wanted to come next.

"Why do you do that?" he asked breathlessly, voice trembling at the edge of vulnerability.

"To remind you," she replied, stepping closer, "that I'm not what you think."

"And what is it I think you are?"

“A distraction. A thorn. A shadow.”

She stepped forward again, close enough now that he could smell the faint floral sweetness beneath the leather and sweat. Her fingers found his collar, tugging at it lightly, tracing the line where it met his skin. “But I’m more than that. You know it.”

Lee didn’t answer—not with words. He studied her face in the silence. For all her teasing, for all the deflection and games, there was something genuine there now—guarded, yes, but real.

Her hands settled on his chest.

And then, without another word, he leaned in. Their lips met in a slow, tentative kiss, but it deepened quickly—days of frustration, tension, and unspoken emotion melting between them. Bella pulled him down with her onto the padded mats, their limbs tangling in soft rustling movement.

No more sarcasm. No more games.

Only breath and skin and quiet sighs echoing off stone walls.

Outside, the city of Cael’varan hummed with distant life. But down here, in the belly of the library beneath its chaotic surface, two young souls tangled in the flicker of candlelight and the stillness of secrets, finding solace—if only for a night—in each other’s arms.

## 21 THE ART OF INFILTRATION

Lee stirred on the padded mat, its surface unforgiving beneath him, faintly damp with the echo of shared heat. The air was thick with the scent of skin and salt, like the aftermath of a storm that had passed quietly in the night. The practice room lay in an eerie stillness, draped in early gray light. Each breath felt slower, heavier, as if the world itself was holding its breath. A memory pressed against him—fleeting warmth, whispered laughter, the rhythm of two hearts finding each other in the dark. But Bella was gone. Only the soft imprint where she had lain remained, cooling beside him like a vanishing dream.

He rubbed his eyes and sat up slowly, listening for movement in the hall beyond. Silence. He wondered if Bella was out shadow walking again. The memory of her vanishing into darkness without a sound gave him chills. He shook his head, trying to push aside the unease. He could see the tactical advantage of such skill—but the deeper implication? Was he now an infiltrator? A saboteur? An agent of shadow?

With a shrug, he dressed and remained in the training room, but moved to the weapons corner. The faint metallic scent of oil hung in the air. Dust danced in the shafts of light coming through the grated vents above. He picked up the compact crossbow pistol from the bench and began target practice, alternating hands with each shot, crouching and pivoting, just as Bella had taught him. He didn't always hit the bullseye, but his aim was consistent. Controlled. Dangerous.

"That's impressive," said a voice from the door.

Gideon stood there, arms folded, a subtle smile tugging at the corners of his



mouth. He walked forward with the careful grace of someone used to observing before acting.

"Were you always ambidextrous?" he asked, stopping near the target.

Lee didn't pause his movements as he replied. "Not originally. I fell hard on my right arm a few years ago. Broke it. Had to rely on the left for months. Eventually just... got good with both."

Gideon nodded. "You told me that under truth serum, if you recall. Still, it's fascinating. You're adaptive, Lee. You mold to your situation. That's rare. Mira wasn't wrong about you."

Lee lowered the weapon and glanced at the older man. "I didn't have a choice."

"We all have choices," Gideon replied, his tone quiet but firm. He paced the edge of the room, the echo of his boots soft on the stone floor. "Some people choose to give up. Some choose to hide. Some choose to fight. You? You choose to sharpen yourself, to become better. That is your strength. And it will lead you to your father."

Lee took a breath, letting the words settle into his chest. The tightness behind his ribs eased a little.

Not long after, Bella returned. She entered the study with a gust of crisp morning air, brushing rain drops from her long coat. Her raven hair was pulled into a high ponytail, and she wore a confident smirk as she kicked the door shut behind her.

"You two look cozy," she teased as she peeled off her gloves.

Lee glanced up from the thick tome he and Gideon had been poring over, cheeks tinged red. The subject was, of course, their favorite—the old gods of the Stormbound Age. Gideon was mid-monologue, detailing how Kaeleth of the Wingglass Tower once bound elemental chaos with the Binding Gale.

"We were just getting to the good part," Lee sarcastically muttered.

"I'm sure," Bella replied with exaggerated boredom. "Well, I have intel. Fresh off the streets."

She sauntered to her usual chair, draping herself across it in her usual dramatic fashion, legs slung over one arm, lighting up a cigarillo with a snap of her fingers and a spark from a flint striker.

Gideon sighed, trying not to look too amused. "Let me guess. Our curator's assistant?"

"Fenric Tallowmere," she said with mock grandeur. "Newly appointed professor at the Grand Collegium of Virellium. Our little bespectacled bookworm is completely love-struck."

Lee sat back, rubbing his temples. "He's a student?"

Bella grinned. "More like an obsessed fanboy. You should see the way his eyes dilate. It's adorable."

"The book he had—that wasn't just homework, was it?" Lee asked.

"Nope. It was an excuse. A well-worn copy of 'The Old Gods of the Sixth Century Stormbound Age.' Not a standard academic issue. He brought it to get noticed."

Lee groaned. "So, what's the plan?"

Gideon stood and crossed the room to pour himself a drink. "Simple. You become Professor Tallowmere. Get the assistant to open up. Find a way into the Crownspire. Once inside, you find the relic and signal Bella."

Lee crossed his arms. "That sounds incredibly optimistic."

Bella leaned forward and tapped her temple. "Don't worry. We have serums, remember? For disguise, not poison. I'll teach you how to use them."

Lee frowned. "Your track record with serums isn't exactly reassuring."

"Fair," she said with a wink.

Gideon raised a hand. "This plan hinges on subtlety. The Lord Baron is throwing a gala at the Crownspire in a few weeks. That's our window. Until then, we train. We plan. We execute."

Bella clapped once, the sound sharp in the dusty quiet of the study. "All right, lovebirds. Let's get to work."

That evening, Lee found himself back in the training room, thoughts swimming as he moved through grappling techniques on the mat. Bella entered quietly, this time without teasing, and stood beside the shadows.

"We should talk about last night," she said softly.

Lee lowered his stance and looked over. Her tone wasn't sarcastic. It wasn't mocking. It was sincere.

"You caught me off guard," he said. "I didn't know what to think."

"Neither did I."

They stood in silence for a moment before Bella took a step forward. "But I'm not sorry it happened. Are you?"

He shook his head slowly. "No. Just... surprised."

She reached out and took his hand. "I don't do well with... softness. But you make me feel like it's okay to try."

Lee smiled, just a little. "We keep fighting. That's what we do."

Bella leaned in, pressing her forehead to his. "Then let's fight together."

The candlelight flickered as they moved closer, their shadows merging on

the stone wall. The air grew warmer, and as their lips met once again, there was no tension. No games. Just a moment of fragile trust in the dim glow of their shared path forward.

Cael'varan, the great capital city of Aetherion, was abuzz with activity in the evenings. The first shift blue-collar factory workers were leaving their mundane work for the day, mixing in with the higher-class scholars and other professionals. Shopkeepers stayed open for a few hours longer to take advantage of the foot traffic on the city sidewalks. Steam-powered contraptions bustled about, weaving in and out of people crossing the streets. People transitioned from the day's work to the evening's leisure. The sky was gloomy, a mixture of rain clouds, steam, and smoke rising from the rooftops of the factories. The capital, one of the oldest settlements in Aetherion, bore the architectural confusion of generations of haphazard planning—churches, banks, and museums stood beside smokestacks and churning machinery. It was a true metropolis.

In a corner coffee shop, nestled just off the main avenue, sat a young man wearing loose, mismatched slacks and shirt with a long robe. He sat at the very edge of the sitting area, nursing his favorite hot caffeinated beverage—the Wyrmfire Brew, a rich, spiced coffee drink infused with warming notes of fire-cinnamon, molten caramel, and a hint of smoky vanilla. It was a treat after difficult days working under the dreadful curator and her volcanic temper. What the Baron saw in her so-called expertise was beyond comprehension.

Close to him sat a stiff young woman with giant eyewear, a ruffled shirt, and black hair tied into a bun. She scribbled furiously onto a piece of parchment that kept rolling up on her as she worked. She was clearly a student or a teaching assistant from the university.

As the young man took a sip of his Wyrmfire Brew, a commotion stirred just outside the shop. He strained his neck to see over the heads of the passersby but couldn't get a good look. He didn't notice the woman beside him subtly slipping a vial of fluid into his drink. As he sat back down, the woman stood over him, pretending to catch a glimpse of the disturbance outside. She apologized, looked at her watch, and muttered about how late she was running. Gathering her parchment quickly, she brushed past him again, offering another apology as she left through the front. A tall man with dark curls and a silver brooch walked in just as she exited. She winked at him. He responded with a deadpan glance before making his way toward the coffee bar.

The young man, Quincy, couldn't help glancing at the tall newcomer. He

recognized him instantly—how could he not? It was Professor Fenric Tallowmere. Quincy's heart thudded in his chest. Perhaps now would be the time to finally speak with him.

Tallowmere, dressed in a long dark coat and tailored trousers, ordered a drink—black coffee with just a touch of cloves—and turned to find a seat. As he passed by Quincy's table, his eyes caught the title of the book in front of the young man.

"Interesting read," Tallowmere said, tilting his head. "That's not a standard edition of that book. Where did you acquire such a splendid volume?"

Quincy looked up, surprised. "At the Crownspire," he said. His voice was thin and strained.

"The museum around the corner?"

Quincy nodded. "Yes, I work there. I'm the curator—well, actually the assistant to the curator—but I have access to their library."

Tallowmere smiled and extended a hand. "Pardon my manners. I'm Professor Fenric Tallowmere. It's a pleasure to meet a fellow enthusiast of the Stormbound Age."

Quincy shook his hand timidly. "I know who you are, Professor. Everyone does. I'm Quincy. Quincy Sternbridge."

"Pleasure's all mine, Quincy," Tallowmere replied. "May I join you?"

"Yes, of course," Quincy stammered.

Tallowmere took the seat across from him and crossed his legs. "So tell me, Quincy, are you an admirer of the arts of the Stormbound Age, or is this just for coursework?"

"Admirer," Quincy said quickly. "Actually, I'd say obsessed."

Tallowmere laughed warmly. "Excellent. Then we are kindred spirits."

They clinked their coffee mugs lightly. "Tell me," the professor continued, "do you have a favorite myth from the War in the Sky?"

Quincy's eyes lit up. "Everyone knows Vaelorin and Aesshara, but there was a third player—Thelanos, the Whisperer on the High Peaks, god of the silent wind, messenger between storm and tide. Some say he tried to broker peace, but was betrayed. Either torn apart by the lovers or bound with the Gale Seal itself, his voice still echoing through the mountain winds."

Tallowmere raised an eyebrow in approval. "The wind on Mount Tirael speaks no name, only sorrow," he quoted.

Quincy practically beamed. "The Skysteel Codex," he whispered reverently.

"Indeed," Tallowmere nodded. "Now let me ask you something. Have you come across any active relics in your studies?"

Quincy looked confused. "Relics? Like the artifacts of the gods?"

"Stormglass blades, skyforged armor, Vaelorin's Ember Helms," Tallowmere listed. "They say they're inert, but I believe some are beginning to wake. Some owners vanish during lightning storms. Others speak in tongues of thunder and foam."

Quincy's fingers fidgeted around his mug. His eyes darted nervously. "We have one," he said. "A stormglass blade. The Baron acquired it recently."

Tallowmere leaned forward, his voice low and eager. "Really? Could I see it?"

"It's after hours," Quincy replied, then immediately regretted it. He watched the professor's face dim.

Tallowmere looked at his cup. "I understand. Thank you for the conversation, Quincy. It's been a delight."

The tall professor stood up and started to stroll towards the entrance.

Panic set in. "Wait!" Quincy said a little too loud. He cleared his throat. "I can show you. Tonight. Through a side door."

Tallowmere turned back with cautious optimism. "Are you sure?"

Quincy nodded. "Meet me at the west hall entrance. In one hour."

Tallowmere smiled and nodded. "Alright, I'll see you there." Then, with a tip of his head, he left the shop.

Quincy remained seated, heart racing, staring down at his half-empty Wyrmsfire Brew. He couldn't believe what he'd just done.

Bella watched from across the street, shadowed beneath the brim of her cap. She crushed the empty vial in her gloved palm and whispered into her comm crystal.

"Hook, line, and scholar."

Lee's voice crackled back. "Time to prep for the vault."

She smiled. "He'll open it for us. He just doesn't know it yet."

And with that, Bella slipped into the crowd, vanishing like a shadow before nightfall.

The sun had just slipped below the skyline of Cael'varan, casting the capital in a veil of smoky gold and ash-gray. The city's spires glowed with residual twilight, while industrial chimneys exhaled columns of steam and soot into the already cloud-heavy sky. Foot traffic dwindled, the sounds of day fading into the clicks and clacks of iron-shod boots and the soft hiss of pneumatic transports. The Celestial Gallery of Crownspire, seated like a jewel amid the chaos, loomed with stately elegance. Baron Eryk Alwyn had spared no expense

on its appearance or its security. Every corner, every corridor was laced with watchful eyes and clever deterrents.

Still, none of that had prepared the staff for betrayal from within.

Quincy Sternbridge paced nervously by the museum's west entrance, glancing down the narrow alley, adjusting his robes for the fiftieth time. The idea of letting someone in after hours chilled him with guilt, but excitement danced just beneath the surface. When the tall, curly-haired professor emerged from the shadows, Quincy's face lit up. From the shadows behind, unseen by anyone but her partner, Bella murmured, "As ready as we'll ever be."

Lee, still playing the part of Professor Fenric Tallowmere, tapped lightly on the door. It creaked open to reveal Quincy's pale, anxious face.

"Come in—quickly," he whispered, eyes darting. "I can't explain your presence if we're caught."

Lee slid in, and Bella followed, melted within the shadows like a second skin.

The museum interior was still and hollow, echoing every whisper of a footstep. They passed rows of priceless art and relics, hurrying too quickly to appreciate any of it. Quincy led them deftly through servant passages, motioning for Lee to stay close. The hush of their movement was punctuated only by the occasional clank of guard boots, which sent them ducking into side alcoves or behind display curtains.

At one point, a patrolling guard stopped just inches from their hiding place, a tapestry-covered recess in the wall. Lee held his breath. He could hear the guard humming softly, the jingle of his keys sharp in the silence. Then, footsteps receded. Lee exhaled.

Up a creaking staircase they went, into the second-floor exhibit hall. Quincy fumbled with a wrapped bundle beneath a display cloth, unveiling it reverently. The stormglass blade within was dull in the lamplight, but something about it made the air feel heavier.

Lee leaned in, studying it. "Magnificent," he whispered, placing a hand gently on Quincy's shoulder. "What other wonders lie hidden in this place?"

Quincy's eyes sparkled. "There's something more valuable. Down below. The vault."

Lee feigned surprise. "And how is something so precious kept safe?"

"With an actual key," Quincy said, then froze. His eyes widened in horror, realizing what he'd let slip.

Lee pounced. "Where is the key?"

Quincy's fingers trembled before he pointed upward. "Around the curator's neck," he whispered, then crumpled to the floor as Bella emerged from the

shadows, a syringed with knockout serum still in her palm.

“Was that necessary?” Lee hissed.

“We got what we came for.”

They stashed the blade and Quincy under a table, and Lee shed his professor garb for the tighter, darker clothing he’d worn beneath. Now, it was time to retrieve the key and find the vault.

They ascended carefully, dodging guards, each floor creaking beneath their feet like a living beast holding its breath. At one junction, they were nearly caught again—a pair of guards rounded a corner just as Bella ducked them into a cleaning closet. They waited in silence, Lee feeling her breath at his neck, the tension electric between them.

On the top level, warm light spilled from beneath a door. Bella peeked inside: a woman sat alone at a desk, the key glinting at her neck in the lamplight.

Lee stood watch while Bella slipped inside. She used the lantern shadows to shroud her movement, creeping along walls and shelves until she stood behind the curator. With a whisper and a touch, the curator slumped to the desk. Bella slipped the key from around her neck.

“Let’s move,” she mouthed to Lee.

Navigating back down to the basement took precious minutes. Every step, every door felt like it took hours. At last, they found it: the vault. Its door was massive and ornate, carved with spiraling iconography and script inlaid with glinting metals. Overwrought and gaudy, it was exactly the sort of thing the Baron would treasure.

Bella inserted the key into the mechanism at the center of the door. It clicked.

Then clunked.

Then nothing.

She turned it again. A harsh grinding groan echoed from within, but the vault didn’t open.

“What is this?” she muttered, stepping back. “It’s jammed or... or stuck?”

Lee crouched beside the door, inspecting it. He pressed his ear to the cold metal, hoping for some sign. “It’s locked again... or maybe there’s more to it than the key.”

“There has to be!” Bella growled. “There’s always something else. Always!”

They tried again. Bella tried turning the key while Lee examined the carved engravings, pressing against seams and indentations. Frustration mounted like heat under a sealed lid.

“There’s a mechanism—there must be a mechanism!” Lee said, his voice

rising.

“Don’t raise your voice,” Bella snapped. “We don’t have time!”

As if summoned by their anxiety, something clicked—but it wasn’t the vault. A sharp sound cracked the silence. Lee stepped back just in time as a shimmering wall of energy burst forth from the door’s edges, forming a translucent shield.

Lee reeled, flung back by the sudden force, and fell to the floor on his side of the barrier. Bella was already in motion, but the shield sealed before she could reach him.

“LEE!” she hissed.

He stood slowly, pounding his fist against the shimmering field. “I can’t get out.”

“We didn’t see this coming. This wasn’t in the plan!”

Heavy footsteps thundered down the stairwell. The guards were coming.

“Hide!” Lee called.

“I’m not leaving you—”

“Bella, you have to! Hide!”

She slipped into the shadows just as the guards arrived—twelve of them, led by the curator now roused and limping, and Quincy still pale and groggy.

“There he is!” the curator shrieked. “Impostor!”

The guards descended. Lee offered no resistance, not with Bella watching. He met her gaze through the shimmering barrier, eyes steady even as boots smashed into his side, into his ribs. He didn’t scream. He wouldn’t give them that.

Bella flinched with every blow, her hand shaking around the hilt of her hidden blade. But she couldn’t win against twelve. Not yet.

They hauled Lee up, blood dripping from his mouth, and dragged him up the steps toward a waiting steam wagon.

Before they vanished from sight, Lee turned his bruised face toward the shadows.

“Don’t follow,” he whispered hoarsely. “Just wait.”

The last thing he saw before the door slammed shut was Bella, eyes burning with a vow.

She would not leave him behind.

Not forever.



## 22 THE FALL AND THE GALLOWS

Lee awoke to pain. A deep, radiating ache that pulsed with every breath he took. His midsection burned, his ribs ground like broken glass inside him. He could barely see out of one eye, and even that was blurry, a red haze from the blood crusting over his brow. He lay on a cold, damp cement floor. The air smelled of mildew and rust, and somewhere in the distance, he could hear the slow drip of condensation echoing off stone walls. Chains clinked. Doors creaked. He was in a cell.

His nose was clogged with blood, making it hard to smell or breathe properly, but he knew the scent of rot and forgotten places. He tried to move, but the pain lanced through his ribs, pulling a gasp from his throat. He clenched his jaw and lay still. They'd beaten him for information. For names. For answers. But he hadn't cracked. Not yet.

But something felt wrong. The whole situation. How could Gideon and Bella have not known about the shield? The trap? The vault wasn't just locked—it was something else entirely. Had they used him? Was he just another expendable pawn?

Dark thoughts clung to him like the blood on his skin. Maybe this had all been a mistake. Maybe he never should've come to the capital. Never should've trusted anyone.

Footsteps echoed down the corridor, deliberate and slow. Lee turned his head, barely able to focus. Three figures emerged from the darkness. One, wearing a tall ceremonial hat—like something a priest would wear. The other, Baron Eryk Alwyn in his usual frilly finery. And a third man, quiet and faceless

in the shadows.

“That’s the one?” the man in the hat asked.

“Yes,” said the Baron. “That’s the vermin who tried to steal from the vault.”

The tall-hatted man stepped closer, his gaze sharp and venomous. “We must send a message,” he said, voice slithering like oil over stone. “Organize a public execution for tomorrow. High noon. I will address the people myself. Let them know we do not tolerate treason or theft against the Sanctum.”

“As you command, High Chancellor,” said the shadowed man.

The High Chancellor turned slightly. “And what did you say was found on him, Baron?”

“A belt. Laced with Xia crystals. Weapons, too.”

“I want to see it,” said the High Chancellor. “Soon.”

Then, without another word, they disappeared into the dark. Their footsteps faded, leaving only silence.

Lee lay back against the wall, staring up at the cracks in the ceiling, unable to move. He didn’t care anymore. Maybe he deserved this. He thought of Kaida—her eyes, her laugh, her warmth. Ronan and Lyra. Mira. He thought of the Skyraker, of his time with the nomads. He thought of his father... taken from him. Like his mother, long ago. And now, his own life. Stolen in the same way.

A tear slid down his cheek.

Then—movement. A skittering sound near his feet. He shifted, wincing, and turned his head just enough to see a silver rat with white cloudy eyes watching him.

“Are you just going to sit there and wallow in self-pity?” the rat said.

Lee chuckled—instantly regretted it as pain shot through his chest. “Oh great,” he muttered. “Now I’m hallucinating.”

The rat didn’t move. “They’re going to hang you tomorrow.”

“I know,” Lee said flatly.

The rat hopped onto his chest.

“What the—?” Lee swatted it off and winced, curling forward.

“You were doing so well. What happened?”

“I failed,” Lee said bluntly. “I didn’t find the shard. I didn’t find my father. I’m in a cell... and they’re going to kill me.”

“I don’t want to die.” Lee whispered with tears in his eyes.

The rat pointed with its nose. “Then walk through that wall.”

Lee blinked. “What?”

Across the cell, a section of the wall shimmered—barely perceptible. Like

water held vertically. A translucent portal.

"How?" he whispered.

"No time," said the rat. "It's a long drop, but the river will catch you. Don't sink. Swim."

"Who are you? You've been following me?"

"No time."

Lee dragged himself to his feet, leaning hard on the wall for support. Each breath was agony. But he made it to the edge of the shimmering portal. He stared out. The night air hit his face. He saw the river below. Cold, black, moving swiftly.

"I can't—"

The rat shoved him.

He plunged.

The air roared around him until water swallowed him whole. Freezing, relentless. It pulled at him like hands. He fought, kicked, flailed. His limbs screamed. His lungs burned. But he surfaced, grasping for breath. He reached for a floating branch and clung to it.

He didn't know how far he floated. But the river had claimed him now.

Back at the jail, the next morning, the jailor and two armed guards approached Lee's cell. The iron door groaned open—only to reveal an empty room. No sign of escape. No broken locks. Just silence.

The jailor's mouth fell open. "What...?"

He spun around. "Did one of you move the prisoner?"

Both guards shook their heads.

"No one touched him," said one.

The jailor stared at the empty cell, dread seeping into his bones. "My head will roll for this..."

Thinking quickly, he eyed another prisoner down the corridor. Similar build. Hooded and silent.

"You," he barked. "Bring that one. Gag him. Bag his head. Tell no one. If you speak of this, you'll join him on the gallows."

The city commons swelled with people. Citizens packed shoulder to shoulder beneath a wooden stage. The gallows had been erected overnight. Signs flapped in the wind—some for the Sanctum of Dominion, others for the Iron Accord. Protests flared. Voices rose.

High Chancellor Vareth Aelthorn stepped onto the platform, arms raised,

voice booming. "Today, we purge the filth from our streets! Let this traitor's fate be a warning—"

Bella watched from the shadows, a black hood drawn over her face. Her fists clenched. Her breath hitched.

She saw the figure—bag over the head, rope around the neck.

She couldn't breathe.

It was like slow motion.

The lever dropped.

The body fell.

The crowd roared, some in triumph, others in rage.

Bella's heart broke.

A single tear rolled down her cheek.

She turned away.

Not knowing, that it wasn't him.

The current was unrelenting, and Lee's grip on the floating log weakened with every jolt. The freezing water churned with fury, its rapids slamming him against sharp rocks and pulling at his limbs like claws. He gasped as another wave crashed over him, his broken ribs screaming in protest. His breath came in short bursts, each one burning his throat. The sound of the river—roaring, gurgling, frothing—became a backdrop to the blur of his thoughts. His life had become this: chaos and pain.

The log twisted violently, sending his half-conscious body under the water. He fought to stay afloat, coughing up what little air he had left. The cold was seeping into his bones now. It dulled the pain but also drained his strength. His fingers were numb. He could no longer tell if he was gripping the log or if it merely floated with him out of pity.

Eventually, the river calmed. The violent thrashing gave way to a smooth, steady current. The trees that lined the banks leaned overhead like watchful sentinels. The air carried a misty stillness, and the earthy scent of moss and wet bark clung to the back of his throat. The silence was both a blessing and a curse—it gave him a moment to breathe, but also to think.

Lee laid flat on the log, too weak to swim, too numb to cry. His body trembled from the cold, his lips tinged blue. But even in the edge of delirium, his mind was active. Images flashed through his thoughts: Bella's smirk, Kaida's smile, Mira's calm wisdom. Then came the darker thoughts. Was Gideon truly an ally? Did they send him to the vault knowing it would trap him? Betrayal festered like a rot, blending with the pain until he no longer knew which was

which.

He closed his eyes. He imagined letting go, slipping under the surface. It would be easy. Peaceful. But something deeper—a core part of him—refused. He dug his fingers into the splintered bark of the log and clung to life.

Darkness fell.

When Lee next opened his eyes, the sky was an eerie violet. The water had stopped moving. He floated now on a still stretch of river, the surface mirror-smooth. A strange warmth touched his skin, unreal but comforting. Then, a figure blocked the sky above him.

"It's about time you arrived," said the figure.

The face was obscured, but the voice was unmistakable—it belonged to the silver-eyed rat from the cell.

"I was beginning to think the river had swallowed you."

Lee tried to sit up but cried out in pain. The figure—now clearly a tall, older man—gripped his arm to help.

"Easy," the man said.

Lee's vision blurred, and then the world melted.

When he opened his eyes again, the world had changed. The sky was a surreal shade of amethyst, the valley below wrapped in strange mist. Lee stood upright on a hillside, but he didn't remember getting up. He felt... weightless. Everything shimmered slightly, as if a dream had swallowed reality whole.

Then came the shadow.

A monstrous winged creature passed overhead—no, it didn't fly, it clanked. Its body was forged from copper plates and iron joints, steam puffing from its limbs, gears churning in rhythmic clicks. Its eyes were emerald beacons, scanning the valley like searchlights.

Lee couldn't move. Couldn't scream. He watched as the beast soared low over the fields, its shriek splitting the skies. Below it, the people panicked. Familiar figures scattered.

Ronan and Lyra fired rifles from horseback, their shots ricocheting off the metallic hide. In the blink of an eye, green fire belched from the beast's maw. They vanished.

The Skyraker soared into view, its crew firing from the deck. Jasper, Vic, and Dahlia. They fought valiantly, but the beast turned and unleashed its fire. The airship dissolved into ash and falling debris.

Lee's chest tightened as he saw Elijah and Fiona loosing obsidian-tipped arrows from a crumbling parapet. The monster struck again. Another wave of

emerald flame. Gone.

And then he saw her.

Little Helena, crying in a field alone. She looked up at the sky. The beast loomed. Her sobs echoed in Lee's ears—childish, desperate, raw. And then...

Fire.

Lee screamed. Finally, he screamed. It tore from his throat as the valley cracked apart beneath him and the world went white—

—and then dark.

He woke with a gasp. Sweat drenched his brow, and his breath came in shallow wheezes. His chest ached, his side was bandaged, and the smell of herbs and old parchment hung in the air. The bed beneath him was soft, but the unfamiliar room made his heart race. Every object—curved brass instruments, dusty tomes, glass jars—seemed strange, foreign.

The door creaked open.

A woman entered, her silver hair catching the lamplight. She wore a flowing gown of matching hue, her steps light, almost ethereal. Her pale gray eyes met his, warm and curious.

"You're awake," she said softly.

Lee tried to speak, but his throat was sand. The woman poured water from a pitcher and held the cup to his lips. It tasted better than anything he could remember—cool, clean, alive.

"Where... am I?" he croaked.

She smiled gently. "You're safe. My name is Iona. You've been with us for nearly two weeks."

"Two... weeks?" he echoed, stunned. "How?"

"You were nearly gone," she said, brushing a lock of silver hair behind her ear. "Broken ribs. Severe bruising. Infection. Fever. Mild hypothermia. You were burning and freezing all at once. Morrigana and I nursed you. Selena wouldn't help."

"Why?" he asked.

Iona gave a small smile and sat beside him. "Because our grandfather asked us to. Malrik said you were important."

Lee winced as he shifted in bed. "I don't feel important."

Iona placed a hand on his. "You were fighting in your sleep. Kicking. Crying out names. It was like you were still battling something."

Lee closed his eyes again. "Maybe I was."

A quiet passed between them. Then Iona stood and smoothed her gown.

“Now that you’re awake, he’d like to speak with you,” she said. “Malrik doesn’t wait long.”

Lee nodded weakly. He had survived a river, a nightmare, and a brush with death.

But something told him—the hardest part hadn’t even started yet.

## 23 THE INVITATION

Lee stood in the center of the chamber, still unsure how to respond to Malrik’s proposal. The quiet hum of arcane energy seemed to press against his skin like a warm mist. The room was filled with curiosities—a globe of swirling stardust suspended in a frame of brass rings, a harp strung with silvery threads that vibrated with no touch, scrolls that hovered just inches above the shelves as if weightless. The scent of frankincense and burnt sage clung to the air. Malrik himself, though aged, radiated a calm power that made Lee feel both exposed and protected.

Earlier that morning, Iona had laid out fresh clothes for him—simple silver trousers, a soft shirt, slippers, and a hooded robe with stitched moon patterns around the trim. As she stepped outside to give him privacy, Lee had hesitated. He pulled back the covers and blushed furiously—completely bare beneath the layers. He tried not to dwell on the vulnerability, instead focusing on the bandages that wrapped around his ribs and limbs. He moved slowly, every motion tight and sore. Still, it felt like a small miracle that he could move at all.

When he was dressed, Iona returned with a polite knock and a warm smile. She led him through the manor at a gentle pace, allowing him to lean on the wall when he needed to. As they moved through the winding halls carved into the mountain's bedrock, Lee marveled at the otherworldly elegance of the place. The floating orbs of violet-blue light bathed the corridors in an ethereal glow. Runes carved into the stone pulsed with life, and whispers echoed from enchanted mirrors, too soft to catch but unmistakably present.

"Where are we?" he asked, his voice hoarse from disuse.

"This is our home," Iona answered. "A sanctuary carved deep into the mountain. Hidden from those who would wish us harm."

Lee looked around in awe, taking in the constellation-etched ceilings and shelves lined with strange vials and arcane tomes. The air smelled of incense, aged parchment, and something floral and elusive. A distant bubbling sound hinted at a cauldron somewhere, while the occasional burst of light from open doorways revealed figures in study or silent meditation.

Finally, Iona stopped before a tall silver-inlaid door marked with shifting constellations. She knocked, and a voice from within called for them to enter. Before Lee stepped through, he turned to her.

"I didn't properly introduce myself before. I'm Leif Everhart... though my friends call me Lee."

She smiled again, a softness in her gaze. "I know who you are. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

Lee pushed the door open and entered a study even grander than Gideon's. The room pulsed with energy. Instruments lined the walls, many of which he couldn't begin to identify. A celestial map rotated slowly above a basin of mist. There were stacks of leather-bound volumes, parchments held aloft in glowing rings, and a warm fire burning in the hearth.

Standing nearby was Malrik Moondrift. He was tall, draped in robes of deep midnight blue threaded with gold. His silver beard reached down to his chest, and his eyes—cloudy and ethereal—met Lee's with recognition.

"You?" Lee said, stiffening with a jolt of alarm.

"Hello, Leif," the man said kindly. "Your reaction is understandable. I must apologize. My actions, while perhaps intrusive, were never meant to harm. I was watching when I could—and helping when needed."

Lee stepped further into the room, his stance wary. "How were you able to change shape? You were a rat. A bird. Even a wolf?"

"I am a mystic," Malrik said, lighting a slender pipe. "And old mystics... develop a few talents. The forms I took were for observation, sometimes for



assistance. And yes, I should have made myself known sooner. But I had to be sure of who you were.”

Lee rubbed the back of his neck, his fingers brushing the bandages beneath his robe. “So, I’ve been followed this entire time?”

“Guided, not followed,” Malrik said gently. “You always had free will, Lee. I only nudged when you needed it most. And I saw strength in you—strength that could shape the world.”

Lee’s jaw clenched. “I’ve lost everything. I’ve failed everyone.”

“Stop thinking like a victim,” Malrik snapped. His voice echoed through the chamber, then softened. “Yes, you’ve lost. We all lose. But you haven’t been defeated, not truly. You’re still here. And what you’ve gained—knowledge, resilience, compassion—these things will outlast any blade or coin.”

Lee lowered his head. It was true. Despite everything—the betrayals, the pain, the losses—he was still standing.

“Great leaders are not born,” Malrik continued. “They’re tempered in the fires of hardship. You are becoming something greater than you were.”

Lee sat down at last, sinking into a velvet chair that seemed to mold to his body. It was like being embraced.

“I don’t feel like a leader,” he said. “I don’t even know what I’m doing anymore.”

Malrik gave a small nod. “That’s why you’re here. To learn. To grow. If you stay, we can teach you. My granddaughters—Iona, Morigana, and even Selena, though she’s difficult—can help. We can give you space to become who you are meant to be.”

“And in return?” Lee asked.

“In return, you help us. Work the forge. Tinker in the foundry. Assist with the gardens or the stables. We each carry our weight here, Lee.”

Lee thought of the days he spent with the Cloudgears, the Emberwoods, and the nomads. Each phase of his life had tested him in different ways. Maybe this place would be the same. Maybe it would be the forge to temper the steel within him.

He looked up at Malrik, then toward the door where Iona had stood. “Alright,” he said slowly. “I’ll stay. For now.”

Malrik smiled.

It wasn’t the end of the journey.

But it was a new beginning.

The sanctuary was a massive labyrinth of winding halls that spread out in all

directions, carved into the very bones of the forested mountain. It pulsed with quiet energy, as though the stone itself breathed in tune with the mystics who dwelled within. The ceilings arched high above, inlaid with silver filigree etched into celestial glyphs that shimmered faintly in the flickering glow of floating orbs. Each corridor seemed to hum, a resonance of enchantment and memory woven into the walls.

After agreeing to stay, Malrik had encouraged Lee to explore the sanctuary at his own pace. He assured him that the sisters would guide him should he get lost, but Lee insisted on beginning the journey alone. Though still weak from his injuries, curiosity pulled him forward.

He wandered cautiously, his footsteps soft against cool stone floors. His breath formed small clouds in the cooler air of the deeper levels. At one point, he took a wrong turn and found himself in a hall lit by ghostly blue sconces. Whispers echoed faintly—faint voices that vanished when he turned his head. The door to his right was slightly ajar, revealing a chamber filled with floating scrolls and suspended ink quills. The air tingled with static, and he felt compelled to retreat.

Just as he turned to find a familiar path, a faint melody drifted through the corridors. It was haunting and lovely, like sunlight falling through mist. He followed it down a short hallway and into a study filled with plants, terrariums, feathers, stones, and skeletal remains arranged meticulously across shelves. Hanging lanterns of amber glass filled the room with a soft golden glow.

A young woman sat on a stone bench, playing a flute carved from silverwood. Her dark blue trousers and cloak gave her a roguish, wandering air, while her long shoulder length silver hair shimmered like moonlight. Her eyes were closed, face serene, lost in her melody.

Lee stood motionless, captivated. The music resonated in his chest, stirring feelings he couldn't name. The song seemed to hold the memory of rain, sunlight on leaves, and distant thunder. He didn't dare interrupt.

When the tune finally faded, the woman opened her eyes and smiled. "I wake you up without sound, I paint the sky, I warm the ground. You can't stare long, though I'm no fun, guess who I am? I'm the..."

Lee chuckled softly. "The sun."

She hopped down from the bench, slipping the flute into a satchel. "The sun will shine another day."

Lee tilted his head. "Is that a saying?"

"No," she grinned mischievously. "That's the name of the song." She offered her hand. "I'm Morigana."

“Lee. I heard you and your sister were the ones who patched me up.”

She gave him a quick once-over. “Looks like we did a decent job.”

Her voice held a kind of teasing bluntness that reminded him of the Skyraker crew. She walked past him and added, “Come on, let’s get you settled. You’ll be staying a while, yes?”

Lee nodded.

As they moved through the halls, Morigana slowed her pace for him. Along the way, she pointed out various rooms: laboratories with vials and crystalline instruments, meditation chambers lined with runes, and enchanted gardens where plants glowed faintly under silver domes. Each space seemed curated for a different type of mystical practice.

One room held an obsidian pool that reflected not his image, but fragments of dreams and memories. Another contained a mechanical loom that wove patterns from strands of light. Lee found himself amazed not just at the spellcasting—but at how functional, how lived-in, the sanctuary was.

“Do you ever leave this place?” he asked.

Morigana nodded. “We provide arcane services for clients who need discretion. Nobles, guildmasters, even smugglers. We have intermediaries who travel topside and conduct deals in shadow markets.”

Eventually they descended a spiral staircase, the air thickening with earthy scents: moss, stone, alchemical herbs. The glow shifted cooler here—blues and violets painting the curved walls.

They entered a chamber where another young woman hunched over a bench surrounded by strange glyphs etched in glowing ink. She wore a long cloak, her silver hair cascading from beneath its hood. Runes pulsed faintly along the walls. Morigana cleared her throat.

The woman didn’t turn. “What?” she said curtly.

“I brought someone Grandfather wants you to meet.”

The woman turned slowly, revealing a lightning-shaped scar across her left eye. Her silver-blue gaze pierced Lee like a blade. “So you’re him.”

Lee opened his mouth to introduce himself, but she cut him off. “I don’t care. Now go away.”

Morigana sighed. “Lee, this is our sister Selena. She’s... absorbed in her work.”

Selena turned back to her bench, muttering something inaudible. As they left, Morigana explained, “She’s been fixated on forbidden rituals she read about. Grandfather won’t let her pursue them fully, so she’s been trying to improvise. It hasn’t gone well.”

Lee frowned. "She seems... intense."

"She's brilliant. But even brilliance has its shadows. I'd keep your distance."

Before showing him to his room, Morigana led him to a tall, narrow door at the sanctuary's far end. It opened into a small monastery, lit by candlelight and filled with the faint scent of myrrh and rosemary. Iona knelt at a modest altar, her hands clasped around a pendant, whispering chants in a language Lee didn't know.

Morigana signaled for silence. When Iona finished, she stood and turned, her expression softening.

"Lee," she said, her voice like warm silk. "I'm glad you chose to stay. I hope you'll find peace here, and understanding."

He nodded. "Thank you... for everything."

"I'll show him to his room," Morigana offered.

As they turned to leave, Iona touched her pendant. "Did you see Selena?"

"Yes," Morigana said, tone subdued.

"How did she look?"

"Not good."

Iona's gaze dropped to the stone floor. She whispered another chant, her pendant glowing briefly.

Back in the hallway, Lee felt the weight of it all pressing on him: the mystery, the enchantment, the unspoken tension between the sisters, the pain he hadn't yet shed. But there was also warmth. Curiosity. And for the first time in a long while, maybe even... purpose.

He followed Morigana through the hall, ready—cautiously—for whatever would come next.

## 24 FOUNDATIONS OF FLOW

The sanctuary's silence was a comforting change from the chaos he'd left behind. The guest quarters were surprisingly spacious—larger than any place he'd ever lived, even the cottage he once rented in Emberwoods. It was so large it made him a little uncomfortable. Every corner felt carefully crafted, purposeful. The air held the faint scents of dried lavender and parchment, and a subtle warmth radiated from unseen sources. He made himself a simple breakfast in the small, stocked kitchenette and changed into clean, better-fitting clothing.

Over the last few weeks, Lee had grown stronger. The concoctions Iona had prepared accelerated his healing. Though his midsection remained a bit tender, he was able to move and stretch again. Malrik and his granddaughters had encouraged him to take on light duties around the sanctuary. The work gave him structure, a rhythm he had been missing.

Morrigana showed him the old tool shop nestled near the sanctuary's lower level. Covered in dust, cobwebs, and the remnants of time, it had once belonged to their ancestors—mystics who hadn't relied on Xia to build, but rather on their hands, sweat, and patience. The tools were worn and rusted, their wooden handles brittle or broken. Lee decided to restore them before taking on any structural tasks.

He scavenged the grounds for usable hardwood and carved new handles by hand. The forge, long unused, hissed to life again under his guidance. The scent of burning coal mixed with oak shavings became a familiar comfort. As the days passed, both Iona and Morrigana stopped in to admire his progress. Morrigana

marveled at his attention to detail; Iona praised the focus she saw in his work. Even Malrik, watching silently from the shadows of the hall one evening, nodded in approval and invited Lee to begin his lessons.

That evening, Lee entered Malrik's study. The chamber pulsed with a quiet, ancient energy that made the hairs on his neck stand on end. Glowing glyphs danced faintly on the walls, and curious instruments hummed with low vibrations. Malrik waited near the hearth, his long silver beard catching the orange glow of firelight.

"Come, Leif," he said, using Lee's full name. "Tonight, we begin."

He handed Lee an ancient glyph etched onto obsidian. "This is a ward," Malrik explained. "It helps regulate the arcane pulse of the Xytherion flow. Never draw more than you need. The Xia is not a well, but a current. If you open too wide, you drown."

He held his staff close, the Xia crystal at its top glowing faintly. Lee could feel the thrum of power within it—steady, bound, contained. "The crystal does not hold the power," Malrik continued, "it channels it. From the dimension beyond."

Lee turned the glyph in his hand, his brows furrowed. "How do I even begin to access it?"

Malrik smiled, pulling a small ring from his robe. "With this," he said, handing it to Lee. The ring's blue crystal shimmered softly. As Lee slipped it onto his finger, he felt an immediate tingle—a ripple of awareness through his core.

"You've used Xia before," Malrik stated. "That belt... the shadow walking."

"Yes," Lee replied, "in the city."

"That was reckless," Malrik said sternly. "No boundaries, no control. You're lucky you had a focused intent—or the flow might've consumed you. Intention matters."

Malrik then handed him a book filled with symbols and parchment for practice. "You'll find a quill in your room. Begin with copying these glyphs. Focus on balance, intention, and consequence. These are the cornerstones of mystic practice."

Lee nodded, absorbing every word.

"Tomorrow, begin with Morrigana," Malrik said, puffing on a pipe as he wandered toward the fire. "She'll guide you in divination. Reading omens. Understanding fate's threads."

Lee raised an eyebrow. "And the others?"

"Selena," Malrik muttered, "teaches elemental combat. Be wary—she

channels raw Xia through emotion. It's dangerous. Then, Iona. Healing, purification, and inner peace."

Lee listened quietly, sensing the gravity behind each path.

Before dismissing him, Malrik fixed his gaze on the boy. "Wisdom is not knowledge alone, Leif. It is knowing when not to act. Power without wisdom leads only to ruin."

As Lee left the study, his thoughts churned. Those three words echoed: balance, intention, consequence.

He began to understand something deeper about the mystics—why they were feared, why they were hunted. They wielded power not through brute force, but through a patient understanding of unseen currents. He could see how, in the wrong hands or without control, that power could shatter entire cities. He imagined frightened kings and paranoid clergy labeling all mystics as threats, unable to distinguish between the wise and the reckless.

He wondered how many mystics had been destroyed not because of what they had done, but because of what they could do. How many had been erased for simply knowing too much—for carrying the knowledge of dimensions, of shaping energy, of bending reality in ways others could not comprehend? And now, others like the Sanctum, or men like Sebastian Greave, didn't want to destroy mystics—they wanted to control them, to use them as tools, or worse, steal their secrets.

He imagined mystics burned in town squares, hunted by zealous inquisitors, betrayed by those they had once helped. Perhaps some had abused their gifts—but most, Lee now believed, had simply been trying to exist. Trying to protect knowledge too dangerous to fall into untrained hands. Their sanctuary was not just a refuge, but a vault for wisdom, safeguarded by generations.

He paused in the quiet corridor outside the study, the air charged with faint static from the wards etched into the stone. A whisper of a spell drifted past him like mist, a reminder of the living, breathing nature of this place.

For the first time, Lee didn't see the mystics as elusive or otherworldly. He saw them as people—flawed, guarded, and burdened by truths too deep for most to comprehend. And now, he was one of them. Or at least, he was trying to be.

With glyph and ring, with hands burned from honest labor and a mind filled with new purpose, Lee returned to his quarters.

Tomorrow, the real lessons would begin.

The outside air was cold and crisp, alive with the telltale signs of autumn. A

light frost clung to the underbrush, and every breath Lee exhaled turned to silver vapor before fading into the still morning. The sun had only just begun to crest the rugged mountains, spilling golden light across the valley in warming streaks. Trees shivered gently in the breeze, casting long shadows over mossy rocks and winding roots. Birds sang with cheerful chirps overhead, and squirrels darted among the leaf-littered forest floor, their chatter echoing lightly.

Lee closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. The sweet scent of decaying leaves, pine needles, and cold stone filled his lungs. It smelled like change, like possibility.

A soft melody floated toward him from down the trail—a gentle, almost haunting hum. Morrigana emerged through the dappled sunlight, her cloak pulled tight around her slender frame. She joined him at the overlook, looking out at the horizon.

“I slip through leaves with silent grace, I kiss your cheeks but leave no trace, I’m cool and light, both near and far, you breathe me in before you are,” she murmured.

Lee smiled, not missing a beat. “Morning air.”

Morrigana stared at the ground for a few long moments, then bent to pick up a pale blue feather glinting with frost. She held it to the sunlight, turning it slowly before tucking it into her pocket. Her eyes, bright silver-blue, studied Lee.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

“I think so,” Lee said, intrigued but cautious.

As they started down a winding trail, he asked, “Aren’t you afraid someone might see us?”

“No one comes to these parts,” she said flatly. “And even if they did, grandfather’s wards would turn them away. This place is veiled. Protected.”

Lee nodded slowly. “Your grandfather is... powerful.”

She smiled faintly. “Old. Wise. His control of the Xytherion Flow is like nothing I’ve seen. He says we never truly stop learning. That growth only ends when we leave this mortal realm.”

They continued through the thickening trees. The silence between them was not uncomfortable, but reflective. Morrigana didn’t fill the space with idle chatter; instead, she observed—everything. Leaves, clouds, the shape of a broken twig, the lean of a tree. Lee matched her silence, watching the world around them with growing curiosity.

After what felt like hours, she stopped abruptly and whispered, “Do you hear that?”



Lee strained his ears. Birds. The wind. A squirrel rustling in the brush. “I don’t hear anything unusual,” he whispered.

Morrigana closed her eyes. Her Xia crystal earrings glowed faintly. “It’s a baby rabbit. It wandered from its den. Its mother is calling it back.”

Lee blinked in confusion. “I don’t hear any of that.”

“You will,” she said softly, smiling again.

They walked deeper into a grove where sun filtered through the canopy like golden dust. Morrigana gestured to a crooked tree with its roots twisted around a stone.

“Signs are everywhere. A broken branch, a feather caught in a web, the way moss grows on a stone. All these things speak. The Flow heightens your senses. With time, you’ll begin to interpret the world’s patterns.”

“Divination,” Lee said.

“Yes. But also awareness. You can read omens, interpret dreams, even walk through them.”

He stopped. “Dream-walking? That’s... real?”

“Very real. But it’s not something to take lightly.”

She didn’t elaborate.

As they made their way back toward the sanctuary, Morrigana offered a final piece of wisdom. “Not everything needs to be changed. Some truths are meant to be witnessed, not controlled.”

Her words sat heavy on Lee’s heart.

Back at the sanctuary, dread coiled in Lee’s stomach as he approached Selena’s chamber. He knocked, though the door was already open.

Inside, Selena stood at a long, cluttered worktable. Bottles, scrolls, and Xia crystals littered the surface. She didn’t turn around.

“Yes, yes. Grandfather sent you,” she muttered.

She turned abruptly. Her eyes locked with his. She wore a deep hood, but her features were hard to ignore—especially the lightning-bolt scar crossing her eye.

“You like the scar?” she asked, her tone venomous.

“No, I—I wasn’t...”

“This is what happens when you push the Flow too far. It bites.”

She moved toward him slowly, predatory. Her bracelet, set with a Xia crystal, began to pulse. Lee felt a sharp pressure behind his eyes.

“Do you feel that?” she whispered, circling him.

His pulse quickened. His breathing grew shallow. Anxieties buried deep

began bubbling up—visions of prison, of failure, of burning cities. The room spun.

“It twists your fear, amplifies it, makes it real.”

“Stop,” he whispered.

She leaned closer, voice like smoke. “This is power.”

Lee screamed, “STOP!”

A sharp voice rang out behind them.

“That’s enough.”

Iona stood in the doorway, arms crossed. Her silver hair glowed with reflected energy.

Selena shrugged. “I was just showing him.”

“Too much,” Iona snapped. “Come on, Lee.”

In a quieter study chamber lined with crystals, Iona poured Lee a cup of herbal tea.

“My sister is powerful,” she said gently, “but reckless. You’ll need to learn to protect yourself from people like her.”

She touched her pendant, murmuring a soft chant. A shimmer of light surrounded her for a moment before fading.

“You can create wards, yes. But the body and voice are also conduits. With the right movements, the right words, you can shield yourself from direct harm.”

She stood and demonstrated a slow, elegant series of motions—half dance, half ritual.

Lee joined her. She adjusted his posture, guided his arms.

“Good. Now again.”

They practiced until he was able to mimic the sequence without stumbling.

That night, Lee sat cross-legged on the floor of his room. The sanctuary was quiet, save for the occasional whisper of wind through carved stone ducts.

He practiced the glyphs Malrik had given him, his fingers trembling slightly as he drew each line with precision. He listened to the forest sounds outside—the rustle of leaves, the hum of nocturnal insects, the distant hoot of an owl. Every sound felt louder now. Clearer.

He recalled Morigana’s patience, Selena’s intensity, and Iona’s calm strength.

For the first time, Lee saw how different each sister’s relationship with the Flow was—reflection, combustion, and harmony.

He realized the mystics weren't feared because of what they did. They were feared because they saw the world differently—and because they couldn't be controlled. Some, like the Sanctum or Sebastian Greave, didn't want to destroy mystics. They wanted to possess them. To dissect their knowledge, to turn power into domination.

But the mystics had endured. Quietly. Secretly.

Lee dipped his quill into ink, drawing the glyph again. His hand was steadier this time.

He didn't know what he was becoming, only that he was changing.

And tomorrow, the path would continue.

## 25 THROUGH THE FIRE

Lee's days fell into rhythm. Morning began with physical chores—repairing beams in the sanctuary's aging halls or hauling bundles of dry moss for fuel. Midday was for glyph study, pouring over parchment with ink-stained fingertips as he practiced replicating Malrik's ancient symbols. Late afternoons he spent outside, seated beneath rustling trees while meditating or observing spider webs, bent stalks, fallen feathers—Morrigana's omens. Evenings were for chanting, repeating Iona's flowing incantations as he mimicked the hand-and-body movements she'd taught him.

The routine was comforting, but not complete.

He had avoided Selena for nearly two weeks.

He justified the avoidance. He wasn't ready. Her intensity left him drained. Her unpredictability set his nerves on fire. But deep down, it was fear that kept him away—fear of his own insecurities being laid bare again. Fear of seeing her sneer, of feeling powerless. Her scar haunted his thoughts, not for its appearance, but for what it symbolized: the danger of losing control of the Flow.

Morrigana and Iona noticed. "You can't avoid her forever," Morrigana said one morning, tapping her flute against her chin. "She may not be kind, but she's truthful. You need that."

"And strong," Iona added. "She's not your enemy—but she's the test."

And so, after days of preparation, meditation, and glyph-writing, Lee stood outside her door. The door was ajar. A flickering glow from within cast shadows across the hallway. His pulse thundered in his ears. He nearly walked away again.

But then he remembered Kaida's voice. *"You're stronger than you think, Lee."* He straightened his back, and he knocked. She didn't answer but turned just enough for him to see her silver eye glint through the strands of her hair. That mischievous grin tugged at the corner of her lips.

"You sure about this?" she asked flatly.

"Yes," Lee replied, trying to steady the tremble in his stance.

She turned fully, hood up, that jagged scar glinting beneath the glow of a hovering Xia orb. He tried not to stare but failed.

"Like the scar, do you?" she said, stepping closer. "You know what caused it?"

Lee swallowed. "Xia backlash?"

"Mm-hmm. Lightning spell. Too much will. Not enough restraint."

She stepped forward and raised a hand. A pulse of pressure slammed into Lee like a wave. The air between them thickened. His chest tightened. She was in his head again, dredging up doubts, failures, voices whispering you're not enough, you'll never be enough. The shame of his past—his father, his failure at the gallery, Kaida left behind—it all surged forward.

But this time, he was ready.

He began to chant, grounding his feet, shifting his weight like Iona had shown him. He moved his hands in circular, warding motions. A faint shimmer glowed around him—the boundary.

Selena smirked. She pushed harder.

Lee buckled slightly but stayed upright. He gritted his teeth, repeated the chant louder, clearer. His hands glowed faintly, the glyphs etched into his mind flashing in sequence. The pressure waned. When he opened his eyes, she was standing inches away, looking up at him. Those intense eyes just staring at him. He could feel her gaze burning a hole right through him. He felt uneasy with how close she was and then he saw it, her expression lightened up with a slight smirk.

"Good," she whispered, then stepped back.

The atmosphere shifted.

Selena dropped her hood, letting her long silver hair cascade over her shoulders. She studied him, expression unreadable.

"You practice. That much is obvious. Iona's dances. Morigana's meditation. Glyphs from gramps. You've been busy."

Lee nodded, still catching his breath.

"Want to see something impressive?"

He hesitated. "Sure."

She raised a palm and snapped her fingers. A flickering flame bloomed in her open hand. It hovered above her skin, vibrant and alive. Lee watched it, transfixed. He could feel the warmth from where he stood.

"Whoa."

She closed her hand, extinguishing the flame with a puff of smoke.

"One of my better tricks," she said. Then, dryly: "Great for parties."

Lee chuckled. "You have parties?"

Selena rolled her eyes. "Please. No." But she smirked.

"Want to learn?"

"Of course."

She nodded. "You'll need glyphs to anchor the flame. Otherwise, you'll turn your arm into ash. Ask me how I know."

He didn't.

She walked to her worktable, grabbed a scroll, and handed it to him.

"These are the fire glyphs. Study them. Copy them. Tomorrow, we'll try it."

He took the scroll carefully.

"Thank you," he said slowly.

She waved a hand dismissively. "Yeah, yeah. Get lost."

As he turned to leave, her voice followed him.

"Power is intoxicating, Lee. But without purpose, it burns you from the inside out."

He glanced back.

She was touching her scar.

He nodded once and stepped into the hall, heart racing—but not with fear this time.

With possibility.

Later that evening, Lee returned to his quarters. He stared into a candle flame, echoing the one she'd conjured. The parchment glyph sat on the table beside him. His hand still tingled from the encounter.

He thought back to the moment when the energy threatened to break him—how it had twisted his fears, manipulated his thoughts. But he had held firm. That had to mean something.

Selena had changed. Or perhaps he had. The edge of fear he once felt around her had dulled. He saw her differently now—not just as a danger, but as a mirror. She had scars. So did he.

He pulled out his journal and wrote her words: Power is intoxicating, but without purpose, it consumes you.

Then he sketched the fire glyph beneath them, careful with each stroke.

EVERHART

This time, the lines didn't feel foreign.  
This time, they felt like part of him.

## 26 ECHOES IN THE DREAM

Lee found his rhythm again, and it helped restore a sense of purpose he hadn't felt in some time. Daily patterns brought structure and predictability, and the routine of visiting with each member of the mystic family grounded him. He worked on the sanctuary, helped with basic chores, and committed himself to practicing the arcane arts of the Xytherion Flow. Though his progress felt slow, it brought him a quiet satisfaction.

He studied glyphs, practiced chants, and refined his hand movements. Even while forging nails to support beams in the sanctuary's forge, he would repeat chants between hammer swings, his movements becoming fluid, meditative. The scent of iron and burning coal, the rhythmic pounding—it all became part of his ritual. So deeply did he immerse himself that glyphs began to haunt his dreams, floating symbols that danced across his mind like fireflies.

Yet despite his efforts, the results remained elusive. He couldn't yet summon fire like Selenia, and though he had learned to shield himself from her mental intrusions, he hadn't progressed further. Iona guided him in finding peace and balance, and Morrigana taught him how to interpret nature's subtle signs. But the breakthrough he longed for still escaped him. He felt like a child on the edge of understanding a language just beyond hearing.

Morrigana sensed this restlessness and decided it was time for something deeper—something that might unlock what was buried within him. She led him to a chamber he had passed often but never entered.

Inside, the room pulsed with quiet mystery. An area rug lay in the center, surrounded by tall candles casting warm golden light. The walls were draped in



deep blue tapestries, woven with glyphs that shimmered slightly in the flickering light. Obsidian disks etched with symbols rested on stands, and strange circular instruments sat propped in frames. As the candles flickered, shadows stretched across the walls—but oddly, they didn’t match the movement of the flames. The shadows moved of their own accord.

Morrigana turned to Lee, her voice soft but deliberate. “I come at night without a sound, in sleep’s embrace, I’m often found. I’m not quite real, yet feel so near, a fleeting world both far and clear.”

Lee smiled. “A dream.”

“Are you ready?” she asked, her eyes searching his.

“Yes,” Lee replied, but his voice wavered, exposing his nerves.

She motioned for him to sit cross-legged on the rug. As he settled, she moved around the room, striking each circular instrument with a padded mallet. Each emitted a low tone, and together they formed a slow, rolling harmony. The frequencies washed over him, resonating in his chest, as though tuning his spirit.

Morrigana sat across from him and adjusted his posture. “Back straight. Hands resting gently.”

He breathed in, but excitement and tension made it shallow. She sensed this.

“This is a safe space,” she said gently. “Nothing can harm you here.”

She began a soft chant. Lee followed her lead, their voices weaving into the room’s musical resonance. He felt a lightness, like the tether to his body loosened. The candlelight grew dim. The world melted into color and vibration.

Lee floated, translucent and free. Colors shifted around him—lavender, gold, cerulean—blending into a dreamlike mist. He looked down at his hands and saw only soft light where flesh once was. The sensation was disorienting, but not unpleasant.

Through the mist, he saw Morrigana, just beyond a swirling oval of translucent energy. A portal. She floated like a breeze over still water and beckoned him forward. He passed through.

On the other side was a breathtaking beach—white sands stretching beneath a golden sunset sky. Palm trees swayed in a warm breeze, and the air smelled of salt and sweet blossoms. Sea birds glided lazily overhead.

“Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?” she asked, standing barefoot in the sand.

“Is this real?” Lee asked, awestruck.

“Only in picture books,” she said wistfully. “But one day, I’ll see it for real.”

She turned to him. “Do you have a place like this? Somewhere you long to

return to?”

Lee hesitated, but as he thought, another portal opened beside them. Morigana smiled. “It’s safe.”

They stepped through into a familiar place—a wooden dock extending over a lake surrounded by thick trees. The sun hung low, painting the sky in amber and rose. The air was cool and fresh, scented with pine and the earthy richness of soil. Gentle waves lapped against the dock.

“This is beautiful,” Morigana whispered.

“This is the lake where I grew up,” Lee said softly. “My father built this dock. We used to fish here in the mornings.”

A voice echoed through the air—faint, distant.

“LEE! It’s time for dinner!”

They turned to see a cottage nestled among the trees, smoke curling from its chimney. A woman stepped outside, calling out again.

Lee’s breath caught. “That’s... my mother.”

Morigana looked at the woman, then at Lee, whose eyes glistened.

“She’s beautiful,” she said gently.

He nodded. “I lost her when I was young. I didn’t even remember her voice until now.”

Morigana placed a comforting hand on his. He held it tightly.

She opened another portal, and together they stepped into a softly lit nursery. A woman with long silver hair rocked a baby while two others slept in cribs. She hummed a lullaby—haunting and familiar.

“I don’t remember what she looked like,” Morigana said, tears welling in her eyes. “But I remember the song. That’s all I have of her.”

Lee’s heart ached for her.

“You’re not alone,” he said.

They stood hand in hand until Morigana reached for a small chime around her neck. She tapped it gently, releasing a soft tone that wrapped around them like a veil.

The dreamscape dissolved.

Lee opened his eyes, blinking as the room came back into focus. The glyphs, the candlelight, the shadows—they were all just as they’d left them.

He looked down. Morigana’s hand was still in his. Her cheeks were flushed as she pulled it away slowly.

“I think we’re done for the day,” she said quietly, her voice trembling.

Lee didn’t argue. He nodded, still stunned from what he had seen—and felt.

Morigana turned to leave but paused at the door. “Dreams aren’t always

fiction, Lee. Sometimes they're memories... and sometimes, they're glimpses of truths we're not ready for."

And with that, she was gone.

Lee sat in silence for a long while. The scent of candles and old parchment filled the air.

And in his heart, something had shifted.

Although seeing his mother in the dream brought back sorrow, there was an unexpected warmth in it. The memory of her smile, the sound of her voice calling him in for dinner, still clung to him. She was beautiful, just as Morrigana had said. That dreamwalk had left something behind—something deeper. A connection to the Xytherian Flow that was more emotional than arcane, more personal than practical. It stirred in him like a pulse waiting to be tapped.

It gave him the urge to try again—to conjure the palm flame Selena had shown him. He believed he could do it now. There was a hum in his chest, a quiet vibration just beneath the skin, like his own soul was reaching for something.

Lee made his way down to the lower levels of the sanctuary, but the labyrinthine corridors led him astray. The deeper he wandered, the more the air thickened, saturated with age and quiet enchantments. Glyphs glimmered faintly on walls, and strange harmonics vibrated in his ears, almost imperceptibly. As he passed one corridor, something caught his eye—a glimmer, a shimmer, like heat rising off stone. He turned, but it vanished. Curious, he retraced his steps. Again, in the edge of his vision—a distortion, a ripple against the wall. But when he faced it head-on, it disappeared.

He chalked it up to the way the light played tricks in this place and finally found his way to Selena's chamber. The door, as always, was slightly ajar. Lee took a breath and knocked, a rhythmic, heavy knock she had come to know well.

Selena turned around with a dry smirk. "That knock again. Mr. Everhart, what a surprise. If that's your real name."

Lee rolled his eyes. "Of course it is."

She studied him for a beat, then asked flatly, "So? What do you want?"

Lee stepped forward, determined. "Fire."

"Just 'fire'?" She raised a brow, arms crossed.

"I think I'm ready to conjure the palm flame."

"You think?" She stepped closer, her expression unreadable. "Are you ready or not?"

Lee nodded, this time with more certainty. He reached into his coat pocket and produced the glyphs. Selena gave a playful, mocking sigh. “Good. Let’s do it—the flame, I mean. Not whatever’s going on in that curious little head of yours. I know how much you like the scar.”

He rolled his eyes again, but couldn’t help smirking. Selena motioned him forward. “Left hand out. Right hand with the Xia ring—chant and gesture as I showed you.”

Lee focused. At first, nothing. Then a flicker of blue light sparked in his palm and vanished.

“Try again,” Selena said, her tone sharper.

Lee closed his eyes and reached deeper into the flow. This time, a small blue flame sparked to life in his palm. It hovered like a dancer, flickering with a cool, steady pulse.

“Ha! Look at that,” Lee said.

Selena’s eyes widened. “Blue?”

They said it in unison: “Blue.”

Selena stepped forward and hovered her hand over the flame. “It’s warm, but not hot. That’s... different.”

“What does it mean?” Lee asked.

“I don’t know.” She turned toward the stone wall and moved a table aside. “Throw it. Let’s see what it does.”

Lee hesitated, then tossed the flame. It struck the stone—and spread. Like paint on canvas, the blue fire rippled outward.

“Whoa!” Selena yelled. “Help me snuff it out!”

The two scrambled, conjuring water from a nearby basin, patting at it with cloths, and finally beating back the spreading azure tongues of flame.

Panting, Selena looked at him, equal parts thrilled and disturbed. “You’re going to have to control that. Don’t practice in here—take it outside. Have water nearby. If you burn down the sanctuary, Gramps will turn us into crows.”

Lee, still smiling, nodded. “Got it.”

“Now get lost,” she said with a smirk.

As Lee left, he was practically glowing with excitement. The corridors seemed less shadowy, the glyphs on the walls more welcoming. His steps carried him quickly until he turned a corner and nearly ran into Iona.

Her silver hair gleamed in the candlelight, and her silver gown flowed with grace as she walked. “You seem... chipper,” she said, tilting her head.

“I did it,” Lee said, beaming. “I conjured the flame. With Selena’s help.”

Her eyes lit up, but there was a note of concern behind them. “Was she...

herself?"

"She was fine," Lee said. "Sarcastic, intense... but that's just her. She was excited, actually."

"Good," Iona said softly. "Still, come with me."

They entered the quiet sanctuary chamber where they practiced meditation and shielding. Iona knelt on a cushion, motioning for him to do the same. The room was quiet, filled with the scent of chamomile and ancient parchment. A soft wind-like whisper echoed through the crystal chimes hanging by the tall arched window.

Iona looked at him, her gaze serious but warm. "How did it feel? Drawing from the flow like that?"

Lee paused. "Powerful. Strange. Like it was mine, but also not mine. Like... tapping into a river and hoping not to drown."

She nodded. "Exactly."

She closed her eyes and placed a hand on her pendant. "I sense something stirring in the Xia. Imbalance. Chaos. The lines are shifting."

She looked at him, truly looked at him. "Selena dances close to the edge. She always has. But lately, she leans further into chaos. Her passion is powerful, but it can consume. You must be careful, Lee. Don't let her pull you into the dark."

Lee nodded slowly, absorbing the weight of her words.

"I trust her," he said quietly, "but I understand."

They sat in silence for a while, listening to the wind ripple through the crystalline chimes. And for the first time, Lee felt something shift inside him—not fear, not anxiety, but awareness. A thread connecting him to the Flow, to Iona, to Selena... to something ancient and powerful.

He closed his eyes and breathed in, the scent of lavender, stone, and fire lingering in the air.

The blue flame had only just begun to burn.

## 27 WHISPERS OF THE SKY

Dream walking with Morrigana had become more frequent in the passing months. At first, Lee wasn't sure how to navigate the ethereal vulnerability of sharing one's subconscious. But something about the gentle cadence of Morrigana's voice and the rhythmic chime of her pendant cymbal made each session feel more natural. Each journey into dreams forged deeper trust between them. What began as an unusual training exercise now served as a bridge into a more profound emotional bond.

It had taken time for Morrigana to reopen that emotional door after they witnessed each other's sorrow over their mothers. That moment had been raw and haunting, their grief overlapping in silent understanding. Morrigana wasn't one to expose herself so easily, but she allowed Lee into her dreams again, guiding him carefully through landscapes formed from fragments of memory and intuition.

In one session, Lee shared the moment his life was upended—the day Sebastian Greave took his father. The memory was fragmented, dreamlike, yet it carried a weight that Morrigana could feel. The cavern walls were cold and damp, and they watched through young Lee's eyes as Greave appeared in a long black coat, flanked by a towering brute and a wiry woman in a pilot's uniform. Morrigana observed as Lee's father stepped forward without protest, silently agreeing to go to protect his son.

They stood together in silence as the red-finned airship vanished into the sky. The world faded into sunset hues as Morrigana turned to Lee. "Explain to me again—why did he need your father?"

Lee, voice heavy, replied, “To locate artifacts. Shards of something called the Latchkey.”

Morrigana narrowed her eyes. “And the Latchkey opens a Portal Sphere.”

Lee nodded. “Yes, a device of immense power. Sebastian wanted to control it.”

Her expression darkened. “There’s something familiar about that man,” she murmured. “His energy—I feel like I should know him.”

The dream ended with the chime of her pendant cymbal, dissolving the vision into wisps of starlight. Lee blinked into the sanctuary’s candlelight, the smell of incense grounding him back in reality.

“All I ever wanted was to find my father,” he confessed.

Morrigana remained quiet.

“But maybe this is bigger than that,” he continued. “Maybe I was meant to stop Sebastian from finding the shards. Maybe your grandfather guided me here for that very reason.”

“Are you afraid you won’t find him?” Morrigana asked.

Lee looked down. “Yes. And I’m coming to terms with it. But that airship... I still dream about it.”

And then, fate answered.

A few weeks later, while splitting firewood near the outer edge of the sanctuary’s protective veil, Lee heard a low, mechanical whirring from above. A shadow passed across the forest clearing. He looked up and saw it—red fins and a crimson nose cone glinting in the sunlight. The very same airship from his dreams. It drifted westward, disappearing beyond the mountain ridge.

His pulse thundered in his chest. He needed guidance.

Lee rushed into the sanctuary, weaving through winding halls until he found Malrik hunched over parchment in his study. The old mystic looked up with a raised brow.

“Your face tells me you have something exciting to say,” Malrik mused.

“I saw the airship,” Lee blurted.

Malrik was unshaken. “There are many airships, dear boy.”

“Not like this one. It had the same markings—the red fins, the red nose. The one that took my father.”

Malrik’s expression hardened.

“It flew over the western ridge,” Lee continued, breathless. “If I follow it, maybe I can learn something. Maybe he’s still aboard.”

Malrik stood slowly, turning to face the fireplace. “Lee, chasing ghost ships through mountains is a good way to vanish forever.”

Lee clenched his fists. "But what if they're still looking for the shards? What if he's still useful to them?"

"And what if he's not?" Malrik snapped. "Would you throw your life away chasing a shadow?"

Lee took a step forward. "Or maybe I follow it and find the truth. Anything is better than standing here, doing nothing!"

Malrik stared at him for a long moment. The fire crackled, casting flickering shadows across the chamber.

Then Malrik turned his gaze toward the doorway. "We have an eavesdropper," he said softly.

Lee looked but saw no one. His jaw tightened.

"I don't care who's listening," he muttered. "I'm going."

He turned on his heel and stormed out.

Malrik sighed, staring into the flames. "You'll come to understand, boy," he whispered to the empty room. "But not yet."

Lee sat on the edge of his cot, fingers laced and head bowed. The stone walls of his quarters were cool to the touch, but the thoughts in his head burned with unresolved energy. His conversation with Malrik echoed endlessly: caution, patience, wisdom. All noble virtues. But none of them felt like action. None of them felt like hope.

He sighed, casting a glance to the mountain ridge beyond the narrow window. The sky had cleared after a cold morning, and warm afternoon light poured in over the valley. What if the airship was still out there? What if he could just get high enough—just enough to see it again? Maybe then, he'd have direction. A thread to follow. He couldn't sit and wait any longer.

Grabbing his rucksack, he tossed in a few essentials: a waterskin, dried fruit, rope, a flint striker, and his Xia ring. He didn't take time to write a note or alert anyone. Every moment counted. He tightened the strap across his chest and sprinted through the winding corridors of the sanctuary, his boots echoing off the stone.

The air outside hit him like a shock. Cold and bracing, with the crisp bite of pine and snow lingering on the breeze. He charged across a narrow field, then into the woods where towering pines shaded the mountain path. The higher he climbed, the thinner the trees grew, and the sharper the wind bit at his cheeks. Pine needles scattered underfoot, making his climb slow and careful. He moved deliberately, fighting fatigue with every step.

After nearly an hour of climbing, Lee reached a small outcropping that



overlooked the valley beyond. The view stole his breath. Rolling hills below shimmered in amber light, painted by the lowering sun. High above, eagles rode thermals, drifting as though weightless. But there was no sign of the airship.

He sat heavily on a rock, taking a long pull from his waterskin. Maybe Malrik was right. Maybe this was foolish. He leaned back, letting the sun warm his face. The silence was peaceful. For a moment, he thought about turning back.

And then he saw it.

Rising from the treetops far in the valley, the red-nosed airship emerged like a ghost from his memory. It shimmered in the afternoon light, slow and deliberate, then banked northward and disappeared over the ridge.

His heart skipped. "It's real," he whispered. The dream walks, the memories, the visions—they had a purpose. He had to know where it had landed.

Lee descended with renewed determination. The terrain was rough, the slope unforgiving. As he reached the thicker forest below, his breathing slowed, more cautious. Towering trees created a tunnel of shadow and light. The smell of moss and damp earth thickened.

After what felt like hours, he spotted a clearing. Tucked within it was a three-story stone manor, half-swallowed by vines and foliage. Cracked windows glinted dully in the sun. Beside it sat a docking tower, where the airship must have recently lifted off. There were no guards, no torches lit, no movement.

Lee crept along the tree line, circling the manor like a hunter. He reached the southern wall where dense shrubs gave cover. Flattening himself against the stone, he listened—nothing. Slowly, he moved to a basement door. Its wood was rotted, the lock rusted and barely intact. With a few firm pries of his knife, the lock gave way with a crack.

He pushed the door open. The hinges groaned in protest, and Lee winced. He adjusted the door's weight as he opened it further, using his shoulder to muffle the sound. Inside, a stale, musty air greeted him, thick with mildew and dust. Cobwebs tangled his face as he slipped into the basement.

Dim light filtered in from cracks in the stone walls. Old barrels and rusted equipment lined the sides. Every step he took stirred decades of undisturbed grime. He followed a faint glow ahead into a hallway.

Above, he heard footsteps—deliberate, slow. Dust rained from the ceiling. Lee crouched, ears straining. Only one person, maybe two. Still, he moved silently, creeping toward a narrow stairwell that spiraled up toward the ground floor.

The sound of pacing came from a door at the end of the hall. A shadow passed across the crack at the base. Someone inside.

Lee ascended the stairs, blade still in hand. He reached the landing and peeked around the corner.

The man stood with his back turned, pacing slowly, murmuring to himself. His long hair was tied back. He wore a white linen shirt, dark vest, and suspenders. He looked up, turned, and the light hit his face. Lee couldn't believe his eyes. The man looked older and tired than he remembered.

Lee gasped, louder than intended. "Father?"

The man froze.

"Who's there?"

Lee stepped into the light. Their eyes met. For a long heartbeat, neither of them moved. Then the man's expression cracked.

"Lee!"

The voice made Lee want to cry.

Alistair Everhart rushed to the barred door. He pressed his hand through the bars, and Lee grabbed it instantly, squeezing tight.

Footsteps sounded above.

"Shh," Alistair warned, glancing upward. "There's someone else here. One of Sebastian's men. He's always here when the rest go off."

Lee looked around, gauging the door.

"How do I get you out?"

Alistair pointed to his neck. "Key. He keeps it around his neck."

Lee didn't hesitate. He raced up the hall and crept toward the stairs. Alistair whispered after him, "Wait! Let's think this through!"

But Lee was already climbing.

The man upstairs never saw it coming. A quick shove. A swift strike to the head. The body slumped silently to the floor.

Lee returned with the key. Alistair gaped.

"You knocked him out?"

"Didn't kill him," Lee muttered.

Alistair opened the door and immediately embraced his son. Lee was overwhelmed with the warm embrace of his father that he yearned for so long. Alistair pushed his son out to get a good look at him. He held him by the shoulders and was amazed that he was now eye level to his own. Lee wanted this moment to last a bit longer but knew they needed to get moving.

"We have to go," Lee cautioned.

Alistair let go and looked around quickly, he grabbed a satchel, and shoved some books and scrolls into it. Together, they made their way down the hall.

A sudden roar overhead made them freeze.

“The airship,” Alistair hissed.

They raced toward the basement door, but it wouldn’t budge. Something heavy had been dragged across it.

Alistair grimaced. “There’s another way—but through the main hall.”

No choice.

They bolted up a side passage and emerged at the edge of a vast chamber. Echoes danced along the marble floor. Something didn’t feel right but they were running out of time. Lee peeked around a column.

“Clear,” he whispered.

They sprinted along the outer wall. But, stopped dead in their tracks as they heard a booming voice that echoed around the hard surface room.

“Leaving so soon, Alistair?”

The voice sent chills up their spines. Sebastian Grieve walked towards the center of the chamber, surrounded by men emerging from hidden doors.

Alistair put an arm in front of Lee. “Stay behind me.”

Lee, acting on instinct, leapt at the nearest member of Sebastian’s minions. He could take on one or two but a few more overwhelmed him and he was sent to the ground. Feet found his rib cage and memories of being beaten returned to him with rage. Alistair motioned for them to stop the torment.

“Who is this boy?” Sebastian demanded.

Alistair hesitated. Tears filled his eyes.

Sebastian raised a pistol. “No answer?”

“Stop,” came a clear, commanding voice.

A woman virtually materialized from the corner of the room and glided towards Sebastian.

It was Iona.

She entered from the shadows, silver cloak trailing, her face calm but firm.

“Let them go. Take me instead.”

Sebastian narrowed his eyes. “And why would I do that?”

Iona removed her cloak, revealing her matching silver hair and gown holding a shard in her hand.

Gasps. Even Sebastian blinked.

“I have what you’re looking for. But I want a partnership.” She held the shard up high for him to see and continued, “When you unlock the Sphere, I want access.”

“You’re a mystic,” Sebastian muttered. “I knew one. Useful people.”

Another voice echoed.

“Really, Iona? This was your plan?”

Selena appeared from nowhere, her dark cloak shedding sparks of Xia. One of Sebastian's men lunged at her. She raised a hand, palm filled with a great flame.

"Touch me you cockroach, and I'll burn your face off."

As his eyes glowed with the heat of the flame she held, he took a few steps back.

She turned on Iona. "I knew you were up to no good. I wondered why you were following Lee."

"You don't understand. The Sphere will recalibrate all planes of existence," Iona snapped. "All will be purged and pure."

"You don't know what you're talking about, you crazy bitch," Selena replied with a hardened stare towards her delusional sister.

Sebastian, losing patience, barked, "Seize them all!"

Chaos erupted.

Iona cast a protective glyph, shielding herself and Sebastian.

Selena exploded with power. Lightning leapt from her fingers, striking every one of Sebastian's men. The air stank of ozone. Lee covered his head. Screams echoed; bodies dropped.

Selena sent another bolt in Iona and Sebastian direction sending them through a wall. They regained their composure and headed towards the airship that roared outside.

Selena dropped to one knee, spent.

Lee ran to her.

"It takes a lot out of me," she muttered.

He pulled her up.

Alistair joined them, stunned. "Are they all dead?"

"Just stunned," Selena said as she looked around the room. "But it will wear off eventually. We need to go."

Together, they escaped the manor and slipped into the forest.

As they walked, Selena regained her strength, brushing dirt off her cloak. Lee explained everything to Alistair as they made their way back. Every hardship. Every loss. Every strange and beautiful truth.

Alistair placed a hand on his son's shoulder. "You've grown into someone strong, Lee. I'm proud of you."

Lee smiled through the pain in his ribs.

For the first time in years, he wasn't chasing a shadow.

He was walking home.

The journey back to the sanctuary was long and arduous, but neither Lee

nor his father Alistair noticed the aching of their feet or the chill that had begun to settle into the trees. The air was sharp and clean, rich with the scent of pine needles and distant woodsmoke. Their footsteps crunched over frost-stiffened grass and underbrush as golden light filtered between the trees. Selena followed behind them, her strength returning with each mile. Despite her fatigue, her mind was a storm of questions, her expression hardened into a mask of frustration and suspicion.

Father and son walked side by side. Alistair kept glancing at Lee, as though needing to reassure himself that his boy—now grown—was truly there. "You've become a man while I was locked away," he said, voice quiet but filled with emotion.

Lee offered a gentle smile. "I tried. I had to."

Selena snorted behind them. "Touching. Really. But let's not forget that your little reunion came at the cost of my sister handing over one of the most dangerous artifacts in existence."

Alistair looked over his shoulder at her, brow furrowed. "She gave the shard to that man—Sebastian?"

"Not just gave," Selena hissed. "She made a deal. Volunteered it. Smiled like it was a gift." Her fingers twitched with restrained energy. She wanted to unleash fire, but knew it would solve nothing. "I need to speak with grandfather immediately."

As the sanctuary came into view—its stone and vine-covered spires jutting from the mountainside like part of the terrain itself—Alistair slowed. "How did you find this place?"

"One of the mystics found me," Lee said. "He'd been following me ever since you were taken. He saved my life. Brought me here."

Alistair let out a low whistle. "It's magnificent."

"Yeah, it's a little slice of heaven" Selena muttered as she pushed passed the father and son. "A cozy little fortress. Come on, we need to speak with the old man about what's going on and hopefully find some answers."

Alistair raised an eyebrow. Lee smirked. "She's a firebrand, but you get used to it."

Inside the sanctuary, the tension turned the cool air into something brittle. The scent of dried herbs and parchment filled the study, where Malrik and Morigana stood waiting.

The moment the door creaked open, Morigana rushed toward Lee, her eyes rimmed red and voice trembling. "How dare you run off like that—"

"Save it," Selena cut in, striding past her sister without a glance. "We have

bigger problems."

Malrik's face darkened. "Selena—"

"No, listen. Iona gave the shard to that bastard. To Sebastian."

The words hit the room like thunder.

"WHAT?" Malrik and Morigana said in unison.

Selena's arms crossed. "Yep. Our noble sister, the righteous one—" she mimed air quotes, "—decided to give the shard away in exchange for access to the Portal Sphere. She said something about a 'Primordial Axis'—some celestial reboot."

Malrik staggered back a step. "The Primordial Axis... she's trying to activate the Cleansing Cycle? That's madness."

"And you all thought I was the reckless one," Selena muttered.

Morigana turned, stunned. "Why didn't you stop her?"

Selena raised a hand, exasperated. "She used an invisibility glyph. I followed her, saw her sneak after Lee. I didn't know she had the shard until she handed it to him."

Alistair, who had remained silent until now, stepped forward. "If Sebastian now has three shards, he only needs the one from the Iron Accord to complete the Sigil Latchkey."

The weight of his words settled over them like a suffocating fog. No one moved.

"He's right," Malrik said after a long silence. He turned toward the hearth, the fire's glow casting long shadows on the stone walls. "If the Sanctum makes a move for that shard, the Accord will respond. They've guarded their piece for centuries. War will be inevitable."

"Then we stop them," Selena said. "We strike first."

"No," Malrik said, voice hardening. "They'll vanish before we get close. We can't waste time chasing ghosts. We prepare. We defend what we can. And we wait for the right moment."

Selena scoffed. "Wait? That's your great wisdom? Sit in a hole while the world ends?"

"I have contacts," Malrik said. "I'll send word. Slow their advance. But we must stay here. There are others who will need our help before the end."

"Help who?" Morigana asked softly.

Malrik didn't answer immediately. He looked up at them, eyes ancient and tired. "It's time you knew everything."

He sank into his chair, the firelight flickering across his face.

"There was a woman. A powerful mystic. And a man. They were in love.

They fought alongside others to protect the rifts from corruption. But the man began to change. He was drawn to the Xytherian Flow, consumed by it. The mystic left, carrying a secret. She was pregnant. With you."

The sisters froze. Even Selena said nothing.

"She gave birth to three daughters, and left you with her parents. Then she went to confront the man, to stop him. But she vanished—pulled into a rift. That man is Sebastian and he has been trying to bring her back ever since. He thinks the Portal Sphere can rewrite reality. That he can save her."

Silence fell like snow.

Selena stepped forward slowly, voice shaking. "You knew this. All this time."

Malrik nodded. "I tried to protect you from it. From him."

"He's our father?" Morigana whispered.

"He was once a good man. But obsession hollowed him out."

Lee looked from face to face, stunned. Selena's hand dropped to her side. Morigana covered her mouth, eyes wide with horror.

"So what now?" Alistair asked.

Malrik looked at them all, each bearing a shard of truth, a piece of destiny.

"Now," he said, "we prepare. Because whether we seek it or not—the Axis is turning."

And outside the sanctuary, deep in the mountains, the wind whispered like an omen through the pines.

## 28 SANCTUARY AND STORM

Conflict, at its core, is as ancient as life itself. From the microscopic struggle of cells competing for resources to the grand wars that reshape civilizations, conflict is inevitable. When groups vie for limited resources or control, friction is born—sometimes quietly in the halls of council chambers, other times in the thunder of artillery across ruined cities. On a molecular level, existence itself is competition. And where competition thrives, so too does the specter of war.

In times of strife, societies adapt. Alliances form, roles are clarified, and strategies evolve. When the balance tips, new leaders often rise—figures forged in the crucible of crisis. But when diplomacy fails, conflict escalates, turning to war. The aftermath is rarely noble. Loss of life, shattered infrastructure, displaced families, scorched earth. And beneath it all, trauma festers.

On the continent of Aetherion, war had come. It stormed through the great capital city of Cael'varan, leaving only the bones of its once magnificent spires. The grand factories, bustling courthouses, council chambers, marketplaces, taverns, temples, academies, and palaces were now ruins cloaked in smoke. The streets, once alive with the footsteps of citizens, now echoed with the panic of civilians caught in crossfire.

The reason? Power. As always.

The Sanctum of Dominion—backed by an influential church, aristocratic families, and the old merchant guilds—preached divine guidance in all things. They feared progress unchecked by godly wisdom. Opposing them stood the



Iron Accord, supported by labor guilds, free-mage collectives, and revolutionary scholars. They sought to dismantle elitist structures and empower the common folk. But beneath these ideologies, one singular goal simmered: control of the Portal Sphere.

To activate and command the Sphere, one needed the Sigil Latchkey—four shards scattered across the land. The Sanctum had three. The Iron Accord held the last.

So, they fought. And in their wake, the world burned.

Yet, hidden in a lush valley downstream from the city, life persisted. Amidst towering trees and stone-laced cliffs, a sanctuary flourished. Originally home to a reclusive order of mystics, it had transformed into a hidden village for those wounded and displaced by war.

Medical tents lined a brookside path. Children played among vegetable gardens. Old soldiers now tended goats and mended clothes. Livestock pens buzzed with chatter. Smoke curled from chimneys of huts constructed from moss-covered stone and salvaged timber.

At the heart of the sanctuary stood a towering figure in a weathered robe—Malrik, the mystic elder whose power shielded the village from detection. Beside him, his granddaughters: Morrigana, calm and thoughtful, and Selena, fierce and solitary. Together with Lee and his father Alistair, they provided healing, protection, and the seeds of rebuilding.

Lee had found a rhythm here. Hammering nails in the forge. Tending the gardens with his father. Practicing glyphs by candlelight. His days were filled with purpose, but in the back of his mind, he knew this peace was fragile.

That morning, a low whine stirred the skies.

Lee looked up. A silhouette cut across the clouds. An airship.

He broke into a grin. "The Skyraker."

The ship descended, her hull scarred with bullet holes and burn marks. Parts of the siding were patched with mismatched iron plates. Still, she flew true—majestic in her resilience.

The gangplank dropped. Out walked two familiar figures, leather-clad, revolvers at their hips, long brown hair whipping in the wind.

"Well, well," said Vic. "I reckon I remember that mug."

"Still got that unfortunate haircut," Jasper added.

Lee laughed. "Vic, Jasper!" He ran to greet them, embraced in a whirlwind of slaps, back-thumps, and brotherly insults.

They introduced themselves to Alistair, who chuckled as he shook their hands. "You're the infamous crew Lee never shuts up about."

Behind them came a third figure—Calder, the wise old mentor. He smiled warmly as Lee embraced him.

“And where’s the Captain?” Lee asked.

“Coming down the ramp,” Calder said.

She was almost unrecognizable. Dahlia, clad in a polished navy-blue coat adorned with brass buttons, strode confidently down the gangplank. Her long hair was braided with copper wire, and her stare was as commanding as ever.

“Are you finally ready to face trial for your many insubordinations?” she asked flatly.

Lee gave Calder a bewildered look. “Is she serious?”

Dahlia smirked and tossed a rucksack into his chest. “No. But you still owe me three crates of schematics.”

Calder chuckled. “She’s the Captain now. Truth be told, I think she always was.”

“What about...” Lee began but, Calder just shook his head slightly as if to say, we can talk about it another time.

“And how did you find this place?” Lee asked.

“A little bird,” Vic said cryptically.

“No really,” Jasper added, “A literal bird told us. Weirdest thing. Gave directions. Named you.”

“Dahlia nearly shot it off the bow,” Vic muttered.

Lee turned. “Ah. That little bird.”

Malrik and Morigana approached. Morigana’s silver hair shimmered in the dappled light.

Lee introduced everyone. Vic and Jasper exchanged subtle glances when Morigana spoke.

“Welcome,” she said kindly. “We’re grateful for your arrival.”

Malrik added, “Much needs to be discussed.”

As they walked back to the village, Vic leaned close to Lee. “Is she... attached?”

“Who? Morigana?”

“Mhm.”

Lee just rolled his eyes. “Let’s get you settled before you start writing poetry.”

That evening, the sanctuary buzzed. Bonfires crackled. Laughter filled the air. The smell of roasted vegetables, smoked meats, and fresh bread swirled among the huts. Musicians—some with battered fiddles and others with homemade drums—played songs of remembrance and hope.

Lee watched from a hill above the camp, arms crossed. His father stood beside him, both of them gazing down at the warm glow.

"You've found something here," Alistair said softly. "You're helping people."

Lee nodded. "For now."

But not everyone joined the revelry. Selena remained in the sanctuary, pouring over texts, sketching glyphs, and whispering incantations under her breath. Her fire would not be dimmed by celebration. She was preparing—for what came next.

For beyond the valley, the war burned ever hotter. And the final shard of the Sigil Latchkey still waited.

The morning sun filtered gently through the sanctuary's crystalline skylight, casting patterns of prismatic light across the smooth, stone floor of Malrik's study. A quiet stillness lingered in the air, broken only by the distant trickle of a fountain and the soft echo of footfalls approaching.

Lee guided the Skyraker crew through the labyrinthine halls of the sanctuary. The air was cool and fragrant with lavender, sage, and old parchment. The others marveled at the intricate carvings on the walls, the floating lights that hovered near the ceilings, and the sense of timelessness that radiated from every stone.

"Hard to believe something like this could exist," Jasper muttered. "Feels like we stepped into another world."

"You kind of did," Lee replied. "The Mystics built this place to stay hidden when the world turned against them. Most think they're extinct. This sanctuary is one of the last safe havens."

Alistair, his voice soft with memory, added, "There were once hundreds of thousands of Mystics across Aetherion and the surrounding lands. They ushered in the Age of Flow. But fear and ignorance turned friends into enemies. Now only remnants remain."

As they neared the double doors of Malrik's study, Lee paused. "One thing before we go in... Don't stare at Selena's scar. She's not exactly the forgiving type."

Vic raised an eyebrow. "What happens if we do?"

Lee smirked. "She'll melt your brain."

Dahlia gave a rare grin. "Duly noted."

Inside, the room was warm with the scent of cedar and incense. Tapestries lined the walls, shimmering faintly with enchanted glyphs. Malrik stood near a

broad table layered with maps and crystal markers. Selena leaned against a shelf in her dark cloak, arms folded, while Morigana hovered nearby.

"Welcome," Malrik said. "Please, gather around."

As introductions passed around the room, Dahlia stepped boldly toward Selena. "Pleasure to meet you. Cool scar."

Selena's eyes narrowed. A tense silence hung in the air until she tilted her head slightly. "Nice jacket."

Lee exhaled slowly. Crisis averted.

Everyone took their place around the table, where Malrik opened the meeting. "As you all know, the continent is unraveling. War has consumed Aetherion. The Sanctum now holds three of the four shards needed to complete the Sigil Latchkey. With it, they can access the Portal Sphere. And one of my granddaughters gave the last shard we held to the man you call Sebastian."

Alistair stepped forward. "Why would she do that?"

Malrik's eyes darkened. "Iona believes she is saving the world. She sees the instability of the Xia flow as evidence that the world is misaligned. She's been studying the Primordial Axis—an ancient theory that suggests that a vast amount energy, like what the Portal Sphere can provide, can recalibrate all planes of existence. To her, it's a cleansing."

Morigana added softly, "She truly believes this is the only way to fix the chaos. But there is a strong chance that the planes could fuse or collapse... and that would be catastrophic."

"She doesn't care," Selena hissed. "She thinks she's too self-righteous."

Lee stepped in. "Selena, please, we know how you feel about Iona but let Morigana finish."

Selena scowled but fell silent.

Morigana gave Lee a slight smile continued, "She's misled. There are forces she doesn't understand. If I can reach her in a dream walk, maybe I can show her what she's not seeing."

"Does she know who her father is?" Asked Alistair.

"No, we just learned that ourselves." Said Morigana looking at Malrik and Selena.

"I'm sorry to say this, but he's not a good man." Alistair said looking at Morigana and Selena. "He may have been a good man, at one time, but Sebastian is delusional as well. It sounds like they are cut from the same cloth."

"If I can somehow find a way to enter Iona into a dream state, I can reason with her and explain that the path she decided to take is flawed." Said Morigana.

Lee raised a question. "Do we know where the fourth shard is?"

"No," Calder replied. "The Iron Accord keeps it moving. They're the last barrier to total control."

Captain Dahlia tapped her fingers on the hilt of her blade. "No wonder the Sanctum is tightening the noose."

Calder looked at Lee. "Do you remember that mysterious crate aboard the Skyraker?"

"Yes, I figured it was something important, and secretive." He replied nodding.

"We agreed to keep it for a short time before we had to pass it along," Calder replied.

"Like a game of hot potato," Vic added.

Malrik turned to a large map of Aetherion. Red markers pulsed faintly. "I've reached out to old contacts. If the shard is moved again, I'll know. When that happens, we'll need to act fast. That's where the Skyraker comes in."

Dahlia straightened, her voice steady. "We'll get that shard."

Alistair frowned. "But that won't end the war."

"No," Lee said. "But it'll buy us time. Time to set a trap. We need to draw Sebastian out. End this before the Sphere is used."

Malrik nodded solemnly. "Lee, you'll lead the contingency for what happens after we secure the shard."

"Understood," Lee said.

As the group dispersed, Lee pulled Vic and Jasper aside. "I need a favor. Selena... she's powerful, but when she burns too hot, she crashes hard. I want you two to watch her. Protect her. But don't let her know."

"You want us to babysit the lightning witch?" Jasper scoffed.

"Yes," Lee deadpanned. "Just keep your distance when the sparks fly. Oh and she's like an angry cobra, if she senses fear, she'll strike."

"So I'm a snake now?" came Selena's voice from directly behind them. The three men turned, faces pale.

Selena smirked, arms still crossed. "Just don't get in my way. Or do. It might be entertaining."

As she walked off, Morigana joined them.

"Was she always like that?" Lee asked.

Morigana sighed. "Pretty much. But she's ours."

"She's on our side, right?" Said Lee with doubt in his voice.

"Yes, she's reclusive and intense, but she's grounded," Morigana replied. "She's knows what happens when you push the Xia Flow too far."

The team had their mission. Now, the storm would gather.  
War was here.  
But so was hope.

The sanctuary valley breathed with the promise of spring. The rains had finally begun to ease, leaving behind a world reborn—glossy with dew, fragrant with blossoms, and humming with life. Trees burst with vivid green and flowered in blushing pinks and creamy whites. Cherry blossoms fluttered from above like delicate confetti, while the sweet aroma of lilacs and magnolias perfumed the breeze. The peep frogs sang from hidden pools, and dragonflies skimmed across the surface of shallow streams. Yet even in such beauty, a quiet tension coiled beneath the surface.

Lee sat beneath one of the cherry trees, watching petals swirl to the earth with the gentle wind. From his perch atop a small hill, he could see the growing village below—huts, medical tents, livestock pens, children weaving between buildings in bursts of laughter. A place carved from peace. But the farther his gaze wandered to the mountains and the clouds rolling beyond them, the more his mind turned to the war. To the missing shard. To the inevitable reckoning ahead.

A shadow passed over him. He looked up just as a hand settled gently on his shoulder.

“Mind if I join you?” Alistair asked with a soft smile.

Lee gave a quiet nod, and his father eased down beside him, folding his arms over his knees. For a few moments, they sat in companionable silence, listening to the rustling leaves and the distant chirps of the sanctuary birds.

“I’ve said it before,” Alistair began, his voice low, “but I want to say it again—and I hope this time you really hear me. I’m proud of you, son.”

Lee kept his eyes ahead, heart thudding, but he didn’t speak.

Alistair continued, “I think about everything you’ve survived—everything you’ve become. Losing me. Running. Fighting. Growing up too fast. And even with all that, you kept going. You built something of yourself. You found your own way.”

There was a heaviness in Alistair’s voice that made Lee look at him. The older man’s jaw was tight, his eyes glassy. “You had every reason to hate me. To forget me. But here we are.”

“I never hated you,” Lee said quietly. “I was just... lost.”

Alistair nodded slowly. “Me too. Every day I spent away from you—on that airship, in those dark rooms—I kept thinking of the last time I saw your face.

You were so young, but there was courage in you even then.”

Lee blinked hard. “I’m still trying to be that kid. Brave. But most days I just feel... scared.”

Alistair reached over and placed a hand on his son’s back. “That’s what makes you strong, Lee. Courage isn’t the absence of fear. It’s choosing to move forward even when your heart’s in your throat.”

They sat quietly for another moment, the wind catching the cherry blossoms and carrying them in spirals.

“I’ve heard things,” Lee said eventually. “About Sebastian. About you and him.”

Alistair sighed and leaned back on his elbows. “Honestly, I didn’t spend much time with him directly. He was always busy—delegating, scheming, yelling at his men. But the longer I was around him, the more I realized how dangerous he was. He’s obsessed, Lee. Possessed, even. Power means everything to him. Or so I thought.”

Lee tilted his head. “What do you mean?”

“One night, after a few drinks, I heard him talking to himself. Mumbling about Naevira. About bringing her back. Like she was a dream he’d never let go.”

Lee’s breath caught. “Naevira... Morigana’s mother.”

Alistair nodded. “He’s not just after control. He’s chasing something lost. Something he believes he can fix.”

A long pause hung between them.

“You think that’s why Iona went with him?” Lee asked. “Because she believes the Portal Sphere can fix the broken world?”

“Maybe,” Alistair replied. “But not everything broken can—or should—be fixed.”

Lee leaned forward, plucking a petal from the grass and turning it between his fingers.

“I’m not going to run into the fire alone this time,” he said. “I’ll work with everyone. I promise.”

Alistair smiled, warm and proud. “Good. You’ve got a family here now. And a future.”

He rose to his feet, dusting his trousers. “Speaking of which... I think someone’s coming to see you.”

Lee followed his father’s gaze and saw a familiar figure approaching through the field of wildflowers. Morigana, with her shoulder-length silver hair swaying in the breeze, moved like poetry across the landscape.

"I'll leave you two to it," Alistair said, patting Lee's shoulder one last time before strolling down the path.

Morrigana reached him moments later, her eyes shining in the soft light.

"Hello, Lee," she said. "Your father has good timing."

Lee smiled. "He does that."

She sat beside him, close enough that their shoulders brushed. For a long moment, she simply watched the valley with him. Then she turned, her voice soft.

"I have no weight, yet lift the soul. In darkest times, I make you whole. You cannot see or hold me tight, but still I shine a guiding light. What am I?"

Lee smiled. "Hope."

She nodded. "Hope can survive even when the world falls apart."

He looked at her. Really looked. There was something delicate in the way her eyes searched the distance—like she was both a part of this world and somehow separate from it.

"Morrigana... your mother. What was her name?"

She paused. "Naevira."

Lee swallowed. "Do you... want to call Sebastian your father now?"

Her lips twitched—not quite a frown, not quite a smile. "He's a stranger to me. His blood doesn't make him family."

Lee nodded. "I think he's chasing more than power. He's chasing love. A lost one."

Morrigana said nothing. Her hand drifted to the pendant at her neck. The same one she had held during their first dreamwalk.

"I think we're meant to stop him," Lee said. "But maybe also to save him. Even if he doesn't realize it yet."

She turned to him, studying him for a long moment.

"You've grown," she said. "In spirit. In heart. You're not just chasing your past anymore. You're guiding us toward something better."

Lee's throat tightened. "Only because I have people like you beside me."

Her fingers brushed his, just briefly. But it was enough.

Side by side, they sat in the warmth of spring, the cherry blossoms dancing around them like blessings. And beneath the weight of the days ahead, they found comfort in that small, silent moment—hope shared between two souls not yet broken by the world.



## 29 THE VAULT OF IRON

All the preparation and years of honing one's skills can never truly prepare a person for the daunting challenges ahead. Lee had known victories and defeats, but he now understood that strength in numbers greatly improved one's chances. He had never wanted to burden others with his troubles, but he was deeply grateful that Malrik had reached out to the crew of the Skyraker to help prevent the opening of the Portal Sphere. He was equally thankful to have his father and the mystics by his side.

Malrik invited the team to his study for a briefing on an important update about the fourth shard. Everyone gathered around the center table, their focus intense. Even Selena, standing beside Dahlia and the twins, was quietly alert. Malrik's presence exuded wisdom, and today his expression was particularly grave.

"Hi everyone," Malrik began, his gaze steady as he met the eyes of each person in the room. "Our intelligence network has pinpointed the location of the fourth shard. As Calder mentioned before, the Iron Accord had been moving it frequently, but deemed that too risky. It is now secured in a vault within a stronghold located here." He pointed to a location on the map.

"I recognize that building," said Calder. "It used to be a factory for assembling giant automatons and constructing airship vessels."

"Precisely," Malrik nodded. "The facility is now crawling with Xia-powered automatons. Much like how Xia crystals generate steam to power vehicles and gears, they power these machines." He held up a sketch of one of the automatons. "Morrigan and I have studied them closely. We believe we've

found their vulnerabilities. Morigana, please explain."

"We've obtained schematics and visual recon of these steam golems, as I've started calling them," Morigana said, gesturing to the drawings. "They're powered by Xia crystals embedded in their chests. Alongside them float hovering orbs—sentinels—that serve as their eyes. The golems can't see well on their own, so the sentinels detect intruders and alert them. Since the golems can't distinguish friend from foe, the factory has been cleared of all personnel."

"Do they have any weaknesses?" Alistair asked.

"Yes. The sentinels are stabilized by small directional modules." Morigana pointed at the schematic. "If targeted, they'll fall, but it may alert the golems. As for the golems, they're extremely strong. Originally laborers, they've since been modified with weapons and armor. But they are still machines—and machines don't fare well against electricity." She gave Selena a meaningful glance.

"Well, that could be fun," Selena said with a wicked grin.

"There are joint gaps where the armor is weakest," Morigana added. "A well-placed electric shock could create an opening for a more destructive strike."

"Selena, if you can strike them while conserving your energy," Lee said, "we can exploit those weaknesses. But we'll need heavier firepower."

"We've got just the thing," said Jasper, nodding at his twin.

"Alright, we know our objective," Lee said. "Let's move out."

Aboard the *Skyraker*, Captain Dahlia manned the helm alongside Lee, Morigana, and Selena. Calder kept the propulsion system humming in engineering, while Alistair reviewed weaponry with the twins. The upgraded rifles and cannons were bulky—but formidable.

Landing discreetly in a wooded area near the factory, Dahlia turned to Lee.

"As we agreed, Calder and I will stay with the ship," she said. "I trust you'll keep the rest of my crew safe."

"Of course," Lee replied.

She then locked eyes with Selena. "If something happens to them because of you, I will rain hell on you."

Even Selena flinched slightly, offering a small, uneasy smirk.

Lee, Alistair, Morigana, Selena, and the twins crept toward the factory's southern entrance. Morigana subdued the guards using Xia-induced mental overload. With a found key, they slipped inside, ducking behind shelves as a

sentinel floated past, its hum fading as it moved on.

The air reeked of oil, scorched metal, and some pungent chemical. Alistair scavenged nearby lockers and found filter masks, which they all donned. The group skirted the room's perimeter, once a maintenance bay filled with dusty workbenches, hanging tools, and scattered parts.

They ducked again as another sentinel passed. Clearly, the factory had been dormant for years.

Reaching a stairwell, they climbed to the top level and crept to a door overlooking a massive production floor. Across the room, they saw the vault. To reach it, they would need to traverse a mechanical labyrinth, all under the patrol of golems and sentinels.

"Selena, stay up here with the twins and Morigana," Lee whispered. "My father and I will navigate the floor. Cover us."

"Actually," Morigana interjected, "I can link with Selena using the Xia flow. She'll guide us more effectively."

"I can stun the sentinels from here," Selena added. "And these sharpshooters can do the rest."

"Alright," Lee nodded. "Let's go."

Lee, Alistair, and Morigana descended and began weaving through the dormant machines and scrap. Every step was slow, calculated. Morigana, communicating with Selena, led the way.

They reached the vault. Its mechanical lock looked daunting, but Morigana tapped into the Xia currents, deciphering it effortlessly.

"Another reason I came," she teased. Lee chuckled and opened the door.

Inside, the shard glowed in a display pedestal. Lee looked around.

"It's too easy," Alistair muttered. "Something's bound to trigger."

"Confirm the patrols," Lee told Morigana.

She closed her eyes, then nodded. "All clear."

Lee jammed his rifle into the door to hold it open. He and Alistair counted to three, snatched the shard, and dashed out just as the door slammed, crushing the rifle.

They exhaled in relief, but only for a moment—then the alarms blared.

Pandemonium erupted. Guided by Selena, they zigzagged through the maze. Sentinels zipped erratically. One intercepted them—until a shot hit its stabilizer and it crashed. Alistair smashed it with his rifle butt.

A golem rounded a corner and roared. It was massive and angry. They could hear the hiss of the steam and grinding of its gears.

It lunged at Morigana. Lee kicked its side, drawing its attention. The golem

advanced until a jolt of electricity convulsed its frame. Then bullets struck its neck joint, and it collapsed.

The trio reached the stairwell as the others ran down.

"We need to go!" Vic barked.

As they retreated through the maintenance rooms, someone seized Lee in a chokehold.

"Give me the shard," snarled a female voice. "Or he dies."

Everyone turned and saw the stranger holding him with intensity.

Lee froze. The scent—lavender and tobacco—was unmistakable.

"Bella!" he gasped. "It's me! Lee!"

She faltered. Lee twisted free and faced her, lifting his mask.

Her eyes widened. "You're dead. I saw you hang."

She pushed him away and raised a mini-crossbow—then collapsed as Morigana struck. The crossbow bolt flew wildly and clattered to the floor.

"Are you okay?" Morigana asked, inspecting Lee over for injuries.

"I'm fine," Lee replied. "We should take her with us."

"Really?" Selena scoffed. "She tried to kill you."

"She's... an old acquaintance."

Lee slung her over his shoulder.

As they made their way out the entrance into the yard, revived guards woken by the alarm spotted them. Selena walked out from the group and unleashed a storm of lightning. Cracks out of nowhere found their way to guardsmen as they dropped. Vic and Jasper stared in awe.

"Wow," Jasper breathed. "I'm glad she's on our side."

"Help me up, boys," Selena said as her knees buckled. They caught her.

The Skyraker roared overhead. They escaped before reinforcements arrived.

Aboard the ship, Lee secured Bella to a chair. Her hood removed, her long jet-black hair spilled over her shoulders.

Jasper whistled in appropriately; Dahlia warned, "Be nice."

Bella awoke, eyes darting in confusion—then fixed on Lee.

"It is you," she whispered, a tear sliding down her cheek. "I saw you hang."

"It wasn't me. I escaped," Lee said softly.

But then she realized the person hung that day was wearing a hood and she realized it wasn't Lee. She looked up at him and she asked, "Why didn't you come back?"

Lee looked at Morigana and then back at Bella "I had to heal."

Morigana stepped beside Lee, slipping her hand into his. Bella looked down

at their hands.

"I see," she rasped. "She's cute."

"We'll drop you off with Gideon," Lee offered.

Bella turned her face away, silent.

After a quick visit with Gideon, the Skyraker charted its course toward the Eastern Valleys of the nomad regions. While cruising at a steady altitude above the clouds, Lee tried to collect his thoughts and rein in his emotions. The encounters with Bella and Gideon had been unexpected, and they left him drained. Though he never fully trusted either of them, he had spent enough time with them to form bonds. He had feelings for Bella, and Gideon had once felt like a mentor. He had learned much from them, even enjoyed their company, but the need to keep his distance always lingered.

Morrigana found Lee alone on the top deck of the airship. The chill of high altitude clung to the air, but Lee stood resolute, gazing out over the vast sky. Without a word, she brought him a cloak and something warm to drink. He thanked her quietly and continued staring at the horizon. She stood beside him in companionable silence.

"I wasn't expecting to see her again," he said at last, his voice barely above a whisper. "I feel guilty that she thought I was dead, only to discover I simply moved on. Gideon wasn't much better about it."

"I think Gideon was more upset that we had the shard," Morrigana replied softly.

"Yes, you're probably right," Lee nodded. "But I still feel like I hurt the last few people who cared about me. My journey wasn't over. I had to move on. I just... I don't want that to happen again."

He turned to look at her, and Morrigana met his gaze with understanding.

"Well, there's nothing going on here, so I don't know what you're carrying on about," she teased with a smirk.

Lee smiled. "Maybe when this is all over, when my journey is complete... maybe we could—"

"Yes," she interrupted. "When this is over, maybe we can do more than just hold hands on a cold airship deck." And she reached for his hand.

"Now," she added playfully, "tell me again where we're going?"

Lee shared his plan: to seek out the nomads he had once traveled with and ask for their aid. They migrated between the Western and Eastern regions, and though nearly a year had passed since he last saw them, he knew where their camp would be. He spoke of their strength, their fierce loyalty, and the deep

respect he held for Mira Duskweaver, their wise and steadfast clan leader. He hoped she would offer both counsel and warriors to their cause. What he didn't say—what he couldn't say—was how much he dreaded the possibility of seeing Lyra again. That, he feared, would cut too deep.

The next morning, Dahlia brought the Skyraker down onto a hillside overlooking the nomad encampment. The Eastern Valley was as breathtaking as Lee remembered—mountains rising like sentinels, a crystal stream cutting through the valley's heart, wildflowers blooming in brilliant colors, and the scent of earth and grass thick on the air. Only Lee and Morigana disembarked and made their way down the slope.

Last time, Lee had been greeted by a circle of riders. This time, perhaps due to the early hour, only one figure approached them.

"It's good to see you, Ronan!" Lee called as they drew close.

Ronan greeted Lee with a warm embrace. "And it's good to see you, my friend."

Lee introduced Morigana, and Ronan welcomed them down into the heart of the encampment. They spoke of current events as they walked to Mira's tent. Inside, Mira's eyes lit up at the sight of Lee, and standing beside her was Lyra—tall, athletic, her long hair adorned with feathers and braids. She embraced Lee warmly and gave Morigana a nod.

"A mystic," Mira said with an approving smile. "It is a pleasure to meet you, my dear."

Then Mira turned to Lee, leaned in, and whispered, "She is stunning." Morigana blushed.

A voice cut through the tent flap. "Where is he?" Kaida pushed past Ronan and planted herself in front of Lee.

Lee froze, unsure what to say. Kaida ran up and hugged him tightly, her big brown eyes already filling with tears. She turned quickly and muttered, "I'm Kaida. Nice to meet you," to Morigana, before walking away.

Lee stood awkwardly. Mira offered a lifeline: "Would anyone care for some tea?"

Once they were seated, Lee told the story of everything that had happened since he left the valley—his journey to the capital, the chaos with Sebastian, and how Iona had given him a shard. He and Morigana took turns recounting their journey and the dangerous mission ahead.

Ronan and Lyra listened in stunned silence. Their expressions said it all.

"Lee," Mira said at last, "I'm proud you were able to rescue your father. I

know that was important to you. But more than that, I'm glad you've come to understand that stopping the Portal Sphere must come first. Now, it's time to lay a trap to get those other shards back."

"That's why we're here," Lee said. "To seek your wisdom—and your help."

"There is a place in the mountains," Mira said thoughtfully, "not far from the chasm where you fought the Mountain Guardian. It forms a natural bottleneck. There is a cave, and if you ask politely, the spirits there may help you."

She handed Ronan a feather with a red bead at its base. "Bring this. Ask the spirits to allow only Morrigana's father and sister into the cave. Ronan and Lyra will go with you."

Both cousins nodded.

With new allies at their side, the Skyraker turned southwest toward Moonveil.

They landed just outside the smoke-hazed city of Ironhaven. The factories still belched soot, and the streets buzzed with laborers and traders. Lee ventured out alone to find Evangeline Thorncroft Emberwood.

First, he tried the Wildflower Apothecary, but no one answered. He knocked again. Still nothing. Peering through the window revealed no signs of life. He made his way to her cottage.

The door opened before he could knock. Evangeline stood there. She looked hollow—bags under her eyes, tear-streaked cheeks.

"Hi, Lee," she said softly. "It's good to see you."

"What happened?" he asked.

She sat down, her knees trembling. "She left. And he went after her."

"When?"

"Months ago," she whispered, eyes filled with tears.

"I'm sorry," Lee said, then explained why he'd come.

"I don't know where they are," she said, shaking her head.

"Come with us," Lee offered. "We have room on the Skyraker. You shouldn't be here alone."

"No," she replied. "I want to stay. If they return."

"We have something to do," he said gently. "But when we're done, if they haven't come back... let me take you to a new sanctuary. A place to start over."

"I don't want to start over," she said firmly. "But thank you."

"Then I'll visit," Lee promised.

"Before you go," she said, rising slowly, "Elijah would want you to have

this."

She handed him a package. Inside was a ranger's tunic woven from lichroot fiber.

"It will protect you from projectiles," she said. "Please, take it."

"Thank you," Lee said, and with a heavy heart, he left.

The The Skyraker circled wide around the capital, its shadow gliding over hostile skies. A direct approach was too dangerous. Instead, the crew touched down miles outside the city, hidden beneath the boughs of a dense forest. Lee and the twins set off on foot, weaving through thickets until they reached a remote guard post.

It didn't take long to subdue the soldiers stationed there—quick, silent work. Once the others were tied and unconscious, Lee found the captain, still conscious but disarmed, glaring defiantly.

"Do you know who Sebastian Greave is?" Lee asked, stepping into his line of sight.

The man's jaw tightened. "Yes."

"Good," Lee said, pulling a sealed note from his coat. He held it just out of reach. "Then you'll deliver this to him. Tell him to meet us at the location written inside."

The captain scoffed. "You think I'm going to help you? I have no reason to—"

"You do now," Lee interrupted. "We're already being watched, captain. Eyes in the trees, scopes on your every move. If you breathe wrong, they'll assume you're stalling."

Vic and Jasper flanked him, their postures loose but menacing, eyes glittering with barely contained violence.

The captain hesitated, scanning the treeline, sweat starting to bead along his temple. "Fine," he muttered, snatching the note. "But if this backfires—"

"It won't," Lee cut in, already turning away. "Just deliver it. And don't try anything clever."

As they disappeared into the forest shadows, Lee leaned close to Vic and whispered, "Be ready. If he runs, we need to know."



### 30 CAVERN TRAP

The journey back toward the nomadic region was rougher this time around. Easterly winds battered the Skyraker, forcing Captain Dahlia to constantly adjust altitude in search of smoother skies. She gritted her teeth at the helm while the rest of the crew tried to endure the stomach-churning ride. Their destination was the cavern Mira had recommended—a perfect trap to confront Sebastian and Iona and take back the shards.

Most of the crew remained below deck, recovering from the rough flight. Lee seized the moment to speak with them, offering gratitude and a reminder that their plans, while formed, could unravel at any moment. They tried to remain steadfast but he noted their pallor—especially Ronan, who resembled a green apple freshly plucked. The only ones seemingly unaffected were the twins, raised on the Skyraker and immune to its sway. Concerned for Ronan, Lee asked Morigana for help. She played a calming melody on her flute, the notes winding through the air like silk. The crew visibly relaxed, their breathing slowing, color returning to their cheeks.

They gathered to review the situation and what to expect. Morigana would be tasked with speaking to Iona, hoping to reason with them and avoid further conflict. Lee and his father would flank from the east side while Ronan and Lyra would approach from the west. Selena would be joined by the twins to provide support from a distance. It was a crude plan, but if they could keep out Sebastian's crew during the meeting, it would even the odds, especially since

they knew Iona had some tricks of her own.

They finally arrived at the location Mira recommended—a cave nestled in the range of the Blackspire Mountains. Dahlia hid the Skyraker between the peaks, keeping it out of sight. As usual, the captain stayed with the ship, and Calder joined her to keep the vessel ready for a quick getaway. The team made the trek over to the cave entrance. It took longer than hoped, but they managed to reach it before Sebastian’s airship arrived. The cave sat at the end of a narrow passage with high cliff walls—perfect for limiting entry and making an ambush unlikely.

At the entrance, Lee took out the feather Mira had given him and chanted the words she had taught him. After a few moments, the air grew cold. Everyone sensed something was happening, but they didn’t expect to see spectral beings walking out from the canyon walls. They looked similar to the Mountain Guardian but floated a few inches off the ground instead of flying menacingly. These spirits resembled nomadic people, with long dark hair drifting as if suspended in water. One spirit approached Lee, seemingly asking what he wanted. The hair on the back of Lee’s neck stood on end.

“We require assistance, great spirit of the mountains,” Lee said, holding up the feather.

The spirit extended its arms and pointed its palms skyward. Its eyes glowed. “What do you wish of us?”

“We ask that you allow only the people you see before you, and two others named Sebastian and Iona, into this cavern,” Lee replied.

“Living beings?” asked the spirit.

Lee glanced at his friends, equally puzzled. “Yes,” he answered, uncertain.

The spirits vanished.

“Is that it?” Lee asked, turning to Ronan and Lyra. They looked equally baffled.

“LET IT BE DONE!” a booming voice echoed and reverberated through the canyon.

“Okay then. Hopefully that worked,” Alistair said.

The team entered the vast cavern, the air dark and musty. They lit torches and arranged them to illuminate the space. It was large enough to fit a dozen airships like the Skyraker, with jagged stalactites and stalagmites forming a natural fortress. The formations provided excellent cover.

They took their positions and waited. Lee pulled out the shard, marveling at how such a small piece of metal had sparked so much conflict. A war was being fought over it. People had died. It didn’t seem right. He second-guessed

bringing it into this dead-end cave. What if it reunited with the others? He shook the doubt away. They had to get the other pieces—not to unite them, but to prevent anyone else from doing so.

While they waited, Vic and Jasper taught Selena how to play Knights and Jesters. She didn't enjoy losing and threatened to melt Vic's face off after he gloated about winning. The threat worked. He calmed down.

Then came a low rumbling, like distant thunder. Pieces of stone rained down from the ceiling, and the walls trembled.

"Please tell us that's one of your mystic abilities," Jasper said to Selena.

The rumbling increased in volume.

"I'm afraid not," she replied, scanning the cavern.

A massive boom shook the chamber. Lee caught Morrigana as she stumbled. Dust filled the air. They shielded their noses and mouths from the fine debris.

Then they saw it. Where the entrance had been now stood a towering, monstrous, steam-powered war machine—nearly two stories tall. Crafted from blackened brass and iron alloy, its torso resembled the ribbed chest of an armored knight, with thick plates hissing and locking into place under pressure. Twin steam exhausts roared from its back like dragon breath. Its arms ended in interchangeable claw-blades and rotary cannons. A faint, shimmering force field surrounded it.

Everyone froze in horror and awe.

"So that's what he's been working on," Alistair muttered.

"Whatever it is," shouted Jasper, raising his rifle, "it's about to eat hot lead."

"Wait!" Morrigana cried, but the twins had already opened fire.

"Get back, you fools!" Selena snapped. She'd seen it—the protective shield.

The bullets bounced off the barrier in translucent ripples. Realizing the assault was ineffective, the twins ducked behind stalagmites. The golem returned fire, forcing everyone into cover. Lee looked to his father, uncertain and afraid.

Morrigana spotted movement behind the golem—Sebastian and Iona. The golem stood motionless, its steam pulsing like breath.

"Don't be foolish!" Sebastian called. "It's over. Hand over the shard, and we'll be on our way."

Lee hesitated. He didn't want to endanger his friends. Alistair broke the silence.

"Fat chance, Sebastian," he said.

"Is that you, Alistair?" Sebastian asked.

"Yeah, it's me," Alistair replied. "I see you got that bucket of bolts to walk.

Congratulations.”

While they traded words, Morigana concentrated, reaching out to her sister.

*Iona, please. Let's talk in the dreamscape.*

*Yes, Morigana. What do you want?*

*Why are you doing this?*

*Just give me the shard. I can recalibrate all planes of existence. I can cleanse the world of suffering, corruption, and imperfection. I can fix everything.*

*It's not right. The Portal Sphere grants too much power.*

*That's the point, Iona snapped.*

*Do you know...*

*About the Portal Sphere? Yes, Iona replied, confused.*

*No. About Sebastian.*

*What about him?*

*Iona," Morigana said solemnly, "he's our father.*

The revelation disrupted Iona's concentration. The force field flickered.

Selena seized the moment. She released a focused Xia burst, knocking Iona unconscious. The shield dropped.

“Now!” Morigana shouted.

The team opened fire. Though the shield was down, the golem's armor remained formidable. Selena signaled to Lee with a twirl of her right index finger over the open palm of her left hand. He nodded and darted forward, conjuring a Palm Flame. Blue fire burst from his palm, striking the golem's back and spreading. When it reached the creature's eye sensors, it began thrashing.

Selena sent a mild electric shock to gauge the effect. The golem's interior lit up, revealing for a moment—

“Did you see that?” Morigana asked.

“Yes,” Selena replied. “The Xia crystal is in its chest.”

Sebastian opened fire in a rage. His shots went wide. As he reloaded, Lee turned to Ronan and Lyra.

“Go for the chest plate!”

The nomads sprang into motion. Their agility from playing Skornfut paid off as they evaded the golem's claws. They struck the weakened chest plate until it began to buckle.

Sebastian reloaded. Lee charged, but Sebastian fired and struck him in the stomach. Alistair didn't realize that his son was wearing a special tunic that protected him from projectiles and even though it hurt, it didn't penetrate the skin. Alistair leapt between them, taking the remaining shots. He collapsed.

Vic and Jasper returned fire. Lee dragged Alistair to cover. He was wheezing

and coughing up blood. Lee held his father's head in his lap. He had a difficult time speaking but managed to look up at his son, whose eyes were beginning to tear up.

"Remember, son," Alistair whispered, smiling weakly. "I was always proud of you."

Lee held him close as he died. He couldn't believe after all these years of looking and finally find this man he loved so dearly, he had to leave him again. Tears rained down his cheeks, but he quickly wiped them away. Grief turned to resolve. He stood up and in a moment of clarity, knew he had to put a to this madness.

"Vic, Jasper—keep Sebastian pinned down."

"Lyra, Ronan—get that chest plate open. Selena, wait for my signal."

Lee summoned another Palm Flame. It engulfed the golem's front, confusing and weakening it.

"Now, Selena!"

Electricity surged through the machine. Lyra and Ronan moved in close and pried at the plate with spears. Lee joined in, yanking until it gave way. They moved quickly to avoid the machine's claws.

Upon landing Lee fired an obsidian-tipped arrow that shattered the crystal which caused the golem to convulse. The machine couldn't contain the pressure building. Steam began to build up between its seams and bolts shot out in all directions.

"Hit the deck!" Lee shouted.

Everyone dove, everyone but Sebastian, who didn't realize what had happened. As he looked out to return fire he was hit by the golem's fiery blast as it exploded into hundreds of molten pieces. A shockwave rippled through the cavern. Most of the team held their hands to their ears which turned to a dull ring from the blast as they picked themselves of the ground.

During the chaos, the shard Lee was carrying fell from his bag. Someone walked over and picked it up, that someone woke up during the skirmish and wasn't affected by the blast due to her ability to cast a shield around herself. Her usual shimmering silver dress was now dull and torn but overall, she was in good form. She took out the other shards and started to piece them together.

"No! Iona, don't!" Morigana cried.

It was too late. The Portal Sphere appeared—a brilliant, serpentine swirl of color. Everyone's heart sank at the sight of the large sphere. All the work they put in to stop this event was now coming to end and failure was now immanent.

Then it came out of nowhere. As if in slow motion. An arrow struck Iona

in the shoulder. She looked down at the obsidian tipped arrow sticking out of her. She stumbled, dropping the Latchkey, and fell into the portal, which consumed her. The key shattered upon hitting the ground. As quickly as it appeared, the portal vanished. Everyone looked at one another still trying to comprehend what just transpired.

Lee quickly gathered the pieces, storing them carefully so didn't accidentally reform. He looked up.

A cloaked figure stood at the cavern's edge. Blonde hair peeked from the hood.

"Fiona!" Lee called. "Is that you?"

She turned to leave.

"Wait! How did you get in here?"

She looked back. Her green eyes glowed.

"Your mother is worried about you," Lee said.

She paused, then turned again.

"How did you know to come here?" he asked.

In a raspy voice, she replied, "A little bird told me."

And she walked away.

Morrigana and Selena walked over to the body of Sebastian. He was still clinging to life, but he was in bad shape. The blast tore through his body, he lost too much blood, and his breathing was ragged. He looked up at his daughters, reaching out a hand that wouldn't be met. They had no feelings for him, it was more like the ghost of a feeling that never got a chance to live. The only feeling they had this moment was curiosity of what could have been. They stood there watching this stranger who shared their blood and felt an odd hollowness as he lay dying.

Tears filled his eyes.

"All I really wanted," His voice slowly deteriorating as he spoke. "Was to see her, if only for one more time."

He looked up and let out one last breath.

## 31 THE RETURN HOME

The journey back down toward the Hollow Sky Tribe's encampment was met with mixed emotions. Even though they had successfully managed to stop the Portal Sphere from being used for both Iona and Sebastian's agendas, the cost was high. Lee's father had perished, as had Morigana and Selena's father and sister. Lee understood that sacrifices were sometimes necessary to accomplish a greater goal, but the loss of so many lives still felt extreme—even when it meant saving the world from overwhelming power.

Lee kept the shards close. The sorrow of losing his father and the need to ensure the shards remained safe led him to remain reclusive aboard the Skyraker until they arrived at the encampment. Upon landing, Lee pulled Ronan aside and presented him with one of the shards, asking for a favor: to hide it in a secure location where no one would know its whereabouts. Ronan agreed, and after heartfelt farewells, he and Lyra departed.

The next destination was southwest, toward Moonveil Grove. Lee had promised to visit Evangeline again and hoped his news would ease her heart. Seeing Fiona had been a surprise, but what shocked him most were her glowing eyes. How had she bypassed the mountain spirits? Was she becoming something more than human? Did she already know how to get past the spirits? Could Myrik have had something to do with it? He clearly knew where they were headed and must have known help would be needed. Lee was grateful she had been there, but the questions lingered.

At Evangeline's cottage, Lee knocked, Morigana beside him. This time, Elijah answered. The tall ranger looked tired but smiled and embraced Lee,

welcoming them inside. Evangeline soon joined them and made tea. Elijah recounted how, once strong enough, he had tried to track down Fiona through the Grove, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't find his little girl.

Lee shared his own journey—where he had gone, who he had met, how he had found his father, and the final confrontation. He told them about Fiona. She was alive, and that alone brought comfort. The Emberwoods held each other and wept. Lee didn't mention the eerie change he had noticed in Fiona. He felt it best to let them hold on to the hope of reunion.

When Lee offered to return the tunic Evangeline had given him, Elijah refused. Evangeline even joked that it was impolite to return a gift. It was the first time in a long while that she smiled and laughed, and it warmed Lee to see her spirit uplifted.

Before leaving, Lee handed Elijah a package containing one of the shards, asking him to hide it somewhere safe. Elijah accepted without hesitation. Evangeline gave Morrigana a basket of herbs, explaining that it would help those at the sanctuary, and that they were welcome to visit anytime they needed more. With gratitude, they said their goodbyes.

The Skyraker crossed the Gulf of Valtoria and the Great Ridge Mountains in record time, thanks to strong westerly winds. Finally, they returned to the Sanctuary, where Malrik Moondrift greeted them warmly, embracing both granddaughters—even Selena was excited to see her grandfather. But the joy faded when they spoke of the loss of Iona. Malrik then turned to Lee, offering his condolences for Alistair's death. The first order of business, he said, would be to hold a proper ceremony for Alistair Everhart and Iona Moondrift.

That night, they built a funeral pyre known as the Cinder Farewell. A structure of birch wood bore two bodies wrapped in fine linen. Though Sebastian had caused much pain and was the reason for Alistair's death, Lee agreed that his body should also be part of the ceremony, given he was Morrigana and Selena's father. Malrik said a few words in their honor, and the pyre was set ablaze. The flames danced, and Lee felt a strange hollowness settle in his chest.

Later that evening, they celebrated their Alistair and the lives of Alistair and Iona. There was dancing and singing. Even the usually stoic Captain Dahlia Cloudgear was coaxed into cheer. The twins got her to laugh, punch them playfully, and take a swig of ale. Selena, to everyone's astonishment, smiled and raised a toast.

As the night wore on, Lee wandered off to collect his thoughts. Malrik joined him.



"How are you doing, my boy?" the old mystic asked.

"I'm okay," Lee replied, attempting reassurance. He handed Malrik a wrapped package. "I wish there were a way to destroy these cursed shards."

Malrik tucked it into his pocket. "I'll do what I can to find a way to deactivate this. Only one needs to be dismantled to make the key unusable."

"Dahlia and her crew have agreed to take the fourth shard," Lee added.

"Good. They must be separated and kept far apart."

"I know you sent Fiona to help us," Lee said, lifting his gaze to the old man. "And I'm grateful she was there—but how did she get past the guardians of the mountain?"

Malrik drew a long, weathered breath before answering. "Your old acquaintance is changing, Lee. It's difficult to explain, even for me. She's evolving—awakening powers that set her apart from who she used to be. The process has been painful, a trial of body and spirit. But in that change, she's gained the ability to slip through unseen, and to witness things hidden from mortal eyes."

Lee didn't fully grasp what Malrik meant, but he understood enough. Fiona's presence had shifted the battle in their favor—her arrow had come swift and true, sending Iona into the swirling heart of the portal.

"Do you think Iona's still alive?" Lee asked, quieter now.

Malrik nodded solemnly. "Somehow... yes. I believe she is. I have to. She is still my kin."

A silence settled between them, heavy but not uncomfortable. Then Malrik stirred. "Oh, and—some of your old companions arrived earlier today. They came with a band of refugees from one of the smaller villages. I'll send them your way."

Before Lee could ask who it was, he heard a voice behind him.

"I cannot be seen, yet I brighten your eyes. I weigh nothing at all, yet my presence is wise."

Morrigan stepped into view and took his hands. "I grow when it's shared, and when true, it won't fade—a force of the heart, not something man-made."

Lee looked into her eyes, leaned in, and kissed her. The warmth of the moment had been long overdue. As they parted, he answered, "Love."

He leaned in again but was interrupted by a soft clearing of a throat. Turning, he saw someone he hadn't expected: the long red hair and green eyes were unmistakable.

"Helena?" he said.

"Hi, Lee." She smiled and gestured to the young man beside her. He had

matching red hair and a thick beard.

"Do you remember my brother Bram?"

Lee's eyes narrowed. He instinctively shifted into a defensive stance.

Both Helena and Bram laughed.

"It's okay," Bram said, extending a hand. "I apologize for what happened years ago. Things got out of hand. I'm a blacksmith now. But if you want to spar..."

Helena elbowed him in the ribs.

"I'm a teacher," she explained. "Malrik brought us here to help build this beautiful sanctuary."

"We're glad to have you," Morigana said.

"Although," Helena added, "shouldn't this place have a proper name?"

Morigana glanced at Lee, uncertain. But he had an idea.

"How about... Naevira?"

Morigana smiled and nodded in agreement of using her mother's name.

"Oh, I almost forgot." Helena said and rummaged through her bag and handed Lee a small book. He turned it over to a title that read *The Messenger*. Lee smiled as a lone tear fell down his cheek.

## 32 THE OTHER SIDE

Her silver gown was soaked with blood, the deep crimson blooming around the arrow lodged in her shoulder. Pain pulsed with every breath, sharp and unforgiving, as she collapsed to her knees on unfamiliar soil. The ground beneath her felt wrong—too soft, too warm—like breathing skin rather than earth. Nothing about this place felt natural. The colors were too saturated, the air too dense with presence. She had fallen through the portal, but where she had landed defied explanation.

Behind her, the portal had sealed shut with a silent flicker, leaving no trace. Around her stretched a world that looked like a painting half-dreamed by a mad god. The sky overhead bled violet, streaked with luminous ribbons of magenta and silver that curled and twisted in hypnotic spirals. A green sun hung low on the horizon, casting long surreal shadows across the alien terrain. There was no heat, no cold—just a strange, weightless neutrality. Yet the air vibrated with unseen energy, static and electric, prickling against her skin like a whisper.

She drew in a breath, wincing. The scent of this realm was like nothing she had ever known—cleaner than mountain air, laced with the sweetness of crushed mint and sun-ripened citrus. Beneath that, a sharp metallic tang lingered, like rainwater sluicing down ancient steel.

Sound came next—crisp, amplified. She could hear the flutter of wings above, but not any wings she recognized. When she lifted her gaze, wonder eclipsed her pain. High above, colossal beings floated through the amethyst skies. Their elongated bodies shimmered with translucence, trailing phosphorescent tendrils that undulated like jellyfish adrift in the ocean. Not birds—no feathers, no beaks—yet they moved with elegance, their haunting calls echoing like whale songs through the air, resonating deep in her bones.

Confusion warped into anger. Her pulse quickened. Who had sent her here? Why? The questions clawed at her insides, but before she could cry out, a gentle hand settled on her uninjured shoulder.

“Easy, child,” came a voice smooth as velvet, rich with knowing.

Iona turned her head and met the luminous green eyes of an elder mystic. The woman’s gaze pierced through her like starlight on still water. She leaned in, a faint smirk playing at her lips.

“There are other ways,” the mystic said, her voice a promise and a warning.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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