

*“Before I knew it was you, who had been saved.  
I could never imagine to finally meet you  
Till then, it was difficult for me to share this with you.  
Before you’ve become what you are, **A Grenadier**  
fighting for the right cause.  
I admire your strength and your soul.  
It reminds me of **them**.  
The ones who saved me, despite being trapped for many  
decades or more.  
From the death of a Saint.  
From a war after another.  
Erased from the waters  
Remains you a saved one.*

*Would you like to hear the story of Maynen and Maeve?”*

# I

## THY KINGDOM COME

### *The Kingdom of Bohemia*

1657

When the wounds of the Thirty Years' War had only just begun to scar over, the land of Silesia remained restless, its soil rich with coal, its people burdened with whispers.

Near the eastern marches of the Kingdom of Bohemia, where forests thickened into shadow and roads dissolved into mud, stood the town of Cosel. It was a modest settlement, bound by trade, faith, and fear. Beyond its crooked houses and smoke-stained roofs loomed a hill of pale stone, crowned by a castle that did not belong to the town in spirit, though it ruled it in fact.

There resided the Palefer family.

They were spoken of in lowered voices, never in daylight, and never without crossing oneself. The Palefers were the wealthiest family in all of Silesia, their fortune said to be carved from the earth itself. Sons of miners, the elders would say, yet no mine had ever yielded such unnatural prosperity. Gold came too easily to them. Silver clung to their name like frost.

And so, as all unexplained wealth demands, rumors took root.

The villagers spoke of a hidden order within the castle walls, the *Kult des Reichtums*, a secretive circle said to commune with forces forbidden by both Church and Crown. Some claimed the Palefers were devotees of “*Dämonische Zauberei*”, or the Darkened-Vow Sorcery which practices condemned not only by priests, but by imperial law. Others whispered of something older than sin, older even than Rome.

They feared the Strzyga.

In Silesian folklore, the Strzyga was no mere phantom. She was a devourer of souls, a creature born of those said to possess two souls, one human, one damned. It was believed such children were marked from birth, destined either for death or for transformation into something unholy. The elders warned that these beings did not always remain buried.

And worse still, they could be summoned.

It was said the Palefer castle had become a place of such summoning.

These fears, once scattered like ash, were given dreadful shape on a winter's morning when a body was discovered within the Grand Szigis Temple. A common man of Cosel, known to be neither wealthy nor wicked, lay upon the cold stone floor. His skin was pale beyond death, drained not only of blood but of all warmth, and his eyes, once brown had faded into a lifeless white.

No wound marked him.

No struggle had been heard.

The priests called it divine judgment. The townsfolk called it something else.

From that day forward, no one walked alone beyond the outskirts of Cosel after dusk. Mothers kept their children indoors. Travelers refused the road. And every misfortune, every sickness, every disappearance was traced, inevitably, back to the castle on the hill.

Yet within those walls, life told a different story.

There, under vaulted ceilings and candlelit corridors, knowledge, not fear, was pursued.

A man named Maynen Anselm had arrived in Cosel under noble invitation. A scholar of considerable promise, he had studied at the esteemed University of Königsberg. His reputation in the fields of history and antiquities had reached even the ears of Duke Aurel Palefer, lord of the castle and master of Cosel's lands.

The Duke had summoned him for a singular purpose: to document the history of Cosel and its surrounding

territories, a task both honorable and perilous in a land where truth was often buried deeper than coal.

Maynen arrived under escort, greeted not with warmth, but with a formality that bordered on coldness. The castle itself seemed reluctant to house him, its stone halls echoing too loudly, its servants speaking too softly.

Still, he accepted his chamber. He followed the rules. He bowed where expected.

And he observed.

By day, he worked diligently, transcribing records, studying relics, and submitting his findings to his superiors. His dedication did not go unnoticed. Within months, several of his works earned commendation, even praise from the Duke himself.

But by night, Maynen pursued a different inquiry.

One not written in ink.

One whispered in fear.

He listened to the servants. He studied the patterns of movement within the castle. He noted which doors remained locked, which corridors fell silent, and which names were never spoken. Beyond the duties assigned to him, he began to piece together a second history, one that did not belong in official records.

A history of deaths without cause.

Of villagers taken in the night.

Of something that fed not on flesh, but on the soul itself.

And as winter deepened, Maynen Anselm came to understand a truth far more dangerous than rumor:

The people of Cosel were not wrong to fear the castle.

They were wrong about why.

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Decades passed.

What had once been whispers in the border town of Cosel had not vanished with time, it had spread, adapted, and taken root in a new world. The Palefer name, once feared in the shadowed hills of Silesia, had risen beyond provincial power and reshaped itself into something far greater.

At the heart of this transformation stood the city of Paleferus, a state whose origins were as obscure as the wealth that sustained it. Marble towers replaced stone keeps, and law replaced rumor, yet beneath its polished grandeur lay the same unease that once haunted Cosel.

The Palefer family still ruled.

To the public, they were statesmen, patrons of learning, architects of prosperity. To the citizens, who called themselves *Pacificans*, they were the silent foundation of everything: trade, governance, even faith. And as before, there was one question no one could answer:

Was the Palefer fortune built upon power...

—or sacrifice?

## II

### THE DAY ANEW

Maynen Anselm had lived long enough to witness this transformation.

No longer merely a scholar wandering castle halls in secret, he had become something far more integral, and far more dangerous. Time had sharpened his mind and hardened his resolve. His name carried weight now, though few truly understood the extent of his influence.

To the public eye, Maynen served as the Supervisor of Security within the Palefer stronghold, a position of trust, discipline, and authority.

But beneath that title lay his true allegiance.

He was a member of the *Kult des Reichtums*.

Not just a participant, but a scholar of the *dark elemental*, a field of study that blurred the line between natural philosophy and the forbidden arts once feared in

Cosel. His current task was one of immense importance: to locate the *Forgotten Pages*, ancient fragments of knowledge said to contain the complete doctrine of dark sorcery.

If such knowledge were restored, it would not merely explain the Palefer legacy.

It would redefine it.



That night began like any other.

Routine had become Maynen's shield, predictable movements, controlled patterns, calculated silence. It allowed him to operate in two worlds at once without suspicion.

But something was wrong.

As he approached his chamber, his gaze fixed upon a detail so small it would have escaped any ordinary man:

His door was ajar.

Maynen stopped.

He never left it open.

A quiet tension crept into his chest. His mind raced, not with panic, but with precision. His chamber contained more than personal effects. It housed documents, coded research, and fragments of knowledge that, if discovered, would unravel not only his identity, but the very secrecy of the *Kult*.

Slowly, he reached for the dagger at his side.

Each step forward was measured. Silent.

Then, without hesitation, he pushed the door open.

Inside, a figure cloaked in shadow hastily gathered loose papers, stuffing them into a satchel with frantic urgency.

Maynen's voice cut through the room.

*"Hey!"*

The figure startled, turning only for a moment before darting toward the window embrasure. In a swift motion, they slipped through and vanished into the night.

Maynen did not call for the guards.

He could not.

To alert them would invite questions. And questions would lead to truths better left buried.

Instead, he gave chase.



The pursuit led him beyond the safety of the castle walls, into the depths of the Canterlun Forest.

A place unchanged by time.

Even in this new age, the forest remained as it had been in the days of Cosel: vast, suffocating, and filled with stories no one dared confirm. It was said that those who entered without purpose rarely returned with clarity—if they returned at all.

Maynen pressed forward.

Branches clawed at his coat. Roots threatened his footing. Yet he did not slow.

Ahead, the cloaked figure moved with unnatural speed.

*“This one’s trained...”* Maynen muttered under his breath.

Drawing upon his knowledge of the terrain, he veered off the main path, predicting the runner’s direction rather than following blindly.

Then.

A sharp metallic snap echoed through the trees.

A cry of pain followed.

Maynen halted.

*“What...?”*

Cautiously, he advanced.

Behind a tree, he found the intruder, caught in a concealed trap, its iron jaws clamped tightly around their leg. Blood seeped into the forest floor as the figure struggled, dagger drawn despite their injury.

Maynen approached slowly, his own weapon still in hand.

The two stood in silence for a moment, predator and prey, neither willing to yield.

Then the wind shifted.

The cloak slipped.

And the truth revealed itself.

Maynen's expression faltered.

*"You... you're a woman?"*

For the first time since entering the forest, hesitation broke through his composure.

The girl's face was pale, her breath uneven, her eyes filled not with defiance, but fear. Yet she did not lower her blade.

Maynen exhaled quietly.

Then, deliberately, he let his dagger fall.

*"I'm not going to hurt you."*

He raised his hands slowly, showing his palms.

The forest seemed to hold its breath.

After a moment, he stepped forward and knelt beside her. She tensed, expecting betrayal, but none came.

Carefully, he released the trap, easing the metal jaws apart despite the resistance. The moment her leg was freed, blood flowed more heavily.

Maynen worked quickly, removing a clean handkerchief and binding the wound with practiced efficiency.

*"You're losing too much blood..."* he murmured.

Her grip on the dagger weakened.

Her vision blurred.

And within seconds, she collapsed.

Maynen caught her before she struck the ground.

He studied her face for a moment, searching for recognition, for origin, for intent.

Nothing.

*“You’re not from here...”* he said quietly.

That alone made her dangerous.

Or valuable.

Perhaps both.

Maynen glanced back toward the forest, listening for any sign of pursuit.

There was none.

Without another word, he lifted her carefully into his arms.

*“I need to return before anyone notices,”* he muttered.  
*“Before ‘they’ notice.”*

And so, beneath the cover of night, Maynen Anselm carried the unknown girl back toward the Palefer castle.

Unaware that this single act of mercy would soon unravel everything he had spent decades protecting.

### III

## THE DOCTOR OF HELTRUTYN

Maynen returned to the castle under the cover of silence.

No torches shifted. No guards questioned him. The night, as always, concealed what it wished to protect.

Cradled in his arms, the unconscious girl stirred faintly as he entered his chamber. With deliberate care, he laid her upon his bed, not as a captor, not quite as a savior, but as something uncertain in between.

He wasted no time.

From a locked chest beneath his desk, he retrieved a short length of iron chain and secured her left wrist to the bedframe. Not tightly enough to harm, but firmly enough to prevent escape.

*“Precaution,”* he murmured under his breath.

Then he turned to his work.

At the desk, he gathered dried herbs, crushed valerian root, blackleaf extract, and a rare Silesian moss once used in treating deep wounds. He poured water into a shallow bowl, grinding the mixture with slow, practiced movements. The scent that rose was sharp, almost bitter.

Yet beneath that routine calm, his thoughts churned.

*She knew where to run.*

*She knew what to take.*

*And she knew enough to risk the forest.*

That was no ordinary thief.

Behind him, the bedsheets rustled.

Maynen did not turn immediately.

*“...Where am I?”* a weak voice asked.

He paused only for a moment before answering, still grinding the mixture.

*“You were unconscious,”* he said flatly. Then, after a breath, he added, *“And attempted to steal from me.”*

He turned.

The girl was awake now, pale, disoriented, but alert. Her hand pulled instinctively against the chain, the metal clinking sharply in the quiet room.

*“I’m not stealing!”* she snapped, her voice strained but fierce. *“I’m trying to save the Kingdom—from a war of Evastania!”*

Maynen raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

*“Evastania?”* he echoed. *“War?”* A faint, humorless scoff escaped him. *“You speak like a prophet...or a madwoman.”*

*“Then free me,”* she shot back, struggling again. *“Because you clearly don’t know who you’re holding.”*

Maynen studied her for a moment.

Then, calmly, he replied:

*“I am Maynen Anselm.”*

The name carried weight, whether she understood it or not.

She stilled for a brief second, then answered through clenched teeth:

*“Maeve Molfra. Doctor of Heltrutyn.”* Her eyes locked onto his. *“And you are making a grave mistake.”*

Maynen said nothing. Yet it sparked to him that he had heard of Heltrutyn as an old city just a couple of provinces in the East.

He shrugged it off. Instead, he lifted the bowl and approached her.

Maeve tensed immediately as he knelt beside her injured leg.

*“Don’t—”*

Too late.

The moment the ointment touched her wound, pain surged through her body like fire. She gasped sharply,

her grip tightening against the bed as she fought not to cry out.

*“It will burn,”* Maynen said evenly. *“If it doesn’t, it isn’t working.”*

*“You could’ve, warned me,”* she hissed.

*“I just did.”*

He continued in silence, applying the salve with careful precision. His movements were steady, clinical, detached, but not careless.

Once finished, he set the bowl aside and began wrapping the wound tightly with clean cloth, binding it to slow the bleeding.

For a moment, the room was quiet again.

Then.

Footsteps.

Heavy. Ordered. Approaching fast.

Maynen froze.

Not guards on patrol.

This was purposeful.

His eyes darted to Maeve.

Without a word, he grabbed a thick tarp from beside the bed and threw it over her just as the footsteps reached his door. In one swift motion, he kicked the bowl beneath the bed and scattered a few papers across the floor.

Then he turned, just as the door burst open.

Guards flooded in, spears drawn.

Behind them stood a man whose presence alone seemed to still the air:

Elder Churdeler.

One of the Eight.

The Third among them.

A man whose authority did not need to be spoken, it was felt.

His gaze fell upon Maynen immediately.

*“I was informed,”* Churdeler said slowly, his voice low and cutting, *“that there was a disturbance in your chamber.”*

Maynen forced a breath, steadying himself.

*“There was... a rodent,”* he replied, gesturing vaguely toward the floor. *“Fast. Persistent. It made quite a mess.”*

Churdeler did not respond at once.

Instead, he stepped forward.

*“A mess,”* he repeated quietly, glancing at the scattered papers. *“For such a small creature.”*

Maynen felt sweat gather at his temple.

Behind him, beneath the tarp, Maeve did not move.

Did not breathe loudly.

Did not betray them.

Churdeler began to walk.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

His eyes traced every inch of the room, the desk, the bed, the corners, the floor. Each step felt like a verdict waiting to be spoken.

Maynen's pulse pounded.

*If he checks the bed—*

*“Such disorder;”* Churdeler muttered at last, picking up a crumpled page. *“From a man entrusted with knowledge.”*

He turned sharply.

*“Fix yourself.”*

The words struck harder than a blow.

Then, without further accusation, he turned and exited the room. The guards followed in silence, their footsteps fading down the corridor.

Maynen did not move.

Not immediately.

Only when the final echo vanished did he step outside briefly, watching until Churdeler and his men disappeared into the dim halls of the castle.

Then he shut the door.

Locked it.

And exhaled.

A long, controlled breath.

When he pulled the tarp away, Maeve was staring at him not with fear this time, but something sharper.

Understanding.

*“You’re hiding something,”* she whispered.

Maynen met her gaze.

For the first time, there was no mask in his expression.

*“So are you.”*

And in that moment, unspoken but undeniable, a fragile truth settled between them:

They were no longer hunter and captive.

They were both in danger.

## IV

### DISTRUSTED COMPANION

Maynen remained still for a moment after the door closed, listening to the fading echoes in the corridor.

Only when silence reclaimed the room did he move.

He knelt quickly, retrieving the hidden bowl of ointment from beneath the bed, then turned and pulled the tarp away.

Maeve gasped sharply the moment the cloth lifted, drawing in air in quick, uneven breaths.

*“Can you at least cover me in a way I can breathe?”* she muttered, irritation cutting through her exhaustion.

Maynen hesitated, then looked away.

*“...Sorry.”*

He said it quietly, too quietly for a man who once carried himself with rigid control.

Without another word, he returned to his desk, setting the ointment down. He began gathering the scattered papers, carefully aligning them, smoothing creases, restoring order where chaos had briefly taken hold.

The routine steadied him.

Or at least, it tried to.

From the bed, Maeve watched in silence.

There was something different now, something fractured.

Her eyes drifted, recalling the voice of Elder Churdeler only moments before.

*“Such a clutter for a tarnished man... Fix yourself.”*

The words lingered.

She shifted slightly, her voice softer now.

*“You’re... tarnished?”*

Maynen paused.

Only briefly.

*“And what of it?”* he replied, not turning.

Maeve studied him.

*“A ‘tarnished’ man...”* she continued carefully, *“...that means you’re losing their favor; doesn’t it? Becoming... expendable.”*

His hands tightened around the papers.

*“You don’t know anything about me.”*

*“I know enough,”* she said. *“Enough to almost feel bad for you.”*

That did it.

Maynen let out a sharp, bitter laugh, one that broke halfway into something else entirely.

*“Oh, go on,”* he said, his voice rising. *“Make fun of me. You wouldn’t be the first.”*

He turned now, his composure cracking.

*“I have done everything they asked,”* he continued, his voice trembling. *“Every study. Every command. Every risk.”* His eyes glistened. *“And what do I get?”*

Silence.

*“Nothing but disappointment.”*

He wiped at his eyes quickly, as if ashamed of the act itself, then turned back to his desk. But it was too late, the damage had surfaced. A drop of tear fell onto the parchment beneath his hands, staining the ink.

Maeve’s expression shifted.

This wasn’t the man who had chased her through the forest.

This wasn’t the man who had held a dagger to her without hesitation.

This was someone... breaking.

Her voice softened.

*“I... I’m sorry.”*

Maynen didn’t respond.

*“I didn’t mean—”*

*“Why does it matter?”* he cut in, his tone cold again, but thinner now—fragile.

*“It matters because—”*

*“Just stop.”*

He turned suddenly and walked toward her.

Maeve stiffened instinctively, her breath catching as he approached. For a moment, she thought she had gone too far, that whatever restraint he had left was about to snap.

But instead—

He reached down.

And unlocked the chain.

The metal fell away from her wrist with a dull clink.

Maeve blinked, stunned.

“...*Why?*” she asked quietly.

Maynen didn't meet her eyes.

*“It's your choice,”* he said, turning away. *“Leave. Stay. It doesn't matter.”*

He bent down, picking up more scattered pages from the floor.

*“Just... leave me alone.”*

There was no anger in it now.

Only exhaustion.

Maeve hesitated, but only for a moment.

Freedom was instinct.

She moved quickly, slipping off the bed and limping toward the window. Ignoring the pain in her leg, she climbed through the embrasure and dropped outside, landing unsteadily on the cold ground below.

Then she ran.

Or tried to.

Each step sent sharp pain up her leg, but she pushed forward, heading toward the distant outline of the Forest. The same forest that had swallowed her hours before.

Freedom was close.

But just before she reached the tree line...

She stopped.

Her breath came unevenly. Her body trembled.

Her eyes dropped to her bandaged leg.

*He treated this.*

Not roughly. Not carelessly.

Carefully.

She closed her eyes.

“...*Idiot,*” she whispered, to herself.

After a long moment, she turned back.



Maynen was still in his chamber, kneeling among scattered papers, when the door creaked open again.

He didn't look up at first.

Until a familiar voice spoke.

*"I'm really sorry... Maynen."*

He froze.

Slowly, he lifted his gaze.

Maeve stood there, pale and limping, holding a bundle of his stolen documents.

*"...Why are you giving those back?"* he asked, his voice quieter now.

Maeve stepped forward and placed them on the desk.

*“To make up for earlier,”* she said. Then, after a pause,  
*“And... to thank you. For saving me.”*

Maynen stared at the papers for a moment before taking them, placing them carefully back into a drawer.

No anger.

No suspicion.

Just... fatigue.

He exhaled.

*“I’m tired.”*

Without ceremony, he removed his coat, then his boots, and lay down on the bed. The tension in his body seemed to unravel all at once as he turned onto his side, facing the window.

Maevé remained where she stood, uncertain.

For a moment, she considered leaving again.

Instead, she reached for the tarp and pulled it closer, settling herself on the far edge of the room.

The fabric rustled softly.

Maynen's voice, half-muted by sleep, broke the silence.

*"You're staying?"*

*"I can't walk far in this condition,"* Maeve replied. *"I'll leave when I can."*

A pause.

*"Do what you want."*

He didn't turn.

Didn't argue.

Within moments, his breathing steadied, sleep overtaking him faster than expected.

Maeve watched him from across the dimly lit room.

The man who had chased her.

The man who had saved her.

The man who had let her go.

Guilt settled heavily in her chest.

*“You really are a fool...”* she murmured softly.

But there was no mockery in it.

Only something quieter.

Something uncertain.

Outside, the wind stirred faintly against the castle walls.

And deep beneath them, far below stone and silence, something unseen seemed to shift, as if aware that two paths, once separate, had now begun to intertwine.

And neither of them understood yet...

what they had just stepped into.

## V

### MORNING DEW

Morning came quietly.

A thin beam of sunlight slipped through the narrow window, cutting across the dim chamber until it fell directly upon Maeve's face. The warmth stirred her from uneasy sleep, her brows tightening before her eyes finally opened.

She inhaled sharply.

For a moment, she forgot where she was.

Then the ache returned.

Her leg throbbed with a dull, pulsing heat, worse than before.

Maeve pushed herself upright from the tarp that had served as her bed. The room was still. Too still.

Her gaze shifted.

Maynen's bed was empty.

Only the faint impression of where he had lain remained.

Beside her, a folded note rested against the edge of the bed.

She reached for it, unfolding it with careful fingers.

*"I left the ointment on the table. I'll return after my labor above. I'll bring you breakfast."*

Maeve read it twice.

Something about the wording, simple, almost... considerate, felt out of place in a man like him.

She set the note aside and slowly moved to sit on the bed.

The moment her foot touched the floor, pain surged through her leg.

*"Ah—"*

She clenched her teeth, gripping the edge of the mattress as the throbbing intensified. The wound had worsened, no longer just a clean injury, but something inflamed... angry.

*“Infected...”* she muttered under her breath.

Her eyes lifted toward the table.

There it was the ointment, now stored in a small glass bottle, waiting.

Just a few steps.

Maeve steadied herself and rose again.

One step.

Then another.

Each movement sent sharp pulses of pain upward, weakening her balance.

Still, she pressed on.

*“Just... a little further...”*

Her vision blurred.

And before she could reach the table.

Her strength gave out.

Maeve collapsed.

The sound echoed softly through the room.

Just as the door opened.

Maynen stepped inside, a small satchel in hand.

He froze.

*“Maeve—?”*

In an instant, he dropped the bag and rushed forward, kneeling beside her. Without hesitation, he lifted her carefully and guided her back toward the chair.

*“What happened?”* he asked, his voice edged with concern he didn’t bother hiding.

Maeve winced, gripping her leg.

*“My wound...”* she breathed. *“I think—it’s infected.”*

Maynen exhaled through his nose, though his hands were already moving.

*“Quit dramatizing,”* he muttered. *“It’s minor.”*

But his tone didn’t match his actions.

He reached for the bottle, pouring a small amount of the ointment onto a clean cloth. Kneeling again, he carefully unwrapped the old bandage.

The wound beneath was swollen, reddened.

He paused, just for a second.

Then continued.

*“This will hurt,”* he said.

Maeve barely had time to react before he pressed the cloth against the wound.

She gasped sharply, her body tensing.

*“Still minor?”* she snapped through clenched teeth.

*“It means it’s working,”* he replied flatly.

Yet his touch was more careful now.

More precise.

After cleaning the wound, he replaced the cloth with fresh gauze, tighter, cleaner, more secure than before.

When he finished, he lingered a moment longer than necessary... as if ensuring the pain had settled.

Then he stood.

Without a word, he retrieved the satchel he had dropped and placed it on the table. From within, he pulled out a small loaf of bread, still warm.

He held it out to her.

Maeve blinked.

*“...For me?”*

*“You need strength,”* he said simply.

That was enough.

She took it quickly, hunger overtaking hesitation. The warmth surprised her, the bread soft, freshly baked, its scent rich and comforting.

She tore into it without restraint.

For a moment, the pain faded.

The fear faded.

Everything faded, except the simple act of eating.

Maynen turned away, walking toward the window. He pulled the curtain partially across, softening the harsh sunlight that had filled the room.

When he glanced back,

He saw her.

Not as the intruder from the night before.

Not as the girl who had stolen his work.

But as someone... human.

Maeve sat quietly now, her movements slower, savoring each bite. A faint smile had found its way onto her face, unforced, unguarded.

It was small.

But real.

Maynen felt something shift in his chest.

Unexpected.

Unwelcome.

Yet... not unpleasant.

*"...It's good,"* Maeve said softly, almost to herself.

Maynen leaned lightly against the wall, arms crossed.

*"I made it before sunrise,"* he said.

Maeve paused mid-bite, looking up at him.

*“... You made this?”*

He didn't answer.

But the faint curve at the corner of his lips was answer enough.

For the first time since entering the castle—

Maevie smiled at him.

And this time...

Maynen did not look away.

Unseen by either of them, beyond the thick stone walls and beneath the castle's foundations, movement stirred within the hidden depths.

The Kult did not sleep.

And neither, it seemed...

did their suspicions.



## VI

### THE LEGEND OF EVASTANIA

The warmth of the bread lingered only briefly.

Silence settled between them once more, but this time, it was not uneasy. It was waiting.

Maeve slowed her eating, her gaze drifting toward the table... toward the drawer where Maynen had placed the stolen pages.

She swallowed.

*“You’re going to ask eventually,”* she said quietly.

Maynen didn’t move from his place by the window.

*“I already did,”* he replied. *“You said you were ‘saving Evastania from a war.’”* His tone sharpened slightly.

*“That wasn’t an answer.”* He added. *“And what on earth is Evastania?”*

Maeve exhaled.

*“It wasn’t meant to be.”*

That earned his attention.

He pushed himself off the wall and stepped closer, not threatening, but deliberate.

*“Then start speaking like you intend to live,”* he said.

*“Because right now, you’re hiding more than I am.”*

Maeve looked up at him.

For a moment, she considered lying.

But something about him, about the way he had treated her, freed her, protected her from the Elder, made that harder than it should have been.

*“...Evastania isn’t just a place,”* she began slowly. *“It’s a legend of a greatness, what’s left of the old territories beyond the Union’s reach. Fractured states. Independent regions. Places the Palefer family could never fully control.”*

Maynen’s expression remained unreadable.

*“I know of them.”*

*“Then you know they’ve stayed quiet for decades,”* she continued. *“No major conflicts. No unified resistance. Just... survival.”*

She tightened her grip slightly around the bread.

*“That’s about to change.”*

Maynen’s eyes narrowed.

*“How?”*

Maeve hesitated.

Then—

*“Because of the ‘Forgotten Pages’.”*

The room stilled.

Maynen said nothing.

But his silence was no longer passive.

It was dangerous.

*“You shouldn’t even know that name,”* he said at last.

*“I didn’t,”* Maeve replied. *“Not until three months ago.”*

She shifted in her seat, wincing slightly as her leg protested.

*“In Heltrutyn, we started seeing cases, people brought in with symptoms we couldn’t explain. Not illness. Not poison.”* Her voice lowered. *“Their bodies were fine... but something was missing.”*

Maynen’s jaw tightened.

*“Their souls,”* he said.

Maeve looked at him sharply.

*“So you DO know.”*

He didn’t respond.

*“That’s when we found records,”* she continued. *“Old ones. Fragmented. Talking about rituals—about*

*extracting something unseen. About converting it into... power... or a portal to Evastania”*

She glanced toward the drawer again.

*“Then the name appeared. The Forgotten Pages. A complete doctrine. A method to control it.”*

Maynen stepped closer now.

*“You think that knowledge is being used?”* he asked.

*“I know it is,”* Maeve said firmly. *“And it’s not just experiments anymore.”*

Her voice trembled slightly, but not from fear.

From urgency.

*“The Union isn’t just maintaining power, Maynen... it’s preparing for expansion.”*

That made him pause.

*“...Expansion?”* he repeated.

*“War,”* she corrected.

The word hung heavily in the air.

Maeve leaned forward despite the pain.

*“Evastania’s regions are being destabilized, quietly. People are disappearing. Leaders falling. Entire communities weakened from the inside.”* Her eyes locked onto his. *“And when the time comes, the Union will step in, not as conquerors... but as ‘saviors.’”*

Maynen’s expression darkened.

*“A manufactured war...”* he muttered.

*“To justify control,”* Maeve said.

Silence followed.

But it wasn’t empty.

It was realization.

*“You think the Palefer family is behind this,”* Maynen said.

*“I don’t think,”* Maeve replied.

*“I’ve seen the pattern.”*

Her gaze hardened.

*“And I traced it back here.”*

To him.

To this castle.

To the Kult.

Maynen turned away, pacing slowly now.

*“That’s not possible...”* he murmured, though his voice lacked conviction. *“The Pages aren’t complete. We’ve been searching for decades.”*

Maeve frowned.

*“We?”*

He stopped.

Too late.

The word had slipped.

Maeve's eyes sharpened.

*"...You're not just studying this," she said. "You're part of it."*

Maynen didn't answer.

Didn't deny it.

That was enough.

A quiet understanding passed between them, fragile, dangerous.

*"You're one of them,"* Maeve whispered.

Maynen exhaled slowly.

*"...Yes."*

No justification.

No excuse.

Just truth.

Maeve leaned back, processing.

*“So the cult beneath this castle... the Damonische Zauberei... it’s real.”*

*“It’s more than real,”* Maynen said quietly. *“It’s deemed by everyone... necessary.”*

Maeve let out a bitter laugh.

*“Necessary? For what—draining people of their souls?”*

*“For understanding it,”* he snapped, turning back to her.

*“For controlling it before it destroys everything!”*

The room fell silent again.

But this time—

The distance between them had returned.

Not physical.

Ideological.

*“You sound just like them,”* Maeve said softly.

Maynen didn't reply.

Because part of him knew—

She wasn't entirely wrong.

After a moment, Maeve spoke again.

*“That’s why I came,” she said. “To find proof. To take whatever I could about the Pages... and bring it back before it’s too late.”*

*“And now?”* Maynen asked.

Maeve met his gaze.

*“Now I’m trapped in the very place I was trying to expose.”*

A faint, humorless smile touched her lips.

*“With the one man who might be able to stop it...”*

She paused.

*“...or help it happen.”*

Maynen said nothing.

Because for the first time—

He didn't know which one he was.



Far below them, deep within the hidden chambers of the castle, a circle of robed figures stood in silence.

At their center, Elder Churdeler watched a flickering sigil carved into stone.

One of the Eight stepped forward.

*"The Pages are stirring,"* the figure said.

Churdeler's gaze darkened.

*"...And so is he."*

Above them, in a quiet chamber touched by morning light—

Two unlikely allies sat on opposite sides of a truth  
neither could escape.

The war Maeve feared...

had already begun.

## VII

### TERMS OF AN UNLIKELY ALLIANCE

The silence that followed Maeve's words did not break easily.

It lingered, thick, uncertain, fragile.

Maynen stood still, his thoughts moving faster than his body ever could. Every instinct told him to shut her out... to deny everything, to return to the order that had defined him for years.

But something had shifted.

Not just in her.

In him.

*"You shouldn't have come here,"* he said at last, his voice quieter now.

Maeve let out a faint breath. *"And yet... here I am."*

Maynen turned to face her fully.

*“You understand what happens if they find out who you are?”* he asked. *“What you were looking for?”*

Maeve didn't hesitate.

*“I won't leave alive.”*

A pause.

*“And you?”* she added. *“What happens to you if they discover you helped me?”*

Maynen gave a humorless smile.

*“I won't be given the mercy of death.”*

That was enough.

The truth settled between them, not as fear, but as reality.

Maeve shifted slightly, steadying herself despite the pain in her leg.

*“Then we have the same problem,”* she said.

Maynen tilted his head.

*“Survival?”*

“No,” Maeve replied. *“Them.”*

That caught his attention.

She leaned forward, lowering her voice instinctively, as if the walls themselves might listen.

*“You said the Pages aren’t complete,”* she continued.

*“That means someone is still searching.”*

Maynen nodded slowly.

*“The Kult has been looking for the remaining fragments for decades.”*

*“Then we don’t stop them,”* Maeve said.

He frowned.

*“...What?”*

*“We get ahead of them.”*

The idea hung in the air.

Dangerous.

Reckless.

Brilliant.

Maynen studied her carefully.

*“You want to find the remaining Pages before they do?”*  
he asked.

*“I want to control who gets them,”* Maeve corrected.  
*“Because right now, you’re losing.”*

That stung.

But he didn’t deny it.

Maeve pressed on.

*“If the Union completes the doctrine first, the war won’t  
just happen, it will be unstoppable.”* Her eyes sharpened.  
*“But if we find them first...”*

Maynen finished the thought.

*“...we decide what happens next.”*

Silence.

Then—

A shift.

Not agreement.

Not yet.

But consideration.

*“You’re asking me to betray the very people who gave me purpose,”* Maynen said.

Maeve met his gaze without flinching.

*“I’m asking you to decide if that purpose is worth what it’s becoming.”*

That struck deeper than she intended.

Maynen turned away, running a hand through his hair.

Images flickered in his mind—

The experiments.

The missing records.

The quiet justifications.

The way Churdeler had looked at him.

*Tarnished.*

Expendable.

He exhaled slowly.

*“...If we do this,”* he said, his back still turned, *“we don’t trust each other.”*

Maeve blinked.

*“...What?”*

He turned back, his expression firm again, collected, calculated.

*“No blind faith. No illusions.”* His voice hardened. *“You lie, I walk away. I betray you, you run. We survive because we assume the worst of each other.”*

Maeve stared at him for a moment.

Then—

A faint smirk formed.

*“Good,”* she said. *“I was worried you’d be naïve.”*

Maynen almost smiled.

Almost.

*“Then we’re clear,”* he said.

*“Not yet,”* Maeve replied. *“We need terms.”*

He crossed his arms.

*“Go on.”*

Maeve raised a finger.

*“First: information is shared, selectively. No secrets that put the other at risk.”*

Maynen nodded once.

*“Second: if either of us is compromised, the other does not attempt a rescue unless it serves the mission.”*

He hesitated.

Then agreed.

*“...Understood.”*

*“Third,”* Maeve continued, her voice lowering, *“if we find the Pages...”*

She paused.

This was the line.

*“...we decide together what to do with them.”*

Maynen held her gaze.

Longer this time.

*“Agreed,”* he said.

The word felt heavier than it should have.

Binding.

Final.

Maeve extended her hand.

Maynen looked at it.

Not as a gesture of trust—

But as a contract.

After a brief pause, he took it.

Their grip was firm.

Equal.

And uncertain.

The alliance was formed.

Not out of loyalty.

Not out of friendship.

But necessity.

Maynen released her hand and immediately moved to the desk, pulling open a hidden compartment beneath its surface. From within, he retrieved a folded map, aged, marked, and far more detailed than any official chart.

Maeve leaned forward.

*“What is that?”*

*“A record of known fragment locations,”* Maynen said.

*“Or at least... where they were last reported.”*

He spread it across the table.

Several points were marked, some crossed out, others circled.

Maeve’s eyes scanned it quickly.

*“These are scattered across the Kingdom”* she murmured.

*“And beyond,”* Maynen added. *“Some date back to the old Silesian territories.”*

Her gaze paused on one marking.

Near the edge of the forest.

*“...This one,”* she said. *“It’s close.”*

Maynen followed her finger.

*“The Canterlun Forest,”* he confirmed.

Maeve looked up.

*“That’s where I was heading before I found you.”*

*“You mean before I caught you,”* he corrected.

She smirked faintly.

*“Details.”*

Maynen folded his arms.

*“That forest isn’t just dangerous,” he said. “It’s... unstable. There are places within it that don’t behave naturally.”*

Maeve tilted her head.

*“...Because of the rituals?”*

*“Because of something older,”* Maynen replied.

A brief silence followed.

Then Maeve leaned back.

*“Then that’s our first move.”*

Maynen didn’t argue.

Because deep down—

He had already come to the same conclusion.



Outside the chamber, footsteps passed.

Guards.

Routine.

Unaware.

But far below—

Elder Churdeler stood once more before the sigil.

This time, it pulsed faintly.

Alive.

*“He is deviating,”* one of the Eight said quietly.

Churdeler’s expression remained unreadable.

*“Good,”* he replied.

A pause.

*“Let him.”*

The others turned.

*“... You expected this?”*

Churdeler’s gaze darkened.

“No,” he said.

*“I’m counting on it.”*



Above, in a quiet room now bound by secrecy—

Two conspirators leaned over a map.

Planning their next move.

Neither trusting the other.

Both needing the other.

And somewhere between strategy and survival—

A fragile alliance had begun.

One that would either stop a war...

Or ignite it beyond control.

## VIII

### TO MEET THE FOREST AGAIN

They left before dusk.

Not by the gates, never the gates, but through a narrow servant's passage known only to those who worked within the deeper functions of the castle. Maynen led the way, his movements precise, practiced. Maeve followed closely, her limp slower now but steadier, aided by a makeshift support he had fashioned from a broken staff.

Neither spoke.

Not until the forest came into view.

The Canterlun Forest stood like a wall against the horizon, dense, unmoving, its canopy swallowing what little light remained. Even from a distance, it felt wrong. Not dangerous in the way of beasts or brigands... but something older. Something aware.

Maeve broke the silence first.

*“This is where your map leads?”*

Maynen nodded.

*“A fragment was last recorded here, decades ago.”* His eyes narrowed slightly. *“Before the Union. Before Paleferus was established.”*

Maeve glanced at him.

*“Back when you were still chasing rumors in Silesia?”*

Maynen didn't answer.

That was answer enough.

They stepped inside.



The moment they crossed the threshold, the world changed.

The air grew heavier, thicker, as though each breath had to be earned. The sounds of the outside world faded almost instantly, replaced by an unnatural stillness. Even

their footsteps seemed muffled, swallowed by the forest floor.

Maeve frowned.

*“...It’s too quiet.”*

“Yes,” Maynen replied. *“That’s the first sign.”*

*“The first of what?”*

*“That you shouldn’t be here.”*

She rolled her eyes slightly, though her grip tightened around the staff.

*“Comforting.”*

They moved deeper.

The path, if it could be called that, twisted unnaturally, bending in ways that defied memory. Trees seemed to shift when not directly observed. Landmarks vanished. Directions lost meaning.

Maeve stopped.

*“Wait... we passed that tree already.”*

Maynen didn't look surprised.

*“We didn't,”* he said.

*“... You're sure?”*

*“No,”* he admitted. *“But that's the point.”*

She stared at him.

*“I hate this forest.”*

Maynen almost smirked.



After what felt like an hour, though neither could be certain, they reached a clearing.

At its center stood something unnatural.

A stone formation, half-buried, carved with markings too deliberate to be natural. Symbols spiraled across its

surface, faintly glowing, pulsing like a heartbeat beneath the stone.

Maeve stepped closer instinctively.

*“...That’s it,” she whispered. “Isn’t it?”*

Maynen approached cautiously.

*“Yes,” he said. “A marker. Or a seal.”*

He knelt, brushing away dirt to reveal more of the carvings.

Maeve leaned in.

*“These symbols...” she murmured. “They’re not just decorative. They’re... structured. Like a language.”*

*“They are,” Maynen said. “One we were never meant to fully understand.”*

Before she could respond—

The air shifted.

A low sound echoed through the clearing.

Not a growl.

Not a voice.

Something in between.

Maeve froze.

*“...Did you hear that?”*

Maynen stood slowly.

*“Yes.”*

The wind picked up, but only within the clearing. The trees beyond remained still.

The symbols on the stone pulsed brighter.

Faster.

Then—

A figure moved between the trees.

Too fast to see clearly.

Maeve stepped back.

*“What was that?”*

Maynen’s voice lowered.

*“Don’t move.”*

Another shift.

This time, closer.

A pale shape flickered into view, then vanished again.

Maeve’s breath quickened.

*“...Maynen.”*

*“I know.”*

Then—

It appeared.

Fully.

Standing at the edge of the clearing.

A woman.

Or something that had once been one.

Her skin was unnaturally pale, stretched thin across her face. Her eyes, covered by a cloth, colorless, reflected no light. Her limbs seemed slightly elongated, her posture wrong, as though her body had forgotten how to be human.

Maeve's voice trembled.

*"...What is that?"*

Maynen didn't answer immediately.

Because he already knew.

*"...A Strzyga,"* he said quietly.

The word seemed to sink into the ground itself.

Maeve's eyes widened.

*“That’s not possible, those are just—”*

*“Myths?”* Maynen finished.

The creature tilted its head.

Listening.

Watching.

Waiting.

Then it smiled.

Too wide.

Too sharp.

And vanished.

*“Move!”* Maynen snapped.

Too late.

It reappeared behind them.

Maeve gasped as the creature lunged—

Maynen reacted instantly, pulling her aside as claws tore through the air where she had stood. He drew his dagger, slashing toward the figure, but the blade passed through it as though striking mist.

*“It’s not fully physical!”* he shouted.

Maeve scrambled back.

*“Then how do we fight it?!”*

*“We don’t,”* Maynen said. *“We survive it!”*

The Strzyga moved again, faster this time, circling them, its form flickering between solid and spectral.

Maeve’s mind raced.

*“The stone!”* she shouted. *“It’s reacting to it!”*

Maynen glanced at the formation.

She was right.

The symbols pulsed in rhythm with the creature’s movements.

*“A binding point...”* he realized. *“It’s tethered to it.”*

*“Then break it!”*

Maynen hesitated.

*“If I do, we don’t know what happens.”*

*“It’s better than dying!”*

The Strzyga lunged again—

This time catching Maynen across the shoulder, sending him crashing to the ground. He gasped, pain cutting through him as something deeper than flesh seemed to tear.

Maeve grabbed the fallen dagger.

*“Hey!”* she shouted, drawing the creature’s attention.

*“Over here!”*

The Strzyga turned toward her.

Smiling.

Maeve didn't run.

Instead, she drove the dagger into the glowing stone.

The moment the blade struck—

The clearing erupted.

Light burst outward, blinding and violent. The symbols shattered, their glow collapsing inward before exploding into fragments of fading energy.

The Strzyga screamed.

Not in pain—

But in release.

Its form twisted, unraveling into strands of pale light before vanishing completely.

Silence returned.

Heavy.

Absolute.

Maeve dropped the dagger, breathing hard.

*“...Did we just—”*

Maynen pushed himself up slowly, wincing.

*“We destroyed the seal,”* he said.

Maeve looked at him.

*“And the creature?”*

He shook his head.

*“No.”*

His gaze darkened as he looked at the shattered stone.

*“We set it free.”*



A faint sound echoed deeper within the forest.

Not one voice.

Many.

Maeve's blood ran cold.

*"...There's more."*

Maynen nodded.

*"Yes."*

He stepped forward, picking up a fragment of the broken stone. Embedded within it, faint, but unmistakable, that it was a piece of parchment. Ancient. Preserved.

A fragment.

Of the Forgotten Pages.

Maeve stared at it.

*"...So it's true."*

Maynen closed his hand around it.

*"Yes."*

But his eyes remained fixed on the forest beyond.

Because now—

They weren't alone.

And whatever had been sleeping beneath Canterlun...

Was beginning to wake.

## IX

### THE COST OF POWER

The forest did not stay silent for long.

That distant echo, once faint, grew into something unmistakable.

Movement.

Not one.

Many.

Maeve's breath hitched. "*Maynen... we need to go.*"

But Maynen didn't move.

Not yet.

His eyes were fixed on the fragment in his hand.

The parchment was older than anything they had seen, its edges blackened as though burned, yet untouched by

decay. Strange markings crawled across its surface, shifting faintly like ink that refused to stay still.

“...*This isn't just a record,*” he murmured.

Maeve stepped closer despite herself.

“*What is it?*”

Maynen turned the fragment slightly.

The symbols aligned.

And for a brief moment—

They understood.

Not fully.

But enough.



“*It's not... sorcery,*” Maeve whispered.

Maynen shook his head slowly.

“No.”

His voice lowered.

*“It’s a system.”*

The markings reorganized themselves into patterns, structured, deliberate. Not spells, not incantations, but instructions.

Principles.

Rules.

*“The Kult was wrong,”* Maynen continued, his tone tightening. *“We thought the ‘Pages’ taught how to use power.”*

Maeve’s eyes widened as realization dawned.

*“...They teach how to convert it.”*

Maynen nodded.

*“Not magic as creation,”* he said. *“Magic as extraction.”*

The fragment pulsed faintly in his hand.

And then—

Images.

Not seen with the eyes.

But felt.

A body.

Still.

Alive, but empty.

Something unseen being pulled from it, thread by thread,  
like light unraveling from flesh.

Maeve staggered back.

“...*No*...”

Maynen clenched his jaw.

“*The soul,*” he said.

The word carried weight now.

Reality.

*“The system defines it as essence,”* he continued. *“A measurable force. Transferable. Divisible.”* His voice grew quieter. *“Consumable.”*

Maeve shook her head, horrified.

*“That’s what you’ve been studying?”* she demanded. *“This is what your cult calls understanding?”*

Maynen didn’t answer immediately.

Because the fragment wasn’t finished.

The symbols shifted again.

Revealing something worse.

*“Wait...”* he muttered.

Maeve leaned in despite her fear.

*“What is it?”*

Maynen's expression darkened.

*"There's a second principle."*

He turned the fragment toward her.

*"Extraction... requires balance."*

Maeve frowned.

*"Balance?"*

Maynen's voice dropped to a near whisper.

*"For every essence taken... something must be given."*

Silence.

Then—

*"... Given?"* Maeve repeated.

Maynen's grip tightened.

*"Memory,"* he said. *"Time. Identity."*

Maeve stared at him.

*“...What?”*

*“The system doesn’t allow creation without loss,”* he continued. *“You can take power, but it takes something from you in return.”*

He looked at her.

*“Not physically.”*

A pause.

*“But... fundamentally.”*

Maeve’s voice trembled.

*“You’re saying... every time someone uses this... they lose part of themselves?”*

Maynen nodded once.

*“That’s why the victims feel empty,”* he said. *“Their essence is taken, and the one who takes it... begins to change.”*

Maeve’s stomach turned.

*“Into what?”*

Maynen didn't answer.

Because they already had.

The Strzyga.



A scream tore through the forest.

Not distant.

Close.

Maeve turned sharply.

*“...That's not the same one.”*

*“No,”* Maynen said.

His voice was grim.

*“It's not.”*

Branches snapped in the distance.

Fast.

Too fast.

*“They’re coming,”* Maeve whispered.

Maynen folded the fragment quickly, tucking it inside his coat.

*“Then we run.”*



The forest shifted the moment they moved.

Paths twisted. Shadows stretched. The air itself seemed to resist them.

Behind them—

Something followed.

Maeve limped but forced herself forward, leaning on the staff as they pushed through thick undergrowth.

*“How many are there?!”* she called out.

Maynen didn't look back.

*"More than one."*

That was all she needed to hear.

A blur shot past the trees to their left.

Then another to the right.

They were being surrounded.

Maeve's breath grew uneven.

*"This isn't working, we're running blind!"*

Maynen's eyes scanned the terrain.

*"No,"* he said. *"We're not."*

He veered sharply to the left.

*"Where are we going?!"* Maeve demanded.

*"There's an old boundary line,"* he said. *"A natural break in the forest's influence. If we reach it—"*

A shape dropped in front of them.

Maeve stumbled back.

Another Strzyga.

This one... different.

Less human.

More distorted.

Its limbs bent at unnatural angles, its face barely holding form.

Its eyes locked onto them.

Hungry.

Maeve gripped the staff tighter.

*“Tell me you have a plan.”*

Maynen reached into his coat—

And pulled out the fragment.

*“You wanted to know what it does?”* he said.

Maeve’s eyes widened.

*“Maynen, don’t—”*

Too late.

He pressed his hand against the parchment.

The symbols ignited.

For a moment, nothing happened.

Then—

Pain.

Sharp. Immediate.

Maynen gasped as something invisible tore through him, not flesh, but deeper. His vision blurred as a memory slipped—

A voice.

A place.

Gone.

“...*What did you just do?!*” Maeve shouted.

Maynen steadied himself, barely.

“*I gave it something.*”

The air around him shifted.

Subtle, but real.

The Strzyga lunged—

And this time—

Maynen struck.

His hand met the creature mid-motion—

And it *reacted*.

A shockwave burst outward, sending it crashing into the trees.

Maeve stared.

*“You—hit it...”*

Maynen staggered slightly.

*“...Now run.”*

They didn't stop.

Not for breath.

Not for pain.

Behind them, the forest erupted with movement, creatures stirred by the broken seal, drawn to the disturbance, to the fragment, to the *essence* now lingering around Maynen like a beacon.

Maeve glanced at him as they ran.

*“You're bleeding.”*

*“I'm fine.”*

*“You're lying.”*

*“...I know.”*

The trees began to thin.

Light, faint, but real—broke through the canopy ahead.

*“The boundary!”* Maynen shouted.

They pushed harder.

The forest resisted.

The air thickened—

Then—

They broke through.

The moment they crossed the unseen line, everything changed.

The weight lifted.

The silence broke.

The forest behind them... stopped.

Maeve collapsed to her knees, gasping for breath.

Maynen staggered forward, barely catching himself before falling.

Neither spoke for a long moment.

Finally—

Maeve looked up at him.

“...*What did it take?*” she asked quietly.

Maynen didn't answer.

He couldn't.

Because he didn't know.

Not exactly.

Only that something—

Someone—

Was missing.

And he would never remember what.

Behind them, deep within the Canterlun Forest—

Eyes opened.

Not one.

Not many.

But something far worse.

Ancient.

Aware.

And now—

Awake.

## X

### WHAT FOLLOWS THEM HOME

The land beyond the boundary felt... normal. Too normal. The wind moved freely again. The silence lifted. Even the ground beneath their feet seemed lighter, as if the forest itself had been pressing against them the entire time.

In the distance—

The Palefer castle rose.

Cold. Watchful.

Safe... at least in appearance.

Maeve slowed first, her breath uneven as she leaned heavily on the staff. Maynen followed shortly after, though his steps faltered more than he let on.

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then Maeve broke the silence.

*“We made it.”*

Maynen didn't answer.

His eyes were fixed on the castle.

*“...Not yet.”*

Maeve frowned.

*“What do you mean—”*

Then she saw it.

Movement along the outer walls.

Guards.

More than usual.

Patrolling.

Watching.

*“...That's new,”* she muttered.

Maynen's expression darkened.

“No,” he said quietly. *“That’s not patrol.”*

The guards weren’t idle.

They were searching.

Scanning the surrounding land. Speaking in short bursts.  
Positioned in intervals that formed a pattern.

Containment.

Maeve’s grip tightened around the staff.

*“They know something happened.”*

Maynen nodded once.

*“The disturbance in the forest... the broken seal...”* His voice lowered. *“Or us.”*

Maeve glanced at him.

*“... Churdeler.”*

*“Yes.”*

The name hung between them like a warning.

They stood there, just beyond the reach of the castle's gaze, yet close enough to feel its weight.

For the first time since leaving the forest, the question wasn't survival.

It was what came next.



Maeve turned to him.

*"The fragment,"* she said. *"We need to decide."*

Maynen didn't hesitate.

*"We don't turn it over."*

*"Agreed."*

*"We don't destroy it,"* he added.

Maeve hesitated slightly—but nodded.

*"...Agreed."*

Silence followed.

Then she looked at him more seriously.

*“And we don’t use it,”* she said.

That made him pause.

Not long.

But enough.

*“...Not unless we have no choice,”* he corrected.

Maeve exhaled slowly.

*“That is a choice, Maynen.”*

*“And so is dying,”* he replied.

Their eyes met.

The same argument, unspoken, unresolved.

Power versus consequence.

Finally, Maeve looked away.

*“...We hide it,”* she said.

Maynen nodded.

*“Somewhere no one will think to look.”*

*“And we don’t talk about it inside the castle,”* she added.

*“Not to anyone. Not even indirectly.”*

Maynen’s voice lowered.

*“Especially not indirectly.”*

A beat passed.

Then—

*“We plan,”* Maeve said.

Maynen glanced at her.

*“For what?”*

She met his gaze again.

*“For the rest of the Pages.”*



They moved carefully along the outer ridge, avoiding direct paths, keeping to shadows and broken terrain. Maynen guided them toward a lesser-used entry a narrow postern gate partially concealed by overgrowth.

Before approaching, he stopped.

*“Once we’re inside,”* he said, *“we separate.”*

Maeve frowned.

*“That’s risky.”*

*“So is being seen together;”* he countered. *“You shouldn’t exist here.”*

She gave a faint, humorless smile.

*“Good to know.”*

*“I’ll draw attention if needed,”* he continued. *“You return to my chamber. Stay out of sight.”*

*“And if you don’t make it back?”*

Maynen held her gaze.

*“Then you leave.”*

Maeve didn't like that answer.

But she didn't argue.

*“...Fine.”*

A pause.

Then, more quietly—

*“Don't get caught.”*

Maynen almost smirked.

*“I was about to say the same.”*



They slipped inside unnoticed.

Or so they thought.

From a high balcony overlooking the lower grounds, a robed figure stood still, watching.

Not moving.

Not speaking.

Only observing.

Far below, Maynen and Maeve disappeared into the stone corridors.

The figure turned slightly.

“...*So,*” a voice murmured.

“*They return.*”

Behind him, shadows shifted.

Elder Churdeler stepped forward.

“*Not alone,*” he added.

His eyes lingered on the place where Maeve had passed.

“...*Interesting.*”



Hours later—

Back in the chamber.

The door shut quietly.

Maeve sat at the edge of the bed, her leg rewrapped, her expression distant.

Maynen stood by the desk, removing the fragment from his coat.

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then Maeve broke.

*“... You lost something.”*

It wasn't a question.

Maynen stilled.

*“... Yes.”*

*“What was it?”*

He shook his head.

*“I don’t know.”*

Maeve swallowed.

*“That’s the problem, isn’t it?”*

Maynen looked at the fragment in his hand.

*“The system doesn’t take what you expect,”* he said. *“It takes what it chooses.”*

Maeve’s voice lowered.

*“And you’d still use it again?”*

He didn’t answer.

Because the truth was—

He might.

That scared her more than the forest.



Maeve leaned forward slightly.

*“There’s something else,”* she said.

Maynen glanced at her.

*“What?”*

She hesitated.

*“...The fragment.”*

He raised a brow.

*“What about it?”*

Maeve’s fingers tightened slightly against the bed.

*“When you activated it... I felt something.”*

That caught his attention.

*“...Felt?”*

She nodded slowly.

*“Not like you did. Not loss.”* Her voice softened.

*“Recognition.”*

Maynen's expression shifted.

*"What do you mean?"*

Maeve looked at her hands.

*"...Like it wasn't foreign to me."*

Silence.

Heavy.

Unavoidable.

Maynen stepped closer.

*"That's not possible,"* he said. *"You've never used it."*

*"I know,"* she replied. *"That's why it doesn't make sense."*

Her eyes lifted to meet his.

*"...Unless I was meant to."*

The words lingered.

Dangerous.

Suggestive.

Maynen's mind raced.

*"Maeve..."* he said slowly, *"if the system responds to you differently—"*

*"That's exactly why we shouldn't test it,"* she cut in quickly.

But even as she said it—

She wasn't fully convinced.

Maynen saw it.

*"You felt it,"* he said. *"Which means the fragment recognizes something in you."*

Maeve shook her head.

*"Or it's trying to trick me."*

*“Or,”* Maynen countered, *“you’re the reason it can be controlled.”*

That stopped her.

Completely.

The idea settled in—

Unwelcome.

Terrifying.

Possible.



A knock echoed faintly in the distance.

Not at their door.

But close enough.

Maeve stiffened.

*“...We’re out of time.”*

Maynen quickly wrapped the fragment and concealed it within a hidden compartment beneath the floorboards.

*“We continue this later,”* he said.

Maeve nodded.

*“But not here.”*

Another knock.

Closer.

Maynen straightened.

*“Next time,”* he said quietly, *“we test it.”*

Maeve’s breath caught.

*“... You mean ‘I’ test it.”*

He didn’t deny it.

Their eyes met one last time.

Not with trust.

Not with certainty.

But with the weight of what lay ahead.



Because the next mission would not be about finding the  
Pages.

It would be about understanding them.

And whether Maeve Molfra—

Was meant to wield the very power she feared.

## XI

### THE WEIGHT SHE TAKES

The mission was not supposed to go wrong.

That was the first lie.

The second was believing they had a choice.

It began just beyond the eastern ridge of the castle, where the land dipped into a forgotten village swallowed by time. Broken rooftops leaned into one another like tired men, and the air carried a stillness that felt... wrong.

Maeve stepped carefully over the debris, her staff grounding each step.

*“You’ve been here before?”* she asked quietly.

Maynen shook his head.

*“No. But the records mentioned it.”* His eyes scanned the ruins. *“A failed settlement. Abandoned decades ago.”*

Maeve frowned.

*“...Nothing just ‘abandons’ like this.”*

Maynen didn’t reply.

Because he agreed.



They found it at the center of the village.

Not a fragment.

Not parchment.

A body.

Still.

Unmoving.

Maeve rushed forward instinctively, dropping to her knees.

*“Wait—”* Maynen warned.

Too late.

Her fingers pressed against the man's neck.

Cold.

But—

*"...There's a pulse,"* she said, startled.

Maynen stepped closer.

*"That's not possible."*

Maeve looked up at him.

*"He's alive."*

Barely.

His chest rose in shallow, uneven breaths. His skin was pale, drained, as though something had hollowed him out from within.

Maeve's voice lowered.

*"...This is what you showed me."*

Maynen's jaw tightened.

"Yes."

Not dead.

Not alive.

Something in between.

The cost of extraction.



A sound echoed through the village.

Low.

Wet.

Maeve froze.

"...*We're not alone.*"

Maynen's hand instinctively moved toward his coat,  
toward where the fragment was hidden.

Shapes began to emerge from the surrounding ruins.

Slow.

Dragging.

More bodies.

But not like the man before them.

These moved.

Wrong.

Their limbs jerked unnaturally, their eyes empty yet searching.

Maeve's breath caught.

*"...They're still alive."*

"No," Maynen said quietly.

*"They're used."*

The creatures turned toward them in unison.

And then—

They moved.



“Get back!” Maynen shouted.

Maeve struggled to stand as the first of them lunged forward. Maynen intercepted it, pushing it aside, but more followed, too many, closing in from every direction.

Maeve gripped her staff, striking one back, but her injured leg faltered.

*“Maynen—!”*

*“I know!”*

They were being surrounded.

Again.

But this time—

There was no forest boundary.

No escape.



Maeve's gaze darted to the man on the ground.

Barely alive.

Drained.

A thought surfaced.

Unwanted.

Impossible to ignore.

*"No..."* she whispered.

Maynen saw it.

*"Maeve—don't."*

Her eyes met his.

*“They’re already gone,”* she said, her voice trembling.

*“But he’s not.”*

*“That’s not saving him,”* Maynen warned.

*“That’s Ending him,”* she shot back.

Another creature lunged.

Closer.

Closer.

Maeve’s grip tightened.

*“I can feel it,”* she whispered.

The words hung in the air.

Maynen’s heart sank.

*“Maeve—listen to me—”*

*“I can feel the system,”* she said, her voice shaking.

*“It’s... it’s like it’s waiting.”*

Waiting for her.

Another step back.

No space left.

No time.

Maeve looked at the man one last time.

*“I’m sorry,”* she whispered.

Then—

She placed her hand over his chest.

Suddenly.

The world stilled.

The moment her skin made contact—

The fragment reacted.

Even from a distance.

Maynen felt it.

A pull.

A shift.

*“Maeve—!”*

Too late.

It didn't hurt at first.

That was the worst part.

It felt—

Natural.

Like breathing.

Like something she had always known how to do.

Energy flowed—not into her hands—

But through them.

The man's body trembled.

A faint glow, barely visible, began to thread out from his chest, like strands of light unraveling into the air.

Maeve gasped.

“...*I can see it...*”

His essence.

His life.

His *everything*.

And it was leaving him.

Flowing—

Into her.

Then—

The cost came.

Maeve froze.

A memory surfaced.

Clear.

Vivid.

A voice calling her name.

Warm.

Familiar.

“...*No*...”

The memory began to slip.

Like sand through her fingers.

“*Stop—*” she gasped.

But the system did not listen.

The exchange had begun.

Something must be given.

The voice faded.

The face blurred.

Gone.

Maeve screamed.

The surge exploded outward.

A shockwave rippled through the ground, throwing the approaching creatures back violently. The air cracked with force as the energy settled—

Into her.

Silence followed.

Heavy.

Final.

Maeve collapsed.

*“Maeve!”*

Maynen rushed to her side, dropping to his knees. He turned her over carefully, his hands trembling more than he realized.

*“Maeve...look at me...”*

Her eyes fluttered open.

But something—

Something was different.

Not empty.

Not broken.

But changed.

*“...I did it,”* she whispered.

Maynen swallowed hard.

*“Yes.”*

Her gaze drifted.

*“...Why does it feel like I lost something?”*

Maynen’s chest tightened.

Because he knew that feeling.

*“...Because you did.”*

Maeve’s brows furrowed weakly.

*“...What was it?”*

He hesitated.

Then—

*“...I don’t know.”*

Her breathing shook.

*“I can’t remember...”* she whispered. *“There was... something important...”*

Maynen clenched his jaw.

*“...I know.”*

Silence settled between them.

But it wasn’t the same as before.

This time—

It was shared.

Maevie tried to sit up, but winced.

Maynen immediately steadied her, more gently than she expected.

*“Don’t,”* he said quietly.

She looked at him.

Really looked at him.

And for the first time—

There was no argument.

No resistance.

Only understanding.

*“... You were right,”* she said softly.

Maynen shook his head.

*“No.”*

Her voice trembled.

*“It takes from you.”*

A pause.

*“...And you still chose to use it,”* he replied.

Maeve looked away.

*“...I didn’t have a choice.”*

Maynen studied her.

Then, more quietly—

*“...Neither did I.”*

Something shifted.

Not trust.

Not yet.

But something close.

Something fragile.

Real.

Maeve's hand moved slightly—

And without thinking—

Maynen caught it.

The contact was brief.

But neither pulled away immediately.

*"...Does it always feel like this?"* she asked.

He understood what she meant.

The emptiness.

The absence you couldn't name.

*"... Yes,"* he said.

A beat.

Then, softer—

*"But it fades."*

Maeve let out a quiet breath.

*“...I hope so.”*

Maynen didn't let go right away.

And Maeve didn't ask him to.

Around them, the village fell silent once more.

The creatures no longer moved.

The system had taken what it needed.

And given what it promised.

But as they stood to leave—

Maeve faltered.

Maynen caught her instantly.

This time—

Without hesitation.

*“...Careful,”* he said.

His voice was softer now.

Different.

Maeve noticed.

But said nothing.

Only nodded.

And stayed close.

Because something had changed between them.

Not through words.

But through what they had lost—

And survived.

Together.

## XII

### WHAT REMAINS IN SILENCE

The castle felt colder than usual.

Not in stone.

Not in air.

But in the spaces between them.

They returned without speaking.

Through narrow corridors. Past dim torchlight. Beneath  
the distant echoes of guards shifting in their posts.

No one stopped them.

No one questioned them.

And somehow—

That made it worse.

Maeve walked slower this time. Not just from the wound—but from something heavier, something quieter pressing into her chest.

Maynen stayed close.

Not hovering.

Not distant.

Just... there.

A presence she had not noticed before—

Until now.



The door shut behind them.

Soft.

Final.

The room was exactly as they left it.

Unchanged.

And yet—

Everything had shifted.

Maeve sat at the edge of the bed without a word, her hands resting loosely in her lap. She stared at them as if they belonged to someone else.

Maynen moved toward the table, setting aside his coat, his movements slower than usual. Measured.

Careful.

Like even sound might break something fragile in the room.

Neither spoke.

Not immediately.

*“I don’t remember it.”*

Maeve’s voice was quiet.

Barely above a breath.

Maynen stilled.

*“...What?”*

She swallowed.

*“Whatever it took.”* Her fingers curled slightly. *“I know I lost something.”*

A pause.

*“But I don’t know what it was.”*

Maynen looked down at the table.

*“...That’s how it works.”*

Maeve let out a hollow breath.

*“That’s cruel.”*

*“Yes.”*

Silence settled again.

But this time—

It lingered longer.

Maynen finally turned toward her.

*“You shouldn’t have done it.”*

The words came out softer than he intended.

Maeve didn’t look up.

*“...I know.”*

*“I told you—”*

*“I know,”* she repeated, more firmly.

That stopped him.

She lifted her gaze now.

Not defensive.

Not angry.

Just... tired.

*“There was no other way,”* she said quietly.

Maynen's jaw tightened.

*"There's always another way."*

Maeve shook her head.

*"Not this time."*

Her voice didn't rise.

It didn't need to.

Because the truth sat plainly between them.

Heavy.

Unavoidable.

Maynen exhaled slowly.

*"... You felt it, didn't you?"*

Maeve nodded faintly.

*"The moment it started..."* Her voice softened. *"It didn't feel wrong."*

That unsettled him.

*“It should have.”*

*“I know.”*

A pause.

*“...That’s what scared me.”*

The room grew quieter.

The kind of quiet that wasn’t empty, but full of things  
neither of them knew how to say.

Maeve shifted slightly, wincing as she adjusted her leg.

Maynen noticed immediately.

*“Let me see.”*

*“It’s fine.”*

*“It’s not.”*

She hesitated.

Then, slowly, relented.

*“...Alright.”*

He knelt in front of her.

Careful.

Gentle.

More than he had ever been before.

Maeve watched him as he unwrapped the gauze, his fingers steady despite everything else.

*“You’re quieter,”* she said softly.

Maynen didn’t look up.

*“I usually am.”*

*“No,”* she murmured. *“Not like this.”*

That made him pause.

Just for a second.

*“... You almost died.”*

Maeve blinked.

*“So did you.”*

*“That’s different.”*

*“How?”*

Maynen finally met her eyes.

*“Because you chose it.”*

The words hung between them.

Not accusation.

Not quite.

But close.

Maeve looked away first.

*“...I don’t regret it.”*

Maynen’s expression flickered.

*“Even after what it took?”*

Her voice lowered.

*“I regret that I had to.”*

A beat.

*“But not that I did.”*

He resumed wrapping her leg.

Slower now.

Thoughtful.

*“I don’t understand you,”* he admitted quietly.

Maeve gave a faint, tired smile.

*“Good.”*

He almost returned it.

Almost.

When he finished, his hands lingered just a moment longer than necessary.

Not enough to be obvious.

But enough to be felt.

Maeve noticed.

But didn't move.

*"...Thank you,"* she said softly.

Maynen shook his head.

*"For what?"*

*"For staying."*

That made him still again.

*"I told you I would."*

*"You didn't have to."*

A pause.

“... *Yes*,” he said.

*“I did.”*

Something in her expression shifted.

Subtle.

But real.

Maeve leaned back slightly against the bedpost, her energy finally catching up to her.

*“I was afraid,”* she admitted.

Maynen looked at her.

*“...Of dying?”*

She shook her head.

*“Of forgetting something that mattered.”*

Her voice softened further.

*“Something I can't get back.”*

Maynen didn't answer immediately.

Because he understood that fear too well.

*"...You won't know what it was," he said. "But you'll feel the absence."*

Maeve closed her eyes briefly.

*"I already do."*

The silence that followed wasn't heavy anymore.

Just... quiet.

Shared.

After a while, Maeve spoke again.

*"...When you used it."*

Maynen glanced at her.

*"You didn't hesitate."*

He didn't deny it.

*“...No.”*

*“Why?”*

He looked away this time.

*“...Because I needed to know.”*

Maeve studied him.

*“And now that you do?”*

A long pause.

*“...I wish I didn't.”*

That was the closest thing to honesty she had heard from him.

And it mattered more than anything else he could have said.

Maeve shifted slightly, making space beside her.

A small movement.

Barely intentional.

But not accidental either.

Maynen noticed.

He hesitated.

Just for a moment.

Then—

He sat.

Not too close.

But not distant either.

Neither spoke.

Not for a while.

The quiet stretched—but it didn't feel empty.

It felt... steady.

Maeve's voice came softer now.

*“... You didn't let go.”*

Maynen frowned slightly.

*“What?”*

*“When I collapsed,”* she said. *“You held on.”*

A beat.

*“... Why?”*

Maynen didn't answer right away.

Because he didn't have one.

Not a clear one.

*“...I don't know,”* he admitted.

Maeve turned her head slightly toward him.

*“That's a lie.”*

He exhaled faintly.

*“...Maybe.”*

Their shoulders almost touched.

Not quite.

But close enough to feel the warmth.

Close enough to notice.

*“I don’t trust you,”* Maeve said suddenly.

Maynen let out a quiet breath.

*“I know.”*

A pause.

*“...But I don’t think you’d let me fall.”*

That made him look at her.

*“...No.”*

Simple.

Certain.

Maeve nodded faintly.

*“Then that’s enough.”*

Outside, the castle remained as it always was, watchful,  
unmoving, filled with things waiting to unfold.

But inside that room—

Something had changed.

Not dramatically.

Not loudly.

But undeniably.

Two people who should not trust each other—

Now shared something deeper than trust.

Understanding.

Loss.

And the quiet beginning of something neither of them  
was ready to name.

Maeve's head tilted slightly as exhaustion finally took  
her.

Not fully asleep.

But close.

Maynen remained where he was.

Still.

Present.

Watching the slow rise and fall of her breath.

Making sure—

Without saying it—

That she was still there.

And for the first time in a long while—

He didn't feel alone.

# XIII

## A YEAR IN THE SHADOWS

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### ◆ A YEAR PASSED IN SECRECY ◆

Time, within the castle, did not pass gently.

It hardened.

It concealed.

It watched.

And yet,

A year slipped by.

What began as reluctant alliance had grown into something neither Maeve nor Maynen had intended... nor resisted.

Trust came first, fragile, tested through silence and shared danger.

Then understanding.

Then something quieter.

Something deeper.

Until one night, without declaration or certainty—

They crossed a line neither spoke of again.

And from that moment on,

They were no longer alone.

Their relationship remained hidden.

It had to be.

Maeve lived in the spaces unseen, within Maynen's chamber, behind locked doors, beneath careful routines. She moved only when shadows allowed it, her presence erased before it could ever be questioned.

To the cult,

She did not exist.

To Maynen,

She was the only thing that did.

While Maeve remained hidden, Maynen changed.

Not outwardly.

Not in ways the Elders could easily name.

But his work—

His research—

It sharpened.

Deepened.

Obsessive in a way that no longer came from desperation alone... but from purpose.

The fragments they had gathered, the knowledge they had risked everything to uncover, it all began to take form within his studies.

Patterns emerged.

Connections aligned.

And slowly—

The so-called *tarnished man* began to produce results.

Elder Churdeler noticed.

Of course he did.

A man like him did not overlook change.

Especially not in someone he once deemed disposable.

Suspicion lingered, but so did interest.

And interest, in the cult, was far more dangerous.

Then,

The breakthrough came.

Maynen stood over his desk, eyes scanning the parchment for what must have been the hundredth time.

It was there.

He was certain of it.

Not a direct location, but something close.

References. Alignments. Mentions buried beneath older texts, threads pointing toward something long lost.

The remaining Pages.

His breath steadied.

After all this time—

He finally had something worth presenting.

Something undeniable.

Something that would erase the word *tarnished* from his name.

*“I have to show him,”* Maynen said quietly.

Maeve, seated near the window, looked up sharply.

*“Maynen—”*

*“This changes everything,”* he insisted. *“If Churdeler sees this—”*

*“He’ll question how you found it.”*

Maynen hesitated.

Only briefly.

*“I’ll manage that.”*

Maeve stood slowly, her expression uneasy.

*“You always say that.”*

*“And I always do.”*

She studied him.

There was truth in that.

But also risk.

Always risk.

*“...Be careful,”* she said softly.

Maynen met her gaze.

A brief pause.

Then—

*“I will.”*

He carried the papers with steady hands.

But his mind was anything but steady.

As he walked through the corridors toward Churdeler’s chamber, the weight of the past year pressed against him—

The secrets.

Maeve.

Their child.

Hidden.

All of it.

One misstep—

And everything would collapse.

The chamber doors were partially open.

Voices echoed from within.

Churdeler... and another Elder.

Maynen paused.

Then, gathering himself, he stepped forward.

*“My Elder,”* he called respectfully.

The conversation halted.

Both Elders turned.

Maynen bowed slightly before stepping closer, extending the papers.

*“I have made a discovery.”*

Churdeler took them without a word.

His eyes scanned the contents.

Slowly.

Carefully.

Silence stretched.

Then—

A faint shift.

Interest.

“...*Leave us,*” Churdeler said to the other Elder, not looking away from the parchment.

“*With respect,*” the Elder replied, rising before exiting the chamber.

The doors closed.

Inside, the room felt heavier.

More contained.

More dangerous.

Churdeler moved toward his seat, a throne-like chair behind a long table, and gestured for Maynen to sit opposite him.

Maynen obeyed.

Still.

Composed.

Waiting.

*“I am quite impressed... with your fruit, Maynen.”*

The words were measured.

Deliberate.

Maynen inclined his head slightly.

*“I have labored diligently for it, my Elder.”*

Churdeler’s gaze lifted.

Sharp.

Studying.

*“Indeed...”* he murmured, leaning forward slightly.

A pause.

Then—

*“Tell me... is there something else that has driven you to labor this... diligently?”*

Maynen’s chest tightened.

*“...What do you mean?”*

Churdeler’s eyes did not leave him.

*“These past months,”* he said slowly, *“I have heard whispers.”*

A beat.

*“Of an Imposter within our midst.”*

Maynen’s pulse spiked.

But he forced a laugh.

Light.

Unconvincing.

*“Impossible,”* he said. *“No outsider could enter this castle. It is sealed.”*

Churdeler said nothing.

Instead—

He stood.

And began to walk.

Slowly.

Around the table.

Behind Maynen.

Each step deliberate.

Each second stretching longer than the last.

Then—

*“Then I implore you,”* Churdeler said quietly, now standing just behind him,

*“To kill the imposter.”*

A dagger appeared in his hand.

Extended.

Offered.

The air froze.

Maynen stared at the blade.

But he wasn't seeing it.

He was seeing—

Maeve.

And their son.

Hidden.

Defenseless.

Real.

His chest tightened.

His hands trembled—just slightly.

Enough to betray him.

*“Take it,”* Churdeler said.

Soft.

Almost calm.

Which made it worse.

Maynen stood slowly.

Turning to face him.

The dagger still between them.

Offered.

Waiting.

His mind raced.

Too fast.

Too loud.

If Churdeler knew—

If he even suspected—

Then this was not a command.

It was a test.

Maynen hesitated.

Just for a moment.

But in a place like this—

A moment was everything.

Then—

A knock.

Sharp.

Urgent.

Both men turned.

A guard entered quickly, bowing.

*“My Elders...All Elders have been summoned to the Chief’s chamber.”*

The tension snapped—

But did not disappear.

Churdeler lowered the dagger.

Slowly.

Then concealed it within his robes.

His gaze returned to Maynen.

And this time—

There was no ambiguity in it.

Only warning.

Only threat.

*“... We will continue this later,”* Churdeler said.

Maynen said nothing.

He couldn't.

As Churdeler moved toward the door, he paused just long enough to cast one final look at him—

A look that said everything words did not.

*I am watching you.*

The door closed.

And for the first time since entering—

Maynen exhaled.

But there was no relief in it.

Only dread.

Because now,

It was no longer about hiding.

It was about choosing.

And whatever choice he made next,

Would decide whether Maeve... and their child,

Lived.

Or became the next cost of power.

## XIV

### BEFORE THE COLLAPSE

Churdeler left his chamber without another word.

Guards fell into step beside him, their armor echoing faintly against the stone halls as they escorted him toward the Chief's summons.

Maynen followed only long enough to avoid suspicion.

One step.

Two.

Measured.

Controlled.

Until the corridor bent,

And the moment he was out of sight,

He ran.



Not walked.

Not hurried.

Ran.

His breath tightened as he moved through the winding halls, his mind racing faster than his body could keep pace.

*He knows.*

Not certainty,

But close enough.

Too close.

The dagger.

The question.

The way Churdeler looked at him.

*It was a test.*

And he had failed it,

Even without answering.

Maynen turned sharply down the final corridor and reached his chamber. His hands moved faster than thought, pushing the door open before immediately slamming it shut behind him.

The lock clicked.

Once.

Twice.

Then silence.

He turned.

Maeve sat on the bed, their son cradled gently in her arms, rocking him slowly as she tried to lull him to sleep.

For a brief moment,

Everything felt still.

Almost peaceful.

Then Maynen spoke.

*“We need to leave.”*

Maeve looked up immediately.

There was something in his voice she had never heard before.

Not urgency.

Not fear.

Something worse.

*“What’s going on?”* she asked, her voice tightening.

Maynen didn’t answer right away. Instead, he moved quickly, grabbing a blanket, pulling open drawers, his hands searching for what little they could carry.

*“They know you’re here,”* he said, the words stumbling over each other.

Maeve stood slowly, instinctively holding their child closer.

*“Maynen, look at me,”* she said firmly. *“Tell me what’s happening.”*

He turned sharply toward her.

*“They’re going to kill us.”*

The words hung in the air.

Heavy.

Unreal.

Maeve blinked, disbelief flickering across her face.

*“... You’re joking.”*

Maynen crossed the distance between them in an instant, gripping her shoulders, not harshly, but urgently.

*“I don’t have time to joke,”* he said, his voice low, strained. *“Churdeler, he KNOWS something. Maybe not everything, but enough.”*

Maeve's breath caught.

*"...What did he say?"*

Maynen swallowed.

*"He told me to kill the imposter."*

Silence.

Her grip on their child tightened.

*"And you think—"*

"I know," Maynen cut in. His voice broke slightly. *"He's talking about you."*

Maeve's expression shifted,

From disbelief,

To realization.

Maynen's gaze dropped briefly to their son.

Small.

Unaware.

Vulnerable.

*“...He won't stop at you,”* Maynen said quietly. *“Not if he finds out.”*

Maeve felt it then.

Not fear for herself,

But for the child in her arms.

Her voice softened.

*“...Then we leave.”*

*“Where?”* she asked.

The question lingered.

Because for the first time

Maynen didn't have an answer ready.



He stepped back, his mind racing. His eyes moved instinctively, to the window... to the corridors beyond... then to the desk.

The papers.

His research.

The locations.

The fragments.

Everything they had built.

Everything they had risked.

Maeve watched him, her anxiety growing.

“*Maynen,*” she said again, more urgent now. “*Where do we go?*”

He looked at her.

And for a moment

The scholar.

The strategist.

The man who always knew what came next—

Was gone.

Then—

It returned.

Not certainty.

But decision.

“...*The forest*,” he said.

Maeve’s eyes widened.

“*The Canterlun Forest? Are you serious?*”

“*It’s the only place they won’t follow blindly,*” Maynen replied. “*They fear what they can’t control.*”

“*And you think we can?*” she challenged.

“*No,*” he said honestly.

*“But it’s better than dying here. It’s our best shot to divert them.”*

He adds,

*“We just need to reach the river... I’ve told the family who helped us with the birth... A plan in case things happen... Like this.”*

Maeve hesitated.

Then nodded.

*“...Alright.”*

But as they began to gather what little they could—

Neither of them noticed,

The shadow beyond the door.

Across the corridor, a guard stood still.

Listening.

Not moving.

Not interrupting.

Only observing.

Then,

Silently,

He turned.

And left.

Deep within the castle,

Churdeler had not gone directly to the Chief's chamber.

Not immediately.

Instead, he paused in a dim corridor, speaking quietly to one of his trusted men.

*"You heard him?"* Churdeler asked.

*"Yes, my Elder."*

Churdeler's gaze darkened.

*“Fear,”* he murmured. *“Uncharacteristic.”*

The guard hesitated.

*“...Do you believe the rumors are true?”*

Churdeler did not answer at once.

Instead, he turned slightly,

Toward the direction of Maynen’s chamber.

*“...I believe,”* he said slowly, *“that something has changed.”*

A pause.

*“And change,”* he added, *“is never without cause.”*

He began walking again.

This time,

Not toward the Chief.

But toward the truth.

*“Send two men,”* Churdeler ordered quietly. *“No noise. No confrontation.”*

The guard nodded.

*“And if we find something?”*

Churdeler’s expression did not shift.

*“...Do not act.”*

A beat.

*“Not yet.”*



Back inside the chamber,

Maeve wrapped their child carefully, her movements steadier now despite the fear beneath them.

Maynen gathered his papers, hesitating only once,

At the fragment hidden beneath the floor.

He knelt quickly, retrieving it.

Maeve noticed.

*“...You’re bringing that?”*

Maynen met her gaze.

*“We’ll need it.”*

She didn’t argue.

But she didn’t like it.

A sound echoed faintly in the corridor.

Footsteps.

Not passing.

Approaching.

Maeve froze.

*“...Maynen.”*

He heard it too.

His body tensed instantly.

The moment had come.

Too soon.

Maynen looked at her,

At their child—

At the only life he had left that mattered.

“...*Stay behind me,*” he said quietly.

His hand moved,

Not to a blade—

But to the fragment.

Because this time,

If something was taken,

It would not be from him alone.

## XV

### WHAT THE FIRE TAKES

The moment the footsteps reached the door,

Everything broke.

Maynen didn't wait.

*"Now."*

He moved first, pulling the window open as Maeve clutched their child close. The cold night air rushed in, carrying with it the scent of pine, and pursuit.

A shadow crossed the threshold behind them.

Too late.

They were already gone.

The moonlight spilled through the canopy of oaks and pines, fractured into shards of pale silver across the forest floor.

And beneath it,

They ran.

Maeve's breath came sharp and uneven as she held their son tightly against her chest, shielding him from the cold, from the branches, from the world that suddenly wanted him dead.

Maynen ran ahead, clearing the path, his senses sharpened by urgency.

Behind them,

Voices.

Shouts.

The unmistakable sound of pursuit.

Back in the castle,

Maynen's chamber door burst open.

Guards flooded the room.

Empty.

Too empty.

Moments later,

Churdeler entered.

Slowly.

Calmly.

His eyes swept the room once, then settled.

The desk.

The scattered absence.

And then,

The trail.

Papers.

Careless.

Rushed.

Leading to the window.

Churdeler stepped closer, picking one up briefly before letting it fall.

A faint smile touched his lips.

*“...So you run.”*

He turned toward the open night.

*“Chase them.”*



Back in the forest,

*“They’re right behind us!”* Maeve shouted, glancing over her shoulder.

Torches flickered through the trees.

Closing.

Fast.

*“Just run!”* Maynen yelled.

A gunshot cracked through the night.

Maeve screamed instinctively as the shot tore past them,  
striking bark instead of flesh.

She didn't stop.

Couldn't.

Her arms tightened around the child as she forced herself  
forward.

The forest began to thin.

The land opened.

A hill rose ahead,

And beyond it,

Freedom.

Or something close to it.

*"The river—!"* Maeve gasped.

*"Keep going!"*

They climbed.

Step by step.

Breath by breath.

Another shot rang out.

Closer.

Maynen turned,

And saw him.

Churdeler.

Descending from the forest's edge, cloaked in green,  
musket steady in his hands as though the chaos around  
him did not exist.

Behind him,

Guards surged forward.

Relentless.

Controlled.

Hunting.

*“He’s here,”* Maynen muttered.

*“The Elder?”* Maeve’s voice trembled.

*“Yes.”*

*“Then we—”*

*“Move!”*

Another shot.

Closer this time.

Maynen pivoted, raising his own weapon—firing back.

The shot cracked through the air,

But Churdeler moved.

Effortless.

Untouched.

Maynen’s breath hitched.

*“Ein Teufel...”* he muttered.

*A devil.*

They reached the peak.

The river shimmered below, dark, wide, and merciless.

Maeve didn't hesitate.

She ran.

Downhill.

Faster than her body could safely manage.

The dock came into view.

A lone boat.

The plan that Maynen told.

Unattended.

Hope.

Maeve reached it first.

She climbed aboard quickly, laying their son down gently, wrapping him tightly in her scarf to shield him from the cold wind.

*“You’re safe...”* she whispered.

For a moment,

She believed it.

Then,

A presence behind her.

Too close.

Too sudden.

An arm wrapped around her throat,

Tight.

Crushing.

Maeve gasped, clawing at the grip as a cloaked Elder forced her back.

*“You should not exist,”* he hissed.

Maeve reacted instinctively, driving her elbow hard into his stomach.

The Elder faltered.

Just enough.

She tore free.

Stumbling forward,

Heart racing,

Mind breaking into instinct.

Her hands rose.

Unthinking.

Untrained.

But certain.

The words left her before she could stop them,

*“Buenusfria!”*

A ring of light formed before her palm,

Perfect.

Ancient.

Alive.

And then,

Fire.

Not wild.

Not uncontrolled.

But focused.

Intentional.

It surged forward,

Engulfing the Elder.

He screamed,

Then was gone.

Ash scattered into the night.

Silence fell.

Heavy.

Unnatural.

Maynen arrived just in time to see it.

To see her.

Standing there,

Lit by firelight that should not exist.

Power curling at her fingertips.

Something more than human.

Something he had studied,

But never truly believed.

Maeve turned to him.

Fear flooded her expression.

Not from the fight.

But from him.

*“I can explain—”* she stammered. *“It’s not what you think—”*

Maynen didn’t move.

Didn’t speak.

Just stared.

Not in fear.

Not in rejection.

But in something far more complicated.

*“... You’re an Elemental Weaver,”* he said quietly.

Not a question.

A realization.

Maeve's breath caught.

*"I didn't want you to find out like this—"*

Another gunshot cracked through the air.

Too close.

Reality snapped back.

*"They're still coming,"* Maynen said.

Maeve turned,

And saw them.

More guards.

Closer now.

And behind them,

Churdeler.

Watching.

Learning

*“There’s too many,”* Maeve whispered.

Maynen’s gaze shifted to the river.

Then to the child.

Then back to her.

*“...Do it again.”*

Maeve froze.

*“What?”*

*“The power,”* he said. *“Use it.”*

Her eyes widened.

*“I—I can’t just—”*

*“You have to.”*

Maeve shook her head.

*“You don’t understand—”*

*“I do,”* Maynen cut in.

His voice softer now.

*“But we don’t survive this if you don’t.”*

Her hands trembled.

Not from fear of the guards.

But from something deeper.

*“...It takes something,”* she whispered.

*“I know.”*

*“It doesn’t choose what.”*

*“I know.”*

Her voice broke.

*“What if it takes something I can’t lose?”*

Maynen stepped closer.

Just once.

Close enough that she could see it—

The conflict in his eyes.

The fear.

Not for himself.

For her.

*“...Then we lose it together;”* he said.

Both shared a passionate kiss.

Perhaps the last,

That was enough.

Maeve turned.

Faced the oncoming force.

Raised her hands.

This time.

She didn't hesitate.

The symbol formed again.

Brighter.

Stronger.

Hungrier.

*“Buenosfria!”*

The fire did not surge.

It erupted.

A wave of searing light tore across the ground, consuming everything in its path, guards, earth, air itself bending under its force.

Screams filled the night.

Then—

Nothing.

The world fell silent.

Maeve staggered.

Her breath hitched.

Her vision blurred.

“*No...*” she whispered.

Something was slipping.

Again.

Faster this time.

Deeper.

A memory surfaced—

Warm.

Fragile.

A quiet moment.

A voice.

A name—

“*May—*”

It fractured.

Gone.

Maeve collapsed.

*“Maeve!”*

Maynen caught her before she hit the ground.

Her body trembled.

Her eyes fluttered open,

But something was wrong.

Different.

*“...Who...”* she whispered faintly.

Maynen froze.

*“...Maeve?”*

Her gaze struggled to focus on him.

*“...Who are you?”*

The words hit harder than anything before.

Harder than the chase.

Harder than the fire.

Maynen's grip tightened slightly.

"...*It's me,*" he said quietly.

But even as he said it—

He knew.

Something had been taken.

Maeve's eyes shifted weakly—

Toward the boat.

Toward the child.

Her expression softened instinctively.

"...*My...*" she whispered.

That part remained.

But him,

Gone.

Maynen closed his eyes briefly.

Just for a moment.

Then he stood.

Lifting her carefully.

Carrying her onto the boat.

Because there was no time to break.

Not yet.

Behind them,

Across the scorched earth,

Churdeler stood untouched at the edge of the destruction.

His gaze fixed on the flames.

On the power.

On what Maeve had become.

“...*Fascinating*,” he murmured.

The hunt was no longer about an imposter.

It was about something far greater.

## XVI

### WHAT REFUSES TO FADE

*“Who are you...?”*

The question did not echo.

It *cut*.

For a moment, Maynen could not breathe.

Not because of the chase.

Not because of the danger.

But because the one person who had stood beside him  
through everything,

Looked at him like a stranger.

Then.

He moved.

Without thinking.

Without hesitation.

He pulled her into him.

*“I don’t care,”* he said, his voice breaking despite himself. *“You don’t have to remember everything, just... stay.”*

Maeve stiffened at first.

Confused.

Lost.

But she didn’t pull away.

Slowly,

He pulled back, his hands still on her shoulders, searching her face.

*“Our son,”* he said urgently. *“Where is he?”*

Maeve blinked.

Her eyes shifted,

Toward the boat.

Recognition flickered.

*“He’s... there,”* she said softly, nodding toward it. *“On the boat...”*

Her voice trembled.

Tears welled in her eyes, unbidden, unexplained.

Maynen reached up instinctively, brushing them away with his thumb.

*“It’s alright,”* he murmured. *“There’s no time for crying.”*

But his voice,

It wasn’t steady.

Not really.

A presence shifted behind them.

Cold.

Patient.

Watching.

*“Ahh...”*

The voice slipped through the night like a blade.

*“What a wonderful family we have here.”*

Maynen turned instantly, raising his gun toward the darkness.

*“Leave them alone, you devil!”* he shouted.

Churdeler stepped forward from the shadows beneath the trees, his expression calm, almost pleased.

*“You surprise me, Maynen,”* he said. *“I did not expect you to run.”*

Maynen didn't lower the weapon.

Didn't blink.

Then he turned, just slightly, toward Maeve.

*“I’ll handle this,”* he said, quieter now. *“You go.”*

Maeve’s head snapped toward him.

*“No—”* she said immediately, shaking her head. *“We leave together.”*

*“There’s no time.”*

*“I’m not leaving you!”*

Her voice broke.

Not from memory,

But from instinct.

From something deeper than thought.

Maynen stepped closer to her.

Just once.

*“... You already forgot me,”* he said softly.

The words hit harder than he intended.

Maeve flinched.

“I—”

“*But you didn’t forget him,*” Maynen continued, glancing briefly at the child. “*That’s what matters.*”

She shook her head again.

“*No... there’s something else—*” she whispered. “*You... I...*”

Her brows furrowed in pain.

A flicker.

A moment,

A memory trying to surface.

His voice.

His face.

Close.

Important.

“...*May*...” she murmured faintly.

Maynen froze.

Hope,

Sharp.

Fragile.

Dangerous.

But it slipped.

Gone again.

Maeve gasped softly, clutching her head.

*“I can’t—”*

*“It’s alright,”* Maynen said quickly, steadier now. *“It’s enough.”*

It wasn’t.

But it had to be.

He stepped back.

Forcing distance.

“*Go,*” he said again.

This time

Not a request.

Maevé looked at him.

Really looked at him.

And though she did not remember,

She felt it.

The weight.

The meaning.

The loss she couldn't name.

“...*Come back, please?*” she whispered.

Maynen didn't answer.

He couldn't promise that.

Finally,

She turned.

And ran.

The gunshot rang out.

Maynen fired,

Churdeler moved, bending just enough for the shot to miss before dissolving back into shadow like smoke.

Behind them,

The river pulled Maeve away.

Faster.

Farther.

She turned once,

Just once,

And saw them.

Maynen and Churdeler.

Facing each other.

Alone.

Steel met steel.

Then,

Something more.

*“You thought having magic gives you an advantage?”*

Churdeler said, his voice echoing with something unnatural.

Maynen’s eyes burned.

*“...Two can play at that game.”*

The air shifted.

Darkness gathered in Churdeler’s hands, shadows bending unnaturally, coiling like living things.

Fire answered.

Fierce.

Unyielding.

Maynen's flames ignited, wrapping around his blade as heat tore through the cold night air.

They clashed.

Steel screamed.

Fire and shadow collided,

Light against void,

Sparks erupted, scattering across the ground as their blades met again and again.

From the river.

Maeve watched.

Helpless.

Distant.

The clash of power echoed across the water, the sound of it sending shivers through her chest.

Something in her stirred,

Recognition.

Fear.

And something else.

Something personal.

The smoke rose.

Thick.

Black.

Swallowing them both.

Maeve paddled harder, the current pulling her further away.

“*No...*” she whispered.

Her eyes strained,

Searching.

Then,

The smoke parted.

Just enough.

Maynen stood there.

Battered.

Barely holding himself upright.

But alive.

Relief surged through her.

Brief.

Fleeting.

Then

A blade pierced through his chest.

Maeve's breath shattered.

*“No—!”*

Churdeler stood behind him.

The dagger.

The same dagger.

Driven clean through.

He pulled it free.

Maynen collapsed.

Still.

The world fell silent.

Maeve's scream tore across the river.

Raw.

Unrestrained.

“...No...”

Tears blurred her vision as the current dragged her further away.

More figures gathered around Churdeler.

Watching.

Waiting.

Leaving Maynen behind,

As if he were nothing.

Maeve’s hands trembled against the oars.

*“I’m sorry...”* she whispered. *“I’m so sorry...”*

A pause.

Then,

*“They will pay for this.”*

A sharp impact.

She gasped.

An arrow struck her back.

Maeve cried out, dropping the oar as she reached behind,  
pulling the shaft free with shaking hands.

The tip,

Dark.

Poisoned.

She turned

And saw him.

Churdeler.

Standing high upon a distant cliff.

Watching.

Certain.

The poison spread quickly.

Burning.

Consuming.

Maeve's breath became uneven.

Her strength fading.

But she did not stop.

The river grew louder.

Rougher.

Wild.

Ahead—

The waterfall.

Maeve's eyes widened.

No escape.

She turned to her child.

Still crying.

Still alive.

Her hands moved quickly despite the tremors, placing him gently into a small basket secured beneath the boat, wrapping him tightly to protect him from the coming fall.

*“Don’t worry...”* she whispered, her voice trembling.  
*“We’ll make it... alright?”*

The baby cried louder.

The sound echoed into the night.

Maeve held him close one last time.

Pressing her forehead to his.

*“Shhh...”* she whispered. *“Just a little more...”*

The edge approached.

Closer.

Closer.

Her strength faded.

Her vision blurred.

But she held on,

Until the very last second.

And then,

The river gave way.

They fell.

Into darkness.

## XVII

### WHAT THE RIVER KEEPS

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#### ◆ DECADES PASSED ◆

*Limousin, France*

1750

Decades passed.

Long enough for stories to fade into rumor.

Long enough for names to lose their meaning.

Long enough,

For the river to forget the ones it had taken.

Afternoon light filtered weakly through the dense canopy of Limousin's southern marshlands, where the air hung thick with heat and the scent of stagnant water. The

swamp stretched endlessly in all directions, murky, alive, and strangely quiet.

Too quiet.

Three figures waded through the shallow waters, their boots sinking into the soft mud with each step.

They were known across the region as the Valse Brothers, hunters by trade, survivors by instinct.

At their head was Gerrette the middle child, broad-shouldered, sharp-eyed, and carrying the quiet authority of someone used to being followed.

Behind him, stepping carefully through the water, was Jacobe the youngest, lighter in build, observant, with a satchel of herbs and tools slung across his shoulder. He served as their medic, though he rarely admitted how much he preferred healing over killing.

And further along the bank, scanning the distance with narrowed eyes, was Michou the eldest, their spotter,

patient and perceptive, with a knack for seeing what others missed.

Today, however

There was little to notice.

Gerrette clicked his tongue in frustration, pushing aside a cluster of reeds.

*“Well, Jacobe,”* he called out, his tone thick with sarcasm, *“isn’t this just a wonderful afternoon?”*

He gestured vaguely at the empty swamp around them.

*“I mean, we’ve barely caught anything.”*

Jacobe sighed, adjusting the strap of his satchel.

*“I know,”* he replied. *“It’s strange. The gators... they’re just gone.”*

He glanced toward Michou.

*“How many did you manage?”*

Michou didn't even look up.

"...None," he said plainly. Then, after a brief pause,  
"*But I caught three catfish.*"

Gerrette let out a dry chuckle.

"Well," he muttered, "*at least we won't starve tonight.*"

They pressed deeper into the swamp.

The landscape shifted gradually.

Less life.

Fewer sounds.

Even the insects seemed quieter here.

Then,

They found it.

A boat.

It lay half-submerged near a patch of still water, its wooden frame rotting, covered in moss and riddled with termite holes. The remains of a life long abandoned.

Gerrette slowed.

*“... You ever seen this before?”*

Jacobe shook his head.

*“Not here.”*

Michou stepped closer, crouching slightly as he examined it.

*“No markings,”* he said. *“No nets. No tools.”*

A pause.

*“... Whoever owned this didn't come here to fish.”*

A faint breeze passed through the swamp.

Cold.

Unnatural.

Gerrette frowned.

*“...Let’s keep moving.”*

They left the boat behind.

But none of them truly forgot it.

The swamp eventually gave way to something unexpected,

A rise in the land.

A cliff.

Stone, jagged and uneven, cutting through the marsh like a scar.

At its base, the water pooled darker, deeper than the rest.

Michou’s eyes lit up slightly.

*“Hey!”* he called out. *“These cracks, look.”*

He pointed along the cliffside where fissures split the rock, some wide enough to reach into.

*“There might be fish hiding in there,”* he continued.  
*“Big ones.”*

Gerrette nodded.

*“Better than nothing.”*

Jacobe glanced at the sun, gauging the time.

*“Alright,”* he said. *“We split. Cover more ground.”*

He pointed as he spoke.

*“Michou, start here. Gerrette, take the right side. I’ll check the left.”*

A brief pause.

*“By sunset, we regroup.”*

They separated.

Each moving along the cliff in silence.

Michou knelt quickly, reaching into one of the cracks.

Nothing.

Only cold water and stone.

Jacobe moved along the left side, scanning carefully, but found no openings large enough to search.

Gerrette, however,

Found something else.

He stopped.

Frowned.

Then stepped closer.

A cavern.

It yawned open in the side of the cliff, partially concealed by vines and shadow. Wide enough for a man to walk through. Dark enough that the light seemed to vanish inside it completely.

Gerrette leaned in slightly.

A cold breeze flowed outward.

From within.

*“...That wasn't here before,”* he muttered.

He straightened and called out—

*“Jacobe! Michou! Get over here!”*

Footsteps splashed through the water as the two hurried toward him.

They stopped upon seeing it.

All three stood in silence for a moment.

Gerrette spoke first.

*“...Since when was there a cavern here?”*

Jacobe shook his head slowly.

*“I've passed this area before,”* he said. *“I would've noticed something like this.”*

Michou stepped forward, eyes narrowing as he studied the darkness.

Then,

A thought.

*“...What if this is where they went?”*

Gerrette glanced at him.

*“The gators? Fish?”*

Michou nodded.

*“It’s possible. A cavern like this, cool, hidden... could be a nesting ground.”*

Jacobe raised a brow.

*“...You’re guessing.”*

Michou smirked faintly as he pulled something from his pack.

A torch.

*“Maybe,”* he said. *“But it’s the only lead we’ve got.”*

Gerrette hesitated.

Only for a moment.

Then,

*“...Fine.”*

Jacobe sighed, already knowing how this would go.

*“Well,”* he muttered, *“if we die in there, I’m blaming you.”*

Michou chuckled lightly.

*“Noted.”*

He lit the torch.

The flame flickered,

Then steadied.

Casting light into the cavern.

But the darkness inside did not retreat.

*It waited.*

The three exchanged a glance.

Then,

They stepped inside.

The air changed immediately.

Cooler.

Heavier.

The sound of the swamp faded behind them, replaced by something deeper.

Dripping water.

Echoes.

And something else.

Something faint.

Almost like,

A distant cry.

Gerrette frowned.

*“... You hear that?”*

Jacobe stilled.

*“... Yeah.”*

Michou raised the torch higher.

*“... That's not a gator.”*

They moved deeper.

Step by step.

The light revealing more of the cavern walls—

Marked.

Scratched.

Not by claws.

By something deliberate.

Symbols.

Faded.

Ancient.

Jacobe leaned closer.

*“...These aren't natural.”*

Gerrette's expression darkened.

*“...No.”*

Michou stepped forward again,

Then stopped.

*“...There's something here.”*

The torchlight shifted,

And revealed it.

A small, broken basket.

Half-buried in stone and time.

Jacobe's breath caught.

*“...What is that doing here?”*

Gerrette stepped closer.

Slowly.

Carefully.

Inside the basket,

Remnants.

Cloth.

Worn.

Decayed.

But still wrapped,

As if once meant to protect something.

Someone.

A faint sound echoed deeper within the cavern.

Not from behind them.

But ahead.

Soft.

Weak.

Impossible.

Like a breath,

That had waited decades,

To be heard.

## **XVIII**

### **THE WOMAN BENEATH THE STONE**

The cavern swallowed the light behind them.

Step by step, Michou, Jacobe, and Gerrette descended deeper into the dark, their world reduced to the trembling glow of a single torch.

Water lapped softly around their boots.

Each step echoed.

Not once,

But twice.

As if something beneath the stone answered.

The air grew colder.

Heavier.

Breathing felt... different.

Like the cave itself was watching.

Droplets fell from above, striking unseen pools below. The sound stretched unnaturally through the cavern, twisting into distant murmurs that made Jacobe glance over his shoulder more than once.

*“Tell me you hear that too...”* he muttered.

Michou didn't answer.

Gerrette only tightened his grip on his blade.

Then,

A glimmer.

Faint.

Ahead.

Michou raised the torch higher.

*“...Light,”* he said.

Gerrette narrowed his eyes.

*“...Or a trick,”* he replied. *“Stay sharp.”*

Jacobe nodded.

*“Nothing in a place like this is natural.”*

They moved closer.

Slowly.

Carefully.

The tunnel widened,

Then opened.

And what lay beyond,

Silenced them.

The cavern expanded into a vast hollow chamber, its ceiling broken by jagged openings where thin beams of daylight pierced through like spears of heaven.

At its center,

Suspended between massive, ancient roots that clawed  
down from above,

Was a sphere.

Luminous.

White.

Breathing with a faint, pulsing glow.

Below it lay a small island of damp sand, surrounded by  
shallow, still water.

The light bent strangely around the sphere, as though it  
did not merely reflect, but *contained* something within.

“... *What is that...*” Jacobe whispered.

No one answered.

They circled it slowly.

Drawn.

Uneasy.

Mesmerized.

Gerrette stepped closer.

Closer than the others.

The light shifted,

Cleared,

And something inside became visible.

His breath caught.

*“...There’s something in it,”* he said.

*“Gerrette...”* Michou warned. *“Don’t.”*

*“Gerrette, don’t you dare touch that thing!”* Jacobe snapped.

But Gerrette didn’t hear them.

Not fully.

Because what he saw,

Was not just something.

It was someone.

A figure.

Curled.

Preserved.

Suspended in stillness.

And beside it,

A smaller shape.

His hand lifted.

Almost without his will.

And then,

He touched it.

The sphere burst.

Not shattered,

But *collapsed*.

Like a breath released after decades of silence.

Water exploded outward.

A violent surge, like a river breaking free, crashing into Gerrette and throwing him backward into the sand.

Michou and Jacobe braced themselves, barely holding their ground against the force.

Then,

As suddenly as it came,

It stopped.

Silence returned.

“*Gerrette!*” Jacobe shouted.

No answer.

Michou rushed forward.

And stopped.

“...*Oh... Dear Lord have mercy...*” he breathed.

“*Jacobe, cloth! Now!*”

Jacobe stumbled forward,

Then froze.

Gerrette lay on the ground,

Unconscious,

And beside him,

A woman.

Not aged.

Not decayed.

But untouched by time.

Maeve.

Her skin pale.

Her breathing shallow.

And wrapped near her.

A child.

Crying.

Alive.

The air felt wrong.

Like something ancient had just been released.

Gerrette groaned.

Stirring.

His eyes opened,

And locked onto the woman.

He scrambled to his feet in shock.

*“What—what is this—?”*

But instinct overtook confusion.

He dropped beside her, grabbing cloth from his pack and pressing it against her wound.

Blood.

Darkened.

Corrupted.

Michou leaned in,

And saw it.

The veins.

Blackened.

Spreading beneath her skin like creeping roots.

“...*Poison*,” he said grimly.

Gerrette didn't hesitate.

“*Go!*” he barked. “*Find help—now!*”

Michou nodded and ran.

Gone in seconds.

Jacobe lifted the child carefully, removing the damp cloth and wrapping him in something dry.

The crying softened.

But did not stop.

Maeve stirred.

Barely.

Her breath came shallow.

Broken.

“...*Save...*” she whispered.

Gerrette leaned closer.

“*What?*”

Her hand trembled as it reached for him.

“...*Save him...*”

Gerrette swallowed.

*“We’re trying,”* he said quickly. *“You’ll be alright—”*

Her grip tightened weakly.

*“No...”* she whispered.

Her eyes met his,

And for a moment,

Something ancient flickered behind them.

Fire.

Loss.

A life long gone.

*“I cannot be saved.”*

Gerrette shook his head.

*“Yes, you can, just hold on—”*

He worked quickly, chewing bitter leaves from his pouch, pressing the paste into her wound.

A Valse remedy.

Old.

Imperfect.

But something.

Maeve winced,

But did not cry out.

Her gaze drifted.

Toward the child.

“...*My*...” she whispered.

Jacobe stepped closer.

“*He’s safe,*” he said gently.

Maeve exhaled faintly.

Relief,

Even now.

Her hand lifted again.

Pointing weakly.

*“...The basket...”*

Jacobe reached in,

And pulled out a satchel.

Heavy.

Filled with scrolls.

Old.

Sealed.

*“What are these...?”* he muttered.

Maeve’s voice trembled.

*“When the time... is right...”*

She struggled to breathe.

*“...Give it... to him...”*

*“To who?”* Gerrette asked.

But she didn't answer.

Instead,

Her hand tightened once more around his.

*“...Save... him...”*

Then.

It fell.

Stillness.

*“Ma'am?”* Gerrette called.

Nothing.

The child cried louder.

Moments later,

Footsteps returned.

Voices.

Michou.

With villagers.

And a physician.

But they were too late.

The poison had claimed her.

Her eyes faded to a pale, unnatural blue.

Her body stilled.

Yet something about her presence lingered.

The physician knelt briefly.

Then shook his head.

*“...She’s gone.”*

Silence fell over the cavern.

Heavy.

Unanswered.

Gerrette sat back slowly.

His hands still stained.

His chest tight.

“...*What was she...*?” Jacobe whispered.

No one knew.

But beneath them,

Etched faintly into the stone now revealed where the  
sphere once hovered,

Was something ancient.

A sigil.

Burned into the earth.

Not of this land.

Not of this time.

A fragment.

A prison.

A seal.

And they had just broken it.

Unseen by the brothers.

As Maeve's body lay still.

## **XIX**

### **WHAT THE RIVER LEAVES BEHIND**

The afternoon had been ordinary.

Quiet.

Predictable.

A Maiden from a farm moved through her chores with practiced ease, her hands working while her thoughts wandered elsewhere. The sun had begun its slow descent, casting long shadows across the yard when something unusual caught her eye.

A gathering.

Beyond the fence.

Too many people.

Too much noise.

She paused.

Wiped her hands against her apron.

And stepped closer.

*“Hello everybody,”* she called out. *“What is with the unusual gathering?”*

A townsman turned toward her, his expression uneasy.

*“Have you not heard of your Sons, Sarra?”*

Her heart dropped.

*“What do you mean?”* she asked quickly. *“Did something happen?”*

Before the man could answer,

Hoofbeats.

Fast.

Urgent.

A rider approached through the dust.

Rosalette.

The Sister of the Brothers.

She pulled hard on the reins, stopping just short of the gate.

“*Sarra!*” she called, breathless. “*You have to see what the boys found.*”

Sarra didn’t wait.

She moved.



The swamp had grown restless.

What was once silent now buzzed with voices—fearful, curious, confused.

On a stretch of dry land near the cavern’s mouth, the brothers stood surrounded by townsfolk.

Some whispered.

Some stared.

Some simply watched,

Unable to understand what they were seeing.

At the center of it all,

A body.

Covered.

Still.

Beside it,

A child.

Crying.

Jacobe held the infant carefully, rocking him gently, whispering soft reassurances that did little to quiet the grief in the air.

Michou spoke in hushed tones with a few men, recounting what little they understood.

Gerrette stood apart.

Silent.

Watching.

Sarra arrived moments later.

She pushed through the crowd, her voice sharp with urgency.

*“Move, please, let me through!”*

Hands parted.

Eyes followed.

Then,

She saw it.

*“...Boys,”* she said, her voice catching. *“What is going on here—”*

She stopped.

Her breath faltered.

*“...Gerrette...”*

Her eyes moved slowly to the covered form.

*“...Who is that?”*

Gerrette didn't look at her immediately.

*“...We don't know,”* he said quietly.

*“We found her... inside a cavern,”* Michou added.

*“And she had a newborn infant,”* Jacobe said, glancing down at the child. *“Gerrette... what do we do with him?”*

Gerrette didn't answer.

Not yet.

Instead,

He stepped forward.

Lifted the body carefully into his arms.

And began to walk.

Away from the swamp.

Away from the noise.

Away from the questions.

Jacobe exhaled softly, then followed.

Michou gave Sarra a brief look,

And then joined them.

Sarra lingered for only a second longer,

Before turning to the crowd.

*“Give them space,”* she said firmly. *“Let them pass.”*

And the crowd did.

The sun dipped lower.

The sky softened into amber and gold.

They walked in silence.

Through narrow paths.

Past watching eyes.

Whispers followed them.

*“She looks untouched...”*

*“Like she’s sleeping...”*

*“Not from here...”*

Sarra heard it all.

And said nothing.

There was something about the woman,

Even beneath the cloth,

That felt...

Wrong.

Not evil.

Not unnatural.

But...

Out of place.

Like she belonged to a story that had not yet ended.

They reached it just before sunset.

A quiet place.

Sheltered by old trees and worn stones.

Gerrette stopped.

His gaze settled on a single tree, tall, rooted deep, its branches stretching wide.

*“Where are you going to bury her?”* Rosalette asked softly.

Gerrette nodded toward it.

*“There.”*

Sarra turned to the remaining townsfolk.

*“We will handle this,”* she said gently. *“Please... leave us.”*

One by one,

They did.

The world quieted again.

Michou and a few men moved ahead, digging into the earth with steady rhythm.

Jacobe stood nearby, holding the child, who had begun crying once more.

Sarra stepped closer.

Her expression softened.

*“I’ll take him,”* she said, extending her arms.

Jacobe hesitated,

Then handed the child over.

The moment Sarra held him,

Something changed.

The child quieted.

Not completely.

But enough.

Sarra looked down at him.

At his small face.

His fragile breath.

“...*You’ve been through too much already,*” she  
whispered.

A breeze passed through the cemetery.

Soft.

Cold.

Gerrette arrived as the grave was finished.

He lowered the woman into it carefully.

Gently.

As if afraid she might still feel something.

They stood in silence.

No prayers.

No names.

Only the weight of what they did not understand.

Jacobe stepped forward.

*“...She asked us to save him,”* he said quietly.

Gerrette nodded once.

*“We will.”*

Michou placed the first shovel of earth.

Then another.

The grave slowly filled.

Sarra watched.

Holding the child closer.

And as the last of the soil settled,

She felt it.

A faint warmth.

Brief.

Like a dying ember.

She looked down at the child again.

His eyes had opened.

Just slightly.

For a moment,

They glowed.

Not brightly.

Not unnaturally.

But enough to be noticed.

Then.

Gone.

Sarra stilled.

Her grip tightened just slightly.

“... *Who are you?*” she whispered.

No one answered.

But somewhere,

Far beneath the earth,

Where roots twisted through forgotten stone,

Where a broken seal once held something ancient,

Something stirred.

Not dead.

Not gone.

Waiting.

The river had taken everything.

But it had also left something behind.

And one day...

*All the two worlds would remember why.*

## ◆ THE CITY THAT FORGETS ◆

Time moved on.

As it always did.

Without grief.

Without memory.

Empires shifted.

Borders redrawn.

Names forgotten.

And the quiet graves of unknown souls sank deeper  
beneath the weight of history.

Far from the marshlands of Limousin,

Far from the forest, the castle, and the river that  
swallowed fire and shadow.

A new world stirred.

A city of contrasts.

Of brilliance and decay.

Its streets told two stories at once.

Above, silk, gold, and indulgence.

Below, hunger, rot, and desperation.

France stood on the edge of collapse, burdened by debt so vast it bled into every corner of life. Bread grew scarce. Voices grew louder. And beneath it all,

Something deeper began to fracture.

Among the many who lived in its narrow streets was a young man.

Not noble.

Not powerful.

But observant.

Restless.

He had once dreamed of knowledge, of seeing the world beyond the tight alleys and crowded markets. But dreams did not survive long in a starving city.

So he worked.

In a tailor's shop tucked between crumbling stone buildings, he spent his days surrounded by thread and steel, his hands stitching garments meant for people who would never know his name.

The scent of fabric clung to him.

The rhythm of needles replaced the rhythm of ambition.

Deep within the city,

Hidden beneath stone, beneath time, beneath memory,

Something long forgotten began to stir.

Not by chance.

Not by fate.

But by *call*.

A single page.

Lost.

Scattered.

Carried across lands and years.

A fragment of something older than kings,

Older than nations,

Older than the very ideas men now fought to defend.

And as the flames of revolution began to rise,

So too did the quiet resurgence of a curse.

Unseen.

Unnamed.

Unstoppable.

The world had forgotten.

But not everything had been buried.

And somewhere.

Between the fall of crowns and the rise of chaos.

A story left unfinished began to find its way back.

History would call it revolution.

But it was never just that.

As a Curse.

Begins to rise.

For one sole goal.

To fight

**With a Grenadier.**

**THE END**