

HOLD ME WHEN I DIE

**IF KARMA DOESN'T KILL YOU, YOUR
HEARTBREAK JUST MIGHT.**

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BlueRose ONE^{com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

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BlueRoseONE
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

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ISBN: 978-93-7310-441-6

Cover design: Shubham Verma

Typesetting: Sagar

First Edition: August 2025

Acknowledgement

Let's not pretend this thing was a smooth or graceful journey (spoiler: it wasn't)- so here's my brutally honest, slightly chaotic thank-you note, complete with all the messy corners and scribbled-out bits.

- Enormous, slightly worried thanks to my brain. Sometimes it showed up, sometimes it didn't, and sometimes it dragged me through a silent existential crisis at 2AM ("What was I even writing?"). Still, somehow, neurons fired and here we are.
- To my friends and family: thanks for your, umm, creative takes on "support." Shout-out to the ones who only messaged "Are you done yet?" at the very worst possible moments- truly, your timing is a gift.
- Google and Wikipedia- just, wow. I should probably apologize for some of my search history. I went in looking for facts, fell into a meme

rabbit hole, and somehow emerged hours later with exactly zero progress. Still, we made it. Ish.

- Special applause to all liquids in mugs and bottles within my reach- mainly chai, coffee, and that one questionable energy drink (which was also a questionable life choice).
- My laptop, which I'm genuinely surprised didn't just self-destruct from the 57 open tabs, weird playlists, or from being physically yelled at (sorry, buddy).
- To Pune's random power cuts and the Wi-Fi signal that played hide & seek- seriously, you kept me on my toes (and occasionally in a mild panic sweat).

And naturally, biggest thanks to me (Samiksh), for every deadline abandoned and re-negotiated, every snack-fueled late night, and every irrational Google search. For picking this up again, and again, and somehow not quitting for good (despite very persuasive arguments from the procrastination corner of my brain).

If none of this makes sense, good! That means it's authentic. If you actually read to the end, give yourself an award- because this wasn't supposed to be easy, tidy, or concise. That's just not how we roll.

- Samiksh

Mirari / past

Delusion- a word I often use to express my relationship with love.

Even though Aehlla could not keep up with my delusional self, I questioned the reality of being myself. Sober, kind, and terrified of hurting others. Love never came to me gently. It arrived with too much noise- in her laughter, in the way her presence rearranged the silence I had grown used to.

My karma didn't warn me. It rarely does.

It randomly lingers on my mind like a song I don't remember learning- smug, observant, and always a little late.

When I first saw her wave at me across the library reception, I swear even karma held its breath. And for once, it didn't question it.

Not the way she smiled. Not the way my heart lurched forward like it already knew her.

That's the thing about delusion- it doesn't ask for permission. It just shows up and calls itself love. But it's something that my pure heart cannot control.

Is it not always the heart that controls us?

I look up, in the middle of a star-studded evening with dim lights in the library and a beam of a street light, to see Aehlla staring at me from a distance. Her angelic smile shone brighter than the lights as she waved at me, holding her laptop bag in one hand. The more she smiled, the more I fell. *She doesn't create magic. She is magic.*

I raised my hand and waved my four fingers at her, looking her in the eyes. The library was about to close, and I could not have asked for a better time for her to meet me.

My desk in my room was filled with love letters and some experimental poems, I wasn't proud of. But written only with one person in mind. I did not necessarily etch her name onto those letters, just a hunch, those were all my raw feelings. I never even planned to give her those, just mine for life.

"Did you get chosen?" I ask her. I reached forward. Much to my surprise, she handed me a note and said, "Read it when you get home."

Silence flared. "And what about your blood donation campaign? Any- O negative receivers?" I escaped the awkwardness.

Yes, she was rare.

As rare as her blood type. An O negative. She was in high demand for blood drives, and she did donate blood frequently. Blood campaigns liked her and blood receivers loved her. Without a doubt, there were only a few in need of an O negative blood flowing in their spleen.

My hands were drenched in sweat. I follow her out the door, trying to look semi-presentable. She grabs my wet hand and clenches it. Her lush hair and dark brows made me melt every time I laid eyes on her. Seemed like they were flirting with me.

I had fallen for someone who was always stunning. And here, I could not even get my hair to behave.

"Does it matter if I am chosen or not?" she badgered. "Would it change your love for me?"

Outside, it was really busy. I could hear the slightest of car horns and people barking. It was delicate. Perhaps my happiness stemmed from her decision to join or not join the literary club, or poetry club, as she calls it. The evening sky was painted with hues of orange and purple, fading into the deep blue of the approaching night. The city park, usually bustling with life, was now quiet. The only sounds were the distant hum of traffic and the occasional rustle of leaves under the cool breeze. Aehlla nervously twirled a strand of her hair. I noticed her discomfort. "Aehlla," I sputtered, "you seem troubled. Is something wrong?"

She looked at me, her hazel eyes reflecting the soft glow of the lamplight. "Mirari," she started, her voice barely above a whisper, "there's something I need to tell you."

I felt a knot tighten in my stomach. "Yah. Sup?"

"I didn't get into the literature club," she admitted, her voice barely audible.

"So?" I was aware that she had put everything into her application, including her love of literature and her poetry, but it wasn't sufficient.

"Aehlla-" She cringed away from me as I reached out to touch her arm, experiencing a wave of rage that was both strange and familiar. Maybe it was simpler to snap at me than to face the heartbreaking disappointment that was chewing away at her.

"Don't! Just don't!" she yelled, her eyes pricked at the corners of her eyes. "You think I'll have it easy? Do you really believe that I can ignore this and go on? More than everything, I wanted this!" her hands flaring in the air pointing to some imaginary trophy.

"You are more than this one rejection, and I want you to know that."

"If no one notices it, talent is *worthless!*" she said, her voice shaking now with passion instead of anger. "If no one is interested in what you write, what good is it?"

She averted her gaze, embarrassed by her outburst at the only person who gave a damn.

"What is love to you?" she murmurs to me.

I shrug. She smiles.

'Intimacy, physical touches, to caress' were my very first thoughts, but she was the one who couldn't read minds. She walked away from me and then stopped in the middle of the alley to look at me. The office next door had its cubicles lit up for the night shift. A flickering street light interrupted what she was saying.

"Mirari," she said, pausing mid-step. Her back was half-turned to me, like she couldn't decide whether to walk away or face me.

Then she turned fully.

"I think we should break up."

The words didn't hit all at once. They landed softly- too softly- like she was trying to say them without hurting me, but they still cut through skin and bone just the same.

I blinked. "What?"

She didn't answer right away. Her fingers were tangled in the hem of her shirt, twisting the fabric tighter and tighter. Her shoulders tensed, like she'd rehearsed this moment but still didn't want to perform it.

"I just- need space," she said, eyes flicking past mine- not meeting them, never meeting them. "Time to figure things out."

Her voice was too even, like she'd swallowed the storm that wanted to come out. And her smile- the faint, apologetic one- wasn't for comfort. It was for distance. The kind of smile people wear when they don't want you to follow. This was in her mind, quite for some time.

I didn't know what she wasn't telling me.

But I could feel it.

And somehow, that was worse.

Dear God. I felt slaughtered.

"But like- you can-" my words trembled. I nod. "I- I can see that." I turn around abruptly. I too picked up my dusty backpack, which had fallen from my shoulders. I was so delusional. "My parents don't eat dinner without me, I need to go".

That was a well-assumed lie which I didn't think before blurting out. They were already on the brink of a divorce. I was let down by someone, simply not because I had a sense of attachment but because I loved her to the point that her flaws were more like precious gifts to me. It was something known as my 'first' in life. She dumped me for something so pointless that she could not do it with me in her life.

Makes sense. Her eyes twinkled.

"Mirari?" she asked mildly as she approached me. I couldn't hear her. My thoughts had been crowded, and some had died in a thought stampede altogether.

"I'll leave."

Was I going insane? The girl to whom I had given everything abandoned me like a piece of trash, with the impression that I *was* trash. Damn right I was trash.

She turned around and hugged me tightly. Her warm sweater had gotten so warm that I did not want to leave it.

She chuckled. "I knew you would not get it, so I am not going to try to explain myself."

"How?"

"“You’re too good, Mirari,” she said softly. “And that’s- hard to be around sometimes,” she says, looking me in the eyes one last time. I could have stopped her, but she seemed to be concerned with something else. More meaningful than me.

This wasn’t how we ended. I hadn’t done anything wrong, not this time. Right?

I wanted to ask her that- but the words stuck, unsure if they’d sound selfish or just stupid.

But I would rather ask myself, would my eyes starve to see you every day? Are you really that important to me?

I wouldn’t have loved her if I knew this hurt this much.

My pure heart is always in control. I squeaked. If that made her happy to some point, I had to be happy too. It felt like my heart was stabbed ten times before I succumbed to my sense of leaving her. With some determination, “Aehlla!” I scream. She turns around in shame, her eyes wide open.

We now understand why good people turn into psychopaths. Because all I could sense was rage.

"I hate you." I needed drugs to keep myself sane, probably the pain in my chest, which didn’t bleed but hurt like hell. *Fuck I loved her so much.*

“I hate you too”. Aehlla replied with a subtle happy face. She never looked back. She did not seem to love me at all.

Was I too naive not to ask for a second chance? Did her happiness mean that much to me?

I fell like a dry petal above the still waters to watch the ripples distort the water for her. I have never been able to imagine how I was attracted to someone so genuine about herself that, at a point, it almost didn’t matter. Cut that almost too. A gust of wind brushed between us, cold and indifferent. Leaves rustled behind her, scattered- like they were falling for no reason, too.

It didn’t matter anymore.

I puddled in the pouring rain.

Her face kept blushing in my mind like some germ even best handwashes couldn't kill. Lately, I have realized that love is not for everyone. I walked down the aisle, passing the beautifully graffitied staircase, only to know it was raining outside. I couldn't hear the rain; maybe my mind was curated by the dazzling break-up Achlla had left me with. My tears had dried up, leaving these stains on my cheeks, pretending to have given me a tan. But it is a temperamental ordeal to have, and leaving me seems like a pretty good deal for a woman like her.

"Cillian?" I glare almost into the middle of the street, trying to make out a ghostly figure with a wet backpack and a wimpy, short stature. Why was he breathing so loudly?

He was my age, yet he wore his years like a heavy coat. His pale skin was rough and uneven, with faint lines beginning to etch around his tired eyes, revealing a weariness that belied his youth. Dark circles marked his gaze and his cracked lips hinted at the cigarettes he snuck when no one was watching. His jawline is straighter than my gender, thin, almost fragile, with a slight roundness to his stomach- a sign of late night drinking sessions that had become too frequent. His hands trembled slightly as he clutched a cigarette, the lingering smell of smoke clinging to him like an unwelcome shadow.

Cillian didn't laugh much, and when he did, it felt forced, as if he was trying to remember what joy felt like. There was emptiness in his eyes, a distance that suggested he had already learned to hide in plain sight, navigating a world that felt too heavy for someone his age.

Apart from the butchering and making shady noises, this guy was the epitome of ruining your life on a basis you can't live within your 7 generations. I gave him a ghastly look as my eight-year-old friend showed up looking beat up and helpless.

"Are you okay?" he stuttered.

"I gotta ask you."

“Aehlla called me to look for you”.

In the hopes that the rain would help hide my tears, I continued walking down.

Cillian looked at me from behind and snapped, “*She is with someone else*”.

I stopped. That was enough. *Grief comes in waves, this was a fucking tsunami now.*

“Huh? How the fuck do you know?” An unapologetic Mirari had risen. I turned around to almost puke on him.

“Let's just say I know a lot of things you don't know,” he said back, then paused for a second. “You always were an option for her.”

I slowly raise my head and come near him, “First thing, you smell a lot; second, I don't know if you would be lying to my face-”

“Lying after she dumped you?” He cut me off, seeing the pity I had on my face. I was dead inside already. “You had to know this someday, somehow, and I am glad it was me,” he yelled.

I pulled my hand above to beg him to stop talking.

“I could've lived without this information”.

“Yes, but you couldn't have; if you saw her with someone else that happy, you thought you made her.” he didn't hesitate. “Right people, wrong times do exist, Mirari,” his arrogance rippled on the shore of my beach where I used to drink lime mocktails with Aehlla. Cillian said as he sat on the corner of the street, weeping for help as his body shot through pain and grinning as he sat.

What a fool I was not to keep her happy. And how lucky I was to feel my happiness in hers, too. I stood out there when she left me, in the thunderstorm hoping to get struck by lightning.

The most chivalrous thing I could have done was go back and apologize for things I did not do.

"Mirari, you're a dumbass" he exclaimed, lighting a cigarette despite the heavy rain. "Maybe this is why she left you. You're a boring piece of crap". His swollen face lit up while his eyes grinned at me.

I dragged myself into the puddles, completely drenched, and ran towards my house, disgusted with myself. I could feel Cillian smiling at my misery from behind.

I took off without looking up. I felt an agony in me that was terrorizing, what I would call, my peace.

But deep down, I was ready for my assault. I hopped through lanes that were unknown to me, still overhearing deep conversations between strangers.

Couples in particular. I slid my foot across a metal bar. The mist had gone too far. It was an endless loop. I slapped myself so hard that my face turned bright red and plump. Even if I got a few scrapes on my knees, this pain would eventually go away. Unlike someone, I used to know now. I could eventually hear Cillian call out for me from behind me.

'Fuck off Cillian,' my mind recited, as if he too, could read minds. I covered both ears with my hands. My heart hurt in places I didn't know existed.

I made a stop near my house's door.

"Please," ' I whispered. A nice, shabbily dressed house, with a number plate instead of a nameplate put outside in a shade of reddish and bluish tint and an admirable scent of my family's perfume, mixed with a little sweat. I caught my breath, wondering if Cillian shouldn't be hurrying over here.

'He would initiate conversations about her, which would hurt me even more,' I had begun to overthink now.

This was bad. My breath couldn't come to me. I sat down in the corridor to make some space for myself.

Aehlla, do I need you already?

I mustered the courage to stand up and knock on my number plate, which was dripping wet and slimy from the rain. Looking back in hopes of seeing Cillian,

I see nothing but rain. And some attention. I knocked twice on my door, assuming my divorced parents were fighting. It was recent enough that being an only child put me at a fair disadvantage. My bones shivered. Their voices couldn't get into my head anymore.

"CUT THE CRAP!" It has rarely happened that I have shrieked at the top of my lungs to them, who often didn't give a shit about me when they raised me and got divorced when they both cheated on each other.

Relatable story? I guess yes.

"Did anyone ask you?" My dad raised his voice. Oh, I shit my pants.

"Am I talking to you?"

"You are living here at my expense, and neither of you is capable of getting food for yourselves, let alone you having a life, you're a mistake anyways."

I stared at him with water dripping on the floor. I could hear that. I could even hear my mom sniffing the tears; unfortunately, the rain couldn't cover them.

"You made mom cry? Again?"

She happened to be staring at me at the time. "Stay out of this, Mirari," she said, grasping the kitchen table. "I am not going to tell you again, scram off and do not show your face to me again," my father said as he stood up and approached me.

"This isn't even your house." I had lost it. Pretty much so did he.

But I was proud of myself. He turned around and *smacked* me hard in the face. I stumbled and barely got on my knees. Nonetheless, I allowed a few tears to fall. It pricked even more as I was drenched.

'How could you?' A soft voice. Mom.

"I wish he was never born." It pounded me more than I could have imagined. "He has taken away my happiness, my money." Those words that you didn't want to hear made you believe that you didn't keep your parents happy.

My mom.

Probably defending me. But I was already so engrossed in my provocative thoughts that I could not concentrate. God, I hated him. I hated my friends. And now I hate myself.

Thank you, I say to my brain, for winning yet again. My overthinking did not let me down again.

I won.

I sprint to my room, jump over 12 stairs, and slam the door behind me. My backpack fell from my shoulders as I stared down, letting it all out. Understandably, my nostrils flared, and my eyes were swollen. I haven't cried yet. I sat on my knees with my fists clenched and my back secluded against the door. My hands shook as I looked at them, slowly raising them to my eyes. A sharp pain shot into my right eye, and I pressed into it. The light. The silence.

'It's too much, it's too much' I wail out. I cry desperately.

Unbearable.

The anger still lurked in me as I felt the room closing in on me. It was difficult to get everything under control. My heart thought it still had a lot of adrenaline to use up on me. The smile ended. My fists banged the ground again and again, till I could see my blood as red paint for my room.

The explosion was near.

Suddenly it struck me. *What about the note Aehlla gave me while leaving?*

Hurriedly, my shaky hands reached out for my backpack, searching for the only note that could keep me alive.

My wet, grumpy bag was a mess, and the note was slightly torn off by the rain.

I sighed. I carefully dried the pieces- only two- and joined them together with my blood-stained hands.

I could somehow read.

*'we almost made it.
to realize we almost survived
to define love, was to be loved by you
You immortalized my heart, which had already died.
It was almost good for you
to know I was almost scared to lose you
your arms to be the safest place to laugh in
You made me doubt to choose you.
but that 'almost' was just one beautiful lie
that 'almost' made me live my life
I expected some sweet pain for a cry
You almost forgot that I made you feel alive.'
P.S.- Friends are better lovers than any lover can be.*

Oh, I'm far away from friends now.

I was scared beyond words now.

I don't wanna be friends with you. I wanna be in love with you.

I never had a heavy heart. It was time to have one. Was I a good person for her?
Is that what she believed to be true when she dumped me?

My head wouldn't stop swirling just as I got up to go to my gallery.

Walking like a zombie, I pushed myself aside, stumbling upon some broken Legos and a half-eaten sandwich.

I carried on.

The fence was quite slippery to look at, but I could make it work. I slowly ascended the rails, worrying about my death before I had one. I could see parked cars and engines revving, and I believed I was free after all.

Green hazy gas covered the soaked atmosphere credibly to the blurred factories I could see remotely away.

'I hope you'll be happy now, Mom, Dad.' I smirk forcefully, taking a step into nothingness. I slapped my face hard till it turned red and scratched scars. As such, my heartbreak was nothing like my adrenaline. It was more of an anaphylactic shock to me.

Utter disappointment. I began to think I had lost. Okay, slow and steady.

Hold Me When I Die

Too late. That was neither slow nor steady. The next step I took flushed my blood into my head all at once.

I fell, but I felt I fell more for her rather than falling to my death.

What could even happen?

A broken skull and a soul never rest in peace. Poetry. Taught by Aehlla.

It hit me then, while trying to kick old habits and figure out new ways of living, I'd basically decided death sounded pretty peaceful.

Midway through, I turned back up and looked at the sky while I fell. I grinned.

Now who would I dedicate my love letters to, Aehlla?

Cillian / past

Daunting- a word that is seemingly more relatable to my life- to keep a hold of everything in my life, I knew I could; I just didn't want to.

Mirari has gone missing, I believe. I had certainly lost him while hovering my eyes in the shadowed rain and the blissful, foggy mist. My eyes reverberated in the same direction as he ran, and I could not help but limp in my shaggy, oversized pants and a t-shirt depicting a beaten boxer after a round. But I used to wonder, What would my grandmother say?

The rent was due in three months. But it was not like I did not have any money. I simply did not have *enough* money. 'Cillian!' she would yell, knowing how daring and imaginative I had to be to roll into darkness, study, and make money to feed both of us. Mirari used to complain a lot to me about his parents. I guess that would suffice for his mental health, but at least he had parents. At least someone he could go to while his life made him suffer.

Oh, I stepped in the mud. Although it did not appear that the rain would stop.

The winds whispered to me where Mirari was going. I stood there, hoping Aehlla had no idea what was going on.

I brushed my t-shirt off and rang the doorbell as the fragrance of the woody-chambered house struck me. Did they get a new number plate? Or was it some wet paint? The doorbell, being moist, was sticky to my fingers. That was my best bet. Where else could he be? Like he has any other friends, for that matter.

I licked it.

Tasted like metal.

It had been a long time since anyone had opened the door. To begin with, it needed renovation and good owners. I gently raise my head to look into Mirari's room. A bright, warm yellow light greeted me. I was ready to express all of my worries when I realized someone was approaching the door.

The voices were harsh and slightly raised as if someone was arguing.

"I told you to get out of my house, would you-" Mirari's mom was so loud, even I was scared for a second. I look back at my watch.

Eleven already?

She turned around to see me, startled.

"Hello, Cillian!" She leaned forward to speak with me, her hand on her knees and a smile I had never seen before, forced, and the abrupt change in her voice surprised me. A blood stain on her left hand was evident in my eyes-overwhelming for her, it seemed.

A snobby woman.

Happily, I disguised myself as a self-realizing stunted person; the sheer confidence in myself had risen to be this sober kid everyone adored who appreciated the stern care any parent had to offer. I had not looked this innocent in a long time.

I squinted at the glass lamp inside their residence. Shattered.

Explains the wound.

My toes swirl up, shooting adrenaline inside of me. I see a parking light under the roof of the building's residence; a man is parking his nearly broken Camry.

"I needed to know if Mirari was okay." I bite my lips narrowly, staring at the grouchy woman. This family was the most appalling family I'd met.

Many secrets. None revealed.

I hear a crash. A loud one.

My eyes open wide, and my teeth pierce deep into my lips to bleed. "WHAT THE FUCK!!" As the horns and car alarms deafen me, I hear the man scream. The pressure in my body rises to a point where my heart pounds, and I turn back to see what crashes. I clench my fists and stand there cold-blooded.

I take a deep breath to keep myself sane.

Something that fell from above shattered the car. Mirari's mother pushed me aside quickly to see how bad it had to be. I gradually raised my gut to investigate what had happened. The crowd had gathered to gossip. I pushed some jobless people out of my way just to take a look. His dad pushed me to run to see who it was.

My legs shook as my heart throttled with my sweaty palms that glowed to see Mirari lying upon the glass debris of the wrecked car. I couldn't blink. The glass had penetrated his eyes, and a metal frame that intruded on his left foot upside down with his jaw left wide open made him completely unrecognizable.

My wet eyes made it blurry, and I noticed I was confused about what happened.

What I saw was infuriating. Not because my aloof, needy friend was lying bruised and impaired above a stranger's car.

But because he was lifeless.

I could just feel what I had lost. I had lost my ability to see what I'd lost.

My fingers tingle at the thought of touching him, but seeing his mother cry over his body made me stop, quite instantly. I took a few abrupt steps back.

I snatched a phone from a bystander and dialled Aehlla.

Mirari / past

Eunoia- a word that made me think about how graceful it was to accept death.

I had become free. I opened my snappy eyes, and I was in awe of the void around me. I gasped in silence. A muscle couldn't be moved. Even if I tried, I couldn't. The whole thing was flawless. A red hell apparently.

Where was I? I was dead, right? Please, I cannot live life twice like this.

I don't know when I left my body. It just kind of, stopped. Like I blinked and everything real just cut out. No air. No ground. No pain, even. I wasn't standing or lying down-I was just there, like floating but not. My heart felt like it wasn't beating but also pounding at the same time. My brain was fried. My chest was tight. Everything buzzed, like TV static inside my head.

Then I landed somewhere. I don't know where. It wasn't normal. The sky was a mess- colors smeared everywhere, shifting and mixing like oil spills and fire, but glowing. Nothing made sense. There wasn't a sun, no shadows, but it

wasn't dark either. Just, lit up in this weird soft glow that didn't come from anywhere. The ground felt too soft, like I was stepping on something that breathed back. There were flowers- giant, glowing, weirdly smooth, and they moved. Like they were alive. Like they knew me. They pulsed, opened and closed slowly, watching me, I swear.

And then I heard it. Loud. Deep. Rushing. I didn't walk. I just sort of ended up near it. A cliff. A waterfall. But not water. Blood. Thick, dark, pouring like it had been building forever and finally snapped. And it was mine. I *knew* it was mine. I could feel it. And it wasn't just flowing. It moved weird- twisting, shifting, forming things. Faces. My face. Pieces of me. My hands. My ribs. Like it was vomiting out all the shit I'd ever done or buried.

And I just laid there. I didn't scream. I didn't cry. I just watched it fall. Watched myself spill out of something I didn't understand. It was disgusting. But also kind of- beautiful? And that made me feel sick. Because what kind of person sees that and thinks it's beautiful?

What kind of person watches their own blood become art and just lays there like it's normal?

My life force was draining away, yet I felt strangely calm. My karma floated beside me, laying just with a forehead as big as a highway, oh wait, that is me. It was a mirror image of myself, but translucent and glowing, a ghostly presence in this fantastical reality.

"You're close to death, Mirari," my karma spoke, its voice resonating in the silence. His hands laid on his stomach much more like a patient to their therapist. "Your life is seeping away", his head tilted at me, "just like the waterfall of your blood."

I turned his gaze to the figure, his vision blurring at the edges. "I see," I replied, my voice weak. "Is this the end?"

"Meh- I guess you could say that" he giggled. "You died for a girl? For fuck's sake have better reasons."

"Shut the fuck up."

Karma looked at me, its shadowy eyes filled with a profound sadness. "That depends on you, Mirari. This is your hallucination. You're in control here."

I looked around, at the surreal beauty of my creation. Maybe this was my end, maybe not. But for now, floated in nothingness, amidst the radiant, glowing flowers and the waterfall of his blood, teetering on the edge of life and death.

I floated up into this composed, purple-looking dimension, my jaws wide apart and my mouth still open. The glittering view of the sky dazzled me. It was something I had never seen. The sky was sparkling with glitter, and I felt it was a dream.

Was I dead? In the corner of my eye, I could see nothingness. A deep oceanic wave of mixed colours changed their desires at random, just as I felt they were changing through my emotions.

Felt like I was controlling it.

I had scars on my face that burned like hell, but I still could not breathe. Agreed, I had not died this time.

A few noticeably big *bubbles* came around me; some went under, and some burst randomly. They had a peculiar aroma. OH, THAT SMELL.

Scented.

This irrational thought of being alive had invaded me. I was paralyzed. It's an accepted truth that, to be honest, life isn't just one. It's the one you can remember.

My eyes were wet from the beginning. They implored for mercy.

'Help me,' I begged myself.

Stranded alone in the middle of nowhere, I grappled with intense feelings of fear and confusion. As I navigate this space, I encounter a peculiar phenomena that defy all logic and reason. My senses were heightened, perceiving distant echoes and whispers that could be his imagination or something far more significant.

"You've been a nice child, Mirari." His unusual yet glorious voice broke the silence. It immediately held me together. "You are here because you killed yourself. That would have been different if you had been murdered."

That was somewhat familiar.

I hesitated, "Karma? You got a fucking makeover?"

I struggle to his face now amidst the bubbles of my nonexistent life.

"I never thought we'd meet so soon," he remarked and got up with great enthusiasm. "We just spoke last night, right?" This was my millionth time I had seen this nincompoop. But he was majestic, polite, and downright scary to look at. I was amazed that my karma had a face. It was me.

"Is it so I am a nincompoop for you?" He was quick to assess what I was thinking. Of course this shithead knew what I was thinking.

"No, no, when did I say that?" I was in pain.

"You're vulnerable here too, Mirari, just as you were while you lived. And that precisely killed you". He came right in front of me, his hands behind him, and looked like he was going to give orders now.

"I haven't been here before".

"Neither did I plan to bring you here. This is your conscience."

In the void, I discover remnants of forgotten memories, each fragment offering glimpses into my lived life. In these mysterious fragments, I uncover buried emotions, unresolved regrets, and long-buried secrets. Guided by these fragments, I begin to unravel my present state.

Explains why my mind has been a shithole all the time. The blob moved and swayed slowly. His voice echoed.

"Sorry to burst your bubble but you haven't died already" he mocked, he had chewing gum in his mouth now, grazing like a cow.

"Funny bitch. My karma cracked a joke".

"Shouldn't you know I was going to say that since I am you?"

I laid my head behind and felt one of the tears brush past my hair dripping down.

“Mirari, look,” he began, “Just zip it, will you?” I shut him up.

“You can talk to me, Mirari. Whenever you’re in a hoax you can talk to me. People can’t do that with their karma. Be grateful you’re privileged”. His hands went everywhere explaining the whole system over and over now, every time we met. He turned out to be an extrovert huh? Unlike me.

“I am the pinnacle of your existence; you can’t live without me. You exist because of me.”

“Then die with me.”

“I was made to protect you and to give you what you deserve.”

“It was worth a try, maybe worth my life?”

He leaned forward, with his eyes bulging out and a breath of mint, to make sure I heard it right and growled, *“I suppose life gets more meaning when you realize you don’t get the same moment twice”*.

Mirari / past

Perspectives- That's the wonder of things; we don't know what we want.

There are 8 billion of us on this planet and 8 billion perspectives, but it didn't take me long to know what this craphead was blabbering.

It was the second time I had been scolded for something so frivolous. Okay, I have died, so it's not frivolous at all. The first time was last night, to be with Aehlla.

I was on a hot streak.

Too late, he seemed angry. I forgot he could read my mind.

"How long am I supposed to be here?" I asked.

"Till you live again". I could tell his hopes were high. Just as high as I was floating in nothingness and talking to a blob of bubbles filled with my experiences and traumas.

Trippy, isn't it?

I felt myself on the edge of reality, staring into a realm of the ether. It was a strange, alien landscape speckled with dazzling bubbles, each of which glowed with the radiant light of a thousand stars. These were more than just soap bubbles; they were timeless lumps, each holding a possible future that could have occurred if I wasn't on my way to death.

A bright red array came straight at me, but I nearly missed it. Suddenly, a red waterfall splashed the entire void.

"Don't worry, that's your blood. You're losing a lot of it." His happy voice was starting to become more annoying.

Each bubble was a universe unto itself, an example of what might have been. I attempted to reach out but felt quiet and mute, my fingers shaking as they brushed across the fragile surface of a swerving bubble. It quivered at my touch, and my visions were filled with a life I had not lived. I saw myself wearing a fine black tuxedo, standing at the altar with a dazzling grin on my face. Aehlla stood afar off, gorgeous in a flowing white gown, her eyes shining with unshed tears of delight. He could almost hear the delicate sounds of the wedding march, the delighted clapping of their friends and family, and the soft whisper of their vows.

I abruptly open my eyes to again hear the shush of my karma's breath and the waterfall filling up the pit of my doom. I laid there paralyzed, stiff enough to even peek at him now.

But it was just one of many. Surrounding this bubble were countless others, each holding a different future, a different path. Some were filled with joy and laughter, others with sorrow and tears. Yet, they all held one common thread - they were futures where I was alive, where I had the chance to live, and to love.

As I lay there, engrossed in this panorama of alternatives, I felt sorry. These were the futures I would never experience, the lives I would never live. Yet, there was a strange comfort in knowing they existed, even if just in this realm.

What now?

“There are timelines, my son; in each, you lose what you loved the most and gain something necessary. Some are so dark”

Kind of like my soul.

I squinted back and forth at the bubbles surrounding me. My tears blurred my vision again. “What could be darker than me dying?”

“Say that to your mom, who saw you die in front of her,” Karma snapped and smiled. I usually think he doesn’t think before speaking. Funny how I am still being hurt even though I am dead.

“So let me get this pretty clear,” he continued, “you died because of a girl?”.

“Is it so? Don’t you realize we loved her? I have sinned for love. Whatever you called this poison, it wasn’t love.” My glowing, sweaty palms again tried clenching, giving up on my karma. Although it was useless. I was sincerely still floating on the ridge of the void.

Yes, filled with my blood. “Isn’t love the reason we live our lives? In hopes we could find someone to betray us in the end? I have been fucking betrayed.”

A loud silence wasn’t the only thing I could hear. I could hear him thinking.

“How delusional can you be? We live for love, I agree, but if you can’t handle the rejection it gives you, are you even capable of love? We welcome death because of a broken heart.” He swayed around frolicking his hands everywhere like that was the most basic knowledge anyone could have.

I widened my eyes. It hit the spot. It hurt.

“Okay, I am not here for your lectures, you dumbass; let me die with you right here, or let me live again so I can die again in peace”.

I seemed to have forgotten who I was. The feeling of worth was gone.

“I couldn’t have said it better, but you’ll find yourself in this world again. You’ll find true love. You’ll be at peace, but it will still cause you suffering,” he comforted so well, I began breathing again.

“Am I living again?”

“I, your karma, let’s you live again”.

“Wait, wait, what?”

“What?” he repeated.

“This is what happens when you are good all the time? Maybe good isn’t for me then.”

“This is a world where love is counted. Show them that you are more than just love. Mirari if you can show them that they do not deserve you, I will stand by your side in return”.

“Then give me a world without Aehlla,” I gasped. “Even my dad”.

The blood kept flowing like a dam in the void. I would soon be drowning in my blood. I lay there as if worshipping my death and my karma, rewarding me with a new life as a new crown on my head.

I didn’t fit in this world so he created a new one.

There was no room for me to see what each bubble had to offer me as they whirled around frantically.

“A blood bubble bath”-some breaths of mine were searching for a new day.

I sway above, and my elbows feel free. I began feeling pain.

Physical pain.

“I did not come here to live again!” I shrieked.

“And I do not foresee a future with temperamental ordeal for your wishes”. I could hear a slight grin in his voice.

“*What now?*” Fuck this dipshit couldn’t find simpler words to explain.

“Without both your father and Aehlla, there is no future. You need one or the other in your life. Your destiny is then complete. And your fate is not tampered with.”

How beautiful his voice is.

Purely calming.

“A whole new era is about to begin”, returned Karma in his polite voice. “You shall find what you deserve; if not, you shall lose what you already deserve.”

Sometimes I do feel he was sarcastic.

Secretly, I wished I had been in the bubble of marrying Aehlra. But my supposed unchangeable fate had brainwashed me. ‘Never again, please, this void’ I pray.

My body was screaming with pain, and it was about to kill me.

I peer across the bubbles to notice some more spots colouring the mist. I whimpered to let myself take it easy on this pain. In fact, I was begging.

The fine remains of once a whole-hearted boy, searching for love, are now empty, soulless, and discarded as if they were never any good.

I could not fathom the unexpectedness and the mess I had made in my world.

To cover my wounds, my eyes close while I breathe erratically.

I pictured a little Aehlra dancing on my 7th birthday, swaying her little hands on top of my shoulder with a whimsical, small attitude, a faint smile, and just being happy to be alive.

But I was the only one suffering, though with a weakened smirk on my face.

“You miss her, don't you?” A more gentle karma took over. Now he sounded like a gurgling 50-year-old man after a hangover at his daughter’s wedding.

“Pretty much”.

“You have lost something more than you can imagine”.

“Can you shut the fuck up and do your thing? I am in pain!”

“Fine, you and I are the same soul. Yet I regret it more than you. Her interests and preferences are all yours, so you will always remember Aehlra. Understand *why* she left you and live the life she wanted for herself. And your misery will have company.”

This guy, or my soul, was becoming annoying by the minute. My dazed, gloomy eyesight was gone. All I could see, and hopefully will see, was black.

Pitch black. I was with Aehlla. Seeing her work on her poetry felt mesmerizing, yet delusional.

She was never mine, to begin with. I snuck up behind her and peered into her room through some streetlights while it was dimly lit. The room was dominated by vandalism. It smelled lush green, and the authority of her framed paintings caught my attention, though it was short-lived, as the fluttering post-it notes danced in the drizzle of the rain.

I remembered that I wasn't the only one in love with her.

Even my karma was. And he wished for me to share her passions, ideas, and emotions in my life. Before committing a second suicide, I thought I would pass away.

She did not seem to mind that I was there, or perhaps she was not even aware of my presence. The walls were covered in vibrant, ornate charts. I bent down to see what she was writing, as she was utterly absorbed. Her breathing was prominent. Maybe I was the one shit-scared? I knew it was a hallucination of some kind, but it felt absolutely real. I asked, "Aehlla?" as reality slowly snuck up on me. She had an awful smile on her face as she looked at me.

I backed up a few steps, nearly falling over her bed. I did not. She gave me another note to help me deal with things.

Why does she keep making these stupid notes?

My hands were trembling wildly as I nervously read-

*"The rhythm of our love,
Matched the rhythm of our pain,
Everything is balanced."*

I crept along the spaces in between the lines. It was alluring to read yet obscene to understand. My fragile hands gave up as I began losing control.

I slipped and fell upon her bed again.

Aehlla / past

Beautiful- the word they use to describe me. Every relationship involves its fair share of concessions.

Not every literate person would get it. But it is not a difficult subject to discuss, lol.

I sensed a feeling of rage and uncertainty as I relived my most horrible fear of the death of someone so close to me. Gladly, he didn't take his life injecting mercury into himself like my mom. She did torture herself.

No more Deja Vu, please. I hurried until the moonlit night stayed to cover the death of my - ex - while Cillain was still holding up on the call for me.

"Is the ambulance there yet?"

"Yes, it is."

I couldn't hear a morsel of regret. Except Mirari's mom is wailing in the back. Cillian stayed cold as a fungus on a rock.

Fine, the neighbourhood wasn't big enough for me to wander around looking for a taxi.

I had control over my body and mind, but my soul was festering with anxiety. I crossed the lanes and tripped over the fibre optic cables. I envisioned a more ladylike, feminine aura about me. But the same dress I had been wearing for two days gave me a different feeling.

I was okay; I lied to myself. Better enough to see Mirari myself.

I was drawn in by a loud red sound that was far away. Hurrying seemed pointless. I leaned forward, somewhat perspiring, with two sirens blaring at me. My vision was blurred by my tears, and my fists clenched in anger and slight dissatisfaction.

I muttered, "Mirari," reminding myself of what I might have done.

I cried out in agony, both hands covering my mouth.

That kind of cry that will not come out no matter what, but I forced it, going numb and collapsing on my knees.

It was entirely my fault. The one thing I had control over was Cillian, who sat in a corner with a cigarette lit up in his mouth, staring as the cars went by. I suddenly charge forward, pushing the crowd aside so I can see the boy they are loading into the ambulance.

He only had a flimsy smile. He appeared to be fairly content.

Did he want this?

Knowing that he was the only person I had ever relied on, hurt. Bad.

The fact that we will forget about him in a week makes the pain worse.

I felt like I died with him in the same second.

But whether my heart could forget how he cherished me, I doubt that.

“Will you be okay?” As I dozed off from the loud sirens, Cillian reached out to me.

“Maybe”.

“Do you want a cigarette?”

My sore back and smudged lipstick made it impossible for me to refuse. Still, I did. My face swelled up as I kept crying. I wondered if he could come back. Not to be back with him, just to see him alive. I was wrinkled. Hell, even my dress is off-topic. I could lean against a wall, but it made squeaky noises when I did. The pressure of having nothing deep inside of him to feel was tangible to Cillian. I wonder if he has ever lost a loved one.

“Do you want to get out of here?” he asked wryly. He shook. He was shivering. I barely noticed that.

Even he shook. He moved a bit. Or maybe I served so much under love that my rituals and my obsolescent thinking were so highly disturbed that I thought Mirari moved. He did, or was I not getting enough sleep?

The ambulance was loaded, and the red sirens grew deeper in my soul, piercing it.

My throat was sore like I had eaten red chillies with no water. But now I had to go about things differently. Things that endured.

AWAY WITH PILLS. NO MORE ATTACKS.

The sirens abruptly stopped, and I watched in shame and tears as everyone continued their way as if nothing had happened. The offer to go to the hospital came from Mirari's mother as soon as possible, but Cillian's grip on Mirari's hand was firm. He kept holding on. He had other ideas, too.

My tummy grumbled. I continued, passing ponds with tadpoles croaking in the night and wet logs. I had engulfed a large amount of moist air.

Oh, wait, I have been here before. Yet I didn't want to bother opening my mouth.

The truth was not yet accepted by my good nature. We hid among some densely packed banyan tree roots, vulnerable to parasites sucking my corpse's blood.

This was not a bad time to pass away, to be honest.

From here, I told Cillian to turn left.

"How do you know, how the fuck?" This sweet spot was a lot sweeter to Mirari and me than it was to Cillian, who may have been naive.

No, we did not have sex or anything else that would pique your interest in intercourse.

"We actually watched Halley's comet from here, away from everyone, everything. That was actually more gorgeous than I had expected" I blurted, jumping from thorns and bushes and snakes if they were peeping at us.

"For real?"

"Why would I even lie to you?" My straight face twisted around to him.

I could not walk anymore. I felt like I was drowning because the ground was all mushy and squished. I gasped. I imagined myself as a speck beneath a blanket of stars, most notably the galaxies, at which I could gaze far enough to see them twinkle in my eyes. Especially since I was crying. A river was waiting for us downhill to slurp some water and invite us to cool off.

But my thoughts didn't last long. I was swollen. I pondered my notions, but it was too late to realize I had zoned out while looking at the stars. It was hellboundedly, freakishly beautiful, to say the least.

"Mirari used to count stars here," he reiterated. He seemed happy he was gone, but not much, as they weren't so close anyway. I can see why. "Whenever he used to be sad, or your problems troubled him too, he came here, saying the time to count these stars would be less traumatizing than dealing with my problems."

I jerked. "Did he even love me then?"

"Duh, you literally have witnessed Halley's here with him and you doubt yourself?"

"I don't even trust my guts."

"Perhaps you should ask the moon over there and the baby stars. They all know you," he replied blankly, side-eyeing me. Why was he poetic?

"Mirari used to tell them about you. Whispered of what you could call the unimaginable. Confessed. Even prayed for your happiness. Hell, even bitched about you. All he could tell them was you".

"How do you know?"

"Because I was there. Maybe once or twice- when he bitched about you a lot. I was only there for the bitching- but you get the point," he huffed, pausing several times to finish what he was saying.

The smoke is probably acting up again.

I yell at the top of my lungs. It was just before dawn, and I did not want any wild animals to go hungry because of me. I crumbled on my knees. This was the worst cry I would ever have.

'Please, Please- No you can't go, I'm not- I just can't-' I huffed my lungs out and my mouth became cold as ice.

I grew up in the midst of the most heinous of unimaginable things, which drew my life backwards rather than forwards. It did not take long for me to fathom that my definition of love was fucked.

You don't realize what love is until you lose it.

Mirari / present

Saudade - a word that my karma adores, referring to being close to someone who is far away.

But it never accepted the fact. He is, after all, my karma.

I opened my eyes only to find myself in the most lilting place possible. The pedestrians didn't carry sweaters and wine up their sleeves; the place was humid now. I was alive, although it was banal enough for me to judge.

Oh, look who's back. Unnerved, I got on my feet, hinging upon the railings of the corridor, and squinted at a distance to see things differently. The sourness, which I once found alluring, is sweet now.

I looked across the veranda deck to see a bright twinkling sky full of stars, tempting me to jump once more. It was midnight.

But this was different, and I had seen it before. The green haze had vanished. It appeared cleaner and fresher than before, like it just rained. I reasoned that

the smoke would have been drawn down. But there was no honking either. As I looked down, I noticed that most people were walking, with only trucks and service vehicles on the road.

I took some steps back just to topple over the hinge of my glass corridor.

OUCH. *It hurt.*

What? It hurt? I was experiencing pain once more. I jumped back in delight, only to bang my head against the metallic cage of the showpiece my mother had hung outside to feed thirsty birds some water and food.

Also, my socks were wet from the rain, or perhaps I had sweated too much. But it did not stink, so I was good. I learned new things about myself the moment I started wrapping my head around what had happened in the previous hour. My desk was neat and tidy, the floor mopped, and my walls decorated with posters and fairy lights were more aesthetically pleasing, just like what I saw in Aehlla's room.

But, of course, this was my room. I suddenly touched my chest and pressed them. No, I wasn't a girl either. A serious question though, what if I was a flat-chested girl?

My room did make me fantasize about being one. I crept forward, lowering myself to my study desk. I glanced up to check my mirror, which had been dirty for ages (not from me using my socks to clean it), but it looked spotless. Not even a single speck of dirt. The only dirt I could see was me.

Wait, THIS BAG OF DIRT IS ME? I couldn't possibly look better. The boy, who didn't even bother to cut his hair, rocked a low, faded medium haircut that just slid up to my eyebrows. A beard that covered my cheeks too? That was something I wanted. I raised my hands to observe some noticeable small changes. THEY WERE BULKY. Me and my gym had a complicated relationship overall; I would just pay them and didn't even bother to go, but my death changed a lot of things.

Aehlla must've lived like this.

Hold Me When I Die

I skimmed through my notebooks, and my handwriting was off the charts. I could finally understand what I had written. But I didn't admit that I wrote this.

*'let me love you so that you won't dwell in your past because of your memories,
but rather make new memories for your future and me.
let me look through your windows as if it were snowing, while we watch the
white become our home.
why has my soul not moved from you, while it has been watching you do all the
wrong things?
if death came apart, would you still be seeking the harmony that wanders
through my soul?
So why say I love you?'*

Okay, I am more than convinced I didn't write that shit. I am not so creative, but Aehll-

Her name kept popping into my head like some alien invasion that only happens in America. But didn't Karma say I would live her life through her lens? Her lens appeared to be both *magnificent* and *vicious*.

The shallow tiles squeaked and rumbled as I walked on them.

No more Deja Vu, please.

Everything was as calm as it had been before I left. Possibly better. I took a peek outside before walking down the 12 stairs while counting each step of my life against the old ancestral home's chilly tiles. I'm pretty sure everything was the same. I did not spend much time observing my own house while I lived, so everything was new to me. Confused, I take a stroll down the hallway to get down and greet my mom. I heard some crackling sounds as the dishes were being washed.

I was fucking lost being in my own house.

"Mirari, hi," my mom welcomed me as I stared at her washing the dishes. "You slept a long time". It was near dawn.

Dishcloths, scrubbers, and some sponges were a mess over there.

'Naive you to say I slept, Mom,' I thought, some bizarre, some intrusive thoughts.

The house felt snug, and my feet were cold. I had wished for a bizarre interaction with my mother for a long time. That is probably why my mother abruptly left me.

"Oh, hello," were my first words after being born again.

But there was a point to address.

Why was my father's photo hung up in the aisle?

Mirari / present

Help - a word I thought I didn't need at all, but my death changed its meaning.

"You look like a fried potato on a stick, Mom." I was sure the woman, who had been so quiet lately, despised me and wanted to get rid of me.

But no.

"But you don't look sleepy," she growled, but she was gentle. And she smiled.

She smiled. Heaven must be liking this, this was quite a show. I stuffed my butt in the cushioned armchair, which was exquisitely new for what I thought.

My mother looked at me puzzled as she washed the dishes with the clunky noises, as if that chair was not meant for me. Or as if I had never sat there with my will.

I instantly got up with that one look as I felt so dumb- wait, existential crisis?

This shit was random. I have just been reborn, goddamn it. And I hate life already? My hormones were acting up just so I could control the feeling of being alone, or better yet, be prepared to be alone for the rest of my life.

I was susceptible to being hated by my mom again, so I asked her about Dad.

“When will Dad be coming home?” Ignoring the fact that maybe, just maybe, they would be together in this life.

A stern look shifted from her eyes, confused and disoriented enough to make me question myself. A heavy stare was waiting to arise.

I quite despise my sense of reality now. It was rather obsolete and unneeded.

“Is he out of town? Or you guys got divorced?” I asked every sense of possibility, which became more childish, and by the word.

“*What's wrong with you?*” came the reply, and I swear it was dry as fuck. I felt I had offended her on so many levels.

Okay, so not divorced. Good going.

“You weren’t even there for his funeral. How dare you ask me this?” Mom’s face grew red just seeing me munch on the bag of almonds and peanuts on the sofa. I walked towards her, not realizing what damage I had done. The floor scraped as I walked upon it, and, I rested my feet on it, which made some irritating, quirky noises.

“Where was I?” I even dared to ask this. Wow. I was hoping I would get some answers on how this life worked, but a peculiar smell caught my attention.

A nostalgic smell.

But I brushed it aside.

A cloud of dark, grey, and gloomy smoke poured like poison from the stove and gas cylinders beneath the kitchen table. But my mom looked quite unbothered.

Her eyes weren’t shifting from my gaze as I stood confused and hoped not to get manslaughtered by my mother.

“He died?”

She gave birth to something even more perplexing. My heart could not take it any longer, so I leaned on the table for support.

“He died?”

A sharpened knife was amongst the dishes, which was all I could see, “Oh, you can put that down,” I said when she lifted some dishes and took them out. She wiped some water off it but kept it in her hand.

A tear just dropped from my right eye amid this chaos, wondering, if this was not what I wanted, Karma.

“You want me to go all through this again?” She spoke softly, and now but never took her eyes off me. “You *killed* him, Mirari. That was your fault!”

I bawled. My hands shook like they needed drugs desperately.

I don’t think my hellishly handsome face would like that.

Mirari / present

Freedom - a word I might use now that my father is no longer alive.

But the thing that really haunted me- the part that stuck in my gut like a nail, wasn't that he died. It was that I *killed* him.

That's the part I can't say out loud without something in me recoiling. People talk about how love or connection gives life meaning, how relationships are sacred. But what if the relationship you were given was a cage? What if it was violence every night, your mother curled up like she was trying to disappear while your father screamed himself hoarse?

No one wants that kind of meaning.

I wanted to ask her- *really* ask her- what she remembered, what she knew. But she already looked so tired of me. Like my questions were poison, and she'd had her fill.

Maybe it wasn't that he died. Maybe it was that I did it. And maybe that's what finally cracked me wide open. The part no one ever wants to admit- that the thing that broke you was something you *chose*.

She stood at the sink. Her apron streaked in bubbles and white film, like she'd been scrubbing something forever. Not blood, not gore, but there was something in the way her hands moved that felt violent. Not butcher work exactly- but close. Just no red this time.

And me? I was falling apart. Inside out. My dreams- no, my nightmares- weren't just dreams anymore. They were memories, maybe. I couldn't tell what was real. Everything was scrambled. Nothing made sense, except the feeling in my chest that I'd done something irreversible.

"How- how did I kill him?" I tried to ask. But the words barely left me. They snagged in my throat, half-formed, like they didn't even *want* to be spoken.

"*WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?*" *she yelled*. "Is it not enough for you, me working for us, that you have to bring up the past like nobody knows?!"

As she should.

I stumbled back. I wasn't trying to run exactly- I just needed to be gone, to get to my room before anything *else* happened. Before things broke again.

But I was right. Of course I was. It *did* break.

That wind- the kind that feels like it's pushing from the inside, like the house itself wants to scream- rushed down the corridor of the old place. My family's house. My haunted, crumbling, too-big, too-silent house. And the chimes outside? All of them. Singing. No- *screaming*. Metal on metal. Like panic.

I turned.

He was there.

Just standing. Casual. Lighting a cigar like this was any normal evening and we hadn't already burned the world down. My dad. Or whatever was left of him.

"I hate you," he said. Not loud. Not soft. Just- like breathing. Like he'd been waiting to let that sentence out his whole damn life.

I didn't answer. I couldn't. He didn't even look *real*. A blur, not quite touching the floor. Like the hallway itself didn't know if it wanted to hold him.

A faint figure. Smoke and bone. And that look- like he wasn't sure if he was haunting me or if *I* was haunting *him*.

My hands were shaking. I don't even remember when I backed into the wall. I just remember the way his eyes didn't blink.

What is happening?

He slid his eyes toward me without looking up. But he didn't move. He didn't glitch.

"MIRARI!" my mother exclaimed as she noticed me staring at the empty hallway. I blinked quickly to clear my vision. Fuck, I am hallucinating. It makes sense that I was not charged with murder earlier. My brain hurts.

It has been an hour since I have been alive, and the regrets keep coming. I needed answers, but definitely not from my mom. She would not take any of it.

I tiptoed in my best non-teary face, which I tried to blend myself into, which was quite difficult but much needed. She was still staring at me in awe of what I had become. Or maybe how much I had changed in a nap, according to her. I flew silently outside my house, not looking back at her pretty sad face, which begged me to stay with her longer.

She needed me.

But I- God- I was worse. More dangerous. More ruined. Whatever storm she was in, I was the bigger one. The one that didn't leave things standing.

Somewhere between the thought and the breath, I was outside. I don't even remember leaving the house. One minute inside, next minute pavement. Concrete under my bare feet, cold enough to bite, but I barely felt it. Like my nerves had shut off or gone on strike.

Hold Me When I Die

I could see everything- but not like me. Through her. Through Aehlla's eyes.
Or maybe mine. I don't know anymore. It all blurred.

It felt- destined. Which scared me more than anything. Like something ancient
had planned it. Like I'd stumbled into a script I didn't write.

And still- none of it should've happened.

The pavement was rough, cold, biting. Didn't matter. I kept walking. My skin
should've hurt, but it didn't. My neurons? Quiet. Like static. Like my body was
happening in the background.

The morning light broke across the street, hitting my face, my chest. Gold and
warm and useless.

It didn't feel like hope.

It didn't feel like love.

Mirari's mom / present

"It's okay; everyone needs a bad day." My son held me tight, crying. Either way, I told the 8 year old that his mom shouldn't be the one he looked up to. But it was his first day at school, and I wouldn't want to disappoint him.

"Mirari, it's time now," I scolded him.

He hung from my dress, not ready to leave me.

"Mumma loves you, right?" I said this while I wiped his tears from his mushy little face. He was chubby with this tight little yellow school uniform, slick back hair, and a heavy ass school bag, unmistakable for child labor.

I had this disapproving look just radiating out of me.

Ah, my little helpless son. And I could have done anything to protect that little innocence too. I stood back first, letting go of his grip, and strayed away from school. It wasn't the first time I was hurt by someone leaving for just 5 hours.

Even some trust what I wanted to tell him- I am all about you. I stood there until the gates told me it was time to go home. I wanted to go back to Sawyer, but the young moms around me were gossiping about something cozy. But I guess my husband's surgery was in utmost need of attendance. The more I looked around, I realized I was alone.

Working alone.

Earning alone. And enjoying my own company. Alcohol too sometimes.

No. If I'm being honest, having Sawyer in the hospital gave me more time with Mirari. And maybe that's awful. Maybe that makes me awful. But it's true.

I threw my bag over my shoulder- hard, like I needed it to anchor me- and stepped out into the street, eyes already scanning for a taxi. I didn't even know what time it was. Didn't care. Just knew I had to get back to the hospital.

Sawyer probably wanted a cigarette. Hell, he probably *asked* for one right there in the ICU. And if they let him- which they wouldn't, but if they did- he'd light up right there, machines beeping, tubes everywhere, like it was just another Tuesday. Wouldn't even flinch doing it in front of the doctors.

That was just- him. Always trying to drag his chaos into every sterile room.

Fucking hell. Sometimes it even crossed my mind that hell would be better than this.

Blood cancer.

Could it be cured? Could he live to make Mirari's future like a responsible dad?

Some questions haunted me while working a minimum wage job as a single mom.

Standing stranded looking for an uber on a busy hustling street made me feel inferior.

Though fluttering butterflies in my stomach left me for a kink of coffee to sip to drown my anxiety, but okay, chilly winds may do the job.

The uber was warm, and a jingling husky wobble sat fixed on the dashboard, wagging its head like a mental breakdown I had a few weeks ago. Okay, yesterday. Don't blame me- I tried my best not to cry.

Seats were warm as if the previous passenger were just exhaling through their buttcheeks.

Breathe.

Certainly wishes didn't obey me often. Some stars weren't in my destiny either. I hopped out of the car as if I really loved him. But I stumbled to get outside absentmindedly.

To see him suffer that was the least I could see, but the most I could cherish. Brushing past the reception, I glanced at some faces I knew very well. Judging and gossiping about me. A coffee catch up maybe?

A nice observable trait. Three women, one hoodied with a sweatshirt sipping black coffee exclaimed, "Oh there you are, we were just talking about you, Elina" her eyes wide open, genuinely excited to see me. She had wavy hair I dreamt of everyday when I showered, blissful skin and a voice only radio jockeys would hire.

But other than that she was a bitch. I worked with her for almost six years of my life and till this date I am not proud of it.

The other two women seemed shy and noticeably out of the conversation.

Naira and Kiara. Both were muttering among themselves which clearly wasn't soft enough of a whisper. Naira was an acid attack survivor, though luckily her hand was burned while defending.

I lowered my head so I could think of a roast.

I cleared my throat, "Oh sure, security told me there were three jobless women sitting here since the morning. "Were those you guys?"

I sneakily grabbed her black coffee and drank it. NO SUGAR. I wanted to puke on her hair; I was jealous regardless.

"Not like my hubby is dying, am I right? Oh, and do you know about the security here? Personally, or-" She hesitated as my blood boiled to its normal temperature.

"Too far, shithead," I howled.

"You wouldn't do anything right?"

"Try me" .

I don't make many friends, yet it seems like bitches never leave my side.

I yanked in the process, and Kiara shoved me away from Sasha. I didn't even realize I was approaching her with the goal of placing her head beneath my feet and squawking for help.

I hope that day comes soon.

Naira chewed into her sandwich with a tomato piece dangling off her lip. Someone seems to be enjoying the show. I wasn't afraid of my hard work, working my tail off for my only son and paying the charity through my husband. Naira's freckles gleamed in the rays from above, as if a divine intervention had blessed her.

But she didn't need any blessings. She was rich.

"How many days more, Elina?" She was more concerned for my husband than I was. But the question quickly turned gory.

"10" was my quick opinion. "The doctors said so" . Very precise.

"Unlucky number," she stated while using her burned palm to sway her hair on her way of eating her meal. She's already eaten the split ends.

I watched the lift open up, indicating that I should take off.

"Go, don't you want to give him sympathy while he's dying?" Oh my God, I despise Sasha. The one who brimmed spells and presented a poisonous fruit to every woman she was envious of. She was everything, Imprudent, Bratty, and borderline horrendous. My eyes stung from blisters. I was cursed. I wished to be home free.

Naira appeared more offended than me. Naira was required for a more extensive social circle.

I sighed.

Kiara gave me her coffee, smudged with extra vanilla ice cream and exceedingly hot, which I of course did not decline. I grabbed it and gripped it as I dashed before the lift closed.

“For the ‘Gram?”

“For the ‘Gram”.

I stepped on the recently scrubbed floor, and the ground felt moist. 'Ward 113,' I said. I kept wishing he'd leap out of his hospital bed so I could take a day off work. The floor shimmered with joy, and the janitor seemed enraged. My small grin eased him down; the woman card always works.

As I approached the ward, I looked inside the room with curiosity, only to be disappointed when he uttered, "Got any food?".

Bitch, my entire existence has become a lie, and this dude is concerned about eating. Well, he is not wrong. His hand was injected with salines, incubators, and some things I don't know the name of. I scooched closer to him and sat on a wooden stool.

"You smell like coffee," he murmured with his morning voice. "Thank you," I returned it to him.

"Could you bring me some coffee?" he asked, smirking.

'I should bring him some,' I thought. "No," I responded.

"Please, I'm dying soon," he smiled.

"Don't bring up that topic," I scolded.

His eyes gleamed, "Then how do you expect me to smile without accepting it?"

Naira / present

21st January, 20XX

My life hasn't always been flowers. I've been picked and gladly have been put into some books as bookmarks. Since Elina had Mirari, my desire to start a family has potentially increased so much. Much more than waves crashing on the shore.

But will anybody accept me? Was I so lovely that any acid could stop me from being myself?

It hurts like people just loved me for my body. Or will I just be abused?

With that, I, Naira, tossed away every written possibility for my life. My journal, all 192 pages of spiraling madness- straight into the trash. It was intense. Too intense. No one really understood me anyway. Maybe they hadn't been abused the right way. That sounds wrong, but you get it. I just hope the

garbage collector picks it up, flips through it, and doesn't relate. That's my version of hope these days.

So, diagnosis in hand- or more accurately, suspicion- I dragged Sasha and Kiara with me to the hospital for a routine skin check. I thought it was cancer. Not the dramatic kind, just- maybe. I mean, I'm not a doctor, right? But it made me wonder, does acid burn lead to cancer? Like, chemically? No one talks about that. People just assume it's aesthetic damage. No one ever says, "Hey, you might die from this."

I'm an extrovert. Loud. Fast. Messy. Unlike Kiara, who folds into herself like damn origami if someone so much as glances her way. And maybe that's why I've dated more guys. Or maybe it's because she lets me handle the messy bits- she crushes, I charm. I get them talking, laughing, leaning in. And then? Boom. They're sleeping together and she's pretending it was fate. I swear, I should start charging. Cupid, but unpaid and morally questionable.

She's not as pretty as me.

Too harsh? Maybe. But- not untrue. And maybe that's where the rot started. Why I'm here now- dry as hell in every possible way. Emotionally. Spiritually. Physically. Like something got scorched inside me and never quite healed. Like this version of me isn't the one I ordered, and I'm stuck in it anyway.

The café door groaned open. We were already there, drinks in hand, pretending everything was casual. Elina walked in with that goddamn immaculate smile- the kind that says she donates to causes *and* judges people who don't. Sasha waved. Kiara giggled. I gripped my iced coffee tighter than necessary, my hands already slick from the heat. My sweat ran down into the drink. Tasted like defeat, probably.

"Sounds about right," Kiara said suddenly, not even looking up. Glued to her phone, as usual- probably watching the likes roll in on her last lip gloss reel. She's got like 200 PR packages stacked in her room. She's not *in* the algorithm- she *is* the algorithm. Half the girls I know breathe in her aesthetic like it's air.

And the worst part? I wasn't exaggerating. I was *underplaying*. If anything, it scared me- how much she could just *exist* and it felt like she was erasing me without lifting a finger. Not violent. Not on purpose. Just slow- like erosion.

But maybe I'm being dramatic. Or jealous. Or tired. Or all three.

Maybe that's the real me talking. The one who doesn't always win.

Sasha and I exchanged a look, blank and unbothered, like maybe Kiara had said something profound. We were supposed to react, maybe laugh. But nothing came. Just silence. Like our brains were buffering.

"You're a disgrace," Sasha muttered, giving up on me like she had rehearsed the line.

"Hi Elina!" I spun around, fury folding neatly into a picture-perfect smile.

We all knew we hated each other. It wasn't subtle. It just made sense. Still, the smell of coffee wrapped around me like a hug I didn't ask for but secretly needed. Funny how the scent alone made me crave another cup - the same way a little attention makes people need more of it. Coffee is life.

What I didn't expect was that Elina's husband would be in the same hospital I had my skin checkup at. "How many days more?" I asked, voice low.

"Ten," she said.

Quick answer.

My father left me when I was twelve. I was glad when he died. This world didn't deserve him. But maybe the better ending would've been him taking me with him.

The news that morning read: *Businessman goes bankrupt, dies by suicide*. Fun fact? He went into debt for me. Education loans, mortgaged the house, buried himself alive in deadlines- and still missed every one. Killed himself over it. So yeah, shitholes feel warmer when you have someone to blame.

But who do I blame *now*?

A few days ago, I heard some politician claim that life's easy if you "follow the rules." All my father wanted was time. Those same rules convinced him that dying would be the best gift he could give his daughter. I hate people.

Elina rushed towards the lobby.

"Hey!" Kiara growled, voice rising.

I felt bad for Mirari. He didn't deserve any of this. Honestly, Elina didn't deserve the coffee either.

I slid my bag onto my lap, dug for some change, and jogged over to the little flower shop. I couldn't walk in empty-handed, even if the man I was about to meet was counting his last days.

"Is it that important?" Kiara mumbled, annoyed. We were twins in name only. She was mom's favorite. I was dad's. I popped in a stick of gum, nearly choked on it, and bought the prettiest bouquet that looked expensive but definitely wasn't.

I climbed the stairs, breath ragged, heart racing like it had somewhere better to be.

Why didn't I take the elevator?

Right. It smelled like damp socks dipped in a barf. I'd rather die out of breath than in that.

"Yes?" The receptionist smiled, a little too sweet. Her bangs were her entire personality.

Wonder how she'd look bald from chemo.

Too dark. Dial it back, Naira.

"I'm here to see Mr. Sawyer Alvarez. Family friend," I said, and of course, I stuttered- the one thing I didn't want to do.

She directed me to the left, first floor. I followed. Her smile was contagious, and I worried I'd accidentally smile when I saw him. That felt- wrong.

“Is it the right time?” I knocked, peeking into the ward where Elina sat with Sawyer.

“I didn’t expect you,” she blinked.

“I wanted to meet him,” I said. Sawyer just clicked his tongue and smirked. That wasn’t the reaction I’d imagined.

“Want a sweet?” Elina offered.

I wasn’t hungry, but I took one. It was good. I said so.

Then the doctor walked in- reluctant, distracted. I adjusted my trousers, which were falling again because of my wallet. Rich girl problems. Or just shitty tailoring. I needed new pants.

He signaled for Elina to speak with him privately. Yeah, I saw that. Okay, I get it.

“I’ll wait in the lobby,” I said, already on my feet.

“She’s a family friend,” Elina pushed back. “She can hear this.”

Was it a lie? Or was it finally becoming the truth?

I sank back into my seat.

“We need a blood transfusion, Elina,” the doctor began, straight to the point.

“An O-negative donor.”

Well, that’s easy, I thought.

“And as you know, it’s rare.”

Oh. Shit. Not so easy.

Thank God I didn’t waste Dad’s debt on med school.

So Elina wasn’t a match. What about Mirari?

“Naira,” Elina turned to me, voice careful. Uh-oh. Here comes the favor.

Look, I’m helpful. Sometimes. Depends on the vibe.

“Can you pick up Mirari from school? It’s almost time.”

That weird, fuzzy feeling filled my chest- the kind that makes you feel like a mother for five seconds. I didn't ask about the blood. Or how they'd find it. I just nodded and left.

As the Uber screeched to a halt outside the school, I handed the driver some wrinkled bills. My wallet was still fighting my trousers. As always, it made me look suspicious as hell.

Yes, I carry cash. Don't judge me.

I limped to the gate, already opening the app to call another ride home. The bell rang, shrill and violent, and a flood of kids ran out. Within seconds, the doors burst open and kids poured out like they'd been held hostage all day.

Too dark.

I hadn't seen Mirari in a while. But I imagined him now- in that ridiculous yellow uniform- a child turned miniature office worker. Society's smallest servant. Poor kid.

The weather was manic. The sun was mad. I ducked under a huge hoarding of a fairness cream ad and waited.

Then I saw him.

Hair bouncing, cheeks glowing, arms flapping like he'd win an award for fastest hug.

"HI!" he yelled, his voice too bright for this kind of world.

"You've grown so much, haven't you?" I said, kissing his cheek. God, those squishy cheeks- I wanted to squish them or eat them. Or both.

"Let's go home. Your mom's still at the hospital."

"Mom said not to go with anyone," he said, eyes big and suspicious. Smart kid. A Parenting win.

I took his backpack. It felt like it had rocks in it. Why do kids carry such heavy shit?

He hurdled through the parking lot like it was an obstacle course, probably wasting all his energy before even getting into the Uber.

“Oh! Did I tell you what happened today?” he beamed, kicking a rock and missing entirely.

“We’re going on a trip!”

Mirari / present

“So where is this trip?” Aunt Naira asked. I could see she was tired. Well even I was when Evelyn didn’t share her lunch today with me.

I hate her. But she’s kind of *cute*.

I am Mirari, 8 years old and I study in North Arizona Elementary school. My closest friends call me Rari. My dad is in hospital because he smokes a lot, so I end up mostly alone in my house when my mom goes to hospital to look after him.

“It’s for 4 days” I say with a lot of sadness. “Mom won’t allow me”.

“I will talk to her idiot, don’t worry” she answered.

A car came to collect us and drop us home. I jumped in the front seat and smelled the car. The driver had a fruity smell. Aunt Naira got comfortable in the back while typing on her phone. She seemed worried.

“Will you make something for me when we get home?” I was hungry. She ignored me.

“Yes, Rari, sure, whatever you say” came the answer without looking up from her phone. Her answer was 5 seconds late.

I am an observant boy, you see.

I smelled burnt fish and potatoes while we passed through a dumpster. I remember because once my mom tried to make ‘something new’ for me which did not end well. My kitchen still has stains of burnt smoke up the ceiling. It felt like a dark cloudy sky in my nightmare.

Hesitantly, Aunt Naira came in forward and hushed, “So what was this trip you talked about?”

“I just told you!” I screamed. “Where idiot? That’s what I am asking”.

“Somewhere in the north, with auroras above us, with blushing squirrels snuggling us when we sleep in our tents-” I blurted out the whole itinerary they gave me in school. I wanted to go, so I memorized the whole thing.

“Fuck, isn’t it dangerous for 8 year olds going camping?”

“I am 9 now, next month” I stand corrected.

Crisp, numbing sounds came from the backseat. She was eating and she didn’t even hear me.

“Give me those chips!” I whirl and try to snatch it off her wrist. She bent under and yelled. “The driver will slap you so hard that you’ll fall in that garbage truck so shut up”.

The driver did look like a criminal with short hair and a beard only kidnappers have. A built body with minor tattoos that read, ‘I love you princess’. I hurdled back in my seat and saw the man quietly glaring at me.

I thanked God my bladder was empty, or I would’ve pissed my pants.

The keys were being weird again, like they didn’t wanna go in right, even though I always do it the same. We were at the door. I told her the lift was

broken. It wasn't. I just didn't want to get in it with her. It's too small. Too- I don't know.

Aunt Naira was behind me making her mad-breathing sounds, like she just ran a race. She always makes it seem like my backpack is made of bricks or something. It's not. It barely even has anything.

"I don't think I should go on this trip," I said super quick. My heart was racing like it was mad at me. I wanted to go. I *really* wanted to go. But if I said that, she might say no. Or say something worse. So I said I didn't.

She stopped walking and stood next to me. I didn't hear her at first, she was that quiet.

"Are you sure?" she said.

And the way she said it- I don't know. It made my skin feel weird. Like cold but not cold. Like when you think someone's watching you but you don't see anyone.

I didn't say anything after that. I just looked at the door and pretended I was thinking really hard. But really, I just wanted to go inside and hide under my blanket and pretend the trip was already over. Or hadn't started. Or never even existed.

Her eyes squinted and her whispers crept on my soul like a prying monster to devour such an innocent, cute little kid. I am modest too.

"Umm yah", I squeak.

"Fine then, go to your room and let your mom feed you cheese sandwiches for the next month till your birthday while your friends camp and s'more marshmallows alongside werewolves and bears-"

Ask me again, I swear I'll be honest now, I began to think. And I rarely think.

You know I was modest.

"It feels different," I blurt.

"Like?"

"I know bears are not real. I am not a kid".

Naira / present

The sun seeped in through the light window stills. Hazy brown summer afternoon vibes are killing me altogether. Patience has me bowing down to Mirari. Maybe this is parenting? He was obliging enough to murmur please while I typed back the reply to his mom on text.

This was urgent. I believed myself to be in this shit more than this family. I glazed back at the little kid knowing well enough what a fuckall state my mind has been put in. Pace didn't suit me enough today.

"You seem worried. Are you saying bears *are* real?" he murmurs like the question is his fault. He sniveled. I was indeed worried. Since the car ride. Mirari's mom had the leisure to share with me that her husband was in dire need of an O negative. I was panicking from inside but this was in my control, I think.

"How much more time?" I text back. I gulped. I shivered, not enough for the little chap to notice.

"Maybe 3 days and fucking don't tell Mirari anything" came back the stern reply. I lifted my eyes slowly up only to see him burping on the sandwich I made him. My feelings were numb. They crumbled. It felt peculiar, like come on, he's just a child.

"Do you want to read what I wrote for Evelyn in my class?" he gawked. "That would make you feel better". His hope made me feel better. I lay back on the newly furnished couch they had got three years ago. "Here, this. This I wrote for her" bubbled Mirari handing the most valued possession he thought he had.

*you are the sky
you are the clouds
you are the rain
that washes my doubts
you are the crime
the soil, the sublime
you are what i thought you were
you were meant to be mine
you are the haze
you are the love apart
to see myself fall for you
you are an art."*

"This is just so.. so.." I was swooned by this crap. This was a beautiful crap.

He ignored me. He did not gloat, nor seemed marveled. He looked like he did this for a living. "You really love her huh? Or are you guys dating?" I peppered him with bullshit questions.

"You really love her huh? Or are you guys dating?" He imitated me with a shy smile. Ah kids. They are adorable when they begin drowning in love, and get their heart broken only when they're eleven. It makes me puke.

My phone buzzed, my face ID unlocked it already.

"Mirari is O negative, we could bring him in tomorrow" Elina texted.

“What’s your blood type Rari?” I cross check. I open up directly with no hesitation. I wasn’t in need of hesitation. “It’s O something, I don’t know” he thought for a bit and definitely disappointed me. His dad needed it. And his mom had the only child who could help. It didn’t take me long to guess that blood was rare to be found. He took his seat beside me, pouring some cola to drink and some stash to gulp on.

“Why?” he asked quickly.

I couldn’t let Mirari’s father face the same fate as me. Or perhaps I was mistaken? He would go through the same ordeal I did. All over again.

The only thing I regret living is life itself. The looks they gave in coffee shops. Where I was ashamed even to look in the mirrors of the salon to have my hair cut. I disbelieved myself that beauty is on the outside. The chaos and the intensity flew right through me. My scars were proof beauty cannot be accepted by people less beautiful.

‘Such a pretty planet, such an ugly world’ I deem.

How is it to be loved only to have to be beautiful? Or as it seems validation just comes in numbers.

The burns, the agony, the solace that people never gave me, stood beside me in my rock bottom. But asking people to show me that they love me, wasn’t exquisite enough now.

“I’ll fund your trip Mirari”.

“Without letting mom know?” He jumped on his couch. He gasped with interest. He was relaxed and casual and joyous as he could ever be.

The same mistakes I had been making again and over. My heart turned stone again, frozen in a cold mess. I zoned out dreaming my exact life thinking how death could have been a better option for me.

“Just go and return back safely” my blunt face indicated I was about to do some things wrong, But I swore to make them right again. Those words took the air out of me.

‘Save your tears, Naira’ consoling myself wasn’t an issue. Doing something wonderful for someone knowing it would be awful and regretful for them, hurts.

I looked scruffy.

I leaned forward to his chubby face, locked my hands onto his face and said, “Meet papa and then go for your trip”. I was already drowned for the sin I was committing. Was I the devil here? I was saving his life right now. He probably couldn’t live with the past hanging on himself. It was better he hung himself over, through me.

Those who use people and toss them aside have no fear.

“Should I start packing then?” effused Mirari.

Some things have to end for better things to begin.

Mirari / present

Abominable- a word that exactly depicted how fucked up this world was for me. I stood dumbfounded on the alley walking barefoot all along, with a hint of sunshine burning my face. I raised my head to notice people peering on me. I did not have this treatment even in my past life. Their eyes gawked at me all they wanted, being pretty much a good stare. Their imagination made me feel harassed. I needed answers that didn't make me a criminal. And why hasn't my mom followed me yet? I am literally barefoot. My vision stroll over the tipsy buildings that made this new world more frightening. And I could see some blood flowing from my sole.

Blood? A wound throbbed below my feet, it didn't hurt, but glass embedded in the wound made it unbearable to see it the least. I hovered my eyes to notice the construction site of a cafe behind me. Was it the reason people stared? I put my body down to sit down on the sidewalk, mainly looking like a homeless

scarecrow with wounded feet. I unpierced the glass slowly but it still didn't agonize me.

"Do you need water?" The voice was hush. The voice was caring. Nope, never heard it. I look above to an appalling figure with long lush hair and spectacles. The sun shone behind her back, trailing its way to my eyes. I squinted to see a girl staring at me handing over her bottle. For sure, those spectacles were big enough to cover her cheeks. "Yes please" I say, chugging the water down my throat. She wore an oversized hoodie, her hands in its pocket, and her bangs covering her forehead. Oh, sipping coffee too. Did I not mention that?

"Generally I don't help the homeless". She sat on her knees and crooned, "Are you okay? Why didn't you come to school today?"

"Home- what?" I shriek, relocating my eyes to her gorgeous smile- I mean- eyes. She smiled and for a second I felt happy.

"Go home Rari. And wear some shoes, or get your broke ass some slippers" the best solid 10/10 advice I had gotten in this world. She stood up and adjusted her bag again.

She kept looking at me. Not blinking. Not breaking eye contact. Like she was letting me squirm on purpose.

And I *was* squirming- internally, at least. My hands were clammy, fingers twitchy, like my body wanted to run but didn't know which direction was safe. I wasn't afraid of her. That wasn't it. It was worse. I wanted her to like me.

Why? No clue. Just felt like if she said, "You're okay," I might actually believe it.

But she didn't say anything. Just shifted her weight a little, and her bag- *that* bag- bounced against her side like punctuation. Even the silence felt choreographed.

I opened my mouth to say something else. Anything. "Nice shoes" or "It's hot out, huh?"- just to break whatever weird spell was choking the air. But nothing came out. Just breath.

She tilted her head, slightly. Not mocking. Not kind. Just- observing. Like she was filing me away in a folder I didn't know existed. I felt naked, but not in a sexy way- in a "you forgot your lines and the spotlight's already on" kind of way.

Her skin glowed. Not some romanticized glow. Just healthy. Real. Like she slept. Like she drank water. Like she hadn't spent the last two years fighting herself in the mirror.

And still- still- she looked like she didn't *need* to impress anyone. Which made me hate her a little. And want to be her. And maybe kiss her. Or crawl inside her confidence like a coat I could borrow for five minutes.

"Who are you?" I finally asked. Too quiet. Too late.

She just smiled. Barely. Like she already knew the answer didn't matter.

"Rari? My name is Mira-" I began. The fuck kind of name is that?

"Did the wound get up to your head?" she said listlessly. "Like I know you fucking don't spend a lot on yourself but this is too far". True, I give her that. I attempted to stand, but she shoved me down. "Will you limp all the way to your house? It's 2 blocks away".

This bitch knows my house address? And to think about it, my karma didn't even have the decency to tell me about the history of this existence? I'll deal with that craphead later. "But to be fair I really forgot your name, is it Jen-Akans-" I gave my best shot to hop up with a name.

"EVELYN!" she shrieked, huffed and closed her eyes at the same time. The public paused and stared for a time. "Fucking hell".

"Yes, Evelyn!" I chortled. I had never met this girl in my seven lives, but for some reason it seemed she knew me for generations. "How could I forget you, Eve?" I opined and shouldn't have done that. Her face dipped from innocence to annoyance. "Come over, I'll make you hot chocolate".

I didn't hesitate saying no.

What matters is who made you smile again.

Evelyn / present

“And this is how World War 2 depicted the fall of-” I concluded with a slight pause. “Can we end this slightly early, Eveyln?” the teacher was as much surprised as the time I took to make this fucking presentation just to see half of my class slumbering upon this precious shit.

“Ya, the end is better” I croaked, searching for my notes in my file distorted on her table.

“Don’t worry darling, it’s an A+ for you as always” she came back aloud dominating the edge of my presentation. She walked in between the class, halting in her favorite position, in the middle, indicating my reign over the class was up.

My class was basically an old money Italian architect premiering his life’s work. Upon entering, your eyes are greeted with large windows running from floor to ceiling along one side of the room, which lets the golden light shine in, giving

the room a warm and welcoming feel. The natural light plays against the smooth concrete floor, a mosaic of light and shade that dances slightly differently every hour.

The clean white walls are reflective of incoming light, a backdrop for the room that reinforces the idea of space. Set smartly into these walls are white boards, which from a distance shine under the down-lighting of the beautiful, smooth LED fixtures that were installed in the ceiling.

Its wrought iron and reclaimed wood desks are configured in a semi-circle - a design that encourages community and cooperation. Every table has a high tech digital piece of equipment on it and the screen actually glows at you with knowledge.

At the front of the room, a teacher's podium stands, crafted from glass and steel, its minimalist design a testament to modernity. Behind it, a large, interactive screen displays vivid images and videos, its vibrant colors contrasting beautifully with the room's neutral palette.

Plants dot the room, their verdant green leaves adding a touch of nature to the space, their presence a nod to sustainability. They sit in geometric planters, their organic shapes a beautiful contrast to the room's linear design.

The room, with its harmonious blend of natural light, modern furniture, and high-tech equipment, exudes an atmosphere of calm and focus. It's a space that not only educates but also inspires, a testament to the power of well-thought-out, modern design.

3 days and 9 hours were spent tirelessly fucking up my sleep and me being depressed making a presentation only I was interested in.

And in these 3 days all I could hear was my mom enchanting in my ears to bring the best grades any girl in North Arizona High has gotten. She will pretty much make me a surgeon like her, because you know, money matters. But lately I've been crazy enough to fill in an internship of fashion designing making my own head up for it.

I just like to cover people's naked butt ass cheeks lol. Can't blame me right?

I snatched a cup of coffee from the canteen, “I want a latte with extra foam!” yelled Cecilia from the back, having her shoulder neck to neck with the seniors for her coffee. We always ran late for our gym class, which was boring fuck. I nearly died last week uplifting, like, forty pounds for an additional 10 points to clear the semester.

Alas I passed. Cherry on the cake was they opted me in for the president of foreign exchange students. They need to pass through me to enter this school, lol. “Everyone likes latte, don’t they?” Cecilia drawled in her South American accent. This blonde, blue eyed fairy of a human caught attention even of the most suave men my school had witnessed. Not to disappoint them, *she’s a lesbian*.

“Heard one student is joining our batch tomorrow from Kert?” she asked.

“Hope it’s a boy” I cut her off. “Hope it’s a girl” she cuts me off.

“What boggles me so much is how in the holy hell you know most of the things before me” petty question to fill in the empty space of her and her hookup stories. I really didn’t want to listen to them for the forty-third time. “You know my job more than me”.

“Babes, perks of being popular” she gloated.

“Take a goddamn bus and go home. No need for your stank ass following me home” I shoed her away from my misery thinking I’ll be single for my whole life.

“Never mind cutie,” she countered, “You won’t get a boyfriend anytime soon”. Damn she knows me well. “Darci will pick me up from Whimsy Park anyway”.

“Are you guys dating?” I inquired. “I’ll send you my sex tape” she yelled, hovering a bye from her hand holding the coffee.

“Am sad anyway, so shut your damn mouth” I hit her shoulder to tackle.

“Why are you sad? Just give up” she blabbered, and walked away.

Yuck. I shoved my head down and walked frivolously. Beneath the tantrums and rallies of the upcoming elections, my walk seemed hesitant slow. The

turmoil grounded me up and just as it was going to hit my trauma, I saw Rari, looking at his feet, dimly lit in pain, sitting near the gutter. Well at least that I could see with my two fat glasses.

I sniffed. This guy was the type who could find a cure for AIDS but was lazy enough even to pass a semester. “Do you need water?” I politely asked, hoping the sarcasm was better understood. I guess not, he drank the whole bottle in. His impression was different. His vibe was awkward. He relished in what he wanted, almost too perfect for what I’ve known him.

“Hot chocolate?” he asks like I literally have to give the definition of hot and chocolate two different times. “Yes hot choco in my house” I repeat like a toddler with actions that looked like gang signs.

“Hold my hand” Despite the fact that we had attended carpentry class the day before, his hand remained warm and tender. My home wasn’t far. I could see it if I squeezed my eyes.

The elevator worked, thank God. “Do you realize I’ve come here barefooted?” I sensed small talk isn’t his strongest suit.

“Is it my fault?!” I whooped, arriving at my doorstep with his limps on my shoulder.

“Hi, Rari!” a less gorgeous woman clanged upon the door while she opened it, who I usually call mom. “I was sensing you would come today”.

Yes, she senses a lot of stuff. Energies, vibes and spiritual interactions were quite a thing for her. But still she couldn’t sense the downfall of my life that I don’t want to be a surgeon. Rari looked amused by my house, it wasn’t so big, while I stood there side eyeing him the whole time. It was ancestral. Pure warm lights running by the edge of walls, 100 year old paintings with a tint of legacy drooling on it, and lush air with occasional winds storming inside my house. It was a residential resort. But I prefer to call it exotic jail.

Rari slowly slid on the couch atoning his wounded leg on the pillow. “Hey doctor,” I called out to my mom, “I have a patient for you”.

“Did you renovate it?” he queried rather slowly, memorizing what to be said.

“Mom, his brain needs some fixing too” I scoop up an Ice cream from the kitchen, ignoring the fact that he had slept over a billion times with Cillian in my own room, I slept on the ground. Pathetic. The carpet appeared wet and moist, “Did Scooby do his business on the floor again?” I screamed.

Scooby aside was trembling with fear, guilt, wrapped up in his favorite sleeping cloth I had bought up from the street bin across the road. He drooled a lot so we commonly assumed it was pee. Scooby halted as my mom brought in cold water and some forceps for Rari.

“Will it hurt?” That was the first time I saw Rari scared about something so baby.

“Not as much when your dad died through cancer, lol” I laughed hysterically nibbling my spoon to its brim.

“EVELYN!” My mom tore her vocal chords. “Say sorry now!”

I nearly shat my pants.

“Sorry man,” I genuinely was, “my humor is broken”. “I’ll break your collarbone next time” came back the threat from the doctor who was consciously dethroning every glass piece in his leg. Scooby was offended too. His eyes scowled at me narrowingly.

Fuck it, everyday I fight my seat for heaven.

Aehlla/ present

As my morning alarm blares, I mutter to myself, who wakes up so early? My freshmen years were not gonna be dead till like 10 years more. I needed a dopamine detox. Coming from a orthodox family I had to be sure everything was by the book.

My karma wakes me up routinely though. Why didn't it today? It's weird to think about my life without it. Being best friends since my childhood, fucked up dating life, and me having no talent to face, I unquestionably don't think anyone had the privilege to talk to this innermost higher power they consume.

The fact of being disposable in high school now scared me, having my dad transferred to Arizona due to some fuckup in the stock market known as recession. I did ruminate about it often.

My dad calls me Elysian, quite cute right? Although my mom is still stuck on Aehlla.

This was my first day of my new school, hoping on some positivity to light up my year. I planned on wearing a dress though I didn't have enough of a reason to justify my mom. I would be in really hot water.

"Good morning my sweets" I greet as I sip my juice, hampering my bag for books.

"No distractions this year, I suppose, we have gone back to square one" my dad, as jolly as he can be, patted my head and rubbed my hair. Though it made me look like I just woke up from a nightmare.

"Ugh papa!"

"Pull yourself together Aehlla" calmed my mom. "This isn't your wedding, it's just school" she brought in more pancakes and milk for me. I'm already dieting, and I'm weary of telling her about it. She deems it as my mental instability. Wrenchy and tear dried, I gulped in some grapes which were supposed to be dad's whole meal.

"Thanks papa, *I owe you 4 grapes*" I squished them in my mouth making them drool from my lips. My hair was split up in the middle, the bangs overshadowing my forehead, and my curls going in my eyes. I was okay with it. Very well not kind of a pick me girl in school, but the kind you want but won't ever get.

"Do well!" cheered my mom as I stepped out in the basking sun getting heated for the walk. Frolicking around, I remembered I was instructed to meet Evelyn who held a very important role in foreign admission, they said. She seemed a bit eccentric when she revealed her voice on the telephone, bossing me around what to do and what not in the campus. My heart was as heavy as it shouldn't be. Sinking deeper as I entered the school for some mascots practicing cheerleading on the basketball court.

Cheerleading squad? Not a bad idea to join in.

It was damp already. I rushed to the principal's office to see a girl sitting on the appointment desk waiting for someone.

"Evelyn?" I ask.

“Sure took you long, Aehlla” she was calm and patient and the same age as me. “I would love to show you around but your classes have started already”.

I already regretted being here. Stupid recession.

“Don’t worry, you’ll fit in here darling” her words felt assuring or was she just a good manipulator? I had to think both ways to not get eaten alive. My face drenched in sweat agreed to whatever she said. We headed for the biology department just for my tremors to begin.

“Class, we have a new member for her academics to continue in North Arizona today,” she seemed bold and not giving a shit about public speaking. I narrowed my eyes to notice their stares fixated on me. I gasped to see guys hooking their ear onto the wise words Evelyn was about to throw off, the spectacles of the nerds blinded me by the reflection oozing out from the sun, a girl who seemed to have her tremendous lip surgery done, and a guy with a wounded leg surprising staring at the sun outside. He didn’t even flinch. His slipper stood on his feet below and the fact that he didn’t care what was happening in class was obnoxious.

I stood shyly analyzing every smile and every frown I had in my presence, just to notice this guy gazing outside the window. His leg was wounded and he wouldn’t blink. His feet were covered in plasters with slippers beneath them. Till I came back on track, I lost what Evelyn was trying to say about me. I am sure she didn’t demean me. But this guy was ; something. My eyes couldn’t go off of him.

“Aehlla!” she whispered loudly in my ears. I look blankly at her. “Give your introduction!” she commanded.

“Hi, my name is Aehlla and-” I stuttered when suddenly the guy turned himself towards me looking me in my eyes. Deeply. Affectionately, as if he knew me.

My head began hurting like hell. I pictured myself fainting, but I stood firmly rubbing my head, as if someone banged the door of my brain and I had to open it. Karma was telling me something.

“You good?” Evelyn brought me a glass of water, though I refused.

“I am”.

No I was not. My karma was definitely protecting me. What did it sense? Was the guy trouble?

It's gonna be okay, isn't it?

Mirari's karma / present

Blue ribbons, dusty eyes and white coats I see everyday in Mirari's mind. A gifted being indeed. Yet naive to realize right people with wrong timing deserve a second chance too.

"Is this not what you wanted, Mirari?" I halted by him as he arose himself in my dimension to talk to me. The thing was pure white, ecstatic and nothingness bled from the edge of the hallways. It was as empty as his heart was.

"You really couldn't tell me who Evelyn was at first?" he debated. "You had a crush on her in this life Mirari" I end the debate.

"Me? Crush? Her? That bitch?" he was unaware things happen for a reason.

And I am his Karma for a reason.

"With my whole damn consciousness, I definitely couldn't possibly have a crush on her" he was stern and he looked like he meant what he was saying. He

couldn't see me unless I revealed myself to him, conjuring the only thing he doesn't give a shit about; his feelings. The weak spot.

"Oh her mom helped you a lot or you would have sat there whining that your leg hurt stepping on a small piece of glass that anyone could chew and gulp easily" I began a fight he wasn't ready for.

"Fuck that, I need answers how I killed my dad. I don't want to be a criminal" he was worried about his reputation. "False allegations".

Mirari stepped in closer, walking rapidly in the realm of the conscious, with his heart beating faster than I expected. His wound perfected his leg. He could sprint if he wanted.

I smiled and asked, "Who accused you?"

"No one but like they say it's my fault" his judgment was prudent, thinking about how someone who has just been born is so conscious about his ego. "I need answers if you are all knowing".

"That's the beauty Mirari, all knowing is cursed. And having an all knowing as your guardian, is a blessing".

"Why did Evelyn say he died through cancer? How is that my fault?" he was stuck on his question. Pretty rough question to discuss right now.

"So you aren't concerned about the fact that your dad died through cancer but rather how this turmoil upon you? That's selfish"

"I didn't mean-"

"Without knowing insanity, you can never know peace". I directed.

"Hey listen okay, I meditated for an hour to come into my consciousness to talk to you and you're here shitting on my feelings as usual" he was teary eyed and wanted redemption so badly. He needed to earn it.

"I didn't make you alive to just know *what* life is about. You know what's wrong Mirari?" he stares into the white panels of the realm looking up to God.

“You really don’t understand *why* is life” his mind kept boggling over the fact that I would be helping him understand love and getting sex, as he thought.

“Well someone said, I am a part of your life, and you are my whole life”.

He huffed. He gave up. But he wondered if his answers lie in his life itself. Grumpy little man I swear to God. But stubborn enough to find the answers himself, I tell you.

“That realm when I almost died was beautiful, what is this all white. Looks minimal though”, he walked through and through realizing every speck in here was a craving of his own thoughts. Even if he could say it’s ugly, he would be cursing himself.

“Can you make me float once again?” he blurts out as if it’s fun being in euphoria from the time he died.

“Why don’t I remove you from here so you can accept the reality that you’re scared of?”

He skimmed through every course of the place, I could see his vision getting blurry.

“Fine” he roared, “You don’t like me here anyways meddling with your privacy”.

Slowly he was lifted up, like his soul was mine, looking above the boundaries of the realm, he closed his eyes and waited until he opened them like a breath of fresh air.

Mirari grasped his head hard sitting in a corner of a class. He really didn’t like this when he talked to me, considering the ache he had to go through every time.

“You couldn’t be less painful?” he blighted, but whispered.

“What is with you and talking to yourself? For fucks sake keep quiet” the boy next to him patched up with his annoying complaints.

Glad Mirari didn't slap him. Being a day old, he wouldn't let ruckus follow him.

The sun shone brightly in the early morning dew on the window with rain commencing through the winds. Mirari could hear Evelyn come up in class to talk about something more important to her than anything else she wanted. He was quite absolutely zoned out watching the sun and telling himself, "I am not a good person" and "I have been tricked by this asshole in living another life", although as amusing it would sound he was lost in himself.

"Hi, my name is Aehlla", he turned as soon as those words fell on his ears like butter on bread. I am not good at analogies. But there she was, star studded in her own natural sunlight, smiling as she had cultured sunflowers herself and her eyes smiled too with her carrying her grace as fluently as she carried herself with her intoxicating eyes.

There he sees a girl blushed up in a beautiful braided tshirt, knitted in fine cotton, has silky bangs and a smile of pearl.

She was Aehlla. The epitome of beauty.

Well at least for Mirari.

She stared at him brimming with warmth, as if she were the one who had returned to life and was seeing Mirari once again. She was jittery enough to grab her head in pain.

Evelyn hurriedly gave her water just to accept a refusal. "You good?" She was apprehensive, despite the fact that she had arrived late to her class to meet and welcome the other students. Still, she remained cool and in charge of her situation.

The bell rang anonymously, "Why don't we eat something downstairs?" offered Evelyn while Mirari stayed on his seat howling over the fact that it was too early to die again in this new life. "I need a ham sandwich" which wasn't too hesitant for Aehlla too.

Mirari felt his life was derailed again.

Hold Me When I Die

But though whatever he thought of her, he was happy seeing her, yet heartbroken.

I pity him.

Love is a scary thing.

Cillian / past

Gorgeous- A word that Mirari kept safe to declare his undying love if I ever have a girlfriend. Her hand was warm. Her hold was tight. She didn't eschew so easily. "Okay, I really need to pee, where are you taking me?" I growl. I had no idea with all my classmates, mostly who I fuck around with, stared at me quietly while she dragged me down the corridor. "It's hurting Aehlla!" I squeak. "Look I am not dating anybody" a fierce voice arose which I wasn't so familiar with.

"Do I look like I care?" I smudged my lips, turned my eyes white and put them out that made her almost puke.

"Then why the fuck were you teasing me back there? This is like the millionth time" she pinned me to a wall, making sure leaving isn't an option. "I am *not* dating Mirari".

She was clear and loud. "Okay shorthead, now let me go".

“Promise me, you won’t tease me by his name again”.

“Umm- you’ll get over it” I taunted again. I really didn’t give a shit. Not the type of a guy ate attention for breakfast, and stayed steady for another round of sex at night. I was carefree, mostly in my own sweet world making muffins and pancakes with mugshots of vanilla ice spice. ‘I won’t share my muffins with you now’ I thought intensely as my way to my class was abandoned.

“Did it work?” Mirari asked me, pulling my chair forward for me to sit. Sly little bastard would do anything if it favored him.

“She won’t even budge” I craved for a cigarette while I put my pencil in my mouth. It tasted weird. “Did someone sit on this?”

“I just wanted to tell you Cillian , YOU’RE STUPID!” Mirari was not in the mood for games though his feelings kept him drowning in his own imagination. But ouch that hurt. “The fuck were you thinking teasing her by my name would make her want me?”

Kian turned around and looked at us. “Yah, just trust Cillian , he’s had a lot of hookups than your entire generation thrice”. I could hear the long silence with me just staring blankly in his eyes.

“Who asked you?” I ask him dryly. He turned back again.

I could sense what Mirari could be feeling. He looked down at his notebook, gulping down the last bit of saliva in his mouth. We had been trying for two months to find out she wasn’t just interested. But I could also sense she was beginning to notice Mirari a little more. The touches, eye contacts and random smiles heightened.

This jackass wasn’t so sharp to get it. He wanted more of his overthinking to take charge and fucking create more problems which didn’t exist. “Ask her out today” I spun around to just see him glaring through the nuisance of the class, quite laughable at this point. “The worst she can say is no”.

“Where do you want us to have our first date? In your washroom? Having your toilet water for dessert?”

“I know you’re mad, you motherfucker, but hear me out” I scoop in his territory of the bench and sniff. “For a movie at least ask her out”. “When you fuck a person you’re not supposed to fuck, thats the best sex right there.”

“Do I look rich?”

“Did I say go in a roll and thrash a movie theater? Go be cozy in your room, Netflix and chill”.

“How do girls hookup with you, oh gosh”

“Aye, I get more action than your entire generation thrice” I repeated making sure this topic remained aloof and untouched in the future, for logical purposes of course. I had a proud look which kind of made him satisfied he should obey me. He certainly did. His eyes spoke poetry when he peeked at her, ironically her trying to be the president of the literature club. No, I wasn’t jealous, I was intrigued. I never saw love so engaging.

“Aye, Aehlla” he rushed his way to her building courage this whole time bugging my brains out. ‘Oh, can I ask her for a coffee?’ or ‘Oh how about a nightover?’ or even worse ‘Should I ask for her zodiac sign?’. Like the last question may get him laid immediately.

‘Learn to fucking talk like a normal person, even gods may be laughing’ I felt.

“How about we complete..” he stuttered, already a bad start. I hung up my bag on my shoulder and fixed my eyes on the couple. “Can we complete the assignment at my place this eve?”

“Are you asking me out?”

“Umm, It’s not technically out, I mean- it’s my place. And it’s cosy”.

She let out a soft laugh. “So do you need my help?”

“Maybe we could partner up? Cause you’re kinda like my homework. You could use a little bit of my attention”.

My heart ran a marathon the entire time he spat this line. That was.. impromptu.

Win-Win. But this guy still had his cold face mode on, making eye contact like it was no big deal. “I’ll be there at 6” she chuckled, sliding her big fat books into her hands like Einstein was her tuition teacher. Her narrow eyes blistered on me and made me hide myself or better yet jump from the fifth floor of the school.

BUT WHAT. IT WORKED? The urge to give a salute to myself was so real. The feeling of winning in life was good. The only fuck ups I couldn’t guarantee now was at his place. I perceived an image of a smut scene in my head having Mirari butt ass naked, and not me smiling the whole time standing in front of them.

Alas, love takes time.

Mirari / past

Grilled - a word which made sense for the state of my heart and the craving for a cheese sandwich topped with garlic honey sauce and some extra vitamin-enriched butter. It made me drool even when I wasn't hungry. I sympathize with people who are unaware of this masterpiece, considering the chef I am, himself.

I slammed my bag in a hurry, not even greeting my mom who worked as a freelancer now quitting her 9 - 8 in an agency that barely paid her even to afford our groceries. Too proud of her. My dopamine was rising, suspecting a very ravishing girl agreed to be my assignment partner. And she was coming to my house. This feeling made me fly and never land back.

“DID YOU WASH YOUR DAMN HANDS MIRARI?” my mom squawked from behind. “AND WHAT IS YOUR BUSINESS IN THE KITCHEN?”

“Can't a boy just make a sandwich to eat?”

“A boy like you hasn’t touched a knife since birth,” she said, eyes narrowing.
“So who’s the girl?”

She leaned on the pillar like she owned the place, sipping her steaming herbal green tea- some pretentious, earthy thing that smelled like judgment.

I blinked. Didn’t answer. Couldn’t.

She already knew.

“A girl?”

“I am sure you don’t like boys, do you?”

I held down the knife with a sly smile, incarnated permanently on my face. “I swear if you tell her any squishy-mushy stuff about me-”

I didn’t want my downfall to be greater than what I had imagined my relationship to be. God, it didn’t even start yet and I was afraid of rejection to begin the least.

“What’s her name?” She hadn’t finished her tea yet and Aehlla’s topic made time move so slow for me.

“She’s Aehlla”.

“What Coachella?”

I turn around, “You should leave if you just wanna taunt me”. “And her”.

“Don’t be a lousy head around her, girls like to be taunted-”

“Oh no, no, I don’t want your love advice. And besides you had your divorce formalities right? In court? I would want you there right now”.

I smudged my lips with chocolate and put on an apron to get messy. It was almost 5. Drizzling and snowing a bit. Perfectly I was scared. The oven was hot, grumpy and nearly growled at me. I pitched down the voice to a more crooning artist. By the time it was done, I judged myself, would she eat it? I mean- my taste is worse than hers and besides-

I was doomed in my thoughts when the bell rang. It sort of quavered me. I brushed off my hands and uttered a soft shriek.

“Oh you’re early, I didn’t expect you so soon” I did. Rather I was anxious about opening the door and seeing Aehlla on my front porch dressed like a Barbie and her hair did not obey her which was perfect.

“Oh isn’t it 6 already? Or my watch just needed a little bit of your time?”

“Cringe” Gosh, I loved it. My heart smacked itself twice to make sure this was what it was and this should be forever. I empathize with it. Deeply. I swirled around just to check she was still standing there, waiting for a polite invite, I guess.

“You don’t have guests over, do you?” she snapped, having her hands clamped up in front of her. She hovered over the main gate and stepped inside, almost covered with a cold dew on her head. “Apologies” I came back, “we don’t have pretty guests so often”, I emphasized on the word *pretty*. I stuck out my hand for her to hold, little to know she just swooshed right beside me, making me hang like a monkey.

Embarrassing.

I smile unintentionally, leaving room for my shyness to endure. I somehow wanted to shatter my clock, rip apart its hands, just for me to spend more time with her. I Began to think I was a psychopath lately.

Cillian was right, ‘take the keys and don’t look back’.

Aehlla/ past

Drenched- a word for my mental health that was giving up on my academics. Literature club, sports, debate team, I have longed for a break. And C's in most of the subjects. Of course.

"Do you mind if I use the restroom real quick?" I hesitate. Mirari went forward to the stairs and halted, "Uh huh".

Was he trying to act cool or something? For a fact I know, Cillian was trying to make me like him since like an age now, and I wasn't falling for it. He went ahead.

"Can you at least tell me where is it? I DON'T LIVE HERE!" I scream. Stupid bitch. The only reason I came by was I needed a partner to at least get a B. I wouldn't possibly say no to an offer like that. Not that I like him or anything, duh.

I stepped in the restroom that made me look in the mirror, huge as fuck. Deliberately, it tried me to put on my lip gloss (just in case) and set up hair in a bun which was braided in the lower end. Not enough for a girl rocking a cute little old money pink skirt with a scarf, just for a 90's vintage look, and an eyeliner. 'You don't have to be awkward, Aehlla' I convince my brain to think. I was equally awkward. This was probably the very first time I have been to someone's house. I take a deep breath.

Stairs tweaked when I walked upon them. I came close to the only door on the second floor of the house. "Mirari?" I called. I see legos and a fungus-eaten cake on the desk. He really didn't plan this through calling a girl at his house. He stood beside his computer, "Shit I was just gonna throw this out, sorry".

"Yah too soon to realize that".

He decorated his room with warm neon lightings, spaceship looking chandeliers, and 2 bean bags for chairs. Pretty cute, excluding the fungus cake. I dropped my bag straight on one of them when he just came to his point, "Why did you say yes to come here?" he whispered slightly.

"Didn't you say you needed help?" I utter.

"And considering the fact I would really want help from a girl who is an all rounder, a school renowned poet, who lately has flunked in most of the major subjects?"

I stared at him blankly. "You called me here to insult me? Or you're just an asshole by birth?"

"Girl, get the hint".

By the time this ruckus was in my head I got up in anger and shook my hair. "I should leave" I was stern. He rushed to me and held my hand up tight, "Stay" he insisted. His eyes begged to do so. "I know you need me as much as I do". My heart raced. I feared to die of an attack randomly and god must've been like, 'Bro, he just touched you'. This feeling of infatuation was surreal.

Traumatized infatuation.

I had never been so close to Mirari. He was so close I could stare into his eyes and smell the gum he was chewing. My mind resolved not to do that again.

“Besides it's just you and me for a long time, since it's hail storming outside now”.

I peeped outside his balcony which had a cage with water for birds. Fuck, I was screwed. A really bad hailstorm. “Or you can spend the whole night studying, I don't actually mind”.

My luck was a douchebag. Humping over the good ones, it always landed on the bad.

“Do I even have an option? But I swear I'll leave as soon as this shit stops”. He agreed.

Two cups of coffee were enough to make me sit down quietly. He didn't skip any chance to boast about his collectives in his room, pronouncing each and every figure he collected from animes, cartoons (both are the same) and his grilled cheese sandwich was good. Just good. Would've said the best if he made me feed with his own hands but okay, who's complaining. He served it on a platter, faking it like it just blistered out of the oven with hot steams burning my tongue out. Fuck it I would've made this at my house.

“It's so good!” I welp. I had to keep his heart or my assignment would drown again. And me being too self absorbed to ask any other guy for help. As my girlfriends were a lot bitchy-er than me, I had to keep it soft with them. Faking it till I make it. I wouldn't dare to ask them either.

He positioned himself beside me, almost making me warm. “Can I sit here?” he asks. Bud got a whole room of real estate for god's sake to lay down naked but no, he had to sit next to me. Which was kind of cute. The first guy who made a move and I didn't mind. “Yah, I guess” were my famous last words.

He swooshed in between my books and my laptop placed on my lap, which nearly fell. I swore my ECG if recorded was going berserk. I was in for a ride, please don't get wet, please. His brown hair swayed as he looked at me like, ‘what did I do wrong?’ or maybe, ‘I am just a friend’.

Traumatized infatuation.

“Am done with mine though” he eeks.

“D-didn’t you need my help?” I slowly slid my lappy down while he stared deadlock in my eyes.

“Nah, I just wanted to spend some time with you, considering you’re too busy at school”. So he does notice. My stomach growled *heavily*.

Mirari was different now, the shy, introverted kid I knew, was charismatic. But still naive. He picked up his sandwich and brought it near my mouth. I didn’t move. “Oh I thought you were hungry, now open up”. I carefully took a bite yet cheese oozed out on his hand. “Mmmm” I cried out.

“You know, I would make you my sandwich at 3 am if you wanted”.

I am not proud to admit it, but I was falling for him.

“You what-” I didn’t really process that. Was he confessing? “Do you like me or something?” I asked with my mouth full of cheese.

“Wasn’t that obvious?” he said, diving in for another bite. He came forward and touched my hand, cold as fuck, I could see him nervous enough wrecking his veins up and down, “I’ve told my mom about you”.

The audacity he had to smirk was unreal. But bold. I was already too deep from the coastline, he was pulling me in and I couldn’t resist. I had to drown. His fingers tickled while he caressed my hand, hovering over my soul to want some more.

I ditched my laptop to look at him more knowingly as I never had. Tossed my crocs to be more free and not think of the assignment anymore. The TV blared with a movie I never saw which made it more romantic nonetheless. “I don’t really know what to say,” the silence killed me already.

“Just a yes or a no would work. If it’s a maybe, I know we could make this work” his words made me melt. He ate a mint chewing gum with water to garnish his breath. He intended not to be far from me. He wasn’t like this. I

grasped his hand and breathed heavily. I didn't notice it till now but yes, my eyes wide open, waiting for an invitation.

"Do you want to kiss?"

Struggling to breathe, I curled my toes up. I grabbed him on his head, and gave it all in. His lips felt smooth, almost silky, and pillowy against my own. I could feel the warm tickle of his breath against my nose, fingers carding through his hair as we inhaled together. I had no second thoughts to keep me guessing over and over, and when it did finish, my desires conquered over me and he was slaying for most of the part. His hands were comfortable around my thighs and just to think I was the one leaning on him to keep wanting more. His minty breath was the one I would become fond of and trembling presuming my ovaries hadn't burst yet. I never had this urge of not letting go so early.

He huffed as we inhaled the same air, our breathing matched. I did not stop him. Rather I kissed him again. The sheer fear of him coming alive in my dreams and all my lonely nights like all my other exes was going to come true.

His chest pressed on mine, I swirled around to be on top of him, literally tasting his perfume. Our noses plucked and to think this moment was precious enough to just look at him one last time before it ended.

I paused, breathing heavily and whispered, "Fuck".

Mirari / past

Ravishing- Never had I ever wanted to stay single now. The hold was good. She tweaked herself onto me, toppled her body over and didn't utter a single word, or fuck, didn't even hesitate to go all in. I wouldn't walk away from such a deal. My manifestations made manifestations about her.

The tremors were slightly unusual not because this was my first rodeo but I intended to make this my last. She halted for a second to just say, 'I was right about you'.

I was huffing puffing and all the synonyms it has.

My smile was filled with pride. And my feet were numb. "What are we?" I whispered in her mouth. Was this lust? I had to be sure about this love thing before it entered my brain. Too early to have a brain now, Mirari? I didn't even second guess how much I wanted her till I made out with her.

“Just friends, I- suppose” she stammered, wanting to think of something else but really couldn’t.

The sun rose on us with the stopping of the snow. A pleasant breeze of warm hamburgers I could smell from beneath my building. She glared outside to check how fine it was to sin again.

“I don’t wanna leave now”.

I gasped, “Ah right”.

“Don’t tell me Cillian was behind all of this. I knew I could sense something weird” she comes close to be claiming me to be hers, penny pinching my hand. Well she was onto us. And I really didn’t care. All I knew was that she wanted me the same as I did.

I needed her. Want is a long lost word.

“You are gonna fail your assignment, you get that right?” I smirk and change the topic for good. “I do not care”. Soft spoken and well bruised on her lips by now, she passes me to get some coffee.

I got down on the couch glancing at some of the books she had got to go through, what I call a journal. For the retards. Though my unsuccessful tries made me wonder every journal I had kept was often read by my mom and my every attempt was known to be fucked up. My hands reach to it slowly with my eyes on Aehlla still making her readymade vanilla cappuccino. I dared to read it. A makeout- just a makeout had a feeling she’s mine already.

How much could I take this love, if it actually was love?

I was already hip deep, drowning.

Nerve cracking, I burst on the first page. Damn, it was neat. She was truly gifted.

Samiksh Ghodke

*“that day
i begged you to stay
where my heart ached
as i knew you weren’t there
i noticed the tears
you had them too
i wanted them to stop
i realized my tears aren’t salty anymore
you made my 2 ams manifest for your love
to make this somehow work
i hardly knew you were the one
waiting for me too.”*

“Did you write this?”

She turned around, “Did you really touch my book?”

“Okay kiss me if I am right, but like these poems are for your exes right?”

She chuckled, moving her hair behind her ear. Her hair was bouncy enough to make me obey her and get down to bark like a dog. “Yah, I’ve been through a lot”.

“Makes sense why you said ‘just friends’”, I wave my hands in the air imagining a pretty cute rainbow and sprinkles on top.

“Oh you’re smart, Mr. Mirari” she walked around in her Barbie dress. “I cannot hurt another soul. I am not worth it”.

“Let me decide,” I snapped.

“We don’t have a future anyways, right?” she looked back at me, her both hands holding the warm coffee. “How do you know that?” I question her.

“I can’t make fake promises to you”.

“What?”

“Because I fucking love you Mirari”.

I sat up to process what she said. “So let me make mistakes for myself then for fucks sake”.

“What if we don’t end up together after this attachment? Or what if my scholarship takes me to another country in like 3 years more?” It didn’t take me long to get up unconsciously and go to her and hug her. She dug her chin deeper in my vest resting her head in my neck. I clutch her head from behind, making sure she knows I was there for her whenever she wants. I didn’t let her go until she left first. The fact that she thought we would last for 3 years was bountiful to make me happy.

“Sorry, but we can’t date” That broke me in ways Osho undreamt of. “Even imagining you getting hurt scares me. I’ve done a lot of damage to myself too. Though I know I will hurt you somehow”.

I- I was speechless. Every bad luck ever stumbled on me. I wasn’t even surprised.

“I guessed you were my comfort person, and I guess I was wrong”.

She opened her mouth to utter an apology but I stopped her.

“I think you should leave now”.

Aehlla / present

Definitely the most sober I had done in a while was to obey someone. I followed Evelyn in the canteen, a big bruised door that needed repairing and a certain chatter among the crowd that made me haywire.

“You’ll be fine after a burger, though it may not suit your taste buds, like most of the transfer students don’t like our taste, but it’s fine you know” damn she’s talkative. I hear her blaring quite exquisitely. Evelyn was the girl who wanted to be in charge. Even in bad times. I am a good observer, thanks. The sherbet pouring and the nasty chewing was not how I wanted it to be. It bugged me like the same way my dad went in and made himself a clown on my 7th birthday and danced in his stripes. It made me puke and run off to an orphanage.

I made my butt comfortable on the stool, THAT FUCKING ROTATED? Gosh I don’t know about food but this may do the job of bringing me here daily.

Evelyn poured me a glass of cold water. Imaginable, she had the rest of her classmates on the tip of her finger. Impressive, I thought. My bangs had disoriented themselves. I looked like Annabelle.

“You know, you do look like Annabelle right now, right?” Evelyn chuckled. “Don’t be offended though”.

“Considering it was a major box office hit, I won’t take it to heart, my dear” I was calm to tackle what this bitch was saying about my looks. I dipped the tip of my finger in the glass to make my nerves silent.

She was making me curse again.

“Look babe, I know you’re anxious” she held my hand and looked me in my eyes, “but I’ve missed my class because of you”.

“Huh? You could go back if you want to” she was putting all on me. “I can handle myself.

“Oh I am just kidding babe,” she simpered. The babe thingy may be a reason her dead body would be in the garage of this damn school. My head throbbed and my chest whimpered. “You need new friends to survive here” She didn’t stop there, “Maybe you could join in history club, sports or fucking cheerleading, you’re cute enough to be there”.

Although a few jerks were hinting at me from the corner of my eye, precisely bitching about me. The thought of ignoring, made me a strong independent woman after all. Is this what all transfer students go through? Or I was cute enough already? I didn’t want chaos following me anywhere near. But these fuckers made me mad. I knew I had to deal with them someday.

My mind hung itself already. I wanted to talk with my karma so bad. I know she needs me right now. “It’s a lot to process for my first day here” I complained. “Maybe I could start with some studying”.

“Studying gets you marks, co-curriculars get you memories”. Damn wise words from a 17-year-old. Or 16, I couldn’t even guess her age right? But maybe Evelyn was right. Clubs would be fun. Fear-fringed and naive Aehlla, wanted

everything to be in her favour. She wanted to rule whatever came in her hand. Well. that's what I thought when I left the house this morning.

The moment I imagined the classroom, the wounded leg guy came to mind. He flashed like he was supposed to be in my mind. And my mind would thump when he entered there with a slight knock. Or maybe he didn't knock at all.

"Is there something else?" she genuinely looked at me like she was going to kiss me. "Ya-yah, I just- who was that guy who had a wounded leg in that class? Like he sat near that window staring out but then looked at me-" My hands moved frantically left and right explaining. Fuck why was I explaining the whole shit? My brain was dead indeed. "I don't even know if you saw him but-".

She paused for a second. She cast her glittering glaze on me grinning slowly. Yes, I had possessed her as I thought. "Oh yeah, what about him?" she leaned forward quite anticipated, interested. That look was screaming she had sinned with him.

"So you know him?" yet I ask.

"Depends who's asking"

"I am, what the fuck"

"I mean-" she stuttered. "Okay fine, but disclaimer, he's a bit weird and I may know him a little too well".

"Did you guys date or something?"

"No, huh, yuck".

"Either way, I give zero fucks". I retaliated.

"So why bother even asking about him?"

She had me in a cuckold. And I couldn't leave now. Awkward shit. Nearly when I waxed for the first time and saw god, the same felt.

"Because- I was intrigued- that why was he wounded?". Gosh, I took a lot of time to find that word.

“And out of all the people, you asked about him?” her questioning look gave me heebie-jeebies.

“Are you implying I like him or something? Pfft, newsflash, inquiring about someone is not liking”.

“He’s a pretty boy, not gonna lie, Aehlla”. She came back to the point and adjusted her glasses. I drank all my water at once. A psycho. “And he’s the president of the literature club”.

I stop my thoughts. I close the dam of my mind, my overwhelming emotions.

“Maybe now, you could start with the literature club, huh” she advised slyly. I was the one who thought a lot, who cared when I was attached to someone, but this guy felt he would. The look in his eyes told a yet compelling story. That I wanted to know. “So he was the one who gave you an anxiety attack?” she laughed it off. More like I strangle herself in the curls of her hair.

But no, she was sweet. Sweet enough to introduce me to that guy again.

Evelyn got up with her bag and tossed her phone inside ready to leave. My limbs were frozen and my seat was warmer than before. ‘I should leave with her’ I said to myself, ‘People aren’t what they’re supposed to be here’.

Panicky, I asked her what was the most obvious question that never flung into my consciousness, “You didn’t tell me his name?” I follow her outside, with the sun now soaking up my makeup.

“Oh I thought you would never ask that,” she joked. “He’s Mirari”.

Mirari / present

Another minute- I wanted to see her more. I lured my brain to watch her more just standing there and talking about herself. Just like the first time we met.

The bus tousled around bumping into every possible speed breaker on the damn road. Though I sat comfortably in the handicapped section. Even my body was painless thinking about her.

The reason for my direct thoughts didn't have to do anything with my past loves and toxic girls who ate chewing gum with water.

Oh look who I stumbled upon on this good day in a fucking bus, what was her name again, yah, Evelyn. For god's sake, she wouldn't leave my sight in pathetic situations. She waved longingly to me from the other side of the bus and I just smiled like I ate a hot dog with extra mayonnaise. And her appetite was a lollipop. She had some gang signs up her sleeves which made me so fucking dumb to understand.

I raise my sexy eyebrows and nod my head to convey what was inevitable to get, **WHAT THE FUCK WAS SHE SAYING?** The glare that I got from her was with a murderous intent. She made her way through people, and stepped on the foot of a grandma, who obviously blighted her but she didn't give a shit. Climbing up next to me like she had achieved a milestone in trekking she blared, "Don't you get it that I wanted to talk to you about something important?"

"Sorry I was dumb enough to be speechless when I look at you".

"Was that an insult or a compliment?"

"What's less offensive to you?"

She stared at me, half-eyed, as if I had smuggled her both kidneys.

"Do you wanna sit on my lap or something? My legs are already paralyzed". I taunted but she was uninterested. Scrumptious. "Or are you too heavy?"

Yes, definitely she was- thick. A lively woman with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, I was practically bouncing in my seat. Her eyes told me she was excited to tell me something. She glanced at me, my brows furrowed in concentration. I never thought I would waver in my own thinking. Her rounded face and glasses made me question her innocence. She was a decent child, well groomed for a teen, and her parents favorite, although I don't know if she has siblings.

She profoundly made her slap ready to aim onto my head. "AH SHIT!" I yell, half of the people concerned about my well being. "You fucking realise your hand hurt right?"

"Then don't bring up my weight anywhere you want".

I apologized for the sake of it.

"So what did your gang signs mean that even the mafia won't understand?" I asked as I stood up for my stop. "Too soon to ask?" I ask and smile retardedly knowing she won't be able to finish before my halt. My overcoat spread apart by the wind howling outside and kissing my face as the doors opened up and I stepped outside, still looking at her for an answer.

“The new girl was asking for you,” she dropped a bomb. Mostly on the Nagasaki of my heart. I took my feet back in the bus with gates closing in on my face.

“COULD YOU PLEASE STAND AWAY FROM THE DOORS, THANKYOU!” whinged the conductor from afar. I got blinded for a second, my other leg could’ve gone, that issue wasn’t so ‘weighty’ (Evelyn would’ve killed me if she heard my voices), but Aehlla asked for me?

“I’m sorry” I raised my hand to the conductor, and hurriedly went back to Evelyn, so near that I would almost smooch her. She seemed like she almost pissed her pants looking at me so close and blushed.

“What did she ask you?” As much as I wanted to whisper and get out everything that took Aehlla to notice me in that crowd of fifty people.

“Move away your breath stinks” she shooed me. Lies. I was eating mint chewing gum. Two.

“We need to talk” I adjourned.

“Yep!” Evelyn popped the ‘p’, looking extremely pleased with herself. “She seemed interested in the literature club, so I thought, why not? Oh wait, so the pussy I know is interested in that newbie huh?”

“Well, NO” I decline. I swayed away from her in regret though karma had to have some answers to my questions lately. But why not her?

We got out of the bus still clinging on the sidewalk and her staring at me.

“What’s with you? Just tell me what she asked dumbass”.

Evelyn shrugged. That grin- God, that grin. Wide like she’d already read the last page of my life and underlined the ending. “You’re the president of the literature club, right? Connect the dots, Rari.”

My mouth opened. Nothing. Air. Choked on it. “But-” No, not even words, just noise. My hand in my hair like I could rip an answer out of my skull. “You could’ve at least warned me.” Ugly. Weak. I hated how it sounded coming out.

And then she laughed. Sweet? Sharp? Both. Like biting into something beautiful and finding glass inside. Her hand- warm, heavy- landed on me, on my shoulder, like she owned it, owned *me*. “Where’s the fun in that?” she said, like this was a game. Like I was a piece she could move.

And something inside me- snapped? Twisted? Broke open. I don’t know. Just heat, crawling fast under my skin like ants on fire. I smiled. Or something like it. Felt wrong on my face, like a mask splitting at the seams.

And then- I don’t even know. Just- hands. My hands. On her shoulders. Like gravity stopped working and I needed something solid before I fell through the floor. Her shoulders were solid. Warm. Too warm. Skin under fabric, and suddenly my whole body was screaming. Loud but inside. Couldn’t stop. Didn’t want to stop.

Her eyes. Jesus. Her eyes slammed into mine like doors locking behind me. And she *knew*. Everything. The whispers. Achlla. The questions that claw me open at night. The thing I keep buried so deep I thought it was dead. It wasn’t dead. Her stare dragged it out, bleeding and ugly.

Don’t look. Don’t. If I look I’ll see it. I’ll see how it ended. My ending. The sound- the crash- the silence that came after like a black ocean swallowing everything. And her. In it. Her shadow like a stain on the memory, like maybe she wasn’t watching- maybe she was pulling the strings.

And even then- even with that screaming in my head like sirens, even when my breath turned to ash and my ribs felt like they’d snap- I didn’t let go.

Couldn’t. Wouldn’t. Didn’t.

“She didn’t say much-” Evelyn sprung up with some gossip she drowned to tell me. “But she did mention you in detail though, and felt like you were the only one she saw in the crowd”.

My legs were scrambled now and the dense blue sky burned my eyes. My lips were rusted soon enough when she voiced, “She’ll text you Rari, or better yet call you,” stuffing a muffin into her mouth, “I have given her your number”.

The clock in the big tower struck 6. It was late. But my hunger paved the way for my thoughts to be eaten up.

“Why would she do that?”

She stopped eating and looked at me with a sense of approval. “She writes poems like you, is an introvert, and talks shit to the people she hates. She is you, but with a vagina of course” She counted every finger on her hand like she memorized this beforehand. Evelyn couldn’t help herself talking nonsense. She rather strolled away.

Bad day to have ears.

The street was an empty, kind of abandoned road with no streetlights under the control of the government. I would shit my pants if I get robbed here while I try to run just to know I am limping back again.

“Don’t be a dick that you are and reply to her. Don’t get knocked out of your girl’s league again” she tried to make the convo spicy, “Don’t thank me, you’re welcome anyways”.

I smiled like a nomad into nothingness thinking she wouldn’t even dare to leave me in this life. Things were weird lately. And I was too muzzled in them.

It would be dumb if I didn’t ask who the newbie was. Ironically, she was the love of my life before I died. “Who’s the girl?” I yell.

She flopped around in her skirt and shrieked,” She’s Aehlla”.

Aehlla's karma / present

Her mind felt serene. But it was ablaze delusionally. Though her two personalities always contradicted, I never loved her less. I caught up in her heart which was beating in the heat of ecstasy. I was a vibrant tapestry of hues, a whirling tornado of light and darkness. The abstract depiction stupefied me. The stronger colours indicated her positive acts when she chose kindness and compassion. They sparkled like stars, a testimonial to her wonderful effect. They were a rainbow of colours: the warm orange of a calming word, the soft pink of a loving gesture, and the vivid green of a selfless act.

Darker tones were interspersed among them, representing the repercussions of her mistakes. They weren't malevolent, but rather a reminder of the times she had failed, when she had let her emotions get the best of her, which was uncommon. They were a darker palette: the stormy grey of a harsh remark, the deep blue of a careless deed, and the stark black of a wasted opportunity to assist.

However, the deeper tints did not dominate the lighter ones. Instead, they created contrast and balance. They served as a reminder of her humanity, that she wasn't flawless, and that was fine. They were as much a part of her as the brighter colours were.

The consciousness lit up green and blue with flowers blooming with each step she took to reach up to me. It cast a soft, golden light over the sprawling meadow. Dew-kissed grass shimmered in the early morning light, a lush carpet of green that stretched as far as the eye could see. The air was thick with the sweet scent of wildflowers and the earthy aroma of damp soil, creating a heady mix that was both invigorating and calming.

A symphony of birdsong filled the air, the melodious chirping of the birds harmonizing with the gentle rustling of the leaves. The world was slowly waking up, the serene silence of the night giving way to the soft hum of life.

Walking through this idyllic landscape was like stepping into a dream. The meadow gave way to an orchid field, a riot of colours that took your breath away. The orchids, in all their vibrant hues, were in full bloom, their delicate petals unfurling to greet the new day.

The air was humid but not uncomfortable, a gentle reminder of the life that thrived in this little slice of paradise.

The tranquillity of the scene was a balm to the soul, the beauty of nature in its purest form. It was a place where one could lose themselves in the simple joys of life, a haven of peace and serenity that offered a respite from the hustle and bustle of the world. It was a testament to the enduring charm of nature, a reminder of the simple, unadulterated beauty that the world had to offer.

She rose her head up to the sky looking ceiling with birds chirping way above her. If she wanted, she would even reach for them to pet. But she found herself digging in the fields of orchids and shuddered. Seemed like that's where she was comfortable. Well, her dim smile did not brighten me.

“You did not find the right time to knock on my brain?! I was introducing myself to them!” she screeched. “They might have just known I am iron deficient”.

My voice being a little too soft and spongy, I remarked, “That boy was something. I didn’t know how to warn you, I am sorry”, the other karma inside the boy frightened me. It was not a regular karma. Like the ones you get for free when you’re born. This shit was inherited like I was. And I am scared to tell her honestly, her eyes showing his reflection. I have observed her every little thing and given her dreams meaning. I found a real karma inside him.

“He made you panic?” she shut me down. “That was weird *as fuck*”.

“I was susceptible”. “About? Like what shit- you didn’t even warn me about when I waxed for the first time and saw god” She was shook. “Even god said hi to me. But this guy was so frightening to you?”.

“He is- like you, Aehlla” I had myself captive, whom I cared so deeply about. This girl who I lived inside held her consciousness in my grasp, and I couldn’t bear to lie to her. She hiccuped to step back a little, weathering some blooms with her steps now.

“Like me?” She was confused. I lifted her slightly from the ground up to the sky for her to hear me. “He is someone you should stay away from”.

Though I could see how disturbed she was, her melted frown, and eyes that yelled, ‘No I want to kiss him so bad’. I protected her. And she usually listened. The time I assumed it was in her head, she hesitated for the first time.

“Why?” she wailed.

“Standardized procedure” I squeak in my fleecy ass voice which was given by yours truly, Aehlla. “I’ll never tell you anything unless it benefits you, - or maybe both of us”.

Her legs fluttered searching for the ground to stand. “Trust is a big word for you huh?”

“I don’t want to mess with my head for you, Aehlla”.

“But I want to, for him” She was an adamant creature with no standards of love I see now. I casually swung her down in the flower field. “I’ve never felt like this. And I don’t want to leave this feeling either”.

“You haven’t even met him- twice- in your entire life bitch” I stutter to make my point crystal clear. “And he’s special to you?”

“You said he’s special, for you too, right?” her arms opened themselves widening to scream that this girl’s got some balls to argue with her guardian angel.

“YAH, BUT IN A BAD WAY!”

“SO LET ME SEE THE GOOD IN HIM!” She turned back and started strolling. The flowers stopped blooming. As she walked, petals broke free from their blooms, carried by the breeze. They would dance in the air, their graceful ballet a sight to behold, before finally settling on the ground with perfume only Scarlett Johansson would wear. The mesmerizing scenery left me in awe. Her mind was truly beautiful. Much in a way for her every time to make a visit in her consciousness, and splurge a new holiday destination.

‘How and why was she so optimistic?’ I wonder.

She interrupted her walk to eye back, and smiled, “How do you know he’s someone I would not want? Didn’t you tell me karma”, I was all ears to her, “We have just met him not even like - twice- in our life?”

She giggles. The birds giggle.

They chirp around gleefully.

“Sometimes women too slay the part which says unconditional love”.

Mirari / present

Collywobbles - a word for which I longed but did not expect Aehlla to give me butterflies so soon. Oh fuck that, I did not even expect Aehlla to come back haunting me to show me what torture I had missed before I died.

"Mirari, is that you?" My anxious, caring mother dove into the living room in search of me, wearing an apricot dress for some reason. I smelt coffee all around the house, but I still couldn't understand why everyone in the world was obsessed with coffee. It's suspicious to wonder, "Why don't you even lock the doors?" as if this wasn't typical.

"You could be robbed," I bellowed.

I slang my bag onto the couch, my shoes lifted my heels to keep perfectly in the shoe cabinet, "You were never this neat, what happened today? You look a little sluggish" she worried a lot I see.

"Just met an old friend, though she might've forgotten about me".

“Oh, it's a ‘SHE’?” She yelled. “Have I met this friend of yours?”

“Yeah- No- I don't think so. Anyways, why do you care? She's a transfer student”.

“So how is she an old friend?”

“Mom! Enough- Just-” I huffed, “bring some pizza and leave me alone in my room for a while?” I was listless enough to ask for some privacy. It was humid outside but I felt like having a heatstroke.

I rushed onto the stairs, “But we don't have pizza!” she sputtered.

“THEN MAKE ONE FOR ME!” I whinged and hurriedly got up to my room.

This picture of Aehlla in my mind flustered me. Grumbled me. I shut my door behind and peeked outside the setting sun. I walked up to it knowing dying again wouldn't make a difference. Well, my idiot karma would bring me back, right? I have unlimited lives and chances with universes where I won't meet her, not see her fucking face.

It came to me over and over, my karma was calling me. I pushed myself back on to my wall, cramping my head. I rolled over to sit aloof, grabbing a dark chocolate, smushed it in between my fingers, from my table and I halted, to close my eyes.

I stood in the dimly lit room, my attention fixed on Aehlla, who was curled in the corner with her arms wrapped protectively over herself. The tension in the air was palpable, like real power throbbing in time with their emotions.

"Why can't you just accept it, Aehlla?" my voice rang out in the quiet, a cry hidden in despair. "Why can't you accept that there are people who care about you, who love you?"

Aehlla's chuckle was brittle and devoid of any real laughter. "Love?" she spat, as if it were a curse. "Is that what you call it?" Do you believe I need love in my life?

My heart ripped at her words and the sheer sadness in her eyes. "Yes, Aehlla," I said quietly, "we all do."

But Aehlla shook her head, her black hair falling in her eyes. "You're mistaken, Mirari. I do not need it. I do not want it."

I had a burst of frustration. "Why, Aehlla?" I inquired, his voice increasing. "Why are you pushing everyone away? For fuck's sake I care about you."

I felt a knot form in my stomach. "But you're already hurting, Aehlla," I said quietly. "You're angry, you're confused, and you're distressed. You're just channeling it in the wrong direction."

Aehlla's eyes blazed with anger. "And who are you to tell me what's right or wrong for me?" she said. "You think you know me, Mirari? "You think you understand my pain?"

My heart clenched. "Maybe I don't, Aehlla," I acknowledged. "But I'm here, trying to understand and assist. "Why don't you let me?"

Aehlla's response was a whisper, a desperate appeal shrouded in a cloak of defiance. "Because I do not want help, Mirari. I do not want to be saved. And I surely do not desire love. "Not from you, not from anyone."

Hearing my name on her lips felt like a physical blow. "Aehlla-

"Just leave me alone," she said, barely audible. "Just- leave me alone."

As I stood there, staring at Aehlla's retreating figure, I realized that sometimes, love wasn't enough. Sometimes, the wounds were too deep, the pain too raw. And all I could do was stand there.

This feeling was surreal. I never gave up on her, not even had a thought about it, and now I didn't even want to see her face? Her memories, rather I would call 'fond' memories flashed back and forth in my head, stiffening my suffering more and more into my wear eyes.

I opened them breathlessly to clear the fog in my mind. All breathless and weary enough to be blinded even by the slightest rays of the sun. Right before my eyes.

I often didn't believe what they called miracles, but every second now felt I missed her. Every opportunity felt like I missed it.

I woke up my senses to open up to my karma to talk about everything bothering me. Teary eyed, I picked up a plugged pillow, with my cheeks shiny and radiant as a parlor like makeup. I breathed in deeply, my chest rising and falling rhythmically as I closed my eyes and began to meditate. The world outside slipped away, replaced by a vast, internal landscape that was my consciousness, and it was white again.

I navigated this space as one might navigate a familiar hallway in the white, dark, moving with certainty and purpose. It was him, but not him, like looking into a mirror where the reflection had its own thoughts and feelings. A figure I saw secluded far afar, a tiny speck of myself, pouring liquid into a glass. The noise of pouring echoed into the vast white nothingness again, with his aura lighting up the room more. The hues and the chrome of his energy were off the charts.

"Karma," I greeted with anger, my voice echoing in the vastness of his consciousness.

"Mirari," Karma replied, its voice a perfect echo of my own. "You missed me I suppose".

"Oh it's all your fault alright" I yelled at him. I rushed down to him with a fist of my hand, to screw his puny face over again and again, or rather mine. Karma nodded, a gesture that seemed to ripple through the space around them.

"Didn't expect to see you so soon, huh" he was soft, affable with his words.

I stood opposite him. My brow furrowed, teeth gritted, and my hand had curled into a tight fist at my side. My anger made the air around us crackle and stretch. He was angry, a burning fury that threatened to consume him. I did feel wrong and betrayed.

With a roar, I lunged forward, my fist swinging through the air with all the force my spiritual form could muster. But this aura I felt, he was untouchable.

The closer I leaned to touch him with my fist, I found myself suddenly lifted off the ground, his body weightless. His arm swung uselessly through the air, his punch landing on nothing but the empty space. I was left hanging there,

suspended in the air, now my anger leaving me in a rush of confusion and surprise.

Karma, still in the form that mirrored me, looked up at me. Its voice echoed around us, calm and steady compared to my roar. "You know you cannot even touch me, Mirari," it said, its tone almost gentle.

I hung helplessly in the air, and could do nothing but glare down at this asshole. His anger had been replaced by a sense of helplessness, a bitter reminder of his intangible nature. "I- won't.. UGH" I gave up.

A subtle realization fucked my brain, it was a force I could not fight, could not punch away. It was a part of me, a reflection of my actions and decisions, and it was something I had to face head-on, not with my fists, for sure.

He slurped his drink away, savoring every taste. "Do you want rum?" He raised his glass up for me to take a look at it.

"You drink too?" It wasn't new considering getting high was the only thing left for me to be sane.

"Oh, I don't get high, like never" he paused and stared at his cup for a bit. "Are you pissed on me or something?" he retreated his steps, still sipping his poison. "I'm sorry either way- AHH that's good!"

"Oh would you mind changing the scenery, the atmosphere and shit, 'cause it's been boring here lately" he insisted. "Every time you have met me after your death, it's been this old Karma in this white icy box caged with a longing fear of death, all over again" he giggled, and yes he was high as fuck.

"How much did you drink?" I was curious to see how, or rather bad my capacity was.

"Probably- twenty- three glasses? I guess".

"Oh fuck this" my hands clamped on my face, all sweaty and drenched while i juggled my thoughts to even ask him about Aehlla in this state.

"Your mind has really become a trash can, don't you agree?" he exclaimed. His looks were sly and leaned across an invisible table with his butt laid over the

edges. His face was down, yet his eyes upwards to me. "You were the one who wanted redemption, didn't you? Yet you float here into this nothingness, how the fuck is this my fault?"

My fists were still clutched for a strike when I got down. I did not hesitate. His form shimmered, the light pulsating with each word he spoke. "I am not the one who decides, Mirari".

"Oh, here we go again," I groaned, waving a dismissive hand at this glowing mother****. "I didn't even say anything, gosh? Did I step on a bug? Forgot to say 'bless you' when someone sneezed?"

"Mirari," his voice echoed, a blend of stern admonishment and gentle understanding. "You've been straying from your path." He gulped again, refilling his glass.

"It's a pretty lousy theory," he snapped, his anger boiling to the surface.

"You only show me the bad things, the mistakes, and the hurt!" I sobbed my tears and inhaled the burst of sadness I inherited from him. "ALL I WANTED WAS Aehlla TO NOT BE HERE AND MEET ME!" the lumps in my throat grew bigger, the words in my mouth to spit in anguish. "I don't- want to hurt her- again".

"Your world would soon end at this pace" he jokingly laughed it off, as it was a no biggie for him to revive me again. "Love is something you cannot yell off, it has to be felt. And feelings are done through actions", he swirled around to me with his aura burning off more as he sipped more.

I gritted my teeth, smashing them all together, and my eyes closed. Suddenly, the crackling of the glass stopped. His breath became audible and the table stopped shaking with the rum bottle toppling on top, even it soaring up.

"It was my fucking fault she left last time. *Mine*. I know that. I've eaten that truth a thousand times already, so don't you dare start with this shit- this fairytale crap about me being there for her, her falling for me, like this is some goddamn movie."

My throat burned. I tried to swallow it down. Tried to keep my voice steady. Failed.

“Just to find out- what? That I’m her fucking *option*? That’s all I’ll ever be?!”

The words ripped out of me before I could stop them. Too loud. Too broken. My chest heaved like I’d just run through fire.

“Okay, a spoiler of your upcoming life” he chirped as the sky twinkled at a stretch of millions of fireflies adding an extra spice. My consciousness wore a cloak of inky black, studded with a million twinkling stars. They glittered like diamonds scattered across velvet, a celestial masterpiece of breathtaking beauty.

Their lights cast a warm, golden glow, cutting through the darkness and painting long shadows on the pavement. They flickered gently, their soft hum a comforting lullaby in the silence of the night. The slow transformation made me wonder what power and elegance my karma held in his hand, he walked beneath me and stood right there.

The air was cool, carrying the crispness of the night and the subtle scent of the dew-kissed grass. It brushed against the skin with a gentle caress, a soothing balm against the remnants of the day’s heat. The world seemed to be in a state of peaceful slumber, the usual hustle and bustle replaced by an enveloping tranquility. The only sounds were the occasional rustle of leaves, the distant hoot of an owl, and the soft whisper of the wind. Despite the darkness, there was a certain vibrancy, a certain magic that the night brought with it. The stars above seemed to dance.

“Too late, she already fell for you. The first glance, the first look, the first sight. And now she may call you. Please pick up. And you thought I was bored here without you huh? I was kidding, haha” he stumped me with that aura. He returned back to catch a hold of his glass.

Well, Evelyn did tell me she will. My life’s been a drama and he was here laughing it all out on me.

“Listen”, he whispered. I clenched my fists, retrieving my blood to stop flowing in my arm.

“It’s your free will”, he insisted. I steadily unclamped my fist, a finger at a time, with my nail marks on my palm piercing my flesh, noticing every droplet of my blood go through my vein while submitting me to my thoughts.

“Don’t tell me how you feel, Mirari”, he said.

“I will feel what you always feel”, he promised.

Mirari's mom / present

The room was dimly lit, the only source of light being the pale moonlight that filtered through the half-closed window blinds. In the corner of the room he sat leaning onto the wall. His body was as still as a statue, his eyes rolled back, revealing nothing but the whites. His face, usually filled with childlike innocence and joy, was now eerily calm and expressionless.

My heart pounded nevertheless, seeing my boy so static like he wouldn't feel a thing. Even though I was someone who would take care of myself, a strong character and a tender heart, I stood a few feet away from him with my heart stabbed. The pizza I made fell on the floor smashing the cheese with a loud pop.

My eyes wide and filled with fear, hands wringing the hem of my apricot dress and the apron.

He was unnaturally still, his eyes rolled back, and a cold shiver ran down my spine. I did hear stories, tales of possession and evil spirits, but I really had never given them much thought until now.

The room was silent, the only sound being the soft ticking of his alarm clock on his table. It echoed in the silence, each tick a stark reminder of the strange and frightening situation.

I took a shaky breath, reaching out a trembling hand towards her son. "Mirari?" I called softly, my voice barely above a whisper. He did not respond, did not even blink. He just sat there, his body rigid, his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling.

A feeling of dread washed over me, a fear I had known before.

I was in this situation yet again.

I felt a lump in my throat, my mind racing with terrifying thoughts. Was my child possessed?

I fell to my knees, my hands clasped together in prayer and I crawled myself towards him. Tears streamed down my face as I pleaded for help. His eyes were brownish and gray, more like he couldn't see now, his mouth left half open, and knees gripped tightly to his chest by his hands.

The most negative thought, 'Would he be dead?' crossed my mind.

No. NO.

NO.

I grabbed his face carefully, "Mirari!" I utter, hoping every scenario in my head goes wrong.

He didn't respond. I reached out and touched his shoulder gently. He was cold, his skin pale.

"Mirari," I called again, louder this time. Still, no response. Panic got a hold of me. I was about to run out and call for help, but wait, I saw it - a flicker in his eyes, a slight twitch of his fingers, still seemed lifeless.

"Are you-," I said, shaking him gently. His eyes blinked slowly, and then he focused on me. It was as if he was seeing me for the first time. His eyes were clear, his expression confused.

"Mom?" he asked, his voice hoarse. A wave of reassurance swept over me. My son was back. I hugged him tightly, tears of relief streaming down my face, shaky breath yet not slowing down. Couldn't bear another to lose.

"Oh my pizza" said he looking grossfully on the spluttered chunk of dough and cheese on the floor. AND THAT'S THE FIRST THING HE NOTICED?

"What were you even doing?!" I bickered. "Praying to satan?!" I was unable to control my worry and fear any longer, instinctively stepping forward and slapping him. The sound echoed around the silent room. Mirari's eyes widened in surprise, his hand instinctively reaching up to his stinging cheek.

"I- I was just-" he didn't get to finish. I stood up gazing at him in fear and anger mixed with a dash of care.

"What just happened? How were you in that state?" I was flustered but he chose to remain silent. "Come down, we need to talk".

The hall remained silent making it more creepily eerie and I needed someone to pray for me.

Mirari slowly analyzed the house, seemingly like he was seeing it for the first time. But I also felt I was overthinking a little. Overwhelmed a little. I had a burst of sweat, dripping on the back of my hair. I felt it but stopped. A jarring sound he made when he pulled the chair to himself, and sat there with his face knowing what was about to come. He wasn't interested at all.

The cozy hall emanated warmth, carrying the inviting scent of freshly baked bread with a hint of cinnamon I had prepared for myself. The gentle radiance of the overhead light bathed the room in a soft glow that almost created a sanctuary in the twilight of early evening. As I watched my hot cocoa melt slowly, left waiting for me, my eyes deeply engrossed in Mirari's, a deep brown glaze, depicted love I guess.

Drawing in a deep breath, my face buried some marks of wisdom.

“Are you afraid?” he inquired. “This is not in my control”. He anticipated this way long before.

“Promise me this, you won't lie to me how you feel. Just please-” I closed my eyes, “don't do anything to yourself. I cannot *imagine* living a life without you. You are the only family I have”.

Aehlla / present

‘I know you think a lot,’ I wondered, sitting in the chair cozy enough for my butt to stay. ‘Does it suffice the neurons in your brain?’ I begin wondering about the things that should be the least of my worry now that a new place and new friends have opted me in. My milkshake too had become warm with froth rising for a burp. My both hands covered the cup while I sat there lifelessly.

“Who’s the boy Aehlla?” It was unusual for my mom randomly strolling into the verandah catching up with me for gossip. “How do you even-” I started. I rolled my eyes back thinking this would be the most useless question to ask her. I slowly glanced at her still asking, “How do you know?”

Though my karma had been knocking on my brain a million times, it couldn’t warn me about how I could tackle my moms questions. “It’s just been a day, and you already caught up with love? Interesting”.

“It’s nothing and there is no guy” I deny.

“Well you said the same when you broke up with Calis”.

“Calis was a different story!” I squabble, spilling some shake down and morseing it with regret. It was already concerning my broken heart and the topics that fucked it even more.

“And this one is different from him then?”

Mom was someone my friends greatly looked up to in my old school, with being the mother of a highly mentally challenged daughter.

I spooned my cup a little more, making it a little more warm. The brisk taste of the evening wind also made me twitch.

“How did you meet dad? Pretty sure he also wasn’t your first love” I stupidly ask her to play the mind game. She leaned on the balustrade, hung her hands on the rails and came forward to me.

I subconsciously got up from my fuzzy seat to make her sit. I made my way sitting in between her feet and calmly placing my head onto the chair. The heat of the urban jungle matched with my milkshake now. Yet the seaside view wasn’t far enough.

“We did meet in college, cute eyes, not really social, but yet so intimidating” her palms felt soft as she massaged my head with argan oil. Even though sitting down, I could imagine her blushing through her voice.

“So your life did change, after meeting dad?” I coax.

“Evolved might be a better word” she replies.

“Didn’t you guys ever talk about having a kid, maybe scrumptious like me, or something?” I ask. The dim shadow of the yellowish brown gaze of the sun flared upon me and I loved every bit of it.

“Well, we used to discuss whether our baby would have my nose or your dads but for sure I knew it would have eyes like me, which you do” she joked. “All I know is that we gave ourselves time. To *know* each other. We didn’t click for a year, and I began losing hope too, but your dad didn’t give up. It was like I was the center of the universe for him.”

Ouch. An indirect hit on my heart considering how hasty I am. Precisely what I had done with Calis. This FOMO of missing the perks of dating and hookups made my mind weird. Regrets. But calling himself dull and not handsome would be a lie. Juniors would have a crush on him. And he had one on me.

“You didn’t tell me his name” she interrupted my thought process while still tickling my hair with oil.

“Whose name?” I slurp my shake till the end of it.

“Don’t play dumb with me” she pulled my hair hard behind, probably plucking three or four. “Idiot”.

For fucks sake, what should I even reply? Like I feel like ‘he has a connection with me somehow, his eyes not as bright but full of concern,’ I picture in my head. My karma even told me to stay away, but me being a horrendous obeyer, doesn’t give a shit. Is this what my mother wanted to hear?

“So you say you guys did not click for a year and your hope was ending” I twist the topic, “what made you guys have me?”

“*NAME, Aeblla!*” she ordered, and I definitely made her cranky.

“Fine! He is Mirari or something, I don’t even know clearly” I speak up.

“Pretty name” she finishes nourishing my hair with argan.

She got up slowly, keeping in mind her back pain, and gathered my fallen hair. The air was so quiet by then, I could hear the brushing of sea waves by the house. Everything so calm and composed, made me panic inside.

“Oh yah” she turned around and smiled, “My hope was about to end. I didn’t lose it. I kept telling myself, we will make it even if we don’t make it”.

I smiled back processing what this actually meant.

“Love is simple, not easy though. Nobody teaches how to stop loving. Teach your kids that”.

That would be my mother’s biggest mic drop moment ever.

Mirari / present

Breathless- Fuck this word. The more I think about it, it progresses even more. And this wasn't the case always. Sometimes quieter things too, aggravate it.

'Mirari' it would call and I fell into the pithole of senselessness. Everytime.

My desk was a mess, now this new life was a big damn curse I was sure about. My poems were a blessing nonetheless. It cheered and appreciated life like life was oozing out of them. Considering I was their father, it was an irony for me too. My head jammed when I picked the pen up, rustling the paper, crinkling it when it turned, scribbling each and every word that came to my mind, and then scratching it all off in disgrace. I called it off pretty soon.

"Dinner's done!" I hear my mom call downstairs.

"Finishing my homework!" I call out in an instant.

The trouble of being the president of the so-called literature club is 'doing work'. Evelyn did promise me to bulge my poems out for the school newspaper

but that idea didn't really touch me. I mean sure I write now and they make sense somehow and it turns out to be phenomenal as they say. But this talent, this honor just isn't mine. I could picture my past life Aehlla smiling, grateful enough to have me.

The dinner's smell of meat lasagna and cheeseballs lingered on the tip of my tongue. My tastebuds longed for it usually not, but I was starving since morning.

"*RARI!*" shouts my mother, "I am not going to tell you twice now!"

"On my way!" I screech, hurdling my backpack down my desk and packing my stuff in it. Lately this obsession of having everything tidy got a hold of me. Even if it was for a mere hour. I rarely got a chance now to make peace with my karma, but reading my own poems felt a reality check on how life really should be. But nevermind, fuck this, I am too hungry to be in this loop of consideration and philosophy.

"Didn't you hear or you're actually deaf?!" My mom barged in, shaking every piece of my furniture slamming the door inside.

"What the-" I start. Shivers ran down my spine.

"What the'- indeed".

"Food's cold and I have arthritis," she snaps. "Two things I hate right now".

One thing about my mother I've learnt- she cares a lot.

Second thing- she's annoying because she cares a lot.

I was always wrong in my past life.

"Is this more important than your dinner?" she charges up to me with her spatula spitting meat gravy, her apron smelling like a butcher showered a goat with love and her hair not obeying her as usual, just like me.

"What you need is a bath" I taunt hastily. She smirks and laughs and smacks my head with her whole willpower given by her ancestors.

"Did I ask you?!"

“OUCH!” The last time I remember I yelled was at Evelyn on the bus. I am a calm guy, agreed, but insane people keep me sane.

“Did you write this?” she asked while me reminiscing on the hottie.

*Two truths and a lie
the beauty that you have, can it be untold?
how glad i would be if my love was weighed in gold
the shimmer that shines even in the night of cold
oh why would i believe the lies you hold?
the evening dusk breaded in noon
silking the glitter you draw in your cocoon
crying for the affection in the dawn of the moon
oh why would our love be fucked up so soon?
i saw you coming far behind to find me
to find the love you wanted to be
to run around in awe and free
oh why would you pretend to be she?
two truths and one lie made you shine
a lie that i believed will fade with time
a rather thought to keep you by stealthiest of crime
oh tell me, how would i make you mine?*

“Well, yah, technically, no, but yah” I stutter.

My mom gave me the slickest side eye ever. “You weren’t so retarded since birth, were you?”

Humph. Great. Now even my mom judges me.

“Why would you keep this quiet? Go publish it”

“Yah, maybe Evelyn would help”. I scoot in my bag packing it again before digging in my food and getting some heavenly sleep.

Evelyn lately hasn't been so boggled up with the new transfer students, or maybe students don't want to come here to harness their educational prowess, 'cause this place is *trash*. Exaggeration would be an understatement.

My pajamas were tight. I mean TIGHT. Well suddenly, I had bloated to give my food baby the most luxurious penthouse space in my stomach. No lying, the meat and cheese were a perfect match. I heard my phone vibrating for a long time, but I couldn't care less as walking right now too was difficult for me.

Night owls hooted their way out into the city, some staying as near as in my verandah. I had water filled up for the birdies and extra garbage 'if in case' they take up adrenaline and wanted to build their nest with it in the middle of the night. The aroma of freshly baked truffles scented my room which my neighbor cooked every Tuesday night.

Who even eats truffles *only* on a Tuesday night?

Can't deny this life I had habituated pretty soon. I knew every nook and crooks and tits and tuts of the bickering people in my life, except for this new, exceptional Aehlla that was going to call me.

Wait, my phone vibrated right? Oh fuck.

Even though my heart wasn't so pumped to talk to her, I made my way nimbly searching for my phone.

Under the pillow? No.

Under the sheets? No.

I could hear it vibrating again, under the bed. God, please it mustn't be broken. I pick it up and analyze it. Screen protector had it in bits and pieces, and could work with it.

Unknown caller?

That phone number was huge. I already had quite a few calls from it. Just 2. I held up my phone on the verge to pick it up, but I went breathless. A god damn normal phone call could actually make me breathless?

If it really was Aehlla, I smirked and wished in my heart to let it be my past Aehlla.

I do really feel a good talk was all needed to fix things between us.

Aehlla / present

My hands were sweaty. Not metaphorically- like *actual* sweat. Palms slick, heart in shambles, and my brain? Somewhere in Havana, sipping piña coladas far away from this moment. I had Mirari's number on my screen, and I'd pressed call. Twice. And he hadn't picked up. Twice.

Desperation wasn't even the word anymore- I needed friends, I needed a chance, I needed to not screw this up. But my karma? Oh, it was screaming. Loud and clear, smug as hell: "*Do you really want to give this guy a chance?*"

The AC was blasting Arctic winds, yet my feet were sweating under the blanket I'd wrapped around myself like a superhero cape- a very anxious, overthinking, dumbass superhero.

Then, light. My phone lit up, blinding me like I was Moses being handed the worst possible version of the Ten Commandments.

"Hi, who is this?" came his voice- deep, gravelly, hoarse like he'd just woken up or was about to cast a curse on me. And in that exact moment, I forgot my own name. Fully. Blank. Dead air inside my skull.

“H-hi, this is Aehlla,” I stammered, sounding like my soul had tripped and cracked a rib. “I, you probably know me? I came with Evelyn- your bestie? Had a dramatic stroke in class? That one?”

There was a pause. A tiny pause. But in my head, it lasted eight years.

“Why have you called?” he said flatly.

Rude. Rude enough to delete him from my dreams. But also not rude enough to stop my heart from running a 10K inside my ribs.

“I- uh- did you have dinner?”

What.

WHAT?!

Why did I say that? Did I black out? Am I possessed?

I deserved to be slapped with a shovel dipped in sarcasm.

But then- he laughed.

God help me, he *laughed*. A warm, low, cackling laugh that sounded like cinnamon sugar and danger.

“Yeah, I ate. Thanks for asking, Aehlla.”

And I melted. I legit *melted*. His voice tickled me straight through the speaker. I could taste his smile like it was a flavor and not an emotion. I imagined those curly strands falling onto his forehead and those dimples - oh God, those *dimples*- glowing brighter than all the fake highlighters in my makeup drawer combined.

I straightened up like my spine had something to prove. Tried to breathe like a normal human and not a malfunctioning air pump.

“I just wanted to- uh, I mean-” System crash. Internal lag. “I was hoping to- maybe, join the literature club? With you?”

He paused. “With *me*?”

“No! I mean, yes. I mean- not *with you*, *with you*. Just. You know. I write stuff. If you don’t mind?”

In full cringe mode, I started scrolling through my Notes app, about to recite a poem I’d written when I was sixteen and hopelessly romantic about ceiling fans and heartbreak.

“Hugs so feeble-” I began, breathlessly.

“No- wait. Wait, wait.” His voice sharpened. I froze.

“Let me get this straight,” he said, deadpan. “You called me at *eleven p.m.*, just to audition your poem?”

Silence. The kind that burns your skin.

I wanted to disintegrate.

I wanted the earth to open up and swallow me like a snack.

“Couldn’t we just talk *tomorrow*? Like, in school?” he added.

I blinked.

Tomorrow?

Tomorrow.

OH MY GOD.

I *completely* missed that option.

“Well Evelyn told me you’d pick up,” I mumbled, fumbling. “I just didn’t think it’d be so late.” *Nervous laughter.exe*

He laughed again- but this time it had a roast built in. “Isn’t tomorrow Sunday?”

Genius brain activated. “Yes. Exactly. So we couldn’t have met-”

“It’s Friday, Aehlla.”

My soul left my body.

“Oh. Right. Yeah. Friday. That makes so much sense. Oopsie.”

Born to say “*Time passes fast when I talk to you,*” but forced to choke on my own chaos instead.

Slowly I crouched myself back on my spine ensuring the cold didn’t catch my hold. And my shivers too.

I was falling for him- slowly, but steadily. It crept in through the cracks I didn’t know were still open. My heart was sinking and floating at the same time, like it couldn’t decide whether to drown or drift.

I shuddered- part nerves, part hope- and suddenly, I just started talking. Too fast, too much, all at once.

“I could be a great help to the team. I’ve been working on this stuff- like, real work. I finally figured out how publishing works, thanks to Evelyn. And, well, my mom and dad just got transferred here because of the recession. We’re juggling everything. Life’s messy, but I’m trying. Like, really trying.”

The words were spilling out now- I couldn’t stop them even if I wanted to.

“I need to make friends again. I need to pull myself out of this pit. I’ve been spiraling with anxiety and depression, and it’s been, a *lot*. The chaos, the change- it’s all sitting on my chest like it pays rent.”

I let out a laugh, too sharp, too dry.

“My doctor literally told me I’m ‘too negative.’ Like that’s a medical diagnosis or something. And don’t even get me started on the whole ‘girls have it easier’ thing. Okay- he didn’t *say* all of that. But it’s how it felt. My last school was toxic, like actual poison. And the people I called friends back then? *Venom*. Just slower acting.”

I paused, barely breathing, then sighed- like the air finally caught up with my thoughts.

“Ugh, why am I even telling you all of this? You probably don’t get it. No one ever really does.”

And then I did the only thing that made sense after emotionally blacking out mid-rant, I chugged an entire jar of water like I was trying to wash the words back down my throat.

I hadn’t thought twice. Hadn’t blinked. Something in me just believed he’d understand. That he’d *feel* it.

On the other end of the phone, his voice came through- low, fuzzy, trying to push through the signal like it was swimming through fog. But it was there. And even in the static, I swear I could hear him listening.

Really listening.

He finally spoke, “So still you called me even though I wouldn’t understand?”

Aww he gets me so well.

Mirari's mom/ past

Shudderingly, I open my eyes. My chest feels tight, but not in a medical way. Just the usual. It's been four months since Mirari left. I've stopped counting days. But I still show up at his grave every morning. Talk to him. Tell him about the weather, the traffic, how the neighbors are annoying. Things he didn't care about then either.

I always think of different ways I could've prevented it. Divorce comes up a lot. Should've done it earlier. Could've saved him the weight.

I wiped the drool off my chin. Sat up. My body wakes up slower than I do now. Coffee usually helps. I stared at the ceiling for a minute like that might spark motivation. It didn't.

My hair's a mess. It's been a mess for a while. Business is still running- barely. Handmade art toys. Custom stuff. People love "authenticity" when it's not sad.

I've got orders to finish. I told myself maybe that means something. Like, maybe I'm building something. Or starting over. Whatever that means.

Cooking for one is depressing. But I still make breakfast. Eggs, sometimes. Toast. Today it was burnt milk. Again. I let it boil over. Again. I watched it hiss down the sides of the pot and thought, *figures*. Coffee tasted like cardboard. I drank it anyway.

People keep suggesting I remarry. Start over. Move on. As if starting over is just an IKEA instruction manual away. I don't care about marriage. *I don't really care about people.*

I was told I have anxiety. PTSD. Depression. "Prolonged grief disorder." Whatever that means. I don't believe in labels. I just think I'm sad.

Mirari's room is mostly untouched. Sometimes I go in. Sometimes I read. There were letters. No names. Just thoughts. Feelings. I didn't dig to find them- he left them out in the open. Almost like he wanted them seen. Or didn't care anymore.

The house smells burnt. Not just from the milk. Like something old and tired. I laughed a little. Not because anything was funny. Just because I needed a sound.

I wore my bathrobe- still damp from last night. Stepped into the shower and stood there longer than necessary. The water helped. Hot enough to hurt a little. Hot enough to feel clean. Safe. I guess.

I stood in front of the mirror for a while afterward. Put on the black dress. The one he once said looked "classic." It feels heavier now. The fabric clings like it knows something I don't.

I buttoned it slowly. Not for effect. Just because I didn't feel like hurrying.

My hair, once something I fussed over, is pulled back into a bun now. Gray's showing. I don't care enough to hide it. Grief ages you, and everyone loves pretending they can't see it.

I dabbed a little makeup on- not because I wanted to- just because I always have. I didn't look at myself while I did it. Don't really want to see my own face these days. The lipstick was soft pink. One of the few shades he said looked good on me. I held onto that compliment like it was currency.

Heels clicked against the empty floor. Echoed more than they used to. Nothing fills the space now. No sound. No warmth.

Just air. Just the weight of missing him- daily, quietly, like brushing teeth or boiling milk I always forget about.

The graveyard was empty again. Just like yesterday. Just like the day before that. Just like every day since he left.

Wind screamed through the trees- not poetic, just loud and sharp, like it was pissed off to still exist. Somewhere near the gates, a hose hit concrete. I didn't look. I already knew the sound. The water pressure always dropped when they did it. I kept walking.

The mud clung to my heels. I didn't bother wiping it off. I didn't come here to look clean.

I found his grave without even thinking. My body walks there like it's on script now. The headstone was still dirty. His name- still scratched, faded, like the stone was trying to forget him too.

I knelt. My dress got caught in the wet earth. I didn't fix it.

He's not here to care.

The soil was soft. Not soft like comfort- soft like rot. Like it was giving in to something slowly. I looked at the headstone. The scratches were deeper now. Something about that made me feel sick. He's already gone. Did they have to erase him twice?

"I'm sorry," I said, quietly at first. Then louder. "I didn't come last week. My brain told me not to. Told me to stay away. Same as always."

I paused. Let the silence settle. Then I laughed- but there was no sound in it.

“You know me. I ruin things.”

A gust of wind dragged across the grass. I stared at the name. Half-carved. Half-vanished.

“I don’t even know what I’m doing here anymore,” I said. “You didn’t let me love you. Not really. But you left the door open just enough for me to feel like I failed.”

I blinked hard. My eyes were already burning.

“I hate that I still want your forgiveness.”

A sound. Movement. I turned. Some guard doing laps like it’s a track field. Pacing. Watching. Nothing else to do, apparently. I waved him over without looking directly at him.

He approached, boots too loud on wet ground.

“Yes, ma’am?”

I didn’t glance up. Just wiped dirt off the stone, my sleeve already damp.

“You see this?” I muttered. “I told you to keep it clean. It’s one grave. One.”

He froze a few feet away, already uncomfortable. Took off his hat like that was some kind of apology.

“I know. I’m sorry,” he said, soft, nervous. “I’m new. I’ve been trying to keep up, but it’s been stormy. I’ll clean it today. I promise.”

I stood up. My knees cracked. I ignored it.

“You don’t get to promise me anything,” I said. My voice came out flatter than I meant, but not softer. “You think you’re the only one tired? You think weather matters to the dead?”

He nodded. Eyes down.

“This is all I have left of him,” I said, and this time my throat caught the edge of something sharper. “This name. This stone. This goddamn square of land. And you let it rot like it doesn’t matter.”

He shifted again. Took a breath like he wanted to say more. Then he did.

“If I may- just one question, ma’am?”

I didn’t answer. I just turned. Crossed my arms. Tight. Like holding myself in might keep me from collapsing.

“Go on,” I said.

The wind blew hard again. This time I felt it in my teeth.

“What?”

He looked around like he was checking for witnesses. Like whatever he was about to say might get him fired or worse- pulled into something he didn’t want to be part of. He took a breath and didn’t look at me when he spoke.

He rubbed his hands together, uncomfortable. Eyes fixed on the dirt.

“There’s been talk,” he said. “Among the workers. People who come by.”

I stared. My throat tightened.

“What kind of talk?”

He hesitated. Like the words didn’t want to leave his mouth. Then they did.

“They say the grave is empty. That no one’s buried there.”

I blinked. Once.

A hollow laugh came out of me. No humor in it. Not even close.

“That’s just noise,” I said. “People who don’t know what they’re talking about. My son is here. I buried him. I watched it happen. I watched the earth cover him.”

He nodded slowly, then pointed toward the stone bench near the cemetery exit.

“There was a message there,” he said. “Scratched into it. Like it was written with a nail. Said, *“I am not dead- Mirari.”*”

I stopped breathing.

“What?” I asked.

“It was there,” he said. “Then it wasn’t. Next day it was gone.”

My hands went cold.

I took a shaky step toward the grave. My voice was quiet, but sharper now.

“That’s not possible.”

He looked straight at me then. His voice low, like he already knew the damage was done.

“Your son’s name is Mirari, right?”

I froze.

Even if he was lying, how would he know my son’s name? His headstone has no name. Not anymore. It was never engraved properly. I never fixed it. Never got around to it. No one would know unless I told them.

And I didn’t tell him.

I turned and ran toward the bench. It looked clean. Too clean. I dropped to my knees and ran my fingers across the surface. Smooth. Like nothing had ever been written. Like it was brand new.

“No. No, no-” I muttered. “He’s here. I was here. I signed the paperwork. I held the urn. Or- no. It was the casket. I stood right- right here-”

My mind felt like it was skipping. I couldn’t keep the memories straight. The world got too quiet.

The guard was still standing there, a few feet away.

“I saw it,” he repeated. “I swear. It said his name. It said he wasn’t dead.”

The silence between us thickened. The fog moved slower now. Heavier. Nothing felt grounded.

He shifted in place.

“People talk about that grave,” he said. “Every week. Strangers. Some of them ask questions. Some just stare at it and leave. I’ve only been here a month and even I know- something’s off.”

I didn't reply.

Tears had started again, but my face didn't register them. My body was moving without my consent- standing, backing away, gripping my coat like it would keep me steady.

Then the guard turned, voice quieter than before.

"So I have to leave him alone to move on, right?"

It sounded like a line he didn't come up with himself. Like something someone told him, or something he heard once in a dream.

And then he walked away.

I didn't follow.

I stayed standing in front of the empty bench. The smooth stone. The name that wasn't there. The grave that may or may not hold anything at all.

As confused as I was, how could I explain to him that he wouldn't sleep without me?

Cillian / past

Serene – that’s the word that describes my life these days. I’ve been treating myself to a pack of premium Russian cigarettes that a friend gave me a while ago, but I’ve always hesitated to smoke them and always wanted to smoke them with Mirari. Aehlla sat on the couch in front of my room, but she zoned out and was still weary of Mirari’s death. She couldn’t help it either.

It was rather everyday she came to me and sulked about it.

I sat on the edge of my bed and stared blankly at the posters on the wall. They were just there - faded and lifeless, as if they belonged to someone else. I couldn’t remember the last time music had meant something to me. The room felt colder than usual, but I didn’t know if it was just in my head or if the outside world was trying to answer the emptiness inside me. I ran my hands over the frayed edges of the comforter, I needed something grounding, something real.

Aehlla hadn't moved much since we'd returned to my room, just pulled her knees up to her chest and stared at the carpet as if all the answers were there. I understood how she felt. We had barely spoken to each other since the funeral. Maybe there was nothing left to say. I glanced over at her. In the dim light coming from the curtains, Aehlla's face was haggard and pale. She had lost weight over the past few days. Not much, but enough for me to notice. Her clothes were hanging a little looser, her skin was becoming a little more delicate, like she was slowly wasting away.

Mirari would've hated seeing her like this.

"Do you remember that time though-" Aehlla's quiet, hesitant voice broke the silence. I tilted my head to her, but she wasn't looking at me. "That time Mirari convinced us to sneak in the school library in the middle of the night to find that 'cursed' book?"

She tried to laugh crisp, but it sounded hollow, and the laugh didn't quite reach her eyes. "We ended up getting caught by the janitor. He had us mop like the entire hallway before we left haha".

A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth, but it disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. I remembered that night. Mirari had always been this asshat, always dragging us into ridiculous situations that somehow felt like the most exciting thing in the world. And now- now everything felt bleak and colorless, as if someone had rejected the saturation of life itself.

"Yes," I voiced, my voice coming out rougher than I intended. "He had a knack of making things miserable, even the silliest thing possible."

Aehlla nodded, still avoiding me. "He always knew how to make me laugh, even when I was mad."

Especially when we were angry at him. I didn't say it aloud, but the memory of those times burned into my mind. Mirari could be reckless and impulsive in his anger at times, but he had a way of calming the situation with a joke or a smile, so it was impossible to stay angry for long. And this emptiness now. The sharp sound of my cell phone broke the silence and I got up to my feet. I saw Mirari's

mother's name blurrily on the screen, I instinctively reached for it and felt a knot in my stomach. I suddenly felt guilty and nauseous as I picked up the phone, my hands crackling, nervous as I did something wrong.

"Hello?"

"Cillian?" Her voice was soft, so soft that it would break if she breathed too hard. "Did you- umm- did you come for Mirari's funeral?"

I swallowed hard and looked back at Aehlla. She was staring at me now with wide eyes, her own fear reflected on my face. "Y-Yes," I said, even though the word was stuck in my throat. "Me and Aehlla were" I nearly shed blood if it wasn't Aehlla by my side. I could hear the lump in his mom's throat.

There was a long silence on the other end, enough that I wondered if she'd just hung up. But then I heard it - her heavy, trembling breathing. When she spoke again, her voice was even softer than before, almost a whisper. "But- they say - they say there was no funeral - there was no funeral. This - this coffin was empty." "There was--nobody there."

I closed my eyes and tried to block out the words, but they stuck in me like needles. I gripped the phone tighter until my knuckles turned white. My brain formed the words, but they wouldn't come out of my mouth. "It's just a rumor," I said, but the words rang hollow in my ears too. "That's all." "It was just a rumor." My mind needed to calm down. I was hoping for some premium cigarettes.

I heard her quiet sobs over the phone, followed by the quiet click of a deadline. I stared at the phone in my hands for a long time before dropping it on the bed. I covered my head with my hands and tried to breathe, but it felt like there was not enough air in the room. I choked on myself.

"These are just rumors, right?" Aehlla's voice was barely a whisper. I looked up and she was staring at me, her eyes wide and filled with the same anxiety that was eating away at me. I nodded, but the movement seemed mechanical and forced. "We were there," I repeated, but the words felt as insubstantial as the air around us.

Aehlla's fingers reached for mine and found them.

They were cold - colder than I expected - but there was something grounding in her touch. Like the only solid thing in a world that kept blurring at the edges. Earthy, steady, undeserved.

I looked at her. Really looked. And for the first time since the funeral, the thought slid into my mind before I could stop it: *Did Mirari know?*

Did he see it?

Did he notice the way she always found a reason to sit beside me? How would her arm brush against mine just a second too long? The late-night texts. The moments we carved out just for ourselves. The kisses we never admitted to. The hangouts where he wasn't invited, or wasn't even mentioned.

Maybe he didn't know.

God, I hoped he didn't know.

But now, with Aehlla sitting here next to me, her hand locked in mine like she belonged there - that hope felt too clean. Too fake. And the guilt came crawling up, tight and alive, twisting in my stomach until I felt physically sick.

It settled in my chest like a bruise. Throbbing. It made it hard to breathe. I wanted to unthink it. I wanted to roll time backwards, to erase whatever this was before it grew teeth. But it was too late. We'd already done it. Crossed the line. And Mirari was never going to be here again to forgive or condemn us for it.

"What do you think?" Aehlla asked, voice low. Almost a whisper. "Do you think he knew?"

She wasn't looking at me. Her eyes stayed fixed on our hands- even though they were damp, even though mine was shaking slightly.

I didn't answer right away.

Because maybe he did.

And maybe the worst part was that I couldn't be sure.

I didn't know how to answer her.

And truthfully, I didn't want to.

The silence between us stretched wide- awkward, weighted, like it was trying to pull something out of me I wasn't ready to give. For a moment, I actually considered lying. Telling her he never knew. Pretending we weren't guilty. Pretending we hadn't kept something from him that he probably felt every time he looked at us.

But something stopped me. Something inside that still knew right from wrong. However late.

We both knew we'd crossed a line. And we hadn't just crossed it- we'd stood on the other side and built something there. Quietly. Cowardly.

"I don't know," I finally said, my voice low and unsteady. "Maybe- maybe I do. But it doesn't matter now, does it?"

She gripped my hand tighter. Her palm had warmed up. She leaned in, rested her head gently on my shoulder.

"No," she whispered. "I guess it doesn't matter."

But it did.

We both knew it did. Even if we didn't say it out loud, even if we never would. This- whatever this was- it meant more to both of us than we wanted to admit. More than either of us had ever planned for. And now we were sitting with the fallout. With the cost. With everything we swallowed, and everything we didn't say, sitting over our heads like a shadow.

A quiet, ugly reminder of what's gone.

Of what we ruined.

Our silence stretched again. Slower this time. Deeper.

Our breathing turned shallow, uneven. The room around us dimmed with the fading daylight. The world outside spun on, indifferent- people laughing, cars moving, lights flickering on in windows like nothing had changed.

Like we hadn't been left behind. Like we weren't still sitting here, knee-deep in the wreckage of something we'll never fully name.

But inside,

Samiksh Ghodke

Inside, everything had shifted. Quietly. Permanently.

And nothing would ever feel the same again.

“Do you still want to be together, Aehlla?”

Aehlla / past

False- A word that comes into my mind a lot nowadays, gazing at my reflection, I half-expect the girl looking back at me to stick her tongue out at me. Instead, she just looks tired, her eyes the result of a sleepless night and her face pale enough to look ghostly. Honestly, it's a little spooky.

Mirari's gone. My fault. Or maybe because of us. Or maybe I don't know?

"Congratulations, Aehlla," I mutter to myself. "You're officially a zombie now." I was tired of wallowing in self-pity, but I didn't know what else to do. My life had been so shitty that my insides were peeling like an orange.

Mirari's death. It was my fault. Or maybe it was our fault. Or maybe I don't know?

"God, this has to stop," I say to myself. "I'll talk to myself in the mirror like a character in a tragic movie. Next thing I know, I'll be crying in the rain."

As if on cue, there's a knock on the bathroom door. Cillian. Because, of course, as always, he has impeccable timing.

"Hey," he said, poking his head in as if to test how crazy I was today, "just give me a second, OK?"

"Please," I snorted, "if I start a monologue, you're legally obligated to play sad violin music."

I didn't have control over my attention starving mind, or was I well ashamed of myself, *I DON'T KNOW*.

He chuckles, as I step outside. "Good to know. I'll keep my phone on standby with a playlist of tragic music."

While the mature being, Cillian was, he was soft hearted to me.

I snort despite myself. "Yeah, yeah. We need to talk."

Well imaginable and spooky.

Cillian, personally, is a beautiful mess of contradictions. He walks around like this untouchable tough guy- always armed with a sarcastic comment, always smoking something, always pretending he doesn't feel a thing. Everything bottled up tight, like he's doing the world a favor by staying unreadable.

But under all that armor- he's a pookie. No other word fits.

He's fiercely loyal. Unexpectedly generous. The kind of person who'll insult you in public and then quietly fix your entire day behind the scenes without saying a word about it.

There's a side of him that pushes people away- ruins things before they have a chance to grow. That's the part everyone sees. But every now and then, just briefly, you catch this glimpse of something softer. Calmer. Grounded. Like there's a version of him that actually wants peace.

I don't trust it. Not completely.

But that hidden part of him? It drives me crazy. Makes me *insane*. My feelings about him are this chaotic mix of admiration and total frustration - caught

between the jagged edges of who he is on the outside and the softness he doesn't know how to show without destroying it.

His smile falters just a little, and he repositions on the edge of my bed, damn serious now. "Okay, blurt. What's on your mind? And for god's sake don't say it's another haiku".

"Oh fuck you, haiku's are timeless," I retorted, trying to deflect for just a second longer. But then I sigh. "No, it's about- us. And Mirari."

Cillian's whole face diminishes to Mirari's name. The way he looks down at the floor, and his eyes roll, makes my stomach twist. "Didn't we talk about this? It wasn't our fault."

"Wasn't it, though?" I say, the question hanging in the air. "What if he knew, huh? What if he knew about us? And that's the reason he-"

He cuts me off. "You're spiraling in delusion. We don't know what he knew. I know him Aehlla, and far off than me, you knew him better, he could've been clueless. It wasn't like Mirari was some Sherlock Holmes,? Plus why did his mom keep saying if we were there for his funeral?"

A shiver ran down my spine. "But- that's impossible. We were there. We saw the coffin. There's no way in fuck-"

Cillian's eyes were dark and unreadable. "I know. But the fact that she mentioned it so creepily, it's making me think there's something we're missing. Something we didn't see."

I raised an eyebrow. I imagined what Mirari was capable of. "Oh, Please. Mirari was always two steps ahead. The guy had this freaky way of reading people. Like he had superpowers or some shit."

Cillian frowns, running a hand through his hair. "Yeah, but, it could've been anything. He was dealing with a lot and maybe it just wasn't us. Maybe it was something else."

“Or maybe it was us,” I counter, feeling my throat tighten. I gulped my last teaspoon of saliva in my mouth. “What if all these secrets and lies pushed him over the edge? What if we were the final straw?”

“Okay, first off,” Cillian says, trying to lighten the mood with that crooked smile of his, “there were no stupid secrets. Our secrets were at least mid-tier.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re impossible!”

“Hey, someone’s got to be the funny one around here- AT LEAST AM TRYING! I AM NOT THE FUNNY KIND EITHER!” he says, leaning back on his hands like he’s trying to appear relaxed. But I can see the tension in his shoulders, the way he’s holding himself too carefully. “But seriously, Aehlla, we can’t drive ourselves crazy over this. What happened to Mirari- we might never know why he did what he did.”

I let out a long breath, my eyes stinging with the tears I’ve been holding back. “I just- I miss him, Cillian. I miss him so much, and I can’t shake the feeling that we could’ve done something, anything, to stop this.”

Cillian moves closer, putting his arm around my shoulders. “I miss him too. Every day. But we can’t go back. All we can do is move forward. Together.”

I lean into him, grateful for his warmth, even though it doesn’t take the guilt away. “Together, huh? Sounds like you’re proposing some sort of tragic, co-dependent duo. We’re like Batman and Robin, but with way more emotional baggage.”

He grins. “Exactly. But I get to be Batman. You’d totally rock the Catwoman outfit, though.”

I snort. “Thanks, but I think I’m more of a Robin type. Less sidekick, more anti-hero.”

“Deal,” he says, squeezing my shoulder. “But on one condition: no more blaming ourselves for things we can’t change. No more trying to solve mysteries that don’t have clear answers.”

“Easy for you to say,” I mutter. “You’re not the one who left Mirari. I am. I’m the one who ran off with you while he-”

Cillian cuts me off again, this time more gently. “Aehlla, stop. We both made choices. Maybe Mirari knew. Maybe he didn’t. But what we had, what we have- it wasn’t wrong. It just was. And Mirari- he had his own struggles, long before us.”

I let his words sink in, but the guilt still lingers, heavy and unshakable. “Yeah, but what if we were the final nail in the coffin, Cillian? What if everything we did, everything we didn’t do- what if that’s why he-”

“We can’t live in the what-ifs,” he says quietly. “We just- we can’t.”

I can’t think of a funny answer to that. Instead, I just lean against him and we sit in silence for a while. Outside, the world keeps spinning, unaware of the mess we’re in. We feel like we’re stuck in a loop, replaying the same scene over and over, trying to make sense of things that don’t make sense.

But maybe Cillian is right. We may never know what Mirari knew, or why he acted the way he did. Perhaps we will never find closure. And maybe - just maybe - we will have to learn to live with it.

But right now, all I can think about is how much I miss him, and how nothing will ever be the same.

And sometimes I wish a good talk was all needed to fix things between us.

Mirari's karma / present

I held a staycation in Mirari's mind for about two hours- and let me tell you, it was a trip. Lush greenery, jacuzzis in the middle of nowhere, waterfalls doing their best to wash away all the existential self-doubt. Even mine- and I'm karma, remember? That's saying something.

The power to steer free will inside a young adult's overworked body? Supreme. Almost divine. And sipping a lukewarm Coke while I watched it all? *Chef's kiss.*

Mirari's mind now is a finely-tuned engine of repetition. Habits. Routines. Every day a mirror of the last. He wakes up with surgical precision. Alarm clock screaming its lungs out. He yanks it off the nightstand like it's personally responsible for his misery. Groggy stumble to the bathroom. Stares into the mirror like he expects it to apologize for reflecting back the same tired version of himself every morning.

Breakfast? Sit by the same damn kitchen window. Same beam of sunlight slicing through the blinds. Same chipped table. Same burnt toast. Same shitty coffee. I swear, if predictability was a crime, this boy would be serving consecutive life sentences.

School? He's so predictable, even a blind psychic could clock his every move. Back of the class, always by the window. Staring at the clock like it owes him rent. Eyes glazed, counting the minutes until he can escape the educational simulation. Literature club? Present, physically. Emotionally? Vacuum-sealed. No deep connections. No one truly close. But somehow- people look up to him. Tragic.

After the whole school charade, he slinks back home, dragging himself like a ghost who forgot to haunt something. The walk home is quiet. Too quiet. I can hear his thoughts louder than the gravel under his shoes- just looping: *Why this life? Why me?* Blah blah blah.

Nights are spent in solitude, like always. Books. Old movies on repeat. That one armchair- the one that looks like it's been passed down since Moses- creaks under his weight like it's given up too. Same books he's read a hundred times. Same scenes. Same endings. I watched all of it. Respectfully, at first.

Then I snapped.

Fuck

no.

This emotionally constipated little gremlin does nothing. Zero. Zip. Nada.

"Oh look at you," I mutter, rolling my metaphorical eyes, "another groggy stumble to the bathroom like splashing cold water's gonna reset your sad little existence."

His breakfast routine? Burnt toast and death-roast coffee. The peak of his day. He lives like a glitch in a simulation. Like a rerun that nobody asked for.

But hey- he hides it well when he's not alone. His mom's a damn chef, by the way. Real talent. Real meals. Real humanity. You'd never know judging by him.

Back in school, he slumps into the backseat of the literature club like it's his throne. I watch, unimpressed. He checks the time again. How poetic.

"I see you, king of recycled thoughts," I say, watching him doze in that thrift store recliner like it's holy. Same novels. Same overplayed playlist. If I got a coin every time he sank into that damn chair, I'd have enough to buy a better storyline.

His life? A looping gif. The same old, same old. I'm here just to remind him how utterly *beige* it's all become.

And let's be honest: what a sweet deal he got, huh? All that freedom. All that charm. And Aehlla. *Aehlla*. She's talent. Art. Spice. And somehow she still entertains this lukewarm fuckboy reincarnation. Unreal.

If I wanted to, I could scribble his name off the list right now. One line. Gone.

And he wouldn't even notice.

But today? Oh, today he's trying. Mirari stands at the front like a self-appointed president of literary healing. Waiting. Nervous. But acting chill - like Kanye West spiritually delivered him confidence via express shipping.

The classroom is decorated with all this sickening cuteness - ribbons, bows, muffins, and vibes that scream *emotional damage support group*. People walk in looking like they've seen God and He didn't give them a hall pass. Bean bags. Mismatched couches. Bookshelves filled with pain and metaphors. It's basically IKEA therapy for the chronically overstimulated.

And yet- he fits in.

They gather every week to overanalyze classic literature and argue whether pizza should be its own food group. People come to translate their breakdowns into poetic stanzas and call it art. It's sad. It's sweet. It works.

Does Mirari care?

Fuck no again.

But he *likes* the peace. The quiet companionship of broken people trying to sound profound. He gets it. He doesn't say it, but he gets it.

He leans on the desk like it's made for him. "Alright, progress reports. Publication updates? Evelyn will skin me alive."

The others mumble, shuffle, offer excuses with creative flair.

"I've got a first draft- just fixing the edits."

"I'm stuck on the ending. It's- off."

Mirari leans forward. Calm now. That rare softness sneaking in.

"Endings are hard," he says. "They're not just an ending- they're the last impression. It's okay to sit with it, just don't freeze. Sometimes the story keeps talking after it's over."

Yeah. That's me. He got that from me. He doesn't know it, but that was all me.

He smiles slightly, but his eyes are still on the door.

Waiting.

And then- there she is.

Aehlla steps in and the whole room exhales. She doesn't walk in. She *arrives*. Like the world tilted slightly to make space for her. Mascara like war paint, tote bag swinging, and a kind of quiet electricity in her step that says *she knows*. Like she belongs here. Like she's always belonged here.

She scans the room and her eyes lock with his.

And they *both freeze*.

Something charges the space between them- not new, but resurfacing. Something old. Something magnetic. He feels it. So does she. That sharp edge between memory and moment.

She walks in like a question mark looking for its sentence.

And suddenly, everything else in the room stops mattering.

“Aehlla” Mirari greeted her, his voice softer than before, sidelining a playful undertone. “You’ve finally decided to bless us with your presence huh?”

Aehlla grinned and leaned against the doorframe with a mischievous glint in her eye. “Oh, don’t act like you haven’t counted all the minutes until I got here.”

The tension was great but she was in awe. I could literally see that. Mirari shook his head with a chuckle. “Me? Want me to count the minutes? Please. I’m too busy as an overworked president to keep track of time. Plus, I’ve already flunked three subjects because of this load of twat.”

Aehlla smiled, trembling on the sidelines, “I wouldn’t miss it for the world, or at least not on purpose. The universe has a funny way of throwing obstacles at you when you’re already late.”

Mirari laughed. “Aha, the universe. With his impeccable timing every time. Now, let’s get started. And I’ll accept responsibility if the universe attempts anything else.”

Laughing, Aehlla felt a bit more liberated. “Whoa, the universe is in danger. That’s something bold for a Literature club President”. She gave a nod.

“Well, we’ll have to spice things up somehow,” Mirari teased, staring at her intently. Observing her fingers anxiously tinkering with the edge of her purse, he couldn’t help but grin. Do you truly wish to participate? It’s far less scary than the universe itself, I assure you.”

After a moment of hesitation, she nodded, speaking in a hushed tone. “Yeah-yeah, I believe so. However, be careful that I can read more than write.”

“And what would be your entry submission?” he asks humbly, knowing that this Aehlla would probably have the same skill set he inherited from his Aehlla.

She handed him a piece of paper like his Aehlla did. His hands trembled to begin with, took the paper with both of his hands, especially using his fingertips, for he knew the value Aehlla used to give in these papers.

“Should I-”

"Yah, you can read it out to them" she gasped.

*the day my eyes laid on yours
god, i got more than what i had wished for
to take mine and give what he deserved
his hand in mine to realize what i truly loved.
he spoke silently like a dandelion flew
i begged to see him smile again like a morning dew
is this what love feels like, as they say?
he was something more beautiful in her own way.
i felt i didn't belong in this world,
for me, he came and created a new one
contemplating the thoughts that i should have denied
i was blessed in his sight, my love was glorified.*

A breath of fresh air. This ominous feeling that this was written for me, was soaring.

"Is it bad though?" She remarks looking at all those faces truly staring as if it was her to write this.

"It's okay," Mirari said, leaning against the desk, playing it all cool. "I just have to be more careful about you and make sure you don't slack off."

Her eyes flickered with amusement. "Oh? You think I'm lazy?"

"Let's just say you appear like somebody who appreciates a challenge, as long as it doesn't require as much exertion."

Aehlla laughed, finally relaxing a little. "You saw right through me, didn't you?"

"Not yet," Mirari admitted, "but I want to work on it."

Their eyes met again, and for a second- just a second- it felt like the entire room blurred out. Like time had the decency to pause, just long enough for something silent to pass between them. Something that didn't need words. Something felt, not explained.

But here's the thing- some things are better *not* understood.

And here I am- his karma- watching this scene play out like a slow-motion drama, and all I can think is: *Look at this idiot.*

He doesn't think things through. Never has. And when it comes to girls? Don't even get me started. He still thinks holding a door open and remembering birthdays is the peak of emotional intelligence.

And yet- somehow- she's looking at him like he might matter.

To be fair, for a first meeting, it's not *awful*. I'll give them that. He's yapping his way through the anxiety like a wind-up toy with trust issues. He's jittery. Sweaty. Probably one misstep away from a panic-induced organ failure. Cute.

You know that kind of heart-cramp you get when adrenaline decides to fistfight your whole nervous system? Yeah, that's him right now.

And she's still standing there. Calm. Composed. The eye of his personal hurricane.

Impressive.

But it's only the beginning. And I've seen this pattern before.

All I can say is- They complete each other's silences.

Evelyn / present

I stepped in the house, barely hearing the door shut behind me as Aehlla's voice filled my ear through my phone.

"I'm in! Oh my god! I can't believe it, Evelyn- he actually picked me for the club!" she fucking squealed in my ear. I could literally hear her jump. Her contagious excitement made me drop my bag by the door. I couldn't help but smile. Her words were breathless which made me realize she didn't really do it just to make friends.

"That's so amazing, I knew you had it in you babygirl!" Why would I even say that? Cecilia was taking over me or what? Yuck. My broad grin with which I responded stretched across my face. I felt the pulse of adrenaline in her veins all through, a mix of pride and anticipation of what was ahead for this girl. The club was stronger now, and with Aehlla now in, I had some hope they would achieve something.

I had just taken off my shoes when I heard my mother's voice cut through the quiet - calm, authoritative, and perfectly measured. The kind of tone only a seasoned surgeon *and* a therapist could pull off without blinking.

"Shear injury to the corpus callosum- you see here?"

Her voice came from the dining room, bent over a thick patient file like she'd just walked out of surgery, her surgical cap still clinging to her head like it was part of her skull.

The room smelled faintly of antiseptic. Classic. Medical journals stacked on one end of the table, a half-empty coffee mug next to her laptop. She muttered under her breath as she scrolled through the scans.

"Subacute ischemic stroke, revascularization needed-"

Then louder: "He's a candidate for carotid endarterectomy. Look at the narrowing here."

I heard her speaking to the patient, or maybe to another surgeon on the line. "That's why you're disoriented. We'll need to monitor your intracranial pressure over the next 48 hours. If the hematoma persists, we'll likely need to move to craniotomy."

She paused mid-sentence just long enough to glance at me - and without missing a beat, pointed sharply at me. That universal mom gesture for: *shut up, don't even breathe too loud.*

I bit my lip, backing out quietly, phone still in hand. I looked down at my screen. Aehlla.

"Humph- I've got to go," I whispered. "But we'll celebrate soon, okay?"

"Yaya, for sure!" she chirped, and hung up.

I tucked the phone into my pocket and stepped into the living room properly.

Mom was still in go-mode, scrolling through a fresh set of brain scans, phone on speaker. "Yah, and do make sure we've scheduled the follow-up MRI," she said, her tone sharp but steady. She glanced up at me briefly- and even mid-

sentence about someone else's skull- she managed to toss me the faintest smile. Like a reflex. Like muscle memory.

Then, click. The call ended. She leaned back in her chair, swung her hair over her shoulder, and shifted gears with surgical precision.

From Dr. Blake, world-class neurosurgeon, to just Mom.

"Hi honey," she said, voice warm now. "How was school?"

"Oh the usual chaos" I replied tossing my bag around on the chair with it eventually falling. "But, get this- Aehlla made it to the literature club! Oh my god! She's over the moon!"

"Ah the literature club- are you still in contact with them? Is that where your heart and soul resides these days?" my mother obnoxiously teased, quite poetic by the way, her lips quivering into a half smile. "Who's this Aehlla though? Nevermind. That's great news. You must be thrilled." That was uninteresting sounding.

Ouch.

"I am," I said, but then my smile faltered.

"There's this festival of poems coming soon at the Ryan's" I give up to the thought that we are definitely going to tank in the competition, but as the history has proven- no the history didn't prove shit, we've always lost to Ryan's university.

Five universities were participating, gaining extra merit points for the tidiness, the language and the delivery part extraordinarily.

"We have to participate and, you know-" I take in a pause, "win".

"No pressure, am I right?" I laughed, though there was a tightness to it.

Mom looked at me for a long moment, setting down the medical file and folding her hands on top of it. "Winning isn't everything, Evelyn." Oh jeez.

“Easy for you to say, Ms. I-saved-two-lives-before-lunch,” I shot back playfully and exaggerated the word play right there, but there was a tinge of irritation underneath the humor.

“I’m serious, Mom. This is huge, like every year. If we don’t do well, it’s going to reflect badly on the whole club- and on me.”

“Oh- that reminds me, I still have your first poem written on my notes app” she clicks her phone frantically, and honestly even I forgot what I had first written in my life.

She chuckles and reads, with a fresh glaze in her eyes,

*“i swear i know when you’re quiet
when your heart goes all silent
when the sun tries to shine brightly than the streetlight you cry under
loving you was maybe wrong
should’ve loved your soul more than i wanted you to be perfect
the lies you kept, the insecurities with a smile
I swear I know.”*

Ah, yes, the poem that was rejected in the intra school poetry competition or some trash. A word about it gives me trauma. I lost. But Rari won. Deserved, he was flawless. Oh come on, we were in 9th grade.

“Is it worrying you though?” My mom read to me. “Like I know I will do my best, just worried about others” My ego spoke for itself.

“Genuinely, though” my mom said, “I could bet on you guys winning. If you do, I promise to take you guys out for lunch.”

“Deal,” Evelyn said, finally allowing herself a genuine smile as she stood up.

Mirari's karma / present

Shunted- were my doubts as I tiptoed my way behind my karma on the floor filled with glasslike mirror water. The ripples made their way through everywhere without noise. He faced up to an enormous theater-like screen made by my eyes, through my perception, playing our meet cue on repeat, yet he knew what this place became after my conversation with Aehlla. A smile lurked on his face as if he had accomplished what he wanted.

“You melted huh?” he bursts out.

“I didn’t want to”

“Did you say something?”

“It was just-”

“Didn’t you want her to like you back, appreciate your efforts, and to be fair, you were flirting there too, weren’t you?”

I stood there with my head down and still processing what had I done to deserve this? My past Aehlla traumatized my life, even my mom and dad gave no fuck about me, and now this cunt wanted me to talk to Aehlla with the same poise I had as before.

Rude.

“Yes, I am rude” he stops my thinking. “Sorry for being rude. Sorry to expect something from you.”

He stepped away, swaying his legs in the water.

“I believed you were the blessed one. The one who talks to his karma. Maybe I talk to you a lot, you’re used to it.”

“Are you guilt-tripping me?”

“Haven’t I done it so many times and you’re dumb enough to notice it right now?”

He turned his head slowly in my direction, staring completely blank, headed towards me.

“What’s wrong with you?” I shutter.

He curled a disappointed look that made me look down. The ripples stopped. He stopped walking.

“WHAT’S WRONG WITH YOU AND YOUR MENTAL ILLNESS?! WE WANTED THE SAME THING RIGHT? OH NO- NO, AS FAR AS I REMEMBER YOU WANTED TO DIE RIGHT?!” He commands authoritatively. He yells. He was in control. But I did not want to be led by him. Even though he’s me.

“I WAS SHAKING WHEN I TALKED TO HER!”

I shriek at him. My eyes matched the water.

Oh fuck. The water, the waves, were my tears.

“Oh did you?” he came forward leaving 2 steps in between us.

“I AM STILL SKEPTICAL OF THIS AND HER AND YOU!” The turmoil made me vulnerable. It made me cry. The water raised gradually as I vented.

“Why don't you try dying again Mirari? Maybe this time I won't save you. Maybe this time, she will save you”. My heart raced but he just stood there smiling, like he knew what was going to happen and what I had to do. He was so close I felt like kissing him. He smelled like flowers.

The water reached my knees.

He subtly smiled with his eyes and said, “Don't let yourself drown in your own tears.”

Aehlla/ past

Expensive- “Shush! I told you not to use that word in public!” Mirari hissed in my ear, bending over. I held up a blue beanie of a ridiculous 200 shacks, which made me go haywire.

“It’s just 200, relax”.

The crisp autumn air filled my lungs with a refreshing chill as we strolled past a small café, the sweet aroma of pastries wafting out to greet us. My eyes brightened at the sight of a shop adorned with colorful scarves in the window.

“Look at that one!” I exclaimed, pointing excitedly at a vibrant red scarf. “It would totally match your coat.”

Mirari chuckled, shaking his head. “You know I’m not great with colors. I’d probably end up looking like a walking traffic light! Please don’t ruin this prom for me.”

As we stepped into the cozy shop, warmth enveloped us, contrasting sharply with the cool breeze outside. Mirari began browsing through the racks while I admired him- his playful spirit and easy laughter made me smile.

“Have you finished that history project yet?” I asked, my fingers sifting through hats on a nearby shelf.

“Not even close,” he admitted, biting his lip in frustration. “I keep getting distracted. Plus, Germany just started the world war. I wonder who will win,” he joked, draping some scarves around his neck.

I nodded sympathetically, but my mind drifted as I watched him. There was something about this moment- the way he looked so carefree yet vulnerable- that sent a jolt of anxiety through me. What if this was all temporary? What if I could lose him? The thought settled in my chest like a heavy stone, and I couldn’t shake it off.

“Are you okay?” he asked, breaking into my thoughts.

“Ye-YES,” I replied with a smile that felt forced. But inside, I felt a storm brewing. Why wasn’t I feeling it? Why did everything seem so fragile?

He moved closer to the cashier, holding me tight as he brought the scarf to the counter. “We need this,” he said confidently.

The shopkeeper chuckled softly, adjusting her glasses. “Ah, yes! This scarf is indeed one of my finest pieces. Priced at 100 for its quality.”

I leaned in slightly, my analytical mind already working on a strategy. “That’s quite a hefty price for just a scarf,” I said smoothly. “I’ve seen similar ones for much less around here.”

Mirari shot me a glance, his expression shifting slightly as if unsure whether to follow my lead or stick to his instincts.

The shopkeeper raised an eyebrow but maintained her friendly demeanor. “Quality comes at a price, my dear. This is handmade from the finest materials.”

Mirari flashed me that charming smile and leaned closer as if sharing a secret. "But we're just two students trying to make ends meet. How about 50?"

The shopkeeper laughed lightly and shook her head. "I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I can't go that low. How about 90?"

I exchanged a knowing glance with Mirari; we had anticipated this move. "How about we meet halfway at 70?" I confidently suggested. "We'd be happy to promote your shop among our friends if we love the scarf."

The girl's demeanor shifted slightly; it felt like disrespect flowed through her gaze as if we had stooped low by negotiating in such an elegant shop.

"You know what babe," Mirari startled me, "just give the 100." My brain lagged as his words hung in the air. "I mean she has great negotiating skills though, plus she is beautiful."

I joined in hesitantly, "Ya- yes! Such an elegant shop deserves to be well treated." But even as I spoke, my heart sank deeper into that unsettling place where thoughts of leaving him began to swirl- a nagging whisper in the back of my mind that wouldn't quiet down.

What if stepping away was easier? What if distancing myself from this relationship would save us both from future heartache? The idea crept in like an unwelcome guest at a party- persistent and uncomfortable.

The shopkeeper had an expression on her face screaming 'Bitch please, I have richer customers than you.'

"Guess it's not our day," Mirari said and stepped back from the counter, leaving the scarf behind.

Just then, we heard the chime of bells tinkling as someone entered the shop.

"You know what? Fine- " she spoke up with disappointment. We both turned around, anticipation tightening my stomach. "Let's do it for 60."

"Thank you so much!" Mirari exclaimed as we left the store, his excitement palpable.

“You know I had no problem giving the 100,” he whispered as we stepped back into the brisk air.

I took a deep breath from this bullshit and felt that familiar anxiety creeping back in again- the thoughts that had been gnawing at me like an insistent itch: What if leaving was easier? What if it was better for both of us?

“You are going to be so fucked if you keep letting people control you, Mirari,” I snapped, not even thinking before the words flew out. “Do you want them to fuck you around with no condoms on? *Is that what you want?*”

He blinked. Looked away. And after what felt like a hundred lifetimes, he said quietly,

“I guess not.”

I scoffed. “What the *fuck* were you thinking, huh?”

He shrugged. Then they looked at me with those goddamn eyes- the ones that usually made my heart twist in all the wrong ways- but this time, they felt-heavy. Like he was holding something behind them that he didn’t want to say out loud.

“I was just thinking,” he muttered, “about how hard it is to balance everything.”

And there it was again- that sinking weight, that lead blanket of uncertainty pressing into my ribs.

What if this was just another thing he couldn’t hold onto? What if I was just one more fragile ball in the circus act he called his life?

Maybe I should step back, I thought. Maybe I should just let him figure it out alone.

We were just walking. Not talking much, just kind of- there. Leaves were everywhere, falling like they were trying too hard to be poetic, and he said something- I didn’t even really catch it- but I laughed anyway. Just to fill the space, I think. And while we walked, I kept trying not to think about it, but obviously, I was. I wanted to hold onto it- whatever this was. Him, the quiet,

the way it didn't feel wrong yet. *But this thought kept coming back, annoying as hell, just looping: what happens after prom? Like actually. What happens when the lights are off and real life turns back on and we're not pretending things are simple anymore? I hate that a part of me thinks maybe it's better to let go before it gets harder.* Before he stops looking at me the way he does now. And still- when he looked at me right then, everything in my head just went still. Not peaceful. Just still enough to keep pretending for a little longer.

But for now, all that mattered was him beside me and how we navigated this chaotic world together- even if it meant facing those darker thoughts alone within myself for just a little while longer. Yet deep down, I knew those thoughts wouldn't easily fade away; they were becoming part of me- a constant reminder of how fragile everything felt between us.

He adjusted his sunglasses, merely no sun in the sky, looked at the scarf and muttered,

“Good job honey”.

More doubtful as I had ever been, I answered, “Thank you honey”.

Mirari / past

Petrichor- A smell for the driest soil to have the bliss of the first rain, creating a rhythmic symphony that matched the chaos outside. I saw the drops drip from the shelter of Aehlla's room while I slowly sip my hot chocolate her mom made.

'The first rain of the season' I dive in thinking, looking at people crossing the roads, the cars honking, children playing. "Are you done?! Oh my god I've been staring outside for 12 minutes".

"Just don't-" she grunts, "let me just dress up properly for fucks sake".

The window was open with a cold breeze cooling my drink. I couldn't help but steal glances at Aehlla as she rummaged through her closet, her silhouette framed by the soft glow of the lamp. She was taking forever, and I almost lost my mind.

And then she walked in. For a second, I forgot how to breathe. The dress she was wearing moved like it wasn't really part of this world- soft, light, catching bits of light like it had a mind of its own. I don't even know how long I stared, probably too long. It hugged her waist just right, then drifted out around her legs like it had nowhere else to be. There was this lace on her shoulders- delicate, barely there- and her hair, god, her hair just fell in these loose waves like she'd stepped out of a dream and didn't know it. My heart was doing something I couldn't explain- fluttering, racing, trying to catch up with whatever this feeling was.

"Wow", I whispered under my breath, though I knew she couldn't hear me over the sound of the thunder rumbling outside. She turned to face me now, a hint of uncertainty in her eyes.

"Do I look- okay?" she asked, biting her lip.

Words failed me. "Okay? You look-" How could I express what I felt? The sight was breathtaking.

The mantra in my mind churred- *She's beautiful. She's perfect.* The rain drummed louder against the window as if echoing my thoughts. Each drop felt like a heartbeat, amplifying my admiration for her.

I wanted to tell her how stunning she looked, but instead all I could do was watch as she adjusted her hair and practiced a smile in the mirror.

"Seriously, are you done?" I asked again, this time with a teasing edge. Instead, though, my heart raced with unspoken words.

She turned back, hands on her hips, a playful smirk dancing on her lips. "You know, if you keep staring like that, I might start to think that you actually like me."

She laughs.

"Like you? You could've just worn a potato sack and still looked better than half of the people there."

She rolled her eyes dramatically. “Oh wow, that compliment made my ovaries burst! Next time I’ll show up in a burlap sack and see how that goes over.”

“Honestly I’d pay to see that”, I teased leaning against the wall, crossing my arms as I admired her. “But again, these creeps will be too busy fending off all the guys who’d be lining up to ask you out- and you better say no- you’re mine.”

“Uhm, ya- yah” she stuttered and lost track of her words.

“You know how it is- everyone loves a girl in white” I sustain the conversation.

“Yah, right-” she scoffed, tossing her hair over her shoulder with a confidence that made my heart flutter. “I’d probably just trip over my own feet and ruin the whole look.”

“Not a chance,” I replied, stepping closer. “You could trip and fall in a puddle, you’d still look like a goddess. It’s infuriating, really.”

“Huh, say that again” her eyebrows raised, pretending to be offended. “You’re really laying it on thick today, aren’t you?”

“Just calling it like I see it,” I said with a grin. “Besides, if I don’t hype you up, who will? My gorgeous little munchkin.”

She paused for a moment and a wave of realisation hit me of how cringe I was. Her expression softened.

I felt my cheeks heating up. “AYO- DON’T LET THIS GO IN YOUR HEAD!”

“Oh, please” she laughed, twirling around in her gown like a little girl playing dress up. “I’m already imagining myself on a cover page in a magazine!”

Okay, I am not the only one who’s cringe here.

She stepped closer again. The teasing glint in her eyes was replaced with something softer. “You know what? You’re not so bad yourself when you’re not busy being an idiot.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment” my heart pounded as she lingered near me.

“Good” she said softly, biting her lip again as she glanced down at her gown.

“Now please can we get going before I start second-guessing this whole outfit?”

“Only if you promise me to swirl you around and get a peck of a kiss on the dance floor” I said with mock seriousness.

“With everyone looking at us?”

“With everyone looking at us.”

“Deal” she said with a grin that lit up the room. As we headed toward the door together, the rain continued to fall outside- the sky darkened ominously, swirling clouds gathering like a foreboding cloak above me.

‘FUCK’ my mind deafens me with a crack of thunder erupting from behind. Shit my spine shuddered involuntarily. That sound reverberated through my chest.

I don’t believe in omens though, but this made me change my mind.

As calm as Aehlla walked out, I felt but this is only the beginning.

She made me wanna smile.

Aehlla/ past

Guilt- A word rising more and more, for the thought of having to cope up with Mirari, my pressure boiling walking in heels in this white gown shining as pearls on my body. The gym was literally transformed into a fairytale realm, a dazzling spectacle of twinkling lights and some vibrant colours. As I stood at the edge of the dance floor, the air was thick with hot breaths and scents of fresh flowers.

Streamers cascaded from the ceiling like waterfalls, and paper lanterns floated above us, casting a warm glow over everything. Tables adorned with shimmering tablecloths were scattered around, each centerpiece a miniature masterpiece of glittering stars and soft candles.

‘Night under the Stars’ theme was a little bit of crap maneuvering, but it felt surreal, enchanting, and soon for me to get bored.

“Do you realise this party is a bum?” I cry. I felt every eye glazing at us, most possibly the prom king, *oh Lord please let it be*, and prom queen. Their eyes had a bit of hesitation, questions. Their brows would go up, not in a happy manner.

“You wanna go get ice cream then?” Mirari jokes, a sly smile slithered over his face. “Better yet we get to see Halley’s comet together.”

He loved ice cream. I pushed him aside jokingly, hanging loose from the tight arm grip I had on him.

But amidst the enchantment, I felt utterly alone. “WHERE ARE YOU GOING?!” I shrieked, Mirari untangled my hand, and drifted away as his friends called him for a drink. To be honest he doesn’t drink. Plus who allowed drinks at prom? And I could see Kyan sobbing his heart and throat out, possibly the denial of going to the prom with him, I wondered. Or maybe she stood him up.

As Mirari glanced over at Kyan, who was slumped in a corner, tears streaming down his face, he felt a surge of frustration.

“Don’t tell me” I snapped.

“I can’t just ignore him,” he snapped back at me, who was trying to pull him back into the dance floor. “He looks like he’s about to lose it, and I’m not going to leave him hanging!” I crossed my arms, my voice sharp. “And what about me? We came here together, and now you’re just going to ditch me, for him? Do I even matter?” Mirari shot back, “It’s not about you! He looks devastated.” The tension hung in the air as I glared at him with my palpable frustration. “Fine. Go save your precious friend! Just don’t expect me to wait around like some backup plan!”

“I promise I’ll be back in no time- I swear-” with that, Mirari turned on his heel, storming off to Kyan, leaving me hopeless on the floor.

I had always felt a deep sense of responsibility to maintain a perfect image in my relationship with Mirari. He was everything anyone could want- loyal, charming, and supportive.

Didn't he care much about leaving me alone swaying away tonight? This night I dreamed about for weeks?

Why was he so caring?

My heart sank as I watched couples twirling on the dance floor, laughter ringing out like music. And now Mirari was nowhere to be seen. He had been so preoccupied with his friends lately- his family looming over him like a dark cloud- that I felt like a ghost in my own life. *But this pressure of making him a part of me was messed up.*

I often worried about living up to the expectations that came with being with someone so admirable. The fear of disappointing him or not being enough weighed heavily on my shoulders.

As I stood there, my heart heavy with longing and uncertainty, Cillian appeared behind me like a burst of sunshine. "Aye, Aehlla! Why are you sulking in the corner? This is a prom, not a funeral! But you surely look like a dead body" he teased, his eyes sparkling with mischief. His carefree spirit contrasted sharply with the seriousness that had begun to define my relationship with Mirari. He wore a goofy grin that made my heart flutter despite my worries.

The fear of disappointing Mirari gnawed at me, whispering doubts that made me question if I was enough. This killed me, even though I wanted none of this to happen.

I kept my puffy gown aside to talk, I couldn't help but laugh at his silliness. "I'm not sulking! Just- thinking," I replied, trying to sound casual while my heart raced at his presence.

"Thinking about what? That's boring! Let's dance!" Cillian grabbed my hand and pulled me onto the dance floor, where the music pulsed like a heartbeat. The moment we stepped into the crowd, I felt alive again. His energy was infectious. He didn't even flinch asking who my date was. Idiot.

"Wait, who have you come here with?" there it was. His hands already reached my waist.

“Umm- Mirari- like he asked me for prom, not me, but he was so adamant and shit like I couldn’t-” okay there was seriously something wrong with me. My arms shook like they belonged to someone else, like something inside me was trying to claw its way out, my heart beating like Mike Tyson wanted to drink my blood. I wasn’t so panicky before anyone, and this was just Cillian. *My classmate Cillian.*

“So would he mind if we dance a bit?” he again asks.

Such weird questions, so politely desperate.

“I mean, we could sway a little I mean”.

Ugh what am I doing?

And for a moment, I forgot about everything. Expectations, the pressures, and even Mirari.

As we danced together, Cillian spun me around with enthusiasm that I couldn’t help but giggle. He made silly faces and cracked jokes between spins, his laughter ringing out above the music. “You know,” he said as he twirled me again, “if you keep looking so serious, you might scare all the cute guys away!”

I rolled my eyes playfully but couldn’t suppress my smile. “And what about you? Aren’t you worried about scaring someone off? Plus who’s your prom date?”

“Me? Never! I’m too charming for that,” he replied dramatically, puffing out his chest as if he were some kind of prince. “I just came here to eat, there’s no one at home to make me dinner, duh.”

We slowly slid to the corner of the hall, beside the food counter, couples stampeding the floor demanding their favourite songs to dance on. Crowd gathered like sheep pushing us aside.

In that moment of spontaneity- a playful gesture that quickly escalated- I leaned in closer to him as we danced. The world around us blurred; it was just us in our little bubble of laughter and joy.

Without thinking much about it- caught up in the thrill- I kissed him. I could feel his lips on mine as I inhaled a ton of air while I kissed. It was quick and unexpected; our lips brushed together softly before I pulled back in shock at what I'd just done.

Oh fuck. OH FUCK.

Time seemed to freeze as I processed what had just happened. Cillian's eyes widened in surprise before they sparkled with delight. "Gosh! That was- very unexpected!" he exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear.

I felt an exhilarating rush mixed with confusion and guilt swirling inside me like a storm. It was thrilling and liberating- an escape from my worries- but it also felt wrong. My heart raced not just from excitement but from regret as well; *how could I have crossed that line?* The kiss awakened feelings I didn't fully understand- an attraction simmering beneath the surface overshadowed by my loyalty to Mirari.

As Cillian continued to beam at me, I felt torn between two worlds: the stability of my relationship with Mirari and this new thrill that Cillian offered- a carefree adventure without expectations or responsibilities weighing down on me. But even as joy bubbled within me from this impulsive act, guilt crept in like shadows at dusk.

"What have I done?" I thought frantically as laughter echoed around us.

Suddenly aware of how much I valued my relationship with Mirari- the boy who had always been there for me- I felt sick to my stomach. The thrill faded quickly as reality crashed back down on me; I had crossed a line I never intended to breach. Cillian's playful banter faded into background noise as regret washed over me like cold water.

"Hey, Aeblla, it's okay-" he stammered.

"We can forget about it-" he opined.

"I just wanted to taste the shade of your lipstick".

“I need to go,” I whispered almost instinctively before slipping away from Cillian’s grasp. “This is my fault, not yours”. I dashed. I left everything and him and dashed.

As I made my way through the crowd back toward where Mirari stood talking to some friends, panic set in, quite anxious.

What would he think? Would he know something had changed? My heart pounded painfully against my ribcage; each step felt heavier than the last as guilt twisted inside me like a knife.

Mirari looked up just as I approached him; his smile lit up his face like sunshine breaking through clouds. “Achlla! There you are, I wasn’t looking for you, but there you are!” he said genuinely, smiling a whole lot better, pulling me into an embrace that made everything feel right again-for just a moment. Or was it just me exaggerating everything now?

“Is she your prom date?” one of his friends started off. *WHY DOES EVERYONE HAVE TO STEP ON MY WOUNDS RIGHT NOW?*

“Bet” Mirari said fist bumping him. Cringe.

But then it hit me- the kiss with Cillian lingered on my lips like an uninvited guest at a party; no matter how much I wanted to push it away, it wouldn’t leave me alone. The taste did not wither away. As hard as I tried. As Mirari held me close, warmth radiating from him filled me with comfort yet also reminded me of what I had jeopardized.

“Hey,” he said softly after pulling back slightly to look into my eyes, bending slightly over. “You okay? You seem off.”

My face masked my true emotions, hideous, but it also wanted to enrich itself with a soft glow to remark this is exactly what I wanted.

Mirari nodded but didn’t seem persuaded; the worry in his eyes made my heart hurt even more. He deserved better than this confusion swirling within me- better than someone who kissed another guy at prom while he stressed over friends and family and schoolwork.

The music swelled around us again- a romantic ballad filling the air- and for a fleeting moment, everything else faded away except for us standing there together beneath those twinkling lights. But even in this beautiful moment shared between us- a moment that should have been perfect- I couldn't shake off the weight of what had transpired just moments before.

As we began to sway gently together under the stars created by glowing fairy lights above us, tears pricked at my eyes despite my best efforts to hold them back. How could something so innocent turn into such chaos? How could one kiss unravel everything?

"I'm sorry," I whispered under my breath as guilt washed over me once more.

Mirari leaned closer, "did you say something?" brushing his thumb across my cheek gently- a gesture filled with love that only deepened my regret further still because now more than ever did I realize how much he meant to me.

Lost in this whirlwind of emotions, I felt myself fading out in my head again; drifting between two worlds where nothing seemed clear anymore. "Are you even listening to me?" he teased, playfully nudging me with his shoulder. His eyes sparkled with mischief as he caught me staring outside, lost in thought. "Umm- I am just thinking about the comet," I admit, trying to sheepishly grin across my face.

In that moment beneath those stars surrounded by laughter and joy while holding onto someone who cared deeply for me- I knew deep down that I needed to confront these feelings head-on before they consumed me entirely; before they turned this magical night into something far less enchanting than it shou-

"OH THERE I SEE IT!" a boy exclaimed. I hate him. He interrupted me. I see him jump off the window in the garden.

Mirari grabbed my hand, pulling me toward the exit. The moment we stepped outside, the cool night air enveloped us like a refreshing blanket consoling my head a little better. It sharply contrasted with the warmth of the crowded gym. The sky above was a deep indigo, dotted with stars that seemed to twinkle

twinkle with anticipation. As we looked up, Mirari spotted a faint glow on the horizon.

I gasped, my eyes widened as I took in the sight. Humongous. Halley's streaked across the sky like a celestial firework, its luminous tail trailing behind it like a shimmering ribbon of light. The comet was pulsed with life, its bright core surrounded by halo of gas and dust that glimmered in hues of blues and white.

"Look at that trail, it's gorgeous!" A familiar voice shook my head. I tilt my head slightly and snoop in to see Cillian standing beside me yet far away in the distance, admiring the sky, his voice filled with awe.

I held onto Mirari's arm reassuring myself, I was his.

The comet's tail stretched across the sky, a magnificent arc that seemed to connect the earth to the heavens.

Mirari nodded to Cillian's reaction, peeping from where his voice came from and the breathtaking spectacle above us. "It's incredible how something so far away can feel so close," he said softly, I could hear his heart thumping because I was so close to him, not just from the sight but from being there with him.

Abruptly, a group of students rushed past us, their laughter echoing into the night as they scrambled to find a better view. Mirari felt a pang of annoyance as they jostled us to a side. "AYO, WATCH OUT!" he called out, but his words got lost into the crowd.

I giggled. "Let's go somewhere quieter, it's actually suffocating me here" I tell him. The honest truth was I wanted to get away from Cillian, nowhere near his sighting or voices. I tugged at his hand again, leading him away from the throng.

We headed to the top of the school knowing this violet and indigo sky won't leave its legacy so soon. The place was adorned with woods, passing ponds with tadpoles croaking in the night and wet logs. I had engulfed a large amount of moist air.

Once we reached the woods, it was quieter; only the sound of rustling leaves accompanied our breaths as we gazed up at Halley's Comet soaring across the

sky. The comet's brilliance illuminated our faces as I stood side by side, lost in wonder.

"Can you believe we're witnessing this together?" he asked softly, his eyes lost in the comet's glow.

He pauses for a bit- gets his hands in his coat- making me wonder if he has a gun inside. "I almost forgot to give you this- I thought it would be better if I gave you after our dance, but this place is more to it".

I take the piece of paper he hands out to me saying, read it when you go home. Hell no. I hate curiosity. I opened it and swirled upside down to read-

*i would call the moon if i could
to define beauty as it should
the real magic that flows so good
the aura that possessed me as it would.
i would call the moon if i could
to tell its prettyneess is defined by the nights wood
to share my dreams as i know i should
her silver glow makes my world feel good.
i would call the moon if i could
to whisper about you as always i would
that her dreams are surreal and often misunderstood
for in her presence why are all my worries shooed
a moment of peace for my heart, for with her the world is not so crood.*

I dove right into the pool of grief straight in my heart. The water that had poison filled which I did not even dare to open the gates to. I halted for my breathing to settle.

I had cheated on him.

I look at him deep in awe.

"Umm this is my very first poem I wrote for you yesterday- because like you love poems so much so I thought-"

“It’s ridiculously b-beautiful” I stammer. I did not know what to say. “The moon is you by the way” he clarified, “in case you don’t know what that means” he says pointing at the paper.

“Yes-yes, I get that”. I smirk, still looking down. I could not look back into his eyes.

Cillian / past

Deja poo- a word I kept in case, you know shit happens again.

I kept quiet that night, knowing she was someone else's date. High hopes huh, Cillian. I crept steadily through her small front poached garden with tulips too, bonsai's too, sunlight scorching my skin.

'Why is it hot today?' I think, pampering my forehead to not look ugly in this time of crisis. I creepily crept in anxiety to ring the doorbell, my hands sweaty as ever.

"Oh hello!" her mom popped up like magic. "Food delivery?"

"Oh- I am Aehlla's friend" I hesitated. She is almost identical to Aehlla. Maybe just a little more wrinkles to add through.

"She wasn't expecting- She didn't tell-" she turned around, virtually examined as if am a threat to her family. "I thought she told me Mirari was coming over."

Ouch, I am not even welcomed here.

“You know what, come in, she’s in her room.”

I took my shoes off, hopped in the house. I scanned through the house, a typical upper middle class with antiques and glasses everywhere, curtains and marble floors elegantly shining through.

“She’s up?”

“I’ll bring coffee to you guys soon,” she strolled away to the kitchen.

I rush upstairs and find her brushing her hair, her room smelling like tulips. A pink bean bag laying in the middle of the room, with piled up clothes and makeup on the desk making me nauseous as ever.

“Can we talk about- that?” I asked. It came out too soft. Still hit like glass shattering.

Aehlila glanced up- real quick- then looked away, jaw tight. She rubbed her wrist, wouldn’t look at me. “Talk about what exactly?” Her voice was thin. Not angry. Just tired.

I swallowed. “You kissed me.”

Silence.

She blinked hard, then let out this weird, dry laugh. “Okay. Cool. Thanks for the play-by-play.”

“I’m not- I’m just trying to understand, Aehlila. That’s it.”

She cut me a look. “And you think barging into my room without knocking gives you the right to ask for clarity now?”

“That’s not-” I stopped. Exhaled. “That’s not the same thing.”

Her eyes flashed. “No? Felt pretty violating from this side.”

I stepped back, just slightly. Her words stung, but I couldn’t tell if she meant them to.

“It was a mistake,” she said then, quick, clipped. “A really dumb, impulsive, brain-melt moment. I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say.”

“You don’t regret it?” I asked. My voice cracked more than hers had.

She looked at the floor, then her ceiling, then me. “God, I don’t even know. I regret everything about *this*. About *us* being here, in this weird, twisted guilt-loop. I regret that I made it your problem.”

“I’m not mad,” I said, even though part of me wanted to be. “Just tell me why.”

“I can’t,” she whispered, shaking her head. “I kissed you because I wanted to, and I hated myself right after. Is that- helpful?”

I stood in her doorway. Door open, yeah, but I could’ve sworn there was a wall between us. She was pacing now, arms wrapped around herself like she was freezing.

“You suck at moving on,” she said, spinning to face me. “Like, *really* suck.”

“And you suck at acting like none of it happened.”

She groaned. “I told you it was a mistake! What do you want from me, Cillian? A signed confession? My diary? Fucking smoke signals?”

“Just the truth,” I said, not moving.

Her face crumpled a little. Not crying. Just worn out.

“That *was* the truth.”

Her jaw locked as she glared at me. “You want the truth? *Fine*. I kissed you because I *wanted to*, okay? There. You got it. Happy now?”

It slammed into me. Not a slap- deeper. But I didn’t flinch. I stepped forward instead, closing the space between us, heart thudding like it wanted out. “Wanted to,” I repeated, voice lower, tighter. “That’s- interesting. Coming from someone who keeps screaming it was a mistake.”

She threw her hands up, spinning like she was gonna tear out of her own skin. “Because it *was*! Cillian, god- *I’m with Mirari*! You *know* that!”

“Do I?” I snapped, louder than I meant. “Because it sure as hell didn’t feel like you were with him when your mouth was on *mine*!”

“Shut up.” She looked at the floor, then back up, her face flushed, her fists clenched like she didn’t even know who to punch. “You don’t *get* it. This isn’t- this isn’t some rom-com shit. This is *me* trying to not screw up *everything*, again, for once.”

I stared at her. “Fixing things by pretending I don’t exist? Pretending *that* didn’t happen? Pretending there’s nothing- *here*?”

“There *isn’t*!” she yelled, too fast, too desperate. “There isn’t anything here, okay? There’s-” Her voice caught like it tripped over the lie.

I stepped closer. She didn’t move. Just stood there, breathing like she’d been running for days.

“Then why are you shaking?” I asked, barely above a whisper. Not soft. Just- quiet. Like I already knew the answer.

She didn’t say anything.

Her breath caught, eyes wide like she’d just been hit. And maybe she had- by me, by herself, by whatever the hell just happened. We didn’t move. We just stood there, frozen in this weird, crackling silence. It wasn’t quiet. Not really. It was loud with everything we weren’t saying.

“You’re impossible,” she muttered, voice trembling, like she hated the words even as they left her mouth.

“And you’re lying,” I shot back. Barely above a whisper, but it cut.

She opened her mouth- nothing. Just this weird, silent panic behind her eyes. Her whole face started falling apart right in front of me, and I just- God-

I didn’t think. I didn’t care. I just leaned in, hand on her cheek, and kissed her.

And for a second- maybe two- it felt like gravity stopped giving a shit. She kissed me back. She didn’t pull away. Didn’t freeze. Didn’t run. She kissed me like it meant something. Like she needed it.

Everything else fell out the window. Morals, plans, Mirari- who even is that in this moment? Everything was her. Her mouth. Her breath. Her skin.

Then- “Aehlla?”

Her mom’s voice came from the hallway, like someone smashing a wine glass with a hammer.

We broke apart like the room had exploded.

“Shit,” she whispered, right against my mouth. Her breath still warm. Still there.

Footsteps.

Fuck.

She scrambled back, hands flying to her hair, smoothing, fixing, erasing. I stood there like a statue- no, like a criminal- like the wall I’d just knocked down was rebuilding itself in real time.

Then her phone lit up.

Buzz.

She picked it up, slow, almost too slow, like she already knew.

Mirari: “Sorry can’t make it right now, dinner tomorrow? Miss you.”

And she just stared at it. Like it was in a language she didn’t speak anymore.

Her jaw clenched.

I said nothing. What could I say? “Oops, I kissed your girlfriend”? “Sorry I hijacked the script I wrote for your relationship”?

Mirari. Fucking perfect Mirari. Soft smiles, clean texts, never late, always thoughtful. The kind of guy who buys flowers just because. Who doesn’t flinch when she’s quiet. Who probably waits when she needs space instead of pacing outside her door like a goddamn idiot.

And I helped him. I built him. Fed him lines like he was a puppet and I was the idiot with the strings. I sat there, watching him become her safe place while I stayed the punchline.

And now?

Now I've broken something.

Maybe it was her. Maybe it was me.

But someone's bleeding.

And I think it's both of us.

To be honest, feelings aren't something you should be dependent on.

These fuckers change anytime.

Her mom showed up in the doorway barely ten seconds later, eyebrows slightly raised, holding a mug like it was evidence. "Here's-" she said, eyes bouncing between us, "your coffee."

"Yeah," Aehlla replied way too fast, plastering on a smile that had *liar* written all over it. "Cillian just dropped by for- notes."

"Notes," her mom repeated, deadpan. She didn't believe a word of it, but she didn't press. Just gave us that long mom-look and said, "Well, lunch is ready when you two are done- talking."

"Thanks," Aehlla chirped, way too perky. She didn't even wait for the footsteps to fade before she turned back to me with wide eyes and this *are you kidding me* look.

As soon as we were alone, she let out a shaky breath and threw me the weakest glare I'd ever seen. "You have the absolute worst timing."

I grinned, because I couldn't help it. "And you- you kissed me back."

She opened her mouth like she was gonna deny it- *really* try to fight me on it- but nothing came out. Her head tilted back with this stunned, half-laughing groan like even *she* couldn't believe this was her life right now. "God," she

muttered, rubbing her forehead, turning away like maybe I'd vanish if she blinked hard enough.

But I saw it. That tiny, traitorous smile tugging at her mouth like it knew better than she did.

"Why was Mirari even coming here?" I asked, voice casual, but way too curious to hide it.

She turned back around slowly, like she already hated where the conversation was headed. "To tell him what I did," she muttered, arms folded tight. "I was gonna fix it. Or ruin it. I don't know. Just- something. I was losing my mind."

I leaned against the nightstand, not even pretending to look away. "And what exactly do you think he'd do?"

She went quiet. Not the kind of quiet that says "I don't know," but the kind that says she *does*- she just doesn't wanna say it.

I tilted my head, dropped my voice a little, just enough to sting. "He'd ghost you," I said flat. "Make it dramatic. Play the heartbreak card. Paint you like some cheating villain in his tragic little narrative. And me? I'd be the backstabber. The evil best friend who 'stole' you. That sound about right?"

Her jaw clenched, but she didn't argue. She just sank into that ridiculous oversized pink hoodie, pulled it up like it might shield her from her own life. Hands over her face like confession could somehow be muffled.

"I-" she started, then stopped. Voice all tangled up in guilt or fear or both.

"Take your time," I said, way too calm. Leaned in a bit. Smirked just enough to piss her off or turn her on- I couldn't tell which. "Don't let all that pressure drown your cute little anxious heart."

That cracked her. She let out this snort-laugh hybrid and shook her head like she hated me, but not really. "God, you're such an ass."

"And yet," I said, slow grin spreading, "you still haven't kicked me out."

She looked at me. Like *really* looked at me.

And for a split second, nothing felt wrong.

Which meant, obviously, it was all about to blow up.

“So do right people with wrong timing deserve a second chance too?”

She stands biting her little lips. “I want to believe that it’s true.”

“WHAT THE FUCK DOES LOVE FEEL LIKE?” I sit on the nightstand now, curious enough and manipulative enough to make her mine. But her answer made me covet her more, down to my last nerve.

“It’s supposed to be vulnerable. It’s supposed to be soft. Silent. Craveful.”

Evelyn / present

“Where the fuck are you?!” I yell my lungs out, the whole lobby to hear, I DON’T GIVE A SHIT. With my bag, my tote bag to be precise, falling off my shoulders and my shoelaces so dirty I wouldn’t even want to tie them up, but I did.

My chewing gum dropped out of my mouth and I literally saw it falling down to its doom. I just stare at it.

“YAH THESE TAXI APPS SUCK, EVELYN! I AM TRYING MY BEST TO BE CALM FOR FUCKS SAKE!” Mirari justifies and screams in my ears, even my airpods fall off.

Does this have to be so hard?

We were already late for the summit, my heart pounding out of my chest and now the whole lobby judging me, side eyeing me, as if a drug lord just entered

the hallway. Mirari was supposed to reach an hour before, but this guy, I SWEAR, has no regards about anything.

I pick my airpods, wipe them off and put them back in my ears. "Sorry you were saying-"

"YOU WEREN'T EVEN LISTENING?! YOU PATHETIC STUPID ASS BITC-"

I cut the call.

No toxicity for today.

"Ma'am there is an exam in the classroom, could you please lower your voice?" now a goddamn class monitor will tell me what I am supposed to do? I reach up to her, look dead in her eyes, and apologise.

No toxicity for today.

Aehlla was waiting. I rushed up to the school gate with my taxi finder open on my telephone.

"I didn't wanna bother you, Evelyn" she startled me. "I could've just walked".

I get it some people try to be humble and get down on their knees to not be so bitchy but this tops it all.

"Walked 10 miles? This evening? It's 4pm, might as well take 10pm to get there or something."

"I am sorry."

"What why?"

"Lets pick this dumbfuck first, he had to go register an hour ago but he's still at home smelling his socks and having some orgasmic time of his life".

"You mean Mirari?"

"You really understood who dumbfuck meant huh? Interesting."

"Well-"

The car screeched in front of us. 0899 I murmur checking his number plate. I didn't wanna be kidnapped. Not today at least.

We became warm enough and Aehlla took her seat at the back. She's fast.

The taxi rattled like it was about to fall apart, windows buzzing with every pothole. I slumped back in the seat, trying to look chill while my brain ran laps. Mischief, maybe. Hope too. Or just nerves chewing holes in me.

"So, Aehlla-" I leaned forward, elbows on knees, grin already stretching too wide, attempting for a small talk- "if you were an ice cream flavor, what would you be?"

She didn't even blink at me. Just raised an eyebrow slowly, like I was on trial. Pretended to think like this was some deep question. "Hmm, definitely something exotic. Lavender honey." Then she cut her eyes at me, lips curling like a hook. "What about you? Vanilla? Basic. Boring."

She smelled like lavender too. Of course she did.

"Excuse me?" My voice went high and stupid. I clutched my chest like I'd been shot. "Wow. Wow. Disrespect. I'd be a wild masterpiece, okay? Cookie dough and rainbow sprinkles- chaotic good energy."

"More like a melting mess," she snorted, tossing it out like it wasn't gonna stick in my brain all night. "And toppings? Who the hell puts gummy bears on ice cream?"

"Only the brave!" Evelyn jumped in like a damn superhero, throwing her arms up like confetti was about to fall. "They add color! Which- you- should know, Neon Queen."

"Neon is a lifestyle," Aehlla snapped back, flicking that loud-ass hair over her shoulder. Bright enough to blind someone. Bright enough to make me stare too long. "Better than beige corpse-core."

"Beige is *classic*," I shot back, arms folded like a brat, grin breaking through anyway.

And then- brakes screeched a little, car jerking us forward. Mirari's place. The driver laughed under his breath. Oh great. Yeah. He definitely thinks we're idiots. Fair.

We pulled up to the curb and there he was- baggy trousers, black hoodie swallowing him whole, Nike high tops sharp as hell. No Crocs. Thank God.

And yeah. He looked good. No. Not good. Dangerous good. Like if I stared too long, something in me would give out.

He slid in, door thunking shut.

"You look hot," Aehlla said. Just said it. Out loud.

My brain? Static.

Then she added, all fake sweet, "Oh, where are my manners-you really look hot."

And I just sat there, gripping my cold coffee like it could anchor me while my heart tried to body-slam its way out of my chest.

Was Aehlla drunk? Didn't smell booze. Not from here, anyway.

Rari was staring- God, the way he stares, like he's about to call the cops for *emotional disturbance*. "What is she doing here?" His voice was flat, sharp. His eyes- locked on me like I owed him answers carved in stone.

"She was left behind, okay? Not everyone loves newbies, Rari. Get in before the waiting charges screw us."

"So what?" he spits back, and my patience cracks like a tooth.

"Oh, you're not the one paying, are you?" My face stretches into this sarcastic smile that feels like a slap.

He slides in anyway, stiff as hell, like sitting down might infect him. He sits next to her, and BAM- the car fills with this weird silence so thick even the driver side-eyes us in the mirror like, *what cult meeting did I just sign up for?*

"Is this why you called me an hour ago?" Rari finally snaps, his voice sharp enough to cut the damn air. "Asking if I was ready to leave?"

I shift in my seat, turning slow, grin crawling up my face like a villain in some bad soap opera. “You *called him* for that?”

And there it is. Aehlla stammers. Stammers. She *never* stammers. “Y-yeah, I mean- just to like-” Her voice is shaking but her eyes are loud. “He’s the leader of the club, duh. Why wouldn’t I do what he says?”

Oh. My. God.

“What has gotten into you?” Rari’s voice drops. Low. Frustrated. Furious. HA. I’m sitting here living for this like Netflix could never. *YES, RARI, YOU TELL HER. GIVE ME THE SEASON FINALE RIGHT NOW.*

The tension- God, it’s dripping. Even the driver is judging us like he’s writing a review in his head: *two stars, too much drama, would not recommend.*

Infatuation? Yeah, it’s here. Hot and messy. Aehlla’s never been this bold- today she’s like, different. Direct. I’m sitting there like, please, God, let her drop an *I love you* and kiss him. Right now. In this cab. I’d tip the driver double just for that scene.

I lowkey ship them. Okay. Highkey.

“So basically,” I say, leaning forward, voice slicing through, “you knew this guy wasn’t ready yet? And all that crying about being stranded and taxis- was fake? Just so you could come with us?”

She freezes. Like a deer in headlights. Doesn’t answer. Not at first.

Finally, she whispers- soft, like it’s the biggest truth in the room, “I feel closer to you guys.”

Aehlla's karma / present

"Just say you look hot when you meet him," I told Aehlla, like it was the easiest thing in the world. Which, obviously, it wasn't. Advising someone to walk up to their crush and basically confess thirst? Bold. But necessary.

She sat across from me, legs crossed, heart practically having a meltdown. You'd think she was about to marry a stranger or something. Then again, that *is* how it goes in half the world.

She glanced up, wide-eyed, like she was seeing the jungle for the first time- the kind of slow-motion awe that made her look even more unsure. Everything around her was just- beautiful. The air smelled like rain-soaked soil and something vaguely floral- the kind of earthy perfume that makes you forget time. Somewhere behind us, a stream trickled through the brush, glinting like someone sprinkled glass in the water. Cicadas chirped. Fireflies blinked in and out of the shadows like the jungle had its own heartbeat.

Honestly? It looked like a dream sequence from a film she didn't know she was in.

"Don't tell me this will work, karma," she muttered, still staring into the trees. Her voice was quiet but steady, like she was hoping the silence might answer her.

And here's the thing: that's what makes being karma annoying. People expect advice like I've got a user manual for fate. I didn't know if it would work. Probably not. Or maybe it would, if she meant it hard enough. Either way, it wasn't my problem. She wanted him. This was her shot.

Might as well take it.

"Fine. Just don't trick him into hating me," she said as she got up, brushing imaginary dust off her knees like she needed something to do with her hands. She always had this thing- trying to be better than everyone else, like it was wired into her. Smarter, faster, prettier, more interesting. Always *more*. But now? Now she's just out here- trying to be better for some guy she met, what, two weeks ago? That's new. Kind of surreal. Maybe more than this jungle, honestly.

"I'll be back if I need more of your help, karma," she said, half-smiling like she meant it, then turned and walked straight into the trees like she knew where the hell she was going.

She didn't look back.

And I stood there for a second, not really knowing if she ever would.

It's weird- I've warned her about him. Told her, more than once. She never really listened. People don't listen to karma, not when they think they're the main character.

Also, I forgot to say something earlier- I sensed another karma nearby. That weird static feeling. Did I already mention that? I don't know. My memory's not great these days. Things blur.

Not that she'd believe me anyway.

She never does.

“Want some chips?” Rari asked, holding the bag out like it meant nothing.

Aehlla flinched. Barely. But it was there. Something weird passed over her face, like she wasn’t in the room for a second. Off. Maybe she was pissed her compliments didn’t land the way she imagined? Honestly, I don’t know. I’m karma, not a mind reader. Or therapist.

And yeah, part of it’s her. First time flirting, for real. Never tested this stuff before. Now she’s getting side-eyes from half the people in the car. Even the driver looked at her like, *yikes*. You could feel it- that kind of thick, silent tension people pretend not to notice but everyone does.

The car jerked near some sketchy old bus stop. Real rust-vibes. Aehlla didn’t wait- just grabbed her bag and basically bolted. Slammed the door harder than necessary. Scrunchie flew off. Landed in the seat behind her. She didn’t look back.

“Your-” Rari called, halfway leaning forward. She kept walking.

God, this girl’s gonna short-circuit me.

He stared at the scrunchie. Picked it up like it was a fragile artifact or something. Looked at it for a beat, then slid it onto his wrist. Twisted it once. Twice. Fit snug.

Didn’t say anything. Didn’t run after her. Didn’t make a show of it.

Just stood there with that same quiet expression. Holding something she left behind.

As Aehlla stood beside the bus stop, Evelyn grabbing her change from the cab, she felt the familiar flutter of excitement in her chest. Behind her, the university loomed like a magnificent fortress, its sleek glass facade reflecting the soft hues of twilight. Brightly if I may say.

The building felt alive somehow, buzzing with a kind of energy you couldn’t quite name. Every glass panel caught the light differently, like it had its own thing to prove. The entrance was lined with flowers- way too perfectly

arranged, like someone cared a lot about first impressions. Colors everywhere. The stone paths that cut through the garden were spotless, almost too white, like no one ever dared walk on them.

Next to her, Rari and Evelyn were talking, probably about something nerdy again- books, deadlines, characters. Their voices just folded into the background hum of students, shoes scuffing tile, someone laughing too loudly across the quad. Aehlla glanced at Rari. His eyes lit up the way they always did when literature was involved. He made it look so easy to care.

She wanted to feel that way too. And sometimes she did. But still, was it *really* her thing? I never could tell.

As they got closer to the main hall, Aehlla tilted her head up and just stared for a second. Big pillars, giant arches, the kind of place built to impress. Some university brochure dream. The buildings didn't feel cold though- they felt like they had stories. Like they'd seen a lot. And now, they were waiting for someone else to add something new.

"HOLY FUCK!" shouted Rari, exclaiming his lungs out. Evelyn looked behind with carefulness at peak. "WHAT?!" she shouted back with an angry stare.

It surely scared the shit out of Aehlla who kept a hand on her chest in panic.

"DUDE THIS UNIVERSITY IS GORGEOUS."

"For fucks sake Rari, are you on drugs?" Evelyn made a tight fist and punched him on his stomach. He gasped for air. "I thought you forgot your bag or wallet in there you psychotic idiot!"

Aehlla laughed her heart out thinking what dumbass she's in love with.

Well, as long as she's happy, anything for her.

The library sat dead center on campus, and for some reason, it just pulled her in. No idea why. Maybe it was the size of it, or the way the windows caught light, or how it looked like it held secrets. Inside, there were shelves that climbed forever. Books from everywhere, all packed in like they belonged to different lives. The smell hit her before the doors even opened- old pages, ink,

something warm. Weirdly comforting. Almost addictive. She didn't say anything, but she took a deep breath and held it.

There were little spots tucked between the shelves, like the kind of corners you'd disappear into when you didn't want to talk to anyone. Quiet, private. She liked those.

As they walked closer, something in her stomach flipped- not in a bad way. Just nerves. The good kind, maybe. This whole summit thing was supposed to be full of workshops, panels, whatever- people who cared about the same stuff. She could picture herself already- sitting somewhere mid-discussion, probably getting too passionate about character arcs or plot twists that didn't land.

She glanced at Rari. He looked like he was barely holding it together- excited, yeah, but there was this tension under his smile. Like he was running every possible outcome through his head. He always did that.

The garden outside was full. People were spread out, scribbling, mumbling lines, pacing like finals were tomorrow. Some were just frozen, staring at nothing, trying to make a sentence come together. She liked the mess of it. The pressure in the air. Everyone was *trying* to prove they were good enough to be here.

Then Rari leaned in, close enough that she felt the warmth of him, even though he didn't touch her.

"You wrote something that's gonna mindfuck everyone?" he asked, not loud, but just enough for her to hear.

She didn't look at him. Couldn't. Her face felt too warm. She just nodded, eyes locked on the grass like it was going to answer for her.

"I- yah, I have written" she began stuttering and I knew this was beginning to look bad.

Rari nodded like he had high expectations from her anyways. Behind her she sees Evelyn talking to a guy in a skirt? She scoudered her eyes, noticing a notepad and a pen writing anonymously on a paper.

“Rari?” Evelyn called him, without even taking eyes off the notepad. “I don’t see our names here. Who registered for us?”

Aehlla glanced to her side and saw him crouched down on one knee. For a second, something in her stupidly hoped it was for her. But no-Rari was completely absorbed in watching a butterfly. A blue one, wings dim like dusk, drinking from a flower like it didn’t even notice him. And he just stared, like it was the only thing that mattered in the world right then. Quiet, soft, still.

“Do you wanna write a poem about this too?” she smiles reluctantly finally wearing off the anticipation she had for this summit.

“I already have one in my mind, Aehlla”.

“RARI, THE FUCKING CAB DRIVER WAS MORE ATTENTIVE THAN YOU, HELP ME AND FIND OUR NAMES HERE!” Evelyn screeches her inner demons on him.

His spine got straight and he got up.

“I actually didn’t.”

Excuse me?, was the look on Aehlla’s face as she quickly turned to him in utter shock.

“Here we have the club leader himself, Rari” she clapped along with every word she spoke. “Who doesn’t give a shit about anything except himself!”

“Aye that’s too far-” he inched closer to them with heavy winds whooshing against us.

“Can you check the registration for the name Calis?”

Aehlla froze.

The name- “Calis”- cut through the air like something sharp, stupidly sharp. It didn’t even sound like a real word at first. Just noise. But it hit her, hard. Everything else dropped away. The crowd, the voices, even the sunlight. Gone. All she could hear was the sound of his laugh echoing somewhere in her head,

the way he used to say her name like it meant something. Like she meant something.

And for a second, it was warm again - his breath against her neck, his stupid smile, the way he'd pull her closer without saying anything. But then it all flipped. Like it always did. The comfort turned cold, fast. Her stomach dropped. Her throat tightened. And she could already feel the sting of all the nights he didn't show up. All the times he just disappeared.

Their love- if that's even what it was - felt like a setup now. A trick. She saw it all in flashes: the long talks that felt like forever, the arguments that came out of nowhere, the exact moment his eyes stopped looking soft. The day he left, and how she still doesn't fully get why.

All of that hit her in one second.

Like someone pressed a button and detonated the whole past.

Her life after him? It wasn't healing. It was fallout. The kind that leaves pieces of yourself scattered in places you can't even remember being.

Still flying around.

Still sharp.

"Who- who's this Calis?" Aehlla asked. No stutter, no wobble. Just the words. Flat. She kept her face still, but everything inside her was pulling tight. She already knew. Or thought she did. But maybe she didn't. Maybe this was someone else.

Rari looked at her sideways, kind of surprised. "Honestly, I thought Evelyn would be the one asking that," he said. "But yeah, guess I'm wrong today."

Her hands were clenched in her lap, and she hadn't noticed until then. Rari went on like he didn't see it.

"We're in this summit group- club leaders, whatever. It's all virtual. People from different sections messaging, sharing updates. I don't know him. Just messages. No calls. Not even a display picture. So, yeah." He paused, eyes flicking to her again. "No idea what he looks like either."

Aehlla nodded, kind of, but didn't say anything.

That's when Evelyn butted in, all loud like she always is. "Wait, you asked *him* to register us?"

Rari rolled his eyes. "I had two brain cells left. You asking that just murdered one."

"You don't even *know* him, you booger-eating-" Evelyn started.

Aehlla cut in. "Do you trust him?"

Rari shrugged. "It's just been messages. Seemed chill, nothing sketchy."

He let out a breath. "Anyway. If you're worried, you can check. We're under his name on the list."

"Yes, Rari, Evelyn, Gabriella, Richard, Sarah, Adonis, Freya, Orion and Aehlla- these are correct?" The guy finally spoke after all the drama. He had a skirt on. A nice one, actually.

"Are you gay?" Aehlla, please. Just shut up sometimes.

"Yes. Yes, I am," he shot back without missing a beat, raising one eyebrow and flashing a grin that pretty much lit the whole damn room.

"You guys need to be seated in the stadium in the next hour, alright?" he added, voice bubbling like soda. "Also- we've got a parade after the summit. Don't miss it."

"But we're not gay, bro," Rari blurted out, too fast, too loud.

Thank God, Aehlla thought, and I really wish I was kidding.

Wait- are *all* the LGBTQ people here?

"Evelyn, call Richard, tell him we're coming," Rari said, putting on his sunglasses like he was in a music video and heading for the stairs without looking back.

"Idiot," Evelyn muttered under her breath.

Aehlla watched the sky start to darken, and something about it made her stomach twist a little. She kind of wanted it to rain. To dance in it with Rari. She told me once, in one of our in-between moments, about that fantasy. Her thing for dancing in wet clothes, soft thunder, his hand on her waist. It stayed with me.

We moved fast after that, pushing through the maze of this massive building until we finally reached the stadium. It was way too elegant- gold trim, velvet ropes, big-name vibes.

Rari disappeared somewhere ahead, trying to track down the rest of the group. And then- just like that- Aehlla stopped.

She'd only taken two steps into the gallery before her body locked up. Her eyes were glued to one corner of the room.

It was him.

Calis.

In a suit that fit him way too well, laughing like he didn't know how much that sound used to mean. Like he hadn't wrecked her.

Time didn't stop, but it slowed. Hard. Her chest tightened. Her feet refused to move. All at once, it was joy, hurt, longing, confusion-everything rushing in at once like the past had been waiting behind a door she didn't know she opened. She couldn't even look away.

The one thing we didn't want here.

He looked at her. Just- looked. Same way as the first time, like the whole damn world narrowed down to her and nothing else mattered. His eyes- God, they *lit up*. Like someone just flicked a switch behind them.

Her chest? Gone. Heart slamming so loud she was sure he could hear it. He moved closer, easy, steady, like this wasn't a war zone inside her. And then he smiled. Soft. Too soft. The kind of smile that makes your knees think about giving out.

“Hi, Aehlla.”

Just that. Two words. Small. Harmless. Except they weren’t harmless, because now her brain was screaming and her hands didn’t know where to go and why the hell did his voice sound like that?

And of course he looked stupid-perfect. Suit hugging him like it was custom stitched by angels with too much free time. Navy blue, sharp, rich- hell, even his damn *tie* had a personality. Burgundy, like wine, like something expensive and smooth you’d ruin if you touched it wrong. Shirt white enough to burn your eyes out.

“Don’t tell me you followed me here-” she said before thinking, words tripping out like loose wires.

He laughed. God, that laugh. Low. Smooth. Like it belonged in a room with dim lights and whiskey. “I’m not that jobless, excuse me.” He took a sip of tea like this was nothing. Like this wasn’t something clawing her insides raw. His eyes never left hers. Not once.

“I only came because I heard,” he said, like it was no big deal, like he wasn’t detonating her entire night with one sentence. “Rari mentioned you were on the list.” His gaze slid past her, quick, almost bored. “Where is he, though? I’ll be pleased to meet him, such lazy ass” he gloated, which invited Aehlla’s stare in advance. “How is he even a leader?”

Aehlla was unable to lift her gaze anywhere else.

‘WHAT IS THIS ASSHOLE DOING HERE’ I wonder, my karma instincts are at cloud nine right now.

She noticed Rari with the team from the corner of her eye, and called him towards her, “Rari- come here please!” she shrieks with four more people turning their heads around like their mother named them Rari.

Her past had been nothing less than an aftereffect of an atomic bomb blast.

Pure toxic, fragments still flying over everywhere.

Rari stood there stuck. He didn’t move. He didn’t budge.

“Aehlla waved. Hard. Fast. Like her arm might snap off. “Rari?” Her voice pitched high, slicing through the buzz of voices, but- nothing. He didn’t even flinch.

Why wasn’t he looking at her? Why wasn’t he moving?

She tried again, louder this time, almost a shout. “Rari!” Heads turned. He didn’t. Still stuck there like someone froze him mid-frame.

And then she saw his face. Oh God.

Wide eyes. Too wide. Glassy, locked on one thing- Calis. Just- staring. Like the air between them was doing something awful, something invisible. And that look- God, that look- it wasn’t just a surprise. It was something jagged. Like his brain broke and he didn’t even notice the pieces on the floor.

“Rari.” Her throat felt raw now. It wasn’t even a question anymore. It was a plea. Because something was wrong. Really, really wrong.

Everything else- the noise, the people- it fell out of focus, like the whole summit folded itself into nothing. Just them. Him. And Calis. Two magnets either about to click together or rip the world apart.

And then- he moved.

Slow. Too slow. Like his bones weighed a hundred pounds each. One step. Another. Shoulders tight, fists loose, jaw twitching like he was chewing glass. And his eyes- God, his eyes- still burning holes through Calis, like he couldn’t look away if someone set him on fire.

Okay, Calis was obnoxious, I do have proof for that, but Rari acting weird too?

Did Rari know? Did he *know* Calis was her ex? The thought hit like ice down her spine. No. No way. He couldn’t. She never told him. Never planned to. That name had been buried deep, locked behind teeth she swore would never open.

And then,

“Hi, Rari,” Calis said, smooth as silk, warm on the surface but sharp underneath. That voice always carried knives hidden in honey. Aehlla’s stomach flipped so hard she thought she might throw up on the marble floor.

Rari just- stared for a second. Then his hand came up, slow, like he was pulling it through water, and they shook. That handshake- God- it was too firm, too loud, the *snap* echoing like a gunshot in her ears. Rari didn’t blink. His eyes locked on Calis, calm on the outside but she could see it- the fracture lines spiderwebbing behind them.

Then Calis turned. Full. Face to her. And that look- Jesus. No smile now. Just eyes asking the question his mouth didn’t need to: *Who the fuck is this guy?*

“Cillian?” Rari’s voice came out thin. Almost a whisper.

Calis laughed under his breath- low, sharp. “Cillian? No. Calis.” Said it like it mattered. Like his name was a blade he wanted them both to feel. “I’m the one who registered y’all.”

Tea in one hand, steady grip, but everything else about him was vibrating wrong. His aura- God, it was heavy, dark, like the air thickened around him just to hold it. Aehlla could feel it pressing against her skin, pressing against Rari too.

And then she said it.

“This is Calis.” Her throat burned as the words scraped out. “My- ex.”

It fell out of her like a secret punched loose. Too fast to catch. Too late to fix.

And then- silence. Thick, sticky, strangling silence.

Rari’s face changed like someone flipped a switch. Not loud, not dramatic. Just- tighter. Jaw. Shoulders. Sweat ghosting at his hairline. Processing. Breaking.

Calis just stared at him. One brow lifting slow, deliberate, like he had all the time in the world. “Ex?” he said it soft. Drew it out. Rolled it over his tongue like something bitter he planned to spit back in their faces. “Interesting.”

Mirari / present

Joyous- a word I wanted to experience for a very long time in this life. I liked it being a leader and amusing people now with the spark I have of writing anything and everything, anywhere.

“I literally have written the best poems, I swear” Richard says.

“Freya- hey- been meaning to ask.” Richard’s voice cut through the noise, too casual to be casual. “That last poem of yours- what was that? Rage blackout? Or were you just doing your best Shakespeare impression for the cheap seats?”

Freya groaned, loud enough for heads to turn, eyes rolling like she was trying to eject him from the room telepathically. But the grin- yeah, that traitor grin- was there. “Oh please. Unlike your sad little moon sonnets, mine actually have meaning. Yours read like-” she sucked in a laugh- “love letters to a cheese platter.”

Richard staggered back like she'd shot him. Full hand to chest. "A cheese platter? Wow. You wound me, Freya. My poetry is *art*. A rare vintage, a fine wine paired with-" his eyes darted skyward for effect-"the perfect brie."

"Perfect brie?" Freya choked on a laugh. "Richard, please. Your poems are like a bottle of gas station merlot somebody left open for three weeks."

That one broke her. Laughter poured out, head thrown back, and now people were turning to watch. Someone even whispered, "What's going on over there?"

Richard leaned in, elbows on the table, lowering his voice like a plot twist. "Admit it," he murmured, eyes glinting with something sharp and sweet, "you love my cheesy metaphors. They're the sprinkles on your cupcake of creativity."

Freya's breath caught- just for half a second- before she leaned in too, a smile slicing wide. "Sprinkles? Fine. But only if your cupcakes come with- humility." Her tone dropped like a knife in velvet.

And yeah, now the whole damn room was watching.

And I am wondering here, bitch just tell her you love her already, she clearly loves you.

People wouldn't understand. Not that they have the *privilege* to live two lives.

"Rari- come here please!" I hear the melodious voice of Aehlla, waving her hand behind a man in a black suit. She peeped from his edges of the suit, I squinted my eyes to clarify what I was seeing.

"Just a second guys", I offered myself to leave but I stood still. Very still. I wanted to move but I was intrigued. The guy looked behind, and his eyes were eager searching for me.

His skin- God. Pale like he hasn't seen the sun in years. Rough. Uneven. Like old paint peeling off a wall nobody loves anymore. Lines creeping in around his eyes, sneaky little reminders that life's been chewing on him longer than his age should allow.

Those eyes- tired. Heavy. Black rings underneath like someone punched him in his dreams and forgot to stop. Like he hasn't slept, not really, not in a decade.

His lips? Split open in places, dry as hell. Cigarettes. I can taste them just looking at him. Bitter. Ash stuck to the back of his throat. He hides it when people watch, but God, it's all over his mouth like a confession.

And that jawline- knife sharp. Straighter than my own damn gender. Too sharp for someone this- fragile-looking. Like it'd cut you if you kissed him but- yeah, I'd still bleed for that.

His body- thin. Fragile, maybe. A stomach that isn't flat, not anymore, just soft enough to whisper: he gave up something along the way. On purpose. Or maybe life just stole it from him.

And I can't stop staring. I shouldn't. But I do.

Fuck, is that- is that Cillian?

I inched steps closer, I wanted to hug him. My heart raced thinking we three have finally reunited. I stood there. Couldn't move. Feet glued to the floor, heart pounding like it wanted out. Hope clawed at me- stupid, reckless hope that maybe, *maybe* he'd remember. Just a flicker. A crack. Something in his eyes said, *I know you.*

But then- the other thing. That heavy, drowning weight. Despair. That this was it. I was a stranger in his world now. Just another face in a crowd he'll forget by morning.

I took a step anyway. Felt like walking into fire. Wanting to hug him, touch him, pull him into the space I'd been keeping warm all these years- it burned through me like electricity. Sweet, sharp, terrifying.

Would he feel it? Or would I just look like some ghost begging to be remembered?

"Cillian?" It came out small. Barely a whisper.

He looked right at me. Smiled, almost. "Cillian? No. I'm Calis." Said it with pride, like the name was a crown.

Calis. Not Cillian. My chest cracked a little.

“This is Calis, my ex,” Aehlla said too fast, like ripping a bandage. Words tumbled, ugly and loud in my ears.

“Ex?” I said it slowly, tasting the word like something bitter. “Interesting.”

My throat went dry. “You definitely look like my old friend, Calis,” I muttered, softer now. “And I really wished it was him.”

He grinned- shrugged. “Ah, shucks. Sorry.” Not sorry at all. And neither was Cillian when he walked away from me that day.

I pressed my lips together hard, swallowed the rest of what I wanted to claw out. “I-”

But the announcement blared, the summit starting, the room swallowing me whole before I could say another damn word.

“Get your seats and your hands along for the summit this year-” Orion’s voice faded into static because, honestly, I wasn’t hearing any of it.

I was staring. Again. At him. At *Calis*.

That face. That impossible, stupid, familiar face.

For one insane second, I thought I had my life together. Like, okay, fine, controlled chaos but *controlled*. And then this? This wasn’t in the plan. Not even close to my top-ten scenarios. Hell, not even my top-hundred. Aehlla’s ex. Standing here. Wearing *that* face.

The air buzzed. Not metaphorically-actually felt like it was humming in my bones as Orion herded everyone toward the round tables, little clusters of fake laughter and half-smiles popping like fireworks.

And then- of course- Calis moved. Smooth. Confident. Like he owned the damn oxygen. And he sat down.

At our table.

NO HE WILL NOT BE SITTING HERE.

He lowered to sit beside Aehlla, which definitely didn't bother me, not at all, but my body shook itself at a point even I didn't know I had that reflex.

"Hi, Aehlla, mind if I sit here? No? Thank You so much!" I blurted out as my butt touched the seat next to her and I slowly looked at Calis with an honest gaze. I could feel Aehlla smiling. I pulled the chair beside me,

"Oh were you gonna sit here? Come sit beside me".

Evelyn / present

Hesitation was scary for Rari. I sat in front of them, talking to Orion and Freya considering their nervousness as the first summit of their life. The summit was probably intervened online worldwide, so if they fuck up, they fuck up on a global level.

“Evelyn, can you please record me while I am up there?” Orion asked for a favour, but I couldn’t grab my attention off the intimacy Calis and Rari shared right now. I liked what I was seeing. “Evelyn please” he continued in a distorted array of chaos.

“I’ll think about it” I swayed to him and told him to his face.

“I hate you”.

“You aren’t my type anyway”.

I leaned back in my chair like I was calm- like I wasn’t counting every breath- but my eyes? Locked. On him. Calis. Mr. Perfect-Polish himself, laughing so

loud it rattled something in me. That laugh- clear, sharp, too clean, like a bell someone keeps ringing in your ear until you want to smash it.

I knew the type. The guy who walks in like the room was built for him. The air bends. People turn. Gravity obeys. And God, they love him for it. They *always* do.

But all I saw was cracks. Hairline fractures under the gloss. That arrogance dripping through, thick as oil, pretending it's water. His smile wasn't real. Couldn't be. Too precise. Like it had been measured in a mirror and approved by a focus group. Compliments rehearsed, ready to deploy like grenades. He wasn't talking- he was performing. Everything about him said *look at me*, and of course, everyone did.

Then- then- he leaned in. To her. Aehlla. Like the air between them belonged to him. Rari was right there, but that didn't matter because Calis doesn't see people. He sees props. Background noise.

His voice dropped- lower, quieter, that fake intimacy trick guys like him use when they want to own a moment. And she- she listened.

My stomach knotted so hard I thought I might choke on it. Heat crawling up my neck, behind my ears. He really thought this worked. He really thought a whisper could rewrite history, erase the rot underneath. God, what a joke.

And still- still- the word slammed through me like a punch: *ex*.

Her *ex*.

Which meant at some point- at some goddamn point- he had her. And now here he is, reaching again, like history's a game and he's ready for another round.

I hated him for that. I hated myself for caring.

DOES SHE HAVE TASTE?

The history between them clung to the air like smoke. You could feel it- Aehlla shifting when he showed up, her smile tighter, her laugh hollow. Girl-to-girl stuff- you just know.

And him? Calis basked in the spotlight like it owed him rent. Cutting people off, twisting every idea back to himself. All ego. No team. Every word out of his mouth made me want to claw my ears off.

What pissed me off most? He thought everyone adored him. Couldn't see the desperation bleeding through the cracks. Pure insecurity in an expensive suit.

And now, leaning in close to Aehlla? He didn't see her. Not really. Just another shiny pawn for his game. Another piece to move, use, discard.

Tell me I'm wrong. I dare you.

I do have good deducing capabilities, right?

"Freya, don't panic" I smiled at her, as she lowered her back, she joined her hands constantly praying her way in.

"What if I fumble?" She had tears in her eyes. Aww, that was me once.

"I'll still be by your side" I didn't let my smile fade, "We'll still clap for you".

Nonchalantly she said, "But I need others clapping too".

Bitch, what the fuck.

The air in the Grand Hall felt wrong. Heavy. Too heavy, like breathing water. Crimson and gold banners sagged from the ceiling like they were tired too, barely twitching even with the fake breeze hissing from vents that smelled like metal and dust.

Then Aerion's voice cracked through the speakers like a gunshot, loud enough to rattle my teeth. "The Summit has officially begun!" The words slammed into the walls, echoed back at us like they were laughing. "Mirror's Team- step forward. Bring your verse. Show us your soul."

Perfect. Absolutely perfect.

And then- silence. Thick. Ugly. The kind that crawls into your ears and won't leave. Someone coughed way in the back. Fabric shifted, soft, like whispers.

Then every head turned. All of them. Burning holes through us like we were something raw and bleeding laid out for show.

My stomach bottomed out. My heart? Gone. Just gone. Couldn't feel my fingers. Couldn't feel anything except that weight pressing down on my ribs, squeezing tighter, tighter- like the air had teeth and it wanted me broken before I even opened my mouth.

"Mirrors? It's Mirari, not mirrors!" Rari shrieked. He had the most obnoxious expression even Aerion couldn't read. "I already regret coming here".

Within their ranks, a subtle shifting could be detected, a silent battle waged in glances and hushed whispers.

"And why are we always the first?" he mumbled under his breath. Freya looked tense. Freya was fried. Funny Evelyn. I WAS NOT IN THE RIGHT MINDSET.

I could feel a knot tighten in her stomach too. She hadn't slept in days, the words swirling in her mind, each syllable magnified by the weight of the moment. Sweat on her eyebrows made me feel she was gonna puke. Again.

"We choose to send Freya" there it was, Rari announced. He looked at Freya with a promising look that he believed in her.

Freya launched upon the stage, adjusting her mic.

She spoke softly trembling her soul,

*dont be my moon
i'll be your moon, you be my sun
so i can show them you're the reason for my shine
have some vodka and wine
to a toast with flowers and honey
for you are finally mine
my worth has risen though i fell for you
be my language
so i can just talk about you
no way i can know whether you talk about me
the smiles or the love you caress like me
it has begun to hurt
like i have loved someone else this whole time
but it's just too late, now am locked up in your crime*

Hold Me When I Die

*you show up in my memory like the sun i said you were
you shone so bright my heart burned with fever
take me back where we rarely met
make me a girl once again
who will promise a boy like you, she won't ever forget.*

Aehlla was the one who applauded first. A Wide smile garnished every face I saw around me. ‘Yes she’s my team mate!’ I screamed internally. Such a small poem but yet so much courage for her to recite. Salute. Been there, done that.

She stood there hesitantly with no thoughts to process at the moment. “Bravo, Miss Freya!” Aerion clapped and screamed through his mic attached to his ear. He was a little extra. A WHOLE LOT LITTLE EXTRA. “What was the poem named by you?”

A deep breath paused Freya, her freckles shining.

“Criminal,” she replied. She nodded.

A subtle confusion surprised us, a beautiful poem, a crappy name, is rare. I blind everyone near me and lock my eyes on Freya who was proud of herself.

“Well done babygirl” I roar. ‘Babygirl?’ Ew. I was turning to Cecilia again. I should not be roaming with her often, but she has a car though.

“Did you write it all by yourself?”

“I did apparently”.

While my bullshit went on, I saw Aehlla going on the stage. Wasn’t it Orion’s turn next?

I looked beside, Calis was stoic. As if he wanted Aehlla to drown in deep darkness. His eyes fixated on her, and his mind focused.

“Don’t you feel proud your *ex* writes so well?” I talked to him.

“Do these guys know what poems are? Imbeciles.” he gloated and here I had 108 ways to strangle a guy to death.

“Aren’t you thankful she dated you?”.

“Why? Her friends should pray for her. She left me, it's her loss.”

I was onto him. This guy- fucking danced on my last nerve.

Mirari / present

Aehlla clapped frantically as if her own kid had just performed. I did it slowly like a proud father. We started off a good beginning.

My mind preoccupied who we should send next. Adonis and Sarah sat at another table surprisingly looking at me. “They just dropped a lyrical nuke,” Aerion said, voice tight like he’d swallowed glass.

I slid up beside him, brain scrambling. The roster burned in my head. Orion’s next.

“Orion,” I hissed, leaning in. “You’re up.”

He didn’t move. Didn’t even blink. Just sat there like someone poured concrete over him. Normally, he’s the guy with all the swagger, the easy grin. Now? Ashen. Ghost-white.

His hands clutched that tablet like it was a damn life raft, but it wasn't saving him. I saw the tremor in his fingers. Sweat was crawling down his temple like it couldn't get out fast enough.

"I-" His voice cracked. Broke. "I need a minute." Barely a whisper against the roar of applause. "The flow- it's not there. I can't- I can't spit this right now."

I slapped my forehead. I couldn't afford to argue with him or even force him, and I was seeing Freya coming off the stage. A delay would be a PR disaster, a major hit to my team's credibility.

"*I'll go.*" All heads whip to Aehlla. Snap. Like magnets.

She doesn't blink. Doesn't even twitch. Just stands there, shoulders squared, chin tilted like yeah, I said what I said. Her eyes? Locked on me. Daring me.

She's not on the roster. Not even close. She's supposed to be last. After the break. Not now. Not when the whole goddamn Summit is wired like a live bomb.

"Aehlla," I manage, voice tight as a noose. "Orion's next. There's a process. You were last for a reason."

She rolls her eyes- slow, sharp, deliberate. "Process is *killing* us. Look at him."

I look. Orion looks- gone. Dead-eyed. Sweat dripping like a busted faucet. Clutching his tablet like it might morph into a parachute. He's not walking out there. Not in this lifetime.

"He's about to *choke* in front of everyone," Aehlla says, voice like a blade sliding clean through. "You know it. I know it. Let me go. Verses locked. Loaded. Ready."

My brain is screaming NO NO NO, but my gut? My gut's whispering maybe this is the only play.

Because the Summit doesn't forgive soft. It doesn't forgive safe. It chews you up, spits you out, and Aehlla- she's chaos. She's fire. And maybe that's what saves us. Or kills us.

The team? Silent. Just darting looks, quick and sharp like cards being dealt in a back alley. Some look like they're watching a train wreck in slow motion. Some look like they want front-row seats to the explosion.

Marcus exhales, this deep, hollow sound like someone just slammed a door on his soul.

"Fine."

The word's out before I even feel it. My chest is tight. My tongue tastes metal. "Fine. But listen to me-" I lean in so hard I can smell the heat off her skin. "You're carrying the Rari brand on your back. You crash, we all burn."

She smirks. The audacity. "Relax," she says, smooth as silk over a blade.

I whisper, "Remember why you write."

And then I'm moving before my legs catch up to my brain, arm shooting up. "Mirror Team sends Aehlla next."

The noise shifts- buzzes, sharp whispers slicing through the air. Aerion freezes mid-scroll, checks his tablet like I've just pissed on sacred law. His head jerks up, eyes narrowing like knives.

"Hold up," he barks, voice cutting across the hall like a whip. Taps the screen, jabs at the lineup like he wants to rip it apart. "Orion. Freya. Adonis. Gabriella." Reads them out loud like a death sentence. "That's the pre-intermission lock. Aehlla?" He looks at me like I've grown horns. "She wasn't even on until after the break."

Fuck, Aerion's gonna call us out for breaking protocol. This could get messy.

I'm gripping the table so hard it feels like it might snap in half. Aerion's walking to the mic, all calm and shiny like a man about to kill me with a smile. My gut? Knots. Big ugly ones. That face- yeah, I know that face. Diplomatic smile, polite execution loading in the chamber.

He clears his throat. Taps the mic like he's blessing it. "Alright, folks," he says, voice smooth like butter melting on a blade. "Seems we have a- slight adjustment."

And my stomach just free-falls. This is it. Here comes the public roast.

He waves his tablet like a holy text. “Checked the manifest-” God, he really said manifest-“ and the pre-intermission lineup for Rari was Orion, Freya, Adonis, Gabriella.”

Pause. Silence that tastes like blood.

Then- “However” He grins. That grin. And I swear something unhinged sparks in his eyes. “Seems inspiration just smacked us in the face like a supernova!”

Wait. What?

“When I *tried* to stop Aehlla-” his voice dips, teasing, like he’s letting the whole room in on the joke-“ she insisted. Was a little rude about it, honestly.” A laugh ripples through the hall. Actual laughs. Like this is comedy hour. “But hey-who are we to chain raw creative chaos, right? Clearly, the muses are drunk and dancing with us tonight!”

I’m blinking like an idiot. My jaw? Gone. On the floor somewhere. Did he just- did Aerion just *cover for us*?

What dimension am I in?

“And let’s be real,” he keeps going, voice swelling now like he’s riding a wave, “sometimes the best moments-the real art-aren’t planned. They explode. They burn. They shock the hell out of us all!”

The crowd- oh, they’re eating it up. Clapping, cheering, like this is the best twist of the night.

And me? My heart is a drumline gone rabid. My brain is screaming what the fuck on a loop.

Aehlla’s smirking like she just won a war. And maybe she did. Or maybe we’re about to get nuked harder than anyone here realizes.

“Where does he find such obnoxious sentences, how even-” I cringe myself in.

“Maybe because Aerion is one of the top teenage poets of the country and has 4 worldwide summit awards already?” Calis answered my question without me completing it. “Plus he’s my friend.”

I just stared at the screen. Blank. Like, what the hell just happened? Aerion didn’t just cover us- he spun it like gold. Turned Aehlla into some kind of spontaneous artistic prodigy. The crowd bought it. Hell, they cheered for it.

I looked at my team. They looked back at me. Same wide-eyed disbelief plastered across their faces.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” I muttered under my breath, heat still crawling up my neck. “Looks like we just got a free pass.”

My head shook on instinct, and then- slow- this grin cracked across my face like the first spark before a fire.

“Alright, Aehlla,” Calis murmured beside me, voice soft, almost smug. “Don’t let Rari down.”

And then she was gone. Up. Moving like a shot fired from a gun.

She hit the stage like she owned it. Shook Aerion’s hand like the queen blessing the king, then yanked the mic up to her lips.

“Sorry,” she said, breath hot against the mic, voice dripping with that sharp edge only Aehlla had. “Guess the last-minute plan didn’t kill the Summit, huh?”

She laughed then. This weird, low scoff of a laugh- like the whole thing was a joke only she got. A laugh that made my stomach twist because, damn it, maybe she was about to burn this room down.

Then she cleared her throat- loud, deliberate- like she was clearing the stage too.

like diamonds and honey

true that i don’t always think about you, as sweet as the candy floss stuck in my teeth, but why don’t i take a chance? There are no guarantees here. The

*playlists and letters written for you are useless now. I've come far enough to tell
you that I've loved you.*

*even if you're not precious like diamonds or sweeter than honey, I'd still want
you. I'll follow you till your graveyard. much more in a lifetime that I've
affected someone. what's the point in loving you if i can't take your name if
anyone asks what is love?*

*your happiness basked in a glow of warm rain on an afternoon of a summer.
let me love you so that you won't dwell in your past because of your memories,
rather make new memories for your future and me.*

*let me look through your windows as if twas snowing, while we watch the white
become our home.*

*Why has my soul not moved from you, whilst it has been watching you do all
the wrong things?*

*If death comes apart, would you still be seeking the harmony that wanders
through my soul?*

*drizzling down to just keep this a secret for the longest time. my mind couldn't
comprehend the reason for loving you, but when it does, i'll promise you can
still keep my hoodies. they do smell great to be honest.*

*the smell of wet mud after rain halts me, even though I would be drenching in
it with your feelings floating in me.*

Maybe in the next life I will be yours.

maybe in the next life you wouldn't be mine.

*but right now I want to wear you like a hug until I sleep with the rain in my
window, smelling like you.*

like diamonds and honey.

I doubt my ability to write now. I clapped frantically. And I made sure she saw that. Beautiful. I should've put a bet on her, I would've won big. She tilted her

head up from the tablet, I saw her damp eyes. This piece wasn't ordinary, this was her life. What she always wanted. The jury stood up.

Oh my shit.

She already had them in the clutch.

"Well, second act is done! And judging by the jury's faces, they're either completely convinced or dying for caffeine. Either way- they're hooked!" Aerion boomed like he was hosting a reality show.

Bro. Who even gave this man a mic?

Then- out of nowhere- one of the jury members pipes up. Calm. Sharp. The type who probably bills per syllable. "Do you have something else to recite? I'm intrigued by your spirit here."

What? Since when do jury members ask for encores?

And me- I'm thinking, *no way she's got anything left*. She burned the stage down five minutes ago, her tablet should be bone-dry. But Aehlla? Oh, Aehlla always makes me eat those thoughts.

She's already digging through her tablet like it's a treasure chest, fingers flying, hair falling in her face, eyes wild like *yeah, I've got more- watch me*.

"Go on" insisted the jury.

"Damn, getting to recite more in summits is as rare as you getting sex Rari" Calis intervened.

"For fucks sake, I have taught her half of the things about poetry!"

"I wanna see you perform". He clicks his tongue. "You? A poet? Don't flatter yourself, boy. Leave the artistry to those who possess the gift."

My ego burned up. Even my diarrhea has a personality and it's better than him. Aehlla strung up,

*if your love
if your love came in a handful of shacks, i'd sell myself to own you
despite the poison you have soaked*

*the love i would dearly caress even if it came in a bed of thorns
the little sleep i would get while the pain makes me think of you
you didn't want me but i needed to
have a better goodbye when i wanted to
if your love wasn't so right in any way
i would gladly be wrong to have you someday
i live a quiet life
as peaceful as it seems
and lonely as it gets
i seek distraction
to avoid seeing the darker side of myself
i was built for a broken heart
to be kind to people who dont even deserve love
oh wonderful thing
to live with this hate that comes with being quiet.*

This got relatable. Sunk me in. Again the applause struck and I wanted to go next now. Fuck this system, the comms, the slate, the process. I was next. I sucked in a breath, deep enough to burn. Lines spun through my head like knives- every word sharpened for one purpose: carve Calis down to size. The stage. The lights. All those eyes glaring like spotlights in a courtroom. Didn't matter. I locked in. This was war, and my weapon was rhythm. My delivery had to slice clean. Every pause, a punch. Every beat, a hit.

Then- bam- Aehlla exploded off the stage. Smiling like she just robbed a bank and got away with it. Hair flying, adrenaline dripping off her like perfume. She'd killed it. No- she'd nuked the whole damn room.

And watching her glow like that? Yeah. It lit something in me. Proud? Hell yeah. But also this- fire under my ribs. Because now I had to follow *that*.

She came down wearing a smile designating honour and achievement.

My jaw locked so hard it hurt. Muscles twitching, grinding like gears, all because of him. Calis. His voice still echoing in my skull like a bad song on repeat:

"You? A poet? Don't flatter yourself, boy. Leave artistry to the gifted."

Yeah? Screw you. Be real damn sure I've got a gift, Calis. Santa dropped it off yesterday with a bow. Want the receipt?

He wanted to cut me down, but all he did was light a fuse. Now I was burning, and I wasn't stopping until the smoke choked him out.

And then- Aehlla. Floating off the stage like she'd been carved from pure light. Beaming, glowing, aura screaming *I own this place*. Damn, she'd killed it. Slaughtered the room and left it bleeding with applause. And God, I was proud. Proud like my chest might split open. I pushed her here, stood behind her every step- and now she was shining like neon fire. She deserved every second of it.

I smiled- weak, shaky- but my heart was a drumline gone rabid. I wanted to tell her. Wanted to spit out my plan, this white-hot needed to shove Calis's words back down his throat. But no. Not yet. This was my war. My kill.

"Now me."

I straightened, legs already moving before my brain caught up. Hurled myself toward the stage like gravity was optional. Eyes hit me like bullets- sharp, cold, curious. Let them look.

Post-intermission act? Fine. I didn't give a damn. I brushed past Aehlla with a smirk so small it probably burned more than a grin.

Time to set the room on fire.

"Aerion, am next" I whispered.

"I can't just change the sequence now" he retaliated.

"You just did it for a girl, didn't you?" I gritted my teeth.

"I mean it's not-" he looked at the audience, still glued their eyes onto Aehlla.

"*Why not?*" he mused. "*It's my show, isn't it?*"

"*I'm already up here. The lights are on me. The crowd is waiting*" I took a step back.

He stood taller now, all that smooth, calm-host energy back in place, but different- sharper. A signal flicked from his fingers to the sound guy. Quick. Subtle. Like: *Get ready. Shit's about to happen.*

Aerion's eyes swept the room like a predator scanning a field. His mouth curled-not wide, just a little twitch at the corner. That grin that says, *I live for this chaos.* He wasn't nervous anymore. He was tasting the tension, letting it sit on his tongue like fine wine.

And then it hit me.

A cold wave slammed into my chest: Aehlla's performance wasn't random. It never was. Aerion knew Calis. Which meant- yeah- he knew about Aehlla too.

For a heartbeat, his eyes brushed mine. Soft. Almost kind. A flash of something like pity- or maybe amusement dressed as sympathy. Like he was saying, *Good luck, kid. You're walking into fire barefoot.*

The host in him? Oh, he was eating this up. I could feel it from across the room. In his head, this was ratings gold. If it worked, it'd be a Summit legend. If it crashed? Even better. A disaster everyone would talk about for years.

And me? I was about to step into the lion's mouth and pretend I knew how to bite back.

"Let's see what you've got, Rari," he tinkled, a predatory glint entering his gaze. *"Surprise me."*

I went to the mic stand, my lips barely touching it, in my raspy voice,

*angels that cried
the most light has been in my eyes
waiting for a sign
she was born with eyes that carried storms,
those kind that made the sun shiver
The night stretched long.
she walked through days, petty stones and hays,
as a thread pulled from an old story,
twisted at the edges,
but still woven with*

Hold Me When I Die

*dreams that only the lost could understand.
angels watched her
from their quiet place,
wings trembling with the weight
of something they couldn't name,
sadness they didn't know they could feel.
every step she took,
the ground beneath her
seemed to remember a time when it was softer,
when it wasn't marked
by footprints of those who've strayed
Too far from the dark.
she laughed sometimes,
but even the laughter
was a fragile thing,
like glass held too tightly,
a shimmer before the inevitable break.
the angels cried
not for her brokenness,
but for her strength to carry it in silence,
a burden too heavy for even
the heavens to bear
they let their tears fall
not to save her,
but to honour what she had become
a girl who walked among shadows
yet still held the promise of dawn
in her trembling hands
quite the steady would know
she left herself for herself
the pity she was offered
the strength she was gnawed
the demons were too envy of her
for they never saw the angels bawl for a human.*

Each sentence lay below me the memories I shared with Aehlla. The last word of my poem hung in the air, a fragile echo in the sudden hush. I couldn't tell

anyone I wrote this for Aehlla. *My* Aehlla. Not the aehlla sitting in front of me, clapping hysterically, and adoring me.

But she was the only one I saw clapping for me. Just her. The rest were invisible. It was like that was all that mattered. She appreciates me.

"Rari, words fail me! That performance transcended the ordinary, a symphony of emotion that resonated within these very walls. The audience is enraptured! Do you have another poem for the evening?" Aerion boomed the speakers. He very well saw my sheet of paper, knowing I only have one poem for this evening.

"I-" I pleaded. "Well, Rari?" Aerion prompted, his voice laced with a hint of playful challenge. "Don't keep us in suspense!"

My heart lurched. Another poem? I hadn't even considered an encore. My hand instinctively clutched the single sheet of paper containing the poem I had just performed.

My heart said just blabber bullshit. But what kind of a leader would I be if this wasn't my forte? I saw Aehlla, a small, almost imperceptible nod, a silent vote of confidence that cut through my panic like a beacon. It was enough.

Aerion wanted me to fuck up. I saw that. Even the jury wanted that. Even Calis.

I had no paper, I had no writing, but I had Aehlla. And in that moment, that was all I needed.

*clouds in me
whispers in the night
me with a smile delight
our hearts matched a rhyme
with our moments frozen in time
cherish each, one by one
catching the rays of the sun
with the sun shining golden and orangish hues
our laughter echoes dimming the sky blues
for you are a gift, my special pearl
needed you more than myself*

Hold Me When I Die

*though my life was a whirl
the rain we wished once
now they seem to be roses and guns
what lays in the sight of the moon
you were my thousand suns
the wane of our distance
and the lack of our pain
slumber be upon me the thought of my existence
wished to smell the sweetness of the same rain.*

Neither did I, nor Aehlla blinked even once. Aerion was the first one to applaud. The thunder rumbled slowly across the room, slowly echoing in my ears.

It was wrapped like a warm hug.

Aehlla/ present

*If you were my moon,
then what fear would there be of the night?
I've become a tale in your life,
even the moon seems lost compared to you.
Those ancient paths of yours,
Which noble person has taken you both away?
Refuse those who are making promises to you,
was my love so little that it couldn't transcend promises?
Embrace yourself with intensity, what shame is there in knowing yourself?
You are so innocent, why dream ordinary dreams?
You are an example,
your cheek would even anger the moon.
Make decisions with strangers,
embracing you is for me to do.
I have become different from the world,
who knows when my funeral procession passed.
How could I be the diamonds of the skies?*

when I couldn't even count the tears in your eyes.

Evelyn seemingly aced it. She must've done it a countless number of times. Practiced it. Ensured it. That girl is what I call capable.

"How many times did you practice it? 'Cause I did like 50 times in my room and still my heart was thumping more than I-" I was fangirling, I could see that, Evelyn took her seat at the table.

"I- umm, wrote this in the taxi, Aehlla" she called out, her voice more soothing than before.

She did what? In that 30 minute traffic hectic ride? I lowkey wanted to marry her now.

And here my first applause meant the world to me. Not everyone, only him. He was the only one I saw clapping for me. just him. the rest were invisible. It was like that was all that mattered. He appreciates me.

The intermission began in no time. Guys left to have some cake and coffee and some elegant aromas, I don't even know the name of. The thing I was cautious of now was not to pay any heed to Calis. I have a new team, and Mirari of course.

"Aehlla", Rari began, "mind if I ask you something in private?"

It wasn't a good time to stutter, but I did. "Ya- yeah sure".

Evelyn smiled as if she read his mind already.

The second Rari's hand closed around mine, the floor dropped out from under me. Not hard, not demanding- soft. Careful. Like a question pressed into my skin.

My heart went ballistic. Slamming against my ribs so loud it drowned everything- applause, voices, the whole damn room. All gone. Just his hand on mine. Just that heat crawling up my arm, burning me alive in the quietest way possible.

It was nothing. A hand. Fingers. Skin. So why did it feel like lightning just kissed my bones?

Then he pulled. Not yanked- just pulled. A gentle tug that said *come with me* without making a sound.

Where? Why? What the hell does he want?

Questions ricocheted in my skull, smashing into each other, useless. My legs moved anyway, like they belonged to him now. Every step was his.

And the only thing I could feel- the only thing that mattered- was the heat of his hand swallowing mine, like the world didn't exist past that single point of contact.

Each step felt like a leap into the unknown. My inner voice, usually a calm and steady guide, was now a frantic chorus of whispers: *Don't read too much into this. It's just a hand. It doesn't mean anything. But what if it does?*

We weave through the crowd, and everything just- fades. The music, the voices, all that buzz- it turns into this fuzzy background hum, like someone turned the world's volume down. The only thing loud now? His hand around mine. Warm. Solid. Real.

He's never done this before. Not once. So why now? Why here? My brain's spinning, tripping over itself. Hope pops up, stupid and bright, and then- bam- fear crashes in and stomps all over it.

Then he stops. Just like that. No warning. And I almost slam into him because of course I do. Smooth. Real smooth.

It's quiet here. Weirdly quiet. This tiny little alcove tucked away from everything, like the room just gave us permission to do something reckless.

He turns to me, slow, and the dim light does this thing to his face- makes it hard to read. Makes him look like a secret.

My breath? Gone. My cheeks? On fire. My heart? Yeah, it's trying to escape through my throat. I have about three thousand words fighting to spill out, and none of them make sense.

He's gonna say something. Ask something. And I swear, if I survive the next ten seconds without combusting, it'll be a miracle.

"Do you want coffee or tea?" he kept walking along and I stopped at the ridiculous question.

"You wanted to ask me this?" I said disappointingly.

"Wha- no, no" he clears himself and comes closer, close enough his minty breath cleared up my nostrils.

He chewed his bubblegum more, the rhythmic snap-crack a jarring counterpoint to the soft, intimate silence that had enveloped us and asked, "I want to know how it was to date Calis."

His words- just words- but they slammed into me. No warning, no buildup. Just *bam*, and suddenly I was back there. Back with *him*. My throat closed up like it wanted to keep the past inside. Calis. God. Why did that name still have power over me?

My heart was doing this awful thing- hammering like I'd been caught in something. Not lying, exactly, but exposed. Rari didn't know. Not really. And now? I was supposed to just- *talk* about it?

It wasn't just a relationship. It was a mess. A fever dream of affection and confusion. Calis had this charm, yeah. That thing where he could make you feel like the center of the world and then slowly twist the map so you didn't even know where "center" was anymore. I don't even know when it stopped being love- or if it ever really was.

I wanted to be honest. Some part of me did. But another part? It flinched. Hard. I didn't want to see Rari's face change. I didn't want him looking at me like I was someone who let that happen. Like I *let* someone like Calis take over my life.

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Tried again.

"It's- complicated," I finally got out, staring at the wall, or the floor, anywhere but him. "It was a long time ago. I'm not- God, I'm not that girl anymore."

I meant it. Mostly. I think.

“I didn’t even know what love *was* back then,” I added, slower. “I thought I did, but no. It wasn’t love. It was something else. Something sharp and clingy and addictive.”

I took a breath. That kind of gasp, like you’re trying not to fall apart mid-sentence.

“I want to tell you,” I said, words tumbling, not planned, not pretty. “It’s just—it’s hard. It’s hard to talk about. But I need you to know- I’m not her. I learned. I changed.”

Then I smiled. The kind of smile that feels like it’s barely hanging on. Like duct tape over a cracked window.

The past was loud in my chest. But I sat there, hoping Rari could hear the quiet part- the part that said: *please still see me*.

He still didn’t let go of my hand. He walked me to the buffet offering a coffee. “Vanilla or Chocolate Latte?” he asks.

“Caramel with two spoons of sugar” we both spoke in unison.

Wait, how did he know? He stalked me, for sure. He followed me on my socials? I was high thinking about it.

“Don’t worry, it’s alright” he reassures. He grabs our coffee and we sit beside a fake ass tree, growing from a root embedded in the university ground. The tree had lights as leafs, and dimly lit like an aesthetic cafe.

“Wish my parents sent me to this school, huh” I joked.

“Yes, I guess, your old town wasn’t so cool huh” he said.

“Not as much as this, duh.”

“And then you get guys like Calis to date.”

I could sense his sarcasm as he looked at me, biting his lips, repressing his smile.

“Sorry, but I can’t help it!” he lets out his horrendous laugh and I sit here embarrassed. “Just itches me to know what made you think he was the one”.

“Fine, oh my god, so much bullshit to know my story”. I thought maybe it's not a bad idea to open up to someone I adored this much, in such a short time.

“It didn't have to be that way, oops”.

“You won't judge?”

“I keep my promises.”

I wouldn't mention my karma though. We're not on that page yet.

Aehlla's karma / present

Looking back now- god, it's all so obvious. The universe was laughing the whole damn time. Calis didn't *turn* toxic. He *was*, from the start. It was just dressed better back then. Hidden under all that charm, the soft smiles, the too-good timing. He knew exactly what to say, and exactly *when* to say it- the kind of guy who'd give you the right words right when you're weakest. And she ate it up. She wanted it to be real so bad. She *needed* it. Soulmate, twin flame, whatever the fuck she was calling it that week. Red flags? She saw them. Hell, she practically *framed* them. Called them passion. Called them "depth." Like if she loved him hard enough, he'd become the version she made up in her head.

And I was there. The whole time. Sitting in her mind like a ghost with no hands. Screaming into the void while she smiled through it. I've known her since she *existed*. I knew every gut feeling she ignored, every flinch she buried. I *tried*. I tried to warn her. But you can't save someone who's convinced they're already safe.

The worst part? Calis was the only guy who actually *talked* about his feelings-like, really laid them out, raw and bleeding on the table. And of course, that's what pulled her in. That stupid, wide-eyed softness in her that made her believe honesty meant goodness. So she kept turning to him. Again. And again. And as her karma? I was screaming. I *did not* approve. Not even a little. Watching her fall harder just because he knew how to say "I feel broken" without flinching- it made me want to shake her. *He wasn't vulnerable. He was manipulative with a good vocabulary.*

What was that? Puberty?

"You're different, Aehlla," he said that first night, eyes locked on hers like he meant every goddamn syllable. And maybe he did. Or maybe he was just really fucking good at looking like he did. Either way, her skin lit up- just from the way he looked at her.

A smile's one thing. Anyone can smile. But his eyes? His eyes made me *want* to believe him. "You see the world in a way most people don't. It's- captivating," he said, and then his hand was on her face, and then- he kissed her. Like they were the only two people left and the world could wait.

And I ate it up. Of course I did. How could I not? There was something about the way he delivered it, like every line had already been carved into a poem. And me? I was just the damn muse at this point, wasn't I? A body to hold, a story to inspire, something soft to set his metaphors on fire.

"Really?" I'd said, cheeks burning, eyes half-lowered like some stupid cliché. "I just- I try to be myself."

He pressed his forehead to mine. His skin was warm, but it smelled like smoke and whiskey and something just slightly broken.

"You're amazing, Aehlla," he said, slurred but soft. "I love you."

It was too soon. Way too soon.

But I smiled anyway.

And deep down, something whispered: *It's an illusion. This love? It's just a line from a show he's running-and you're the audience and the stage and the goddamn set design.*

And I stayed.

Because I wanted it to be real.

Calis, I figured out later- too late- was running on fumes. His whole sense of self was this hollowed-out space he kept trying to stuff full of compliments and clapping and people who looked at him like he mattered. It wasn't love he wanted from me. It was reflection. I was supposed to hold up the version of him he couldn't create alone.

He needed worship. Not partnership. That hole in him? That came from somewhere. I didn't ask enough questions back then. But I remember this one holiday, I was in the kitchen pretending not to eavesdrop, and I heard his mom through the phone- sharp, cold: *"Why can't you be more like your brother?"*

I don't think he knew I heard.

But I saw the way he froze. The way his face didn't move at first, then slid slowly into that too-smooth smile he used like armor. He never talked about them. Not really. If I tried, he'd just shut the door, or go silent. Go somewhere I couldn't follow. He was never *really* around, not when it mattered. Not for me.

At the start, I was all in. Completely. I thought he was brilliant. He *sounded* brilliant. "Your poems are incredible, Calis," I used to say, all breathless after his readings, even when something inside me was already twitching with unease. "You're going to be famous someday, I swear." And he'd light up- grab me, kiss me too long, too hard. Eyes wide like he didn't believe me but needed to anyway.

"You really think so?" he'd whisper, voice low and uneven against my neck. "You're the only one who gets it. Who gets *me*."

And God, his breath. Smoke and bourbon and whatever else he'd swallowed to survive the night. I'd smile. I'd nod. I'd rub his back. I'd say "I'm proud of you,"

because he needed it. And then he'd vanish into the bathroom for hours, and I'd sit there, pretending not to worry, but watching the clock anyway.

Over time, it shifted. My awe became an expectation. Not mine- *his*. I had to always believe. Always adore. Always applaud. Because the second I didn't- if I paused too long before a compliment, or forgot to show up, or didn't react big enough-he'd shift. The smile would falter. The warmth would turn cold.

Once, we were out with friends. Casual, chill night. Food, drinks, nothing dramatic. But even there, he wouldn't let go of my hand. Not for the whole meal. Like he was scared I'd drift if he didn't keep touching me. Or like I was some kind of grounding wire he needed to stay real.

It looked romantic, probably.

It wasn't. It was control, dressed in affection.

And I didn't know how to name it yet. But I felt it. Every time.

I have had my moments regarding Calis, adamant Aehlla just wouldn't listen.

"I REALLY WANT TO GO TO HIM. I SWEAR HE MAKES ME HAPPY, PLEASE LET ME LOVE HIM!" she pleaded to me like he was her last lifeline.

"Why are you here? I thought I asked you to leave" he ordered skeptically. "Also, why are you spending so much time with Selene lately?" he asked, not even pretending it was casual. His voice had that edge- tight, suspicious- as he slung his arm around my shoulder like a leash. Everyone looked at me, all at once. Of course they did.

"She's just going to drag you down with all her whining," he added, lips close to my ear. I could feel the tension in his fingers, like he thought the squeeze might shut me up.

I held my ground. Barely. "That's not fair, Calis. She needs someone. I'm just trying to be there."

He didn't even blink. "And I don't?" His voice sharpened. "I need you too, Aehlla, but you're always- *always*- with someone else. Running off. Acting like I'm just- optional."

We'd hit the wall. Again.

He needed to be the sun. The most talented, the most praised, the one everyone circled around. And if I ever started to glow a little too bright? It pissed him off.

The show was coming up- our first time performing on the same stage. I was terrified. Not of the performance. *Of him.*

"That song you wrote is- nice," he said that week, barely glancing at me as he looked around the room, scanning for something or someone more useful. "It's just not really- special, you know? Like, not your best work."

Then he kissed me. Because that's what he did. When he knew he'd gone too far. When he needed me to shut up and feel chosen again.

But that kiss felt hollow. Like he was kissing a version of me he missed, or maybe just a version he could still control.

I knew, right then, without ceremony: that was the last kiss.

It was New Year's Eve. Last night of the year. We'd made a deal- if either of us got too drunk, we'd go home. No fights. No drama.

He got drunk.

She knew he wouldn't leave.

So she did.

Fog. Not fire. That's what it felt like, creeping in until I noticed I was drowning in it.

It started with little cuts- "Maybe tone it down," "Are you really going to wear that?"- things that felt small but echoed. I'd laugh, shrug it off, but later- damn- my skin would crawl.

He began pulling me out of my orbit. "Your friends don't get it. Only I do." And so she retreated- from texts, calls, the group hangouts. Until the silence around me? I wore that silence like guilt. Because it was me withdrawing, right?

His kisses became apologies that never landed. I let them do their work- over and over- hoping they'd blur the sting of his words. But the pain stuck.

That performance? We didn't show up. She couldn't. She ended up shoving him out the door- tears hot and leaking- while he sneered insults, loud enough so the cab driver must've heard. Then back at his place, that hug- it was robotic, hollow. She- my heart?- she broke into pieces because the warmth had gone cold.

We lay in that silence- until he spat: "I don't care. I just don't give a shit anymore." And when he did- I believed him. Something inside me died a little right then.

He didn't care. He was too wrapped in his own darkness to care about anything else. He couldn't hold love- by himself, or for me. And that's a horror that doesn't fade easily.

But- it taught me. Boundaries aren't betrayals. Self-love isn't selfish. It's birthright.

So I'm rebuilding. Not perfectly. Not quickly. Messy. Bloodied. But moving.

Rari is patient. He's not flawless- who is? But he laughs with her, not at her. He listens. Doesn't flinch. Doesn't suffocate her. That- that's love I can breathe in.

I could still remember the night she sulked in front of me, bowed, and said, "Love is wrong. It cannot just break me up so easily right?" her head down and she hadn't opened her fist since.

She slowly lifted her face, her cheeks red, eyes swollen, she whimpered, "Right?"

"Aeblla, I can't promise you peace," I hushed her, "but unless something goes wrong, everything cannot go right."

I looked down on her even though I didn't want to. "Would you take a shit in the toilet, and wish to put it back in your ass? No right, so why would you even CONSIDER to get back with Calis?"

The pain of his indifference was agonizing, a constant ache in her heart. But it was also a catalyst for change. A much needed one. It forced me to confront the harsh reality of our relationship, to acknowledge the toxicity that was poisoning my damn soul. And it ultimately gave me strength to walk away, to break free from the karmic cycle, to choose myself over this fucking illusion of love.

“I need to break up with you,” she spoke up.

“Sorry?” he didn’t gasp or was surprised.

“I said- I need a break up.”

“Why?” the audacity this guy had, made her think, ‘you dipshit really treat me like a trashcan, ordering me, using me for your poems, only loving me when the lights go out, trash talking me just to be cool in front of people you don’t care, getting so damn jealous if I perform better than you, I have had enough!’

But she hesitated.

Her willpower wanted no more arguments.

“My dad’s having his transfer to another town. I need to leave ‘us’ here”.

“So you don’t love me anymore, or you’re just giving up because your dad’s transferring?”

“I don’t love you Calis.”

“You know that’s a lie right? You’re definitely lying”

Tears shone through her damp eyes. “Trust me, if you can, but I am not.”

“WHAT THE FUCK DOES LOVE FEEL LIKE?” Now we’re getting to the real questions.

“It’s supposed to be vulnerable. It’s supposed to be soft. Silent. Craveful.” Aehlla closed the door behind her, seeing him for the last time, as she thought.

He was eating her heart. And she wished for his love bites.

Mirari's karma / present

"Filmy" that's all Rari said winking at Aehlla.

"You're mocking me, aren't you?" Aehlla gasps.

"Just a girl having a traumatised infatuation who thinks if she had a desert, she doesn't deserve the ocean" he speaks softly lifting his coffee to his lips.

Aehlla had an expression even she didn't know her face could make. "I don't judge people Aehlla" he assured again.

"I know" was all she got in return.

"There you guys are!" a familiar voice sounded, grabbing their attention. Ugh not him again. EW. Calis patted Rari's back, "I thought we could roam the river bank outside, needed some fresh air."

Aehlla inhaled a ton of fresh air, “I think I should go find Evenlyn, she must be alone anyway.”

“Hey wait”, Calis interfered, but Aehlla had gone past him.

“Hey Calis, I wanted to ask you something,” Rari asked calmly. His eyes glittering, and his upper lip covered with milk froth. Calis turned his head following Aehlla. He stopped and turned back.

“Yah sure.”

“What was it like to date Aehlla?”

“Empowering” he replied, every facial expression reminiscing our old Cillian. Rari saw every piece of his friend in him, but didn’t move a muscle to show it.

Calis was intrigued by his question so much he was forced by his curiosity to sit beside him and talk about this crap. So generous.

“Honestly? From where I stood- it wasn’t that bad. Like- not the way she probably tells it.” He tapped the side of his bottle, not really looking at Rari. “I mean, yeah, there were some shitty moments. I messed up. We both did. But it wasn’t like I was trying to hurt her.”

He shifted in his seat. “She sees everything in black and white. I don’t know. Life’s not like that. Especially when you’re young and kinda just figuring stuff out. It’s messy.”

The beer was warm now, and he looked at it like it had betrayed him.

“I met her when I was a mess, okay? My parents were breathing down my neck nonstop, telling me to give up poetry, do something safe. ‘Stable,’ whatever that means. I felt like I couldn’t move, couldn’t think.”

He scratched his arm, leg bouncing without him noticing. “Then she came along. And she- I don’t know. She believed in me. Like really believed. No one else gave a shit.”

He exhaled hard through his nose. “I clung to that. To her. Because it felt like the only thing that kept me from losing it completely.”

Rari was silent, but listening.

“We used to sit in my place, just talking. My apartment was tiny, freezing half the time, but it didn’t matter. We’d stay up and talk about stuff-our plans, or fears, whatever. She’d listen to my poems. Actually *listen*. Not just nod. It mattered to her. I could tell.”

His voice dropped. “Those nights- I felt like I had something. Like I wasn’t completely falling apart. Even if I kind of was.”

Rari didn’t say anything, just listened. Calis could feel everything he’d pushed down starting to float back up- and not slowly either. It was all over the place now. He swallowed.

“I me- I showed up for her. I really did. Every single one of her shows, even when I was dead tired or completely drained. I’d be there. I clapped the loudest, probably. First to hug her, first to say I was proud. And yeah- okay, there was this small part of me, sometimes, that felt- off. A flicker of jealousy. But it wasn’t serious. It passed. Her happiness meant something to me. Even if she never really said anything about it. Not once.”

He rubbed his hands together, not even aware of it. “Did I get jealous? Sure. Yeah. But not in some weird ‘own-her’ kind of way. It was fear, more than anything. Fear she’d outgrow me. Be better without me. I’d see her on stage, just- lighting up the whole damn room. And I’d think, ‘God, she’s out of my league.’ And then I’d go quiet. That’s when I’d start pulling back.”

He took a breath, a little shaky.

“I was slipping. I know that. I started being- gone. Not physically, but not *there*. I wasn’t showing up the same way. Not because I didn’t care, but because everything else around me was falling apart. My parents were on my back nonstop. Rejections kept rolling in. I didn’t know how to keep up. I shut down. I thought backing off was better than dragging her into my mess.”

He paused, finally looked up.

“I didn’t want to be alone. I didn’t. But I convinced myself it was better for her if I stepped back. I don’t even know if I believe that anymore.”

His voice dropped.

“I made mistakes. I know I did. I’m not gonna stand here and act like I was some perfect boyfriend. I wasn’t. I did what I thought made sense in the moment. But none of it- none of it was meant to hurt her.”

He blinked slowly, face unreadable for a second.

“I don’t know. I just- I loved her. For real. And yeah, it wasn’t perfect. But there was love. And support. And I wish she’d admit that part too. It wasn’t all bad. And it’s not fair that she only tells half the story.”

Rari seemed to get it- like he really understood how much Calis had cared about Aehlla. And yeah, maybe he did. There wasn’t any sign he was lying. Not once. No stutter, no pause. The way he spoke about her- it just came out. Like he didn’t have to stop and think. Like she was still living somewhere in his head, just waiting to be talked about. It just flowed like himalayan water down the green lush meadows.

“You still have her pictures don’t you?” I asked.

“I thought I might delete them when she finds someone better than me,” he smiled slyly.

“Maybe she has.”

“You love her, don’t you?”

“Maybe I do.”

“I spoke too much. Am sorry, but because of you I realised those things I never wanted to even think of.”

“You’re welcome I guess” Rari chuckles.

“Time to pass the torch, eh?” he laughs it off, pain squeaking along the sides of his laugh. “I have tried my best Rari, maybe she hasn’t seen it, but I did. I did everything I could.”

“I know Calis,” Rari was out of words.

“She was annoying anyway.” He became normal, his own self taking over him again.

“She can never be annoying unless she loved you completely with every cell in her body. You mistaken annoying with caring, don't worry, a small mistake,” he gulped down his last sip of coffee, “*you did everything you had to do. I will do everything I can*”.

The noise of the venue faded into the background- just this low hum- but inside Rari's head, it was chaos. Aehlila's voice, her words about Calis, kept looping. Over and over. The way she talked about him- it stung. He rubbed at his temples, like that could stop the buzzing. Did she really love him back then? Or was it all as toxic as she said? He didn't know. And now it was eating at him.

He cared about her. A lot. That was never the issue. But had he ever been enough for her? Had he given her what she actually needed? That thought alone was like a punch to the gut. He knew he wasn't awful- not really- but somehow his mind started dragging up every little insecurity like it had a score to settle.

His mouth went dry. A weird bitterness rose in his throat. Calis. Fucking Calis. Did Aehlila really see something in him? That guy? Then came the instant backlash in his brain: *No. No, she didn't deserve someone like him*. She deserved better. She deserved- someone real.

But what if that wasn't him either?

The doubt crept in fast. Was he trying too hard to be different from Calis? Should he try harder? Be more- something? He didn't even know what.

He glanced at her- laughing, glowing, surrounded by people like none of this touched her. She looked so light. And he just felt- heavy. He wanted to be what she needed. Her comfort. Her joy. But something deep down whispered: *What if she never really lets go of Calis?*

And that scared him more than he wanted to admit.

Then Evelyn's voice snapped through the fog. "Alright, the night's young stars are out- who's up for an after-party at Jack's? We can talk about prom stuff too."

Rari blinked, slow. "I think I'm gonna head out. I need sleep."

Yeah, sure.

We both know he's coming to find me later, probably around midnight. He'll talk. Really talk. He always does. But sulking right now? Useless. He knows that. Still won't stop him.

"Don't be a shithead, Rari!" Evelyn said, coming up behind him and digging her thumbs into his shoulders like she was trying to massage the angst out of him. "I swear I won't ask you to prom, alright? Calm your emo boy heart."

That got a laugh out of the group. Loud enough to echo.

"Yah, whatever," Rari muttered, standing up like he was being forced at gunpoint. "Intermission's almost over. Go find your damn seats."

Evelyn narrowed her eyes. She knew that tone. He was being weird. Like, extra weird. That asshole was definitely spiraling or planning something- probably both.

Jack's wasn't flashy from the outside, but inside? Big. Warm. Kinda hidden under those old train tracks with just enough mystery to make it cool. A total Evelyn move.

The place had this low, soft glow from those old-school Edison bulbs hanging all over, lighting up the lounge without trying too hard. Wooden beams overhead, beat-up couches that were weirdly comfortable, and walls covered in all kinds of random-ass art- photos, old posters, scribbles that probably meant something to someone. It all felt lived-in, like the place had seen some shit.

Evelyn had claimed this semi-private nook near the back- just far enough from the crowd, but not so tucked away it felt stiff. Big table. Cushy chairs. Room to talk over each other about prom, food, playlists, life. Everyone dropped into

their spots like they were deflating. Someone popped open a bag of chips. Someone else was already fighting the aux cord. The laughter? Chaotic. Loud. Just the right level of unhinged.

It felt like their zone.

“You’re in charge of prom?” Rari muttered, pouring soda into another soda like it was a cocktail. “Bitch, how many events are you even managing this month? Do you- actually study, or nah?”

Evelyn barely looked at him. “And *you’re* here mixing drinks like it’s potion class, right after pounding two coffees. Pathetic. If you’re gonna puke, aim for your poems, not this table.”

Damn. She didn’t miss.

He went quiet, and for once, stayed quiet. That one hit. Even I winced a little.

But Aehlla? Her face barely moved- except her eyes. They said a lot. Curious. Hopeful. Kind of dreamy in a way she probably thought nobody noticed. But Rari noticed. And so did I. Her smirk slipped in and out like it wasn’t supposed to be there.

Then, yeah- Calis showed up.

Of course he did.

He kept it together, I’ll give him that. Cool posture. Chill face. But I could feel it- he was only here for her. Not this party. Not the group. Just Aehlla.

Orion started bouncing like a kid. “What’s the date?”

“Yah, wait- what date is it again?” Freya added, leaning forward.

I groaned and tossed my hands up. “You do know prom’s a *couples* thing, right? You two are basically married.”

That got a laugh- too loud maybe. Rari laughed with them, full performance mode. It almost worked. Almost. But I could tell- he still wasn’t alright.

Laughter rippled around the table.

“See? Everyone agrees,” Rari said, grinning and pointing at no one in particular.

Evelyn clapped once, loud. “July 28th!” she announced like a queen declaring war. “And I expect all of you degenerates to have your dates figured out by then. No wallflowers. Don’t even try it.” She gave everyone a pointed look, dramatic as hell. “This is your official partner warning.”

“July 28th, huh?” Rari echoed. “That’s- deep summer. Shorts weather. Is there a tank-top dress code I missed or something?”

Evelyn barked a laugh. “Only if your date has *zero* style and lets you show up like that. And let’s be honest- who’s volunteering to take you?”

She shook her head, fake disappointed. “Better start working on that charm, Romeo.”

Aehlla had her hand half outstretched toward the mayo when Evelyn slid in beside her, lowering her voice. “Babe,” she said softly, “you might want to chill with the Rari staring. Before it becomes, like, a group activity.”

Aehlla’s head snapped around so fast she almost pulled something. Her cheeks went pink before she even opened her mouth. “Was it- that obvious?”

“Fuck yah, girl,” Evelyn laughed, flicking a bit of mayo onto Aehlla’s arm. “I *see* what you’re doing.”

Aehlla’s face went from light pink to full-on fire truck red. Her neck, her ears- burning. She could’ve sworn her thoughts were playing on a projector behind her head for the whole damn table to read.

“Listen,” Evelyn leaned in, her voice low but loaded, “this isn’t complicated. Find a flower shop- it’s not even late, most of them are still open. Pick something that looks like it tried a little. Then take your best poem- the one you’ve been hoarding like a psycho- and write it down. Rari’s soft. I’ve known him since he had braces and too many feelings. Trust me. A little honesty will mess him up in the best way.”

She gave Aehlla’s hand a quick squeeze. “I’ll stall him here. Go.”

The flower shop was over-scented to hell, like a mix of beauty and bathroom spray. Aehlla grimaced. "Okay. Effort. I'm not judging- too hard."

She picked out a chaotic mix of blooms, wrestled with the damn note for way too long, then jammed it between a rose and some stubborn lily that wouldn't stay still. Outside the pub, she clutched it to her chest.

"Do you think he'll actually like it?" she asked, twisting her fingers so hard they hurt.

Evelyn raised an eyebrow. "Seriously? You don't *already* know the answer?"

Before she could overthink it, the pub door swung open.

Rari stepped out, waving to someone behind him. He spotted them and let out this huge, dramatic sigh. "You are not gonna believe what just happened-Sarah asked me to prom!"

Aehlla blinked. "Wait- *our* Sarah?"

Rari shot her a look. "How many Sarahs do you think I talk to, Aehlla?"

Her brain short-circuited. She shoved the bouquet toward him like it was something she didn't want to hold anymore. "I just- I wanted to give you this. Just, uh- read the note later. Please."

He paused, surprised. Then took it, slow. "Thanks-" The word slipped out soft, like it caught him off guard.

"Go home safe, Rari," a voice said from behind him.

Rari turned. Calis.

"You gonna hit me with a car, or what?" Rari asked, deadpan.

Calis didn't even glance at him. Like he wasn't there. His eyes went straight to Aehlla.

Rari kept his gaze down, fixed on the bouquet in his hands- until something shifted. He looked up.

“Aehlla, can I drop you home?” His voice was steady, but quieter than usual.
“Maybe for the last time?”

Aehlla froze. Her mind clearly somewhere else. Lost. She looked at Rari, unsure.

“Aehlla?” Calis stepped closer, eager now.

“Oh- uh, I mean- Evelyn can drop me,” she mumbled. “It’s fine.”

Calis nodded, but didn’t move. “Right. I just, I just wanted to talk for a minute. Is that okay?”

“Go, Aehlla,” Rari cut in, voice sharp. “He *needs* to talk.”

Evelyn stayed quiet, for once. She knew if Calis crossed a line, she’d be the first to throw him under the damn bus. No hesitation.

Aehlla blinked. “Yah?”

“I know you’re not coming back, Aehlla,” Calis said, his voice rough. “I stopped expecting it. But there’s still this- this fucking hope. That maybe you would. That I’d get one more chance to get it right.”

He paused. Swallowed. Tried to hold it together.

“I’m leaving tomorrow.”

Then- surprisingly- he turned to Rari.

“I know you’ve found your people here. They’re good. You’re good. Just- take care of yourself, alright?” He hesitated, jaw tight. “Next time something feels beautiful- I hope you think of yourself too.”

He turned back to Aehlla. “Goodbye.”

Aehlla held his eyes for a second. Her voice was soft. “Thank you, Calis. For saying that. And- for everything. I know that wasn’t easy.”

She glanced at Rari, just briefly. “I’m happy now. I’m finding my way. And yes-I’m in good hands. Goodbye.”

Calis gave a slow nod, then turned. Walked off weirdly fast, like the moment was heavier than he'd let on.

Evelyn's voice broke the quiet.

"Should we leave, Aehlla?"

Aehlla watched him go- didn't blink, didn't move.

"Yes," she said finally. "We should."

It was almost 11:30 by the time Rari made it home. He didn't even turn the lights on- just hung his jacket on the hook and let the dark settle around him.

"What's the damn time?"

Of course. Mom.

She never went to bed before him. Not really. No matter how old he got, she had this invisible clock tied to his shadow.

He sighed. "Mom, please-"

"You're not drunk, are you?" she asked, sniffing dramatically as she flipped the light on. He squinted hard. She was already in her robe, ready to sleep, but clearly still on alert.

"I gave you a cell phone for a reason," she said. "Maybe pick up next time."

"Uh, Mom- whoa, whoa, whoa, I was *busy*, okay? Like, *with my teammates busy*," Rari said, hands up like a man under arrest.

Did he just say *busy* twice? Shit. Now she's definitely gonna think he's drunk.

Her eyes narrowed a bit. "And the flowers?"

He blinked down at the bouquet like he forgot it was even there. "A girl gave them to me," he said, way too casually.

Her eyebrows went up. "Is she the transfer girl?"

"Why are you suddenly a detective?" he shot back, but there was a grin tugging at his mouth.

“What’s the occasion, then?” she asked, still eyeing the flowers like they were evidence.

Rari shrugged, tried to look bored. “Maybe prom.”

His mom’s tone shifted immediately- classic. “Oh! You kids are having prom? That’s so cute!” She lit up like a Christmas tree. “When is it?”

“July 28th, apparently,” Rari muttered, kicking one shoe off with the heel of the other. The second one got stuck, of course. He grunted, tugged at it, and nearly lost his balance. “Ow- damn it.”

His mom leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed, eyebrows up like she already knew everything.

“So- this girl’s asking you to prom?” she teased, smirking like she lived for this.

“I don’t know, Mom. I *don’t know*,” he mumbled, and yeah- his face was probably red. Great.

“And you didn’t think to ask her yourself?” She scoffed. “Definitely your father’s genes showing.”

“Mom,” he groaned.

“Alright, alright- go to bed,” she said, already walking off. Then she stopped. Peeked back around the corner with that look again.

“Say yes, Rari,” she said, gentle now. “It’s July 28th. Hailey’s Comet Night.”

His breath caught. Hard. Like the air changed.

July 28th. Hailey’s Comet.

Something clicked. And then hit. Like a flash of heat, a jolt in his chest. That night wasn’t just a date. It wasn’t even just prom. It had happened before. Or something like it. He couldn’t explain it- but it *wasn’t new*.

His mom’s voice came soft. “Don’t let it pass you by, sweetheart. Promise me?”

He barely whispered, “Again?”

Hold Me When I Die

He looked pale now. Drained. Tired in a way that didn't have much to do with the day. I felt it through him- that kind of tired that reaches the bones.

He turned, bolted up the stairs two at a time, the bouquet shaking in his hand. A few petals fluttered behind him like he didn't notice or didn't care.

"Karma- Karma-" he kept muttering under his breath. Over and over.

He dropped onto his bed, his chest heaving. His fingers trembled as he unfolded the note- creased, bent, still warm from his palm.

His eyes were wet before he even started reading.

*to be loved so loud
is to feel the world shift under your feet
like the earth finally recognizes
the weight of your existence
it's the warmth of a sunrise
on a cold winter morning
a fire that burns, not to consume
but to illuminate the shadows
you've carried for far too long
to be loved so loud
is to hear your name spoken
like a song that never ends
a melody woven into the fabric
of someone else's heart
it's the echo of laughter
bouncing off the walls of an empty room
filling the spaces that once felt hollow
with something that feels like home
to be loved so loud
is to know that silence
will never feel the same again
that even in the quietest moments
you are heard, you are seen, you are felt
it's the kind of love
that doesn't need to shout
but somehow it drowns out everything else*

Samiksh Ghodke

*because it's the only sound
That truly matters.
P.S- Prom, me, please?*

His heart jumped a little- even though he knew the game. He knew exactly what she was doing. Still, it got him. He dropped down on the doorstep, legs stretched out, just kind of- stuck there.

He was trying to zone out. That quiet kind of focus where the world fades. Where nothing matters for a second.

His eyes blurred a bit, and in the distance- he saw me.

I was there, standing still, arms behind my back like I had all the time in the world. Waiting for him. Probably too obviously. But I didn't care. The air around us was heavy. Tense. Almost buzzing.

Would he move? Would he come closer?

He looked wrecked. Breath catching in short bursts. His whole energy- off. Shaky. Like his body was here, but the rest of him wasn't.

I popped my mint watermelon gum, slow. No reaction on my face. I didn't expect one from him either. He never moved first.

So I did.

A few quiet steps forward, soles tapping against the glass floor. Soft, but loud enough to echo in the quiet.

He didn't flinch. Just kept staring, caught in whatever thought-loop had grabbed him. Probably playing through every story they ever told him. Every little moment that built up to this one.

Still didn't look at me.

"Why are you thinking about all that?" I asked, voice low. "No, really. Why'd you even bring up their love lives? Don't tell me it actually matters to you."

He looked up.

And for the first time- he looked wrecked. Like- *real* wrecked. Eyes red, not blinking, tears he wasn't even trying to hide. And I don't know why, but I heard myself ask-

"-Are you okay?"

It felt weird. Too soft. Heavy. I didn't even know what I expected him to say.

"I asked them," he said, barely getting the words out. "I just- I wanted to know how to not love Aehlla."

His voice cracked on the word *love*. Then he shook, once. Shivered, like something had left his body.

And for some reason, that was okay.

"Is it wrong?" he asked, wiping his face like it'd help. "Is it wrong that I want to treat her better than what she's had?"

He didn't say it looking for approval. It just- came out.

The silence was thick. I didn't speak right away. There was nothing to say, really. Not after that.

"Karma," he whispered. He met my eyes again. His voice steadier now. "I *need* her. It's not want. That word doesn't fit anymore."

I stared ahead. Didn't move. Didn't blink. My head stayed perfectly still.

But I saw him. All of him.

And for once, I didn't feel like teasing him.

"I really want to love her. Just- *do something*," he said, voice cracking like it got stuck in his throat. That was it- no big speech. Just the truth, finally out.

I sat with it for a second, let the silence hang.

And yeah- it hit me how messy this might get. How messy it *already* was.

I had my cute smile tug at the corner of my face to say, "*Now that's my boy.*"

Aehlla's/Mirari's karma / present

Aehlla's mom lit up the second she stepped through the door.

"You're finally here!" she beamed, practically vibrating with joy. "Who dropped you off so late?"

"Evelyn," Aehlla mumbled, her eyes already halfway shut. She looked like she could pass out standing.

"And how's *she* getting home?"

"She lives, like- a block away," Aehlla said with a shrug, barely awake.

"Did you eat anything? I can heat something up-"

"I'm *fine*, Mom." Her words were slurred with sleep. "I'm just fishing for some sleep right now. Good night- blah blah blah."

She looked like someone who'd downed six vodka shots, somehow holding herself together with the last scraps of energy. Barely.

Aehlla locked the bathroom door behind her, barely registering the click. She just needed a minute. Away from all the noise. The laughter outside, the voices - they blurred into the background, like someone turned the volume down on life. She leaned against the wall. Cold tile. Deep breath.

She caught herself in the mirror. Hair a mess. Eyes half-lost. She didn't look okay, not really. "Alright, Aehlla," she muttered, mostly to hear her own voice.

Then- escape mode. She closed her eyes and let her brain wander.

Prom. The version she wanted, not the one everyone else kept talking about.

And there he was. Rari.

He just appeared in the scene, like her brain summoned him. Standing there, looking like he belonged.

Her heart tripped a little.

She imagined stepping toward him, her hands on his chest. They started to sway, slow and easy, like a scene from a movie she forgot the ending to. He was warm- or at least, the idea of him was. She let herself believe it for a second.

Every spin, every little step- it felt light. Like the panic had dropped off somewhere behind her. No pressure. No awkward jokes. Just him.

He looked unreal. Like he'd been made for this- blue glow around him, like-animated almost? Aehlla laughed a little in her head. He didn't feel real. Not in the bad way. In the *perfect* way.

But then- something glitched.

He flickered.

Like, for real. One second he was there, the next- not. Her chest tightened. No no no. Don't do that.

She held on tighter, like she could stop him from phasing out. "Don't go," she thought. *Don't leave me here again.* Not now.

This was supposed to be her moment. Her little dream world. Not- this.

But she could feel him slipping. Like trying to hold onto a balloon string in wind. And then the colors around them started smudging- like someone spilled watercolor everywhere. It wasn't pretty anymore. Just messy.

Her heart was pounding, her hands frozen.

She wanted to scream, or reach, or say something, but her body wasn't moving. Just stuck in place. Like she couldn't decide if this was love or fear or both. And now it was too late anyway.

Mirari's smile didn't go anywhere. It just- stayed. Calm. Kind. Like he didn't even need to say anything- like he already understood.

Which somehow made her chest hurt even more.

Seriously, why did the good stuff always feel like it was on a timer?

Couldn't he just stay put? Just five seconds. That's all she wanted. Five seconds without the ground shifting under her.

Her eyes started to sting - of course they did. She could feel it building. That lump in her throat thing.

"This isn't forever," she thought, and wow, that hit way too fast.

"Why can't I have *one* nice thing?" she muttered in her head, already halfway into her dramatic soap opera meltdown. Cue the slow piano, cue the emotional breakdown behind a bathroom door. Classic.

Her hand reached for nothing- just air.

He was gone.

And yeah, that realization stung. Hard. Like she'd tried to grab smoke. Or a dream mid-sneeze. Whatever. He'd never been real anyway.

She was back where she started: alone in front of the mirror, staring at the girl who'd just slow-danced with a hallucination. Her heart was still racing, like her body hadn't caught up to reality yet. Like some part of her still believed she'd step back into his arms if she closed her eyes again.

The washroom came back into focus- less fairytale, more toothpaste smears and an overflowing trash bin. Great.

She wiped her eyes, muttered something like, “Alright, enough,” under her breath, and took one long inhale. Maybe it was time to get out of here. Maybe daydreaming about pixel-perfect guys who glitch out mid-hug wasn’t a sustainable coping strategy.

Still, something about him- fake or not- left a weird kind of glow in her chest. Not heartbreak exactly. Not hope either. Just- a spark. Like her mind saying, *hey, you’re still capable of feeling something*. Even if it was just a fantasy.

She cracked the door open.

“Aehlla? You puking?” her mom’s voice came from down the hall.

“Umm- yeah. I mean no. I mean I’m just doing my skincare,” she called back, blinking hard. “I’ll sleep in a bit.”

And yeah, maybe she would.

Eventually.

Aehlla was *definitely* spiraling. Not the soft kind either. Full-blown mental dance party. Prom was coming. Her *first* one. And somehow, the guy involved made her feel like she had butterflies in her knees, lungs, and *eyelids*. Everything felt like it was spinning- cha-cha style.

“Evelyn, this might work,” she whispered, voice panicked and breathy. Like even her thoughts were too loud in her head. It had barely been ten minutes since her brain started acting up, and now? It was chaos. Pure overthinking madness. One anxious thought feeding the next, chasing its tail like a cracked-out hamster.

“Evelyn??” she tried again, sounding like someone pretending to be chill while standing in a fire.

A pause. Then a voice, half-asleep and 100% unimpressed.

“Didn’t I drop your dramatic ass home, like, forever ago?”

Aehlla flopped on her stomach, squishing the phone to her face. “I know, I just- what if he turns out like Calis? And I ruin my life again?”

There was silence. Long enough that Aehlla thought Evelyn had passed out with the phone on her face. Just breathing.

And then softly, like a sleepy fortune cookie:

“The one who cares about your tears, won’t let you cry at all”.

Oof. That one hit.

But then Evelyn followed it up like only she could:

“Either hang up, or I swear to god I’m slicing your throat tomorrow.”

Aehlla blinked. “Wow. That was- subtle.”

She stared at the ceiling. Her heart still racing, even though Evelyn was already zoning back out.

“Are you even awake right now?” she asked, barely hiding the panic in her voice.

“No, Aehlla. I’m out here watering the plants at 1 AM while composing poetry with my fucking chakras.”

If eye-rolls made noise, Evelyn’s would’ve shattered a window.

There was something about Evelyn. I noticed it ages ago, but I guess I never really put words to it until now. Her energy- it just sat differently. It wasn’t loud or flashy, but you *felt* it- like the room shifted a little when she walked in.

She was sweet, yeah, but not in that empty way people use the word. More like- comforting. Familiar. Like warm fruit, or- I don’t know, sunlight through kitchen windows on a weekend. I remember thinking the first time I saw her that she genuinely wanted good things for Aehlla. Not for show, not for credit- just because. If it came down to it, I actually think she’d put herself on the line for her. No drama, no speech. Just do it.

She had this softness, something graceful, but not fake. Like it wasn’t something she tried to be- it just was. And her eyes- they kind of gave it away.

The way they softened when she looked at people, like she was seeing something beautiful even when there wasn't much there.

But I don't think it was just kindness. There was something else going on underneath it- something more layered. Evelyn didn't just care- she *understood*. Like she could sit across from you and just know what hurt, even if you didn't say a word.

And she didn't walk away from it, either. That's the thing. She leaned in.

You could be falling apart in silence, and somehow she'd still manage to show up right when it counted- with a dumb joke or a hug or literally just sitting next to you, saying nothing. And weirdly, that would be enough.

I think a lot of people looked at her and thought, "Wow, she's just nice." But no. It was deeper. Way deeper.

In that moment, I kinda got it. Why people were drawn to Evelyn like moths to a dimly lit, emotionally stable flame. It wasn't just that she was nice or graceful or whatever- it was the way she *actually* made people feel seen. Like she wasn't pretending. Like she really *got* them. You'd think that'd be rare. It is.

And yeah, standing there watching her just exist, I had to admit- there was something kind of unreal about it. Like, damn. She actually makes people *feel* things. Good things. Real ones.

"I'm guessing you didn't sleep last night, huh?" Evelyn said, breaking the silence with a sleepy grin as she dumped a questionable amount of sugar into her coffee. Her glasses hung low on her nose, ready to fall off, but she fixed them like it was muscle memory.

"I didn't- I- no," Aehlla replied, tripping over her own voice like it owed her money.

Evelyn tilted her head. There was something off in Aehlla's expression. A flicker of something- jealousy maybe? Sadness? Her aura was all out of whack, unreadable even to Evelyn, which was saying something.

“Tell you what,” Evelyn said suddenly, setting her cup down. “I’ll go talk to him. About the prom.”

Aehlla blinked. Once. Twice. Then her jaw dropped.

“Are you *out of your fucking mind*?!”

Evelyn just sipped her coffee. “Relax. I’m great with people. Manipulation is a love language.”

Aehlla narrowed her eyes. “What makes you so sure?”

“I’m not. Let me try anyway.”

She smiled- calm, smug, dangerous.

Aehlla stared. “What if he says no?”

Evelyn shot her a grin.

“I’ll slit his throat, then *you* can go have a word with the cops.”

Why is she always talking about throats? Evelyn didn’t flinch- not even a little. Classic Aehlla. Unhinged affection in its purest form.

But honestly, Aehlla couldn’t stop staring at her. Evelyn. Her friend. The one person who actually *showed up*. She hadn’t expected much when they met. A few laughs, maybe someone to sit next to at lunch. But Evelyn had turned out to be something else entirely.

And Aehlla felt it. That warmth. That weird little buzz in her chest when someone just *gets* you without you having to explain anything.

She smiled- not a polite one, but the kind that just happens when you’re not holding anything back. Something about this girl made her feel like she’d lucked out without even realizing she was in the game.

“Okay, okay,” Aehlla sighed, slinging her purse over her shoulder and heading toward class. The hallway was packed, chaos-level bad. Like a fish market with hormones.

She turned back around suddenly and plopped down beside Evelyn again.

“What if-” she started, all dreamy panic now, “he just wants to hook up with me?”

She licks her lips and says, “I swear relationships are so fucking good when they’re not about sex.”

Evelyn felt good when Aehlla smiled, twirled around and left. Evelyn stared at her. Slowly blinked.

“Girl. Go to class.”

The door opened. Rari didn’t look up at first- he was busy typing, focused like whatever was on his screen couldn’t wait.

“Hi,” she said, casually. Or at least, she tried to sound casual.

He finally glanced up.

She stood there like it was nothing, like showing up unannounced was normal. That red skirt she had on- bright enough to catch your eye without even trying. Her earrings? Kinda loud. Maybe too much. And the way she smiled, not fake, but it definitely felt like she was in on something he wasn’t.

She walked in anyway, no hesitation, and dropped onto the couch like it was her regular spot.

“Did you say yes to her?” she asked. Voice soft, a little playful, but not entirely joking.

Rari blinked, caught off guard. “Who- Aehlla?”

The name hung in the room. His jaw tensed slightly, and for a second, he looked like he couldn’t decide whether to answer or change the subject entirely.

“You really didn’t think I’d be the one asking about prom, did you?” she said, grinning- just a little too pleased with herself.

Rari dropped his phone onto the cushion beside him and sat down slowly, legs bouncing a bit. Nervous energy. “Wait- how did you even know she asked? Did Aehlla tell you she- likes me? Or was it- did you guys plan this or something?”

He sounded like a sentence crashing into itself.

She reached over and tapped his arm. “Hey. Lover boy. Chill. I told her to ask you.”

His eyes darted back to hers like she’d just confessed to murder. “You? *You* told her to?”

“Yup,” she said, leaning in. Calm. Confident. No apologies.

He just stared at her.

Then she tilted her head, voice quieter. “But you still didn’t answer me.”

“Huh?”

“Did you say yes?”

Rari blinked. His brain hadn’t caught up yet. “I didn’t. Not yet.”

Her eyes narrowed just a little, curious now. “Why not? You don’t want to?”

Rari looked down, and something shifted in his face- softer. A smile started tugging at the corner of his mouth. “I do.”

He grabbed his phone again and started typing something, fingers moving a little slower this time. Thoughtfully.

She watched him, trying not to look too interested. Then he turned the screen toward her.

The light from the phone hit her face, and a little text popped up just above the keyboard- blinking.

i promise ill take care of you. snuggle in when you burn with fever, feed you chicken soup while you adore me, how could she love me so much? hug you in the midst of the summer rain because i know you cry under it for your tears to be one. the simple kiss you didn't want from me became your biggest escape from the undue world. my understanding of love changed. the ones i knew, hated love. the midday in metros, had me wondering what even she be doing right now? I was in clutch of your hold. your loving voice. your cold heart. would she even be missing me? what should I do? write some letters again?

knowing that you wouldn't read them? maybe i will. maybe i want someone to know i still love you. the kindness was never enough for you. the caring, incomparable. the sinking spirit of you smelling like someone else was a nightmare. maybe i loved you so much that without knowing insanity i cud never know peace. and also because love never creates excuses. it just wants you to never give up. even if i am a part of your life now, you are my whole life.

I SAVED THIS FOR YOU, PS- Mirari.

Smile, you're in my heart.

"You've known her for a while, haven't you?" she asked, her voice quiet but a little loaded.

Rari gave a quick laugh- more like a breath, really. "Yeah," he said, glancing down. "I think I have."

The room went quiet- not awkward, just- still. You could hear the soft buzz from the AC, maybe even their breathing if you paid attention. Something hung in the space between them- not quite spoken, but not hidden either.

"Okay, then tell me," he said, eyes on her now. "Why'd you tell her to ask me out? Wasn't she going to do it herself?"

That landed harder than he meant it to.

"She-" Evelyn's voice caught. "She didn't think she could."

He blinked. "Seriously? *Her*? She didn't have the guts?"

His voice wasn't mocking, just- surprised. Curious, even.

Evelyn sat up straighter. "You don't know everything," she said, finally meeting his eyes.

"Dude, do you even know how she looks at you? She looks like you're her whole world. You're her pillar of strength. I've caught her so many times," she laughs, "but yeah she won't listen, it's just so obvious. But you won't even notice, hell boys are so naive when it comes to hints."

“Hints?! Why don’t ya’ll just communicate, for fucks sake!” he gets up.

“Sit your ass back down, now” she commands.

“So you just helped her, because?”

She huffed.

“Because I see myself in her, you too didn’t take any of my hints, did you?”

Rari gets caught up in a hold. “What?”

“She’s doing every possible thing I wished to do to you, and now the feeling I see in her eyes, her personality when she’s next to you, is- perfect. Even though I didn’t have the courage to come up to you, and say this, I wished I had someone like myself to help me with this mess I had been, but *she* is someone you could stick up with, Rari.”

“Please don’t expect me to read your mind, it could lead to a situation where I might not be able to meet your expectations” he confronts, coming in front of her, swaying his hands to and fro. “Are you high?”

“OH YOU STUPID DICKHEAD, I LOVE YOU!” she yells her heart out.

The confusion was distinct on his face.

“Or well, I *loved* you-” she gets up ever so slightly.

Rari was rather speechless, his blood flowing to his heart and not returning to his head. He was dizzy.

“I don’t know,” Evelyn started, barely above a whisper. “I just- I couldn’t get used to the idea of seeing you with someone else. It messed with my head.”

She gave a soft, half-laugh- the kind that comes out when you’re trying to play something off but failing miserably. “Figured it’d feel a little better if I actually said something for once. Should’ve done it a long time ago, huh?”

Then she shrugged. “Maybe best friends aren’t as big a deal as people make them.”

"I'm sorry," Rari said quietly. He sat down next to her like the words were heavier than they sounded.

She turned toward him, folding her legs under herself. "Why are you saying sorry?" Her tone wasn't angry, just- tired. "I'm the one who let it all get to my head. I started expecting things. Even when we weren't anything official. I knew that. Still-" She rubbed her hands together. "I feel kinda stupid."

She hesitated, then let it out.

"I wrote about you. A lot. Probably too much. My poems, my journals - you were all over them. I used to stare at you during recess and pretend I had a reason to. You always left with your friends. I don't think you ever noticed."

Her voice cracked, but she didn't stop.

"It wasn't just about sitting next to you or talking. I think I just- I wanted to be known by you. Even a little."

She looked straight at him - not blinking, not backing down.

"I didn't want Aehlla to feel like this. That's why I helped her. Figured if I couldn't say it in time, maybe she could."

Rari's throat tightened. His palms were sweaty, cold.

"I mean-" he said, barely getting the words out, "I can't say I love you back-right?"

Evelyn stood up, not angry, not sad. Just steady.

"Relax," she said with a faint smile. *"I didn't say it so you'd say it too, idiot. I said it so you'd know."*

Rari was irritated- really irritated. The kind of annoyed that crawls under your skin and just stays there. It was like some universal truth had hit him in the face: guys really do need everything spelled out. Subtle hints? Body language? Forget it. Apparently, they needed flashing lights and a megaphone to get the point.

Why the hell do we need to be spoon-fed feelings? he thought, jaw tight. Why can't we just pay attention for once? Everything was there, in front of us, and somehow we still miss it. It made him mad - mostly at himself, maybe at all of them. Like emotional intuition skipped their generation or something.

Then she said it- casually, with a laugh, but not really.

"Actually, I think we'd make a great couple," she said, smirking. "I mean, just think of how fun it'd be- arguing over who's more stubborn. I'd win though, obviously."

Her voice was light, but there was something underneath. A thread. A little crack of honesty wrapped in the joke. She didn't push it. Just threw it out there and leaned into the silence, hoping maybe- just maybe- he'd catch on this time.

So close, yet so far.

Evelyn's hand paused on the doorknob. She didn't turn it. Not yet. She looked back at Rari, her expression a weird mix of tired and defiant.

"You know," she said, "being around you is like standing in a storm. It's- beautiful. But mostly, it's just chaos."

Rari met her eyes. Something in him softened. "And you're like the first sun after it," he said. "There, and then not."

She huffed a laugh, but there was nothing funny about it. "You're a damn puzzle. I keep trying to put the pieces together, but they never fit."

He stepped toward her, not too close. "Maybe we're not meant to fit," he said. "Maybe it's just supposed to be felt."

She raised an eyebrow. "Do you rehearse this stuff?"

The air between them got quiet again, like the room didn't want to interrupt.

Then she said it. Not loud. Not dramatic. Just straight.

"I hate you."

Rari smiled, just barely. "Cool. Pretty sure your birth certificate was a formal apology from the condom factory."

Evelyn laughed- quick, breathy, tired. She looked down at her feet for a second.

Then back up. *“Take care of her, okay?”*

“I will.”

She opened the door. Paused in the frame. “Touché, idiot. See you tomorrow.”

Mirari / present

Nostalgia- a word I was longing to use to feel the warmth of love again, and Aehlla was finally making me feel it again. “You’re peculiarly early, aren’t you?” I stuffed my face in my pillow, sniffing it all out as it was Aehlla’s neck. Orion stood near my bed, seeing me laying on my bed made his blood boil, even though he told me to wake up and he needed to talk, something very important. But I know his ‘important’. It’s either to hook up with someone or help write something to a girl to impress her. Studies and academics don’t even come close.

“I think I told you I needed to talk, Mirari,” he wailed.

“My ears are all yours Orion, cum in my ears and enlighten me.” My voice raspy as I talked into my pillow, not willing to leave Aehlla’s neck.

“I wanted to- umm- ask Freya to the prom,” he took a seat on my desk.

“DING DING DING- I knew that was coming!” I look up to him and laugh. “But prom’s tomorrow, you asshole, still think nobody has asked her to prom?”

“That’s what my worry is,” he whispers, regret in his voice.

“The fuck were you doing all this time?” I sit straight on my bed. “At this point you have a better chance of kidnapping her and taking her to prom.”

“Could you rather call her and ask her to go with me- ‘cause I can’t, I really can’t” he stammers, “my heart will explode inside me, I don’t wanna die of a broken heart, please.” His hands anxiously played with themselves.

“Are you a cuck or something?” I got so weirded out by his question, it made me puke. “Call her yourself and don’t ask, just tell her you’re gonna be there and pick her up at 8.”

“What if she rejects?”

“Then suck it up. That’s what boys do.”

The flashes of Aehlla breaking up with me flashed in front of my eyes, blinding me for a moment. I felt that was my prime.

Heart ached, I died too, what being nice cost me? Another life.

“You sure I shouldn’t just ask her calmly?”

I look at my ceiling. Feeling pathetic. “Girls like guys who know what they do, be authoritative and not get indecisive, so for fucks sake it’s a do or die situation you’ve got, don’t suck anymore, just tell her it’s 8 you’ll be picking her at.”

“So no poems and all?”

I glare at him to stand up and leave.

“Fine, fine, I get it, don’t you have a prom date too?” That was a good question. I had sent the long ass text I showed to Evelyn a week before, but anticipated no reply. Anticipated is a wrong word, it’s more like- I pretended I didn’t care for her text, but deep down, I checked my phone whenever it buzzed, any notification I wished it was hers, always glued to it. But how did it even matter

now, even though I overthought my ass so many times wondering if that is what I had to send her, I sent her the text yesterday.

Still no reply.

“Are you with me Rari?” he caught me in the middle of my sesh.

“Yah, I don’t know, maybe I won’t be there for prom-”

“Okay, goodbye then,” he slammed the door hard and left. He left me hanging.

I was just standing there, blank as hell, staring out at the balcony like it had answers or something. My head felt stuffed with cotton, and even though I technically got sleep, it didn’t feel like it. Everything was off. Heavy. Like I hadn’t really caught up with myself yet.

Then it hit me- suddenly and stupidly clear.

Wait-

Did I even ask her to prom?

I grabbed my phone, scrolled through our chat like a man possessed, rereading everything with a pit in my stomach.

Nope. Nothing. Not a single message, not even a half-joke or some dumb emoji hint.

And there I was, acting like she was the one being distant.

God. I messed that up. Bad.

A complete *STUPID. STUPID. STUPID.* Why can’t I get myself together for a bit?

It was more like- **Expressing my love for her** kinda message.

My fingers were ready to tumble aggressively on the keyboard but stopped. A whirlpool of diabolism hit me. Should I ask her, or just tell her to be ready at 8 tomorrow?

I can’t even decide myself and I expected poor Orion to believe me.

'be ready at 8, i'll pick u up soon' my fingers were confused to click the send button, so eager. But my brain bawled. It lagged like a 486DX, 16MB RAM, 500MB HDD, no GPU PC. Yah, why do I know that.

Karma would definitely be like, send that shit you asshole! Don't blow this up on me!

Fine, fine, sent.

Legit, I am not fucking kidding, her message popped up in 30 seconds. I opened it in an instant. My old feelings were back. The old Mirari who used to sulk upon his self respect to text back in an instant, was back.

"Dude. I was so fucking confused," she texted. "Like I genuinely didn't know if you were saying yes or no about prom. Then you dropped the 'I love you' outta nowhere, and I swear I didn't sleep that night. I honestly thought you were about to hit me with that 'I love you, but I can't go' kinda crap. Full drama mode. I was ready to cry and roast you at the same time. But look, I've been thinking about you nonstop. And weirdly- I'm kinda glad you didn't say all that bullshit. You just went for it. And I dunno, it's kinda hot."

I could feel karma jumping in my head like a maniac, probably drunk as fuck. My jaw dropped. I risked all my aura into that text and it paid off pretty well.

"Also yes I'll be ready at 8 tomorrow, bubyee" I took a deep long pause at that text.

I felt like jumping off my balcony again, but this time for her. Wait, wasn't the last time for her too?

Fuck I need rehab from this girl, but this girl is my rehab.

What a dilemma.

"Ah, you look rather- homeless" said my mom as I swayed myself in front of her, showcasing my outer beauty, that is all I have, elegantly.

"Who even suggested you can wear this crap?"

I opted for a sleek black tuxedo with a twist- a vibrant, neon grey vest underneath. I paired it with black boots and a silver chain necklace.

“It’s vintage” I boast.

“Even if she pukes on this dress, it would be pretty” she climbs up the stairs wanting me to makeover.

She basically decided for me- navy blue tux, plain white shirt, black tie. Said it was classic or whatever. “You’ll look sharp,” she kept saying. I mean- sure, it looked good. Just didn’t really feel like me.

I wore it anyway. Tossed on my dad’s old silver watch, figured it might give it some kind of edge. Didn’t change much though. Felt like I was pretending to be someone who had it all figured out. I kept looking at the shoes- shiny as hell- and thinking, maybe this is too much. Or maybe too safe?

My mom thought it was perfect. Totally confident. Me? Still not sure.

“Now move!” she ordered.

“What, are you disowning me or what?”

“It’s eight past five, what a terrible impression on the first date.”

“Shit! Did you get the bouquet I told you to?”

“Yah, the premium one? I got that in the morning.”

“No mom, I asked for the standard small bouquet” I huddled down the kitchen to find it.

“You’re actually giving her that tiny bouquet?” she snorted, smacking her forehead. “Wow. If your dad had pulled that crap, I swear I wouldn’t be here right now.”

Rari shrugged, trying not to laugh. “Hey, it’s not about the size, alright? Let me survive the first week without scaring her off- *then* I’ll get her a proper one. Big, obnoxious, Instagram-worthy. Promise.”

She stood on her ground staring at me.

"Be good to a woman, and she'll be good to you."

"Yah mom, I'll remember that." I took off into the cold street, with my suit flying off. I had the scrunchie tied on my wrist, hoping to give it to Aehlla.

I knocked on her door, checking the address again she gave me to pick her up, my breath slowly leaving my body. I felt the flowers were wilting.

"Hi there!" her mom surprised me with a glorious look. "Food delivery?"

"Oh no I am-"

"Yes sweetie I know, come in!"

I step inside tapping my formal shoes in the still silence.

"In fact- everyone was eager to meet you Rari!" her voice gave me enthusiasm I did not believe I had. "And by everyone I mean me and my husband."

"Chip in, she'll be coming downstairs soon" her dad poked in from behind.

That sounds weird.

The second I saw her, I just- kind of froze. The dress? Unreal. It fit her like it was made just for her- tight around the waist, then flaring out near her knees, almost like it changed its mind halfway down. The fabric had this soft shine to it, nothing too flashy, but when she moved, it sort of followed her.

She had these tiny beads or maybe lace- I couldn't even tell- but they caught the light every time she stepped. Her necklace was simple, silver, not trying too hard, but it worked. Her hair? Down, wavy, effortless. Like she didn't even plan it and somehow looked like that.

She walked like she didn't notice everyone staring. Or maybe she did and didn't care. And yeah, she had this little bouquet in her hands, tucked close, like the whole thing was out of a movie I wasn't cool enough to be in.

I was lost and I had no plans to be found. I swept across the corner of my eye seeing her parents adoring us which made me so nervous. So icky.

There was an unexpected reply, 'they're all for you'.

I couldn't be more grateful than this. This is what I wanted from *my* Aehlla. She smiles elegantly, handing me those flowers she made herself.

'Stop faffing around' I gasp. She didn't let go of my hand yet. After all these years I knew she also wouldn't let go.

"It's not because of prom, idiot" she snaps.

"It's because I love you."

The air blew across my heart, beating it faster than ever.

'Does it smell good?' I ask shyly hopping onto her porch.

'Duh, it does. they are wearing your perfume'. She stopped and turned back at me.

She leans forward and kisses my neck to claim I am hers. Always will be.

The intimacy was pure, I could feel it. her eyes spoke way more than her expressions.

Maybe she realised she was meant for me.

Maybe I too realized I am not who I think I am.

Or maybe she was too perfect for me?

Mirari's karma / present

He boasted and came across the most elegantly dressed man (rather boy, this dickhead has no clue how to be a man) holding the most precious gift I had to offer him, Aehlla. She walked in with what she thought was the most perfect man she could ever have, and she was right. Well at least he was the one carrying her personality. And the looks, of course.

“Rari, my man!” Richard dabbed him so hard it bounced off the walls of the halls. “You got a date?!” he seemed so surprised, “I didn’t think you could pull that off.”

VERY DISAPPOINTED.

I saw every possible move and I was still disappointed. His self image was a depreciating asset. And I know he won’t come back to me being like, ‘*Karma, karma, I need your help*’ in his bitchy ass tone but I would still know what he wants and what he deserves.

“When’s the Haileys?” Aehlla asked curiously, seemed more like she cared for the damn asteroid more than a cute romantic moment with someone I desperately hooked them up with.

“Probably an hour more” a low pitched voice greeted them with joy. Ah, Gabriella. I forget she even existed. So many people, such annoying traits.

“Gab- hi” Aehlla greets her with poise. “I hope your phone is charged, don’t want it dying when it passes!”

“I mean- it’s 15 percent right now.”

“God, charge it sometime girl.”

“Is she your date?” Rari asks him.

“To be honest, I got no girl but her, got rejected 7 times and she was the only option. Makes sense she had a crush on me for a year, so I knew she would definitely say yes” he chuckled.

“What the actual fuck, Richard” Rari snaps. “She’s gorgeous enough for a guy like you” he makes an impeccable eye contact.

“You better not fuck this prom for her.”

“Aren’t you the one to talk?”

“Have a fun night Richard.” He tapped his shoulder and swiped left like tinder.

Rari walked away, feeling pretty frustrated. He wanted to be better than those guys, to rise above their drama. He didn’t just want to be good – he wanted to be awesome.

Why were people flexing that they had a fake ass date? Are they ashamed that no one loves them? (Other than their parents). Or maybe even they don’t at this point.

Rari turned around to his date completely crowded. “You do look like a future prom queen!” Sarah budgered.

“Doesn’t she?” Rari interrupted from behind.

Sarah came close to him. Unfiltered she whispered, *"Should've been me."*

He stooped in closer, *"Maybe ask Richard the next time, he won't say no."*

I assumed I would take over Rari's mind, to keep the bullshit away and focus on the queen herself. But the jam started. He grabbed her by the waist and made her follow his every step.

They were dancing. Or, trying to. Not like professionally or whatever - just-swaying. Slowly. It wasn't even a slow song, but they didn't care. Her dress kept brushing against his leg, and once, the beaded part near her hip caught his sleeve, and they both kind of laughed and untangled it like it happened all the time.

Rari didn't say much. Neither did she. The lights were dim, kind of warm-looking, and for once, the room didn't feel too loud. He was mostly staring at her - not in a creepy way, just- watching how relaxed she looked. Or maybe pretending to be. She smiled a couple times. He smiled back, nervous as hell, but it didn't really show.

They stepped wrong more than once, bumped into each other a bit, but kept going. It wasn't smooth, but it felt weirdly perfect anyway.

And then, without warning, she leaned in. Just a little. Her hand squeezed his, and her lips barely touched his - soft, unsure, but there. Like, yeah, this is happening. Nothing big or dramatic. Just- her and him. And one really quiet second.

She kissed him. He could feel her lips on his as she inhaled a ton of air while she kissed. She tasted like cherry and vanilla scented like rosemary. Rari froze. For a second, he didn't even register what was happening. Just-soft lips. Hers. On his. And everything in his head went quiet.

His eyes opened fast. She was right there, looking at him like she didn't mean to do it, but also kind of meant to. His chest was going wild. He couldn't even swallow properly.

She pulled back just a little, her hand brushing his shoulder like maybe that would make things less weird. It didn't. Her cheeks were pink, and she looked

everywhere but at him for a second-then she glanced back, and her face kind of- softened.

He still couldn't speak. He just looked at her. Everything in the room felt far away, like it was all happening on mute. Someone whispered something nearby, maybe even laughed. Didn't matter.

The music kept playing - something slow, probably romantic, he wasn't even sure. They didn't move. Just stood there, still a little stunned.

Then, finally, Rari let out this weird half-laugh under his breath. Not loud. Just enough to say something without making a big deal.

"Well," he said, voice low, "-that was unexpected."

"Shit- I am so sorry-" she was genuinely scared. He stood there like a dummy, which he was for sure.

"I love you Aehlla," his eye contact was impeccable.

"I didn't know what to do, I got fucked up-"

"I love you Aehlla."

"I know I should've asked-"

"I love you Aehlla."

"Huh?"

Her mind swirling around all possibilities that could happen, this was the least likely. Not gonna lie, I was enjoying every bit of this.

Cecelia at the corner of the room, all cozy and warm in her fur jacket apparently noticed everything. She fixed her gaze upon us, as if she was staring at me; I mean Rari. She was- judgemental. In a good way though. Alone. Chocolate strawberries in hand. Like a commercial for intimacy, except the room was empty and the spotlight a joke.

People just started yelling and pushing forward like the world was ending. No warning. Everyone ran toward the gate like they were about to miss something

huge. Phones went up in the air- some recording, some just trying to see through the mess.

“Rari! It’s happening!” Aehlla’s voice shot out from somewhere behind him. A second later she came flying past, laughing like a total maniac, weaving through people like it was nothing. She didn’t even hesitate.

Rari just stood there, frozen for a second. Then this stupid grin crept across his face. He couldn’t help it. She was chaos, and she looked happy, and that was enough.

Her smile was his salvation. The warmth that he felt now, was warmer.

The comet was ridiculous. It burst out in flashes- gas, dust, whatever- like it was trying to put on a show just for us. The sky around it went all bluish and pale gold, kind of hazy, like when someone shines a flashlight through smoke. It didn’t even feel real.

You couldn’t hear anything. Not from the stars, not from the comet. Just the buzz of everyone around us holding up their phones like they were filming the next space documentary. It was kind of dumb, but kind of sweet too.

Rari didn’t move. He just stood there next to Aehlla, both of them quiet, both staring up. She hadn’t blinked in what felt like minutes. And honestly? Fair. This was probably her once-in-a-lifetime thing. For Mirari though? Yeah- no.

“I saw this last year,” Rari muttered, eyes still locked on the sky like it had answers he was waiting for.

Aehlla let out a little laugh, leaned into him, and wrapped her arm around his. It wasn’t big or loud. It was just there.

“Oh really? Must’ve been a lucid dream,” she teased.

He smiled softly, his eyes still fixed on the sky. *“We’re all in a lucid dream, Aehlla.”*

Another horde of annoyance bugged in. Like they haven’t seen Halley’s before. Stupid kids. The urge of wanting to take over Rari’s mind was killing me, more so, I had plans when I saw Aehlla for the first time, to grab her and kiss her in

front of the world, for the world to know that she is Mirari's. But that would've ended in sexual assault and harrassment, so lets keep it right there.

Talking of harassment, Cecelia slowly crept behind them, scared the shit of them saying, "Hi there! Are you two a thing now?"

"Oh- Oh hi Cecelia-" Aehlla stammered. "You are here? Who's your date?"

"Yah no one babe, I am just here for food. And it's really good, I guess"

The two of them stared weirdly at the most unique piece of the lot from the academy standing in front of them.

"But you didn't answer my question- Are you two a thing?"

Rari clutched Aehlla's hand, filling in the spaces between them. Her palm fit right into his hand.

"It's complicated" he spurted out as if he didn't lip lock her in front of a dozen couples.

"Well weren't you the one holding her face as you sucked her tongue, and your hands were-" she teased, eating the last bite of chocolate strawberry, licking her lips.

"Whoa whoa- chill woman," she surely knows how to get people on their nerves.

"The fact that you stared at us while doing it, makes me puke now" he said turning again to the comet's trail which colourfully decorated the black sky like millions of stars followed it like disciples and the dust bringing more life to it. How ironic.

"True true, I am so jealous, may this love choke and kidnap me." She stood still like everyone else, in awe.

"Let's go somewhere quieter, it's actually suffocating me here" she whispers out to Rari.

'Fuck, not the woods' he began thinking. 'My heart wouldn't take me there again.'

The sweet spot wasn't so sweet after all huh, Rari.

"Where exactly?" he turned to her, acting clueless.

"Do you even want to try the food here?" she grabbed his hand.

"If Cecelia liked it, it's better off worse"

"So let's get out of here."

"Don't you wanna attend the prom?"

"I got what I wanted, Rari."

His heart jumped out of his rib cage. Finally getting to hear what he wanted to hear from *his* Aehlla. Pure Cinema.

They stepped out of the hall, and the night hit them with that weird mix of cold and calm. It smelled like wet pavement and something flowery- maybe from someone's leftover corsage or some bush nearby, who knew. Aehlla still had her hand loosely around Rari's wrist. She wasn't dragging him exactly, but there was a pull. Like her body knew where it was going, even if her brain hadn't caught up.

"Where are we even going?" Rari asked, trying not to laugh.

She looked over her shoulder, caught in the glow of a flickering streetlight. "No clue," she said, almost proudly. "Just- not back there."

The town felt way too quiet for 11 p.m., but it kinda made sense. Everyone was on their roofs or huddled in backyards, staring up at Halley's Comet like it was going to explode or drop a sign from the sky. You could hear a few voices in the distance. Some laughs, maybe a speaker playing something low. But out here on the sidewalk, it felt like everything had gone still.

They walked for a bit without saying anything. The kind of silence that didn't feel awkward-just full. Every few steps, Rari glanced over at her. She looked like she belonged out there, like she didn't have a single care about where they were heading. Her dress kept catching the glow from the streetlights, and her

hair was doing that floaty thing like in old movies. He thought about asking again where they were headed but figured it was better not to.

Then she stopped.

They'd turned down some wide, empty street lined with shut-up houses and trees barely moving in the wind. No cars. No people. Just the sky still glowing above.

"This feels good," she mumbled.

"What does?" Rari asked, slowing down behind her.

She didn't answer. Instead, she walked out into the road and dropped to the ground like it was the most normal thing ever. Arms out, legs out, just- laid there.

"What are you doing?" he asked, laughing under his breath but also kind of nervous.

She didn't answer.

Rari looked around, even though there wasn't a single engine sound for miles. Everyone was busy stargazing. Still, it felt strange.

He shook his head once and gave in. Walked over and lay down next to her. The pavement was rough and cold and smelled like the end of a long summer day. And above them, the sky just went on forever, with that comet still dragging light across it like it had somewhere else to be.

They didn't talk. Just breathed. And it felt like enough.

"I don't want to die Rari", she said, both laying in the middle of an empty starstruck road stunned by stars and moonlight. "That's what makes life so precious don't you think? Death scares me."

"Do you trust me with your life?" he whispers softly.

She turns so abruptly, like no one had asked her this before.

“Will you hold *me* when I die, Aehlla?” He paralysed her with a question. “Maybe then we would meet again in another life.” ‘Again?’ it striked her. He chuckled.

“Who are you? Friends with death?” Ugh what a question.

The comet was still there, barely. Just this faint smudge across the sky, like someone dragged their finger through wet paint and forgot to clean it up. It felt too quiet, except for the leaves shifting now and then, like the world was holding its breath.

Neither of them talked. They just laid there, looking up. Not thinking too hard. Not needing to. Sometimes silence isn’t weird- it’s actually the only thing that fits.

After a while, Aehlla said, “You think we’ll ever see it again?”

Rari turned his head just a little. “The comet?”

“Yeah.”

He didn’t answer right away. “Probably not. But- maybe. I don’t know. Stuff like that- it shows up once, then disappears. Sometimes you don’t even realize it mattered until later.”

She didn’t say anything right away either. Just rolled onto her side and looked at him. “Even if we don’t,” she said, softer now, “I’m glad I saw it tonight. With you.”

That hit him somewhere deep. He turned onto his side too. She was close now- like, close enough to see how uneven her eyeliner was. Her eyes were doing that glowy thing, like they had too much to say but none of it wanted to come out in words.

He opened his mouth. “Aehlla-” and then stopped, because what the hell was he going to say?

She reached up, pushed a piece of hair off his forehead, and just- left her hand there, against his cheek. Warm. Solid. Familiar.

And he didn't say anything else. Because whatever this was- it didn't need explaining.

He only felt the serenity of her touch. Never really felt what her touch meant.

"You talk too much," she teased with a small smile before leaning in and kissing him gently.

"Would you be someone I would love forever Mirari?"

"I may not be the coolest or the best looking, but the love I offer is real."

She kept quiet.

'Mirari', has been a while since I heard my full government approved name from Aehlla's mouth, "Will *you* hold me when I die?"

His heart sank.

"Of course I would," an immediate response seemed like I took over, but I didn't.

Her smile stretched ear to ear, her eyes shut themselves. He looked closely and it had water in it. Salty I suppose.

He couldn't let her cry. "Are you crying?" She nods.

"You made me cry, Rari. *Seems like you know how to love me already.*"

Aehlla's karma / present

Blood. Everywhere.

Not his, but it was on him. Smeared across his face, his jaw, dried and wet and in between. His hands-Jesus, his hands were dripping. It looked like someone had dragged him through it. Smelled sharp too. Like something you're not supposed to smell in real life.

Aehlla couldn't breathe right. Her eyes kept jumping-from the guy moaning against the curb to the blood pooling near someone else's leg. It was all starting to blur together, the red, the pavement, the sounds. Like a nightmare that hadn't decided where to focus.

She blinked hard. No time to fall apart. She made herself look at Rari.

He was standing over one of them-maybe the leader, maybe not. She couldn't tell anymore. Rari had him by the front of his shirt, lifting him like he weighed nothing. The guy's face- wasn't a face anymore. It was swollen, messy. Blood in

his mouth. His nose looked crooked, maybe broken twice. His hands just dangled there, barely twitching.

Then Rari leaned in real close. His voice was so quiet Aehlla barely heard it over the ringing in her ears.

“How dare you touch her?”

That was it. Flat. Cold. Not a yell - which was somehow worse.

The comet’s fading tail painted streaks of silver across the sky, and for a heartbeat, nothing else existed.

Then came the crunch of gravel.

Rari’s head snapped toward the sound. Three figures emerged from the shadows of a nearby alley, their silhouettes warped by the dim streetlights. The tallest one, wiry with a shaved head, grinned as he stepped onto the road. His two companions fanned out-a stocky guy with a scarred cheek and a lanky teen clutching a broken bottle.

“Well, well,” the leader drawled, his voice sticky with menace. “Look what we got here. A couple of lovebirds playin’ astronaut.”

Aehlla stiffened beside Rari, her hand tightening around his arm. He squeezed back gently, his eyes never leaving the men in front of them. He didn’t move. Not yet.

The stocky guy let out a low laugh, his gaze crawling over Aehlla like she was something on display. “Cute little thing, ain’t she? Bet she’s real friendly.”

Rari’s jaw clenched so hard it felt like his teeth might crack. Stay calm, he told himself. Breathe. His mind flickered to those self-defense videos he’d watched years ago-focus on one attacker at a time, aim for vulnerable spots: eyes, throat, groin. But theory felt flimsy against the raw adrenaline surging through him now.

“Wallet. Phone. Now,” barked the leader as he took another step forward. The teen with the bottle circled behind them, his weapon catching faint glimmers of light.

Aehlla's voice wavered. "Rari-?"

"It's okay," he murmured, rising slowly to his feet and positioning himself between her and the men. His body was tense but steady as he faced them head-on. "Take what you want," he said evenly. "Just walk away."

The stocky man didn't wait for an answer-he lunged first, throwing a wild haymaker aimed at Rari's temple.

Move.

Rari ducked at the last second, letting the punch sail harmlessly overhead. As the man stumbled forward from the missed swing, Rari drove his elbow into the back of his neck with all his strength-just like he'd practiced in those videos. The man let out a guttural noise and crumpled to his knees.

"Run, Aehlla!" Rari shouted without looking back.

She scrambled backward instinctively as chaos erupted in front of her.

The leader charged next, flicking open a switchblade with practiced ease. Rari sidestepped just in time as the blade slashed through empty air and caught the man's wrist mid-swing. They grappled for control of the knife, their movements fast and frantic.

The leader spat in his face-a disgusting glob that landed near Rari's eye-but it didn't faze him. With one swift motion, Rari drove his palm upward into the man's nose with enough force to make cartilage crunch audibly. Blood sprayed everywhere as the leader staggered back, clutching his face in agony.

Rari spun just in time to catch the teen's arm mid-swing and twisted it behind his back until something popped unnaturally. The kid yelped in pain as Rari followed up with a sharp kick to the back of his knee, sending him crashing face-first onto the asphalt. The bottle shattered uselessly beside him.

"Stay down," Rari hissed through ragged breaths.

They hit the ground hard-Rari tasting copper as fists pummeled into his ribs over and over again while he struggled beneath the weight pinning him down.

“Get off him!” Aehlla’s voice cut through everything like lightning.

And then came the clang-the sound of metal meeting flesh as she drove her car key into the leader’s ear with all her strength.

“I said get off!” she screamed again as she twisted it deeper until he finally rolled away howling in pain. “FUCK!”

Rari scrambled back onto his feet just in time to see another attacker lunging toward Aehlla-but not fast enough.

“No.”

With one swift motion-a front kick aimed squarely at vulnerable anatomy-the stocky man folded like paper before collapsing onto the ground beside his buddies who were either unconscious or too injured to move anymore.

Blood pooled around them on the cracked asphalt under dim street lights that flickered lazily above like they hadn’t just witnessed hell break loose below them. Aehlla stood frozen where she was-her chest heaving and her hands trembling slightly as she stared at Rari through tear-filled eyes.

“You’re- hurt,” she whispered finally, her voice barely audible over her own heartbeat pounding in her ears.

Rari wiped at his face absentmindedly with one hand while reaching out for hers with the other. “You’re okay?” he asked softly instead of answering her question directly. His pulse shattered and eyes numb.

She nodded quickly even though tears were already spilling down her cheeks uncontrollably now because everything about tonight felt too much all at once but also not enough somehow too because they were still here together alive breathing holding onto each other tightly.

The night was already a mess - like, beyond fixing. And I really thought that was it. No more damage. No more drama. But then Aehlla - yeah, of course it was her - somehow yanked the whole thing off the rails again. Like she had some invisible grip on my chest and wasn’t letting go.

Hold Me When I Die

I don't know how she did it, or if she even knew what she was doing. All I know is, karma- me- felt useless. Like I'd been benched in my own damn story. I was supposed to guide this, protect her from whatever was coming, but instead I just stood there. Watching. Too slow. Too late.

Aehlla/ present

We stumbled back to my house somehow. Don't ask how. My dress was wrecked but not soaked-through, which felt like a small miracle. The street was dead quiet - like the whole town had been vacuumed up while we weren't looking.

Rari basically collapsed on my side. Deadweight. He kept trying to shift off me, like I wouldn't notice his leg barely holding him up or his hand literally dripping. I could feel him trembling, and every time he moved, I felt his whole body jolt like it wanted to give out. We were a mess. And weirdly- I still hadn't processed it. That he saved me. Like, literally put himself in front of it.

"You tired?" he mumbled, trying to sound casual, "Sorry-am I too heavy?"

Dude. Yes. You're bleeding and half-dead and I'm dragging you like a human suitcase but sure, let's worry about my shoulders. I didn't answer. What was I

even supposed to say? I was running on fumes and weird adrenaline, the kind where you feel everything and nothing at once.

I knocked on the door. Barely. It opened like five seconds later. My dad.

He looked like he'd been pacing for hours, waiting for this exact moment so he could explode. "WHY AREN'T YOU ANSWERING YOUR PHONE?" he yelled so loud I felt it in my spine.

Rari immediately straightened up like my dad was gonna swing. He pulled his arm off me like we'd been caught doing something bad in sixth grade.

Dad's eyes darted all over us. Hair, bruises, clothes, blood. His expression didn't even land on one emotion. He looked confused. Starving. Pissed.

Finally, with all the dramatic timing of a Netflix cop show, he said: "Why are you guys covered in blood?"

And I just stood there. Numb. Tired. Kinda wanted to laugh.

No idea, Dad. Take a wild fucking guess.

Rari dropped onto the couch like every bone in his body had checked out. He had an ice pack half-falling off his leg, the living room clock blinking some version of 1:03 a.m. My mom, bless her caffeine-powered heart, didn't even blink-she went straight for the coffee pot. No questions, just automatic survival mode. She handed him a cup like she was giving him a medal.

I finished telling them everything. The whole thing. How it went down, why we looked like we walked out of a horror movie, and how we lost our goddamn phones on top of it. "And yeah- they took our phones," I said, kind of like a punchline, but it came out more like a sigh I'd been holding in for three hours straight. I was pretty sure if I talked any more, I'd start shaking.

But then I glanced at Rari - all bandaged up and still somehow trying not to spill coffee on himself - and suddenly the chaos didn't feel as heavy. Like, we made it. We were here. Alive. On a couch. With coffee.

He looked at me like he'd just remembered something important. "Hey- could you call my mom? Just let her know I'm safe?" His voice cracked a little, but he smiled after like it was nothing.

"Yeah, of course," I said.

I grabbed the stupid landline - which somehow still exists in our house - and dialed. My hands were kind of shaking. I didn't even know what I was gonna say. But the ring tone felt weirdly comforting, like the night finally slowed down enough to let the fear settle.

The tension in the hall was absurd as we waited for his mom to come get him. My dad was still pacing, muttering under his breath about missed calls like we hadn't just crawled home from hell. My mom, meanwhile, was in full triage mode - crouched next to Rari with a first-aid kit and her "I'm-fine-but-not-really" face on. It was weird. Everything felt louder than it was.

I just wanted it all to stop. My body hurt, my head was buzzing, and I was running on whatever's left after adrenaline wears off.

Then the doorbell rang.

My dad stomped off to get it, still mumbling something about irresponsibility and common sense. And then - boom - the front door opened and Rari's mom exploded through like she'd been shot out of a cannon.

"Oh my god. My baby- what happened?" she cried, rushing into the living room before my dad could even get a word in. She practically tackled Rari into a hug, knocking his coffee sideways. He winced but didn't push her off- just kinda froze with her arms wrapped around him, like he didn't know how to breathe yet.

She ran her hands all over him, checking for God knows what- blood, bruises, maybe just proof he was real. "You didn't answer your phone! I thought-" her voice cracked, and she couldn't finish the sentence.

Rari looked up at me over her shoulder, his eyes tired, a little helpless.

And for once, I didn't have anything sarcastic to say. Just stood there, watching the mess unravel.

"NO, NO, NO, NO!" he screeched in pain, but she was the one who didn't budge hugging him.

Rari tried to play it cool, like he wasn't in pain or two seconds from collapsing. "I'm fine, really-"

But his mom wasn't having it. "You're *not* fine, you absolute moron. I was worried sick!" she snapped, tugging at his jacket like she could fix him by rearranging the fabric. Her voice cracked somewhere between rage and relief.

Then she looked at me. Hard. Like this was all somehow *my* fault.

I just shrugged. My entire body was done being blamed for stuff tonight. "Yes, terrible things already happened, Mom," Rari muttered before she could say more. It shut the room up for a second.

My mom stepped in then, because of course she did- smiling gently, holding a fresh cup of tea like that fixed everything. "Elina, please- don't worry. They're safe now. And your son was incredibly brave tonight."

Rari's mom turned toward her, face still tight, but softening. "Thank you," she said quietly. "Really. I'm just- so glad he's okay."

It felt like the air had finally let out.

And just when we thought it was all winding down, my mom cleared her throat like she was about to suggest a bake sale or something. "Actually," she said, "I was wondering- would Rari like to come over for dinner tomorrow? As a thank-you?"

Rari's mom lit up. "That would be *wonderful*. Wouldn't that be nice, Rari?"

Rari gave this tired little chuckle and stood, adjusting the old watch on his wrist like it might break under the movement. "Yeah. That'd be great."

And for the first time all night- maybe the only time- *everyone* in the room was smiling.

“I’ll see you at dinner?” he said. “Hope you’re not cooking.”

“Would you even-” I calmed myself *considering* his mom was there.

“Just go and sleep, you’re in deep hallucinating pain.”

He stood there, wondering if there was something else I had to do. Like a damn husband who waits for his wife for a kiss before leaving home.

He stepped forward while I was pinned to the ground, my muscles frozen.

He slowly wrapped me in his wounded arms, his chin on my shoulder, so close his heart thumped out of his chest.

DO YOU REALISE HOW CLOSE HE WAS? His breath and warmth like a blanket over me, snoozing my brain off for a while, he whispered in my ear, “would’ve kissed you bye but your dad would really eat me up.”

I smiled and clutched him like a puppy holding his head, my fingers gently digging into his hair.

I blushed.

God this is more than what I prayed for.

Mirari / present

The dining table was set with an impressive spread- roasted chicken, mashed potatoes, fresh vegetables, and a basket of warm bread rolls. Aehlla's mom had clearly gone all out, and the effort showed. "Do you really think this was all necessary?" she whispered back to her mom. She had been in the kitchen for 5 hours, ramming it all out.

I and Aehlla sat side by side, with her dad at the head of the table and her mom bustling around, adding finishing touches to the meal. As she finally sat down, her dad wasted no time starting the conversation. *I WAS PREPARED, apparently.*

"So, Rari," her dad began, leaning back in his chair with a smirk. "Do you always make it a habit of showing up at people's houses bleeding all over the place?"

Bro, this is how we are starting this convo?

I blinked, caught off guard for a second. I chuckled nervously. “Umm- not usually, sir. I try to keep that to a minimum.”

“Well, that’s good to hear,” her dad said, digging into his chicken. “We don’t usually entertain guests who look like they’ve been through a war zone.”

“Stop it, honey,” her mom interjected with a playful glare. “You’re going to scare him off before he even gets to finish his dinner. All he’s saying is Rari, thanks for yesterday.”

“Scare me off? No way,” I said with a grin, catching on to the tone of the conversation. “This smells too good to leave. Besides, I think I can handle a little teasing.”

“Smart boy,” her mom said approvingly. “See, Aehlla? He knows how to appreciate good cooking.”

Aehlla rolled her eyes hard but couldn’t help smiling. “Yeah, yeah, Mom. Don’t let it go to your head.” Rolling her eyes made me feel things I didn’t wanna feel.

Her dad wasn’t done yet. “So, Rari,” he said again, this time narrowing his eyes in mock suspicion. “What exactly are your intentions with my daughter?”

“Papa!” Aehlla groaned, nearly choking on her water.

“What? It’s a fair question,” he said innocently.

I laughed nervously looking at both of them, but played along. “Well, sir, I think my main intention tonight is to survive this interrogation.”

“Good answer,” her mom said with a laugh as she passed me the bread basket.

“Here, have some bread. You’ll need your strength.”

“Thank you so much,” I said politely as I took a roll, so polite, so demure.

“Oh, please,” she said with a wave of her hand. “Call me Maria.”

“Alright- *Maria*,” I said hesitantly.

“And you can call him ‘Grumpy,’” Aehlla added cheekily, nodding toward her dad.

“Hey!” her dad protested, but his eyes were twinkling with amusement.

This whole dinner thing is a fucking challenge, one wrong move and I’ll have my whole self respect down the valley.

“So, Rari,” her dad said at one point, pointing his fork at me like it was an accusation tool. “You’re sitting here eating our food and charming us all-what’s your secret? Are you always this smooth?”

I grinned sheepishly. “Honestly? I’m just trying not to mess this up.”

“Well, you’re doing alright so far,” her mom reassured him with a smile.

“Don’t let him off that easy!” Dad interjected. “We haven’t even gotten to dessert yet.”

“Oh no,” I said dramatically. “Is dessert where the real test begins?”

“Exactly,” her dad replied with mock seriousness. “If you can survive Maria’s experimental desserts without flinching, then you’ll officially have my respect.”

“Do you want to sleep on the couch tonight or what?” her mom exclaimed indignantly. “My desserts are amazing!”

“They’re- *creative*,” her dad teased. Thought a little, but teased.

“They’re delicious!” she added in defense of Mom.

Her mom glanced at me that I am the main culprit of why this is happening. I laughed and raised my hands in surrender. “I’m sure they’re great!” He looked at me before passing on, “Bring it on, I’m ready for whatever you’ve got.”

Her mom chuckled. “Well, I think you’ll find it’s worth the risk. I made a chocolate mousse that’s supposed to be quite good.”

“*Supposed to be?*” Dad raised an eyebrow. “You mean you’re not sure?”

Her mom looked offended, playfully rolled her eyes. “Don’t you dare ask for second’s tonight”. Her dad humphed.

Is this the reason for their love still blooming out so loud?

After a while, her dad asked, “So, Rari, what do you like to do for fun? Anything exciting?”

I thought for a moment before responding, “I love writing poems and- hiking. How about you, sir?” I DIDN’T EVEN KNOW I LIKED HIKING AT THIS POINT.

Her dad snorted. “Me? I’m too old for hiking. I stick to my garden. It’s safer that way.”

Her mom chimed in, “Yes, and he’s very good at it too. He grows the best tomatoes in the neighborhood.”

I smiled. “Oh, were those tomatoes grown by you in the garden? I’ve always wanted to learn how to garden.” No I did not.

Her dad perked up at this. “Well, maybe I can teach you sometime. But don’t expect any special treatment just because you’re charming my daughter.”

I laughed. “I wouldn’t dream of it, sir.”

“Dessert is ready! Who’s ready for chocolate mousse?” her mom divulged from the kitchen.

Everyone cheered, and I looked a bit apprehensive but amused. Her dad leaned over and whispered to me, “Don’t worry, it’s not as bad as it sounds.”

I grinned. “I’m sure it’s great, sir.”

“Tell me Rari, does this girl bother you while you are out with your friends?” her dad asked so suspiciously I almost had an attack. I looked over to Aehlla.

“Should I be a snitch Aehlla?”

“What NO!” she shrieked. Her hand on her throat, indicating she would choke me.

I would take my chances.

“Oh this girl uses me A LOT” I began my trauma. I swirled my fork in the salad, mostly to keep my hands busy. “You all think she’s sweet, right?” I said,

glancing around the table. Aehlla froze mid-bite beside me, and I knew that look- the *uh-oh-he's-telling-stories-again* look.

"She makes me carry her books every single day," I continued, trying not to smile. "Even when she's not bringing any of her own. Says my backpack already looks sad, so what's one more tragedy to add to it?"

Laughter bubbled up from across the table, but I wasn't done.

"She ties her shoes and then, without asking, sticks her hairclip in *my* hair to keep it safe. Like I'm some kind of decorative lamp stand." I rolled my eyes theatrically. "And then pats me like, 'Thanks for your service, soldier.'"

Aehlla buried her face in her hands. "You're making it sound worse than it is!"

I smirked. "Oh, I haven't even started. She forgets her lunch on purpose-don't even try to deny it -and then when I open mine, she leans over and goes, 'Rari, you love me, right?' Like that's a valid lunch-stealing strategy."

"He feeds me!" she protested.

"I do," I admitted. "Happily, too. Which is the problem."

There was a beat of silence, but it was a soft one, filled with the kind of warmth you don't question.

"She's chaos in human form," I added, quieter now, more to myself than the table. "But I guess- I kinda like it. The chaos, I mean. Especially when she sticks around."

Maybe being hers in all those quiet, ridiculous ways was my favorite part of the day.

Her dad literally stared at me in awe. His face was like, '*did you memorise this beforehand*' kinda look.

"You found yourself a perfect guy, Aehlla" her mom whispered, but I heard it. My heart was warm and bubbly. And I focused on the mousse.

The chocolate mousse was indeed lip smacking, and even her dad had to admit it was one of Mom's better creations. Her mom turned to her with a knowing

smile, clearing the table. “Why don’t you show Rari around the house while we clean up?” she suggested.

I hesitated for half a second before nodding casually. “Why not, come on, Rari.”

I stood up quickly and followed her out of the dining room while her parents exchanged amused glances behind us.

As we walked upstairs, I turned to Aehlla and whispered, “Your parents are hilarious. I had a great time.”

I smiled, feeling a warmth in my chest. “Yeah, they can be a bit much sometimes, but they mean well.”

I nodded sceptically. “I can tell. They’re really nice.”

We reached my room, and she pushed the door open. “Welcome to my habitat. It’s a bit messy, but make yourself at home.”

I saw a room full of pinky makeup, a table decorated so well, she pretty well assumed I was gonna be judgy enough, and she knew she was gonna get me here.

I like my women who know me so well.

I stepped inside, looking around at the posters on the wall and the books stacked on her desk. “It’s great. I love the decor.”

She laughed. “Thanks. I like it here. It’s my favorite place to relax.”

I walked over to the balcony and looked out. “You have a great view from here.”

She joined me, standing close enough that our shoulders touched. “Yeah, I love watching the sunset from this window.”

And here I stood being the devil myself, who banished his angel despite her loving him the most. I was wrong. Love is pure evil. I couldn’t let my heaven and my hell meet and aspired to a happy ending.

The thought hit me- *Everyone is fucking toxic, anyone you look at, you just need to choose your toxic, the one you can handle all your life.*

My flames melted in her frozen heart. One last kiss I wished for my karma to be eternal with me again. She kissed my neck twice, making it hard to breathe. She was close enough to make me feel stupid as to why I didn't love her before. Her lush hair made its way to my face and I smelled how heavenly angels smelled. I scratched her back which itched me to hug her. She stopped and looked at me and rushed out of the balcony, leaving me wondering why, *to lock the damn door.*

The impeccable eye contact made me surrender to her fate. Her grasp was undeniably good.

I pushed her back to pin onto her wall just below the Da Vinci's art her mom had won in a shopping spree. She tasted like pure chocolate mousse.

"You didn't imagine this in your dreams, did you?" I whispered in her ear though I could sense her smiling.

"I didn't have to" she had me in a chuck hold.

"I wanted it to be real, with you".

I clamped both of her wrists and grabbed them on top of her. She was out of breath already.

"Too bad huh" I whisper in her ear.

"Get your breath back again. I am not done with you yet".

Cillian / past

Trepidation- A word for when life gives you butt aches, and you can't do shit about it. "Can we come in?" I asked, as they were on my front porch, with Aehlla accompanying me.

"Yes- yah, sure" Aehlla's mom was too busy in her own thoughts to continue her life anyways.

She was up in my nightgown the whole night, couldn't sleep, her emotions hung over the drizzling sounds of the rain and the blank house she lived in. Utter silence. I could read her face very well.

"You seem so- lost" Aehlla walks up to her and she does nothing but stare.

"I want to ask you something," she asked her calmly.

Her body was squeezed up by her arms like she caught a severe cold, our faces made her wonder, if this was the right thing to do, to be so sure she was going mad, or to be sure we weren't sane either.

She kept me off.

But I kept smiling. I didn't want to reveal I was going berserk. I slowly held Aehlla's pinky finger, stopping her to follow Mirari's mom.

She turned around her hair in her mouth.

"I have a bad feeling" I whisper low enough it would melt in her ears and feel what I felt.

"Huh?" she asked.

"Come sit, please." My heart was coming out of my body.

Was this about Mirari's death? Did she suspect us? Did Mirari know we were together?

My blood rose. I felt dizzy.

"Aehlla-" I stuttered. She didn't even hear me. She went on and sat beside her mom.

I limped, my legs sore, my hands tingling to choke myself before any allegations I had to find.

Mirari, I prayed, I am sorry. I am so sorry.

I sat there, more like 'awkwardly' sat there beside Aehlla.

"I've been trying to make sense of everything since Mirari's passing. It's been-" Elina paused, the kind of pause where you could hear her breath tighten.

"-difficult." She said it like she was talking to a wall that might talk back. Like we were just, there. Witnesses. Not really people.

The clock in the room was ticking so damn slow I thought time had given up. I felt like I was glued to the chair in someone else's nightmare.

I swallowed hard, trying to be helpful or present or whatever people say you're supposed to be. Aehlla shot me a look- nervous, wide-eyed. She looked like she wanted to bolt.

“Yah, of course. We’re here for you,” I said. Like a total dumbass. My voice cracked halfway through, and I wanted to punch my own throat for sounding so stiff. I don’t know how to comfort people. I don’t even know how to comfort myself.

Aehlla clasped her hands so tightly in her lap I thought she’d cut off her own blood flow. I could see it in her- she was spiraling quietly. And I knew why. We both did.

Elina stared at the photo on the mantel. It was Mirari, all smile and soft eyes like nothing bad ever touched him. “I keep thinking about that day,” she said slowly, “what happened. What I might’ve missed. I don’t know- it’s like something’s off.”

I stiffened. “Off how?”

She turned back to us. Her expression didn’t crack, but her eyes were loud. “I thought I saw you two at the funeral. But now I’m starting to think I imagined it.”

The silence after that? Brutal.

I glanced at Aehlla again. She didn’t blink.

“No,” I said finally, barely pushing the word out. “We weren’t there.”

Elina didn’t react the way I expected. No shock, no accusations. Just- this long stare. “I see,” she said. “That explains it, I guess. Still- I have questions. So many.”

“You’re completely fine,” Aehlla blurted, reaching for Elina’s hands. Her voice had this softness to it that didn’t match the tension in her shoulders. She was lying. Through her teeth. And Elina knew. I could see it.

“I just- I have this feeling,” Elina whispered. “This mother instinct or whatever. That he’s still- somewhere. Like the whole thing was a dream. A bad dream I haven’t woken up from.”

I blinked. “Wait- you’re saying you think he didn’t- actually die?”

Her eyes fluttered closed. “From the moment I saw him on that car- the blood, the bones, all of it. I keep seeing it, but I don’t remember the funeral. I don’t remember burying him.”

I looked at Aehlla. She looked at me. My heart was hammering. This? This wasn’t part of any theory I’d built in my head. This wasn’t grief. This was something else.

Something way worse.

She sips some water from the jug. “I still don’t know why he did this. Not even a note?” she was asking herself those questions which she herself did not know the answers to.

“Maybe because of my arguments with his dad, or because-”

She looked at me narrow eyed. My chest exploded. I felt a cold sweat trickle down my spine. My heart was racing, and my mind was a jumble of worst-case scenarios. Suffocating, making it hard to breathe, hard to think.

I don’t want to be a killer.

“Have you told anyone about this?” Aehlla diverted the topic to a long route.

“No.”

“Not even his dad?”

“No.”

I could see Aehlla shaking her legs anxiously, to get her body stable and not panic.

There was no chance Mirari knew, right? *Right?*

“Is it possible to arrange for a therapist, cause I feel we, here, ain’t helping at all” I budge in kicking all the thoughts aside.

She looked at me with a glance, ‘Oh did you think I didn’t try to do that earlier you optimistic gremlin’ kind of look.

But she had given up. That was obvious. My heart still didn't take a step down, lingering at the apex of confusion.

"You still go to visit the grave, don't you?" Aehlla could you please keep it on the low. She kept on asking like she really cared.

"Of course, I do" the more I hear Mirari's mom talk, I feel like I am in an old age home, cursing myself for the life I have.

"I still know he's somewhere there Aehlla and I know he won't sleep without me."

The amount of conviction she had in her eyes made my knees shake.

I took a hush of deep breath.

"I- have someone" Aehlla reached for her phone to open her contacts, "maybe she could help you" as she handed her phone to his mom.

"Who's she?" Elina asked in her cracky voice.

"A therapist, my mom knows very well," Aehlla got up from the couch finally,

"Just trust her, she knows what she's doing."

Crumbling with peace now, we stepped out of her house, "take care!" I yell almost too far away from the door.

"Cillian," Aehlla came close to me wrapping her hand around mine, "Do you think Mirari did this all, and he knew about us?" I clasped my fists.

"No."

It came out too sharp. Like it cut the air.

"Don't go there, Aehlla. We didn't-fuck, we didn't kill him. Don't do that. Don't be so-" I stopped, almost said *immature*, and hated myself for even thinking it.

But it was too late. The air had already changed. It felt tight now. Cold.

She was still standing there like she hadn't heard me, or maybe she just didn't believe me. I could see it all over her face - she *wanted* to blame herself. And the worst part? Some sick part of me was thinking it too.

What if he knew?

What if he'd known the whole time?

What if he looked at me, at her, and just saw it? Saw us?

I turned away. My hands were sweating and my head was starting to spin. I just needed to walk it off. Or pretend I could.

But she didn't move. I heard nothing behind me. Not a footstep. Not even a breath.

Then, softly- "Cillian, wait."

I stopped, didn't want to, but I did. My back stayed to her for a second too long before I finally turned around.

She looked wrecked. Not crying, not screaming. Just- completely wrecked. Like she'd been hollowed out from the inside.

"I need to know the truth," she said. Her voice cracked mid-sentence. "Mirari, did he know about us? About what we did?"

I stared at her. Her face. Her shoulders. Her hands - they were shaking. She was breaking apart like glass, and I didn't even know what to do with my own hands.

I swallowed hard. It felt like there was sand in my throat.

"You think he- what, *died* because of us?" I asked, barely above a whisper.

Her lips trembled. "His mom said things. About that day. About him. And I-" her breath hitched, "I keep thinking about the way we left it. The things I didn't say. And now it's just- nothing. I don't know if he hated me. Or if he was just hurting. Or-fuck-I don't know."

I stepped forward, instinct or guilt, I don't even know. My hands found her cheeks, cold and soft and familiar.

“Don’t do this to yourself,” I murmured. “Please.”

But she pulled away like my hands burned.

That broke something in me. The space between us felt massive now- not like a few feet. Like a canyon.

Neither of us said anything after that.

Just the kind of silence that rings in your ears and makes your stomach hurt.

The kind you never really come back from.

“This guilt-” she said, barely. Her voice was all cracked and hushed, like something stuck in her throat refused to let her speak. Her eyes- glassy, tired, holding back whatever storm was behind them. She looked- breakable. One more word and she might’ve just splintered right there.

“I loved him, Cillian.”

It landed like a sucker punch. Not new, but still- it knocked the air out of me.

“I know you did.”

“No,” she said, sharper now. “I keep telling myself we didn’t do anything wrong. That what we had was- real. That it didn’t leave anyone bleeding. But it did. Mirari bled for it. We just didn’t see it.”

“We never meant- none of this was supposed to happen,” I said, fast, too fast, like maybe rushing the words would make them truer.

“I know,” she whispered. “But it did happen.”

Then the words came like they’d been waiting in her mouth for days. “I love you, Cillian. I do. But it’s not enough. Love doesn’t clean this up. It doesn’t wipe out the pit I feel in my stomach every time I remember his face.”

She blinked, once. “I can’t forgive myself. Not yet. Maybe not ever. And if I can’t do that- I can’t be with you.”

She stood there, like maybe she was waiting for me to stop her. But her eyes were already halfway gone.

Hold Me When I Die

There was no space left. No maybe. No try.

I didn't even nod. Just- kind of breathed through it. Everything hurt in weird places. My voice cracked when I finally said, "Okay."

And that was it. That was all it took to lose her.

My chest was doing something ugly. My stomach felt like it had flipped inside out. None of this felt fair- but I couldn't say that out loud.

She needed room. And I had nothing left to offer except that.

Mirari, then Aehlla. One after the other.

Guess some people just aren't meant to hold on to anything good.

And this time, after all of it, after the wreckage- I was alone. Like actually alone.

Not the kind you shake off. The kind that settles in your bones.

I wanted her to choose me. Some hope.

But you cannot make someone love you, by loving them harder.

Mirari's karma / present

The roof of Cecelia's car was freezing. Like, you'd put your hands down and immediately regret it. But they stayed there anyway. Parked on the edge of this hill that looked out over- nothing. Just dark. So much dark. But the stars- shit, the stars were unreal. Like someone had just spilled them across the sky on purpose.

Aehlla turned, real slow, pulled her hoodie tighter, didn't even look straight at Rari at first. Then, "Isn't it so- so damn beautiful?"

She said it quietly, but it hit hard. Like she wasn't even talking to him. Or maybe she was. Maybe she was talking to herself.

Rari looked at her, not the stars. "Yeah," he said, kind of dumbly. "Yeah, it is." Then he paused, scratched the back of his neck like he didn't know what to do with his hands. "But, like, I don't know. You looking at it makes it more beautiful or whatever. Sounds cheesy, sorry."

She turned her head finally, and there was this look on her face- like she was about to cry or laugh or both but didn't want to do either. Just- stared at him. Soft, but also kinda tired.

It was late. Like late, late. 2 a.m., maybe more. Not that it mattered. Time felt fake out here.

She pointed up, hand trembling a little. "I see this- constellation, I think? It looks like a- uh- I don't know, maybe like a horse? No. A dog? God, I have no idea."

She giggled, kinda embarrassed. Her lip gloss caught the moonlight and it made her look stupid beautiful in that way people do when they don't know they're glowing.

Rari smiled. "Maybe it's a new one. One that only shows up when you're here." He said it without thinking and then immediately wanted to take it back- too much? Was that too much?

But she didn't flinch. Just smiled into her shoulder like he'd caught her off guard. "Maybe," she whispered.

And then nothing. No big wrap-up. Just them sitting there, cold as hell, saying dumb things under a big-ass sky that didn't care who they were or what they felt.

But it mattered.

God, it fucking mattered.

The car, which had seemed out of place in the darkness, now felt like part of the landscape.

Well now Cecelia had some serious beef with Evelyn, not inviting her to the summit.

"You sure your dad won't call me right?" he asks with a slight hesitation.

"Out of all places dumbass, in the middle of a fucking date with me, you're thinking about my dad right now?"

"Dude he scares the shit out of me!"

Rari's coffee spills from the roof of the car, "MIRARI!" Cecelia yells, who had her windows open for fresh air and munching on some mosquitoes.

"Oh did I make you wet?" he teases.

"You fucking wouldn't be alive if you did that."

"Umm- sorry babygirl."

She storms out of the car, slamming on the door so hard, it shook the car.

"Babygirl?!" Aehlla wakes up from her slumber. Almost too real to be a dream.

"Wait, aren't you a lesbian?" he stares at Cecelia, almost too real to be a lie.

"I am basically a bi-"

"That still doesn't give you the right to call- whatever you called her!" Aehlla shrieks, they were in the radar of the wolves quite noticeably now.

"Hmm- someone's getting possessive" the tone in Cecelia's voice made Rari have goosebumps, even his pubic hair stood up.

"Hmm- someone's getting possessive" he repeated, forgetting all the masculinity he had with the only two girls there.

"Possessive?- fuck no" Aehlla stood by her word, even the wolves knew that wasn't true.

"But we aren't dating right?" Rari held her hand as he said.

"No we aren't."

The stars were aligned perfectly. But the fault was basically in Rari and Aehlla. Ah pitiful humans.

"Was this your ideal first date?" she asks knowing best this is Mirari's type.

"I wanna caress and hold your hands as we sip coffee grazing stars at midnight and you be comfortable in the warmth of my body that you don't wanna leave soon and keep cuddling till you match my breath and when it finally matches you kiss me with perfect harmony and sync that we breathe the same air taste the same coffee and be perfectly in awe of how perfect we are with silent lofi

songs in the background to keep us awake so we kiss more.” He said that in one complete breath, no pauses, no hesitations.

“Isn’t that romantic?” she grins.

Her smile opened doors for him. *He healed something he didn’t break.*

“And your meaning of life would be completely different than mine, I suppose”

“Duh, of course, my adrenaline rush ain’t greater than yours.”

“Or more girly.”

She paused like my server in this afterlife lagged.

"Love is all about being chill and kind. It's not about getting jealous or trying to one-up everyone else. Love isn't about being a show-off or acting superior. It doesn't demand to always get its way, and it's not easily annoyed. Love doesn't keep a scorecard of past grievances. Instead, it's all about celebrating when the truth shines through. Love never throws in the towel, stays optimistic, and keeps pushing forward no matter what life throws its way." Aehlla recited.

Rari looked over. Aehlla was on her phone, like, totally sucked in-scrolling slow, eyes stuck. Reading something.

He squinted. “Wait- what?”

He sat up a little. “You didn’t just write that? Like- just now?”

She glanced up, blinked. Kinda caught. “No,” she said, barely smiling. “I wrote it forever ago.” Shrug. “First time I saw you, actually.”

Rari just- froze. Like, no expression for a second. Then this dumb-ass smile started creeping in, real slow. Like it surprised even him. Then, boom. Full face. Grinning like someone handed him a puppy and a winning lottery ticket at the same time.

“Shut up,” he said, laughing but not really. “You’re messing with me.”

“I’m not,” she said, but all quiet. Playing it off, like whatever, but her eyes were screaming a little. Like maybe she was already regretting saying it, even though she meant it.

Then she looked at him again, serious this time. “Have you ever written something for me?”

And he just- Nothing. Zero words. Brain static.

He wanted to. He’d wanted to, a million times. But what the hell do you write when your whole head is just noise? Like, yeah, cool, lemme just make a poem out of chaos and panic and weird tenderness that doesn’t know where to go.

He didn’t do ‘words’. He did ‘showing up’. Quiet. Background love. Fixing the shit nobody noticed was broken. Making sure she didn’t have to ask.

But how do you say that?

“I don’t write stuff, but I’d- I don’t know, I’d stand in front of a moving car if it meant you’d feel okay for like five seconds.”

Yeah. That would’ve sounded insane.

So he just sat there. Looking at her. My mouth- kind of open. Nothing coming out.

She looked down. Like maybe she wished she hadn’t asked.

And that silence?

It just sat there. Between them. Loud as hell.

“Yeah! I’ve written a lot for you.”

It came out too fast. Too chipper. He regretted it the second it hit the air.

Not a lie, exactly. He had written things. Beautiful stuff, even. Just, not for *this* Aehlla. For the other one. His Aehlla. Different time. Different universe. Same ache.

“You want me to write a poem for you?” he blurted out right after, way too eager, like throwing a blanket over a fire that had already started burning up the edges.

She smiled. Small, almost shy. The kind of smile that made his chest do that fluttery thing it hated doing. That “oh no, we’re feeling things again” flip-flop. God.

“Yeah,” she said, voice soft, eyes kinda shiny. “But not in English.”

Rari blinked. “Huh?”

She looked out at the sky like she was asking it for backup. Then, all casual-way too casual- she said, “I think prayers would be an attractive language to start with.”

What.

Just- what?

Rari stared. Like full-on paused, mouth slightly open, brain just shorted.

“Prayers?” he repeated, like maybe he’d misheard.

She didn’t even flinch. Just nodded, like yeah, duh, obviously prayers, what else?

And Rari, man. He just smacked his lips and shook his head, not mad, just- what even is this girl. Who says stuff like that on a car hood under a sky like this?

But damn if it didn’t make him fall a little harder. *‘Dude she talks in poetry too’.*

He couldn’t stop grinning. Like, full-on dumb smile territory. This girl- she was a trip. Somehow deep enough to drown in, but also weirdly soft, like you could actually touch the edges of her and not get cut. She was holding his hand, and yeah, they were both sweaty now, palms kinda gross, but neither of them let go. And he didn’t care.

For once, Rari didn't feel the need to crack a joke or fill the silence with something dumb. Didn't feel like performing. Just- sat there. Still. Letting the moment do its thing. The sky had its own poem going, and that was enough.

Then Aehlla broke the quiet.

"You never had any exes, did you?"

Voice soft but direct. She was always like that- just tossed stuff out like it wasn't loaded. "Or are you like Cecelia, bi-"

And boom. Rari's brain hit the brakes so hard it hurt.

Nope. Nope nope nope. Don't go there. Not tonight.

"I loved only one girl," he said, fast. Too fast.

And then added, quieter, "And she, yeah. She left."

He smiled. Sort of. That tight, fake one you use when you're trying not to fall apart. Flashbacks started tugging at him again- *her* laugh, the other Aehlla, the first time, the last time- but he shoved it all down.

Buried it deep. Locked the door.

"Why don't you- write an annotated poem about me, in your *messy* handwriting, let me wonder how it was to *love* in your mind?" he asks so softly.

Then Aehlla spoke again. Real quiet this time. Almost like she didn't want him to hear.

"I want to be the one who makes you believe in love again."

They sat there, not saying anything. Just breathing. Hands still kinda stuck together- sweaty, clammy, whatever. Nobody pulled away.

He stared at her, his eyes locked on hers.

"I love you too," she blurted out, her voice filled with emotion.

Rari smiled softly. "Just like that, I know every time when I have to say it, but I don't," he admitted, his voice low and honest.

Without realizing it, Aehlla reached out and took his hand again. She leaned in close, her lips inches from his, and whispered, "I always know when you have to say it."

Then- cut.

"Aehlla, your mom called," Cecelia said, totally straight-faced. Like she was reading a weather report.

Everything fell apart.

"Wait- what?" Aehlla snapped out of it like someone hit fast-forward. "She *what?*"

Cecelia blinked. "I picked up. Then- hung up."

"What the fuck," Aehlla said, voice high, cracking a little. She shifted, legs slipping. Almost fell. Rari caught her arm.

"Did she ask where I was?" she barked.

"Didn't get that far," Cecelia muttered. "I panicked."

"Oh my god. That's worse. That's actually worse."

"She'll live."

"She'll *freak*," Aehlla snapped. "She's gonna think I got kidnapped or overdosed or joined a cult."

Cecelia half-laughed. "It's not that deep."

"It's literally *that deep*, Cece," Aehlla said, running a hand through her hair. "She's probably called the cops by now."

Rari leaned in. "We can call her. Explain."

Aehlla scoffed. "Yeah. What do we even say? 'Hey, sorry, we were lying on top of a car whispering love confessions under a bunch of stars while ignoring your call?'"

Cecelia shrugged. "Honestly, sounds kinda romantic."

Aehlla looked at her like she wanted to scream.

Rari grabbed his keys. "You want us to take you home?"

She didn't answer. Just stared off into the dark like maybe she wasn't sure if she was mad- or just really, really tired.

Rari watched the two of them go back and forth, half amused, half terrified. "Can I drive?"

"NO!" they both yelled. It echoed. Like, *echoed* down the damn valley. Probably woke up birds or ghosts or something.

Cecelia flexed- literally flexed. "The only girl here with a license is *me*, you immature imbecile."

"Aren't you, like- our age?" Aehlla asked, eyebrows lifted, more amused than judgmental.

"Yeah. So?" The girl didn't flinch. "I flunked two years of college. Big deal. You got a problem with that?"

Aehlla laughed under her breath. "No, just- damn. That's kind of impressive." The girl grinned, toothpick between her teeth. "Yeah, well. I collect academic disasters. Want one?"

Rari slid down the hood, hands behind his head like he was lounging. "Still could drive, though."

"That'd be worse than drinking and driving," Aehlla muttered. Not even looking at him.

On the road back, it was quiet-ish. But not the bad kind. The kind where everyone's a little hyped, a little over it, a little still-tangled in what just happened. Aehlla was still annoyed but couldn't stop giggling every time Cecelia did something dumb. Which was often.

They pulled up outside Aehlla's house, brakes squeaky as hell.

Aehlla sighed. Long and dramatic. Then opened the door. "Thanks for taking your car tonight, Cece," Rari said, casually popping a chip in his mouth.

She rolled her eyes but didn't say anything.

"I'll go face the music," Aehlla muttered, dragging her feet a little.

"Hey, good luck!" Cecelia yelled. "You're gonna *need* it."

Aehlla turned, half-laughing, half-murderous. "You're dead to me."

Cecelia just grinned like she'd won something.

Then- door opened before Aehlla could even fake a calm entry. Her mom. At the doorway. Arms crossed, not yelling. But that calm voice that's *worse* than yelling.

"You're here soon?"

Yeah, she was mad. But holding it in like a pro.

Aehlla opened her mouth, already gearing up for a downplay monologue. "So, we were just-"

"I thought you were worried," Rari cut in, appearing from *literally nowhere*, hands up like he was reporting for duty. "Cecelia cut your call," he added, hand dragging down his face dramatically, "which was obviously intentional." He dropped the hand. "So we came back early. Tried calling again- nothing. So yeah. Figured best to bring her home. Safe."

The room paused.

Then Aehlla's mom just- *smiled*. Like this soft, quiet little smile that felt weirdly reassuring.

"Oh Rari, I know she'd be safe with you."

Rari blinked. Did a double take. Aehlla stared at him like he just summoned a patronus or something.

What kind of witchcraft was that?

"Is papa asleep?" Aehlla asked cautiously.

"Luckily. I told him you were at Cecelia's. Sleepover."

Rari fist-bumped her mom. "Best wingman ever."

Then he backwalked down the driveway like a movie character, grinning like a fool, not even watching where he was going.

Aehlla went inside, shoulders tense. But before the door closed, she looked back.

Cecelia was still in the car. Smirking. Being Cecelia.

Aehlla mouthed, *I'm going to kill you.*

Cecelia blew a kiss.

'I love you', Rari mouthed to Aehlla, whose eyes were sparkling with awe.

Mirari / present / past

Pain- A word to not be used much. I burst into consciousness, my head throbbing like it was being hammered by a crazy goblin demanding food. “Seriously, can’t you find a gentler way to wake me up, karma?” I groaned, my hands rubbing my forehead in an attempt to soothe the pain.

“Why did you even want me here?”

I couldn’t see shit. I pinched my eyes hard to stray away from the glow that lit up my mind. Karma stood before me, his presence radiating an intense, ethereal glow, that almost illuminated the very fabric of reality. His eyes burned with a deep, ancient wisdom, and his smile was both captivating and humbling. It was as if the universe itself had taken form in him, guiding me towards my destiny, with a gentle yet unyielding hand.

Shit, too dramatic.

I used to hate him. Whatever he was. Karma, fate, the universe's cruel little game master. Always dragging me where I didn't want to go. Always ripping things out of my hands.

But now, now he looked different.

His eyes- still intense, still sharp- but not in that cut-you-open kind of way. There was something behind them now. Like, like he *knew* something. Like he wasn't there to shove me anymore. Just stand there. Watch. Understand.

And maybe even, fuck, I don't know- care?

And me? I just stood there. I didn't even know what to do with myself. That glow around him- it wasn't blinding or loud. It was soft. Almost too soft. Like the world went quiet just around him. And I was standing in it. Like I wasn't in trouble anymore.

I hated that. I loved that. I didn't know.

It felt peaceful. Grossly peaceful. From *him*. The thing I blamed for everything. Now he felt- familiar. Like maybe he was never against me. Maybe he *was* me. Some weird part of me I kept trying to cut off.

He wore this robe- light bounced off it like water, but not flashy. Just enough. Just enough to make you stop and stare. Around his neck, a chain. Small, barely there. But the crystal hanging from it- man, it *glowed*. Blue. Gold. Purple. Like the sky was trapped inside it. Like everything I was trying to figure out had already settled in that tiny stone.

And me?

Yeah. I'd changed. I couldn't pretend I hadn't. Something in my brain had shifted. My serotonin wasn't running wild anymore- it was, I don't know. Balanced? Still buzzing, but in a way that felt less desperate. Less "hold on or crash."

It felt soft. That's the word. Soft.

I looked around and realized I had everything I kept begging the universe for. Aehlra was here. Still here.

I had a reason to keep waking up.

And this weird- connection to something I couldn't explain without sounding like I was losing it.

And maybe I was.

But it felt good.

Like finally.

"What is this glow up karma?" I ask him and myself.

"Come closer" he said like a perverted uncle.

I stepped closer, my tongue out in suspicion, I saw him more clearly.

"How do I look?" he asks, so intrigued, like a princess on her 16th birthday.

"Oh who's this diva?" I almost touched his robe, he slapped my hand.

"Did I do this?" I ask.

"You did enough for both of us." He smiled and flowers bloomed across my consciousness. *He was in control of my consciousness?*

They sprung up like summer, cool breezes to welcome me, to be a part of him.

"Now you can change the way I think, I feel, and even my personality. Right?"

His eyes rolled up. "Fuck no, you gotta handle yourself."

He stumps down to the ground.

"Are you eter-?"

"Yes, I am eternal, if you didn't notice."

I smile, "Now you are me, my soul is yours- and I am yours- how does this crap work?"

He just floats and looks at me with grace. "I need to show you something Mirari."

He gently lifts me up to hover over the flowers and the bees that sucked it.

His voice sounded fairly- annoying now. Just like me.

Air shimmered, my heart beat. Tiny fragments of bubbles came across my face.

Ah, bubbles of memory.

“Are you killing me again? Now that you’ve become eternal or something?”

“Am I so cruel?” he answered aptly.

“You are one of humanity’s most torture giving pantser ever lived, inside me.”

I halted. “That also sounds wrong.”

He tilted his head towards me, “*You think there is only one of me?*”

Did I listen carefully? *There were more like him? Like me?*

Karma’s voice whispered softly in my mind. “Aehlla, too, has a karma like yours- I mean me-” he said, his words filled with a deep understanding. “But hers is different- more sophisticated, more mature. She has walked paths only a few have tread, and her soul carries the weight of wisdom and compassion”. Karma’s glow intensified, and I felt a surge of curiosity, my mouth dryer than the Sahara.

I had a brief ‘what the fuck’ session in my brain.

Yah, I never even thought she might have a blessing like me. Did I say blessing? This curse, like me. The thought filled him with a sense of wonder and awe, and he couldn’t help but feel a deeper connection to her. Karma’s presence seemed to grow stronger, as if urging Rari to understand the depth of Aehlla’s journey and the profound bond they shared. “Her karma is intertwined with yours,” Karma continued, “with me” he took a deep pause, “now forever.”

His smile melted my heart. I wanted everything to do for this guy and this guy is me.

“So- she’s my- *soulmate?*” felt gnarly saying that, but okay.

“You don’t know but you would lay your life for her, *unknowingly.*” he put the emphasis on *unknowingly*.

“How are you eternal when I, myself don’t have enough feelings yet for her- I mean why would I give up my life or-”

“Because, in the grand tapestry of existence, your souls are woven together in a way that transcends the limitations of time and emotion,” he explained, his voice filled with a deep wisdom. He changed. Oh my god how much has he changed.

“It’s not about how much you feel for her right now; its about the promise of what could be. Your connection to Aehlla is a doorway to a future filled with possibilities, a future where love and joy are not just emotions, but the very fabric of your reality.”

I gulped.

“What?”

“Your dumbass wouldn’t understand such feelings.”

He laughed. “We are already entwined together, Mirari. Officially, a soulmate to Aehlla.”

He stopped his glow.

“Now nothing- absolutely nothing- but death can do you guys apart. *I promise you that.*”

I blinked rapidly, my eyes sweating.

He fucking used me. He respawned me to live another life, to be closer to her karma.

And then, almost like it slipped his mind, he muttered, “Oh. Right. One more thing.”

I looked at him, already bracing. My insides pulled tight, waiting for the next wrong thing to be etched into me.

“A reward,” he said, calm as static. “For making me eternal.”

No theatrics. No spark. He just said it, flat and final, like reality had already rearranged itself to make room.

“You’ve got instant karma now.”

My stomach twisted. “The fuck does that even mean?”

His grin widened, slow and deliberate. “It means if someone hurts you-*they get hurt worse*. Not balanced. Not fair. Just- worse. Always worse.”

I stared, blood rushing in my ears.

“They shove you, they break a rib. They scream in your face, they lose their voice for three days. They try to break your heart?” He leaned in, voice dipping.

“They won’t even know why their chest won’t stop aching.”

“You’re not saying it’s- mirrored,” I said.

“No,” he replied. “I’m saying it’s *compounded*. It escalates. Like interest on a debt. They touch you with cruelty, it burns. They lie? They choke on it later. And the best part? You don’t control it. You don’t have to lift a finger.”

A pause. The silence stretched so long it felt like the air had been sucked out of the room. UGH I HATED IT.

“It’s not protection,” he added, his voice like ice water down my spine. “You’ll still take the hit. You’ll still cry. Still fall. But they? They *don’t recover clean*. They limp out of it. Scarred. Changed.”

And just like that- like he’d handed me a weapon with no safety- he stepped back. Done.

I didn’t feel stronger.

I felt cursed.

There was something crawling under my skin now. A thrum. Not power. Not clarity.

Just pressure. Like something in me had teeth.

And he just stood there, watching. Like he couldn’t wait to see who’d try me first.

“What? NO” he bellowed. Oh he could still know what I was thinking. Stupid.

“I made sure even if you didn’t accept her I would. All your destinies are with her, all of the possible outcomes of your future are with her, I couldn’t be eternal without your dumbass realizing that you also love her, as much as I do. And that happened last night.”

He kept thinking what to add in his speech.

I rubbed my face hard with my sweaty palm. As soon as I realized it was sweaty a cool breeze flew by me, steaming my sweat at ease. I could still see him smiling.

“Love is deceiving and your time is fleeting. I know what I have done for you.”
He soared up higher, more bubbles ramming up in his command.

It smelled heavenly, more scented than the last time I encountered them.

I saw the fumes burning in one of the bubbles, one had me with Aehlla and our children, one had us so old together that I hardly believed it to be true.

“Yah- yah, great story” I thumbs up to him in the void, “but why didn’t you become eternal in my past life- if both of us loved each other?” my mind ignited with a beautiful question.

“Is it because she broke up with me for some stupid ass reason? She might have come back.”

“Every aehlla in your every possible existence either loves you in her greatest way, or leaves you in the worst way.”

“Hey hey hey, I don’t need your self explanatory answers, okay? Just a simple reason.”

“The truth?”

Well duh. Now read my mind asshole.

“Will you digest it if I say she didn’t love you as much as you did?” he exclaims. He waited for this moment, I could see that.

“Say what?”

“Remember when Cillian told you ‘she’s with someone else’ while you were soaking every last bit of those raindrops on the street?” his fingers up pointing

the exclamation. “So people won’t notice your tears in the rain or some shit you were thinking-”

Wait, yah. Hold on. No wait again.

My eyes narrowed.

Cillian did say that.

“She was with ‘someone’ when I dated her?” my fingers go up too.

“Genius IQ Rari” he slams.

A summoned bubble, he took out from his robe like he had kept it in secret to show me when he was ‘eternal’.

“Don’t look surprised when you see it, actually, you should’ve seen it coming long ago.”

I gasped when it floated to me so slowly, I began wondering about the bubble where I was old to be true.

The bubble floated up. Slow. Shimmery. Weird glow around it, soft like soap but heavy, too. Like it *knew*. Like it was carrying something I wasn’t ready for.

My chest tightened before I even touched it.

Like my body already knew- *don’t go in there*.

But I did.

The second I sank into it, it hit. Fast.

Memory spilled out like someone tipped ink into water. Black tendrils. No warning. No pause button. Just *bam*- right there in my head, spreading fast.

Prom.

I was at prom.

Laughing with people I don’t even talk to anymore. Stupid smile on my face. Music blasting, lights everywhere- moving too fast but also not fast enough. For a second, it felt kinda good. Familiar. Warm.

I looked good. Honestly. Jacket sharp. Hair right. I looked like someone who didn't know what heartbreak even was.

And then- I saw her. Aehlla.

God. She was glowing. Like she'd stepped out of a dream and didn't even know it. Her dress- blue? No, gold? Fuck, I don't remember. Just that it caught the light and bounced it right back. Her smile was brighter than anything in that room.

But she wasn't looking at me.

She wasn't waiting for me to turn around and lock eyes like in every movie I grew up watching.

She wasn't laughing with me.

She wasn't even *thinking* about me.

Nope. She was dancing.

With *him*. Cillian.

His hand was on her waist. Soft. Way too familiar.

They moved like they'd practiced. Like their hearts were synced up and no one told me.

And she smiled at him.

Not me.

Him.

And just like that, whatever that bubble had to show me- yeah. It did its job. It cracked me wide open.

And then they kissed.

I stared. That's it. Just- stood there, stuck. Couldn't move. Couldn't think. Everything just froze. My brain kept looping the same thing like it was trying to catch up- weren't they just best friends? That's what I thought. That's what she told me. What he told me. Over and over. Besties. And then this. This

wasn't confused or spontaneous. It was real. It was heavy. Slow. Intentional. The kind of kiss people mean.

She leaned in like it was nothing. Like she'd been leaning toward him the whole time and I'd just never noticed. Her hands on his shoulders, gentle- familiar. Like they did this often. Like I was the outsider in a story I thought I was starring in. Everything else around them went blurry. Music, lights, background noise- all fuzz. But the kiss? Sharp. Clear. Burned into me.

And I was just- gone. Not even there. Not where I should've been. I'd been off somewhere being loud, laughing at dumb jokes, acting like the world was fine. With people who didn't matter. While the one person who did was slipping away. Not even slipping, actually. She was already gone.

It hit like a punch to the ribs. No wind-up, no warning- just pain. Deep and fast. My chest felt wrong. Like something hollowed out and forgot to put anything back. Like I was walking around with a hole in me now. And the worst part? I'd done it. Me. I let it happen. Because I wasn't paying attention.

And then the laughter. From earlier. From me. From them. It felt gross now. Too loud. Like it was aimed *at* me. Like everyone had known and just hadn't said anything. I felt stupid. So fucking stupid. I wanted to look away. To shut my eyes. To scream, maybe. But I couldn't.

Karma was still there. Not saying anything at first. Just watching me fall apart. Then, finally: "You needed to see this." He said it soft. Like he didn't enjoy it. Like maybe he'd seen it hurt before. "You needed to understand."

I didn't blink. I couldn't. My eyes burned but they stayed open. Like they were part of the punishment.

Man it's too early in the morning for shit like this to pop up. I haven't even brushed.

I felt tears sting at the corner of my eyes as the memory faded back into nothingness leaving behind only its weight- a heavy ache lodged deep within my soul. It wasn't just about losing her at the moment; it was about realizing

how easily she could slip away while I stood still, thinking she would always be mine.

As the bubble dissolved, I stood floating in place, haunted by the image of Aehlla's kiss that fucker.

Sometimes love isn't enough to keep someone close when you fail to show them they're your world.

I was choking. "A-And my mom?" I ask. "How's she?"

"Been through a lot, and going through worse."

He casted out another bubble forcing me to see, not just listen, what my death caused.

Misery. I kept quiet and let him show me.

I stood there. Or floated. Or whatever the hell this was. I didn't know anymore. I just knew I wasn't in my body, and I wasn't dead either, not completely. But watching her like that? Felt worse than dying. Felt like dying twice.

She kept crying. Hands still over her face. Shoulders shaking like maybe if she shook hard enough, time would reverse. Maybe the universe would crack open and fix it. Give her back her son. Give me back *me*.

I turned to Karma. "Please," I said. Didn't yell it. Just said it. Quiet. Real. Like maybe being calm would change something.

He didn't move. Didn't blink. Just stood there, same expression. Like this was just another sad movie and he'd seen it a hundred times. And I hated him for that. I hated that he wasn't breaking the way I was. That he wasn't *shaking*.

"Why are you even here?" I snapped. "Just to watch me fall apart? To rub it in?"

His eyes didn't even flicker.

"You asked for truth," he said.

I laughed. It came out ugly. "Yeah, well, I changed my mind."

Still nothing from him. Just that blank, eternal calm. Like pain meant nothing in his world.

My mom was still there. Still shaking. Still whispering stuff into her palms like maybe I could hear her. And I *could*. That's what made it worse. I could hear everything. Every breath, every sob, every word. And she didn't know. She had no idea her broken son was standing two feet away, watching her collapse.

I wanted to run. I wanted to scream and punch the sky and make the whole world stop spinning.

"I'm not ready," I said, voice shaking now. "I'm not ready to be gone. You hear me?"

Karma turned, finally. Just a little. Enough to let me know he was listening.

"No one ever is," he said.

"That's bullshit."

He didn't argue.

She finally lifted her head. Eyes red. Face blotchy. She looked older all of a sudden. Like this moment alone had aged her years.

And then she did it- reached out and touched the stone. Just rested her hand on it like it was warm, like it was still *me*. And she whispered, barely loud enough to catch:

"I love you."

I lost it.

Dropped to my knees-if that's what you could call it-and cried like a kid. Big, shaking sobs that didn't even feel like they belonged in the world anymore.

"I love you too," I said, but it was useless.

She didn't hear.

"I just- I just wanna tell her, I am here."

"No."

“You fuckhead, didn’t I help you to be eternal, huh? Didn’t I do everything you said and lived this life for you?” I yelled my lungs out, potentially losing my voice in the end.

“Please let me do this for my mom” I beg.

“Do you understand, you would change the course of time and her reality as well?” He was the most boring teacher in school.

“I won’t fail. I would like to take the chances.” My eyes shimmered.

“I trust you not to fuck up, or I’ll do something you won’t like.”

I nodded. “In spirit” he clasped his hands and grabbed my head.

I saw myself standing a little far from mom. I was translucent and my body felt weightless. Karma wasn’t there.

I took a sharp stone to etch on a stone bench nearby, *‘I am not dead- Mirari’*.

Yah, yah perfect. My handwriting in shackles. I hoped she understood it.

‘I hope it’s fine’ I wondered continuously, jumping like I had to pee.

I vanish back. “OH YOU BIG CHROMATIC IDIOT, I wanted to see if she really checks out what I wrote.”

“You going back in the past is already a big deal for me, I have no expectations from you.”

“Put on your bubble and show me what happens” I scream.

He sighs.

I see my mom carrying her overcoat and reaching for the exit.

Yes, yes see it. Please.

My mother didn’t notice the paper; she was too lost in her grief. She continued walking down to her car.

NO- NO- NO.

I couldn’t physically touch or even apprehend my presence.

I looked behind and it struck me.

I ran towards my headstone, the stone still in my hand, felt heavier now.

MY AURA WAS VANISHING.

With all my might, I scraped the stone from the edges making it harder even for dyslexic people to read.

I stood there silently hoping to get back to karma.

“Okay nevermind” I covered up the fuckup I did, “I wrote on the bench and scratched my name on the headstone, I suppose?”

“WHAT?” his expressions read, Are you a dumbfuck?

“She’s still holding on to her past dude” I raise my hand pointing to the bubble, “she’s so busy cursing herself- I-” I stop and think. “And you as my karma, should pretty well know what I am gonna do.”

“Either I give her hope that I am not dead- or let me not be a part of their history and let them forget me.”

“And scratching your name would work?” his glare, more bitchy. “They would still know you.”

“Can’t you just magically make it disappear?”

“Magic? Now you want a bunny out of your ass? That kinda magic?”

Okay I sense he can’t do it- and the tone made my heart beat more.

“Am not here to fucking correct your mistakes, again and again and again-”

He didn’t blink while he stared at me. *“I AM NOT ALL KNOWING, I AM NOT GOD!”*

Karma chuckled. “Nice plan. Looks like someone-” he stares at me angrily, “-agreed to be sacrificed to a volcano.”

Mirari's karma / present / past

I had myself shut up. I knew what I was doing was wrong. But I couldn't help it.

Being eternal came with a cost.

"Is something wrong?" he asks in his tiny voice.

I was pissed, but couldn't show. I didn't like the tone. I radiated an enormous aura, I was tired already. "Don't even-" I thought, "time ripples have begun."

He looked at me obnoxiously. Explain, he thought.

"The pain to your mom- was supposed to happen. Aehlla cheating on you- was supposed to happen, you scratching your name the fuck out of your headstone was not." I descended him to the ground, the show was over.

He looked at the ground. Then at the stone. Then away. Like his eyes didn't know where to land.

“It’s not just the pain,” he started. Voice low, uneven. “It’s not just, losing me. It’s more than that.”

I didn’t interrupt.

He kept going. Words tumbling, like he hadn’t planned them. Like they just wouldn’t stay inside anymore.

“It’s, every time they come here. Every time someone stands by that headstone, they just- get stuck. Frozen. They look at my name and it’s like that’s it. That’s all there is. Just death. Just the loss.”

He blinked fast. Swallowed something down.

“And I- I hate that. I fucking hate that. ‘Cause that’s not who I was. I had so much, so many dumb moments, so many loud, messy, *alive* things. But none of that comes back when they look at this rock with my name carved into it. All they feel is the part where I’m not here.”

His foot scraped against the dirt. Grounded. Barely.

“I don’t want that to be what they hold onto.”

Another pause. Hands clenched. Unclenched.

“I want them to think about me *living*. Not just how it ended. I want my mom to laugh, even if it hurts. I want her to fucking *move*. I want her to be free of this anchor. This spot.”

He looked at the grave again, jaw tight.

“That’s why. That’s why I want the name gone.”

He exhaled, sharp. Shaky.

“It’s not erasing me. It’s just- letting go of the worst part.”

He didn’t look at me after that. He just stared at the grass. Like maybe if he stared hard enough, he could crawl out of all this and start over.

He’s a great manipulator, isn’t he?

I stare hysterically.

“And don’t forget I made you eternal, not my mom,” he added. “Won’t my mom now remember me for who I was, and not just how I died?”

I stood blank. Even I was blank. “Do you even think these people would think about such a deep meaning of your actions? They would probably be like some brat did that as a prank.”

The consciousness now was blurry, drizzling from the sky. It was snowing.

“Does this symbolise anything now?” he asked looking up.

“No nothing, snow makes me think.”

He took a step forward and blurted, “I have free will right? I don’t care if my decisions are stupid, and bratty, but they give me *hope*.”

He had me at hope.

“You had a hope in me, I will live this life and make you eternal or some shit you wanted, how did that affect me? To live in pain?” I smell his morning breath, “I wanted to live purely and finally when I am in love, YOU SHOW THAT AEHLLA CHEATED ON ME WITH MY BEST FRIEND?!” his voice turned up a notch.

I listen intently.

“HOW IS THAT FAIR?!” His words made my snow into rain.

“Your little ounce of hope made me live a whole god damn life again, what would it take to make my mother happy?” we both were drenching now in the rain.

“Are these my tears?” he asks calmly, making sure he wasn’t crying now.

“Yes they are.”

I looked down in vain, I did make him do all of it. In spite of his regrets and his wish to die. I was the one to blame.

“I didn’t have-” I clarified but he nudged me, “No this is where you zip it okay?” he roared.

“I’ve had enough bullshit about your ‘hope’ story and your pathetic lectures about myself to me.”

“I had to tell you the truth,” I began anyway, “I don’t want to keep you in the shadows anymore, you have grown in life.” I took a few steps away from him, his morning breath stinked.

He was in deep thought. More importantly he had to know how to love despite the pain.

“Let me get this straight, *to be in love is to be in pain.*”

His spine erect, he looked at me with puppy eyes. ‘Please don’t do this to me’ he thought.

I don’t want to, Mirari. “But in the end, I feel your heart will be broken into pieces just to give her peace forever.” I managed a smile.

“Think about it- any of the bubbles you take, if you peek into each one, you’ll find Aehlla right there with you. Some of them are just temporary, but others are for life.” I look around and admire the floating memories.

“And I wanted you- to have an Aehlla for your life.”

He looked disturbed. I still hesitated to ask, “Are you okay Rari?”

“Yah, sure” came the reply. “I am going back.” Dull and lonely, I felt that.

I couldn’t do anything. I regretted being eternal at this point.

He opened his eyes claustrophobically, and gasped for air. His head was pumping like a cannon. Still in his bed, in his pajamas and a good day to be alive.

“Woke up handsome as fuck again, I don’t even know what I can do anymore” daily affirmations, he pretended everything was alright and under his control, staring himself in front of the mirror.

Which apparently wasn’t.

“Mirari!”

His name cracked through the ceiling like a gunshot. Sharp. Jarring. His mom's voice- high, raw, like it'd been building up and finally snapped.

"Come down, *RIGHT NOW!*"

He flinched. Actually I winced. His heart jumped, then started thudding too fast. His head buzzed- static, like white noise turned up too loud. His thoughts felt like chalk dust, clinging to the inside of his skull. Everything itchy. Off.

He pulled on a t-shirt- wrong one, not the one he thought he grabbed. It felt weird on his skin. Cold. Like it didn't belong to him. Like his own damn clothes didn't recognize him today.

Too much.

Too fucking much.

He stormed down the stairs- each step loud, uneven. Not on purpose. Just no control. It felt like walking into a fight you didn't remember starting. Like trying to play it cool with your insides screaming.

At the bottom step, he stopped.

Everything tilted.

There- right there in the hallway- stood a woman. And not just a woman. A presence. Like someone had walked straight out of a dream and brought the thunder with her.

Her hat was ridiculous. Wide-brimmed, loud, dripping with peacock feathers that shimmered when the light hit them. Blues and greens shifting like oil on pavement. Her hair, silver and wavy, slipped out from underneath the brim like she didn't care it wasn't perfect. Her face was sharp and worn and alive- like it had seen things, burned through things, and still stood tall.

The dress- deep green, velvet, heavy. It looked expensive. No, old. Like history. Like something you didn't touch without permission. Sleeves long and tight, lace cuffs trembling with the smallest move. A string of jade beads sat tight around her neck, each stone catching just enough hallway light to glint. Her gloves were soft leather, the kind that had stories. She had a cane- thin, carved,

topped with a green stone that looked like it could snap a person in half if it wanted to.

She stared at him like she was seeing a ghost. Or a prophecy. Or both.

Mirari opened his mouth. Failed. Tried again. “Umm-” was all that came out.

He glanced over at his mom, who hadn’t really turned. She just stood at the stove. Her shoulders were hunched, like something heavy had been dropped on them. Her face was grey. Not tired. Not upset. Just hollow. Like there was nothing left inside.

She looked over her shoulder, voice flat, almost detached.

“Aunt Naira has come to meet you.”

Naira / present

I have thrown away my journal. Did I tell you guys that already? Kinda wished I hadn't done that. My therapy now costs more than my phone's EMI.

"Rari's all grown up, huh?" I amuse myself, 'cause there is no one to.

"Yeah, and you're still the reason people pray for selective hearing," Elina mocked.

Some grudges don't wear off. She couldn't forget what had happened. And I am completely okay with that.

I have always loved Rari, as my own child. I know it's been 7 years, no contact with the Alvarez family. I kept smiling despite my heart sailing away on some distant island.

But he looked confused.

Maybe about my looks?

“I didn’t have another acid attack,” I said, forcing the smile. “It’s the same one. Don’t worry.” The words came out a little too fast, a little too sharp. Like I was trying to laugh through it and it wasn’t landing.

Rari leaned in. Slowly. Like he was still trying to figure out what I even was. His eyes scanned my face- not casual. Searching. Like he thought maybe if he looked hard enough, he’d recognize something. Someone.

I reached for his hand without thinking. Just grabbed it. Held it like a rope in water. “Can I take him out?” I asked. Voice soft. Shaky. “Maybe we could- I don’t know. Eat somewhere today?”

Elina didn’t say anything at first. Just shot me this look. Straight knife. Her eyes were fire and ice and knives all at once. I didn’t have to hear her say no. It was written all over her face. *Over my dead body.*

She opened her mouth- probably to shred me- “Don’t even-”

But Rari cut in. Calm. Gentle. Like a different person. “It’s okay, Mom. I’ll go get ready.” He turned to me. “Could you wait for me?”

I blinked. Was he always like that? That soft? That- polite? Something in him was different. Either cracked or stitched back together the wrong way.

Outside, the air felt weird. Too open. Too raw. He walked next to me, quiet. His steps unsure, like he wasn’t totally in sync with himself yet. Like he didn’t quite believe he was real. Every shop window, every dark reflection we passed, he glanced- like he was searching for someone. Or checking if he was still there.

We found a quiet café. Corner table. Near the wall. Not a lot of people. Just enough noise to stay anonymous. The clatter of cups, the hum of soft conversation. Life moving on while we just sat there, stuck.

He looked tired. Not in the “I didn’t sleep” way. More like his soul was tired. His eyes had shadows that didn’t belong to kids. He held himself like he was bracing for something.

I watched him. Didn’t even hide it.

Then I asked. “Do they still abuse you?”

It dropped into the middle of the table like a glass shattering. The space between us shrank and exploded all at once.

He didn't answer right away. Looked away. Jaw clenched. His fingers traced something invisible into the table-circles, maybe. Or scars.

Then he looked up. Met my eyes.

"Abuse?" he said. Like he was translating it for the first time. "You mean, like physical abuse?"

I shook my head. "No. Mental. Emotional. The quiet kind. The one no one notices until you're already wrecked."

My hand brushed the side of my head without thinking.

He blinked, like I was speaking a language he hadn't learned. "Why would they do that to me?" he asked. "And who's 'they'?"

That stunned me. Not because he said it, but because he *meant* it. Full confusion. Nothing behind it. Just blank.

Something in my chest shifted.

I leaned in. "Are you okay?" I asked. "Because it doesn't *sound* like it."

He stared into his coffee. The steam curled around his face. Soft, like it was trying to hide him. His shirt was baggy, sad-looking. Like it belonged to someone else. Maybe it did.

"I'm fine," he said. "Really."

I didn't buy it.

"I mean- who even *are* you?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. "Why do you think you were mentally abused? What happened?"

He looked up again. That same vague calm. But something flickered underneath.

And all I could think was-how is he sitting here with me, sharing a meal, saying he doesn't even know who I am, while also wanting to hear the story that broke him?

This wasn't how people acted when they were fine.

And it wasn't how you sat with someone you didn't remember.

I took a breath.

"So- when did you get back from rehab?"

He didn't answer right away. Just stared at his coffee, fingers tightening around the cup.

Then finally, quiet:

"Can you- just start from the beginning?"

The sun dipped behind the hills, fast, like it couldn't stand to watch what was coming. The light just bailed. Inside the Alvarez living room, it was already done. That quiet, smoky kind of aftermath. The kind that sticks to your skin.

Burnt incense. Wilted flowers. Sweat. Grief.

And silence. But not the good kind.

Elina sat stiff. Back straight, jaw tight, hands white-knuckled in her lap. Across from her- Aure and Kael. Still in black. Dust from the cemetery on their sleeves. Like grief left residue.

I sat in the middle. Silent. A place I didn't want to be, but couldn't leave.

Long sleeves, despite the heat. Needed the fabric. The coverage. The lie. One eye flicking around. The other frozen, half-lidded, stuck in the same place it always was. Half-blink. Mid-scream.

No one said anything. Until Elina did.

"You knew." Her voice didn't rise. Just- cut. "You knew he needed Rari's blood. And you sent him away anyway."

Aure didn't wait. "You absolute fucking wretch," she said. Loud. Immediate. "How dare you sit here like it's fine. Like you belong anywhere near us. Near him."

Kael stood up. Fast. Loud. Knocked over a glass. It shattered. Didn't matter.

"He begged. He begged for his life. Needed O-negative. We waited. And waited. You signed the form. You sent Rari away."

I blinked. The slow kind. Like my body didn't care anymore.

"He was dying anyway," I said. Voice flat. Cracked. "I did what was kind."

Aure shot up. "Kind?!" Her voice cracked open. "He had a chance. You took it. You took everything. You stole him."

I didn't answer.

"You told me once," I said to Elina, not looking at her. "That suffering for the sake of hope is worse than death."

Elina stood up. Real slow. The chair groaned under her like it didn't want to let go.

"Don't twist my words," she said. "Don't you fucking dare."

"He was in pain. His kidneys were gone. The doctors knew. You knew. I let Rari go. I didn't want him to watch that."

Kael's face twisted. "And who made you God?"

He stepped forward. His voice felt like it wanted to hit something.

"You think your own pain makes you wise? Makes you the fucking gatekeeper of death?"

"You're broken," he said. "Just broken."

Aure didn't stop. "You should be in jail."

There it was.

"You murdered him."

I flinched. Not from the word. Just from the relief of hearing it finally said out loud.

Kael pulled his phone out. "Calling the cops."

"Stop," Elina said. Quiet. But it hit.

They didn't.

"She's a monster," Aure said. "Always was. Hiding behind scars like it makes her untouchable."

"I said STOP!"

That one cracked the room.

Even the air paused.

Elina stepped toward me. Slow. Like she was walking through everything we used to be.

"Do you know what it's like," she said, "to lose the one person who held your hand like it was sacred?"

She didn't wait for me to answer.

"I trusted you," she said. "You were family. I let you in. I loved you. And you stole the last shot he had. Maybe it wasn't much. But it wasn't yours to decide."

I looked away.

Then it happened.

Her hand came across my face.

Not loud. But it hit. Hard. Echoed.

My head jerked sideways. Someone gasped. Aure covered her mouth. Kael just stared.

I didn't cry. What was one more burn?

"You're not going to court," Elina said. "You're not going to jail. That's not what he would've wanted."

Kael scoffed. Aure crossed her arms.

"But you're done," she said. "You're out. You don't speak to me. You don't come near my son. You don't come near us. Ever again."

I didn't argue. Didn't apologize.

Just- stood. Smoothed my sleeve. My cheek still hot.

I walked out.

The door clicked behind me.

Inside, the room stayed silent. Emptier now. Not better. Just-emptier.

Aure muttered something. Kael poured another drink. His hands still shook.

Elina sat. Palms open on her knees.

"He would've wanted peace," she said.

No one answered.

Because peace, like O-negative, always shows up too fucking late.

His eyes seemed shocked, worried and fucked. He stared at my coffee continuously.

"Oh obviously you didn't know all this about me, or even what happened that day" I whisper silently.

And I just stare at him.

Blank. Confused. My stomach already folding in on itself.

"You're asking me this again?" I say. "Rari- why the hell are you asking me this now? After everything? After years?"

I don't yell it. I can't. It just spills out. Tired. Shaken.

"You know what happened. You *lived* it."

But he's just- looking.

Wide eyes. Wide and empty. Like a vacuum. Like someone scooped the memory out and left nothing behind.

No hurt.

No sting.

Just that awful, desperate hunger for answers.

My voice shakes. “Why are you looking at me like that? Like I’m making this up. Like I’m telling you a ghost story you’ve never heard.”

And then I see it.

He doesn’t remember.

He doesn’t fucking remember.

Not like I do. Not like I’ve carried it. Not like it’s stitched into the back of my teeth.

His pain- it’s gone from him. Or it never landed right. Or it broke him so clean he just blocked it out. I don’t know which. Doesn’t matter.

All I know is something in me splits open.

“You want to know the real fucking tragedy, Rari?” I say. And this time, my voice doesn’t shake. It cuts. Sharp. “It wasn’t just that your dad died. It was everything that came *after*. What they did to you. To *you*. Because I wasn’t there to take the blame.”

I’m spitting now. Not from anger. From everything finally crawling out of my chest.

“They turned on you like fucking wolves. Like scared little animals looking for something to bite. They needed someone to crucify. And you- you were there. You didn’t even get to say goodbye. And suddenly it was *your fault*.”

He doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t talk. Just listens.

Because someone’s *finally* saying it.

“They didn’t just mourn your dad. They mourned being *useless*. Powerless. And instead of dealing with that- they came for you. They called you selfish. Said you ran. Said you let him die.”

I choke back something bitter. Not tears. Just acid.

“You were a *kid*, Rari. A kid. And they tossed you into that goddamn lion’s den like it was nothing. And I let them.”

I wipe my face. Angry at myself. At them. At time.

“You stopped smiling. You started twitching every time the phone rang. You *flinched* when someone said ‘dad.’ You broke. And nobody fucking cared. They didn’t hold you. They didn’t help. They just dug deeper. Until you stopped being *you*.”

He’s breathing heavy now. Eyes glassy. But he’s holding it. Just barely.

“You were never supposed to carry that,” I say. “It was mine. That blame. It should’ve been mine. If I’d stayed, they would’ve thrown it at me. And I would’ve taken it. I *should’ve*.”

His lips part. Not to speak. Just to breathe again.

“I’m built from fire, Rari. I could’ve taken the hate. It would’ve scorched, but I would’ve held it.”

I look at him. He’s not crying. Not really. But something’s trembling in his jaw. Something huge.

“You weren’t built for that weight,” I whisper. “But they dropped it on you anyway. And I let it happen.”

He closes his eyes.

And I just sit there.

Hating the silence. Hating this moment. Hating *them*.

Because blame is easier than grief. And grief is quiet. But blame?

Blame *bites*.

And they chewed through *him* when it should’ve been me.

“Rari!” a voice pinched my ears, it was loud.

I see a girl waving at him but he just looked at her, with his obnoxious breathing. She ran up to us like we were gonna get assaulted. She hugged him and didn't let him go for legit 23 seconds.

He looked at me worryily, "This is Aehlla."

Aehlla / present

I looked at the woman hesitantly, although wondering why she was smiling at me.

“Come let’s have coffee together” she spoke as if we were her kids, but nah, “I had a lot of juice, and I peed like 5 times in an hour already.”

Plenty of exposition to a woman I just met.

Maybe because I was happy, I wrote what I honestly felt for Rari and I wanted him to scoop through my journal. My dopamine was squishing in my brain and my estrogen surpassing its levels. I even checked my pads this morning, no blood.

“What are you even-” Rari started, voice brittle, worn thin.

“I, I went to your place,” I rushed in, too fast, too soon. “Your mom said you were out with someone, and well- it’s a small town, so-”

His head tilted slightly, a muscle twitching in his jaw. "What do you want?"

"Nothing- well, not nothing," I stammered, raising my journal like a peace offering. "I just wanted to show you something, and there's this whole mess at school, like real drama-"

"WHAT DO YOU WANT?!"

His voice cracked like a whip through the air, sharp enough to make even the woman beside him flinch.

"It's a simple question. Don't play games."

My mouth fell open. The journal sagged in my hands.

This wasn't about the journal. It wasn't even about me, I felt.

He stared at me like he'd seen this before.

Like whatever I was about to say would just prove him right.

Like some part of me reminded him of someone who broke something in him a long time ago.

And I had no idea how to prove I wasn't it.

"Why don't you guys take a seat and talk?" the kind lady told us.

"Actually, I was kind of in a hurry to school- just wanted to show Rari what I wrote for him" I turned back to him, hoping, just hoping he would read it.

"I don't wanna read it right now" he grabs his coffee with his sweaty palms, "just leave me alone for sometime, can you?" He walked past me while I contemplated, did I do something wrong?

"Adorable," the lady whispered. "Come sit, coffee's on me".

I thought for a bit.

"I know you don't have to go to school, you just wanted to be with him for a while, and not some random ugly lady to bother you" she talked, very slowly, looking right through me. She knew what I was, and how bad of a liar too.

"Forget about him for a while, he needs some time- alone. Do you want Latte?"

"I've never seen him this rude-" I hesitate.

"Probably because it's not everyday you get to know the truth about your dad's demise-" she holds up the menu card like it's not a big deal what she said.

The air turned cold. Or maybe I did.

My hands were still, fingers curling around nothing. My mouth parted, no words came.

"-what?" I breathed.

"Ah," she smiled, flipping the page, eyes not even on me anymore. "I figured you didn't know. You just wanted to be there for him, not realizing you were walking straight into the storm he just got trapped in."

Her tone was syrupy, but every syllable hit like a hammer.

"I don't understand." My voice broke. "He- he never said anything about-"

"No," she cut in, finally meeting my eyes again. "Because he doesn't trust anyone anymore. Especially not people who show up conveniently, right when his world starts crumbling again."

I stood up, knocking the chair back. My breath was uneven.

"You don't know me," I snapped.

She leaned back, smiling. Calm. Still. Her scar screaming in my face.

"No," she said. "But he does. Even if he doesn't remember why."

Aehlla's karma / present

Her mind was trembling. It was thundering in her mind. She was tired enough to show. She didn't even know how hurt she was, let alone how Rari felt hearing the truth.

I was stunned by how even she didn't flinch, but obvious enough she would come to me for my advice.

The woman's words echoed like thunder after lightening, delayed but deadly.

'He doesn't trust anyone anymore. Especially not people who show up conveniently- right when his world starts crumbling again'.

When did she not show up when he needed her the most?

Her footsteps grew faster, erratic, pounding against the pavement as she tore through the narrow town streets.

If I found him sitting in this aloof cafe, I must find him here anyway, she thought.

She finally found him sitting along the railings of an old book library, his both hands mushed into the book, staring blankly, he wasn't reading it. For sure.

"Rari-" she called out, catching for breath.

'Oh she found me again' he thought horrendously.

He didn't look up.

"Rari- listen to me please"

He turned a page slowly. "What now?"

"I just- I just spoke to her. The woman you were with." She stepped closer. "She told me about your dad."

Rari went still, then shut the book with a quiet, final snap.

"And?" he said, his eyes still on the ground. "You want a medal for hearing it secondhand?"

"Why are you taking this all on me? I was just here to-"

"You could've what, Aehlla?" His gaze softened, cool, unreadable. "Fixed it? Offer some poetic closure in a monologue?"

Her arms dropped to her sides, the journal still clutched in one hand like it could anchor her. "That's not fair."

"Neither is death," he said flatly. "Or *betrayal*. But we survive, don't we?" He looked up with the most amount of tears I had seen in his eyes. Seemed as if he was blaming me for betraying him.

"Do you really think I'm here to hurt you?" she asked, voice barely a whisper.

"Kind of embarrassing, I fell for you, and you did too, of course you ended up hurting me first" he just laughed it off on himself. Bitter, but I had no clue what it meant.

"Huh?" Aehlla exclaimed, "I hurt you?"

He just stared with those dreamy eyes into her soul.

But Aehlla gave her justification, even though he didn't wanna hear it.

"I would've blurted out all my feelings, the ones which you didn't want to hear too, but will you be willing to understand me? Will you be that someone who only listens while I talk just as I did for you?" her eyebrows narrowed and pleaded to him.

He smacked his lips, listening intently.

"When was I never there for you? I know you love me, and I love you too-"

"Can we just meet after some time?" he said looking at his watch, it was eleven thirty in the morning. The sun shone brightly upon them, wanting them to go and have lunch together.

Rari didn't want to.

"I mean- take your time, I don't wanna meddle through your feelings-" she hushed him. "It's not my fault for whatever happened - or whatever *'truth'* you know" she pointed her fingers in the air.

"I am sorry that you had to know this way," she said.

She gave in and hugged him. His heart couldn't take it. He shivered.

'Tremors when I knew she was bugging me, an obvious bug, but little did I know, I was holding my world in my hands' I read his subconscious. So clear, so powerful. The price of being his soulmate was- surreal.

I didn't even know I could do that. And I was scared to tell her the things I know about Mirari now.

For a fact, I knew, he loved her more than he knew, for a reason he didn't show, is what me and Aehlla didn't know.

Aehlla rushed home, throttling on what demonic soul infected Rari.

'Karma, I know you saw all of that,' she whispered to herself, her teeth gritted, undenyng proof I was mad too.

Yes honey, I saw that.

She slammed her room door so fucking hard, a hinge fell over. “Are you okay up there?” her worried mom asked.

“Just the wind- I- I’m fine!” Aehlla shrieked.

“Oh I wish I was” she facepalmed herself.

She didn’t just appear. She *spun* into the room like the laws of reality bent for her. One step, two- then her jaw hit the floor. Like, literally looked like it might drop off and roll under the couch.

She was staring. At *me*. At the dress. At all of it.

And yeah, it was fragile. Delicate in a way that didn’t mean breakable, but sacred.

My dress wasn’t just a dress. It was memory sewn into fabric. Stardust layered with things nobody ever said out loud. Soft. Weightless. But heavy if you knew what it meant. Gold from old sunsets that never really ended. Purple like a dream you forgot but still wake up from crying.

It moved before I did. Like it knew who I was better than I did. Like it felt people’s thoughts before they could speak them. Every thread shimmered like it remembered something- like it *was* something. A message. A warning. A story I hadn’t finished telling.

The belt at my waist wasn’t for fashion. It was a string of silver rings, each one hammered out of some moment Aehlla survived. A heartbreak. A win she didn’t tell anyone about. A quiet night where she didn’t fall apart, even though she wanted to. All of it wrapped around me, like armor she forgot she earned.

My shoulders, bare, but not alone. A veil hung there. Smoke and music woven together, always shifting. It changed with every thought Mirari had of her. Of *me*. It was never still.

And the crown- God, no. It wasn’t a crown. It was a tangle. Roots and stars, caught in each other like a fight that turned into something softer. Flowers blooming from it, but not from Earth. From *here*. Wherever *here* was.

And yeah. I wore all of it. Not because I needed to prove anything. But because I *remembered*. I remembered who she was. Who I was. What we lived through. What we lost.

Once I was a shadow. Stuck in stone. Silent.

Now I moved like I meant it. I *was* the sound. The echo. The bloom. The storm that stayed.

I was dressed in everything love didn't kill. Everything it *rescued*.

And yeah. I loved it. No notes. Just: period.

"Wait- what-" she stammered, eyes wild, voice tripping over itself. Her whole body tilted like her brain was spinning too fast to keep up.

And yeah, I smiled. Because *of course* she spiraled. Anyone would.

"*YOU ARE ME?!*" she shouted. And it echoed. Not in a scary way. In a *perfect* way. Like the realm itself wanted to carry her disbelief as far as it could go.

We were standing in the middle of- God, I don't even know how to explain it- some kind of meadow that looked like it had been painted by a dream. Hazy skies. Wildflowers everywhere. Not a wall in sight. No broken brick waiting to bleed me. Just softness. Space. Air that felt like it liked us.

Violets, corals, yellows- all of it scattered across the field like the earth had finally decided to be kind. The flowers moved when the wind touched them. Not harsh. Just enough. Like they were leaning in to tell secrets.

The grass brushed our knees. Bare feet sinking in. Warm. Alive. Nothing bit. Nothing broke.

Off to the side, a brook trickled through- silver glinting over stones worn smooth by time. It made this soft little laughing sound, like the world wasn't heavy anymore. Like it never *had* to be.

Butterflies drifted around, aimless and light. Dragonflies skated over the water like they knew something we didn't. Like they were carrying messages we weren't ready to read.

And the sky, shit. That sky.

Blue like it was *invented*. Clouds soft and slow, not going anywhere, like they'd finally found the right place to rest.

And in the middle of all of it- her. Me. Us.

Losing her mind in the best possible way.

Maybe that's what love does to you. *It lets you out of confinement.*

"I was always yours Aehlla" I talked so softly even though no one could hear us, it was only for her.

"I-" she struggled to grasp the air.

"Don't worry you can hug-" I choked when she fell in my arms, ready for the impact, yet hard. Her warmth radiated happiness, closure and happiness. My hand rested on her head, to make sure she felt safe. "Finally we can hug."

"How did you-"

"I'm eternal Aehlla." I shrugged as if it was no big deal. "Even though I had no clue being eternal was *actually* possible."

"Care to explain how?"

I stepped back, just slightly. Not out of fear- just, bracing. Because what was I about to say? It could break her. Or heal something. Maybe both.

"Mirari's karma," I said slowly, carefully, "it merged with us."

She didn't say anything at first. Just stood there. Eyes wide. Breathing gone shallow. Like her brain had slammed the brakes and her body hadn't caught up.

For a second, I thought she might fall. Her knees bent like they forgot how to hold her weight.

But then- something shifted.

Her eyes lit up. Not in that fake, polite way. They *brightened*. Real joy, slow and quiet, blooming behind them like sun through fog.

A smile broke across her face. Warm. A little stunned. But steady.

And I watched it land- watched the truth actually *settle* in her chest. Like it finally clicked.

She wasn't fractured.

She wasn't just some leftover version of herself.

"So we're truly one," she whispered. The words soft, almost scared to be real.
"Miraris is with me. Part of me."

She laughed. Just a little. Like her lungs had space again.

It wasn't big or loud. Just light. Free.

Hope. That was the sound. Hope waking up inside her again, stretching out in her bones. Like she could finally breathe like she used to.

Like she wasn't alone anymore.

I didn't trust it.

Didn't trust myself in it.

Not fully. Not with this.

It wasn't just doubt- it was caution. The kind that sits in your chest like a stone. I was holding something too heavy, and every time I opened my mouth, I felt it press harder. Like even the air didn't want it said.

How was I supposed to tell her?

How do you explain that version of Aehlla- the one before this softness, this glow she walks in now. The one who cheated. With his best friend. The one who left splinters in places people don't see. How do you tell someone that the girl they were is the same one who broke you?

And worse- how do you say, "Hey, by the way, your ex looks exactly like the guy you loved before him"? Like a copy the universe made just to mess with her. Like some sick cosmic loop designed to tear her open again and again.

It wasn't just painful. It was twisted.

Cruel.

And she didn't know.

She didn't know because I hadn't said a word. She built this whole version of peace- this delicate, stupidly beautiful faith in what we could be- and she built it by ignoring everything I'd left unsaid. She wanted love so bad, she ran past every warning sign. Ran straight into it with arms wide.

And maybe, maybe she was right to.

Maybe we were soulmates. Tied together by whatever weird force kept dragging us back to each other. Even through lifetimes. Even through wreckage.

She believed in us once. Fully. Blindly. That kind of faith people don't get twice.

But now- right now- I was the one holding the knife.

The truth.

And it was sharp. It could cut her free. Or tear her apart.

I still didn't know which.

"So even if we fight for ages, we are inseparable right?" she asked innocently.

"Short answer- yes" I nudged it. She frantically jumped with joy.

"I fell in love again, but you know what is new?" she hung up her smile on her face.

"I am actually being loved for the FIRST time."

I look at her slyly. Her infectious smile had me. I didn't ever want it to go. Not by my own hands.

"Oh by the way, what happened to Mirari today- If you are eternal, you should be knowing right?" she asked, coming forward. "He kept saying it's my fault? How even?"

My face screamed UGH NO NOT THIS. *I can't do it. I don't want to. I can't lay it all bare before Aehlla- she'd drown in self-doubt, maybe never trust anyone again, not in this life or the next. And now, bound eternally with*

Mirari's Karma, I have no choice but to carry his soul alongside mine for all time.

Honestly, his Karma knows exactly what he's doing-no games, no lies to sift through. Just raw, unfiltered truth.

"Uh- nothing, no" I blurted.

"Huh? This is the first time you stuttered- Are you hiding something from me?" she came closer.

I've been caught. "No just- Am eternal, am more human like now."

Smooth.

"Just go and talk to him. My advice hasn't worked before, but maybe this time it will. He's hurting-still carrying the weight of his father's death. What he really needs is a little love, something to remind him he's not alone."

"I guess that's what I'll do" she slips out and hugs me hard again, my belt of silver rings crackling. "Oh now that you're eternal, please just keep my mental health in peace, can you? Okay bye girl!"

I promise, I didn't want to hide shit. *But I would rather lose the world, than lose her. This love shouldn't be lost.*

Mirari / present

Elude- I wanted to fucking elude from Aehlla so bad it turned me into a goddamn villain. I broke my brain trying to make sense of it, and now I can't even look her in the eye and say, "You fucking cheated on me?" It's disgusting. I was far beyond just being fucked- I was completely shattered.

Blurred faces rushed past me, lights smeared into chaos, and the sky burned orange like hell itself. Am I having an attack?

Karma called me to have a word with him, he hammered my head like glass and I felt that glass broken in pieces stabbing my brain.

But somehow, I managed to drag myself back home, still in my pajamas.

I knew she'd come back to talk to me. *I know her karma would smirk, satisfied that she's my soulmate. And of course, she'll whisper to her karma, just like it is.*

For the price of being happy, this is such a fucking hefty toll to pay.

I keep my past hidden from her, just because I don't want to hurt the love she has for me. But maybe that is too much. Maybe that will kill me inside, but she doesn't deserve this.

"You're early, huh?" Mom called out over the clatter of dishes, the sink crackling like it had its own commentary.

"And you're still washing dishes? Since morning?" I snapped, stomping into my room. "Weird."

I slammed the door shut harder than necessary. "And yah- don't come in, I'll be studying!" I shouted. Fair warning. I wasn't about to deal with her busting in mid-freakout like last time when she thought I was summoning Satan just for sitting still with my eyes closed.

"Karma, you fucking asshole," I muttered, already climbing onto the bed. I folded my legs like some kind of desperate monk and shut my eyes. Hard. My whole body stiffened like it could beat meditation into working. Anything to keep me from jumping up and ripping that smug bastard's hair out.

And then, that weird, clean click where everything changes.

The room fell away.

Suddenly, I was standing in the middle of a goddamn meadow. Like, aggressively peaceful. Soft grass brushing at my legs, flowers everywhere- way too pretty to be real. Daisies. Dandelions. Poppies. All sparkling like someone turned the saturation up too high.

The sky was massive. Pastel clouds, warm air, that floral smell that almost made you feel like you were about to cry but didn't know why.

And then I heard him.

"You're back," he said. Calm. Like he hadn't been ruining my life on and off for weeks. His back was to me, like he was too cool for eye contact now.

"Don't tell me you were pissing in the middle of these flowers," I said, deadpan.

He didn't even flinch. "Good plan. Not yet, though."

“I have-”

“Maybe try talking like this to Aehlla,” he cut in, tone lazy. “Since, y’know, you can’t actually look her in the eyes.”

And then- he *giggled*.

He *giggled*.

I swear to God, I almost lost it right there in the flowers.

“Hey, hey slow down wobble head- It’s not my fault I can’t do it. I feel betrayed when I do. AND ITS YOUR FAULT FOR BRINGING SUCH FUCKALL NEWS- I COULD’VE LIVED WITHOUT IT!”

He was chewing some gum. He grazed like a cow. “Look, the thing is- handsome and loyal? Do you know who wins everytime? *Handsome*”.

His metaphors were weird as hell, but they landed. Like, *ugh*. I didn’t want them to. But they did.

“What’s that got to do with *me*?” I snapped, my jaw so tight it hurt. “Seriously, what the hell are you even saying to me right now?”

He didn’t blink. Of course not. Just kept going like I hadn’t just nearly bitten the air in half.

“Okay. Rari. Look- I’m not gonna wrap this up in some poetic crap, alright?” He exhaled. “You feel like shit. Like someone kicked your dog *and* spit in your coffee. Yeah. That’s real. That’s supposed to hurt.”

He bent down mid-rant, picked a flower- like casually, as if the world wasn’t crumbling, and sniffed it like he was in the middle of some goddamn acid trip. Eyes still locked on me.

“But here’s the thing, man. You *need* to let it hit you. All of it. Let it punch you in the face. Let it knock you down. That’s how you figure out what’s real. What’s worth bleeding over.”

He waved the flower like a wand. I wanted to slap it out of his hand.

“Life’s a mess. You *know* that. Love’s a car crash most days. You don’t just wake up magically better. You drag yourself through the shit. You ugly cry. You scream at walls. You wish you could burn everything down. And then- *then*, you get up.”

He paused. Looked at the flower again. Took another slow sniff like it was the most peaceful thing in the world.

“And if you don’t? If you skip the pain and pretend you’re fine?” He shrugged. “You’ll never know if you were strong enough to make it through. You’ll never even *meet* the version of you that comes out the other side.”

And he just- stood there. Chill. Straight-faced. No hesitation. No drama. Just dropping emotional bombs like it was casual.

And me?

I wanted to scream. Or laugh. Or cry. Maybe all three.

Because goddamn it- he was right.

And that *pissed me off*.

This guy was actually cooler than I imagined.

Karma smiled, that slow, soft, punchable smile he did when he knew shit I didn’t. He didn’t even look at me. Just tilted his chin toward the horizon like some peaceful little omen. And there she was- Aehlla. Or at least the shape of her. Out in the field, half-blurred by flowers and light. Just existing. Not moving, not waving. Just standing like the wind held her up. And something in my chest twisted hard.

“Sometimes,” Karma said, all calm like he was reading a bedtime story, “the only way through the storm is to face it. The meadow’s endless, but so are the chances to make things right.”

I stared at him. Tight face. Suspicion full throttle. “Cool metaphor,” I muttered, not buying any of it.

He shrugged. “She’ll come back. She’s gonna talk to you. Just don’t fuck it up like you usually do- good boy.” Then he patted my head. Actually patted it. Like I was a dog. All casual, like I wasn’t trying not to scream.

And then I was *gone*.

Ripped out. No fade. Just one second there, next second slammed back into my stupid hot room like someone hit reset on my whole body. I sat up fast. Desk in front of me. Ceiling fan spinning like it didn’t care. My bed creased under me like it wanted to kick me off. Sweat already at my back. Sun blasting through the curtains like it owned the place. My head blasted off.

He could *boot me* from my own head now? What the hell? I rubbed my eyes like it would fix anything. It didn’t. Of course.

And then- knock.

Sharp. Too real. My brain stopped working for a sec.

“Is Rari there?”

Her voice. God. High. Familiar. Fragile. It cracked against the door and bounced through the hallway like it was looking for me, like it already *knew* I was listening.

I didn’t move. Didn’t breathe.

She was at the door.

And I had no clue what the hell I was supposed to do.

“Yes he’s up, and why the flowers?” my mom asked. *SHE GOT ME FLOWERS? Annoying.*

“Why not?”

I scrambled to clean my damn room- socks flying into drawers, a questionable pair of boxers launched under the bed, and the bean bag forcefully shoved into its “aesthetic” corner. I wasn’t trying to impress her- okay, maybe I was. A little. Had to at least look semi-functional for a girl.

I cracked my door open just enough to peek down the hallway.

There she was- halfway up the stairs, completely locked into her phone. Her thumbs moved like they were in combat, texting furiously, and a bouquet tucked in her arms. Probably some elective Evelyn guilt-tripped her into. Or maybe poetry club drama. Who knows. Who cares.

She was here. That was enough to send my heart into temporary cardiac arrest.

But I hated her right now. My mind crumpled about impressing her, or just being stoic.

I didn't open the door the first time she knocked. Or the second. I thought if I just ignored it, she'd go away. Like everything else I've buried.

But the third knock- soft, hesitant- it hit somewhere I couldn't reach fast enough to shut off. So I opened the damn door.

There she was. Aehlla. Standing there like a fucking apology with a bouquet of marigolds and white *chrysanthemums*, looking like she didn't even know what she was sorry for. And maybe that's what made it worse.

But it also read-

I don't even know why I'm searching for you. Maybe it's the belief that I'll find you at my lost landmarks. Or maybe someone will come along who knows why I'm crying. If someone asks my love language, I want to say your name before anything else. This difference isn't just between us. That's what those songs also say that we want to listen to. But what's the point of those playlists if you don't say, "this song reminded me of you?" I was meant for someone greater than me, I get it, but my love is increasing as I wait. Maybe I just kept traveling alone on the metro and enjoying the sweet rain. The same rain that you like, but I don't. And that's why now it has become sweet for me too. If I don't get to see even a glimpse of you for a week, then even I say to comfort myself, my time has passed. I'm still the same as I was, in that hope that after seeing your one smile, I'll make a new playlist.

"I- I don't know what I'm apologizing for," she said, her voice all soft and shaky, "but I had to come." She paused, "I am so sorry about your dad, you had to find out-"

Her hands were trembling around the stems. And her face- God, her face- it looked like it hadn't been told it had done anything wrong. Which it hadn't. *Not in this life.* But my body didn't give a shit about the timeline. It remembered. It remembered everything. And now I couldn't cope with it.

"I brought these," she added. "I figured if words were too much, maybe flowers would do."

I almost laughed. Almost. "You shouldn't be here."

"I'm sorry," she said again.

For what? For existing? For cheating with a guy who I thought was my best friend- for ruining me? *This exposition wouldn't make a ton of shit in her mind anyway.*

She stepped closer. Slow. Like I was a skittish dog that might bite.

"I don't know why you're angry. I can feel it, I'm not dumb. You're carrying something, and I don't get to know what. But if it's heavy, let me help. Let me do something." she squished in some poetry, she thought I wouldn't notice.

I wanted to tell her to leave. I wanted to scream. But I didn't. Because a part of me still wanted to believe she wasn't like him. That she wouldn't turn out to be a liar.

"Why flowers?" I asked. It came out more bitter than I meant.

She blinked, confused. "Because I thought- you needed something soft."

I stared at her. She was unaware of the blade's depth. No idea who she was holding it for. She just stood there, bearing the exact face of the person who had done the wrong thing but pleading for forgiveness for it.

"You didn't do anything," I muttered.

"Then why does it feel like I did?" she asked.

That hurt.

Not because it wasn't true, but because she looked so damn *genuine*. Her eyes puffy like it just cried, her cheeks damp, and her lips dry like she smoked a pack. And she shook like crazy.

I took the flowers from her. Just to stop the shaking. Just to have something in my hands that wasn't rage.

"It's fine," I lied.

She cried.

Not loud. Not messy. Just this quiet collapse, like her body couldn't carry the weight of whatever the hell I was putting her through. She cried, sinking in the grief so strong, yet had no idea what wrong she did. Ah there it was, she had it hidden all this time. Puffy eyes made sense.

And I broke. Fucking cracked straight through.

"I love you," I said. *NO NO NO, I DIDN'T MEAN TO SAY THAT.*

She looked up, eyes swollen, voice wrecked. "I don't even know what I did."

"I love you," I said again, because it was the only thing that felt honest anymore, my forehead touching hers, my hands cupped on her face.

"Please let me love you," she whispered.

And I did.

Or maybe I didn't. Maybe I just *wanted* to.

"I love you," I said once more, softer than before.

Then her phone buzzed.

I turned away, setting the flowers on the table behind me. But something about the way she froze made me pause.

I glanced back. Her eyes were on the screen. Still. Focused.

Too focused.

"Who is it?" I asked, already knowing.

She didn't look at me. "Calis."

Boom. There it was. Just like that. My heart didn't even break. It just fucking *snapped. Ouch.*

She read it aloud. Stupidly. Naively. Like that would make it better.

"Aehlla, They picked your poem. You still write the way I remember- like you're kissing winter and afraid it'll melt. I'm proud of you. Don't forget what we said about words making homes. You built one in that stanza. I miss that. I miss you sometimes."

I was silent.

Because I was remembering another life. Another moment. Another fucking betrayal dressed in poetry.

I didn't need to hear any more.

She smiled through wet cheeks.

Only for a second. But she fucking smiled.

That's when I felt it. The shift. The fire. The white-hot fuck-you kind of pain that goes straight to the chest and doesn't ask permission.

"You still talk to him?" I asked, my pitch high.

"No. I don't. It's just a message."

"It's not just a message if he's writing to you like that."

"He saw the poem results. That's all."

"That's all," I echoed. I could barely hear myself over the buzzing in my ears.

You smiled. You fucking smiled, Aehlla.

I stepped back from her like she was venom.

"I thought you were different," I said.

She blinked. "I am."

"No. You're not. You're just like him."

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You keep parts of yourself for him,” I spat. “You let him live in your inbox. You let him speak to you like he still owns some part of your heart. And then you show up here with fucking flowers like you’ve earned the right to be forgiven.”

“Rari-”

“Do you miss him?”

“What? No-”

“You smiled.”

She froze.

“Don’t lie to me,” I hissed. “You smiled. That’s all I needed to see.”

Her face twisted into something between hurt and panic. “I didn’t mean to-”

“You didn’t mean to what?” I snapped. “Carry him in your goddamn pocket? Keep him close while pretending to be mine?”

She took a step toward me. “Please-”

“No,” I growled, stepping away. “Give him your poems. He knows where the ‘warmth’ is.”

“I really wish you did know how much I loved you” she stuttered so slowly, it was from her heart. Yes, me, I am the villain here.

She stepped out of my room.

“Mirari, I didn’t-”

I shut the door in her face.

Quietly. Firmly. Without another word.

And behind that door, I felt something rip. No drama. No theatrics.

Just cold, hard hate.

For the first time in this life- and the last- I hated her.

Not because she did anything wrong. It's me. I just couldn't deal with the whole Calis situation- like seriously? Dude's basically a Cillian reboot, and I'm not trying to throw myself into that emotional blender again. Every time I see her, it hits me. Like, hard. Like face-first-into-a-wall hard. And raw. No filter. Just pain.

But because she didn't even know what the fuck she was doing to me.

And that? That made it worse.

Aehlla's karma / present

She stood there like the door owed her something, like if she stared long enough it might open and undo everything. Zoned out, barely blinking, hands stiff, body still- like even breathing felt risky. She didn't knock again. Didn't move. Just held the moment like it might shift if she stayed quiet enough. Then his mom showed up from the hallway, towel in hand, eyes already reading the scene like it was a script she'd seen before. "Leaving already?" she asked, tone easy, but her eyes said otherwise- sharp, tuned in, waiting. Aehlla didn't even turn. Her voice came out low, barely shaped. "No. Just about to." That was it. No extra words. Her voice so fragile, like if she pushed it harder it would crack wide open. His mom nodded- slow, too slow- like she'd already heard everything that hadn't been said. "Right," she said, dragging the word, and walked off like she knew something had broken- but also knew it wasn't her place to fix it.

"Aehlla, you could have dinner with us if-"

“No thanks,” she cut in, already turning. “It’s late, actually. My mom would be worried.”

“It’s just six p.m.”

But she didn’t stay to explain. She shut the gate gently behind her and walked away, like leaving fast would hurt less than staying slow.

“You see that, karma? Every time I try to fix things, this guy bolts. Like I’m the damn problem. Like I started the plague,” she muttered, half to herself, half to me- assuming I was listening. And I was. God, I was. Every word from her pulled at me like a thread, and all I could do was wait. Wait for her to come meet me, to look up, to feel me. I wanted to reply. I wanted to scream back, *You didn’t start it. But you’re walking through it barefoot.*

She exhaled, voice lower now.

“It lingers in my heart sometimes, this guilt. Like maybe it really is my fault. I have flaws- I know that. But not the kind that should make someone bleed.”

Then she turned away, and under her breath- quiet, sharp, and cracked, *“I hate you, Mirari.”*

Aehlla kicked off her sandals and flopped face-first into the glowing grass of her consciousness realm. The sky above us swirled like a trippy lava lamp- oranges, pinks, and the occasional neon purple cloud shaped like a rubber duck. The trees sparkled like they’d been dusted with glitter by a toddler with no supervision. Somewhere nearby, a river purred like a cat, and a flower tried to wink at her. She didn’t know how her subconscious did this, but it had taste.

And I was in a damn hoodie.

“Alright,” she groaned into the grass. “We need to talk. Like, real talk. Get-your-pajamas-and-popcorn talk.”

I drifted beside her like a breeze with good posture and a smirk. “I was wondering how long you’d sulk before you came here.”

She rolled onto her back, hair full of stardust and one suspiciously sentient dandelion. "I am not sulking. I am- observing grass. Spiritually."

I raised an invisible brow. "You're lying down dramatically because Mirari's ghosting you harder than your middle school crush."

"Rude. But accurate."

She stared at the sky for a minute, watching a moon blink like it was having second thoughts. "He's ignoring me. Not like 'oops I forgot to text back' ignoring. I mean, full-on main character in a tragic indie film."

"Go on."

She sighed. "At first he was just kinda moody. Like 'don't talk to me unless it's about pain and poetry' moody. And now? It's silent. Radio silence. He didn't even flinch when I waved at him yesterday. Just kept walking like I was part of the furniture."

"He could be grieving. He just got to know about his dad- you know."

She sat up, brushing sparkles off her hoodie. "I know. And I get that. I really do. But what if it's not that? What if he's ignoring me and grieving - like, two open tabs in the sad boy browser of his brain?"

I snorted. "Sad boy browser. That's going in the archives."

"Sometimes it's not love, it's just pain. You made a mistake."

"Pain makes me funny," she said flatly. "And now people are looking at him like he's the reason his dad's gone. Like he held the guilt in his pocket and forgot to throw it out before it exploded. It's not fair. He already punishes himself better than anyone else could."

"You're not wrong."

"And still, he won't talk to me. I show up. I say sorry for shit I don't even understand. I bring him flowers. He takes them like I handed him a live grenade."

“Because he doesn’t know where to put you,” I said gently. “You’re the only soft thing in a life that currently feels made of glass shards and tax forms.”

She flopped back again. “I’m trying to be patient. Like a golden retriever outside a locked door. But what if he doesn’t come back? What if this is just it? What if I’m a side character in a tragic arc that’s not even mine?”

“You’re not a side character,” I said. “You’re the plot twist.”

She blinked at the sky. “That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“I’m growing.”

I paused, then said casually, “You know, you could talk to Evelyn.”

Her head tilted slightly. “What, like- Evelyn *Evelyn*?”

“Yeah. Ice queen with a pen. She might know how to deal with this fucker. She’s got that ‘I’ve-seen-your-soul-and-I’ll-turn-it-into literature’ vibe.”

She raised a brow. “You want *me* to talk to Evelyn?”

“Why not? They were close once, right? She probably knows what version of him you’re not getting. Or what version he’s too scared to show you.”

“God, that’s- actually not a bad idea.”

I smirked. “I know. I have those sometimes.” *Mood swings*.

She sighed, arms behind her head. “Yeah, Evelyn probably has the cheat codes. Meanwhile, I’ve been stuck playing this emotional RPG on expert mode without a map.”

We sat there for a moment- me in a hoodie, me being a non-corporeal force of cosmic cause and effect- just watching the clouds morph into random furniture.

“He’s hurting,” I said. “You know that. But he’s also probably terrified that if he lets you close while he’s broken, he’ll make you bleed too.”

“Newsflash,” she muttered. “I already am.”

“But you don’t *resent* him.”

“Nope. Just mildly want to scream into a void and maybe set his bookshelf alphabetically out of spite.”

“That’s fair.”

She chuckled, rubbing her face. “I’m not mad at him. I just- miss him. I miss us. Even the awkward silences. Even his stupid metaphors.”

“And is it even bad that Calis texts me randomly? I mean WE ARE JUST FRIENDS. I am not gonna hurt somebody for no reason. Calis and I are done, even you know that”.

“Yah, don’t make me remember his face again, we are over him.”

“But Rari-?”

“Then don’t give up. But maybe skip the flowers next time. Try pizza.” Such a spontaneous response.

She looked at me. “Bribing him with food?”

“It’s not bribery. It’s a tactical romance strategy.”

She paused. “You really think he’ll talk to me again?”

“I know he will.”

“When?”

“When he realizes ignoring you hurts more than facing whatever he’s scared of.”

She exhaled deeply and stared up at the weird, beautiful sky of her inner world. A shooting star zipped across it - then made a U-turn and disappeared into a cloud shaped like a loaf of bread.

“Okay,” she whispered. “I’ll wait. But not like a sad girl with a violin. I’ll wait like- like me. With snacks and stubbornness and good eyebrows.”

“There she is.” I smirked, my eyes smirked.

She grinned. “And if he doesn’t come around, I’ll just date someone else in my imagination.”

“Make him jealous.”

“Exactly.”

We both laughed- louder than usual- as the flower by her foot winked again like it was in on the joke.

Somewhere in the real world, Mirari probably sighed and didn’t know why.

But here, in this sparkly, stupidly perfect slice of mindspace that smelled faintly of nostalgia and cinnamon, Aehlla didn’t feel lost. That’s all that mattered to me.

I smirked.

“Because I’m you, genius. Where am I gonna go? I didn’t stay out of kindness, I stayed because we’re stuck together. Soul contract. No refunds.”

Then softer, after a beat. *“But even if I had the choice, I’d still stay. Every time.”*

She forgot she was a human.

Well she didn’t forget she was a human, she remembered she wasn’t a human.

Her eyes wide open, absorbing every piece of information Aehlla just told her.

“Was I not good enough?” Aehlla sat upright slowly, like her own voice had startled her. It wasn’t self-pity- it was something colder. The ache of needing an answer, even if it hurts. *“I wouldn’t have loved it if I knew this hurt this much.”*

“You’re perfect in every way, maybe just not for him” Evelyn huffed and told her the bitter truth.

The night just came in, and it was still young. The clock struck 11, and Evelyn hissed, “Is your mom getting the juice or not, I have eaten too much anyway.”

Aehlla got up as her butt agonised in pain, “Shut the fuck up, you think my mom will listen to me to not get our guests what they want?”

“I mean I wanted juice like after dinner but-”

“DON’T CHANGE THE TOPIC! WE AREN’T DONE WITH RARI!”

Aehlla yelled so close to Evelyn, her heart almost came out of her ribs.

“Jeez, chill, and don’t spit on my face, ew” Evelyn crackled.

“Mirari would’ve swallowed it” she whispered it to her so softly, yet audible.

“What?” Aehlla turned back.

“What?” Evelyn repeated, her eyes big enough to bulge.

“So- now what? I mean, do I just move on? Pretend none of this happened?”

Evelyn tilted toward her, nudging her gently. “Maybe don’t write the ending just yet.”

She scoffed. “It kinda feels like he already did.”

“No, he paused the story. That’s different.”

Aehlla rolled her eyes, but only half-heartedly. “Great. I’m a plot hole now.”

“Hey, not all pauses are bad,” Evelyn said. “Sometimes the best songs have silence right before the chorus.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Was that a metaphor?”

“Surprisingly, yes.”

We sat for a minute- her quiet, me invisible but there. The weight between her eyebrows softened slightly. She was still hurting, but there was room now. Room to breathe.

“So?” she asked, voice smaller. “What should I do?”

Evelyn hesitated. “You really want to try?”

She nodded. “Yeah. If there’s even the slightest chance, I want to fix this.” She clearly didn’t, but her parents didn’t raise a fucking loser.

“Okay then,” Evelyn smiled, “Let’s not force it. Let’s- show up.”

“How?”

She thought for like 4 seconds, “Oh, I have an idea.”

Evelyn let the moment stretch a little, then casually dropped it in.

“It’s Cecelia’s birthday in *3 days*.”

The horns outside of cars and bikes echo, and the silence was strong. This wasn’t the information she wanted. “You mean *our* lesbian?” Aehlla clarified.

“Shush, she hates that word.”

Evenlyn nodded. “Yup. And she’s planning something small, a little gathering. Nothing huge.”

Her lips parted, something shifting behind her eyes.

“I’ll tell her to invite you both,” I continued. “Let it be natural. Light. You don’t need a grand apology or a poetic meltdown. Just show up. Be the version of you he used to let in. Some distance will make his head right. And some presence, quiet, unannounced, might remind his heart of what it’s still reaching for.”

Oh how poetic. She was quiet again, but this time she looked lighter.

“And maybe,” Evelyn added, “You bring something. Not flowers. Something meaningful. Something that *says* something, without you having to say it.”

“Like what?”

“Maybe his favorite coffee. Or that old poetry book you both fought over in the library once. Something that makes him remember who you were. Who *he* was. Before all this. But till then, no texts, no calls, and no randomly showing up to his house because you miss him and you have boners.”

“How can I have a bone-”

“I don’t care.”

A faint knock bumped the door. “Mom?” Evelyn asked Aehlla.

Aehlla slowly opened the door, creaking it all the way, her voice teasing but touched with affection. “Were you cold-pressing the juice by hand or something? We’ve been waiting forever.”

A warm laugh met her. “I just wanted to make sure you all had something fresh. No chemicals, no junk- only the good stuff.”

She set the tray down gently, eyes soft. “I hope you like it. Don’t stay up too late, alright? Even sleepovers deserve a little sleep. Good night, my loves.”

Aehlla turned to Evelyn discreetly. “Yah, she’s a yapper.”

She smiled ear to ear.

Evelyn shrugged. “*Your parents haven’t raised you to see you beg people to love you back.*”

She nodded. “Alright then. Cecelia’s party.” That confirmation made Evelyn feel better.

“Yup. No pressure. Just you, being you.”

“Okay,” she whispered. “Let’s start there.”

Aehlla smiled faintly. “You’re seriously good at this.”

And just like that, the plan wasn’t about fixing everything.

It was about showing up. Opening a window. Letting some breeze in.

Maybe that was enough. For now.

Mirari's karma / past

(A page from my journal) (Yes I write too),

"It all starts with a word," Aehlla had said, twirling a pen between her fingers, seated cross-legged on top of the literature club table like it was her throne. "You don't just write for the sake of writing. You start with a word that *means* something to you. One that tastes like truth in your mouth. One that makes your chest feel heavier, just for a second."

Cillian leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, pretending he wasn't listening as closely as he was. Mirari, on the other hand, was scribbling in the corner of his journal, trying not to look too eager. His handwriting trembled slightly, like it already knew it would never be enough. But it was what he found important, and necessary.

"Vocabulary," Aehlla said, pointing the pen at them like it was a wand. "Isn't just about big words. It's about the right words. Pick one. Live inside it. Let it be the beginning of whatever you're trying to say."

Mirari took it seriously. Like, too seriously. While most of us either forgot or made something up on the spot, he actually showed up with a list. Words he'd highlighted, circled, re-read a hundred times just to find the one that felt like it meant something. He spent hours in the library after school - dictionaries, poetry books, old issues of some literary magazine no one read - just to get it right.

He didn't say it, but it was obvious: he was doing it for her.

He wanted to write like her. Sound like her. Be good enough to sit across from her and not feel like he was faking it. And maybe, somewhere deep down, he just wanted her to notice him a little more than she already *did*.

He wanted her to notice him, a little more, maybe, than she already did.

They were already together by then. Not in the loud, all-over-each-other kind of way. It was quieter. Familiar. The kind of relationship that slipped into your routine without asking. Club meetings turned into walks. Walks turned into waiting for each other after class. It just was.

And Mirari believed in it. Whatever it looked like to anyone else, to him, it meant something. He thought the words he was learning were for their future. That every page he filled was some kind of proof that he could meet her where she was, and stay.

But sometimes you try so hard to keep up with someone, you don't notice they've already started walking in a different direction.

He didn't say much about his home life. But it wasn't hard to guess why the library lights were more familiar than the ones in his living room. His parents had grown too loud. Or too quiet. Some evenings he'd show up with his sleeves rolled high, carrying a silence that clung to him like smoke. No one asked. Not even Aehlla.

But she smiled at him sometimes. A real, crooked smile. And that was enough to make him stay.

I guess that's what I call being delusional.

What Mirari didn't know was that Aehlla's own compass was spinning.

She had fallen into something with Cillian. Quietly. Awkwardly. Not with the intent to hurt, but with the inability to stop. They hadn't planned it. They hadn't even defined it. But they had crossed a line they hadn't spoken of since.

Neither of them told Mirari. Maybe because they were cowards. Or maybe because they still wanted to be the versions of themselves he believed in.

And Mirari, with all his poems, all his effort, all his goddamn hope, kept showing up.

Day after day, word after word, building verses like altars, never knowing he was praying to something already broken.

He had started with admiration - with a word, just like she taught him. And he followed it, obsessively, faithfully, as if finding the right one might also mean finding his way into her world completely. But words have a cruel edge. They can carry love. They can carry lies. And sometimes, they carry you straight into your own unraveling.

That Thursday, the club met as usual. Late sun filtered through the classroom windows, turning the dust in the air into gold. They passed around poems and lukewarm tea in mismatched mugs. Laughter came in pockets, never quite filling the room. No one said her name. The chair she always took near the bookshelf- slightly askew, always the first to catch her bag-remained untouched. It wasn't deliberate. It was reverent, in a quiet, cowardly way. Her absence settled in like a misplaced stanza- noticeable, but unspoken. When someone mentioned the theme of the week- "resonance"- she didn't volunteer anything. Not because she had nothing to say, but because every line she'd written still echoed her.

Aehlla didn't make it to the literature club.

The evening was quiet, the kind of quiet that made fluorescent lights buzz louder and every breath feel borrowed. The library was nearly empty, its corners bathed in amber as the sun began its slow descent behind city buildings. Mirari sat alone, his notebook open in front of him, filled with half-finished verses and crossed-out stanzas.

He wasn't writing anymore- he was bleeding into the page.

He'd stayed late, again. Partly because he wasn't ready to go home. Mostly because he wanted to feel like he belonged somewhere, even if only to silence. The smell of paper and old wood grounded him more than his parents ever could. His hands were stained with ink, his eyes tired, but he didn't move.

Then he heard her.

Footsteps. The soft click of boots he'd learned to recognize. Aehlla.

She stood in the corridor, framed by the dim light, her face unreadable. "Hey," she said softly.

He turned, startled. "You came to pick me up?"

She nodded. But there was hesitation. Her arms crossed. Her gaze didn't quite meet his.

Outside the library, late evening, the kind of hour where the city feels both alive and exhausted. The light above them flickered once, then steadied, like it, too, was holding its breath.

She handed him a folded note and said, "*Read it when you get home.*" A second later, as if that wasn't heavy enough, she added, "*I think we should break up.*"

Just like that. No build-up. No warning. Like it was a decision made quietly, long before the words ever reached him.

Mirari didn't protest. Didn't beg. He blinked, muttered something about his parents waiting for dinner- a lie, obviously- and stood there trying to make sense of a moment that didn't feel real yet.

She hugged him once. Tight. Brief.

And then she let go.

“You’re too good, Mirari,” she said, not quite looking him in the eye. “And that’s hard to be around sometimes.”

And then she left.

Just walked away. No looking back. No pause.

Wondering, maybe for the first time, what the hell he’d been writing all those poems for.

And he stood there, backpack half on, notebook pages still ink-wet in his hands, watching her disappear like she had never stayed long enough to begin with.

He tried to find the word for it. For this.

He couldn’t.

Not even she had taught him that.

Aehlla's karma / present

The backyard looked like someone searched “aesthetic teen birthday” on Pinterest, got halfway through execution, and then remembered they hated effort. Streamers drooped from the trees like they’d lost the will to participate. The fairy lights blinked unevenly, like they were reconsidering their life choices with every flicker. A makeshift banner fluttered near the patio, its corners taped down with exactly the kind of panic that says *we planned this an hour ago*.

Cecelia was fuming. Her eyeliner was perfect, her playlist was glitching, and someone had set the chips out in a dog bowl.

And then Thais showed up.

Beaming. Radiant. Carrying a 12-pack of juice boxes like she’d just solved world peace.

Cecelia blinked at her. “What are those?”

Thais, still hopeful- “Juice?”

There was a beat of silence before Cecelia replied, flat as death, “Cool. Did you also bring nap time and coloring books?”

Cecelia stood in the middle of it all, wearing a hoodie over her birthday outfit, hair in a claw clip that was fighting for its life. Her face said two things: *I’m done and try me anyway.*

“If this flamingo falls one more time,” she hissed, slapping the plastic bird upright for the third time in ten minutes, “I’m calling animal control. *On myself.*”

Evelyn strolled over, cool as always, sipping from a glittery cup like she wasn’t watching Cecelia mentally unravel in high-definition.

“Need help?” she asked.

“I need a flamethrower,” Cecelia muttered. “And a therapist. And five minutes of silence. And maybe a life.”

From across the yard, Thais wobbled toward them with tangled string lights and a half-eaten cake pop in her mouth. “Hey, Cece, where do you want the-”

“Ugh, get off my dick,” Cecelia snapped, not even looking up.

“You don’t even have one-” Thais blinked. “Okay nevermind.”

“You’ve been walking around like a Pinterest ad having a seizure. Just tie the lights somewhere and pretend like you know what direction is.”

Evelyn suppressed a chuckle.

“And don’t even start,” Cecelia turned to her, “You’ve done nothing except sip that tragic-ass lemonade and watch me suffer.”

“I’m providing moral support,” Evelyn replied, deadpan.

“Great. Can your moral support stop this party from looking like an emotional low-budget circus?”

A loud beep-beep-beep rang out from the construction site behind the house. Cecelia turned slowly, eyes narrowing.

“If that truck hits the fence,” she said, calm and terrifying, “I’m going over there with a knife and a dream.”

“Maybe don’t stab a bulldozer,” Evelyn offered.

“Try me,” Cecelia said.

Selune walked by with a tray of unlit candles and a concerned expression. “Do we still need these?”

“Shut up, you little fuck!” Cecelia snapped. “Who even invited you?”

“I- I thought you did.”

“I invite chaos. Not cardboard cutouts with anxiety.”

Selune backed away into the shadows of her self-worth.

“Cecelia” Evelyn said, placing a hand on her arm, “do you maybe wanna sit down?”

“I can’t sit down. My back hurts, I’m emotionally constipated, and my playlist is one breakup song away from committing arson.”

She grabbed her clipboard like it was a weapon.

“You think I do this for fun?” she demanded. “This party? This drama? I do this because I’m an artist.”

“You literally just threw glitter in Thais’s face.”

“It was symbolism.”

Evelyn smirked. “So you admit it?”

“What, that I invited both of them?” Cecelia said, lips curling upward. “Of course I did.”

“Cecelia-”

“Yah, I judged them immediately the moment she took a shit in that litterbox she calls a love life. This is redemption. This is cinema.”

“I can’t believe you’re turning your party into a revenge plot.”

Cecelia sipped from Evelyn’s drink without asking. “What’s the point of having a birthday if no one cries by the end of it?”

She adjusted a chair near the corner. Just slightly. Just enough.

“I set the scene. Now we wait for them to ruin each other.”

Evelyn sighed. “And what will you do?”

Cecelia smiled. “Eat cake. Look hot. And say, ‘I told you so.’”

“If this works out, I need like 5 seasons of this” she shuts herself saying it.

Aehlla stepped into the backyard like she wasn’t entirely convinced the earth beneath her feet would let her stay. The night had settled strange- not quiet, not loud. Music fumbled through the speakers, tangled in conversations that tried too hard to sound alive. Fairy lights blinked above like they were struggling to stay awake, and somewhere to the left, someone spilled a drink and didn’t care enough to clean it up. It wasn’t a beautiful party.

But she hadn’t come for beauty.

She walked slowly, carefully- the kind of slowness that wasn’t about attention but holding herself together. Her arms curled around a black leather journal, old and scuffed at the corners, the edges softened from being opened too often. It wasn’t decorative. It wasn’t meant for anyone’s else’s eyes. A yellow post-it note clinged to one of the top pages, fluttering with each of her steps like it was threatening to fall, like even that damn paper knew there wasn’t time left.

Evelyn saw her first. She cut through the crowd like she always did- calm, calculating, a question already hanging on her lips before she even stopped walking.

“That’s not your usual party accessory,” she said, eyeing the journal like it might explode.

Aehlla didn't laugh. Her fingers curled tighter around the spine, like it had started slipping away.

"It's- a collection," she said. Her voice wasn't steady nor shaky either. "Of poems."

She wore a bright marigold yellow, impossible to ignore. The dress flowed just past her knees, light enough to catch the wind, but heavy enough to remember where it had been. It shimmered under the garden lights like sunlight trapped in fabric- too warm for a night like this, too alive for what waited at the end of it. Her sleeves slipped gently down her arms. The satin ribbon tied at her waist flicked against her side, like a loose promise unraveling.

She didn't meet anyone's eyes.

She didn't need to. Her presence said more than most people did in whole sentences.

Evelyn didn't really change her expression. "For Mirari?"

Aehlla nodded.

Then paused.

Then quieter, almost like she was realizing it as she spoke:

"The most I could give without knowing what he likes. What made him pause, what books he'd underline, what he'd call beautiful."

She looked down at the journal in her hands. Her fingers traced the edge of the yellow note like she was stalling time.

"But now?" She blinked hard, shook her head slightly.

"He seems *different*. Maybe something handwritten would work, I gave him flowers already, duh."

There it was- raw, unpolished, the kind of honesty that cracked quietly instead of screaming. Evelyn didn't say another word.

The note still fluttered, hanging on by one stubborn corner. Waiting. Watching.

Like it already knew what was coming.

“Where’s Mirari?” she asked, like she already hated how hopeful her voice sounded.

Unimpressed, Evelyn tilted her head. “He got here like- an hour ago? I think?”

She scratched her wrist lazily. “Jobless little shit’s been wandering around helping out. Said something about streamers being uneven. I didn’t really check on him. Thought he’d be hiding in the kitchen by now sulking over the playlist.”

Aehlla frowned. “He’s helping?”

“Yeah,” Evelyn said with a shrug. “I think manual labor calms his trauma or something.”

She followed Evelyn’s vague point across the yard. There he was, her heart beating one more time that she felt it, at the far end, crouched near a wobbly trellis where the fairy lights looked more strangled than strung. A tangled loop of the wire was coiled around his arm like he’d lost a fight with it. His sleeves were rolled to the elbows, revealing ink-smudged forearms. He wore a slightly wrinkled black button-down, not too formal, not too careless- and jeans that had definitely seen better days. His hair looked like it had lost an argument with his hands, and one side of his collar stood up like it knew better than to lay flat tonight.

He looked annoyingly good for someone pretending not to care.

Aehlla took a few careful steps toward him.

He noticed. Didn’t show it. Just kept adjusting the lights like he hadn’t just clocked her presence in his peripheral.

“Need help?” she asked, trying to sound casual.

Mirari didn’t glance up. “I’m good.”

She hovered there for a beat, unsure if he meant it or just didn't want to see her.

Then without looking, without warning, he said, "Cecelia invited you too?"

He tilted his head slightly, eyes still on the lights. "Didn't think you were on her naughty list. Must be an oversight."

Aehlla blinked. "I think Evelyn strong-armed her."

Mirari gave the faintest smirk. "Sounds about right."

She smiled a little, nervously. "You're doing a lot for someone who hates parties."

He shrugged. "Better than being cornered with small talk. Or poetry."

"Still allergic to compliments, huh?"

He wasn't straight to an answer, his heart too beating, feeling that was sinking him down, his expression unreadable, not cold, but unreadable. "Let me have this cleared, you don't text me in three days, nor even call me, and you magically spawn here to give me oddly arousing compliments?"

"What was arousing in that-" she burst out, but got shut up.

"What's with the journal?" he asked, chin-tilting toward it like he already knew it had something to do with him.

She held it up gently, thumb pressed over the fluttering post-it. "It's for you."

That stopped him. Just for a second. Like a thread had been pulled somewhere he'd stitched himself shut.

But he didn't take it. She handed him the journal with fingers curled too carefully around the spine- like it might fall apart if she wasn't gentle. "Just open any page," Aehlla said, "Any one. They're all you. I wrote them at midnight when I couldn't sleep."

184 pages journal, all filled with poems.

Screw that, all filled with Aehlla's poems for him.

Mirari didn't speak. His hands moved without thinking, flipping to a random spot near the middle.

And the moment his eyes caught the poem, his breath turned sharp. She waited gently to peek at which poem he had opened.

*i would call the moon if i could
to define beauty as it should
the real magic that flows so good
the aura that possessed me as it would.
i would call the moon if i could
to tell its prettyness is defined by the nights wood
to share my dreams as i know i should
her silver glow makes my world feel good.
i would call the moon if i could
to whisper about you as always i would
that her dreams are surreal and often misunderstood
for in her presence why are all my worries shooed
a moment of peace for my heart, for with her the world is not so crood.*

Mirari flipped the page, partly out of routine, partly because she was worn out. She wasn't expecting much- maybe another gentle metaphor, something dreamy or flowery.

It was his.

Not sort of. Not inspired by. His.

"Who gave you this poem?" he asked very curiously, wanting his mind not to crash.

His vision blurred-not from crying, but from the force of it all crashing back, not like a memory, but like a gut-punch he hadn't seen coming.

"I did-" she didn't waste a second to reply.

How the hell had she written this?

"The moon is you by the way" she clarified, "in case you don't know what that means" she says pointing at the paper. She innocently decoded that he would smile after that.

'Wait, what the hell,' Rari thought. He zoned out. Didn't karma tell me he would have to see this life through Aehlla's eyes- to feel what she felt, to know what she knew?

He stood frozen, his legs locking up.

"You'll live through her eyes in this life."

YES. THOSE WERE HIS WORDS.

Halfway through the journal, he froze.

Not those stuttering lines that didn't quite rhyme, didn't quite land, but bled with something real. It was his. The poem. The original. Every offbeat comma, every awkward line break- it was all his. And somehow, she had it in her handwriting, tucked between pages of things she'd claimed to feel.

He remembered writing it. Prom night. She had kissed someone else, then looked him in the eye and said he was still "enough." So he wrote, like an idiot, like someone who still believed love could be rewritten if the words were pretty enough.

She said it was beautiful. Said thank you.

Now it was staring back at him, scrawled in her journal like it had come from her. Like she'd just felt it. Like she hadn't already broken him with it years ago. Same words. Different hands. And she had no idea. No memory of what she'd taken.

His stomach twisted. Not with heartbreak- he'd lived that already- but with something hotter, tighter. Rage. Confusion. The kind that grabs your throat before your brain catches up. Because how could she forget something that gutted him? How could she still hold pieces of him like souvenirs and not even know where they came from?

Because he remembered writing it from the ruins of her betrayal. And somehow, he had still wanted to make her feel loved. Even then. Even when she chose someone else.

How goddamn naive had he been?

He hated that version of himself. The one who thought words could fix everything. The boy who bled sincerity onto a page and gave it away like it didn't cost him something. He didn't want to be him anymore. Didn't want to keep reopening the same wound dressed in a different name.

He was tired of breaking for the same girl across lifetimes.

This wasn't romantic. This wasn't fate.

She felt it now, apparently. This Aehlla version of her. Stayed up late, scribbled poems, though the ache was hers alone. She didn't know those words were echoes - already spoken, already suffered. Already gifted to her by a boy who had nothing left but still handed over everything.

It wasn't just deja vu. This was a full circle. He was dizzy with it.

He didn't hate her. He wished he could. But trust? No. Not anymore. Not with this. Not with the last real thing he had left of himself.

This was the universe rubbing salt into the same cut over and over until even the scar tissue gave out.

He didn't want to keep hurting himself for the sake of some cosmic poetry. He didn't want to spend any more time attempting to cure someone who was blind to the harm she had caused.

He wanted peace.

Just quiet. Just space where his heart didn't have to brace itself every time someone said his name.

And maybe- maybe this was the moment to choose that. To finally let go of what was once beautiful, but came back around wearing someone else's face.

Because the truth was- she didn't know.

But he did.

Cecelia / Present

Bitch-uation – a word that makes you act like a bitch in any situation, I saw that on instagram. Why should I be the one left silent just because my sharp edges show first? Yeah, maybe being a bitch *is* my brand- but I've never been tired of it. Words are the one thing I never run out of.

And right now, my curses were chart-toppers, rolling off my tongue like hits on repeat, no filter, no remorse. I swear to God, any of these fuckers ruin my party I'll get their heads severed and displayed in my living room. How ironic.

“Wait!” Aehlla called, pushing through the mess of people. And yeah, you know exactly who she was chasing. It's always him. This girl's got one person on her emotional playlist and it's Mirari on loop.

He stomped ahead, not caring who he shoved past, glitter in his damn eyes like fury had gone sparkly. She chased him, barefoot in all her desperation, finally catching up.

“Rari, could you just listen to me?” she gasped, grabbing his arm.

He turned around hard, like whip-fast, no grace. Me and Evelyn? Sitting back with our plastic cups of lemonade, watching like front-row VIPs to whatever emotional trainwreck was about to go down. The construction site behind us was screaming with drills and metal clanks. I swear if I had TNT, the whole damn lot would be gone.

Aehlla held out the journal again, like it meant something. Like paper could fix what had already snapped.

“Didn’t you like the poem or something?” she said, trying to keep her voice from falling apart. “There’s better stuff in here, look-”

She held it out, shaky hands and hope dripping off the pages. Sincerely wanting him to appreciate her.

Mirari didn’t even blink.

He shoved the journal down from her hands, not hard, just rude- casual disrespect. Like her words weren’t even worth catching.

“You walked in like you’re the prize. You’re not. You’re a rewrite of a draft I should’ve never started.”

Her heart flinched. She felt it inside her chest- like a candle flickering in a storm. I read her like her open journal.

“I’m here because I love you,” she whispered.

“Love?” he scoffed. “Aehlla, you don’t love people. You collect them. Like projects. You write about them, squeeze them dry for meaning, and then dump them when they don’t make a good metaphor.”

Her mouth opened- but nothing came out. Not even breath. Just that frozen, too-late kind of silence that made the air feel sharp. And me? I burned. Not my usual simmering shit- I ignited. For once, it wasn’t about me. It was about her. And it pissed me off in a way I didn’t know I had in me.

“You wanna play the sad little star of your pity show?” he snapped. “Fine. Just don’t rope me into your drama- I’m not here to be your audience.”

Every eye turned. Evelyn. Me. A couple strangers halfway through their drinks, now just holding their glasses like props. Nobody moved. The music had dropped into the background, this useless static thudding against tension that didn’t need help. Even the lights above flickered like they were embarrassed to witness it.

“You came here thinking you were going to fix me with a half-assed apology and some clingy, pathetic obsession that looks like love. But it’s not love.” he was confident with too little empathy. I wanted drama, but not to this extent.

Then he leaned in- voice low, cruel in its calm.

“It’s delusion.”

And that’s when she broke.

She felt her throat tighten. Her hands tremble around the journal. Her stomach lurch. Her ribs close in around her heart like it was a crime to feel.

But instead of tears, she moved.

She looked at Evelyn. Her eyes filled with tears, so wide, as if she didn’t want tears to fall off. Then at him.

And slapped him.

One sharp, beautiful sound.

She turned around, breathing all over the place, chest rising like she just got hit. Her face flushed deep, that kind of red that makes you want to hide behind anything. And yeah- everyone was looking now. Full attention. Phones halfway out. Some whispering. Some pretending they weren’t watching while staring straight at her. Her eyes flinched like she felt every pair of them.

She tried to breathe normally, failed. Tried to stand still, but failed harder. Her hands were twitching at her sides like they didn’t know where to go.

Evelyn stepped in, didn't wait. Just reached out and caught her arm before she could slide fully into the spiral. Aehlla didn't say anything, didn't fight it, just blinked fast like she was trying to hold the tears hostage. But her whole body? Already breaking. Shoulders caving. Mouth clenched shut like even breathing might break the rest of her open.

I could feel her.

She ran. Just fucking ran. Like something was chasing her but nothing was- just the shame, the heat, the eyes. Her breath wasn't even working right, like every inhale came in crooked. Her face was red, tight, like if she blinked too hard everything inside would come out. She didn't cry. Not yet. Her name barely left Evelyn's mouth before she was already gone- legs moving too fast, arms tight, like she couldn't even feel her body. She didn't look anywhere. Not at the curb. Not across the street. Not at the people turning their heads. Just forward. Blind. Her hair slapped across her face and her fists were clenched like she had something to hold on to but didn't. Her eyes weren't seeing- just shiny, full, not focused. She wasn't running toward anything. Just away. From him. From us. From herself. And the road- she didn't see it. Didn't see the fucking truck.

But *I* did. "NO!" I yelled and took off to stop her.

It came from the left. Too fast. Too fucking fast for this narrow lane where people were still walking. A massive construction vehicle, double axles, thick-tread tires, and front grilles like iron jaws. The driver may have seen her. Maybe he screamed. Maybe he slammed the brakes. I don't know. No one could've stopped it. Not in time.

And Aehlla- she didn't even know it was coming.

One foot lifted off the ground, mid-stride. And then it hit her.

The front of the truck caught her like a hammer to a glass body- no warning, no slowing, just that brutal, instant kind of force that doesn't care what it's hitting. It wasn't a bump. It wasn't some cinematic moment. It was just a direct, unforgiving *crash*- center-mass, full-speed, enough to snap her

midsection like she was made of paper. Her ribs didn't just break- they caved inward, crushed like someone had stomped them in. The sound- god, the *sound*- that awful crack, like something thick and alive just split open. Her whole body jerked back, spine bending violently, the shape all wrong. She didn't even scream. She was just *gone* in that second, airborne, lifted clean off the pavement like gravity gave up. Arms flung wide, head thrown back, hair whipping out behind her like some angel mid-collapse. Her shoes came off mid-air. One of them hit the curb. And in that horrible half-second where she was floating- she didn't even look real. Just this limp, flying thing, no control, no self, no more time.

Then gravity took her back.

She hit the ground like it wanted to keep her. Hard. Her back smacked first, sharp and heavy, and then her head- fuck- her head cracked so loud I felt it in my throat. That jarring sound of skull on pavement, like wet stone. Her body bounced once. Then again. Then stopped moving. One leg crumpled under her in a twist that didn't make sense, the other still flinching once like it hadn't caught up to death yet. Her arm was flung out too far, her shoulder popped half out of its socket. Her hand-her other hand- was trapped beneath her ribs, completely flattened, fingers curled in weird directions. Her skin had already started turning.

Blood was already moving. Fast. From her mouth, her nose, her temple- just pouring like her body still hadn't realized it was over. It soaked into the cracks in the road, mixed with dirt and oil, and kept going. Her hair stuck in it. Her cheek lay pressed in it. Her eyes- still open. Wide. Unblinking. Looking up like she expected someone to catch her before it ended. Like she was still mid-thought.

And Evelyn dropped next to her like the world had shoved her down. No pause. Just knees in blood, palms slipping, her whole body crashing into the moment. "*No- no, no- fuck, come on, come on- please, please, baby-*" she was already gone inside it, shaking her, grabbing her shoulders, her face, trying to pull her out of it like she could just drag her back from death if she screamed

hard enough. “Please, don’t do this, just fucking breathe, please- *look at me.*” But Aehlla didn’t move. Nothing did. Just Evelyn’s voice getting louder, her hands messier, her cries cracking apart. And the blood kept spreading. Like it didn’t know how to stop. Like it was finishing what the truck started.

And then she stopped moving.

Blood, thick and dark, gushed from the side of her head, trailing fast down the road in streaks. It ran from her temple in slow pulses, from her nose in sharp drips, from her mouth in wide smears. It pooled under her cheek, around her ear, soaking into her hair until it gleamed wet, slick, and black-red. The blood moved like it was alive, tracing the cracks in the pavement, flowing around pebbles and broken glass. It was too much. Too fast. It didn’t just look like she’d hit her head. It looked like something had been torn *open* inside her.

Her face was caught mid-expression. *Eyes open. Wide. Unmoving.* One eye slightly more closed than the other, lashes clumped with blood. Her mouth was parted slightly, lips already losing their color, teeth just visible beneath the red smear. She looked like she had been about to say something. A name. A word. A breath. But it never made it out.

She didn’t twitch. She didn’t gasp. She didn’t even flinch. Her journal, in mud to the side of my backyard. I went back to it, to read the yellow post- it - ‘*just because, love aehlla.*’

Aehlla / present

I wasn't standing. I wasn't even sure if I still had a body. I was just- there. Lying flat on something that didn't feel like ground. It pulsed, softly, like it was breathing underneath me. Not warm, not cold. Just *wrong*. Like it didn't want me on it, but it wasn't going to spit me out either. My arms wouldn't move. My legs weren't mine anymore. My mouth was cracked open, dry, but I couldn't even cough. Couldn't ask where the hell I was.

I didn't black out. I didn't drift off. It was like the second my head hit the pavement, I slipped out of everything- noise, pain, air. One second I was hearing my name screamed by voices I loved, and the next- here. Whatever *this* was.

Above me, the sky was a mess. Colors spilled into each other- violet, teal, gold, red- like the atmosphere was crying in every direction. No sun. No moon. Just this glowing light that wasn't coming from anywhere. It hovered, dull and alive, like it was watching me. Or maybe reflecting me. I couldn't tell.

The flowers were worse. Too perfect. Too big. They leaned toward me, glowing and twitching like they were listening for something. Like they *knew* me. I hated how soft they looked. I hated how calm it all was. Nothing here should've been this calm.

Then I heard it. A low, crashing sound in the distance- steady, angry, alive. I didn't sit up. My body didn't move. But I could *see* it. The cliff. And what poured over it.

Not water.

It was red. Heavy. Endless. My blood. My own fucking blood, pouring like a flood that wouldn't stop. It didn't drip- it gushed. Violent. Fast. Thick enough to drown a city. And inside it- snapshots. Me. My life. The parts that still stung. The things I thought I could outrun. My laugh, my crying, *him*, the look on his face when I said I loved him, the slap- god, the slap. The moment everything broke. All of it bled out of me again and again like it hadn't finished the first time.

I wasn't crying. Couldn't. My body was numb. My soul was numb. I just lay there, watching myself get erased by the second. The smell of my own perfume mixed with blood hung in the air like some sick joke. Like the universe was playing my last memory on loop and asking, "Was this what you wanted?"

And the worst part?

This didn't feel like some peaceful afterlife.

This felt like mine. My mess. My grave with the lights turned on. My ending.

And I couldn't move. Maybe because I wasn't supposed to.

I didn't remember hitting the ground. I don't remember the pain. Just this jolt, like someone unplugged me from life in the middle of a thought. Then- nothing. No sound. No breath. Just this feeling like my body was somewhere else and I was floating above it- disconnected, weightless, numb.

Then I was here.

Laid out in some unreal place that didn't make sense. The sky above me was purple- not even just purple, but layers of it, moving like liquid light, shot through with glitter like stars had exploded and smeared themselves across everything. I couldn't sit up. Couldn't speak. I floated, just hovering in this fucked-up dream where everything was too quiet but somehow loud enough to shake through my bones. If I even still had bones.

And the blood- god, the *blood*. I saw it pouring before I felt it was mine. There was a cliff, distant but somehow right next to me, and it was *gushing*. Not dripping, not flowing. It was *roaring* out of the stone, this endless, heavy rush of deep red, thick and dark and alive. It fell fast and hard, like it had somewhere to be. And I knew. I just *knew*- it was mine. All of it. Every drop.

My blood.

Gushing out of me, still, even here. The earth below it soaked, stained, choking on it. I wanted to scream but my mouth wouldn't move. I saw my own reflection in it- face twisted, terrified, arms still reaching out like I hadn't stopped falling. My hair floated in it like it was still trying to swim away. And I couldn't stop watching. Couldn't look away from my own end spilling out of me like it hadn't finished yet.

It was beautiful. In that horrible, horrifying way. Like the sky was proud of it. Like the flowers blooming around me were feeding off it. Everything glowing. Everything surreal. And none of it felt like it was meant for me.

I wasn't supposed to be here. But here I fucking was.

It felt alive. It pulsed underneath me, and every now and then I'd swear it was matching my heartbeat- if I even had one left. My limbs were heavy as hell. Like my body was done. Like I wasn't supposed to be carrying it anymore. I couldn't lift my head. My mouth was dry. My eyes felt swollen. The air around me didn't feel like air- it was thicker. Like it was watching me.

I wasn't sure where I was. Everything above me was just color. Not a sky, not clouds, just light- swirling, melting into itself. Like a dream that forgot it was supposed to end. Everything shimmered. Even when I closed my eyes, I could

still *see* it. That glow, those colors. And the blood- somewhere behind me- still rushing. Still mine. I could hear it, like a river that wouldn't shut up. I didn't want to turn around. I knew what I'd see.

And then- someone was beside me.

I didn't hear her walk up. She didn't land. There was no entrance. She just- was. Lying next to me like she'd always been there. Quiet. Not trying to steal attention. She looked- fragile. But not weak. She glowed, but not blinding. She just radiated this quiet presence that made the air still.

"You know you're going to die, right?" she said.

Her voice wasn't sad. It wasn't mean. It was just- true. And somehow, hearing it didn't shock me. It didn't scare me either.

"Yeah," I breathed. "I've known. For a while, I think."

We didn't talk right away after that. It was quiet, but not empty. Like we both knew there wasn't much time, but no need to rush. She turned her face slightly toward mine, and I could see every soft line of her expression. Calm. Honest.

"Do you regret anything?" she asked.

I let out a shaky breath. "Lately I've been finding meaning in this life," I said. "With him. With the stupid little things. It finally felt like- I don't know. Like I was actually here. Not just existing."

She reached out and brushed my forehead. So light I wasn't even sure I'd felt it, but my chest tightened like I had. Her touch didn't fix anything, but it made me feel- *seen*.

She said, "The memory is always blurry. But the reality is always clear. Yet the memory stays forever."

It felt like someone had punched me with my own heart. I blinked at her. "Remember you told me- 'I wanna see you achieve everything you've ever told me, even if I'm not there'? I'm sorry I couldn't make it."

She smiled- not wide, not dramatic, just enough to feel warmth. “Oh, it’s okay. You remember too, right? You said- *‘sometimes women too slay the part which says, unconditional love.’*”

I nodded, and the tears hit before I even realized they were there. “Yeah, I said that.” I let a small giggle, even that hurt.

“*You did that,*” she said. “*And I’m proud of you.*”

That shattered me in the quietest, softest way. I turned my face into her shoulder. Didn’t say anything. I didn’t need to. She didn’t flinch. She let me lean.

“I wish I could’ve stayed longer,” I whispered into the glow around her.

“You stayed long enough to make it matter,” she said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

We didn’t speak after that. Didn’t need to. The sky kept swirling above us, and my blood kept falling behind, but none of it touched where we were.

We just laid there.

Me, fading. Her, staying.

And maybe, just for that moment, that was enough.

Karma’s voice was quiet, cutting through my fog. “Aren’t you scared of death?”

“It was love, wasn’t it?” Karma didn’t say it outright, but the question was in the way her voice curved, soft but sharp enough to cut. Her glow hummed against the bleeding sky.

I laughed- if you could call it that. It came out jagged, caught between a sob and a choke, burning its way up my throat. My ribs ached like splintered glass. Every inhale was a knife dragging against my lungs.

“I thought it was. The first time.” Calis’s name sliced through me before it even hit the air. “God, I loved him. Hard enough to carve myself hollow. Hard enough to bleed out twice if it meant he’d look at me like I was real.”

My laugh broke down the middle, sharp and ugly. “Thought he was the story. The myth. The kind of love people carve into stone.” A cough ripped through me, dark and metallic on my tongue. “Turns out those stories don’t end in ‘forever’. They end in fire.”

I doubled over- or tried to. My body barely answered anymore. Heat flared behind my eyes, blurring the kaleidoscope sky above me. My fingers clawed at nothing, trembling like they wanted to keep holding on to a life already sliding away.

“Then-” My voice scraped like gravel. “Mirari.” The name was a whisper and a wound. “He wasn’t a storm. He was a sunrise. Gentle. Gold-edged. Didn’t make me fight to breathe. Didn’t make me tear myself open to feel worth something. With him-” I gasped, chest heaving, pain ripping through me like wire. “-with him, it finally felt like air wasn’t rationed.”

Karma stayed silent, her glow steady, her presence a gravity pinning me here. Like she knew every word before I spilled it but needed me to bleed it out anyway.

“I stayed for that,” I whispered through cracked lips, my voice paper-thin. “Stayed in this broken skin because after Calis burned me to ash, I needed proof that love wasn’t all teeth and smoke.” Tears burned as they slipped into my hairline, stinging salt against skin already raw from life clawing me apart. “And I found it. God, I did.” I moan in pain.

I stopped. “*Thankyou for giving me a second life to live karma.*”

Karma didn’t say anything, just waited. I think she knew there was more coming.

“I keep thinking about my mom,” I whispered. “Like- how she’s gonna keep making tea for two, forgetting I’m not there. That she’ll fold laundry and still fold mine out of habit. I picture her standing at the sink, washing dishes and just- breaking.”

My voice cracked. I kept going anyway.

“My dad’s gonna pretend he’s okay. He’ll go to work like nothing happened. But he’ll stop listening to music, read my poems. He’ll stop talking about stupid stuff like the weather or traffic. He’ll just get quiet. And that’s worse.”

I wiped my face with the back of my hand, even though it didn’t help. “Cece’s gonna scream at the sky. Break shit. Swear she’s fine. And then she’s gonna stop texting anyone for weeks. Thais is gonna spiral, I know it. She’ll blame herself even though she had nothing to do with it. Evelyn- she’s gonna show up to class and pretend to be strong, but she’ll cry when she sees an empty chair. They all will.”

I looked up again- at that fake dream of a sky. “And the world’s just gonna keep moving, you know? Like people are still gonna buy groceries and fight over dumb shit and laugh at stuff on their phones. And I won’t be there for any of it.”

“I’m not scared of the after,” I said. “I’m scared of being erased from it. Of being reduced to a story people whisper when they think no one’s listening.”

I let the silence sit heavy between us, like it needed space to settle.

“I wasn’t done. I wasn’t even close.” Tears fell from my eyes and I couldn’t move myself to stop them. I sulked. *I just didn’t want to be howling for love. When you stop chasing someone for yourself, they then realise your worth.*

And that was the part that hurt the most.

Mirari / present

Shattering- a word that doesn't just describe what breaks, but *how* it breaks- suddenly, violently, and in a way that leaves behind pieces too sharp to ever fit back together. Ugh fuck.

My eyes were too big, too empty. Everything else went loud- screams, footsteps, tires, sirens- but in my head it was silent, just too much. Evelyn hit the ground somewhere behind me, hard. I didn't move. Couldn't. I just stood there, frozen, as if gravity forgot me. She was down on the road, pure wreckage. Blood pooling, limbs bent wrong, her hair stuck to her face, cheek pressed to pavement. Mouth open but silent. And I, I just stared. Like if I blinked, time would fix itself. But it didn't. Pain shot through me like broken glass.

I heard people shouting, sobbing, bending over her. I didn't join. My body felt like a shell, empty and useless. I knew that feeling of hurt so deep you can't breathe.

Yah, I know how it must've felt. Been there, done that. But this, this was her. My stomach dropped, my chest locked. My voice died. I wanted it to be me. I kept thinking, *let this be me too.* I don't want to be here without her. I didn't want this world anymore.

I didn't want to be alive. I saw Cecelia pick up her journal.

"CECE CALL AN AMBULANCE FAST!" Thais screamed like her lungs were tearing. But Cece, she was already moving, already digging in her pocket, already yelling back, "Screw that, just throw her in my car, I'll fucking drive, faster than whatever-" She didn't wait. Just jumped in, keys scraped metal, tires screeched like she'd punch the road herself.

"RARI, GET YOUR ASS IN THE CAR-NOW!" And I did. Or I tried. My body wasn't listening. I was stumbling, dragging legs that felt like concrete. They were lifting her-fuck, her *body*-into the back seat like she was made of feathers but dead weight too. Evelyn's hands were slipping, she was sobbing, voice high and cracked, "I can't feel her pulse, man, what the fuck- what the *fuck* is happening-" She was shaking so bad she couldn't stop. And I, fuck, I was already gone. I was in the car but not really. Brain mush. Just noise and heat and blood and her not moving. Not even a twitch.

The doors slammed, and Cece floored it like she was trying to outrun death itself. Tires screamed. The car jerked so hard my head smacked the window, and I didn't even flinch. Didn't feel it. Couldn't. The smell hit me next-*blood*. Not just metal or whatever-they say that, but no. It was *thick*. Hot. Everywhere. Like it filled the air and just-got in. Crawled down my throat and sat there. Like I could taste it. Like it wanted me to gag.

Aehlla was crumpled in the backseat, twisted weird, her body doing this awful limp thing. Evelyn was pressed against her, trying so hard, her hands were shaking like crazy, palms on her chest, voice breaking- "Come on- breathe, baby, please, just one breath-" She was begging and crying all at once, every word sounded like it tore her lungs out.

Cece's grip on the wheel was insane- her knuckles were white, jaw clenched. "Fucking red light, fuck it- I don't care," she muttered, and then just- *gunned*

it. Blew through like it didn't exist. Horns went off, people yelling, but I didn't look. Couldn't. I wasn't there. I was still on the road, watching her fly. Watching her slam down. Watching everything break.

Every bump sent her body bouncing slightly and Evelyn would just lose it- "She's slipping, fuck- Cecelia, FASTER!" And Cecelia yelled back, cracking- "I'm trying! I'm fucking trying! *MOVE!*" She laid into the horn like she wanted to tear through traffic with sound alone. Someone probably flipped us off, I don't know. Didn't care. Not one bit. None of it meant anything anymore.

I couldn't stop looking. The blood. Her mouth. Her head tilted, "Please, please, please, please, stay, stay, don't leave me, don't-" It sounded more like panic rather than hope. I knew she knew it, but didn't show.

We were close. I could see the ER sign blinking, stupid little red glow like it meant help. But the car still felt slow. Time felt *mean*. Like it was stretching just to mess with us.

And in all that screaming and honking and begging- I realized I hadn't said a single word.

Not one.

I didn't even know how.

Wait, was this what that fucker meant? The instant karma thing? The shit he warned me about? Is this it? This moment? Her body in the back, blood all over, Evelyn screaming, and I'm just here, stuck, watching- was this the price? Did he do this? Or did I? Fuck, was it me? Was this whole thing some kind of cosmic hit job I signed off on without reading the fine print? He said it. I remember him saying it like a joke, like a soft fucking threat- instant karma. Like it was nothing. Like I wouldn't end up here choking on the smell of her blood. I didn't take him seriously. I laughed. I thought I had control. Thought I could handle it. Thought it wouldn't cost anything. Thought he was on my side.

But it doesn't feel like it. This- this doesn't feel like something he wanted. He didn't want her to die. I know that. I feel that. He didn't ask for this. He tried. He warned me. But I ignored him. I pushed and snapped and let every bitter,

loud, stupid part of myself take the wheel. And it wasn't even like Karma wanted this. He didn't move out of hate or rage or some godlike need to punish me- I did that. I turned him into this. I gave him all my pain, all my mess, and never told him what to do with it. I just left it there. Every broken part of me became instruction. And now she's paying for it. I didn't protect her. I built the storm, watched it grow, and let it tear straight through her without lifting a fucking hand.

Fuck, did I just murder her?

The tires screeched as Cece slammed the brakes in front of the ER entrance, barely getting the car out of gear before Evelyn flung the back door open. "GET HELP!" she shouted at no one and everyone, her voice already hoarse, panic carved into her face. Cece jumped out with her and I stumbled after, legs jelly, mind blank. Evelyn was already calling her mom, hand trembling so hard, that she could barely keep the phone to her ear, stuttering, "Mom- Mom, it's Aehlla, we're outside, she's not breathing properly, she's bleeding, ICU now, *please*, just come down, need you right now." The last words shattered into something barely spoken, her voice cracking under it.

We pulled Aehlla from the backseat, her body slippery with blood, too soft, too quiet. Her head tilted back slightly, lips parted, her arm flopping out of Evelyn's hold. I grabbed under her knees, Cecelia had her shoulders, Evelyn still whispering to her under her breath, "*You're okay, you're okay, baby, we're here- hold on, hold on- just stay.*" We didn't walk- we ran toward the sliding doors like we could outrun what was happening.

A nurse inside saw us coming and shouted, "We need a trauma bed!" and within seconds, two more appeared with a stretcher. Evelyn didn't let go. "She's not stable," she kept saying to anyone who would listen. "She's not stable. My mom's on her way. She's a surgeon here." The nurse tried to guide her away, but she clung to Aehlla's hand like it could keep her tethered.

The hallway doors slammed open like someone had kicked them off the hinges, and she walked through- Dr. Blake, Evelyn's mom, scrubs already on, face hard, eyes zeroed in. She didn't blink. Didn't waste a second. "What happened?" she

barked, already at Aehlra's side. Her hands were moving before we could answer-pulse, eyes, breath, chest, all of it. Evelyn opened her mouth to explain, she tried, but Dr. Blake didn't wait. "ICU. Now. She's mine." Voice flat. Sharp. Final.

She snapped her fingers once. Just once. And everyone moved. The nurses jumped in like they were wired to her. The stretcher wheeled away so fast it left a streak on the floor. And then, gone. The doors slammed shut again. Just like that. Quiet.

Cece started pacing so fast she nearly tripped. She was muttering, biting her thumb so hard I thought it'd bleed. Thais slid down next to the vending machine, hugging her knees like if she didn't, she'd fall apart completely. Evelyn was already gone, vanished behind those ICU doors with her mom, and didn't look back once. She couldn't.

And me? I didn't move. I didn't fucking move. I dropped into one of those steel hospital chairs, cold, stiff, like it was built to punish. I didn't sit, I just collapsed into it. Could still feel her all over me, her blood on my hands, in the creases of my shirt, soaked into my jeans. My jaw wouldn't loosen. My chest felt crushed. I stared at the floor, at this one dull tile under my shoes, like if I looked away, I'd fall apart. Everything outside of that moment blurred, Cecelia pacing with her journal, Thais curled up, Evelyn gone. And somewhere in the back of all that noise, I knew, she was in there because of me. And I had to sit with that.

Cecelia slowly came to me, "*Don't lose it this time*", handing over her journal, with the post-it intact to it.

My brain wouldn't form sentences anymore. Just flashes. Her body jerked when the car hit the bump. The gurgle in her throat. Her hand twitched and then went still. Static. All of it. Loud and empty at the same time.

And in the middle of all that noise and horror, something broke through. Not a voice. Just a truth that sat in my gut and twisted until I couldn't breathe.

She's in there because of *me*.

I don't need anyone to say it. I don't need a doctor to tell me what went wrong.

I already know what's going to happen.

And just like that, she left before I could stop her. Again.

Dr. Blake came out, slow, tired. No rush, no hesitation- just calm in that way only people who've been through hell professionally know how to carry. She stood in front of me for a second, then sat down beside me like she didn't want to stand taller than I was. No softening. Just, "She's gone."

I didn't say anything. Didn't flinch. My hands were still red.

She didn't ask if I was okay. Just leaned back, rubbed her face. "It was fast. Clean, as much as that word even means right now." She looked over at me- not for permission, not for reaction. "You loved her. She loved you. It wasn't enough to stop what happened. That's not fair. But that's how life works sometimes." She paused. "It is what it is, Mirari."

That hit harder than anything else. Because it was true in a way only something brutal and honest could.

"You stayed," she added, quieter. "A lot of people run. You didn't. That counts." She stood up again, and didn't wait for me to reply. "Take your time. But don't sit here forever." And then she walked off, while I zoned out.

It's gonna be okay, isn't it?

Mirari's mom / past

I sat hunched in that too-clean waiting room, card crushed in my fist like it was the only damn anchor I had. My hands wouldn't stop twitching. I kept folding and unfolding the edges of it, trying to keep my breathing even while every thought in my head screamed over itself. I was sweating through my shirt and freezing at the same time. Just a name. A number Aehlla scribbled for me, months ago. "*Call her,*" she'd said. "If it gets too loud." And it was loud now. Deafening.

People kept saying it. Whispering like it was a rumor, like it didn't matter. "*He's not dead. Mirari's alive.*" Over and over. And the worst part? I have started to believe it. I looked for him in crowds. I thought I heard his laugh in the grocery store. And then one night, I tried to remember the funeral- my own son's funeral- and I couldn't. Just flashes. Sounds. Nothing whole. I started asking myself if I made the whole thing up. If my grief rewrote the story just to give me something to hold.

I didn't know anymore if I was mourning a dead child or losing pieces of myself. People looked at me with pity now, or worse- concern. Like I'd snapped and didn't notice. Like I needed saving from something in my own head. I didn't trust anything. Not my memory. Not my gut. Not even the ache in my chest because even *that* felt suspicious.

When the receptionist called my name, I thought I'd throw up. My legs moved but my mind stayed sitting. I was walking toward a stranger to find out if I was broken, or just broken open. I didn't know which would be worse. PAIN.

I stepped into the room, and my legs almost buckled. Walls were painted calm colors but felt fake. The doctor stood up without smiling- not warm, not cold. Just watched me with tired, serious eyes.

My hand held that damn card- creases, smudged edges. I kept rubbing it like it could fix my head. I didn't say anything at first. I just sat, choking on voices in my skull.

Finally, I whispered: "I can't remember his funeral. But people say they saw him- alive. And I- God, I believed them for a second." My voice broke. "What if I made it all up? What if I lost my mind?"

She didn't blink or judge. She said, "Grief eats memory sometimes. It's not poetry, it's survival." She slid a paper across. "You don't have to know everything today. Start at the pain." And I realized- I'm not insane. I'm fucking grieving.

The doctor smiled just a little when I came back the next week. Not the kind of smile you fake at a dentist, but the kind that says, *we're still on the same side*. She handed me a fresh piece of paper, bullet-pointed and messy.

"Last session, you named it: grief stealing memory. That's huge," she said, voice gentle but firm. "This week: we do something small. Something alive."

I blinked. Blinked again. "Alive?" My voice sounded tired, like it'd been used to whisper at midnight for too long.

“Yes.” She pulled out a single sheet- no questions, no forms. Just a list: *Describe your favorite breakfast. Text someone you love. Walk for five minutes.* “Let’s anchor you back. To do simple things.”

It felt- tiny. Ridiculous even. But weirdly hopeful.

That night, I boiled eggs, soft-done, yolk still creamy, just like he used to like. I called my sister, and said, “Hey.” We ended up laughing about the time Mirari dyed his hair purple in school. It sounded morbid at first, but it wasn’t. I realized I *missed* it. I missed him being reckless. Being alive.

The next day, I walked just around the block. The air smelled like wet cement and autumn leaves. I thought of Mirari stepping over cracks in the sidewalk, like he was daring gravity to make him stumble. And I smiled. I found myself being glad I still *could*.

The next session, I told her about all this as if I was reciting a secret. She didn’t say “good job.” She just nodded, eyes gentle, and said, “Anchor and remember: small acts are alive too. Always alive.”

Then she paused. “You know, when grief steals your world- it can still leave you crumbs. Let’s find the place each crumb came from.”

We laughed once- sharp and messy- when I tried to guess what her weekend plans were. I was off by *a mile*. She teased me about it. I teased back. And I realized: the world wasn’t just broken. It was also still here, still stubborn, still waiting for someone to step into it.

I walked home after that, bones still aching, mind still buzzing- but something felt lighter. Like I just caught a breath. Maybe a small one.

I took a deep breath now, “Look I know, we had a funeral, but a small hope, because I clearly don’t trust myself that much, if they say he’s alive, I wanna bet on it.”

The doctor was clearly used to this- “People die Elina, and you know honestly, *they’re the lucky ones*” she didn’t move her eyes from me, “they don’t stay behind, haunted by the echoes. They don’t live in the empty rooms, the

unfinished conversations, the birthday cakes with one less slice. They don't carry memories like glass in their lungs."

I huff. After a week. She smiled. Almost daily. Those wrinkles beside her mouth said so.

She paused, like she wanted the weight of it to land. "Death is an answer, Elina. But grief? Grief is a question that keeps changing shape. And the living, us, we keep answering it, every day, without knowing how."

She didn't let me speak. Or maybe I didn't want to. Maybe I didn't trust my voice to come out sounding like it belonged to me. Silence was safer. Silence didn't ask anything back.

"So," she said, her pen already moving across a notepad, like this was routine for her, like shattered people sat in this chair all the time, "you want to start therapy next week?"

She slid a card across the table. Crisp, white. Her name printed in that professional, steady font.

Dr. Shannon Blake.

I stared at it longer than I needed to. The name felt- quiet. Like it didn't want to scare me off.

"Yes. I should. Yeah," I mumbled, nodding too fast, my voice doing that crackly thing where it couldn't decide what it was trying to be. "You- uh, you get a lot of patients like me?"

She looked up. Didn't blink. "No," she said. "Rarely."

Then her voice softened, just slightly. "I have a daughter, Elina. I know what this feels like."

That one hit. Somewhere between my ribs and my spine. I stood, slow, like I was testing the gravity in the room. "Really? What's her name?"

She got up. "*Evelyn Blake*".

Mirari's karma / present

"Glad to see you here" I greeted him spontaneously, I didn't speak for a long time.

When it happened, when she flew, when her body hit the ground like the world had decided it was done with her- I didn't move. Not a flick. I watched it in real time, every frame carved into me like a curse. People think I'm immune to it. To pain. To aftermath. But I felt it like a gut punch through the soul. I felt the second her breath left her chest.

And I broke.

I wailed. Loud. Ugly. A sound I didn't know I had in me. No one heard, not where you come from, but here? It echoed. It ripped through the realm and split the clouds down the middle. I collapsed. My knees gave out. The floor- if you can call it that- shook under me like it felt it too.

I didn't ask for this. I didn't *want* this. Instant Karma was a *gift*- a ripple of truth meant to balance, not destroy. But the slap- the crowd- the humiliation- her pain, it collided with the energy like flint to gasoline. And by the time I realized what was happening, it was too late.

I wept. Because I was supposed to be the answer. And instead, I became part of the wound.

It didn't look like a place. More like the inside of a thought you didn't want to remember. The sky- or whatever counted as sky- hung low and thick, this weird bruised purple, like someone had wrung out a storm and left it unfinished. No stars. No light source. Just a kind of glow that came from everything and nothing. You couldn't tell what time it was. Or if time even mattered here.

The ground was solid, but too smooth. Almost like stone, but soft in spots, like it had given up being earth a long time ago. It wasn't cold, but it felt- heavy. Like the place had its own gravity. Like grief pressed down on you physically.

There were pools, scattered around. Not water, not really. They didn't reflect anything. Just still. Thick. Black. Like ink that never dried. Every once in a while they'd ripple, but nothing ever touched them.

There was no wind. Just silence that felt stretched too far. The kind of quiet where you start hearing your own breath too loud and your thoughts echo back sharper than they should. It didn't feel dead. Just- stuck. Like the whole place was holding its breath, waiting for you to confess something.

"You killed her!" he spat at me.

I didn't even blink. Didn't look shocked. Just rolled my jaw and gave him the slowest, most exhausting eye-roll I could manage. "Oh, we're opening with that? Not even a warm-up punch?"

He didn't stop. Didn't breathe. "You gave me that Instant Karma. You told me it was a gift. And then you just *stood there* when it turned into her fucking death sentence."

I folded my arms. “Newsflash, genius: when I said *instant*, I didn’t mean *apocalyptic*. You were the one that let your pride fumble the moment. She slapped you. You froze. *You* triggered it.”

He stepped forward, his voice boiling now. “You could’ve stopped it.”

I laughed. Laughed like it hurt. “Right. Because that’s what I am now? A supernatural bodyguard for your emotional incompetence? I *gave* you balance. You treated it like a performance. You wanted the universe to hear your heartbreak louder than hers. And it did.”

He flinched, but I wasn’t done. “I didn’t kill her, Mirari. You gave me permanence, immortality, and used it to play god. What you got wasn’t punishment. It was the price.”

I should’ve known he wasn’t here to talk. He came in like a storm made of nerve endings- red-eyed, jaw clenched so tight I could practically hear his molars grind. He wasn’t grieving. Not yet. He was blaming. And of course, I was the easiest target.

“You handed me that gift,” he said, voice shaking with that kind of rage that only grief dares to wear. “You said Instant Karma was balance- justice. You never said it could kill her.”

I shrugged. “Oh, I’m sorry- did you need a disclaimer label? ‘Warning: Consequence may react poorly with pride and public humiliation?’”

“Don’t you dare-” he stepped closer, that hollow look in his eyes twisting tighter. “*She didn’t deserve that.*”

“And yet, here we are,” I said. “Actions. Reactions. That’s what you wanted, remember? Cause and effect. Newton’s third law. You handed me eternity and expected it to behave like a fucking mood ring.”

He laughed bitterly. “You act like you didn’t know. Like you didn’t *watch* it happen.”

I glared right back. “You think I *wanted* that to happen? You think I built the universe to crush the one person you gave a shit about?”

“You could’ve stopped it,” he growled, again.

“I’m not your babysitter,” I snapped. “You’re the one who made me real. Eternal. You’re the one who wanted a consequence that *meant* something. I didn’t expect you to let your ego cash a check your soul couldn’t pay.”

“You gave me something I couldn’t even understand,” he hissed.

“And you *used* it anyway,” I shot back. “Like a kid with a matchbook, waving it in a fireworks factory.”

He went quiet for half a beat. And I saw it. The weight of it. Right there in his eyes. Guilt trying to crawl its way out of denial.

But he didn’t stay silent.

“You act like you’re blameless,” he said, softer but darker. “But I *felt* you the moment she ran. I felt you tighten around my chest. You were there.”

“Yeah,” I whispered, not sarcastic this time. “I *was*. And I begged the universe not to make that her last run.”

He blinked.

“I didn’t kill her,” I said again, quieter now. “But I couldn’t save her either.”

“They’re our feelings. I can’t change them. Go live with it.” I seep in that sentence calmly.

And for the first time since she died, he finally looked like he knew the difference.

He looked at me like he wanted to rip my throat out.

So I said it.

“Your greatest curse isn’t me, Mirari. It’s love.”

His expression twitched- pain, anger, denial, all of it trying to fight its way out of his skin- but I didn’t let up.

“Every timeline you touch, every thread you follow- it ends the same. You fall in love, and it betrays you. Not because the person changes. Not because the

universe is cruel. But because *you* don't know how to hold it. You cling. You perform. You punish. You don't *feel* it. You chase it like it owes you something."

He looked like he wanted to scream. Or cry. Or both.

"I am your gift," I said, stepping closer, not yelling- *knowing*. "The only one who's gone beyond his bounds to show you what love *actually* feels like. I've stayed. I've watched. I've carried every ugly, bitter, hypocritical piece of you. And still- I didn't run."

He shook his head like it would shake the truth off.

But I wasn't done.

"Maybe that's the irony, huh? People worship the moon. Write poems about it. But the moon?" I tilted my head. "It doesn't shine. It reflects. It borrows light it can't make. It's beautiful because it takes what isn't its and makes us believe it's its own."

I let the silence fall heavy between us.

"That's you. You love like the moon. You reflect. You echo. But you've never burned with your own light."

And I looked at him. Quieter now.

"That's not punishment, Mirari. That's who you are."

Then I snapped my fingers.

The air bent. Fainted on itself. And one by one, the bubbles appeared- hundreds of them, floating silently in the thick violet sky, humming low like lullabies from forgotten dreams.

They smelled- *God*, they smelled. Like roasted memory and dust, like vanilla dragged through sadness, like some haunting combination of blood and flowers. The kind of scent that makes your lungs ache with nostalgia you didn't earn.

“These,” I said, motioning around us, “are you. Every you. Every branch that broke. Every thread that twisted just a little differently.”

He stared. Watched them spin. A version of him where he never met Aehlla. One where she stayed. One where she died sooner. One where he died instead. And I stepped in closer. Enough to spit it out.

“Look- *look* around you,” I snapped. “Out of all these fuckers, every miserable, tragic, half-baked version of you- *only you* have me. You have a Karma that *talks* to you. You made me *real*. Do you get how wild that is? Not one of them has me. Not one other Mirari in this entire multiversal graveyard got what you got.”

I leaned in, teeth clenched. “And *you* have the audacity to call *that* a curse?”

His mouth parted. Nothing came. Just- “*What the actual fuck?*” He listened intently, confused, wanting answers.

“You think Karma is the punishment?” I said, softer, but sharper. “No, Mirari. Karma was the *mercy*.”

I step forward knowing what’s gonna happen. He just stood there. Didn’t move. Like his body forgot how. His hands were fists, but they weren’t steady, twitching, clenching harder, then not at all. His jaw looked like it hurt from how tight it was. And his eye- fuck, they were everywhere. Looking at the bubbles, then at me, then nowhere. Like his brain couldn’t catch up to what was in front of him. He tried to say something- I could tell- but nothing came. Just a shaky inhale like he thought that would be enough. It wasn’t. He looked wrecked. Not just mad or sad. Like he wanted to scream and couldn’t. Like he’d burned through the anger and what was left didn’t even know how to be loud.

One fast, ragged breath. His fist came up like it had been waiting for hours, maybe days. It wasn’t clean. It wasn’t some cinematic punch with a perfect arc. It was messy, unbalanced, *real*. But it landed.

Right across my jaw.

It hit like a confession. Not power. Not precision. Just pain, thrown out of his bones the only way he knew how.

I didn't fall. Just stumbled back, touching my face slowly, almost bored.

He was breathing hard now. Shoulders heaving, fist still clenched, knuckles reddening. But there was no victory in his eyes. Just this flicker of *please let that fix something*.

It didn't.

"You done?" I said, my mouth bleeding just a little. "Or do you wanna try blaming me harder until it hurts less?"

He was helpless, and he wanted help so bad.

"For the first time, huh, I touched you. I am glad it was a punch."

"The epitome of love."

Mirari / present

Hollowed- it wasn't just a word anymore. It was fucking stitched into my skin. Like someone carved it in while I was sleeping. That empty echo? It was me now. Walking, talking, nothing. And when I finally, finally, got the balls to open our chat, I swear it felt like a goddamn funeral in my chest. Like my heart sat up just to watch itself break. Again.

Her last message? That fucking heart emoji. Still beating. Still blinking like she was alive, like she was just on her way back or caught up somewhere. I laughed. I actually laughed. Not because it was funny, but because if I didn't, I was gonna throw my phone across the room and scream until my throat bled. What kind of sick joke is that? She's dead. She's fucking *gone*. And this little red blob was the last proof I had that she ever said something sweet to me. No glory, no guts.

Goodbyes? No. They're not hard. It's the ones you never get to say that rot you from the inside out. I didn't say sorry. I didn't explain. I didn't fucking *do*

anything but watch her run- and let her go. That's what's killing me. Not the blood. Not the crash. Not even the funeral invite that just popped up on my phone like it wasn't about to split me in half.

Evelyn's text: "*funeral's at 4, this address. come if you can. please.*" The 'please' got me. Not the time, not the location, just that single word, small and quiet like she was scared I wouldn't show. Like anyone else *should* be standing there instead of me.

I stared at it forever. Didn't even open the thread. I already knew. I'd go. Because if anyone deserved to stand there like a fucking statue while everyone mourned the girl *he* couldn't save- it was me.

Getting dressed felt like dragging my body through molasses. My shirt wouldn't sit right. I buttoned it wrong, twice. Couldn't even look at myself in the mirror without flinching. Every version of me staring back looked like a fraud. A murderer. A coward wrapped in black cotton.

I found the handkerchief she gave me. Stupid little thing. Said it was "for emergencies," like she *knew* I'd fall apart one day and need something to hold onto that wasn't my own damn regret. It smelled like her. Soft, lavender, eucalyptus- comfort. Shoved it in my pocket before it made me cry.

And yeah- I didn't wanna go. Every bone in my body said *don't*. Said run. Hide. Burn the suit. Smash the mirror. But I didn't. I walked out that fucking door because the world took her, and the least I could do was show up to say I'm sorry- even if it's too goddamn late.

They say funerals are for closure. Sure. And knives are for hugging. Nothing about this felt like closure. It felt like watching someone you love dissolve into dirt while strangers sniffled behind you like they knew her. Like they *deserved* to be there. Now the funeral- devastating, cruel, and so fucking tragic it made my insides burn. My chest was hollow. My throat was dry. Everything smelled like soil and cut flowers and that sickly perfume someone probably thought was respectful. It wasn't. It reeked of pretending.

I stood there, staring like a goddamn idiot, trying to convince myself this wasn't real. That maybe if I blinked hard enough, she'd just sit up and roll her eyes. "Chill, Mirari," she'd say. But she didn't. When I saw her in that coffin for the last time, my heart didn't break- it *detonated*. And there it was. That faint smile still tugged to her face. Soft. Almost smug. Like she knew something I didn't. Like she'd made peace with it all and I was the only one left scrambling for meaning. I hated it. I loved it. It gutted me. That smile said, "*It's okay, I'm done now.*" And I wanted to scream *No, you don't get to be done. You don't get to leave me with all this shit.* But I couldn't scream. I just stood there like a ghost watching someone else's life unravel.

I tossed this big, ridiculous bouquet of flowers on her grave. Loud colors, ugly ribbon. Over the top. Everything she used to tease me for. I wanted it to look wrong. I wanted it to scream. Maybe then someone would feel half of what I was choking on. She would've hated it. Then smirked. Then secretly liked it. That was her.

This hideous atrocity shuffled things a bit. I kept my tidily ironed handkerchief in her coffin, laid beside her wonderly self made crotchets, weakened by my will to look at her face even on her death bed. I stuffed it so good, making sure absolutely nothing would make it waver away. I put it there because I didn't know what the hell else to do. I put it there so a part of me would still be with her. Because everything in me was screaming not to leave her alone. Not in that box. Not under the ground. The stupid thing smelled like my skin, like all the nights I cried into it without making a sound. It was damp and crumpled and mine. And now it was hers. I shoved it in like it mattered. Like anything I did now could matter. My hand hovered over hers- blue, too still, not her anymore. I couldn't touch it. I wanted to. I wanted to climb in there and curl up next to her and say "*Take me too.*" But instead, I just stood there, fingers twitching, heart in pieces, saying goodbye to someone who never fucking said it back.

I put a big huge bouquet of flowers on her grave. Stupidly big. The kind that screams *look at me*, like that makes up for everything I never said. Half the flowers were half-dead already, crushed from how hard I gripped them walking here. The ribbon came undone twice. I didn't fix it. She'd have laughed at that,

said it was typical of me to show up with a mess and call it heartfelt. Maybe it was. Maybe that's all I've ever been. A fucking mess trying to mean well.

And then the words just spilled out, like bile. *"Remember once you called me and ranted even when you thought I wouldn't understand shit?"* My voice cracked. Felt like my throat was lined with broken glass. *"Guess what, Aehlla? I understood even your silence."*

And I did. Every pause in your voice, every time you inhaled like you were gonna speak but didn't- I fucking heard it. I understood what it felt like to strive for love, the affection I felt distant from, the void pulling me down. I lived in that silence too. I drowned in it. And I spent so long thinking I didn't deserve love, didn't deserve shit, that I didn't even stop to think that *you* deserved love too.

You weren't just this chaotic, brilliant storm I couldn't hold onto. You were someone who needed to be held.

And I failed. Fuck, I failed you so hard. I was so busy feeling sorry for myself I didn't see you slipping. Didn't see you fading into the kind of quiet you don't come back from.

Now all I've got is this pathetic pile of crushed flowers and a million words I should've said when your heart was still beating.

"How was the funeral?"

That's what Mom asks me.

I'm dripping in the doorway- soaked in cemetery mud and graveyard rain, and that's the first thing she says. Her voice doesn't even land right. Like it's not real. Like she's whispering to a ghost. She's not looking at me. Just twisting that old dish towel in her hands like she's wringing out her own nerves, slowly, quietly.

I didn't blink. Didn't even breathe.

"Pretty awesome," I mutter. "Had fun."

Then I turn and shove the stairwell door so hard the damn glass hums. I don't care. I take the steps two at a time, not thinking, just moving like something inside me's already breaking. The moment I hit the terrace, the sky fucking *slaps* me. Rain pelts me in the face like it's been waiting. Like it knows.

I don't walk- I drop. Hit the ground like my bones don't belong to me. Knees crunch into concrete. Palms smack down. My chest's caving in. It's like I can't get enough air but I also want to stop breathing entirely. My mouth's open and the rain floods in, and I don't even care if I choke. I WAS CHOKED CRYING. My breath stuck in my throat, and lumps so heavy, I needed it all out.

And then I fucking *scream*.

It rips out of me, throat first- raw, animal, disgusting. I sound like something dying. Maybe something is already dead. I scream until my voice fractures into something hoarse and useless. I'm gagging, coughing up snot and spit and the taste of blood, and it's all pouring down my face with the rain. I can't stop shaking. I can't stop seeing *her*.

That fucking smile. That stupid, soft, beautiful smile in the coffin.

"You killed her," I choke out. "You *killed her*."

I slam my head down. Once. Hard. The impact sends stars bursting behind my eyes. I do it again. Harder. Again. I want it to split open. I want to crack my skull like it'll leak out the guilt. I want the hurt.

And then my fists are flying. Smashing the concrete until the skin tears like paper, until I see bone glinting through the blood. Warm, slick, dripping into the rain pooling at my knees. My hands are wrecked, but I don't stop. I can't. If I stop, the truth hits-and I'll burn alive in it.

"You lied!" I scream, voice breaking into shards. "You said you were different! You said you wouldn't leave-" My throat seizes, rage eating the words before I can spit them all out. "But you did. *You fucking did. Again!*"

The sound of my own voice bounces back from the walls, harsh and hollow. Maybe someone hears me. Maybe the whole street does. I don't give a fuck. Let them watch me tear myself apart.

I start clawing at myself, my neck, my chest, my face, anything I can reach. I dig my nails down, tear red lines into my arms like I'm trying to rip off the skin and escape myself. I slap my face, over and over, until my ear rings and my jaw clicks. I want bruises. I want damage. I want something outside to match what's inside.

"You let her die." It comes out broken. "You let her *fucking die*."

I grab fistfuls of my hair and *pull*, and I don't even stop when I hear something snap. I'm twitching now, like I can't keep myself upright. Everything's white noise. Everything's *too loud*. My body's convulsing, folding in on itself. I want to disappear into the floor. Just sink through and be done.

"I should've been there," I whisper. "I should've answered. I should've- I should've fucking loved her louder."

And then I collapse. Flat. Face to the rain-slick rooftop. Skin scraping against cold concrete. My blood's all over it. So is the rain. My breath won't settle. I'm shaking so hard I might be seizing. And I don't care.

I don't feel the cold. I don't feel *anything* but the way my own heart's trying to rip out of my chest.

It wasn't the world that failed her. It was me.

And I deserve every fucking second of this.

Blood and rain had soaked through my shirt, heavy and sticking to me like something I couldn't shake off. Cold. Clammy. It felt like grief- tight, suffocating, inescapable. My skin burned and chilled at the same time. My neck was soaked too, but I couldn't tell what was what anymore- sweat, rain, tears, all of it blurred. My jaw was locked so tight it throbbed. My hands, if I could even call them hands, were just busted-up wrecks by now- numb and raw, pressed useless against the concrete. I didn't try to move. Couldn't. My brain wasn't working right. Everything was static, frozen except for the shiver running down my spine that wouldn't leave me alone.

Then something in the air- shifted.

It wasn't the wind or the rain. It was quieter than that. Like something held its breath.

I blinked. Once. Twice. My lashes were stuck together with water, vision smeared and shaking. Everything stung. But there- through the gray- there was a shape. Trembling.

Someone at the edge of the terrace.

I stared, thinking maybe my mind was just fucking with me. Wouldn't be the first time. But he was there. Unmoving. Still in that way that makes everything else seem loud. The storm didn't touch him. Or maybe it did and I just couldn't see it right. But something about him- his shoulders, the way he stood- slammed into me before the rest of me could catch up.

It was him.

My dad.

No light, no glow, no ethereal music playing from the clouds- just him. Standing like he belonged there. Like he never left. Or maybe he'd been standing there the whole time and I just didn't look up until now.

And then, *Aehlla. Hub?*

She was beside him. No announcement, no slow pan over- just there. Like she'd always been meant to be right there.

Her dress clung to her, soaked and heavy. Hair wet, stringy, sticking to her jaw, her cheeks. She was barefoot. Of course she was. That was always her thing- feet on the ground, skin to earth. The rain rolled down her face, soft like she wasn't even feeling it. Her expression didn't move. Not smiling. Not crying. Just- still. That kind of still doesn't mean empty. It meant she wasn't holding the weight anymore.

She was holding his hand.

Fingers threaded through his like it had been that way forever.

Neither of them looked at me. Not once. They didn't have to. Something about that made it worse. Or maybe it made it make sense. I don't know. My chest pulled tight, like something inside me had collapsed in on itself. I wanted to call out. Scream. Crawl toward them. But all I could do was lie there, trembling and wrecked and soaking in the mess I made of everything.

Then he spoke. Once. Just once.

"Don't you worry. She's safe with me." And he smiled.

My eyes burnt like ash, trembling and begging to let myself rest. They were gone before I could even blink again.

One second they were there. The next- nothing. Just the rain. Just the empty hum of water hitting the rooftop, same as it had been all night. No more figures. No more hands. No more quiet.

I stared at the spot where they'd been. That stretch of terrace felt miles away now. My eyes stayed wide, too wide, like maybe if I didn't blink they'd come back. My breath slowed without meaning to. Everything in me just- stopped. Not in a calm way. Not numb. More like I didn't know how to keep going from that point forward.

I should've moved. Should've said something. Reached. Cried. Screamed maybe. Anything.

But I didn't.

I just couldn't.

I just laid there. On my side now, maybe- I don't even remember shifting. Face pressed to the concrete, cheek cold and raw and wet. I let the rain hit me like I wasn't even part of my own body anymore. Like maybe the roof was gonna swallow me whole and I'd let it.

"Yes," I whisper, barely more than breath. *"Please, Dad, she's everything I had."*

Mirari's karma / present

The scrunchie felt weirdly heavy. Like, heavier than it should be for something so small. mirari had been holding it too tight the whole drive, thumb kind of rubbing over the fabric like it might- do something. Respond maybe. It was Aehlla's. The lavender one- old and kind of worn out. She used to wear it even when her hair was already up, like it was part of her wrist. It was stupid how much that thing mattered now. Last thing she left behind at his place. He'd thought about keeping it, maybe pretending it meant she'd come back for it. But he couldn't. Not anymore.

"Did you miss me, babygirl?"

The audacity. Cecilia said it like we were back to normal, like nothing happened. Like we weren't standing in the aftermath of something that gutted us all. But maybe that's just how some people work. You lose someone, cry for a few days, and then life keeps moving. I guess you can't mourn forever, right? Not everyone gets stuck in it the way I do.

"I'm not your- can you stop treating me like one of your sex toys?"

I snapped. Couldn't help it. I didn't even know what I meant by it, not really. It just spilled out. Raw. Unfiltered. And ugly. Everything about this felt wrong. Too quiet. Too normal. Like grief was something we were supposed to fold up and pack away already.

Cecilia had stayed in the car. Said she didn't want to intrude. Her hands were clenched around the steering wheel so tight they looked pale. But she hadn't let him go alone either. She watched him get out, then after a second, got out too. Quiet. No drama. Just there.

He didn't even get the chance to knock. The door opened and there she was- Aehlla's mom. Her face looked wrecked. Like she hadn't slept or eaten or even blinked since the news. But her eyes still had that strange warmth underneath everything, like she hadn't given up on being human through all the pain. mirari's hand trembled as he held out the scrunchie.

"She left this at Ryan's the other day," he said, voice rough and lower than usual. "I- I can't keep it. It doesn't feel right. I thought it should come home. It still feels like her a little, you know?"

He paused, swallowing. "You raised the most respectful, loyal, loving, sweet girl a man could ever hope to meet."

Her eyes dropped to the scrunchie. She took it slow, careful, brushing against his hand like she needed the contact as much as the object. She held it like it was glass. Or maybe a heartbeat. Then her voice broke, just a bit.

"She was beautiful," she whispered. "Because she was loved by you."

That was it. And something about the silence felt full, like if they moved too fast or said too much, it'd all shatter.

There was this small smile on her face. Faint. Like she knew it was coming and had already made her peace with it. Like she was thinking, *yeah, this is fine, I guess this is how it goes*. And me? I just stood there, not even blinking. My face felt frozen, stuck in this weird blank nothing. Stoic, maybe. Or just trying real hard not to fucking fall apart right there.

“Come on in” she offered, like we weren’t the first ones to visit the place after her loss.

We walked in- me trailing a bit behind Cecilia, who somehow managed to look like she wasn’t fazed by any of this. Like walking into a house thick with dead silence didn’t rattle her. The place smelled like old tea and something sweet that had been sitting out too long. It was still. Like even the walls were holding their breath.

Aehlla’s dad was at the dining table. Just- there. Elbows on the wood, hands folded, staring at nothing. The TV was off. No phone in sight. Just silence and a man floating in it.

Cecilia nodded at him. He didn’t move.

We all just stood there in that weird, loaded silence- the kind that feels like it’s waiting for someone to mess it up.

Cecilia glanced at Aehlla’s dad, then back at me, then at the table. She cleared her throat lightly, like she was trying to warm up to a question that didn’t need asking.

“So- uh, do you guys still, like- cook in here?” she asked.

I blinked at her. *What?*

Aehlla’s dad looked up, just barely, eyebrows tugging together like he was trying to figure out if she was serious or broken.

“Or- like, I just mean- does it smell the same? You know. Like when she was here?” She trailed off, arms crossed tightly, clearly regretting everything that just came out of her mouth.

Aehlla’s dad blinked. Just once. Real slow. Like that was the dumbest thing he’d ever heard but he didn’t have the energy to care. I didn’t either.

He didn’t even answer at first. Just kind of- stared at the table.

“She used to sit right there,” he said eventually, nodding at the chair across from him. “Ate grapes like she was rationing joy. One by one.”

The room pulled quiet again. The kind that makes your skin itch.

“She was late for school once. Ate mine too. Just laughed about it like it was a joke.”

His voice cracked. He didn’t flinch.

“She owed me four grapes.”

No one said anything. Cecilia bit her thumbnail. I rubbed my palm against my jeans. My throat felt tight but not like crying, just tight.

I looked toward the hallway. Swallowed hard.

“Would it be okay if I went into her room?” I asked. Voice low. Tight. “Just-one last time.”

He didn’t nod. Didn’t speak. But he didn’t stop me either.

The door stuck a little when mirari pushed it. Made that low, shitty groan like it didn’t want to open. Like it was holding her in.

Her room was still. Like it had been waiting. Not quiet in a peaceful way- quiet like something unfinished. It smelled like her. Lavender maybe. And something else- paper, maybe. Time. It hit both of them at once, but neither said anything.

Cecilia stood at the edge, hands shoved into her jacket pockets, like touching anything would break it. Mirari stepped in slower, eyes not really landing anywhere for too long. The bed was still unmade. Half a blanket, a sock, some paperback book she probably meant to finish. Her desk looked like she’d just stepped out for a second- pens scattered, a notebook open but slightly off-center, like she’d tossed it there mid-thought.

Mirari picked up the top journal. His fingers trembled a little. “She wrote all the time,” he muttered. “Didn’t matter what. Just stuff. Everything.”

He flipped it open. Her handwriting hit him like a slap. Messy, looped letters, some lines written sideways, some scratched out like she hated the words after they came out.

Cecilia leaned over his arm. The pages were full of half-poems, angry lists, weird dreams. A line near the bottom of one page read: *I think I only feel real when I'm disappearing.*

Neither of them breathed for a second.

"She never let anyone read this," Mirari said, voice raw and uneven.

Cecilia didn't look up. "Guess she knew someone would need to."

They didn't sit. They didn't even talk after that. They just stood there, surrounded by whatever parts of her refused to let go.

He reached out, real slow, like the paper might bite. Picked up one of the poems she'd scribbled on the back of a receipt or maybe a grocery list- didn't matter. He just needed to see what was in her head. What she wasn't saying out loud when they sat in silence, when she smiled like nothing was wrong. Maybe the poem would spill what she never did.

don't light candles.

don't call it peaceful.

don't say I "went quietly in my sleep"

I never did anything quietly.

let the dishes stay in the sink.

don't sweep the floors.

let the dust collect where my body used to hum.

I want the mess to remember me.

the day I die,

don't wear black like you're following a script.

wear that ugly sweatshirt I used to steal,

the one that still smells like sleep and second chances.

open my notebooks.

read the scribbles I was too afraid to say out loud.

find the page with coffee stains and finger smudges

and know that I meant every word I never showed you.

Hold Me When I Die

*the day I die,
don't pretend I was whole
I was cracked as hell
but I tried.
I tried.*

*cry if you need to.
scream into your pillow
break the stupid lamp I always hated.
but don't say I'm "in a better place."*

*just say I mattered.
even when I didn't believe it
especially then.*

*and maybe,
just maybe,
keep the window cracked open
in case I ever find my way back*

P.S- i will never die that soon haha

Yah, out of all the damn poems, this poem.

My hands shook to find another one laying just beneath it.

"cartography of you"

*i mapped you in constellations
stitched your voice into the black velvet sky
where stars learned your syllables
and the moon borrowed your calm.

i planted your laughter in the soil of my lungs,
and now every breath grows wildflowers
violet, gold,
petals soft enough to hold the storms
you never saw me swallow.*

Samiksh Ghodke

*when i sleep,
you spill through my dreams like ink on glass,
shifting,
a river that forgets it's water
but never forgets its way back to me.

if you ask what love feels like here
it's the sky folding inward,
the gravity between our spines
writing new laws for planets.

it's me,
folded into your shadow,
still bright enough to glow
because you touched me once
and everything learned
how to bloom.*

So this was how I lived in her head, huh? All those scattered words bleeding meaning I never said out loud. Maybe scribbling an '*annotated poem*' in her handwriting wasn't the worst idea I ever had. Hell, maybe it was the only way to stay in her margins.

"Cecilia," he said, barely above a whisper, "can you go out for a minute?"

She turned, eyebrows raised like he just asked her to leave her own funeral. "What? Do you wanna cry?" she said, voice sharp, teasing-but not cruel. Just typical of her.

He didn't answer.

Did he want to cry? Maybe. But more than that, he needed to be alone. With whatever the hell still lived in this room. And not the kind that is haunted.

Cecilia rolled her eyes and huffed. "Fine. But don't start talking to the walls, okay?"

"Whatever. I'll give you space," she said, walking toward the door. Then just before leaving, she tossed it over her shoulder like it was nothing: "Guess some

people get the lives they're meant to. Some of us just- get stuck in the ones we didn't ask for."

And then she went out.

But her words hung there. Heavy. Stupidly sharp for something she probably didn't even think twice about.

Some people get the lives they're meant to.

He stared at the wall. No, through it.

What if this *was* the life he was meant to live?

And who the hell decided that?

Why *this* one, with the ache stitched into every corner? Why her smile, just to have it ripped away?

Something twisted in his gut. It didn't feel like grief. It felt older. Quieter.

Like a door had cracked open in the back of my mind. One he hadn't looked at in years.

Not the kind people tattoo or quote online. The real kind. The *before* kind.

Yeah. He needed answers. Not from Cecilia. Not from the universe. From whatever version of me put me here. In this mess. With this story.

And the worst part? A small, cold part of him already knew the answer. I knew he would come knocking.

The walls of the room didn't fade.

They fractured.

Time didn't stop. It bent. Like it was embarrassed by itself. One blink and he wasn't in her room anymore. He wasn't anywhere- but everything around him felt loud. The kind of silence that buzzes in your teeth. Air, thick with

something heavier than gravity. He stood still, not because he wanted to, but because he didn't have a choice.

And then he felt me. That goddamn presence. The familiar static. The one he remembered without knowing how.

"Karma!" he shouted, throat already torn. "Why this fucking life? Out of *all* the timelines, all the versions, all the lives you could've handed me- you chose *this* one?! Why her? Why this ending?!"

There was no echo. Just space, swallowing his words like they weren't worth throwing.

A ripple. A sigh. My voice, smooth as glass and twice as annoying.

"Okay, first of all," I said, "you could really use some manners."

He blinked. Rage rising again.

"What?"

"You barge in screaming like some pissed off soap opera character, and you don't even say *good morning*. Or *good evening, sir*. Or *hello, ancient force of balance who's probably holding my fragile existence together*. Nothing."

"Are you fucking serious-"

"Yes, yes, blah blah, blah blah. Rant, scream, fall to your knees. I get it. Classic mortal meltdown. Go ahead. I'll wait."

My voice stayed calm. Too calm. Because this? This was routine.

He wasn't the first soul to crawl into the void, furious and cracking, demanding answers about their pain.

"Are you drunk?" he asked.

"Sometimes, but not today, maybe I am out of my mind" I reply so cold heartedly.

He grew silent. But he was fine. Didn't smile, nor looked up.

I still hesitated, "Are you okay, Rari?"

His eyes swollen and he looked like a drug addict, a lump in his throat and thirsty as fuck. “Then why only this life? Why not some other bubble wandering into happiness?”

“You want the truth?” I said. “Fine.”

I stepped in- not with feet, but with force. The kind that presses against your ribs and makes breathing a chore.

“The Mirari whose life you now carry- he wasn’t bad. He was broken. Not in that sad-boy, Instagram-poem kind of way. I mean *shattered*. Torn open by the very people who were supposed to shelter him.”

Mirari’s mouth twitched. Then he snapped, voice sharp, throat tight.

“Yeah, I know, you asshole. Naira told me *everything*. Dumped it all over coffee like it was fucking gossip. Like it wasn’t a goddamn obituary for the guy I am now.”

I let his rage hang for a beat before I went on.

“He was in the hospital. Still breathing. Still *there*. All he needed was blood. O-negative. The one type that’s rare enough to make miracles inconvenient. And guess who had it?”

I let that silence throb.

“You. Him. Whatever version of you existed back then. Five years old. Packed off on a school trip because Naira thought it would be good for you to ‘see the world’ and stop clinging to shadows.”

The words hit him square. Like a punch he didn’t brace for.

“They tried to call your teachers. Tried to find you. But you were halfway across the state feeding goats or drawing clouds, while your father bled out on a plastic mattress begging for time.”

I leaned in, voice flat.

“He died waiting for your blood.”

And then I let it settle.

“He wasn’t even old enough to spell ‘trauma’ right, but they handed it to him anyway- gift-wrapped in blame.”

“THEN HOW WAS HE TO BE BLAMED?!” he screeches through the walls of consciousness.

“Dude, we all know you didn’t alright?! Remember what Naira said?” I slowly gut crept at him, “*They needed someone to crucify. And you were there. You didn’t even get to say goodbye. And suddenly it was your fault.*”

He stepped back, knowing the whole story, a little more clearly.

“He got called a murderer by his own fucking blood. His mom wouldn’t touch him after that. Teachers didn’t say his name unless it was a roll call. Friends? Gone. And no one ever asked what he saw that night. What he heard when the engine screamed or how long he stood there shaking, hoping someone else would say it was okay.”

Mirari swallowed hard, jaw clenched.

I kept going.

“He stopped eating. Would just sit there, blank, staring at a wall like maybe it held answers. He scratched lines into the soles of his shoes, just to feel something when he walked. Scraped his fingernails raw. Started biting the inside of his cheek until it bled and pretended it was just gum.”

I saw it hit him. Finally. The horror of it. The reality.

“They *laughed* when he flinched. When he cried, they called him *unstable*. His room became a morgue. He used to pace at night, barefoot, just in case the glass balcony finally cracked and gave him *mercy*.”

I stepped even closer.

“And the day he finally climbed that railing, barefoot, rain pouring, nothing left- *that’s* when I stepped in. I couldn’t let him fall.”

I paused.

“That’s when you climbed up,” I said. “Onto the railing of your balcony.”

His breath hitched, just slightly. Like the memory wasn't distant enough to be dull.

"You didn't die, Mirari. But you would have. One more second. One more breath. One shift in the wind and you'd have been gone, if I wasn't there."

I didn't soften it. I wanted him to feel it.

"And I couldn't let that happen. *I couldn't let two Miraris disappear on the same night.*"

My voice dropped, quieter now. "So I gave you his life. In *return*. It's not because you were good in your past life or anything."

He didn't flinch. Not this time.

"Because as I say- only *you* have me. I've followed through timelines you don't even remember, through names that never reached your tongue. And this? This life?" I nodded once. "*This was the best thing I could've done for you.*"

A beat passed.

Then I added, dry as bone, "So- yeah. You're welcome."

He was zoned out. And very zoned out. "But didn't you say, I would live through Aehlla's eyes?" He looks up to mine, very delicately.

"And when did I say that Mirari didn't have the personality of your 'past' Aehlla? Haha" I let out an ugly laugh being so sure, he was smart enough to decode that himself. I was proud of myself. Clearly Mirari wasn't.

He was pacing again. Like his feet knew something his mind didn't. Restless, shaky steps scraping the floor in loops that never landed. I watched from the space I always do- the gap between memory and consequence, where karma keeps its stupid notebooks and lost bets. He needed to burn a little. Let the weight hang on his ribs a while. Mortals- always trying to scream the pain out instead of letting it rot quietly for a bit.

Then I said it. Maybe too casual. Maybe not enough.

"I have a surprise for you."

He stopped like I'd slapped him. His body stiff, face hard. Suspicion curled around his expression, like hope was trying to sneak in but he wasn't gonna let it. Not yet.

"Don't look at me like that," I muttered. "Not all surprises are weapons."

I rolled my shoulder, reached through the in-between, the tangle of timelines and soul-noise. It's not magic, not memory- it's older. Raw. Where the echoes live. Where grief never dies, it just rewrites itself.

And from that static, I pulled her forward.

Aehlla. But not the version anyone else remembered. This wasn't skin or heartbeat. It was something deeper. *Her karma. Her core.* Still her, down to the soft sadness behind her smile. The quiet way she used to blink when thinking too much. The way she held back everything just to make someone else feel lighter.

She didn't glow. Didn't float. She just- existed. A hum in the air. A knot in his ribs. Her presence was folding into the shape of him like it had always been part of his spine. She had his hoodie on- yeah, that old maroon one, the one she always "borrowed" and never gave back. Except now it didn't just hang off her shoulders; it moved like it remembered every time she pulled it tighter on bad nights. The sleeves still frayed, elbows worn thin, but somehow it looked- richer, like it was stitched with all the stuff you don't say out loud. Her pajama pants were the same stupid striped ones- clashing, familiar, and weirdly glowing around the hems, like karma itself couldn't make her match. Her hair? Half-up, messy, strands slipping everywhere. That lavender scrunchie barely held on, but glowing soft like it was holding more than just hair.

She didn't glow like light. She shone. She even smiled.

She glowed like a memory. Like something you never really forgot even when you tried. Something the universe didn't dare clean up.

She didn't just enter the space.

She *calibrated* it.

“She’s with you now,” I said. “Permanently. Soul to soul.”

He didn’t reply. Just touched his chest like he was trying to find proof beneath bone. Like he didn’t trust the silence not to betray him again. And when he finally breathed- it wasn’t relief. It was recognition. Like his lungs remembered how to inhale with her name tucked inside.

“I couldn’t bring her back,” I said, barely above a whisper. “But I could keep her close. She will always be close to you Rari.”

He stared at the place she wasn’t. Eyes wide, pupils blown. That quiet kind of broken where no sobs come out, just the weight of it pressing into your bones. He didn’t cry. Didn’t scream. Just stood there. And I could tell- he felt it.

She hadn’t left. Not really.

“We both are eternal now- *thanks to you*- and ‘soulmates’ so we’re gonna like, stay in your head, rent free.”

Because now, when he speaks, she answers in the pauses.

When he dreams, she presses close in the static.

And wherever he drags himself next, her tether follows. Not behind. Not lost.

Beside.

She’s not gone. She’s not separate.

We’re stitched together now. Quiet. Undeniable.

Karma doesn’t always punish.

Sometimes- it cheats death just a little. Just enough.

Sometimes, it gives you back the thing grief tried to eat alive.

Aehlla's karma / present

Pretty boy, now that I see him as Karma. Pretty lovable, but decisions, pretty fuckable. Now after 4 days I understand why Aehlla wanted to 'not give up' on this guy.

There's something magnetic about someone who's ruined and smug about it. Who wears guilt like jewelry, cracked knuckles like cufflinks, and still talks like he's the one doing you a favor by showing up. He walks like he owns every mistake he's ever made- and maybe that's what pulls you in. Not the prettiness. Not the tragic backstory. But the way he stands there, broken as hell, and dares you to look away.

I get it now.

Why she held on. Why did she look at him like he was in a war worth losing? It wasn't hope. It was belief.

In the worst version of someone.

And the impossible idea that maybe- just maybe- he'd become the best.

Even if it kills you.

They showed up around midday, Thursday. Clouds dragging their feet like the sky knew how much this place didn't need sunlight. The kind of day where even birds sound too polite to sing.

Mirari walked like someone who still thought grief had a finish line. Shoulders hunched. Palms stuffed into the front pocket of his hoodie like he might lose something if he let them fall to his sides. He had that crumpled paper in his hand. A letter. I could feel it from here. Like the ink itself ached.

Cecelia trailed behind him, sunglasses half-slipped off her head, hands jammed into her jacket like she had better places to be but couldn't quite let him go alone.

"Why am I *always* with you?" she muttered as they crunched past the rusted cemetery gate. "Oh my god, am I your babysitter now?"

Mirari didn't look at her. "Yeah. I'm gonna hire you. I just need your car, you dumbass."

She rolled her eyes, but I saw the corners of her mouth twitch. She cared. She just didn't like people knowing it.

They stopped at the stone. Her stone. The one with *my* name carved across it. Sharp and final.

Mirari stared at it like it might blink back.

He unfolded the letter, slow. Paper creased and softened like it had been held too long. His throat bobbed as he tried to swallow whatever he was about to say.

"I wrote something," he said, eyes never leaving the marble. "Figured- you might want to hear it."

Cecelia flopped against the next grave over. "God, you're so dramatic. Don't cry, okay? I forgot tissues."

He gave her a look. “You’re a menace.”

“And you’re an emotional unpaid internship.”

The loft cushiony smile faded and the glow in his eyes wore off. Then he looked back at the grave. At her. Sat his butt down. And read.

His voice cracked halfway through the second line.

hi.

i don't know how to start this, or if i even should, but i can't keep carrying this around without saying something.

it's my fault.

everything.

you're not here anymore, and it's because i wasn't enough. not brave enough. not loud enough. not- there when it mattered.

i should've called.

i should've listened harder.

i should've stopped assuming we had time.

but i didn't.

and now all i have is this grave and the weight of everything i never said.

i keep thinking maybe if i'd shown up earlier

if i'd held your hand tighter

if i'd loved you better, maybe you'd still be here.

maybe you wouldn't have had to carry so much alone.

but you did.

and i hate myself for that.

i know people keep saying it wasn't my fault. but they weren't there. they didn't hear your silence. they didn't see the way your smile faded before your face ever did.

i saw it.

and i still did nothing.

so yeah, this is on me.

i'm sorry. for being late.

for being scared.

for surviving when you didn't.

true that i don't always think about you, as sweet as the candy floss stuck in my teeth, but why don't i take a chance? there are no guarantees here. the playlists and letters written for you are useless now. i've come far enough to tell you that i've loved you.

even if you're not precious like diamonds or sweeter than honey, i'd still want you. i'll follow you till your graveyard. much more in a lifetime that i've affected someone. what's the point in loving you if i can't take your name if anyone asks what is love?

you're happiness basketed in a glow of warm rain on an afternoon of a summer.

drizzling down to just keep this a secret for the longest time. my mind couldn't comprehend the reason of loving you, but when it'll do, i'll promise you can still keep my hoodies. they do smell great to be honest.

the smell of wet mud after rain halts me, even though I would be drenching in it with your feelings floating in me.

maybe the next life I would be yours.

maybe the next life you wouldn't be mine.

but right now I want to wear you like a hug until I sleep with the rain in my window, smelling like you.

like diamonds and honey.

i love you.

i always will.

-mirari

Okay the things he didn't really tell are- He gets dreams, surreal, nightmares.

They crawl into him at night, no knock, no reason. Not mine. Not placed by divine hands or cursed design. These are all his. Dreamborn from the leftover

guilt he refuses to say out loud. I don't touch them, I don't need to. His mind does the damage just fine.

It begins the same every time. A suburb without identity- symmetrical houses lined like teeth, windows dark, lawns unnaturally still. No breeze, no sun. Just a light that hums without source, casting everything in a sterile yellow wash. Mirari walks through it like he's been here before, though he hasn't. His feet crunch on nothing, soundless. The silence is full- not empty, but crowded, like it's watching.

Then the change. Subtle. Sudden.

The curb fractures. Asphalt splits in hairline cracks, and the houses dissolve- not collapse, dissolve- like ash drifting upward. The sky stains itself in slow motion, bleeding from white to an impossible violet-orange haze. The air warms. Thickens. And beneath his feet, dirt replaces pavement. Dry. Cracked. Breathing.

From that earth, the sunflowers *rise*.

They don't bloom- they emerge. No stalks bending toward light, no sway. Just towering yellow faces staring straight ahead. Miles of them. Their black centers wide, like eyes mid-blink. Petals too golden, almost metallic. Nothing moves. They don't react to wind, because there is none. The field stretches to a horizon that shouldn't exist.

And there, in the dead center of it all- her.

Aehlla.

Still. Radiant. Barefoot, toes sunken slightly into soil that doesn't dirty her skin. She wears white- not the sterile white of a hospital, but something soft, moon-drenched. It floats around her like it's not made of fabric at all. Her hair spills behind her in waves, catching glints of silver as though stars are trapped inside it. Her eyes are open, wide but calm. And her smile- gentle. Peaceful. Like someone who has nothing left to forgive.

She does not move.

She does not speak.

She simply stands, framed by towering sunflowers, framed by stillness, framed by memory.

Mirari never reaches her. The ground won't let him. It expands with every step, stretching the distance no matter how far he walks. The light thickens. Time slows.

She smiles, and the dream ends. Always there.

Always just out of reach.

Then the world flicks off and on again.

Now he's on a moving bus. Metal groaning. No driver. Just him- alone. The glass beside him fogs, hums. He leans in to look. And what does he see? Makes his whole spine stiffen. There's a building. Towering. Aehlla stands at the top. Midday sun above- but the sky is inked in stars. Like the universe forgot what time it was. She's still. Balanced. Calm. She spreads her arms. And then, she falls. *No scream. No splatter. Just gone.* Dusted midair like she never had weight. And the bus just keeps going, like nothing happened. Like he didn't just watch her leave again.

These aren't my games. I didn't give him these.

I just sit back. Watch. Let the silence echo louder than punishment. Because sometimes, the worst sentence a soul can serve is one they wrote themselves.

Even after the emotional apocalypse he'd willingly waded through- screaming at skies, bleeding on terraces, cursing karma itself- he was, shockingly, okay now. Not "sunshine and morning coffee" okay, but the kind of okay where he could breathe without shattering. The dreams still showed up like uninvited houseguests- sunflower fields stretching into nowhere, her barefoot and glowing like some grief-drenched goddess, or her standing on rooftops with stars dancing behind her like the universe gave a shit- but he didn't flinch anymore. Not as much, anyway.

He'd written the letter. Brought it to her grave like some sad, modern Shakespeare. No theatrics. Just the truth, scribbled in ink and regret. The sky didn't split open. The earth didn't swallow him whole. The silence just sat there, smug and constant.

But this was it. This was the life he got. Not the happiest timeline, but the one where Aehlla had loved him the most. Not just once, not just halfway. The *most*. And wasn't that poetic tragedy at its finest? That the best version of love he'd ever get was tucked inside the messiest, bloodiest chapter of his story.

And still- he'd live it. Every damn page. Because if there was one thing he knew now, it was this: loving her had wrecked him, but being loved by her had saved him.

Mirari knelt beside the grave, fingers brushing the cold stone like it might still remember warmth, and whispered so low the earth had to lean in to hear- "*You died for me knowing I might not ever want you. What a love. I'll live for that.*"

He accepted his life here, totally, wrenchingly, but at least he *lives*. At least he *expresses*.

At least he knows what it means to ache and still show up, to carry her in the fold of every breath, to scream into the dark and still wake up the next morning.

At least he knows what it is to be chosen, even if just once, in a way that brands the soul.

At least he's no longer running from it- this heavy, furious, beautiful life.

It isn't what he asked for. It never will be.

But it's his.

And he's still *standing*.

Closure.

So this was it. Not some glowing threshold into eternity, no celestial harmonies swelling in the distance. Just- this. Apparently, she'd been handed the reins to her own pocket of consciousness- because somewhere along the line, someone decided she should be the one decorating her trauma. And of course, she built a garden. Orchids everywhere. Lavish, wild, unnecessarily dramatic. She never even liked orchids much. But still, they grew, bold and relentless, creeping over the ground like they were clawing back every version of herself that had once surrendered.

They didn't arrive quietly, either. At the fringes, bruised violets bloomed, stark and unafraid. Whites so bright they bordered on pain. Blues that mirrored old griefs, the kind she thought she'd buried long ago. And if she stood still long enough, she could swear some of them were humming. The air carried the scent of something intimate and unspoken, a page from a journal she never had the

guts to start. Damp earth, something sweet underneath, but always edged with something bitter. Like nostalgia with a blade tucked in.

And at the center of it all, because fate liked its jokes, stood her. Aehlla's karma. Poised at the apex of an arch woven from stems and blossoms, like something dreamed by a feverish mind. She wasn't glowing or floating. Just standing there, unnervingly still, wrapped in robes that caught the light like dusk trapped in silk. Her eyes fixed on the other woman, steady and patient, as if she'd been waiting since before the first clock ticked.

Her name slipped out. No ceremony, no whisper. Just a sound. The kind that carries the weight of years. Aehlla heard it, of course. She tilted her head, the way people do when they know everything you're about to say before you say it. Her expression said it all: You finally got it. Took you long enough.

Then she moved. And the orchids bowed. Not metaphorically- actually bowed. Petals curled, blooms parted, stems shifted to make space for her steps. Even here, in this self-made hallucination, she was still magic. Still revered. The woman couldn't move. Just stood there, frozen somewhere between awe and disbelief, watching the one soul she'd never stopped tripping over love walk toward her like it was just another morning.

When Mirari's karma reached her, she didn't speak. Neither of them did. The woman didn't know where to put her hands, so she did the only thing left, she reached out. Their fingers met in the space between. No dramatic pause. No trembling music. Just warmth. Immediate, undeniable. And suddenly, every prepared line, every grief-soaked confession she'd written in her head, fell away.

They weren't needed. Everything was already there, in the silence between heartbeats. The kind of quiet that's full, not hollow. Loaded with every near-miss, every unspoken truth, every touch that never quite landed. Mirari's karma looked at her- not like someone who'd left, not like a ghost, but like someone who was still, against all odds, choosing her.

And so they stood, in that ridiculous orchid jungle, with the sunrise curling over the horizon like an over-the-top film ending. Not forever. Just long

enough. Aehlla's karma folded into hers. Not above her. Not beyond. Beside her. Like that's where she'd always belonged.

She didn't cry. Not because she couldn't- but because, for once, the ache inside her had somewhere to go. No speeches came. No dramatic closure. Just one breath, deep and real, with Mirari's karma hand in hers. The kind of breath that says: *This is enough. You don't have to keep fighting.*

He smiled, and it hit her the same way it always had- except this time, it didn't break her. It mended something instead.

Behind them, the garden held. The sun kept rising. And the light curved in just the right way to suggest a truth that had been there all along:

They'd never really been gone. Just waiting.

And now- *finally*- they were here.

That's the beauty. We fall apart, and still, we find each other again.