

# ECHOES OF EIDOLON

—THE FRACTURED SPARK

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Stories Matter

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Thank you to my family for always supporting me, even  
in tough times. You guys are the stars of my world ☆

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# The World

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This world is divided into factions:

▮ **The Veil-bound (Aethergeist)** seekers who draw power from the self, evolving as their identity sharpens. Every battle changes them, every revelation awakens something new.

⚙️ **The Maonforge (Arcanetics)** scientists and innovators who bend the Elythos atoms flowing through the world. They turn science into sorcery, carving miracles from circuitry and theory.

🕒 **The Valkari (Divinar)** zealots and faithful, children of the Eight Gods. Their blood and belief shape miracles, their tattoos mark divine heritage, and their faith fuels fire, storm, and stone.

Factions. Three truths. Three ways to power.

At least, that is what everyone on the continent of **Eryndor** believes.

A land carved by war and faith, where every village bears a faction's sigil, and every child is tested to see where they belong.

But Eryndor's history is written in lies.

There are powers older than the factions. Older than the Eight.

And some truths were never meant to be found.

It began with the **Glitch Stone**.



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## The Glitch stone

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I'm what you'd call... ordinary.

At least, that's what I thought. An ordinary teenager, stuck between factions, not quite fitting into any. Oh yeah, I'm Zeon. My sister Zebbie was the same—we weren't blessed by the Valkari gods, nor gifted with Maonforge brilliance, nor awakened as Veil Bound. Just... normal.

And maybe that's why it chose us.

It started on a quiet night after dinner. I was dragging myself toward bed, still thinking about college and how I'd be leaving soon, when a sudden **flash of light** cut through the house.

No thunder. Not lamps. Just one sharp pulse, bleeding out from the basement.

Something in me froze. I wasn't expecting anything—but if it could hurt Zebbie, I had to know.

We crept downstairs together.

The basement air was colder than it should've been, heavy with static, like the air before lightning strikes. Shadows stretched too long across the walls, bending at wrong angles. We searched every corner—behind shelves, under crates, until Zebbie whispered:

“Zeon... here.”

She pointed under the floorboards.

That's where we saw it.

Not glowing. Not alive. **Glitching.**

A jagged shard, black and prismatic, pulsing like a broken hologram. Its edges bent reality around it—dust warped, wood trembled, light stuttered. It didn't belong. Not in our basement. Not in this world.

**The Glitch Stone.**

I don't know why I touched it. Curiosity. Recklessness. Or maybe... it wanted me to.

Instantly, my fingers brushed the surface, and **everything broke.**

A storm detonated inside my mind. Images, languages, memories, equations. Maps of worlds I'd never seen. Faces of people who'd never lived. Galaxies collapsing, time looping, futures unraveling.

Not just Earth. Not just Eryndor's.

The entire universe—every star, every law of existence—downloaded into me in a single breath.

And then—just as suddenly—it was gone.

I collapsed, clutching my head, gasping. The basement looked the same, but it *wasn't*. It felt thinner, fragile, as if the world itself were cracking.

That's when I realized—

**Time had stopped.**

Zebbie was frozen mid-step, her hand reaching for me, her mouth open in a soundless gasp. Dust hung motionless in the air, frozen like constellations trapped in glass. Even the hum of the old pipes had vanished.

And then I heard it.

A voice.

Not loud. Not clear. Just a whisper, threading through silence.

*“Help me escape... or everything you hold dear will vanish before your eyes.”*

My heart pounded.

What did it mean?

What was trapped?

And why did it feel like it was speaking to me?

I didn’t have any answers. But I knew one thing: Whatever this was—it wasn’t just about me anymore.

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## The Fracture appears

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Whatever that thing was, I didn't care.

If it threatened my family—if it threatened Zebbie—  
I was ready to fight, even if it meant dying here tonight.

The instant I made that choice, time snapped back.

Zebbie's voice spilled into the silence, panicked and sharp. The storm outside howled, thunder shattering the night like cannon fire, wind clawing at the windows. But I barely heard her. My mind was stuck on the whisper, on the glitching stone, on the voice that promised destruction.

**Time. Power. Imprisonment.**

Who could cage something that strong?  
And why had it chosen me?

Then it hit me.

The world itself felt... *different*.

My pulse roared in my ears, but underneath it I heard things I shouldn't—the faint wingbeats of a moth outside, the metallic hum of streetlights three blocks away, the whisper of rain sliding down shingles across the street.

The air tasted different. Sharper. My vision cut through the storm, through the night, like the world had shed a veil.

I hadn't just changed.

I had **Awakened**.

And then—

A sound.

No thunder. No wind. Heavier. Faster.

Something running.

Before I could react, it was already here.

“Duck!” I shouted, shoving Zebbie to the floor as the shadow slammed into the basement with bone-rattling force.

I shoved the Glitchstone in my pocket.

(I thought I might need it, and it was useful...)

The floor shuddered beneath us. Dust rained from the ceiling.

I looked up—

And froze.

It was wrong. All wrong.

Its body bent in ways that broke nature itself, joints jerking backward, limbs twitching in uneven spasms. Its skin flickered with static, patches of it vanishing and reappearing like a broken projection. Its face—if you could even call it that—was smeared, distorted, half-erased.

### **A Fragment.**

I didn't know the name then, but my gut did.

This was something that wasn't supposed to exist.

It twitched closer, glitching forward in jerks. And then—

It pounced.

I shoved Zebbie clear and rolled sideways. My body moved faster than my mind could track, instincts screaming in perfect rhythm.

Adrenaline flooded me, but so did something else—*Will*.

The Fragment shrieked, a static scream that stabbed my skull like needles. Its claws ripped gouges on the floor where I'd stood seconds earlier. Sparks of warped reality sprayed from its touch, edges bending like the world itself was unraveling.

"Come here," I spat, bracing with the first weapon I found—an old broom handle, snapped against the wall into a jagged staff.

(Okay, yeah. It sounded cooler in my head. Out loud? Not so much.)

The Fragment lunged again, claws slicing through the air. I ducked under and jabbed hard into its ribs. The wood connected for a heartbeat—then slid through, the Fragment's body flickering intangible.

"Oh, come on. That's just unfair," I muttered.

It screeched louder, reality warping around the sound. My vision split at the edges, the world fracturing like broken glass. I stumbled—then something ignited inside me.

Strength.

Will.

Something deeper than fear.

The Fragment lunged again.

This time, I didn't dodge.

I met it head-on.

The blow knocked me back into the wall, wood splintering, my lungs crushed. By all logic, I should have died. Instead—

I surged back to my feet. Stronger. Faster.

I roared, charging. My strike landed solid this time, shoving it back. Sparks of broken space flared where my fists connected.

But it adapted.

It flickered, dodged, and slashed across my back. Pain burned. My legs faltered. I was cornered.

I couldn't protect Zebbie like this.

Another strike came—jagged, lethal. I leapt backward, then sprang forward, ramming it hard enough to stagger it.

“Run! Go!” I screamed at Zebbie.

She hesitated—then bolted, sprinting for the woods.

I followed, heart hammering, lungs burning, glancing back with every step. The Fragment twitched after us, glitching forward in bursts—but then it stopped, flickering violently, retreating into the storm.

We ran for what felt like hours. No food. No water. No supplies. Lost, breathless, broken.

But alive.

Finally, in the pitch-black forest, we collapsed.

I laughed through ragged breaths.

“We’re safe. I think...”

I glanced at Zebbie, her face pale in the Storm light.

(Then again, we were lost, starving, and probably doomed.

But hey—at least I wasn’t bored anymore.)

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## Awakening the Eidolon

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After that night—the storm, the Fragment, the whisper—I thought nothing could surprise me anymore.

I was wrong.

We had been wandering for days, starving, lost, and running on fumes. My legs burned with every step, but at the same time... they didn't. Ever since I touched that glitching stone in the basement, I wasn't the same anymore. I was faster, sharper, stronger.

Too strong for an ordinary teenager.

"Zeon!" Zebbie's voice cut through my spiraling thoughts. "I see something—up ahead!"

"What is it?" I called, jogging to catch up.

"A village—I think!"

Hope flared in my chest. "Ok! Coming!"

I sprinted toward her, feet pounding the earth harder and faster than I ever remember moving. By the time I stopped, nearly colliding into her, I was already breathless. But not from exhaustion. From disbelief.

She hadn't been wrong.

It *was* a village.

Or what was left of one.

Ashes. Charred walls. Doors burned into black husks. A hollow silence clung to the ruins like fog, broken only by the groan of broken beams swaying in the wind.

It wasn't just destroyed. It was erased.

We searched desperately through the wreckage for food, but it was hopeless. Every home was hollow, every corner empty. Until, in the very heart of the ruin, we found it—

### **The Pantheon.**

A cathedral so massive it seemed to defy the destruction around it. Its stone walls were cracked but unbroken, its towering roof fractured by a jagged scar that let thin streams of light spill into the shadows. Curtains hung in tatters from their sides. And at its heart, rising over us, stood **eight colossal statues.**

### **The Eight Gods.**

Even I knew their faces—sculpted in divine perfection, staring down with silent judgment. People across the continent had lived and died for them. Belief in the Eight gave soldiers strength, gave desperate hope, gave kings their crowns.

And yet here they stood, looming over an empty ruin. Silent. Cold. Watching.

My breath caught. My chest tightened.

Because in the center of the Pantheon—  
Between the feet of gods who had ruled for centuries—  
There was a sword.

## A katana.

Its sheath was simple, unadorned. But it shimmered faintly, as if light bent differently around it. While everything else in this hall was coated in ash and dust, the katana was untouched. Waiting.

And when my eyes met it... something inside me *shifted*.

The same pull as the glitch stone.

The same whisper of power that wasn't supposed to exist.

It felt alive.

It felt like it knew me.

I took a step closer, the air tightening like a held breath.

"Zeon?" Zebbie whispered, uneasy. "What... is that?"

I didn't answer. Because I didn't know.

But somehow, I did.

This wasn't just a weapon. It was a key.

And as my hand reached out—trembling, reckless, I realized the truth:

This wasn't the beginning of survival.

This was the beginning of something else entirely.

The awakening of an **Eidolon**.

Even though at the time I didn't know what I was, I knew the moment I touched that sword, I could not turn back to what I was turning into...

Regardless, I held the **katana**; it felt exactly right for my weight. I unsheathed it, expecting a rusted and

unusable sword, but what I found was a perfectly usable sword, so sharp you could cut paper clean with it.

Then I could hear it...

The **creature** was still following us.

I could hear it from afar.

But...

This time, I was prepared; I had a weapon, and I felt more powerful than ever before. If I couldn't defeat it now, then I never would.

While I was waiting for it, I asked Zebbie to move to a small corner where she couldn't get hurt.

Then I waited.

Until it finally arrived.

I saw it; the monster where time bends around it and space doesn't exist for it. The abomination in front of me was probably 100x stronger than me, but I went for it anyway.

(Well, safe to say that was pretty accurate)

As soon as I unsheathed my sword, it lunged. I dodged the strike, then the pillar behind me was vaporized into dust instantly.

Then I dashed towards it and struck the side of it. I landed it a solid hit! Then, as if it heard my thoughts and was angry, it hit me back! I flew to the side and hit the feet of one of the gods.

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## Kairo the Forgotten Faith

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Then—out of nowhere—a figure dropped into view, landing between us and the Fragment.

He wore the robes of a Pantheon devotee, but they weren't like any I had ever seen. Torn, faded, etched with runes I didn't recognize. His presence felt heavy, like the air itself bent around him. I couldn't even tell which god he served... or if he served any at all.

“Hey,” his voice cut sharply, steady—too calm for the chaos we were in. His eyes locked on the monstrosity, not me. “Back off.”

Before I could react, his hand moved.

The world erupted.

A storm of glowing threads—light woven into weapons—burst from his fingertips, striking the Fragment with blinding precision. Each strand carved through the glitching form, leaving trails of searing brilliance in the dark. The air crackled with divine resonance and something else... something I couldn't name.

The Fragment shrieked, static warping into a sound that rattled my bones—  
And then, just like that, it was gone.

The light faded. The silence returned.

And the stranger stood there, calm as if he hadn't just erased a nightmare with nothing but his will.

"Hey. I'm Kairo," said the stranger at last, his tone casual—like he hadn't just erased a nightmare with a flick of his wrist.

Zebbie peeked out from the corner where I'd pushed her, her voice trembling but sharp.

"WHAT *are* you?" she demanded.

Kairo tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

She stepped closer, eyes wide. "How did you defeat that monster with just... a *flick of your wrist*?"

Kairo gave a half-smile, almost smug. "Oh, that? Simple. I created my own style of magic. It taps into the divinity of the Pantheon... but in ways they don't exactly approve of."

Then, suddenly, his gaze snapped to me. "Hey, *you*."

I stiffened. "What?"

"Come here," he said, squinting as if he were seeing straight through me. "Your aura... It's strange. Like it's not bound to one path. It feels like... all three factions at once."

"All three?" I frowned.

His eyes widened slightly, then a grin tugged at his lips.

"Wait. Don't tell me... are you an *Echoborn*?"

"What's that?" I spat, more defensive than curious.

Kairo laughed—an amused, disbelieving sound. “You *seriously* don’t know? Unbelievable.” He shook his head. “Okay, listen up. An Echoborn is a myth—someone who carries the essence of all three factions. Aethergeist, Arcanetics, Divinar. Balanced together. People like that aren’t supposed to exist... but they say Echoborn also awaken unique powers tied to themselves alone.”

I stared at him, my chest tightening. “...And why would you think *I*’m one of them?”

Kairo’s laugh echoed as he turned away, brushing some dust off his cloak like nothing had happened. “Forget I said anything,” he muttered, clearly enjoying the fact that he’d dropped a mystery and left us dangling.

Zebbie tugged my arm hard the moment his back was turned. “Zeon. We *cannot* trust him.”

Her voice was low but urgent, the kind she used when she wanted me to stop pretending everything was fine.

I frowned. “He saved us.”

“Yeah, by casually *obliterating* something that nearly killed you!” Zebbie hissed. “You saw it—he didn’t even *try*. That kind of power... It’s dangerous. He’s dangerous.”

I glanced over at Kairo, who was now leaning lazily against one of the cracked statues of the Pantheon like he owned the place. His eyes flicked toward us, amused, like he *knew* exactly what we were whispering about.

Dangerous. Yeah. But also... fascinating.

Because for a moment—when he'd looked at me, when he'd said that word *Echoborn*—it was like someone had torn a hole open inside me, showing me a glimpse of something I didn't understand yet. Something that felt like the truth.

I swallowed hard. "Zebbie... what if he's right?"

She froze. "What do you mean?"

"What if... I *am* something different?" My voice came out quieter than I meant it to. "What if that's why the stone reacted to me? Why did I feel time break? Why can I suddenly... hear, see, *feel* more than before?"

Zebbie's eyes softened, but her jaw tightened. She reached up, gripping my shoulder. "Zeon. I don't care what you are. You're my brother. And whatever this Echoborn thing is, whatever Kairo thinks you are—it doesn't change that."

I nodded, her words steadying me. But still...

When I looked back at Kairo, I knew.

He wasn't just some stranger. He was a thread in this whole unraveling mystery.

And whether we trusted him or not, our paths were tied now.

"Oh yeah, I didn't catch your name," said Kairo as we were walking along, his tone light but his eyes still sharp, always watching.

"Oh," I answered, a little wary. "My name's Zeon. And this is my sister, Zebbie."

Kairo tilted his head, gaze flicking briefly to her. “Makes sense. She has a similar aura to you—just fainter.”

“Wait, what?!?” I blurted, stopping in my tracks.

He smirked. “Yeah. I realized you two were siblings the moment I saw your auras.”

I frowned. “What even is an aura?”

Kairo didn’t stop walking. He spoke casually, like explaining something obvious to a child. “Aura is... a resonance. I use the divinity of the Pantheon, channel it into my eyes. Let’s see the core of someone—their potential, their nature, the outline of who they are and who they *could* become.”

My stomach twisted. “So, basically... Can you read someone in the blink of an eye?”

“Exactly,” he said, glancing over his shoulder with a cocky grin. “Personality, drive, strength, even flaws. It’s all written there if you know how to look.”

Zebbie tensed, her hands curling into fists. “That’s... invasive.”

Kairo chuckled. “Relax. Most people’s auras are boring. Like gray smoke, faint flames, dull sparks. But yours?” His eyes lingered on me again, sharper now. “Yours is different. Wrong, even. A mix that shouldn’t exist.”

My mouth went dry. “And that means...?”

He shrugged, like it didn't matter—but the grin on his face told me he *knew* it did. "It means you're interesting. And I like it."

Zebbie muttered under her breath. "Great. Just what we needed. A creep who stares at us like we're experiments."

I ignored her, heart pounding. Because a part of me *wanted* to know.

What did Kairo see in me?

And why did it feel like the answer would change everything?

"How did this village get... decimated?" I asked, staring at the ruins. Shattered homes, broken streets, lifeless statues of the Eight—all swallowed by silence.

Kairo didn't answer right away. His gaze lingered on the rubble like it was alive, like it still screamed at him. When he finally spoke, his voice was low.

"We were peaceful. We didn't fight in wars, didn't swear oaths to armies. The only magic we used was for survival—against mana-beasts, against the wild. We never sought blood." His hands trembled, then curled into fists. "But then the Arcanetics came. Not just soldiers—machines wearing men. Circuits glowing with stolen Elythos, weapons that cut through miracles like they were smoke. They swept through us like fire."

"But..." I hesitated. "You're strong. So strong now. How did you—how did no one—"

“I wasn’t this strong then,” Kairo cut in sharply. His eyes burned, but his tone cracked. “I was nothing. A failure. I had no gifts, no spark. Couldn’t even conjure a flame. The Pantheon didn’t look at people like me. They only blessed the worthy.”

His breath hitched. “Except him.”

“Who?” Zebbie asked gently.

Kairo’s jaw tightened, but the fire in his eyes flickered into something softer. “My best friend. He was brilliant. Saw the hypocrisy in it all—that power was locked behind bloodlines, gods, and fate. He wanted to tear those barriers down. To make a system where anyone—chosen or not—could touch the divine. He called it... the ‘Universal Code.’”

“The Universal Code...” I repeated.

Kairo nodded. “He worked day and night, bending Elythos, carving runes that *breathed*, shaping miracles from scraps of science and faith. He believed that power should never be hoarded by the Pantheon or the factions. He believed... it should belong to everyone.”

He swallowed, voice breaking. “The night the army came, he stood against them. Alone. One boy and his unfinished dream, holding back an entire legion. He saved lives... but lost his own.”

A silence heavier than stone settled over us.

I finally asked, “So this power you use—”

Kairo's eyes snapped back to mine, burning with pride and grief. "It's his. His system. His legacy. I swore I'd finish what he started. I rewrote his runes, fused them with my faith, carved them into my soul until I bled." He raised his hand, golden lines glowing faintly across his skin like living scripture. "This magic—this system—doesn't belong to the gods. It doesn't belong to the factions. It belongs to me. To him. To everyone, the Pantheon has abandoned."

For a moment, I almost believed him.

But something stirred deep inside me. A memory of the whisper in the Glitch Stone. The same... rhythm. The same resonance.

Little did I know the "Universal Code" wasn't just an invention. It was an **echo**.

An echo of the **Forgotten**.

"Wait a second," I asked, still catching my breath, "what was that creature you destroyed?"

Kairo shrugged, eyes narrowing at the empty air where the Fragment had vanished. "That... even I don't know. It didn't belong here. Not to this world, not to this universe. But it was a threat. So I killed it."

I blinked. "Hold up—you're telling me even the *almighty* Kairo doesn't know everything? Oh my god!"

Zebbie smirked, covering her mouth as if she'd just dropped the greatest joke in history.

Kairo rolled his eyes but allowed himself the faintest smirk. “Yes, yes. Believe it or not, I am not all-knowing. Even though it may *seem* that way.”

“Wow, humble too,” Zebbie teased.

Kairo waved her off and stood taller, suddenly serious again. “Jokes aside—we can’t stay here. This place is dangerous, crawling with echoes of death and ruin. I know a shelter nearby. We’ll rest there for the night. After that...” He paused, looking toward the horizon. “We’ll keep moving. I don’t have a destination yet—but I needed to leave this village anyway. So whatever direction we take, it doesn’t matter. Forward is enough.”

“Uh-huh. And since when did you become *boss*?” I asked, crossing my arms.

Kairo turned, his grin sharp, almost cocky. “Since I know more about this world than you two combined. Obviously, that makes me the leader.”

Zebbie tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Good point. You’re hired.”

“Hey!” I protested.

“Sorry, Zeon,” she said with a grin. “Majority vote. Leader privileges officially granted.”

Kairo chuckled, already walking ahead. “See? The universe agrees with me.”

I muttered under my breath, “Yeah, well... the universe is rigged.”

We started trekking through the mountains, hoping to find shelter before nightfall.

“It won’t be safe in the night,” clarified Kairo

“Well, yeah, that makes sense.” My sister replied

We started trekking through the jagged mountain path, the air turning colder with every step. The rocks were sharp underfoot, and the wind howled through the cliffs like some ancient beast warning us to turn back. My muscles burned, but somehow, I barely felt tired—my body still buzzing with that strange surge of strength since the basement.

“It won’t be safe at night,” Kairo said firmly, scanning the darkening sky as though he’d seen this story play out before. His tone left no room for argument.

“Well, yeah... that makes sense,” Zebbie muttered, pulling her jacket tighter against the wind.

We pressed on until the trees thickened around us, a forest swallowing the trail. The last rays of sunlight flickered through the branches, stretching shadows across the ground. Just when I thought we’d have to make camp in the open, we stumbled upon it—a small, crooked house tucked between the trees.

The place looked abandoned. The shutters hung loose, half-broken, and moss crept up the walls like fingers reclaiming the structure. But inside... it was strangely intact. The floor creaked under our weight, and the air carried a faint smell of smoked wood and ash, like someone had once lived here, once cooked here.

For a moment, I swore the fireplace still glowed faintly, but when I blinked, it was dark again.

“Ok,” Kairo announced after a quick inspection, “this seems safe enough for the night. We’ll rest here and continue tomorrow.”

“Safe enough,” Zebbie repeated skeptically, eyeing the shadows in the corners.

She turned to him. “Do you have anything with you?”

Kairo dropped his pack on the ground, pulling it open with a smirk. “Yeah. I came prepared. Three sleeping bags, one tent, a small hunting knife, and food. Enough to last us two, maybe three days. After that, we’ll need to start hunting.”

Zebbie raised a brow. “You carry *all* that?”

He smirked again, like it was obvious. “Survival rule one—expect the worst.”

I hesitated before speaking, my voice quieter than I expected. “Kairo... can you teach me? How to use these abilities? My strength, my speed—it’s overwhelming. I don’t know how to control it.”

Kairo looked at me for a long moment, studying me with that unnerving aura-vision of his. Finally, he nodded. “Sure. But not tonight. You’ll need a clear head, and right now, you’re rattled.”

He laid out the sleeping bags on the creaky wooden floor. “Tomorrow, we start. For now—we sleep.”

The three of us settled into the dark, the crackling  
silence of the abandoned house pressing in on all sides.  
And though my body lay still, my mind churned.

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## Rivfa the Arcanetic

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The next morning, the forest was alive with the sounds of birds. Birds called through the mist, insects hummed, and the air was thick with the earthy scent of pine and damp soil.

Kairo handed me my katana—the one I’d taken from the Pantheon ruins. “First rule of survival,” he said, his voice calm but sharp, “your body might be strong, but strength is nothing without discipline. You’ve got speed, reflexes, and raw power now... but if you swing wildly, you’ll just exhaust yourself—or worse, get killed.”

We walked deeper into the woods. Kairo’s eyes scanned the ground, the trees, the faint breaks in the undergrowth. “Lesson one: awareness. The world *talks*, Zeon. The snap of a twig, the bend of grass, the staleness of air—it all tells you something. Prey. Predator. Danger. Listen before you act.”

For hours, he made me walk silently, pointing out tracks I would have missed, showing me how to smell for musk in the air, how to test the wind with a pinch of dirt. I stumbled often, crashing through leaves, but slowly... I began to hear what he heard.

“Lesson two: patience. Never chase unless you know you’ll catch it. Let the prey make the first move. When it thinks it’s safe—that’s when you strike.”

That night, we camped under the stars. Kairo sharpened his knife by the fire. “Lesson three: respect the hunt. You don’t kill for sport. You kill to live. You kill clean, or not at all.”

Days passed. My body adjusted. My senses sharpened. I learned to move quietly, to wait in stillness until every muscle burned. And then—finally—the chance came.

A boar.

It burst from the underbrush, tusks glinting, foam at its mouth. Its body was massive, easily three times my weight, its eyes wild with fury.

The old me—the ordinary teenager, would’ve frozen. But not now.

The boar charged.

I remembered Kairo’s voice: *Don’t meet force with force. Flow around it. Let it reveal the opening.*

The ground shook as it barreled toward me. At the last second, I shifted sideways—fluid, almost instinctual—and raised the katana.

One clean motion.

The blade cut across its abdomen in a perfect arc, faster than my eyes could even follow. The boar staggered, collapsed, and lay still.

My chest heaved. My hands trembled. Not from fear—but from the realization that I had done it.

Kairo approached, his expression unreadable. Then, for the first time since we met, he smiled faintly.

“Lesson four,” he said, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Trust yourself. The weapon is just an extension of your will. The moment you hesitate, you lose. But the moment you *believe*—you win.”

I looked down at the katana, its edge gleaming in the fading light.

It wasn’t just a blade anymore. It was part of me.

We had been wandering for days, following faint trails that twisted through valleys and jagged cliffs. The forest gave way to barren stone, and soon we found ourselves standing before something strange—something *ancient*.

The ground was littered with shattered metal plates, half-buried gears, and glowing fragments of crystal. The air thrummed with static, like the leftover hum of a storm that had never ended. And in the center of it all... a tower.

Tall. Rusted. Covered in runes and strange inscriptions that pulsed faintly with blue light. Its top was broken, jagged like a snapped bone, but even in ruin it radiated power.

“A... structure,” whispered Kairo. His usual confidence was gone, replaced with awe. “This is... Arcanetic.”

Zebbie stepped forward, her eyes wide. “So this is what their magic looks like...”

As we entered the crumbling tower, I could feel the walls vibrating with some kind of energy. Strange, shifting diagrams flickered across the stones—half math, half language, like equations etched into reality itself.

Then, suddenly—movement.

A figure stepped out from behind a broken console. A girl, about our age, with oil stains smeared across her hands and sleeves. Her eyes gleamed like polished steel, and in them danced a brilliance I had never seen before. She looked... alive with discovery.

“Oh, finally,” she muttered, dusting herself off as if we were expected. “I was wondering when someone would trip the outer sensors.”

We froze.

She smirked. “Name’s Rivka Aerin. And you’re standing in my lab. Well... what’s left of it.”

“Your... lab?” I asked.

“Technically, it belonged to the Arcanetics centuries ago,” she explained, her voice quick, sharp, and filled with energy. “But it’s abandoned now. The others don’t understand what this place *is*. They think it’s just ruins. They don’t *see* the code written into the stone. The Universal Code is a theory—this is its foundation.”

Zebbie stepped forward, hopeful. “Do you... know magic? The kind of Arcanetics use?”

Rivka raised an eyebrow. “Magic?” She scoffed. “That’s not magic. It’s science. It’s math. It’s rewriting the particles that hold the world together.” She snapped her fingers, and a glyph of glowing circuitry appeared in the air, spinning like a miniature galaxy. “This is Arcanetics. And if you’re asking if I can teach you—yes.

But only if you're willing to unlearn everything you think you know."

Her words hung in the air, heavy with promise.

I looked at Zebbie, and for the first time since this journey began, I saw hope in her eyes.

This girl—Rivka—wasn't just another traveler. She was the missing piece.

"Well then, let's start with the basics." Rivka's boots clicked against the stone floor as she strode confidently ahead, her coat brushing against the walls of the ancient ruin. Her voice carried that sharp, matter-of-fact tone she always had when she was teaching.

"The 'magic' we Arcanetics use isn't like the devotion of the Divinar, nor the self-discovery of the Aethergeist. Ours is... precise. Scientific." She held out her hand, fingers curling as faint blue glyphs shimmered in the air. "We harness the very particles of mana that float unseen in everything—atoms of power called **Elythos**. By altering their composition, we don't beg the gods for fire or pray for storms—we *build* them. Fire tornadoes, water spheres, gravity wells... all of it comes down to rewriting matter's equation."

She turned to Zebbie, her sharp green eyes narrowing. "To start, you'll need to sense the Elythium in the air. That usually takes meditation—fifteen minutes a day, every day, for three to four weeks. After that, you'll see them—glimmering motes of power in the air."

“Three to four weeks!?” Zebbie blurted, throwing her arms up. “I don’t *have* three to four weeks!”

Rivka arched a brow. “If you want it faster, there is another way... but it’s dangerous. Dangerous enough, I wouldn’t recommend it unless you’re truly desperate.”

“I *want* to use science magic *now*,” Zebbie insisted, her stubbornness flaring like a flame.

Rivka sighed, folding her arms. “Then your brother gets a say. I don’t gamble with other people’s lives without their consent.” She turned her gaze toward me. “So, Zeon. What’ll it be?”

I felt my chest tighten. “On a scale of one to ten, with ten being guaranteed death... how dangerous?”

Rivka thought for a moment, muttering half to herself as she calculated. Then she answered: “Five... maybe seven. Depends on how strong her mind is. If her focus cracks, the backlash could scramble her nervous system.”

I swallowed hard. Zebbie stood beside me, eyes locked on mine, fiery determination written all over her face. I sighed. “Okay. But if anything goes wrong—”

“—I’ll take responsibility,” Rivka finished, nodding once. “Come. Both of you.”

She led us deeper into the ruins. The corridors tightened, the air thick with dust and faint static. The walls were etched with half-broken symbols glowing faintly blue, as if remembering a time when this place thrummed with power.

Finally, we entered a circular chamber. The room was lined with cracked stone pillars, each carved with jagged glyphs. The floor was marked by an intricate circle of runes—thousands of lines and curves overlapping like a giant, alien circuit. Some glowed faintly, others flickered like dying stars.

“This is an **Arcanetic Conduction Chamber**,” Rivka explained, her voice quieter now, almost reverent. “Ancient Arcanetics used this to awaken their initiates to the flow of Elythium. Most of these rooms are lost to time... but this one is still functional.”

As she stepped forward, the markings on the floor began to respond. One by one, faint lines of light crawled across the stone, sketching the circle alive with eerie illumination. The whole chamber began to hum, like a great machine awakening after centuries of silence.

I shivered. The air vibrated against my skin. Zebbie clenched her fists, her eyes wide with awe.

Rivka extended her hand toward the glowing circle. “Step inside. The chamber will tear away the veil between your mind and the Elythos. If you’re strong enough, you’ll emerge awakened. If not...”

Her words trailed off, but the silence said enough.

Zebbie swallowed, then looked at me. I could see it in her eyes—fear, yes, but also unshakable resolve.

She stepped forward into the circle.

The glyphs flared instantly, bathing her in a cascade of pale-blue light. The hum became a roar, filling the room until I thought my bones would rattle apart. The air around her shimmered, bending like heat haze, as if reality itself was struggling to hold together.

I clenched my fists, forcing myself not to run to her. Rivka's arm barred me anyway, her face grim. "She has to do this alone," she murmured.

Zebbie let out a sharp gasp, her body tensing as sparks of Elythium swirled around her. Then—she screamed as the chamber flared like a star, swallowing her in pure, blinding light.

Zebbie's scream echoed through the chamber as the circle blazed with light. The ground shook beneath us, dust spilling from the cracked ceiling, and every rune on the walls flared awake.

Her body convulsed, lifted slightly off the ground, as ribbons of blue light coiled around her like serpents of lightning. Her eyes flew open—glowing, as if stars had been pressed into them.

"Zebbie!" I shouted, trying to push past Rivka.

"Wait!" Rivka snapped, her arm still barring me. "Look."

I froze.

The ribbons weren't hurting her—they were *entering* her, threading into her skin, her veins, her breath. Her scream turned into a ragged gasp, then... into silence.

Her chest rose and fell slowly.

And then—she whispered.

“I can see them.”

Her voice was dazed, distant, but clear.

Her gaze lifted upward, scanning the air as if the room itself had peeled back to show her something hidden. Her glowing eyes tracked invisible motes, her fingers twitching as if she were tracing patterns in the air.

“They’re everywhere... little sparks, little atoms, glowing like fireflies. So many... so *alive*...”

The circle pulsed again, and the motes she spoke of began to manifest faintly, visible even to me—tiny pinpricks of light swirling like dust motes in sunlight, only sharper, more vibrant, like fragments of a shattered constellation.

“Elythos,” Rivka said softly. “She sees them.”

Zebbie raised her hand instinctively. A cluster of those motes gathered at her palm, trembling with potential. She gasped as they flared, reshaping themselves under her will—at first a ripple, then a flicker of flame.

The fire sputtered and vanished, but the shock in her eyes told me enough.

“I... I did that,” she whispered.

The circle dimmed, its work complete. The light drained from the walls, leaving only a faint hum in the air. Zebbie staggered, collapsing forward—straight into my arms.

She was trembling, sweat dripping down her forehead, but her smile was brighter than I'd ever seen.

"I did it, Zeon," she said breathlessly. "I can *use* it. I can use science magic."

Rivka stepped closer, her expression equal parts awe and caution.

"You didn't just awaken," she said quietly. "You bent Elythos to your will on your first attempt. Most initiates take months before they can form even a spark. Your resonance with them... It's unnaturally strong."

Zebbie chuckled weakly, pressing her face against my shoulder.

"Guess I'm just talented."

Rivka's eyes flicked to me, something calculating in them.

"Or," she muttered, almost to herself, "maybe it's something else entirely."

I ignored her tone. All I cared about was that my sister was alive.

By now, the ruins had become more than just shelter—they felt like a base. The cracked walls and glowing runes hummed faintly at night, like the echoes of something ancient still watching over us. It was eerie, but also... comforting.

In the evenings, Kairo and I would head out into the woods together, hunting for whatever game we could find to keep us alive. The forest was thick and

shadowed, branches clawing at the fading light, but with my sharpened senses, tracking had become second nature. Kairo would bark pointers as we moved—where to step, how to read the broken brush, how to breathe without spooking prey.

Meanwhile, back at the ruins, Zebbie's progress with Rivka had been nothing short of unbelievable. Where most students would still be meditating, struggling to even *see* Elythos, Zebbie was already weaving them into sparks and streams of light. Each night, when we returned with food, she greeted us with some new trick—tiny whirlwinds, bursts of flame, shimmering ripples in the air. Rivka tried to hide her shock, but I could tell. My sister was progressing faster than anyone had a right to.

For the first time since all this madness started, things felt... good. We had food. We had shelter. We had allies.

For a moment, it almost felt like we weren't just running anymore.

Almost.

Until all hell broke loose...

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## The First trial

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The forest was silent except for the crunch of our boots against damp leaves. Kairo crouched low, motioning for me to follow. We were tracking a deer—my first real hunt.

“Patience,” Kairo whispered, eyes sharp as a hawk. “A predator doesn’t chase. It waits. You let the prey give you the opening.”

I nodded, gripping the hilt of the katana strapped to my side. My pulse raced, though not from the hunt. Ever since the basement... ever since the stone... something inside me hadn’t been the same. The air itself seemed sharper, like my senses were tuned to a frequency I wasn’t meant to hear.

The deer moved through the clearing, its ears twitching. Kairo raised a hand to signal me forward. My legs coiled like springs, every muscle tense.

And then—

The world stopped.

The sound of the wind died. The forest froze. Even Kairo, mid-motion, hung in place like a paused image. My breath echoed too loudly in the silence.

And then I saw a city skyline. Older me, sitting in a dim apartment. Papers scattered, my eyes hollow. No Zebbie. She was gone.

The weight of regret crushed me, heavier than any blade.

*"If you do nothing, you'll lose everything."* The whisper curled like smoke through my skull.

Then another one hit like a truck, A battlefield. Flames tore across the land. Bodies—glitching, twisted, scattered at my feet.

I stood at the center, katana dripping with light that burned too bright, too wrong.

Zebbie's eyes—fearful, broken—looked at me like I was the monster.

*"If you take too much, you'll lose yourself."*

Then I could feel myself losing consciousness, but then another came in: Darkness. Not night—void. A cosmic sea of collapsing stars.

Chains stretched across infinity, binding a figure made of starlight and static. A presence so vast it shook me apart just to look at it.

The whisper came again, this time not faint but roaring:

*"You are my blood. My heir. Break the chains—or fade into silence."*

The chains cracked. The void shattered.

Then, at the end of it all, I saw a temple broken and ruined, but it still had a mysterious aura to it, like it wanted me to visit it and have a chat over a cup of tea, but at the same time, it would kill me if I dared to.

I collapsed to my knees, gasping. The deer was long gone. The forest rushed back in the wind, branches, the hum of insects.

“Zeon!” Kairo was already beside me, gripping my shoulder. “What the hell was that? Your aura just spiked off the charts.”

Zebbie came crashing through the underbrush, Rivka right behind her. Both froze when they saw me pale and shaking.

I explained—haltingly—what I saw. The broken futures. The chained god.

Kairo’s face darkened.

“That sounds like a Trial. And if it is, then you’re not walking into it alone.”

Zebbie’s hand found mine, firm, steady. “Yeah. If this is about you, then it’s about us too.”

Rivka adjusted her glasses, her voice quieter but edged with curiosity.

“Besides... if it showed you a temple, then it’s tied to something older than the Pantheon. Older than even the Elythium civilizations. I *need* to see this.”

We followed the fragments of vision I remembered - symbols, shapes, a path through the trees that hadn’t been there before.

The deeper we went, the stranger the world became. Trees bent unnaturally, their trunks glitching at the edges like broken images. Whispers stirred the air: *Closer. Closer. Remember.*

Finally, the forest opened into a clearing. At its heart stood ruins—stone cracked and jagged, etched with patterns that shimmered faintly with starlight.

A temple.

“The architecture... It’s impossible,” Rivka murmured, wide-eyed. “This predates the Divinar pantheon. This—this is something *erased*.”

Kairo raised his weapon instinctively. “Doesn’t matter. If it’s what called, then it’s dangerous.”

The doors groaned. The stone shifted, opening by itself.

A cold wind rushed out, thick with the scent of dust and stars.

I stepped forward, the glitch stone in my pocket pulsing like a second heartbeat.

This was it.

The Trial had begun.

Well, it hadn’t begun just yet.

We stepped inside the temple, convinced nothing within could harm us.

Oh, how wrong we were.

The air itself shifted as we crossed the threshold. The inside wasn’t ruined or decayed like the outside suggested—it was magnificent. The walls rose higher than anything I’d ever seen, lined with tattered curtains that still carried an echo of grandeur. It was almost

identical to the Pantheon at Kairo's village, yet... older. Forgotten.

And then we saw them.

Eight deities. Statues towering, carved with impossible precision. But they weren't the gods of Kairo's pantheon. No. These were faces none of us recognized. Their expressions were harsh, alien, unyielding—echoes of something ancient, something erased.

Kairo and Rivka exchanged glances, equally baffled. Even Kairo, the devout one, looked rattled.

Then, the statues moved.

Stone groaned as they began to rotate, shifting places with one another in dizzying patterns. The sound reverberated like thunder through the temple floor.

Rivka's eyes widened, practically glowing with fascination.

"This... this technology is beyond anything the factions have ever created. For it to still be functioning after thousands of years—"

"It's not technology," Kairo muttered grimly. "This is magic... but no magic I've ever seen. No Divinar blessing, no Arcanetic construct, no Aethergeist resonance could accomplish this."

Finally, the statues stopped. The floor trembled as a shaft opened at the center of the chamber, leading downward.

And I knew. Somehow, I *knew*. This was for me.

“Don’t follow me,” I said, locking eyes with them. My voice came out harder than I meant it to.

“Zeon—” Zebbie started.

I turned to her, and my chest clenched.  
“Stay. Please.”

She bit her lip but nodded.

I descended into the dark.

The stairwell was cramped, pressing in from all sides. My shoulders brushed damp stone. The deeper I went, the heavier the air became, thick with rot. A vile stench clawed at my throat, metallic bitterness coating my tongue.

I gagged, nearly vomiting, but kept going.

At the bottom, a faint light shimmered. Hope surged through me, and I stumbled toward it—Only for the stairwell to snap shut behind me like the jaws of a beast.

Panic flared.

No way back.

No escape.

The chamber ahead was nothing but mirrors.

Top to bottom, wall to wall.

And every mirror showed... me.

But not me.

Each reflection carried my face, my voice—but twisted by different choices, different paths.

The glass began to melt and reform until only four mirrors remained.

**Mirror One: *The Coward***

I saw myself refusing to act in the basement, paralyzed by fear. Time never unfroze. Days bled into weeks. I wasted away, muttering to myself in madness, until—Until I ended my own life.

**Mirror Two: *The Tyrant***

Another me stood atop a battlefield. My katana pulsed with cosmic fire. Bodies burned around me, and Zebbie—Zebbie was one of them. My strength had crushed the only thing I cared about. I saw myself sink into despair, clinging only to sleep, where dreams were the only place she still lived.

**Mirror Three: *The Weakling***

This made me reject my power, too afraid to use it. When the Fragment attacked, I did nothing. I watched Zebbie die, her neck snapped like a twig. I fled. Ran until my knees broke. And still the Fragment found me, tore me apart as easily as it had her.

And then—

Just me. No chains. No despair. No fear.

This mirror reflected not who I was, but who I chose to be.

I understood then.

The Trial wasn't about power. It was about choice.

I closed my eyes, steadying my breath.

“I am Zeon Cosmo. My strength, my flaws, my doubts—they’re all mine. I don’t need to be perfect. I just need to keep moving forward. And I will. Always.”

The mirrors shattered, glass dissolving into motes of light. The stairwell cracked open above, releasing me back to the surface.

A surge hit me like a tidal wave—raw, unshakable force. Not just power. Not magic. Something deeper.

*Will.*

Time froze.

Kairo mid-breath. Rivka blinking. Zebbie is reaching for me—frozen in place.

But I moved.

I stepped between them, testing the flow. Reality itself bent around me. Then time resumed.

They jumped, startled.

“Zeon! How did you just—” Rivka stammered.

“I... stopped time. For all of you. But not for me.”

Her eyes widened, practically burning holes through me.

“That’s not possible. You broke the laws of physics—of reality itself!” She circled me, muttering rapidly. “You shouldn’t even exist as you are. Are you even human?”

Kairo’s gaze hardened. He didn’t look surprised—just... resigned.

“That confirms it,” he muttered. “You’re not just different. You’re Echoborn.”

Silence.

The word hung heavy between us, thicker than the dust in the air.

Even Zebbie—usually quick to quip—looked shaken.

I swallowed, my throat dry. “Echoborn? You keep saying that word, Kairo. What does it even mean?”

Kairo didn’t answer right away. He just kept staring at me with this unreadable expression, part awe, part suspicion. Finally, he exhaled.

“An Echoborn... is a myth. A legend passed down through whispers in Divinar temples. They say there were once children—people—who carried the resonance of *all three factions* inside them. Aethergeist. Arcanetic. Divinar. United in one soul. But...” He shook his head. “That’s supposed to be impossible. Nobody can hold that much.”

Rivka stepped forward, her arms crossed, eyes sharp and calculating. “And yet here he stands. Not only resonating across factions, but manipulating *time itself*. That goes beyond Echoborn. That’s—” She stopped herself, lips pursed, as if saying it aloud would make it too real.

“Beyond what?” I pressed.

Her gaze flicked to Kairo, then to Zebbie. Finally, she sighed. “Beyond anything the factions have ever documented. Even Arcanetic records have no theory

for this. Not even our most dangerous experiments dared touch the fabric of time.”

Zebbie edged closer to me, her voice quiet but firm. “So you’re saying... my brother is some kind of... freak?”

“No,” Kairo said quickly, more firmly than I expected. “Not a freak. A... disruption. A ripple in the pattern of this world. Someone who wasn’t supposed to exist—and yet does.”

His words chilled me.

I remembered the mirrors. The broken versions of myself. The lives I could’ve lived. The deaths I could’ve suffered. The voice in the basement whispering *Help me escape...*

Why me?

Why was I chosen?

Before I could ask, the temple shook. A low rumble vibrated through the floor, sending dust and debris raining from the ceiling.

Zebbie grabbed my arm. “What was that?”

Rivka’s face paled. “Something... woke up.”

Kairo’s expression hardened, his hand already glowing with divine runes. “The Trial may not have ended with you, Zeon. Whatever built this temple... it left guardians behind.”

And then we heard it.

A sound that made the Fragment's screech seem almost merciful.

Like stone grinding against bone. Like static clawing reality.

Something was coming.

I tightened my grip on the katana—the weapon that had called to me since the ruins. My hands no longer trembled. For the first time since this all began, I felt steady. Ready.

Whatever awaited us... I wasn't running anymore.

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## The Temple of Echoed Light

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Then...

Nothing.

Nothing came for us or attacked us.

(I know, pretty anticlimactic, right? Like, at least do something...)

Well, we went back to the ruins, while we were walking there, no one said a word, the air was heavy with silence.

Once we reached the ruins. My **katana** was in my hand just in case something happened.

As I was headed to sleep, I started to sharpen my blade with Kairo.

“Look, I get I’m *different* from all of you guys, but can you just act like I’m normal too?” I asked

“This is something that I can’t just shake off after a good night’s sleep, Zeon. This is something serious, these things keep me awake at night, ok? So I can’t just nod it off like normal.” He replied

“Ok, I understand, I guess,” I said

Then, my katana began to tremble in my hands.

At first, I thought it was me. That my grip was unsteady, that fear had crept into my bones.

But no... the weapon itself was alive.

A faint hum pulsed through the blade, low and steady, like the beat of a hidden heart. The steel glimmered faintly, then blazed with light. Symbols began carving themselves across the metal—not etched by hand, not forged by heat, but **emerging** as though the blade itself had been waiting for me.

Runes.

Not the holy script of Divinar. Not the atom-binding glyphs of Arcanetics. Not even the identity-markings of Aethergeist.

These were older. Wilder. Untouched by any faction.

They writhed and shifted as if resisting translation, as though even trying to *understand them* would break my mind.

“What... what language is that?” Zebbie whispered, her voice barely audible.

Rivka stepped forward, her eyes wide, her usual analytical calm gone. Her lips moved, searching for an explanation, but only one phrase left her mouth:

“...This isn’t possible.”

“You’re telling me,” Kairo muttered, but even he couldn’t look away.

The runes pulsed again, each symbol burning brighter, synchronizing with the thrum of my heartbeat. The katana wasn’t just glowing, it was *resonating* with me, answering something buried deep inside.

I could feel it. The blade wasn't just metal. It was a memory. A fragment of something forgotten, something erased yet tied to me by blood and fate.

The whispers returned. Not from the stone this time—*from the sword itself.*

*"You are my bearer. My will is your will. Together, we carve the path unbroken."*

The glow intensified until the temple was drenched in its light. Even Rivka, the scientist among us, staggered back, shielding her eyes.

"I can't decipher it," she muttered, frustrated and awed all at once. "These runes don't match *any recorded system*. Not Elythos, not divine, not human. It's... older. Primordial. It shouldn't exist."

But it did. And it was mine.

For the first time, the katana felt whole in my hand. Not a weapon I had picked, but a partner, forged for me alone.

The runes on the blade burned brighter, crawling up my arm, pressing into my skin like a brand. My pulse thundered in my ears—then...

A voice.

*...At last... my bearer...*

I froze. My eyes flicked to Zebbie, to Kairo, to Rivka. Nothing. They just stared at the glowing sword, awestruck. None of them heard it. The voice was in my head.

“Uh—hello?” I whispered under my breath.

*...I... am the will... the memory... the soul of this blade...*

The words were drawn out, echoing like some ancient god rising from its tomb. But then the voice coughed. Literally coughed.

*—Sorry. Sorry. Been stuck in here for... uh... a couple thousand years? You try speaking after being locked in silence for that long. My throat—well, I don’t technically have a throat, but still—it’s rough, okay?*

I blinked. “...What?”

The blade pulsed indignantly.

*Don’t know what’ me! Do you have any idea how boring it is being a sword? I’ve been waiting for centuries—centuries!—for someone with your bloodline to finally touch me. And when you do, do you know how long it takes to sync up? FOREVER. I was basically screaming into the void while you swung me around like some broomstick!*

“...You were awake that whole time?”

*YES. Watching you try to fight that Fragment with a broomstick handle was painful. I’m a legendary soul-bound weapon, not some stick from the janitor’s closet.*

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “This can’t be happening...”

*Oh, it’s happening, buddy. You’re stuck with me now. And let me tell you—if you die, I go right back to being stuck in shiny-metal prison for another thousand years. So... no pressure, but let’s not screw this up.*

I stared at the blade, dumbfounded. "...So you're my weapon now?"

*Weapon? Please. Partner. Equal. Soulmate, if you will—*

"Don't push it."

*...Fine. But you are going to give me a really cool name later, right? Something ominous, mysterious—like 'The Echo of Eternity' or 'The Blade That Devours Suns'—*

I groaned. "Oh great, I got stuck with a diva sword."

*The glow dimmed slightly, like it was pouting. Better than being stuck in silence. Trust me.*

"Ok, guys," I sighed, holding up my katana. "I have... a diva sword."

"...What makes you say that?" Kairo asked, raising a brow.

"Well, after that whole catastrophe just now—yeah, it started talking to me."

*Hey! Don't out me like that!*

I pointed at the blade. "See? That."

Kairo blinked. "Wait, *that piece of metal* is talking to you?"

"Yeah..." I shrugged.

Rivka stepped closer, her eyes wide. "Okay, but... can it do something? Or is it just here to roast you?"

I glanced at the katana. "You heard her. Prove it."

*Ugh, fine. But here's the thing—I can only talk to other people if you're in physical contact with them.*

I looked back at Rivka. "...So, uh. The sword wants me to hold your hand."

Her face went pink. "Wh-what? For communication purposes, right?"

"Yes, Rivka. Communication." I said flatly, offering my hand.

She sighed, muttered something about "science gone too far," and placed her hand in mine.

*Check. Check. Testing, one-two-three. Can you hear me, Rivka?*

Rivka yelped and nearly jumped out of her boots. "Aaaaah! It's *actually* talking to me!"

"Oh, let me try!" Kairo said, immediately grabbing my other hand.

*Oh, great. Now we've got a chain. Hey Kairo, how's it feel, huh? The only reason you're hearing me is because of my partner. Without him, you'd still be yelling at shadows and pretending you're cool.*

Kairo squinted. "...I don't like this sword."

"Yeah, welcome to my life," I muttered.

Then the blade pulsed, its voice dropping in tone. *Wait... I feel something. Connected to you. It's like... a trial.*

I straightened. "Okay then. Lead the way."

“Wait, wait, wait,” Zebbie cut in, raising her hands. “Are you serious? Can’t we do this tomorrow morning? I’m tired. I want to eat, sleep, maybe not almost die for once!”

I sighed. “Well, if the sword’s fine with waiting—”

*Yeah, fine. Tomorrow morning. But after breakfast, no excuses.*

“Great,” I muttered. “Bossy *and* dramatic.”

*Excuse you—I’m legendary. Bossy is just part of the package.*

Later, when the others were asleep, I lay down and whispered in my thoughts: ‘Hey, can you hear me when I’m just thinking?’

*Loud and clear.*

‘Okay... do you remember who forged you?’

The sword was silent for a moment, then: No. Nothing. Just three weeks ago, when I woke up. Before that? Blank. And yes, it’s as frustrating as it sounds.

‘Three weeks ago? That’s exactly when the Glitch Stone showed up in my basement. Think the two are linked?’

...Maybe. Check the middle of my handle—see that little socket? Looks suspiciously Glitch-Stone-shaped, doesn’t it?

I groaned, rolling onto my side. ‘Yeah. It’s a perfect fit. But I’m too tired to mess with cosmic Legos tonight.’

Fine, fine. Sleep. But tomorrow? Epic destiny upgrade sequence. Deal?

‘.’

*Also, you snore. Just saying.*

I threw the sword on the floor.

The next morning, I slid the Glitchstone into the socket on my katana's hilt.

The reaction was instant. Light burst from the blade, runes crawling brighter than ever, and then—

BOOM.

The same “awakening surge” as before hit me, like lightning in my veins. My muscles tightened, my pulse thundered, and my senses sharpened all over again.

I grinned. *I feel stronger!*

“Ok, and?” I asked the sword out loud.

...Silence.

Then a dry voice finally muttered in my head:  
*Oh. Uh... nothing else, really.*

‘What? That’s it?!’

*Hey, power upgrades don’t come with a full warranty, kid. Be grateful your bones didn’t explode.*

“Ugh,” I groaned.

“Oh yeah,” I said, glancing at Zebbie, “what should his name be?”

She tilted her head, thinking. “Maybe... Ryuusei no Ikari?”

The sword practically vibrated with excitement.  
*‘Fury of the Shooting Star’? I LOVE it! Yes, yes, yes! From*

now on, that's my full glorious name. But you—you can just call me Star.

'Fine, Star,' I sighed. 'But no boasting—'

*MUHAHAHAHA! I HAVE THE COOLEST NAME IN ALL OF ERYNDOR! Say it louder, Zeon! Say it like you MEAN it! Oh—what was that? You were saying something?*

'Nothing,' I muttered.

*Thought so.*

Kairo folded his arms. "So... where is this great place you've been hinting at?"

Star's tone dropped into mock-seriousness. *I don't know the exact coordinates, but I can feel it. Like an itch under my edge. It's close. Very close.*

"Can you guide us?" I asked.

*Sure thing, partner. I'll just... You know... point dramatically in the direction with all the flair of a legendary blade of destiny.*

"Or," Zebbie deadpanned, "you could just say 'go left.'"

*...Ugh. Fine. Left. We left the ruins early that morning, packs light, weapons ready. The forest stretched around us in endless shades of green, with mist still clinging to the undergrowth. Every sound felt sharp—the crunch of twigs, the distant calls of unseen beasts.*

Star hummed faintly in my hand, his runes glowing with a lazy pulse.

*Alright, onward! he shouted in my head. Heroes, adventurers, seekers of destiny! We march toward greatness!*

*'Just... point, Star.'*

*Fine, fine. Forward. Then veer left at the funny-looking tree that's shaped like a goat sneezing.*

*Thank you, thank you, Star said smugly. I take my cartography very seriously.*

We trekked deeper, the woods growing denser. At one point, the air shifted—heavy, buzzing, almost electric. The hairs on my arms stood up.

"Zeon," Kairo muttered, hand resting on his weapon, "you feel that?"

"Yeah," I said. "Star?"

*Oh, that? Totally normal. Just, you know, the veil between dimensions is thinning. Happens all the time. Like Tuesday stuff.*

"Wait, WHAT?!" Zebbie shouted.

*Relax! It's fine. Probably. Maybe. Unless something nasty slips through. Then, uh... you're on your own.*

"Star—" I started.

*I'm kidding! I'd never abandon my wielder. I'd just... complain a lot while helping.*

We pushed on until we reached a clearing. The ground here was scorched black, as if lightning had struck a hundred times in the same place. At the center was a jagged stone arch half-buried in the dirt, its surface

etched with runes even Rivka (if she had been here) would've failed to recognize.

Star went completely still in my hand. His usual chatter cut to silence.

"...Star?" I whispered.

For the first time, his voice was hushed.  
*This is it. The Temple of Echoed Light.*

Kairo frowned. "You mean that broken rock pile?"

*BROKEN ROCK PILE?! Star snapped back. \*That, my uncultured rune-flinger, is a gateway older than your Pantheon. It's been waiting for centuries... for him.\**

And just like that, all eyes landed on me.

My katana pulsed again, brighter, the runes resonating with the arch ahead. The air grew colder, heavier, like the world itself was holding its breath.

"Guess we found our next step," I muttered.

Star hummed with excitement.

*Oh-ho-ho, buckle up, Zeon. Things are about to get shiny, dangerous, and very interesting indeed.*

The inside looked just as unimpressive as the outside—dusty walls, cracked stone, and a smell that screamed "*centuries of mold.*"

Except... for when we fell through a hole.

Oh, right. I didn't tell you about that part yet, did I?

So here's what happened: one second, we were carefully stepping through the "very stable" floor that

Star assured us was fine (*“Trust me, I’m ancient, I know architecture!”*), and the next second—CRACK.

The ground gave way.

We fell. All of us. Screaming, flailing, very much *not* graceful.

Kairo tried to slow our fall with magic (failed). Zebbie tried to cushion us with some kind of mana burst (semi-failed). Me? I just yelled “STAR, DO SOMETHING!” while clutching him like a glow stick of destiny.

*I’m a sword, Zeon!* he shouted in my head. *What do you want me to do, sprout wings?*

We crashed. Hard.

Groaning, I peeled myself off the ground. My body should’ve been shattered, but strangely... it wasn’t. The impact didn’t hurt as much as it should have.

When the dust cleared, we realized we weren’t in the same ruined hallway anymore. The fall had dumped us into something else entirely—something intentional.

The chamber was massive, stretching farther than the torchlight could reach. Smooth obsidian floors reflected faint, shifting light. The walls were lined with... mirrors. Hundreds of them.

But they weren’t normal mirrors.

Each reflection moved just a second out of sync. Sometimes they smiled when we didn’t. Sometimes their eyes lingered too long. Sometimes they... weren’t us at all.

Zebbie shivered. "I hate this. I hate this already."

Kairo crossed his arms. "This place is testing us."

"Correction," Star said in my head. "This place is testing *him*."

And then, before I could even argue—  
All the mirrors around me flared.

The reflections shifted. Warped. Until they weren't just  
"versions" of me anymore. They were choices. Lives.  
*Trials.*

I felt my feet lock to the floor. The others' voices  
dimmed into echoes.

The trial had begun.

*Well, we're cooked.*

"Yeah... so what?" I muttered, gripping Star a little  
tighter. "I think I need to do this alone... again."

The air went heavy for a moment.

Zebbie stepped forward, worry all over her face. "Just...  
try to be careful, okay? Please?"

I gave her a small nod.

Kairo clapped a hand on my shoulder, his smirk just  
barely hiding concern. "You're tough, Zeon. Stronger  
than you realize. Just don't do anything stupid."

Rivka adjusted her glasses, her voice softer than usual.  
"Strength isn't enough in a place like this. Think before  
you swing that sword, alright?"

I gave them all a faint smile. “Got it. I’ll be fine.”

Star snickered in my head. *Pfft. Sure, fine.’ Famous last words.*

The mirrors gave way to a narrow stone path—barely wide enough for me to squeeze through sideways. My shoulder scraped the walls as I pressed forward, each step echoing like I was walking deeper into someone else’s lungs.

After what felt like ten minutes of claustrophobic silence, the tunnel finally opened.

A cave.

Small, circular, its walls slick with moisture. In the dim glow of the sword’s light, I saw dozens of shallow pools scattered across the stone floor, each one as smooth as polished glass.

I crouched down and peered into the first pool.

And froze.

It wasn’t just water.

It was a *memory*.

In the reflection, I saw *myself*—that night in the basement—my hand reaching for the Glitch Stone. The moment that shattered my ordinary life and pulled me into all of... *this*.

I staggered back and turned to the next pool.

This one? Not so dramatic. Just me, years ago, deciding whether to eat the ice cream my friend had shoved into

my hands. (For the record, I *did* eat it. Best decision of my life. Cookies and cream—peak flavor. Please don't fight me on this.)

But as I moved from pool to pool, the weight of it began to sink in. Every ripple, every choice, every stupid “yes” or “no” that I thought didn't matter—they were all here. Preserved. Waiting for me.

And with my luck? Of course, I had to look through every single one.

Hours passed. Or maybe minutes. Or maybe days. Time didn't matter in that cave.

Because when I reached the last pool—when I thought it was finally over—the cave... shifted.

The walls groaned, expanded, split apart. New pools rippled into existence, stretching farther than I could see.

My stomach sank.

“You've got to be kidding me,” I muttered.

*Welcome to the funhouse of your own bad decisions,*

Then it arrived: The pool that nearly broke me.

I leaned over it cautiously, already dreading what might appear. And when the vision came, I almost tore my eyes away.

There I was. But weaker. Afraid.

In this reflection, when the Fragment first attacked us in the basement, I froze. I didn't move. I didn't push Zebbie out of the way. I just... stood there.

And I watched as its claws tore through her.

I could hear her scream in the water, echoing louder than thunder. Could see myself drop to my knees, sobbing, unable to do anything but crawl toward her as her body went still.

That version of me didn't fight back. Didn't survive.

He just broke.

I staggered back, clutching Star so hard my knuckles went white. My chest felt hollow, like the air had been ripped out of me.

*Zeon.* Star's voice rumbled in my head, for once without sarcasm. *Don't look away. You need to see it.*

"I can't—" My voice cracked. "I can't watch her die again."

*She didn't die,* Star reminded me firmly. *Not in your path. But this pool shows you why. Because you chose. Because you moved. Because you refused to freeze. That decision is why she's alive right now.*

I forced myself to look again. My reflection, broken and hollow, mourns the sister I had lost. A version of me that I could've become in a heartbeat.

Tears stung my eyes.

That's when I understood what this trial was really about.

Not just seeing my choices. *Owning* them.

Every mistake. Every regret. Every victory.

Because if I couldn't face the worst of me—the me who failed Zebbie—then I'd never be able to protect her in the life I actually had.

I knelt by the pool and whispered, "I'm sorry."

Then I stood. And walked on.

The pools blurred together after that, vision after vision, decision after decision. Hours passed. Or maybe minutes. Or maybe seconds. Or maybe centuries. Time didn't matter down there.

What mattered was this: I was proud of the choices I had made. And I would keep making them. I would own every single one — good, bad, or catastrophic. No more running. No more regret.

The pools rippled in unison, glowing brighter until the light lifted me, carrying me upward, pulling me back toward the path above.

When I blinked again, I was standing in front of my friends.

"Oh, hello..." I said casually, like I hadn't just gone through an identity crisis in a cave of nightmare puddles.

"WHERE were you, for god's sake!?" Rivka practically exploded. "We've been waiting for HOURS."

“Yeah, bro, that was way too much time for—whatever this is,” Kairo added, arms crossed.

“I’m just glad you’re alive,” Zebbie said, rushing forward. “Don’t *ever* disappear like that again.”

I raised my hands. “I know, I know, that took way too long. But... I think I unlocked something. Something that definitely shouldn’t exist. But then again, that’s kind of my whole vibe, isn’t it?”

Star hummed smugly in my mind. *Oh, here it comes. Try not to blow yourself up, partner.*

“Alright,” I grinned, “I’m going to do it in 3–2–1.”

The air cracked.

Space split open in front of us like glass fracturing under invisible pressure. Light bled through the break — no, not light. A place. A *location*.

A portal.

I poked my head through cautiously... and nearly tripped.

“Uh, guys?” My voice echoed strangely between both spaces. “This leads... back to base. Come on through.”

One by one, they followed me, eyes wide with disbelief as they stepped back into the ruins we’d been using as camp.

And that was just the start.

Over the next few hours, I experimented. The “fractures” obeyed me like extensions of my will.

I could store weapons and supplies inside the void between spaces, pulling them back out whenever I wanted.

I could carve a door to any place I'd already seen — a forest, a cliffside, even back to the temple. And the craziest part?

I could teleport parts of myself.

My hand, my arm, my blade. Imagine trying to fight someone who doesn't just swing at you — but swings from *behind* you, or above you, or through your own blind spot.

Let's just say... hunting became laughably easy. I could appear behind a boar mid-charge and just—*slice*.

Kairo stared at me like I was cheating. "You basically broke combat."

"Don't hate the player," I said smugly, "hate the fractured space-time continuum."

Star snorted in my head. *Congratulations. You've gone from 'guy with a sword' to 'walking glitch in the universe.'*

And he wasn't wrong.

Because this wasn't just an ability. This was... Overpowered.

And for the first time, I felt the weight of it settle in. This power wasn't just survival anymore. It was something that could change everything.

After that, it was peaceful for a couple of weeks; nothing much really happened, just the same old

routine, until, well, let's say that if my life right now was a lot, this was 1,000 times worse. But first, we go shopping!!!

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## Zephyros: The City of Runes

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“Look, guys, I know this is kind of... sudden,” Rivka said, pushing her glasses up her nose while avoiding our eyes. “But there’s a city nearby. I came from there. Problem is, I’m not exactly... ‘accepted’ over there. Let’s just say I don’t have the best reputation.”

Kairo blinked. “Wait—you’re saying you *knew* there was a city nearby this whole time and you didn’t tell us? Because *you* don’t want to face your reputation?”

Kairo nearly exploded. “Are you kidding me, Rivka? We’ve been sleeping in ruins, nearly dying to monsters, and starving for days—while a whole city was within reach?! Unbelievable!”

“Whoa, whoa, calm down, Mr. Rage Issues,” Rivka shot back, folding her arms. “Yes, I knew about it, but excuse me for not wanting to waltz back into the place where half the Arcanetic Council would happily toss me into a lab. Forgive me for *considering my own safety*.”

I raised a hand before Kairo could retort. “Rivka... just take us there tomorrow, okay?”

She adjusted her glasses again, lips twitching like she was biting back a rant. “Fine. But at least you asked nicely. *Thank you, Zeon.*”

“Yeah, yeah,” Kairo muttered.

The next morning, we set off. The path wasn't easy; it never was.

The forests gave way to jagged ridges; stone cliffs carved into sharp angles where the wind howled like screaming spirits. We spent a day climbing rocky terrain, where the ground seemed to crumble beneath our feet. At night, we slept under makeshift shelters, taking turns keeping watch.

The second day, the air grew strange—thin and charged, almost like static crawling on our skin. Strange glowing glyphs were etched into the stones of the valley we crossed, humming faintly as we passed. Rivka seemed jittery, muttering under her breath about “resonance fields” and “unstable ley channels.”

On the third day, the terrain shifted again. Great metallic spires began to appear along the horizon—like enormous needles piercing the sky. Some were shattered, leaning, abandoned. Others hummed with light, floating symbols revolving around them. By the fourth day, the spires multiplied until they formed walls, and within those walls...

We stood at the crest of a ridge, breath stolen from us—not just from the climb, but from the sight below.

There it was.

Zephyros. The City of Runes.

The city was a living marvel of Arcanetic brilliance. Towering skyscrapers weren't built with stone or steel but with lattices of glowing runes woven into reality

itself. Each building shimmered with light that pulsed like veins, powered not by fire or oil but by crystallized energy drawn straight from the atmosphere.

Floating bridges connected towers, runic elevators carried people up and down effortlessly, and streets were lined with stalls selling artifacts that glowed faintly with active spells.

Hovering platforms drifted above us—public transports, each guided by arrays of glowing glyphs. Even the lamps lining the streets didn't burn flame; instead, they cycled through shimmering colors of Elythyetic resonance, casting the entire city in hues of sapphire, violet, and emerald.

"Whoa," Zebbie whispered, clutching my arm. "It's... beautiful."

"It's insane," I said. "It's like science fiction came to life."

Kairo looked around, wide-eyed despite himself. "So this... this is what the Arcanetics do with their obsession with science and runes. I hate to admit it, but... this is incredible."

Rivka's expression was complicated—nostalgic, pained, proud. "Yeah... welcome to Zephyros."

The first thing we learned. This place ran on more than just runes.

"Currency here isn't gold or silver," Rivka explained as we walked past glowing kiosks where transactions flashed through rune-glyph screens. "It's called

**Zephrios.** Think of it as crystallized energy, condensed from Elysium streams. Each Zephrios shard is basically a tiny fragment of pure, usable power.”

She showed us a small prism, pulsing faintly like a heartbeat. “People use these to trade, to power devices, even to forge weapons. They’re rare outside this city—but here, they’re the lifeblood of the economy.”

Zebbie tilted her head. “So basically... they turned magic into money?”

“Exactly,” Rivka smirked. “Leave it to the Arcanetics to monetize the fabric of existence.”

Kairo crossed his arms. “Hmph. Figures.”

But even he couldn’t hide the wonder in his eyes as we stepped deeper into Zephyros—where the streets themselves were alive with light, and the walls whispered with the hum of runes older than we could comprehend.

A sprawling bazaar where merchants sell enchanted goods, rune-etched weapons, floating trinkets, and crystals of raw Zephrios. Runes flicker in the air like holographic advertisements, calling out prices or demonstrating spells.

Zebbie’s eyes widened as a vendor casually shaped a sphere of fire, tossing it into the air like a juggling ball to attract customers.

Kairo stopped at a stall of weapons, his hand hovering over a massive glaive that pulsed with lightning.

Rivka frowned. “Half of this is counterfeit. Tourist traps. Don’t touch anything unless you want your arm blown off.”

*Pssst. Don’t buy from that guy with the glowing mustache. His wares are trash. Also, that sword over there? Totally cursed. Looks cool, but you’d wake up screaming every night. Just saying.*

‘Oh, shut up, will you?’

The heart of Arcanetic education. A towering complex of rune-carved spires linked by levitating bridges. Inside, classrooms are holographic arenas where students duel by rewriting runes mid-combat.

Rivka paused outside, her face unreadable. “This is where I studied. Where I learned everything I know. And where... they branded me a failure.”

Zebbie squeezed her hand, surprising all of us. “Doesn’t look like a place for failures. Looks like the kind of place where you outgrew their rules.”

A district of beauty, suspended platforms carrying entire ecosystems. Waterfalls fall upward, runes twisting gravity itself. Citizens come here to rest, meditate, or show off their wealth in garden mansions.

Zebbie gasped, leaning over the railing of a floating bridge to watch koi fish swimming through levitating ponds.

Kairo crossed his arms. “Okay, I’ll admit it. This is... incredible.”

*Take notes, Zeon. If you ever want to impress someone, bring them here. Runes, flowers, floating waterfalls—it's practically cheating.*

The heart of the city. A massive rune-circle etched into the ground, constantly pulsing with energy. All ley-lines converge here, and it's said that the Nexus itself can alter reality in the hands of a skilled Arcanetic.

Rivka's voice trembled. "This is why I left. They wanted to weaponize it. To use it as a tool of dominance."

Zebbie stared, eyes wide. "It feels... alive."

*Careful, partner. This place hums with more power than I can handle. And that's saying something—I'm amazing. But seriously... something about it feels dangerous, even to me.*

"Wait, so this place is dangerous?" I asked, my voice dropping low as we stepped past the gates.

*Yeah, Star whispered in my mind, his tone was sharper than usual. It feels... familiar. Like the same energy that flows inside of us—but twisted.*

The streets of Zephyros unfolded like something out of a dream. Banners of deep sapphire and gold shimmered in the breeze, glowing faintly as if powered by enchantments woven into the fabric itself. Lining the streets were stands stacked high with glittering crystals, humming gadgets, and strange artifacts that pulsed with light. The air itself carried a faint charge—alive with Elythium, the raw energy source that fueled nearly everything here.

I tried to focus on the wonders—the vendors showing off pocket-sized runic drones, children trading tiny glowing stones like toys, floating lanterns drifting overhead like fireflies—but then I noticed it.

The people.

Whenever Rivka walked past, the crowds parted. Not politely—no. They avoided her. Shopkeepers folded their arms, lips curling in silent disdain. Street vendors quickly turned their backs, pulling their wares closer. Even children stopped mid-play, eyes wide, before being hurried away by nervous parents.

The look of disgust was impossible to miss.

And it burned inside me.

Because Rivka—awkward, brilliant, perpetually messy-haired Rivka—had been nothing but extraordinary since the moment we met. She might talk too fast when she's explaining her theories, or forget to eat while buried in her work, but she was brave, resourceful, and—whether she admitted it or not—kind.

I clenched my fists. They didn't deserve her.

*Aaaaww.* Star's voice cut through, smug and singsong.

*Is my little boy finally realizing his feelings?*

'Shut up,' I thought back, glaring at nothing. 'It's not like that. More like... like a sisterly vibe.'

*Sure, keep telling yourself that.*

But even as I argued with him, my eyes betrayed me.

I caught the tiniest things about her. The way she adjusted her glasses whenever she felt uncomfortable, the way her lips tugged into the smallest grin when she was proud of something, the stubborn spark in her eyes when she refused to back down from Kairo's teasing.

*Her hair was a complete disaster, a wild tangle like a bird's nest, yet somehow it suited her. And every time she ran her hand through it in frustration, I felt that strange tightening in my chest again.*

I hated to admit it, but Star was right.

I had definitely fallen for her.

*Took you all of what—five minutes? Star laughed in my head. Honestly, I'm impressed.*

I ignored him, but deep down, I knew there was no escaping it.

Eventually, Rivka began to notice. The sidelong glares. The whispers trailed behind us like shadows. The way entire streets bent out of their way just to avoid her.

At first, she shrugged it off. Adjusted her glasses. Pretended not to care. But as the hours wore on, the weight of their stares pressed harder, like needles digging into her skin.

That's when *he* showed up.

"Well, well, well," a voice drawled, sharp and mocking.

A tall figure stepped out from a side street, arms crossed, a smirk plastered across his face. His eyes

gleamed with cruel delight the second they landed on Rivka.

“Look who finally crawled back,” he sneered. “The coward who was too *scared* to use her power.”

Rivka froze, her jaw tightening.

The man circled, hands gesturing toward us as if we were nothing more than background scenery. “Huh. I thought you’d be too ashamed to show your face here again. Guess I was wrong. And these... *these weaklings*—” his lip curled, “—are the people you’ve sunk to keeping company with? Pathetic.”

I stepped forward, fists clenching, but Rivka raised a hand—stopping me cold.

“Don’t,” she whispered. Her voice was calm, but her eyes burned like steel.

She pushed her glasses up with one finger, never breaking eye contact with him.

“Shut your mouth, Anas.”

The street went quiet.

“You and I both know,” Rivka continued, her voice low, even, and dangerous, “that I was stronger than you then. And I’m stronger than you now. So, unless you’re ready to prove otherwise—don’t you *dare* pick a fight you can’t win.”

For the first time, Anas faltered. His smirk twitched. His eyes flickered—uncertain, even if only for a second.

I couldn't help it—I smiled. That was the Rivka I knew.

“Who is that guy?” I asked, keeping my eyes locked on him in case he tried anything.

Rivka's jaw was still tight, her shoulders stiff. She didn't even look at me when she answered.

“He was my rival back at the academy,” she said, her voice sharp but controlled. “Anas. Top of the class in theory, always desperate to prove he was the best.”

Anas chuckled darkly, tilting his head like a predator circling prey. “*Was* my rival? Don't flatter yourself, Rivka. You quit before the real trials began. You ran.”

Her hands curled into fists, the faintest tremor running through her fingers, though her face stayed unreadable. “No,” she said flatly. “I didn't run. I *refused*. There's a difference.”

“Refused?” He laughed, the sound loud enough to draw curious glances from the crowd. “That's what you call it? You refused to finish the initiation because you were too afraid of what it would take. Because you knew you'd never measure up.”

Rivka finally turned to face him fully, her glasses catching the sunlight as her eyes hardened. “Or maybe I knew I'd become something worse if I stayed. Unlike you, Anas, I still have a conscience.”

The smirk on his lips faltered. Just for a second. But enough for me to catch it.

I leaned toward her, lowering my voice. “So... this guy’s basically your evil twin?”

Rivka sighed, muttering, “More like an arrogant mosquito that won’t go away.”

Star snickered in my head. *Oh, I like this one. He’s giving off big ‘punch me in the face’ energy.*

‘Not now,’ I thought back.

But I had to admit—Star was right.

Anas smirked wider, seeing the crowd gathering. “Tell you what, Rivka. Why don’t we settle this properly? Unless you’re too scared to face me in public.”

The bystanders murmured, eyes flicking between them like they’d stumbled into the best entertainment of the week. Some whispered Anas’s name with admiration, others looked at Rivka with barely concealed disdain.

Rivka adjusted her glasses, sighing as if she had just been asked to solve a math problem beneath her skill. “You really want to embarrass yourself *again*, Anas?”

“Big words,” he snapped back, “from someone who couldn’t even pass the final trial.” He turned, gesturing toward the open plaza ahead. “Zephyros Arena. Ten minutes. Unless you’re planning to run away—again.”

The crowd erupted with eager chatter, already following to secure a spot.

I leaned closer to Rivka. “Uh, what exactly is the ‘Zephyros Arena?’”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “It’s... a dueling ground. Public matches, sanctioned by the Rune Administrators. Think of it as the city’s way of letting grudges bleed out without burning the streets down.”

Star chimed in with a chuckle. Sounds like my kind of party. Let’s go make him eat dirt.

‘Not helping,’ I shot back.

Kairo, of course, was already grinning ear to ear. “This is gonna be *amazing*.”

Zebbie frowned. “Are you sure about this, Rivka? I mean, this feels... personal.”

“It is,” Rivka admitted, her voice calm but firm. “But that’s exactly why I can’t back down.” She glanced at me and Zebbie, her usual mask slipping just enough for us to see the hurt in her eyes. “If I let him drag my name through the dirt again, it won’t just be me they spit on—it’ll be all of you, too. And I won’t let that happen.”

She stepped forward, shoulders squared, heading toward the plaza where Anas and the crowd were already waiting.

I sighed, tightening my grip on Star. “Guess we’re about to find out what Rivka’s really made of.”

Star hummed with excitement. *Don’t worry, kid. She’s about to make one hell of an impression.*

The market street buzzed with murmurs long after Anas threw down his challenge. Shopkeepers leaned out of their stalls, children darted between legs to get a

better look, and the crowd swelled around us like a tide.

Anas was eating it up. He raised his hand, basking in the whispers of his name, the crowd already chanting for a duel. “Zephyros Arena!” he declared, his voice carrying above the noise. “Let’s see if Rivka finally has the courage she lacked before.”

Rivka didn’t flinch. She simply adjusted her glasses, sighed, and started walking. “Fine.”

“Wait—you’re seriously going along with this?” I asked, hurrying to keep up.

“Of course I am,” she said without looking at me. “If I don’t, every rumor Anas has been spreading will become fact. And if I do...” She paused, her lips curving into a thin smile. “Well, you’ll see.”

Kairo was practically bouncing. “Yes! A real duel in the Arena—do you know how rare this is?!”

Zebbie frowned. “Rare or not, it sounds dangerous.”

Rivka glanced at her, and for a moment her calm cracked into something softer. “Don’t worry. I’ve been waiting for this.”

The crowd carried us along, funneling toward the coliseum-like structure at the city’s center. The **Zephyros Arena** loomed ahead—an enormous stone amphitheater, its outer walls covered in glowing runes that pulsed like veins of light. Arched gateways opened into the interior, guarded by Administrators in polished armor inscribed with protective glyphs.

Inside, the air was electric. Rows of seats climbed skyward, already filling with shouting citizens eager for spectacle. The central stage was a flat, circular platform of polished stone, marked with containment wards to absorb stray spells. Above it all, massive runic projectors shimmered, ready to display the combatants' moves to the farthest seats.

Star hummed in my mind. This place reeks of pride and blood. Perfect stage for Rivka to crush that smug idiot.

'You're enjoying this too much,' I thought back.

Of course I am. Don't tell me you're not.

I sighed, looking around at the sheer size of the arena. "All this... just for two people fighting?"

"It's Zephyros," Rivka said, stepping into the preparation circle. "Here, magic duels are both entertainment and law. If you can't prove yourself in the Arena, you'll never be taken seriously."

Across the platform, Anas raised his arms to the roaring crowd, drinking in their cheers. His voice carried even above the din: "Watch closely, everyone! Today I'll show you the fraud that Rivka really is!"

The crowd erupted again. Rivka just rolled her shoulders, completely unbothered.

Kairo nudged me. "Get ready. This is gonna be legendary."

The gong echoed through the arena, silencing everything for a heartbeat.

The duel was about to begin.

The Zephyros Arena was alive with sound—chants, jeers, gasps. The air shimmered faintly with containment runes, cast by overseers to prevent collateral damage.

Anas stood at one end of the dueling ground, cloak trailing, one hand already tracing binding glyphs in the air. His smirk was sharp enough to cut glass.

Across from him, Rivka adjusted her gloves, her glasses reflecting the arena lights. Calm. Collected. Until her eyes locked with his—then her lips curved into the faintest, sharpest grin.

“Last chance to walk away, Anas,” she said.

He sneered. “Funny. That’s exactly what you’re good at.”

A gong sounded. The match began.

With a flick of his wrist, Anas slammed his hand into the floor. The arena stones glowed, runes spreading outward like wildfire. From the glowing script, a massive beast clawed its way into existence—a six-legged wolf made of shimmering Elythium chains.

The crowd roared. Contracting Arcanetics was rare, and this was Anas’s pride.

“Rip her apart,” he commanded.

The wolf lunged.

Rivka didn't flinch. With a sweep of her arm, she conjured a barrier of condensed Elthium shimmering like glass. The wolf crashed into it—cracks spiderwebbed instantly, but the barrier held just long enough for her to counter.

She clenched her fist, runes spiraling across her arm, and hurled a bolt of compressed force into the wolf's chest. The beast shattered like glass, fragments of light scattering across the floor.

The audience gasped.

"Still relying on pets to fight for you, Anas?" Rivka called. "Some things never change."

Before he could respond, Rivka pressed forward. Her runes glowed brighter, Elythos atoms swirling around her as if drawn to her will. She snapped her fingers, and fire spiraled from the air, coiling into a whip.

She lashed it at him. He ducked, barely avoiding the strike, the ground searing where it landed. She followed with a barrage of mana bolts, each one detonating like miniature grenades.

Anas cursed, erecting a wall of glyphs midair, her blasts ricocheting off like sparks. He smirked through the shield. "Is that it? You're still predictable."

His fingers danced across the glyph-wall. "Witness what true mastery looks like!"

The runes expanded, swirling into a summoning circle above him. From it descended a massive armored

golem, its body inscribed with chains of contracting runes. Its fists glowed with crushing power.

The ground quaked as it landed.

Rivka stood her ground. “Predictable, huh? Let’s test that.”

She stomped her foot, unleashing shockwaves that rippled beneath the arena floor. The very stones rose at her command, twisting into jagged spikes aimed straight for the golem.

The beast blocked, smashing through them with brute force, but Rivka was already moving—closing the gap with a rune-charged sprint, her katana of light flaring into existence.

The crowd erupted as steel met stone. Sparks and shards flew. Rivka carved glowing scars into the golem’s armor, her blade ringing with each strike.

The final round started.

Anas roared in frustration. “ENOUGH!”

He poured all his energy into the contract rune, the golem swelling with size, its arms igniting with chained lightning. It swung with enough force to flatten a house.

Rivka’s eyes narrowed. She whispered an incantation—and her runes exploded with brilliance. Her body blazed with a battle mage’s full release, raw energy coursing through her veins.

The golem's fist descended. Rivka launched upward, vaulting across its arm in a streak of light. Her katana flared, runes spinning along its edge.

"Try keeping up now, Anas!"

With one clean strike, she carved through the golem's core. It shattered in a burst of Elythium-light, the fragments dissolving into sparks.

Silence fell.

Rivka landed, her blade dissolving back into runes. She stood tall, barely winded.

Anas staggered, his summoning circle flickering out. His smirk was gone—replaced by disbelief.

"Still think I'm afraid?" Rivka asked, her voice calm, sharp as glass.

The crowd erupted. Some cheered, others muttered in shock, but one thing was clear—Rivka had won.

She adjusted her glasses and turned away, her friends rushing toward her.

Anas clenched his fists, fury burning in his eyes. "This isn't over."

"Of course it isn't," Rivka said without looking back. "It never is with you."

Anas clenched his jaw, but before he could retort, she added casually, "And for wasting my time, you owe me some Zephyros."

He blinked. “You’re shaking me down—for money? After humiliating me in front of half the city?”

Rivka adjusted her glasses, her smirk razor-thin. “Consider it compensation. Call it... a lesson fee.”

The crowd chuckled, whispers rippling through the stands. Anas’s face flushed red.

“Fine,” he hissed, digging into his pouch. The metallic clink of **Zephyros coins** rang out as he tossed a small stack her way. “But if I pay you, we *will* have a rematch. And next time, you won’t be walking away so smug.”

Rivka caught the coins with one hand, weighing them with a grin. “Yeah, yeah. Whatever makes you sleep at night. For now, thanks for covering our inn bill.”

She turned and walked off with the confidence of someone who had already won the war, not just the battle.

I couldn’t help muttering, “Did she just mug her own rival in front of the entire city?”

Star snickered in my head. *Oh, I like her. Keep this one around, partner.*

“Yeah, she really is something, huh?”

Our first night in Zephyros felt like stepping into a dream. The inn Rivka had chosen—paid for with Anas’s begrudging “donation”—was tucked between two glowing rune-towers. Its walls were etched with protective wards, its windows shimmering with crystal glass. For the first time in weeks, we slept on real beds.

I remember lying awake, though, staring at the ceiling. The city hummed faintly, like it was alive, whispering in a language only it understood.

Star's voice echoed in my head. *Can't sleep? 'No. Just... hard to believe all of this is real.' It's real. Get used to it. You'll need to.*

The next day, Zebbie woke me before sunrise, dragging me to the city's eastern quarter where Rivka had arranged for her to visit an **Arcanetic training hall**.

The place was incredible, pillars of glowing Elythium crystals, floors covered in layered glyphs that shifted and responded to touch. Here, apprentices practiced manipulating the currents of Elythium in the air, sparks and whirlwinds forming between their hands.

Rivka guided Zebbie into her first proper session. I watched my sister close her eyes, hands trembling as she tried to sense the particles around her. For hours, nothing happened. Then, just as Rivka encouraged her to push harder, a faint shimmer danced in Zebbie's palms—a tiny spiral of light, fragile but beautiful.

The instructors whispered among themselves. Some smiled, some frowned. But I only saw Zebbie's grin, brighter than I'd seen in weeks.

*Careful, Star muttered. Power like hers burns bright. And bright things always draw shadows.*

Kairo finally got what he wanted: a chance to show off.

The **Combat Plaza** of Zephyros was a circular arena smaller than the grand dueling grounds but open to

anyone who wanted to spar. Crowds gathered quickly, and of course, Kairo was in the center, grinning like an idiot, dual blades of conjured divinity in his hands.

His opponent was a hardened Aethergeist, muscles like iron, eyes glowing with inner will. The man's strikes were fast, his movements honed. But Kairo fought like fire—reckless, relentless, laughing even as he dodged by inches.

When he finally landed the finishing blow, pinning his opponent with a flourish of burning glyphs, the crowd roared. Kairo bowed dramatically. "Told you," he said later, "I'm destined for greatness."

I rolled my eyes. But deep down, I believed him.

If Kairo thrived on combat, Rivka thrived on knowledge.

She dragged us to the **Grand Library of Zephyros**, a labyrinth of towers and bridges, scrolls floating midair like migrating birds. Here, she spoke with scholars, challenged their theories, and even discovered manuscripts on **proto-rune systems**—scripts that might predate the Eight Gods themselves.

She looked different here. Not the awkward, prickly Rivka we first met, but someone alive, radiant, utterly at home. And as I watched her debate with a professor twice her age, fire in her eyes, I realized just how extraordinary she was.

Star chuckled. *Careful, partner. You're staring too long.* 'Shut up.'

That night, I wandered alone. I walked the high bridges of Zephyros, where the city lights met the stars. The runes beneath my feet pulsed with life, guiding me forward, as though the city itself recognized me.

And for the first time, I let it sink in.

Two months ago, I was no one. Just a boy about to leave for college. Now, I'd faced Fragments, awakened powers that broke time, and held a blade that spoke with its own will. I had friends beside me—Zebbie, Kairo, Rivka—each brilliant, each carrying their own destiny.

And somehow... they trusted me.

I closed my eyes. The wind carried the scents of spice, smoke, and ozone. For once, I wasn't afraid. For once, I believed.

Star's voice softened. *You're beginning to understand. You're not just caught in this world, Zeon. You're shaping it.*

I opened my eyes and whispered, "Then let's see where it leads."

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## The Last trial

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Zephyros was alive with its usual rhythm—vendors shouting in the markets, rune-trains humming along their glowing tracks, the evening lanterns sparking with silver-blue Elythium fire. But as I walked the quieter backstreets, I felt something tug at me.

Not a sound. Not even Star's sarcastic whisper. A *pull*.

It was subtle at first, like the way your gut knows when a storm is coming long before you see the clouds.

'Star... do you feel that?'

*Yeah. Not good. It smells like static... like the glitch stone.*

I followed the tug, deeper into streets I'd never seen on the maps Rivka had memorized. The air grew heavier. Colder. Shops thinned out. The stonework beneath my feet started to... bend. Cracks crawled along the walls, but they weren't cracks like you'd see in a road—they shifted, reassembled, erased themselves, then cracked again.

A plaza opened before me. Deserted. Silent. And wrong.

The buildings here *glitched*. Their windows flickered between open and closed. Doors swapped positions—statues warped into melted, faceless figures and back again.

And in the middle—  
A shard.

Black and prismatic, humming with unstable light. Not as large as the glitch stone back home—barely the size of a dagger’s hilt—but unmistakable.

My chest tightened. I could *feel* it calling to me.

“Don’t touch it,” I muttered to myself.

*So of course you’re gonna touch it*, Star sighed.

My hand shook as I reached out. The moment my fingers brushed its surface—

The world shattered.

The plaza collapsed into fragments of light, falling away like glass. I felt myself ripped through the floor, through space, through time—until nothing was left but void.

I woke lying on cracked stone.

Above me stretched a sky I didn’t recognize—black as ink, fractured by streaks of static lightning that froze midair, then jittered forward again.

The city of Zephyros was here... but not. Its towers bent at impossible angles, their runes flickering out like dying stars. Statues of the Eight Gods loomed, their faces melted blank.

And in the center of this broken reflection stood a temple—vast, black, its spires clawing into the sky. Its gates bore no inscriptions of the Pantheon, no sigils of

Divinar. Just... absence. A symbol I couldn't comprehend.

"The Hall of Null," I whispered, though I didn't know how I knew. The words forced themselves into my mouth.

*Partner...* Star's voice was tight, for once without his usual humor. *This place... It's not supposed to exist.*

The gates opened without a sound.

I stepped inside.

The air was colder than death. Shadows crawled the walls, whispering in voices I almost recognized—my own, Kairo's, Zebbie's, Rivka's—all repeating moments of fear, doubt, regret.

As I walked, time broke.

I saw myself walking ahead—then saw myself again, a few steps behind. Loops folding over loops.

The whispers grew louder. The deeper I went, the more the temple seemed alive, bending closer, suffocating.

And then the mirrors appeared.

The hall ended in a circular room filled with mirrors. Thousands.

Each one reflected *me*.

But not me.

Some wore armor of kings, leading armies of flame. Others were shadows, starving, eyes hollow. Some looked broken, scarred, twisted into monsters.

And they moved on their own.

One by one, they stepped forward, glass shattering as their versions of me entered reality.

The first wore a crown of fire. His sword was not Star, but a jagged blade dripping with glitching light. His voice was mine, but colder, crueler.

**The Tyrant.**

The second was gaunt, his eyes empty, his body trembling as though half-dead. Shadows clung to him like parasites.

**The Coward.**

The third... gods, the third twisted my stomach. He looked like me—except broken, eyes red from endless tears, his blade warped with corruption. He whispered one word, again and again: *Zebbie*.

**The Broken.**

They circled me, silent, waiting.

*Partner... Star said slowly. You're not gonna like this, but they're real enough. You'll have to fight them.*

"I guessed as much."

The Tyrant smiled first. "I am what you could be if you stop pretending. If you take power and use it, as you should. Rule. Command. Burn."

The Coward whispered, voice cracking. "Or you could just... stop. Hide. Run. No one will blame you if you vanish. Better than failing."

The Broken clutched his blade, sobbing. “Why fight at all? She’s gone. You couldn’t save her. You never could.”

My throat tightened. I wanted to scream at him, to deny it—but his pain was mine.

And then all three lunged.

The Tyrant struck first.

His crown blazed brighter than the ruined sky, and his blade carved arcs of fire that split the chamber. The heat seared my skin before his sword even touched me.

*He’s fast! Star shouted. And he’s not holding back!*

I barely ducked under his first swing. The stone floor cracked as fire bled from the impact, glitching like broken pixels.

“You hesitate,” the Tyrant sneered. “That’s your flaw. All that power, and you waste it on doubt. I wouldn’t. I would take what’s mine.”

He swung again, the flame expanding into a tidal wave of fire. I raised Star instinctively—and to my shock, the blade pulsed, absorbing part of the blast. My arms shook under the force, but I held.

‘Star, tell me you’ve got a plan.’

*Yeah. Don’t get killed.*

I grit my teeth, rushing forward. A heavier, crueller version answered every strike I made. He knew my style *was* me, but refined into raw violence.

The air scorched my lungs. My arms ached from the weight of deflecting his blows. And yet, beneath the fury, I saw it—the weakness. He was strong, but arrogant. He believed he couldn't lose.

I let him swing wide, his flaming blade slamming into the ground. Sparks of glitch-fire erupted. And in that opening, I drove Star upward into his crown.

The crown shattered. The flames sputtered.

The Tyrant screamed as his body broke into shards of fire and static, consumed by his own ambition.

"Power without restraint..." I gasped, catching my breath. "That's not me."

No sooner had the Tyrant dissolved than the Coward stepped forward.

He shook, bones visible beneath pale skin, his voice a whisper. "You shouldn't have done that. You'll only draw more danger. Run. Hide. Survive."

The shadows clinging to him peeled away, crawling like living smoke. They lunged, forming claws and chains that wrapped around my arms.

*Careful!* Star warned. *He's not fighting with strength—he's fighting with fear.*

The chains tightened, dragging me down. My chest heaved as the shadows whispered in my ears—my failures, my weaknesses, the countless ways I could die.

"You can't protect her," the Coward hissed. "You never could. Better to run, leave her behind, save yourself."

Rage flared in me. My knees buckled, but I refused to kneel.

“Say whatever you want,” I spat, straining against the chains. “But I’ll never abandon Zebbie. Not now. Not ever!”

Will surged through me. The chains cracked. Star pulsed with light, tearing through the shadows.

The Coward shrieked, collapsing into himself, consumed by the very darkness he wielded.

The figure rose from the glitching throne. Its body was nothing but fractured light and shadow, flickering as though it had been erased from existence and stubbornly stitched back together. Behind it, the vast chained silhouette of a deity writhed, its form bending space itself—stars collapsing and expanding within its body, constellations forming and breaking apart in its wake.

## **A Deity**

The creature tilted its head. Its voice was a chorus of echoes, layered and jagged.

“You faced yourself. Now face what you were born to inherit.”

The ground split apart beneath me. Gravity twisted sideways, then inverted, and suddenly I was standing on the ceiling—or maybe the ceiling was the floor. My stomach lurched as the chamber folded in on itself.

*Zeon, Star said, his voice unusually sharp. That's no ordinary Fragment. It's feeding on a god's essence. You can't win this fight the way you fought the others.*

The creature raised a hand. Time itself buckled. The shards of broken mirrors from earlier froze midair, then reversed, repairing themselves before shattering again. My body lagged behind my own heartbeat.

And then it attacked.

A wave of static-laced energy tore across the chamber. I dove aside, but the strike didn't *follow* the rules of space—it bent, curving toward me even after I dodged. The blade of Star rang out as I deflected it, the force sending tremors up my arm.

“You are fragile,” the Fragment intoned. “A child playing with broken gods. You will shatter as they did.”

It lunged, faster than thought, its form blinking between places. One instant it was across the room, the next its hand was at my throat. I barely raised Star in time, slashing upward to force distance. Sparks of distorted reality sprayed where blade met shadow.

My breath came ragged. Each move it made wasn't just strength—it was inevitability. It fought with time itself.

*You can't just react,* Star snapped. *You have to impose yourself. Force your will onto the world before it forces itself onto you.*

“How?” I gritted my teeth, rolling aside as the Fragment ripped through the stone, the floor dissolving into a pool of stars.

*Stop thinking of power as something you use. Think of it as something you are. Your will. Your choice. That's what you are.*

The Fragment reformed behind me. Its voice boomed, splitting into a thousand overlapping tones. "You will kneel to the forgotten. Or you will be unmade."

It raised both arms, and the chamber split open into a vortex of static and starlight. The chains binding the God's shadow rattled violently, straining as if they might break.

For a heartbeat, I felt despair. The sheer weight of it crushed me. How could I fight something like this?

Then I thought of Zebbie. Of Kairo. Of Rivka. Of every step that had brought me here.

I wasn't fighting for victory. I was fighting to be myself.

"NO!" I roared, my voice shaking the chamber. "I don't kneel! Not to you, not to the Eight, not to ANYONE!"

Star blazed in my grip, brighter than ever before. The runes along his blade pulsed in rhythm with my heartbeat, then erupted outward, spilling light into the broken chamber. The world bent—not to the Fragment, but to me.

Time froze. Not like before, when it had been imposed by me—but by my will. The falling shards of stone hung midair. The Fragment's body stuttered, caught in the stillness. Even Cosmo's chained shadow faltered, its movements slowing.

I raised Star high. Power surged through me—not borrowed, not given, but mine. My **arm** ignited, raw and furious, warping space around me. The pain was unbearable; the stone underfoot cracked, and reality itself seemed to bend to my resolve.

It was my **Willbrand**.

It was a tattoo that gave me immense power in exchange for grueling pain.

The Fragment screeched, its body glitching wildly as it tried to resist. But this time, it wasn't inevitability against fragility. It was inevitability against defiance.

I charged.

Each step shattered the frozen moment around me, sparks of reality bursting. My blade carved a path of light, slamming into the Fragment's chest.

Its body convulsed, glitching harder, splitting into a dozen versions of itself before collapsing back into one. The scream it let out wasn't just sound—it was an entire world collapsing.

The chains behind it rattled again. A single link snapped, and the **God's** shadow stirred, one eye of infinite starlight opening.

For an instant, I felt it—the vastness of time and space, the weight of eternity pressing down on me. And then it was gone, sealed again by the chains.

The Fragment's body fractured, its voice fading.  
"You... are not done. The forgotten... will return. And  
when they do... You will break."

It shattered into static, dissolving into the void.

Silence.

I fell to my knees, gasping. Star's light dimmed, but  
his voice was steady.

*You did it, partner. You bent the world. You forced it to  
listen. That's Willbrand.*

"I... I actually did it..." I whispered, trembling. My body  
screamed with exhaustion, but inside, something new  
pulsed—a certainty.

I wasn't just surviving anymore.

I was changing the rules.

The void cracked apart like glass under pressure.

I staggered forward, still gripping Star, though my arm  
felt like lead. My legs buckled with every step, but I  
pushed on. The glitching throne dissolved into pixels  
of fading light, the shattered chamber around me  
pulling itself inward. For a terrifying moment, I  
thought I'd be crushed along with it.

Then—

A rush of cold air slammed into my lungs.

The scent of stone, smoke, and rain filled my nose. I  
blinked hard and realized I was back in Zephyros. The  
deserted plaza stood still and quiet, as if nothing had

happened. Except... Zebbie, Kairo, and Rivka were there, huddled together, eyes wild with worry.

“ZEON!” Zebbie’s voice cracked as she ran to me.

Kairo rushed forward, his grip tight on my shoulder. “Where the hell did you go? You vanished! One second you were here, then—boom—you were gone. We’ve been tearing the district apart looking for you.”

Rivka adjusted her glasses, squinting at me as though I were an equation she couldn’t solve. “No... it wasn’t that long. Maybe three minutes, at most four. Not enough time to search more than a block.”

Three minutes?

I staggered, my throat dry. It had felt like days. Weeks.

Zebbie hugged me tight. “Don’t do that again. Ever.”

I hugged her back, my body shaking. “Trust me... I didn’t *want* to.”

Star pulsed faintly in my hand. And then, his voice whispered directly into my mind:

*Partner, don’t tell them everything. Not yet. They’re not ready for the truth of what you saw.*

‘You mean Cosmo,’ I thought back, teeth clenched.

*Exactly.*

I exhaled sharply, forcing myself to stand straighter. My friends deserved answers, but I could barely form words. And before I could decide what to say, my katana flared.

Runes carved themselves deeper across the blade, shifting, reshaping, until they locked into place. At the hilt, a socket opened—and the shard I had touched in the plaza fused into it with a blinding flash.

The hum filled the air, vibrating in my bones.

“What the—” Rivka shielded her eyes. “That isn’t Elythos script. It’s not Divinar either. I... I don’t recognize it. This isn’t possible.”

“Again with the impossible,” Kairo muttered, though he couldn’t look away.

Zebbie squeezed my arm tighter. “It’s alive, isn’t it? Your sword—it’s... It’s *alive*.”

Star snickered in my head. *Oh, now she gets it? Took her long enough.*

I almost laughed out loud, but I bit it back.

“Yeah,” I said quietly, looking at the blade pulsing with light. “He’s alive.”

The runes steadied, glowing faintly like a heartbeat. The shard was part of Star now. And I knew, deep in my gut, that this wasn’t just some upgrade. This was the beginning of something bigger—something tied to the **Gods** Themselves.

I looked at my friends. They were staring at me like I was becoming a stranger. Maybe I was.

“Come on,” I said, sliding Star back into his sheath. The echo of battle still lingered in the air—cracked pavement, shattered windows, smoke drifting lazily by.

“We’ve got work to do. Whatever that thing was—it won’t be the last.”

“But before that,” I grinned, eyes glinting, “let me try something.”

Rivka’s eyes narrowed. “Oh no, please don’t destroy this entire district,” she muttered, sidestepping a toppled lamppost as if it might explode next.

I snickered, focusing as I flexed the strange new ability pulsing inside me. The world tilted—suddenly, gravity shifted sideways. Cars skidded across the street, paper and debris tumbled through the air, and people clung desperately to anything bolted down.

“YOU CAN CHANGE GRAVITY?!” Kairo screamed. He dangled three feet off the ground, holding onto a bike rack, eyes wide with disbelief.

“What the—” someone gasped, tumbling past in midair, arms and legs flailing.

Rivka crossed her arms, head tilted to compensate for the slanting world. “Honestly? I’m not surprised by anything you do anymore.”

I smirked, releasing my grip on the power. The world snapped back to normal. Dust settled.

“I’m only realizing this now, but... what’s that tattoo on your arm?” Zebbie asked, voice soft amidst the sudden chaos.

I glanced down. Lightning bolts, fierce and jagged, wound around my forearm. They spiraled into petals—a flower blooming in a storm.

“Oh, that?” I said, rotating my wrist so everyone could see. “It appeared during the fight. Star called it my **Willbrand**. I don’t really know what that means yet, but... yeah.”

The mark glowed faintly, flickering with energy. It felt like something alive, a secret waiting to be revealed.

Rivka arched an eyebrow. “A flower made of lightning. That’s actually kind of beautiful... and terrifying.”

Kairo dropped to the ground with a thud. “Great. First gravity, now mysterious tattoos. Next, you’ll be summoning dragons.”

I grinned wider. “Don’t tempt me.”

Smoke cleared. Somewhere distant, a siren wailed, echoing through the district. For now, at least, we were together—and ready for whatever came next.

The city never truly slept. Golden lanterns floated weightlessly along the streets, bobbing with the faint hum of mana that crackled in the air. Tower spires jutted up like spears of obsidian and crystal, etched with runes that pulsed faintly under the starlight. In the plaza where we stood, the cobblestones shimmered faintly, carrying traces of ancient enchantments. Crowds bustled still—even at this hour—merchants calling out with charms and relics, mages whispering incantations that fizzled in glowing sparks overhead.

It felt... alive. And yet, when Zebbie stepped toward me, everything else melted away.

“Hey,” she said, throwing her arms around me in an embrace. She hugged tighter than usual, head nestled against my chest, before pulling back with startled eyes. “Did you realize you’re sturdier now that you came back?” Her brows furrowed like she was measuring me not just with touch, but with her own sense for the magical currents in my body.

The crystal lanterns reflected her surprise in soft hues of blue and violet.

Kairo, who had been leaning against a low wall carved with glyphs, raised an eyebrow. The faint glow of a wardstone behind him outlined the sharp smirk spreading across his face. “Yeah, it looks like you gained a few pounds...” he drawled. And then, with exaggerated emphasis, “...of muscle, I mean.”

Despite the words, something in his gaze lingered too long, as though he noticed something beyond muscle. He muttered under his breath, voice nearly stolen by the bustling winds that carried whispers in languages I didn’t know: “Do NOT pick a fight with him.”

But in this city where whispers carried unnaturally clear, I caught every word.

“You do know I heard that, right?” I said, stepping closer, my shadow stretching long across the rune-lit cobblestone as though it belonged to something much larger than me.

Kairo's grin faltered. He scratched his neck, laughter escaping like smoke from a cracked cauldron. "Yeah, yeah, I know. Just... making sure we're all on the same page." But the way his hand inched toward the dagger at his belt betrayed nerves he couldn't fully hide.

Zebbie's hold tightened on my arm, her eyes darting between us. The magic of the city reflected in them, like twin moons caught in a ripple of water. "He's right, though," she whispered, as if afraid the city itself was listening. "You're not just sturdier. You're changed. It's like—like the mana in you is stronger. Thicker. I've never... felt this much power from you before."

Her words set the air heavier around us. The floating lanterns above flickered, as if reacting. Somewhere in the distance, the rune-chimes hanging from a tower gave a mournful note, a sound the city only made when magic shifted.

"Well then," I said, drawing in a steadying breath. My voice carried across the plaza, and even a few passersby turned their heads before hurrying on, not wanting to linger. "It's about time we got serious."

The words etched a crack in the atmosphere. Kairo's smirk was gone completely now, his cautious stare almost reverent. Zebbie's hand trembled slightly on my sleeve, though she refused to let go.

And then, from beyond the crystal gates at the edge of the plaza, I felt it—a ripple of Elythium, like a predator stirring. The city wasn't just reacting to me. Something

out there was listening, waiting, drawn by the change they noticed too.

The magical city itself seemed to hold its breath.

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## The Real Test

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After everything we'd survived, making it back to base felt like waking from a nightmare into a dream. For a few days, nothing mattered except breathing. Rivka brewed strange teas no one trusted. "It'll wake you up," she swore, smirking as Zebbie sniffed the cup and wrinkled her nose.

"It'll kill us," I muttered, which earned me a playful shove.

Kairo sat apart, tracing god-symbols into the dirt, lips moving in quiet prayers. Zebbie kept the mood bright, filling the air with sparks that fizzled and popped. She laughed when one almost singed my hair.

I tested my portals with pebbles—sending them vanishing and reappearing in random places. One clinked into Rivka's mug. She glared at me, then grinned. For once, we were safe.

But peace never lasts.

Rivka's rest turned into sharpening blades until they gleamed. Kairo searched the wind, his voice low. "Storms come. I feel it in the air." Zebbie checked and re-checked our packs, finally snapping at me: "Don't look at me like that, Zeon. You're restless too."

She was right. I was.

We set out before sunrise, nerves and hope tangled together. Mist curled at our ankles. The silence of the forest was wrong. No birds, no insects, just the cold breath of something waiting.

Then we saw the town.

Crooked houses leaned like broken teeth. Hollow windows stared back at us. A dry fountain hunched in the square, its silence louder than screams.

“Something’s wrong,” I said quietly.

The first shriek tore through the mist.

Fragments burst from the ruins—jagged glass shaped into monsters, their cries like shattering mirrors.

I reacted instantly. A portal flared under Rivka, lifting her to a rooftop. “Take high ground!” Another sent Kairo into range. I yanked Zebbie aside just as claws slashed where she’d stood.

“Close one!” she gasped, already raising a shield.

Rivka loosed arrows wreathed in ice, her shots threading through my portals to pierce enemies from impossible angles. “Keep ‘em steady, Zeon!” she shouted. Mist veiled us, then she burned it away with a fireburst, exposing the creatures in a dazzling trap.

Kairo’s hands blazed with golden light. “By the gods—fall!” he roared, as pillars of fire and wind hammered down. Fragments cracked and staggered, shards spraying across the square.

Zebbie darted between us, shouting: "Shields up!" Radiance wrapped our bodies as her illusions fooled enemies into striking shadows. Her laughter cut through the chaos like sunlight.

Still, we were being overrun.

I clenched my fists. Time froze. Silence slammed into place, the battlefield caught mid-motion. Rivka's arrow hung in the air, and a fragment's claw hovered inches from Kairo's throat.

In those stolen seconds, I dragged my friends out of danger, shifted portals into killing positions, and whispered to myself, "Faster. Smarter. Stronger."

When time snapped forward, everything shifted. Rivka's arrow struck dead-on. Kairo blasted his foe apart. Zebbie's shield flared just in time.

But the fragments adapted.

I bent gravity to my will, forcing their bodies down as if anchored in stone. My friends, though, are light as air. Rivka leapt impossibly high, raining destruction from above. Kairo's lightning tore through a collapsing portal, obliterating three at once. Zebbie hurled radiant orbs like stars, laughing even as sweat soaked her brow.

"Keep pushing!" I shouted.

Then the ground shook.

The fragments fused, shards rising and knitting together into one massive beast. A storm of glass and hate, its roar splitting the air.

“Oh stars,” Rivka muttered. “That’s new.”

I forced portals into chains, binding its limbs. “Hold it steady!”

Rivka’s bow blazed with frost. “On your mark, Zeon!”

Kairo lifted his hands, golden flames wreathing him.

“Strike as one!”

Zebbie raised a dome of light, shouting, “We’re covered—hit it now!”

I pushed harder than ever—slowing time, twisting space, crushing the beast under invisible weight. “Now! Everything you’ve got!”

Rivka’s freezing arrows locked its joints. Kairo’s divine storm seared its body. Zebbie’s shields flared brighter than the rising sun. I warped space itself, dragging its form into a crushing fold.

The monster shattered in an explosion of shards. Silence followed, broken only by our ragged breathing.

The sunrise spilled across the ruins, painting broken stone in gold.

We stood bruised, bleeding—but alive.

Rivka dropped to one knee, catching her breath.

“That... counts as a win, right?”

Kairo chuckled, his voice calm and warm. “By the gods, yes. You fought like champions.”

Zebbie, glowing faintly, poked me in the ribs. “You almost got us killed, Zeon. But... you were brilliant.”

I laughed, exhausted. For once, I wasn't just Zeon the mistake. I was Zeon the fighter.

And I wasn't alone.

We didn't rush to leave. The town was broken, but the light made it beautiful. Rivka scavenged crystal shards, holding one up. "These'll make good arrows." Kairo etched wards into the earth. "To keep this place safe... or at least less cursed." Zebbie tried on a tattered cloak she'd found, twirling. "Well? Do I look mysterious?"

I grinned, opening a portal that dropped her onto a rooftop. She squealed, then laughed. "Not funny, Zeon!"

"I thought it was hilarious," Rivka muttered.

We sat together at the fountain. The water was gone, but the silence didn't feel threatening anymore. Just... still.

Rivka stretched. "Next time, you freeze time sooner. I almost lost my head out there."

"Next time," I said, "you brew tea that doesn't taste like swamp water."

She threw a shard at me. I ducked, laughing.

Kairo leaned back, eyes closed. "You three... remind me of light in dark places. Don't forget that." Zebbie leaned against me, her smile soft. "See? Even Mr. Serious agrees we're amazing."

For a while, we just sat. Broken walls all around us, sunlight creeping over the rooftops, our laughter echoing through the ruins.

When at last we stood, Rivka slung her bow over her shoulder. “Come on. We’ve got a long road.” Kairo whispered one last prayer. Zebbie skipped ahead, sparks trailing behind her.

I looked once more at the shattered town, then followed.

Together, we walked on—tired, bruised, but stronger. And for the first time, I believed we could face anything.

Not as long as we had each other.

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## Aether, The Capital of Veil-Bound

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After a few days of nothing but walking and passing quiet roads, we finally ran into some trouble—or rather, some merchants who were in it. A group of bandits had cornered them, and things weren't looking good until we stepped in. After the fight, the merchants told us they were headed to Aether, the capital of the Veil-Bound—home of the Aethergeists.

They asked if we'd travel with them, and we figured, why not? The road felt shorter with company...

The merchants guided us down the last stretch of road, and long before the city revealed itself, I felt it. The air shifted—lighter, sharper, almost humming with invisible threads of energy. Then the horizon cleared, and **Aether** rose before us.

I stopped without meaning to.

The city wasn't built—it was *woven*. Roofs curved upward like wings frozen in flight, each layer stacked in ripples as though the buildings had grown from waves instead of stone. Their crimson beams gleamed under the sun, lacquered and etched with curling glyphs that faintly glowed in rhythm with the lanterns strung along the streets. Golden tips crowned every roof, scattering sunlight into blazing arcs that danced across the city walls. And those walls—alive with spiraling patterns of

Elythium light—shifted like breath across a sleeping giant’s chest.

Zebbie tugged on my sleeve, her voice low with awe. “Zeon... are my eyes tricking me, or are those rooftops actually bending? They look like they’re about to slide off.”

I swallowed hard, shaking my head. “They’re not bending,” I murmured. “They’re flowing. Like water caught mid-surge.”

At the corners of each roof sat carved guardians—dragons, phoenixes, winged serpents—eyes polished so smooth they caught the light and seemed to glare down at us like sentinels.

Beside me, Rivka had already slipped into her world of analysis, muttering so quickly I could barely follow. She adjusted her glasses, her gaze flicking from beam to lantern to wall.

“The curves aren’t weakness—they’re brilliance,” she said at last, her tone clipped and sure. “Angled beams disperse pressure, the gilded edges amplify warding sigils, and those lanterns aren’t decorative. They’re channeling Elythium currents across the streets, stabilizing the city’s resonance field.”

Her voice caught, trembling for once not with nerves, but with excitement.

“This isn’t just architecture. It’s a masterpiece of living magic.”

Kairo snorted, crossing his arms with deliberate disdain.

“Or it’s just a bunch of smug architects showing off,” he said flatly. “Pretty roofs and glowing walls don’t stop an army. One good siege and this place crumbles like the rest.”

Zebbie turned on him, eyes narrowing. “Says the guy who tripped over a lantern post *twice* last night,” she shot back.

Kairo bristled. “That post shouldn’t have been there,” he said through his teeth.

I tried to smother my laugh, but it slipped out anyway. Kairo glared at me, of course, but I couldn’t stop smiling.

“Strong or not,” I said quietly, “I’ve never seen anything like this. It doesn’t just look alive... it *feels* alive.”

The sensation grew stronger as we passed beneath the gates—massive wooden doors painted with a swirling mural of stars orbiting a spiral of light. My fingers brushed the carvings and, for a heartbeat, I swore I felt them pulse. The city wasn’t welcoming us in. It was testing us.

Inside, Aether erupted into life.

Banners of blue and white cloth swayed over crowded markets, each inscribed with curling sigils that shimmered when caught by lantern light. Merchants shouted their wares in a chorus of overlapping voices.

The air was thick with the scent of sizzling meats, sweet pastries glazed with syrup, and incense burning from shrines tucked between shops. Children darted past with wooden toys, their laughter rising above the noise as lanterns drifted overhead in soft chains, glowing and shifting color like schools of fish following unseen currents.

Zebbie turned slowly, her wide eyes reflecting the lanternlight.

“Zeon... It’s like the whole city’s in on a secret,” she whispered. “Like it knows something we don’t.”

Rivka smirked faintly, already pulling a small journal from her satchel and scribbling furiously. “That’s because it does,” she replied. “The buildings aren’t separate—they’re one system. Every beam, every lantern, every carving is a channel in a greater construct. This isn’t a city in the ordinary sense. It’s... It’s an organism.”

Kairo muttered darkly, his gaze sliding across the crowd.

“Organism or not, it’ll bleed just like the rest,” he said.

But I barely heard him. I couldn’t stop staring.

Every lantern seemed to watch us. Every glyph hummed at the edge of my hearing. Standing there, in the pulsing heart of Aether, I knew one thing for certain.

The merchants guided us down the final hill, and Aether unfolded below like a living tapestry. The closer we came, the more the city revealed its nature—not a

place of chaotic streets and reckless crowds, but a vast, breathing dojo spread across stone and sky.

The gates themselves were not carved with shields or weapons, but with flowing lines that depicted stances, strikes, and meditative poses. It wasn't meant to boast of war, but of balance. The roofs still curved skyward like wings in flight, but now I saw how each tier seemed to flow into the next, the shapes echoing the rise and fall of breath. Lanterns swayed in long rows, glowing not with random colors but with deliberate, steady patterns, as though marking the rhythm of a heartbeat.

Inside the walls, silence and noise lived together strangely. Markets bustled, voices rose in trade, children darted laughing between stalls—but beneath it all, there was a current of discipline. Even in the chaos, there was structure. The streets bent at sharp angles that resembled forms in a kata. Walls carried painted glyphs of flowing figures mid-strike, each stroke of ink precise and deliberate. And everywhere, in courtyards and on raised platforms, men and women moved in practice—flowing from one stance to another in slow, perfect harmony, their motions radiating a faint shimmer of Elythium light.

Zebbie leaned close to me, whispering. “Zeon... they’re all... training. In the streets.”

Her words weren't an exaggeration. In one courtyard, a circle of fighters sparred barehanded, their strikes leaving faint streaks of light in the air. Beyond them, children no older than ten practiced meditative

breathing around a fountain, each exhale pulsing with faint threads of power. It wasn't a spectacle. It was routine.

Rivka's eyes practically glowed.

"It makes sense," she said, her tone quick and sharp. "Their architecture is only part of it. The city is a crucible. The entire environment is designed to refine spirit and body. Every street corner, every shrine, every lantern... it all shapes discipline. No wonder the Aethergeists are revered—here, even breathing is training."

Kairo scoffed, though he couldn't quite mask the way his gaze lingered on the sparring fighters. "Hmph. All this posturing... let's see how they fare when someone's blade finds their back," he said.

Zebbie crossed her arms.

"Maybe don't challenge an entire city to a fight before we even find an inn," she replied flatly.

I stayed quiet, but inside, I felt it. Every step deeper into Aether stirred something in me. The people weren't just living here. They were evolving here. The city wasn't a home—it was a training ground.

We hadn't been in the city more than a few minutes before the sound of clashing palms drew us to a wide courtyard. A circle of people had gathered around two fighters, barehanded, moving so fast it was hard to follow. Each strike left a faint ripple in the air, as though the force of their spirit pressed outward with the blow.

One fighter—an older man with silver hair tied into a knot—moved with deliberate patience, every motion measured. His opponent, a boy barely older than me, struck with fiery speed, his kicks slicing the air like blades. The difference was clear. The boy’s power came in bursts, bright and sharp. The man’s power was quiet, steady, an unbroken stream.

When the boy lunged recklessly, the elder pivoted, redirected his strike with a palm, and sent him sprawling. The boy hit the ground hard but was already scrambling back to his feet. There was no anger, only determination in his eyes.

“Again,” the boy said, bowing quickly.

The elder gave the faintest of smiles. “Again,” he replied, settling into a stance.

Zebbie leaned against me, eyes wide. “Zeon... did you see that? He didn’t even push him. He just... *shifted* him.”

Rivka was scribbling notes furiously, her glasses slipping down her nose. “It’s not physical strength. It’s alignment. He’s matching the boy’s energy, redirecting it. The more refined the spirit, the less effort it takes. That’s the key...”

Kairo folded his arms, unimpressed, though I caught him watching the fighters a little too closely. “Hmph. Fancy tricks. If you want someone on the ground, a good blade does the job faster.”

“Maybe,” Zebbie replied, smirking. “But I think the point is they don’t *need* blades.”

Before Kairo could answer, the sparring ended. The elder bowed to his student, then turned, his sharp gaze sweeping across the onlookers. His eyes landed on us—and lingered. I froze. It wasn’t hostility. It was... *curiosity*.

“You’re outsiders,” the man said. His voice carried across the courtyard like rolling thunder, calm but impossible to ignore. He studied us for a long moment, then his gaze narrowed slightly, as though sensing something beneath the surface. “You carry resonance.”

“Resonance?” Zebbie asked cautiously.

The elder stepped closer, and I felt his weight before he even moved. Not just his body—his *spirit*. Every footstep was grounded, unshakable, as if the earth itself supported him.

“Resonance of spirit,” he explained. “Power comes not from grasping at it, but from becoming it. The Aethergeists walk this path—to refine body, mind, and soul as one. Each breath is discipline. Each strike is true. The more you evolve as a person, the more your spirit answers.”

His eyes flicked over me, then Zebbie, and finally rested on Rivka and Kairo. His expression shifted slightly, as though he’d glimpsed something hidden. For a heartbeat, I thought he knew us—knew what we were.

Then he nodded once, almost to himself. “The city watches all who enter. If you carry strength, it will test you. If you carry weakness, it will teach you. But if you carry deceit...” His eyes sharpened. “It will break you.”

A hush fell over the courtyard. Even the merchants who’d escorted us stood straighter, bowing their heads slightly.

Zebbie whispered, barely audible. “...Zeon, I don’t think this is just a city. It’s... a trial.”

And for once, I didn’t laugh at her. Because I felt it too.

The elder’s voice carried like a bell across the courtyard.

“You carry strength, but strength untested is only noise. Here in Aether, we measure spirit with the body itself. No blades. No charms. Only fists and breath.”

The crowd murmured with approval. Zebbie nudged me forward.

“My brother first,” she said quickly.

“Zebbie—!” I hissed, but the elder was already bowing. The eyes of a hundred onlookers pressed into me. Reluctantly, I stepped into the circle.

The elder struck without warning. His palm blurred toward my chest—fast, too fast—until instinct seized me. *The world slowed to a crawl.* His hand drifted through thick syrup, every heartbeat a lifetime. My breath thundered in my ears.

*You slipped again*, Star whispered in the back of my mind, its voice sharp and amused. *Time bends whether you want it to or not.*

“Not now,” I muttered, forcing myself to move. I sidestepped, letting time snap back into place. The elder’s palm sliced empty air.

Gasps rippled through the onlookers. The elder’s eyes narrowed.

“Interesting,” he said, his tone unreadable.

I lashed out with a clumsy punch. He caught my wrist, redirected—yet gravity buckled beneath my feet, tilting the stone. I stumbled but didn’t fall, the force pulling me sideways instead.

The elder froze. His gaze pierced me, but it wasn’t anger. It was recognition.

“Impossible...” he breathed.

The courtyard had fallen silent as the Lord of Aether crumpled to the ground.

He was no mere elder, no wandering master. This was Harin Veynar, the Lord of Aether himself. The undefeated palm of the city. The guardian of its gates. The man whose spirit had never once broken.

And he had fallen from nothing more than a glance.

The gathered crowd recoiled in horror. Some dropped to their knees in prayer, others whispered frantically, their voices trembling.

“The Lord—”

“He never falters—!”

“What have they done to him?”

I dropped beside him. His breath rasped shallow, sweat beading across his brow. His lips moved faintly, just enough for me to hear one broken word:

“Forgotten...”

Then his eyes rolled shut, and he went limp.

Zebbie grabbed my arm, her grip tight. “Zeon, he looked at *us*. He... he saw something.”

Rivka was already at his side, her fingers on his pulse. “Still alive. Stable. No signs of Elythispo disruption. This wasn’t a strike—it was recognition. Something he *sensed* in you both.”

Kairo barked a bitter laugh, though it rang hollow. “Recognition? The strongest man in this city drops at a glance, and you’re calling it ‘recognition’? Either he’s weaker than his reputation, or you two are hiding something.”

From deep within me, *Star stirred*, its tone sharper than usual.

*The Lord of Aether does not fall easily, the sword murmured. I have felt kings tremble, gods fracture, but never this. What are you, Zeon? What lies beneath your skin that even a master cannot endure?*

“I don’t know,” I whispered, my voice shaking.

*Liar.*

The murmur of the crowd built into a roar. Fear. Suspicion. Accusations. Every eye burned into us.

“Outsiders!”

“They cursed him!”

“Demon-blooded!”

Then came the thunder of footsteps. Dozens of Aethergeists in ceremonial robes surged into the courtyard, their aura heavy as storm winds. At their head strode a woman with hair bound in silver rings, her presence commanding silence.

She stopped over the Lord’s body, her jaw clenched tight. The disciples around her bowed low.

“Master Harin, Lord of Aether,” she said, voice trembling despite her composure. Then her gaze lifted, locking onto me and Zebbie. “What happened here?”

“He collapsed,” Rivka answered before I could speak. “No strikes landed. No Elythispo surge. It was instantaneous—neurological, not physical.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed, suspicion hardening her expression. “And yet it was you he looked at before he fell.”

I swallowed hard. “I didn’t hurt him. I couldn’t, even if I tried.”

Her gaze flicked to Zebbie. Zebbie shrank under the weight of it, her hand clutching mine tighter.

“You two will come with us,” the woman said coldly. “Until the Lord wakes and speaks, you remain under

watch. If he does not..." Her eyes burned with quiet fury. "...then Aether itself will judge you."

Gasps rippled through the crowd. The words carried weight—not just a warning, but a sentence waiting for proof.

We were seized, hands firm on our arms, pulling us away from the courtyard.

Behind us, the Lord of Aether lay unmoving, his breath shallow but steady. His final word hung in the air like a curse.

*Forgotten.*

Inside my mind, Star's voice was quieter now, uneasy in a way I'd never heard before.

*Zeon... even I do not know what that means. And that terrifies me.*

We were led into the Council Hall of Aether — a vast chamber of stone and flowing banners, where glowing glyphs spiraled across the walls like rivers of light. At the center stood a circle of robed masters, each a pillar of discipline and authority. Their eyes cut into us like blades.

Zebbie and I stood at the heart of the circle, Rivka and Kairo just behind us. The silence pressed down until one of the masters spoke, his voice low and sharp.

"You step into our city, and our Lord falls. His spirit has never bent in forty years. Yet one look at you brought him to his knees. Explain yourselves."

“I don’t know what happened,” I said quickly, voice cracking. “I didn’t do anything to him—”

“Lies,” another councilor snapped. “We all saw his eyes. He *saw* you before he fell. What are you hiding?”

Zebbie stepped forward, fists clenched at her side. “We didn’t hurt him! If you want to blame someone, blame me—I’m the one he looked at last!”

The masters whispered among themselves. Some looked uneasy, others furious.

Kairo scoffed. “Are you blind? They’re just kids. If your mighty Lord faints from looking at them, maybe he’s weaker than you think.”

The nearest master’s hand twitched, as if tempted to strike him down, but Rivka cut in, her tone firm and analytical. “There’s no proof of attack. What happened to the Lord was recognition shock — his mind identified something he couldn’t reconcile. Zeon and Zebbie carry *something* unrecorded in any of your systems. That doesn’t make them guilty.”

“Something unrecorded is something dangerous,” a woman hissed. “Our Lord has never faltered. If he cannot withstand their presence, why should we allow them to remain?”

The voices rose around us, suspicion and fear building into a storm. Zebbie’s hand tightened around mine, and my heart hammered in my chest.

*Inside, Star whispered, uneasy. They will condemn you, Zeon. They do not understand, and what they do not understand, they will destroy.*

I opened my mouth to protest again—

The great doors boomed open.

Every head turned.

The Lord of Aether walked into the chamber.

He stood tall despite his earlier collapse, though his steps were slower than before. His presence filled the hall instantly — a tide of silence washing over the chaos. The masters bowed low, their fury suddenly stilled.

“My Lord!” one of them exclaimed. “You should be resting—”

“Enough,” he said, raising a hand. His voice carried like a bell. Calm. Steady. Irrefutable.

He walked to the center, stopping between me and Zebbie. His gaze lingered on us both — not fearful this time, but thoughtful, heavy with unspoken meaning.

Then he turned to the council.

“What happened was not their fault,” he declared. “It was mine.”

The council erupted in confusion.

“But Lord—!”

“You collapsed!”

“They—”

“It was my failing,” Harin said firmly, his tone cutting through every protest. “I saw something in them my spirit was not prepared to face. That weakness is mine, not theirs. Do not hold children responsible for the blindness of an old man.”

The words struck the chamber like thunder. The council fell silent, stunned. The man they revered above all had not only absolved us — he had *taken the blame himself*.

Zebbie blinked, her lips parted. “He... he’s defending us,” she whispered.

I stared at him, my chest tight with confusion. Why would he protect us when he clearly *knew* we were different?

*Interesting*, Star whispered, its voice soft and intrigued. *He knows more than he lets on. And yet... he shields you. Why?*

The Lord of Aether finally turned back to me, his eyes meeting mine.

“Zeon. Zebbie.” His voice was quiet now, but every syllable carried weight. “There are truths in this world even I cannot name. Do not let fear drive you from your path. For now, you are under my protection.”

He faced the council once more. “This matter is closed.”

And just like that, the interrogation was over.

The Inner Citadel of Aether was less a palace and more a temple carved into the bones of the sky itself. Light poured through towering stained-glass murals of the eight gods, painting us in divine color as Kael led us forward.

Star's voice coiled inside my mind. *Every step you take here presses deeper into judgment. The walls remember. The gods remember. The man you are about to face remembers more than he should.*

At the end of the hall, Lord Harin Veynar sat upon his throne of quartz and stormlight. He did not rise; he did not need to. Authority radiated from him like a tide, pulling the air tight in our lungs.

"Zeon Cosmo. Zebbie Cosmo." His voice was calm, measured. "You carry names that echo deeper than these walls care to admit."

Zebbie's fingers twitched at her side. "You already knew that back in the council chamber."

The Lord's sharp eyes glinted. "I did. But knowing and weighing are not the same. Here, in my citadel, I decide which knowledge is burden... and which is purpose."

Kael stood at his father's side, staff resting against his shoulder. His jaw was tight, his storm-grey gaze flicking between us and his father. Protective. Suspicious.

The Lord leaned forward slightly. "Your presence fractured the council. It will fracture more than that if handled poorly. So I ask you—what is it you seek within Aether?"

My throat tightened. I wanted to answer, but Star's whisper cut through first.

*Choose carefully, Zeon. Speak of power, and you will be chained. Speak of ignorance, and you will be dismissed. Speak of truth, and you may walk free—or fall.*

I steadied myself. "We don't seek power. We seek answers. Answers about what's happening to us... about what we're becoming."

The Lord's gaze lingered on me, unreadable. For a heartbeat, I thought he might laugh—or strike me down. Instead, his eyes softened, just slightly. "Honesty. Rare, even here."

Kael stepped forward. "Father, with respect—these outsiders bring danger into our walls. You said yourself their names echo ghosts best left buried. How can we trust them?"

The Lord's eyes flicked to his son, then back to me. "Trust, Kael, is not given. It is tested."

He rose at last, his height casting a long shadow across the chamber.

"You will remain in my citadel. Under my watch, under my son's eye. Not as prisoners, but not as free wanderers either. In time, you may prove whether your names herald ruin... or renewal."

Kael slammed his staff to the floor, bowing his head. "Yes, Father." Then, to me, his eyes locked sharply: "Don't mistake this for welcome."

The Lord's voice dropped low, almost private. "Rest tonight, Cosmo blood. Tomorrow... we begin."

The chamber doors closed behind us, heavy as judgment itself. Zebbie finally let out a long breath. "Well. That wasn't terrifying at all."

Rivka smirked. "Didn't kill us. I'll take it as a win."

But Kael's storm-grey stare burned into me long after we'd left the hall.

The corridors stretched like veins of light through stone. The walls weren't just carved rock but living crystal, pulsing faintly with etheric breath. Murals of battles past towered above us, glowing faintly with runes that shifted as we walked, as if they watched our every step.

Kael walked a pace ahead, staff tapping against the marble floor with measured rhythm. Every sound echoed, swallowed by the height of the ceilings.

I quickened my steps until I was closer to him. "Back in the training halls... You didn't fight like a normal soldier. How do you gain power like that? Is it something you're born into, or do you... earn it?"

Kael didn't look at me at first. His jaw tightened, and he let the silence hang long enough that my question almost felt like an insult. Then, without breaking stride, he said quietly: "You don't gain it. You become it."

Zebbie blinked. "Cryptic much?"

He stopped, turning sharply to face us. His storm-grey eyes caught the citadel's light, reflecting it like blades of tempered steel.

"Aethergeist is not a weapon you pick up. It is the spirit of becoming. Every person carries a Geist Core—an echo of their true self. When it awakens, your identity itself becomes your strength."

Star hissed in my mind, amused. *Doctrine and discipline. He's feeding you the priest's version. Still... listen well. His words are truth wrapped in chains.*

Kael walked more slowly now, as if lecturing was a burden he was nonetheless bound to carry. "You want to understand strength? Then understand this: confidence is control. The clearer you are about who you are, the sharper your Geist becomes. Doubt, guilt, self-loathing—those are poison. They corrode your core until your power fractures, malfunctions, or even consumes you. But growth—acceptance of yourself, no matter how brutal—forces your Geist to evolve."

Zebbie folded her arms, studying him. "So... you're saying people literally weaponize their personalities? That's insane."

Kael's expression hardened. "It is true. And you're standing in the citadel that proves it."

Rivka smirked, tilting her head. "So let me guess: you all climb stages like some kind of spiritual ladder, right?"

Kael's eyes flicked to her, unimpressed. "A ladder must fall from before the second rung. There are four stages. The first—Veritas Echo—when your Geist Core awakens, usually in trauma or revelation. Raw, unstable, emotional. The second—Soul Forme—is when you accept that truth, shaping it into a state of stability. The third—Mythos Bloom—when your power becomes symbolic, the embodiment of your philosophy. Few ever reach the final stage: Eidolon Ascendant. That is the unity of self, action, and belief. Transcendence. The power to reshape reality itself."

I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly dry. "And you've... reached which?"

Kael's silence was telling. His eyes didn't boast; they warned.

Star whispered, sharp.

*He hasn't reached the fourth. If he had, boy, you wouldn't be asking questions. You'd be bowing.*

Zebbie whistled softly. "Alright, so, four steps to godhood. Got it. But how does it actually appear? Everyone's different, right?"

Kael's mouth twitched, the faintest ghost of a smile. "We call them Willsmith Subtypes. Your Geist expresses itself according to your core desire. Three paths. Some dodge fate: the Vireo. Instincts sharpen so keenly they slip through blades and bullets alike. They move because the soul knows survival."

He gestured sharply to the side, and the mural on the wall flickered, briefly showing a shadowed figure weaving between dozens of enemies, untouchable.

“Some resist fate: the Gravemind. They harden their bodies, their weapons, until they cannot yield. Duty becomes armor.”

The mural shifted again—a warrior of crystal and iron, unyielding as storms crashed upon him.

“And some reshape fate: the Dominion Pulse. They project their will so strongly that the world obeys. Force, barrier, aura—it doesn’t matter. Their belief becomes law.”

He planted his staff on the floor. The sound rang out like thunder. A ripple of pressure shot down the corridor, forcing the torchlight to flicker and our hearts to stutter. I felt my knees nearly give.

“I walk the Dominion path.”

Zebbie steadied herself, eyes wide. “What the—did you just—”

Rivka whistled. “Okay, intimidation factor: ten out of ten.”

Kael drew the power back in, the corridor still humming faintly from the aftershock. His eyes were sharp, but his voice was calm again. “Most people never master more than one path. A rare few touch two. But there is a myth: the Tri-Sigil. The one who embodies all three, without collapse. Dodge fate. Resist fate. Reshape fate.”

Star stirred within me, almost reverent.  
*Not myth. Memory. The path your blood will walk, whether  
you want it or not.*

I forced myself to breathe evenly, though my chest felt tight. “So... power isn’t just training. It’s... identity. You don’t control Aethergeist. You become it.”

Kael’s eyes locked on mine, hard as stone.  
“Exactly. And you, Cosmo... your name already makes you dangerous. Because if your Geist reflects who you truly are...” He stepped closer, his voice lowering.  
“...then what kind of world will it remake when you finally accept it?”

The silence that followed felt heavier than stone, thicker than air. For the first time, I realized the truth Kael lived by: here in Aether, the greatest battlefield wasn’t land or sky.

It was the self.

The Training Hall was alive with silence. Ether-lanterns floated in the vaulted air, their pale light bending through drifting dust. The runes on the marble floor pulsed faintly, waiting for blood, sweat, or willpower to feed them.

Kael strode to the center circle, planting his staff in the etched lines.  
“This place knows truth. It accepts only what you are, never what you pretend to be. Step forward, Cosmo.”

My legs felt heavier than they should, but I forced myself into the circle. The marble hummed beneath my boots, sensing me, judging me.

Zebbie's voice carried from behind. "Don't let him bully you, Zeon."

Rivka leaned against a statue, smirking. "I'm voting on how long you last. Ten seconds?"

Kael's eyes didn't waver. "This is not a duel. It is a revelation. Show me your Geist—or this hall will show it for you."

I clenched my fists. "And what if I don't even know how?"

Kael's voice was sharp, cutting. "Then you will break."

He raised his staff. Power rippled outward, pressing the air into walls. My chest tightened under the weight, every breath like dragging a stone.

Star stirred inside me, urgent.  
*Don't resist him, boy. If you resist, you'll shatter. Lean into who you are. Let the Core speak.*

The marble beneath my feet blazed with runes, locking me into the trial. Kael advanced, Dominion Pulse coiling around him like a living storm. "Identity is survival, Cosmo. Who are you?"

The words slammed into me as force, not sound. My knees buckled, pain blooming in my skull. Doubt clawed at me, whispering all the things I wasn't—warrior, leader, savior.

Zebbie shouted from the edge. “Zeon, don’t listen to him! You know who you are!”

But did I?

I saw flashes—my reflection in the mirror, ordinary and fragile; the fragment-beast from the basement, screaming glitch-light; Star’s endless, burning eyes.

Kael’s Dominion bore down harder, cracks spiderwebbing across the marble. “Answer me! Who are you?”

Something tore inside me—like glass breaking under pressure. Heat flooded my chest. My vision warped, the hall around me stretching and bending.

Star roared.

*Yes! Tear it open! Let the Geist Core breathe!*

The pressure collapsed outward from me in a violent pulse. The runes beneath me blazed white, flaring past their design. Space itself seemed to flicker—walls shivering, lanterns duplicating and snapping back.

Kael staggered a step, eyes wide. His Dominion faltered for the first time.

I gasped, clutching my head, as power spiraled uncontrolled around me. Fragments of my identity broke loose:

The boy who wanted normalcy.

The brother who had to protect.

The descendant of something far greater.

The forces collided, unstable, twisting the air into jagged distortions.

Kael's voice cut through, harsher now. "Control it, or it will consume you!"

I screamed—not in fear, but in defiance. The distortion collapsed into a single surge of light, bursting from me in a shockwave. It hurled Kael back, slamming his staff into the ground to brace himself.

Silence followed. The marble smoked at my feet. My chest heaved, body trembling, but the Core inside me still burned like a newborn star.

Zebbie rushed forward, only to be stopped by Kael's raised hand. His storm-grey eyes fixed on me—not cold now, but... wary.

"This... was not Veritas Echo," he muttered. "No first whisper burns like that."

Rivka whistled, low. "Well. I think our betting pool just exploded."

Star's laughter echoed in my skull, raw and wild. *They still think you are a fledgling, boy. They don't see what I see. They don't see what you will become.*

Kael steadied his staff, but his gaze lingered on me too long. His words, when they came, were quieter, almost reluctant.

"You are dangerous, Zeon Cosmo. More than I thought. And that makes you a threat... or a salvation."

The lanterns flickered once, as if the hall itself agreed.

And in the back of my mind, I realized—I hadn't just shown my power. I had terrified him.

The hall still shivered from my outburst, runes flickering as though uncertain how to reset. Kael's staff pressed into the ground, his breathing controlled but heavier than before. His eyes stayed on me a long time before shifting.

"To think a Cosmo bloodline could still... No. This is unfinished." His gaze sharpened on Zebbie. "Step forward."

Zebbie's eyebrows shot up. "Wait—me? He just nearly ripped your training hall apart. You want round two?"

Kael's voice was flat. "You both carry the name. The hall will not be satisfied with only one truth."

Rivka grinned from her perch. "Oh, this is going to be fun."

Zebbie muttered, "Easy for you to say," before walking past me into the center circle. She shot me a quick sideways look. "Try not to look so worried, Zeon. I'm not planning to explode."

Kael leveled his staff. "Then show us."

The runes ignited beneath her feet, spiraling outward in patterns different from mine—tighter, sharper, like blades forming around her. The hall's light bent inward, concentrating instead of scattering.

Kael unleashed the same Dominion weight as before, the air pressing down like a crushing tide. Zebbie

staggered for a moment, but instead of yielding, she laughed.

“Really? That’s it? You’re just trying to scare me?”

Kael’s eyes narrowed. “Mockery won’t save you.”

She straightened, grin defiant. “Who said I need saving?”

The pressure intensified—but this time, instead of breaking, it fractured around her like glass. Shards of invisible weight split and drifted, crackling against the runes. Her hair lifted in the force, her eyes glowing faintly.

Star’s whisper brushed my skull.

*Ah... the sister knows herself more keenly than you, boy. She sharpens identity into a weapon.*

Kael’s stance shifted, staff lowering slightly. “Vireo instinct...” he muttered. “No—something sharper.”

Zebbie raised a hand, and the broken shards of Dominion pressure snapped inward, condensing into lances of shimmering light. They hovered around her like orbiting blades, humming with tension.

Rivka actually stood up at that. “Well damn. That’s not beginner work.”

Zebbie grinned, eyes blazing. “You wanted to know who I am?” She flicked her fingers, and the lances shattered into sparks. “I’m me. And I don’t bend for anyone.”

The marble floor pulsed once, sealing her trial. The runes dimmed, leaving her standing tall, chest heaving but unbroken.

Kael studied her with a mixture of irritation and reluctant respect. “Stubbornness as strength... dangerous, but unyielding. You are no shadow of your brother.”

He turned, staff clicking against the floor. “Both of you are unstable. But you are also undeniable.”

Star’s voice curled like smoke in my thoughts. *Together, you are not halves. You are mirrors. The boy bends the world without knowing himself. The girl wields herself like a blade to cut the world. Both paths lead to ruin—or divinity.*

Zebbie came back to my side, smirking despite the sweat on her brow. “See? Didn’t explode.”

I exhaled, tension draining from my shoulders. But the truth burned in my chest: we weren’t just visitors anymore. We had shaken the Citadel itself.

And Kael knew it.

The Citadel was all light and silence when the trials ended. My body still remembered the fight—the crushing weight of Kael’s Dominion pressing into my chest, the sting of sweat in my eyes, the sharp crackle of Zebbie’s Geist echoing in my ears. None of us spoke. Our footsteps fell too heavy in the hush as we followed the Lord of Aether down a corridor lined with silver banners, their fabric shifting faintly with the breath of unseen winds.

Kael walked at his father's side like a shadow carved in stone, his grip white-knuckled on his staff, his jaw set as if he were holding his own words back with his teeth.

When we reached the archway to the Lord's lair, the old man turned. His gaze fixed on his son—unblinking, immeasurable. The weight of that look was like the Citadel itself leaning down.

"Kael." His voice filled the space, cold and resonant, as if the stone itself carried it. "These youths are storms unbound. They carry fire greater than their years, yet without a compass they will burn themselves—and perhaps us all. You will go with them. Guide them."

My stomach twisted. His son? With us?

Kael's face hardened, eyes sharpening to steel. "No," he said flatly. "My duty is here. To the Citadel. To you. I will not waste myself chasing strays who don't even grasp the weight of their power."

His glare cut straight through me like a blade. It burned in my chest.

The words bubbled hot on my tongue, sharp and reckless, but before I could speak, the Lord lifted one hand. The silence obeyed him instantly.

"Sometimes the fortress," he said, his tone like thunder on the horizon, "is not the stone we defend, Kael. Sometimes it is the fire we choose to follow."

The words hung in the chamber, heavy as storm clouds—

And then the storm broke.

The ground itself convulsed. A roar split the air, deafening, wrong, shaking banners loose from their mounts. The stone beneath us cracked, and distant screams carried up through the Citadel's throat.

My blood froze. I knew that sound. I'd heard it once before, in the basement of our house. A sound that scraped the soul raw.

Fragments.

The ceiling above fractured like glass. The sky beyond was torn open, jagged cracks vomiting horrors of broken light. They fell like a rain of monsters, limbs twitching, bodies stuttering through reality in glitches and sparks.

Kael swore. Disbelief cut across his perfect mask. "The barriers—they're failing—"

He surged forward, staff blazing white with Dominion. The force of it made the air vibrate in my bones. He struck, crushing one Fragment into shards of smoke, then another, and another. But more spilled through, clawing, shrieking, reality-bending around them as they flooded the streets. Guards fell like paper against them.

"Zeon!"

Zebbie's voice hit me like a slap.

I moved. We all moved.

Rivka slammed her generator to life, its coils screaming as power coursed through my katana, runes searing

white along the blade until it hummed in my hands like a living star.

Zebbie's Geist flared, silver threads lashing from her fingertips, weaving into blades sharper than glass. They sang through the air, slicing three Fragments in half before their claws could touch her. She shouted something wordless, fury twisting her face.

And me—

Something tore open inside my chest. Not pain. Not fear. Something deeper. A choice. A will. My strike tore the air itself, space warping with my swing. The world bent, reality stuttering around me. The Fragment in my path howled, shredded not by steel but by the break in the fabric of the sky itself.

The words tore out of me, raw, not my own.

"This city stands because we will it to stand!"

They carried more than my voice. They carried weight, age, and a fire older than me.

We fought street by street, blood and smoke and light. The Fragments shrieked, swarming from every crack in the sky, but we met them—Zebbie slicing with her threads, Rivka's devices sparking shields and blasts, Kael hammering Dominion down like the wrath of mountains. And me, carving not just through bodies, but through reality itself.

At last, the final shriek faded. The cracks sealed with a sound like breaking glass in reverse. The sky went still. The city was scarred, but it still stood.

I collapsed to one knee, chest heaving, sweat burning my eyes. My blade dimmed, steam rising from its edge.

Across the courtyard, Kael stood drenched in sweat, his braid loose, his staff trembling in his grip. For the first time since I'd met him, he looked less like a statue—and more like a man.

"You..." His voice rasped, hoarse, unbelieving. "...you fought as if this city were yours to protect."

I met his eyes. No triumph, no smile. Just the fire still raging in my chest.

Kael's jaw clenched. He looked to his father, then back at me. His lips pressed thin, as if he were fighting the words with every part of him.

Then, slowly, he lowered his staff.

"Very well," he said, each word dragged from stone. "I will go with you. But not as your ally." His eyes burned into me like nails hammered deep. "As your measure. Prove you are more than chaos in flesh. Prove you deserve what you carry."

My fists tightened on my sword hilt. I wanted to laugh in his face. I wanted to scream back at him. Instead, I forced myself to nod. Because we'd done it—we'd carved respect from him, whether he'd admit it or not.

The Lord of Aether hadn't moved. He hadn't spoken through the entire battle. He didn't need to. The faint curve of his mouth told me everything.

The slight grin on his face told me everything.

Like he'd been waiting for this all along.

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## The Holy Kingdom

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The Citadel still breathed like a wounded beast. The Fragments had been beaten back, but the air smelled of burnt stone and blood, and the very walls seemed to listen as we gathered in the high council chamber. The firelight caught on marble pillars, throwing our shadows tall and sharp across the floor.

Rivka's holographic map flickered to life, hovering between us in threads of gold. The world spread wide before our eyes—oceans, fractured continents, glowing lines marking hidden roads. Her gloved finger tapped a single point. It flared bright.

"The Holy Kingdom," she said, voice taut but steady. "Their archives are older than the Citadel itself. If we want answers about Zeon—about what happened to him in the trial—this is where we'll find them."

I shifted uneasily. Just the name carried weight. The Holy Kingdom.

Before I could speak, Zebbie leaned forward, grinning like she'd just been handed the keys to something forbidden. "Finally. Something interesting. You're telling me we get to storm into the most secretive vaults in the world? Count me in."

Rivka's head snapped toward her, sharp glare through her goggles. "You don't understand the risk—"

“Oh, I do.” Zebbie tossed her hair back, smirking. “It’s dangerous, right? Good. You think I want to sit here while everyone whispers about Zeon like he’s cursed? Nah. If there’s even a chance of finding the truth, I’m with him.”

Her words steadied me more than I wanted to admit. Even when she teased, even when she laughed at the wrong time, Zebbie always stood beside me.

Kael spoke next, his staff ringing as it touched the floor. His voice was low, unyielding. “She’s not wrong. The Kingdom is perilous, but its vaults hold truths that even the Citadel has forgotten. If Zeon is to understand the storm he carries, he must go there.” His eyes met mine like a brand. “And hope is not to be wasted.”

The Lord of Aether stirred then, rising like a mountain. His voice rolled through the chamber, absolute. “Then it is chosen. The Fold Gate will open.”

The words sent a chill through me. “The... Fold Gate?”

Rivka adjusted her goggles, her generator humming at her hip. “It isn’t a doorway, Zeon. It’s a scar in the world, carved open and kept from collapsing by runes. You step through, and the world folds. One heartbeat, you’re here. The next—you’re there.”

Zebbie’s eyes widened, her grin growing brighter. “That sounds insane. Like some kind of world-breaking ride. Zeon, we’re doing this. No question.” She elbowed me.

Her excitement made me smile despite the weight in my chest. A flicker of recognition stirred inside me,

something I hadn't meant to reveal. The words left my mouth before I could stop them. "...Isn't that just like my portals?"

The silence that followed was absolute.

Rivka froze, her lips pressed tight. Kairo clenched his fists, shoulders tense. They already knew, but their eyes cut to me with one clear warning: shut up.

But Kael's reaction was different. His grip on his staff turned his knuckles white. His voice rang sharp, dangerous. "...What did you say?"

My throat was dry. "I've... done it before. Not with runes. Not with anchors. I can open space. Step through it. Pull others with me."

Kael's composure cracked. For a heartbeat, I saw it—fear, raw and unguarded. "Impossible. No one commands the Fold without centuries of blood, craft, and sacrifice. For you to do it with nothing but will..." His words faltered, his iron mask splitting. "...you should not exist."

The Lord of Aether rose to his full height, and the chamber bent beneath his presence. Shadows trembled. Even Kael lowered his eyes. The Lord's gaze pinned me, unblinking.

"You speak truth?"

Every muscle in me screamed to stay silent. But I forced the word out. "...Yes."

The silence that followed crushed me flat. Then he spoke, voice rolling like thunder.

“Then you are not storms unbound. You are the storm that binds—and breaks.”

Zebbie stepped closer, her grin gone, but her hand brushing my arm. Her whisper cut through the heavy air. “Don’t flinch, Zeon. If you can bend the Fold, you’re stronger than all of them.”

I swallowed hard. For the first time, it wasn’t her reckless grin that held me steady—it was her faith.

It wasn’t walking. It wasn’t falling. It was everything—everywhere—at once.

The world tore open, colors splitting into shards I didn’t have names for. My body stretched to infinity and collapsed to nothing in the same breath. Each heartbeat was an eternity. Each breath, a lifetime.

And then the whispers began. Not voices from outside. Voices from within.

*Doubt, and you are devoured.*

*Fear, and you are torn apart.*

I stumbled forward, clutching my chest. Beside me, Zebbie laughed raggedly, defiant even here. “This is—insane!” she shouted. “Zeon—don’t stop—keep moving!”

Her voice cut through the chaos like a rope.

The Fold bent. Warped. Pulled toward me. My portals flickered, threads of light weaving into the storm. The

Gate itself seemed to lean, recognizing me, resonating with me.

Kael gasped as the path twisted. Rivka cursed, trying to stabilize her generator. Kairo gritted his teeth, fighting to move forward. But me—and Zebbie—we walked in sync, her reckless encouragement anchoring me when the storm threatened to take me whole.

And then—

We were through.

The bells rang first.

Not once, not twice, but in a cascade — as if the sky itself was iron, struck again and again. Each toll ran down my spine, hollow and deep, until even my storm went quiet.

And then I saw it.

The Holy Kingdom.

Streets wide enough to drown armies. Spires like spears pointed skyward, their tips gilded so that sunlight itself bowed before them. Mosaics stretched across the cathedral walls — not paintings, but sermons carved in glass, each piece catching fire in the sun until the saints seemed to burn alive in color.

People knelt in droves. Pilgrims, beggars, merchants, nobles. It didn't matter. When the bells called, they fell to their knees, foreheads pressed to the stone, lips moving in rhythm with the toll. The whole city breathed together. Not as people. As worship.

Zebbie muttered at my side, “They don’t even look up. Like the bells own them.”

Her voice was small, swallowed by the chant.

Kael’s staff struck the ground — one sharp crack that cut through the hum. His eyes raked across the plaza, cold and severe.

“This is not a city,” he said. “This is the fortress of Divinity. The High Synod rules from here. Their word is law. Their silence is law. And their Divinity binds it all together.”

“Divinity...” I started, but the word felt heavy in my mouth. “It isn’t Geist, is it?”

Kael’s gaze snapped to me. “No. Geist is will. Wild, unshaped. Yours is proof enough of that. But Divinity...” He raised his hand toward the cathedral, fingers trembling, as if pointing alone risked judgment. “...Divinity descends. It is not born, it is bestowed. Power tied not to the self, but to faith. To obey. To the gods themselves.”

The air shifted. A line of templars marched across the plaza. Their armor wasn’t steel — it was pale, like carved bone, inscribed with glowing scripture that pulsed faintly in rhythm with the bells. They moved as one, heads never turning, eyes hidden behind slitted visors.

The crowd pressed flat to the stones.

I didn’t. Couldn’t.

Kairo noticed. He stepped closer, voice sharp but low. “Don’t. Don’t draw their gaze. They’re templars. They bleed vows, not blood. Pain won’t stop them. Fear won’t touch them. Geist can’t touch them either. If the Synod names you heretic, you won’t make it to sundown.”

He leaned in further. “And that’s just the Templars. Pray you never meet the Knights.”

I didn’t have to ask. The people’s gasp told me enough.

They came down the great avenue in silence. Horses clad in silver barding. Banners of flame and sun trailing like rivers of fire. Their armor blazed with holy radiance, as though their flesh was light given form. The air bent around them. The swords at their sides hummed with hymns that scraped against my skull, words I almost understood but dared not.

The crowd wept. Some reached out to touch the dirt where their hooves struck. Others screamed praise until their throats bled.

Kael lowered his head. Even he. His voice was hushed. “Divine Knights. The purest vessels of heaven’s storm. Not fragments, not blessings — the full torrent of Divinity bound into flesh. One knight is an army. Dozens serve the Synod. They are judgment given shape.”

I stared until my chest hurt. My storm clawed inside me, restless, but it bent beneath the pressure of their presence.

“Not men,” Kairo said beside me, his tone flat, bitter. “Weapons. And the Church points them wherever it wants.”

“Careful with your words.”

The voice startled me. I turned.

A man hunched behind a stall of candles and beads. A shopkeeper. His hands trembled as he adjusted a string of icons, his eyes flicking from the knights to us. He leaned forward, whispering.

“You speak of Divinity as though you know it. But do you know it's blood? Do you know the *Divinar*?”

Kael's face hardened instantly. “Not here—”

The man ignored him. His grin was half-pride, half-fear. He pulled a pendant from his shirt, a charm of beaten silver marked with a burning sun over water. It glowed faintly as the bells tolled again.

“To be *Divinar*,” he whispered, “is to carry the blood of the Eight. The gods who shaped this world. Their sparks linger in mortal veins. Hidden. Waiting. When awakened — in faith, in trial, in holy places — a man becomes more than man.”

Zebbie blinked at him, wide-eyed. “Like... half a god?”

The man chuckled sharply. “Not half. Never half. To be *Divinar* is to be *claimed*. To belong. The Eight mark their children in three ways.”

He raised three fingers.

“The Chosen. Mortals awakened by faith, ritual, belief. They bear the clear signs — eyes, skin, voices marked by their god’s domain.

The Vessel. Hosts of a god’s lingering will. When they speak, it is not their voice. When they act, it is not their hand.

And the Kinborn. Natural heirs of divine blood. Children of gods and mortals, born with power simmering in their marrow, wild and untamed.”

His hand trembled as he pointed to his chest. A faint glow pulsed beneath his skin — a sigil over his heart. “All bear the Mark. Proof of their claim. It flares with faith. Fades with doubt. And without faith...” His voice dropped. “...without faith, the gift mutates. Burns. Destroys.”

Kael’s jaw tightened. “Enough. This is dangerous talk.”

But the shopkeeper pressed on, feverish. “Eight gods. Eight domains. Fire. Water. Earth. Air. Lightning. Shadow. Light. Metal. Their children walk among us. The Flameforged King’s heirs — warriors with embered eyes and molten veins. The Veiled Ocean’s healers whose voices drown men in memory. The Ironroot’s — giants whose skin grows stone. The Whisperwind’s — sages who vanish on the breeze. The Storm Herald’s judges, whose every step cracks with lightning. The Silent Empress’s — shadows given flesh, who bend dreams and silence. The Radiant Mother’s — burning shields of light, who strip lies bare. The Warden of

Chains’ — iron-veined, magnet-blooded architects of order.”

His eyes darted toward the cathedral. “The Synod seeks them. Gathers them. Uses them. For glory, for war, for judgment. The Divine Knights themselves are not mere men in armor — they are *Vessels*. Flesh hollowed and filled with Divinity until nothing mortal remains.”

He leaned close, whisper sharp as a blade. “Beware the Burn of Doubt, boy. For in this city, faith is life. And doubt... is death.”

Kael grabbed my shoulder, dragging me away. Kairo’s hand went to his sword. Zebbie stared back at the shopkeeper, caught between awe and horror.

The man only laughed. A dry, broken laugh that followed us like smoke.

“The blood of the gods runs in the streets here! You’ll see it! You’ll see it!”

The bells tolled again, louder than before.

And in my chest, my storm whispered back.

The shopkeeper’s voice rose like a flare. “The flower of lightning—Valkari’s bloom!”

Heads turned. Pilgrims froze mid-prayer. A mother dragged her child closer to see. Even the templars at the far edge of the plaza slowed, their helmets tilting, scripture etched across their breastplates glinting in the light.

Kael grabbed me by the collar and hissed through his teeth. "Cover it. Now."

But it was too late. The whisper had already passed from mouth to mouth.

"Divinar..."

"...Storm Herald's kin..."

"...a Chosen..."

Each voice added weight. The air itself seemed to tighten, humming with expectation.

Zebbie stepped in front of me, arms wide, her chin tilted stubbornly. "Back off! He's just a boy with a tattoo. You've all lost your minds."

The shopkeeper fell to his knees before me, pressing his forehead to the stones. His voice trembled with awe. "Forgive me, my lord. I—I never thought to live to see one marked so clearly. The Knights themselves bear less radiant signs..."

Kairo swore, sharp and low. His hand tightened on his sword hilt. "This is bad. They'll think you're blessed—or cursed. Either way, they won't let you walk free."

I tried to speak, but my throat had dried to dust. The brand on my chest burned, faint sparks twitching at the edges of the lightning flower. My storm was awake, restless, clawing against my ribs.

Then someone shouted from the crowd.

"A Divinar stands among us!"

The words struck harder than any bell. A hundred faces snapped toward me. Some lit with awe, others with fear, still others with suspicion so sharp it felt like knives against my skin.

The pilgrims pressed forward. A few reached for me, hands outstretched, desperate to touch even the dust at my feet.

“Bless us!”

“Judge us!”

“Prove him!”

The templars at the plaza’s edge turned fully now, their steps deliberate, heavy. Each one bore scripture across their armor that glowed brighter with every stride. The crowd parted before them, but not before someone else’s voice pierced the air.

“If he is Chosen, let him show it!” A priest, his robes glimmering with golden thread, eyes bright with fanatic fire. He pointed at me, his voice booming unnaturally, carried on some divine force. “Let him speak in judgment! Let him burn with Valkari’s truth!”

My storm roared inside me, pressure building until my skin tingled with static. Sparks crawled across my knuckles. The brand flared bright beneath my shirt, visible even through the fabric.

Zebbie grabbed my hand, squeezing hard. Her voice was a whisper only I heard. “Don’t you dare. Don’t give them what they want.”

But the crowd was chanting now, pounding the stones with their fists.

“Show us! Show us! Show us!”

Kael pulled me back, teeth bared. “If you unleash your Geist here, they’ll know you’re no Divinar. They’ll name you heretic and burn you alive.”

Kairo’s hand shot to his sword as the templars drew closer, their helms glinting like death. “We need to move. Now.”

The shopkeeper remained on his knees, sobbing with joy, his hands lifted toward me as though I were already anointed. “Storm Herald’s child! Valkari’s blood walks among us! The Synod will raise you high—”

“Or crucify him,” Kairo snapped, shoving us toward a narrow alley between the stalls.

The bells tolled again.

Louder. Closer.

And for the first time since entering the Holy Kingdom, I felt them toll *for me*.

The plaza erupted.

“Seize him!” the priest roared, voice booming with unnatural force. “Bring the Storm Herald’s son before the Synod!”

The Templars surged forward, armor glowing with etched scripture. The crowd scattered, some crying in worship, others in terror. Hands reached for me — some grasping to touch, others to hold me still.

Kairo shoved a pilgrim aside, blade drawn. “Run!”

I didn’t need telling twice.

We darted into the alley, Zebbie’s hand locked in mine. Kael swept his staff across the ground, muttering words that cracked the stones — a burst of dust and rubble filling the alley behind us. The Templars didn’t falter; their armored boots smashed straight through, unshaken.

“Left!” Kairo barked, shouldering open a door. We spilled into a narrow passage stacked high with incense crates and wooden idols. Zebbie vaulted the first pile with a laugh that was more panic than joy.

“Keep moving!” she cried.

I followed, my storm humming hot in my veins. Sparks licked my fingertips as I scrambled up a crate tower, pulling myself onto a low roof. My boots hit tile, slipping on slick moss, but I caught my balance.

Kael landed beside me with surprising grace for his age, staff clutched tight. Kairo came up next, practically dragging Zebbie by her arm.

Behind us, templars poured into the passage, their heavy armor clanking — yet impossibly fast, vaulting the crates as though weight meant nothing.

“They don’t slow down,” I gasped.

“They don’t *stop*,” Kairo growled. “Keep higher!”

We ran rooftop to rooftop, leaping over alleys so narrow they seemed like veins between stone. Below, the faithful swarmed, pointing, shouting.

“There!”

“The boy with lightning!”

“Valkari’s heir!”

Every shout was a dagger. Every face turned to follow me.

A temple spire loomed ahead, its walls carved with saints. A narrow wooden beam stretched across the gap — one careless misstep meant a fall into the chanting mob below.

“Go!” Kairo roared.

Zebbie didn’t hesitate. She sprinted, hair whipping, and threw herself across. Her boots slapped the beam, arms out for balance, before she landed on the spire’s lower ledge with a triumphant yell. “Easy!”

Kael followed more slowly, staff tapping for balance. Kairo crossed like a soldier, unshaken.

I took a breath, storm sparking at my heels, and ran. The crowd below gasped as I launched off the tiles. Electricity rippled from my boots, a flicker of unnatural speed — and for a heartbeat, it felt like I flew.

I hit the ledge hard, rolling into Zebbie. She laughed breathlessly, clutching me. “See? You’re getting good at this!”

The Templars were already on the other side. One strode onto the beam, armor impossibly steady, scripture glowing brighter with each step. Another simply leapt, slamming into the wall below us like a living hammer and beginning to climb.

“They’ll catch us!” I gasped.

“Not if we disappear first,” Kael said grimly, pointing upward.

The spire. Windows of colored glass shimmered high above. A narrow maintenance ladder led the way, iron and rusted.

We scrambled up. My hands burned against the iron rungs, static crackling from my palms. Zebbie climbed like a cat, laughing despite the chaos. Kael muttered curses under his breath. Kairo took the rear, his sword flashing whenever a templar’s hand gripped too close.

We reached the window and burst through – shards of colored saints raining around us as we tumbled into the cathedral’s upper galleries.

The air inside was heavy, thick with incense. Voices rose from below: a choir of priests chanting, their hymn wrapping the entire chamber.

Zebbie whispered, wide-eyed, “We’re in their gods’ house.”

Kael’s face was pale. “No. Worse. We’re in their cage.”

The bells tolled again, rattling the stained glass still clinging to its frames. And somewhere below, deeper in

the cathedral, I heard armored footsteps — heavier, slower, more resonant than the templars.

Kairo swore under his breath. “They’ve called a Knight.”

We sprinted along the cathedral’s upper gallery, our boots pounding ancient wood. Incense hung in the air, thick as smoke, making every breath burn.

“Down there!” Zebbie shouted, pointing toward a stairwell spiraling to the ground floor.

But templars rose from the shadows below, scripture flaring across their shields. Their voices rang in unison: “None escape the Synod’s house.”

Kairo skidded to a halt. “Blocked!”

Kael swung his staff toward another passage, but a second squad surged from that direction, armored boots slamming in rhythm. The hymn of the priests below grew louder, as if feeding them strength.

We were surrounded.

Zebbie pressed against me, her chest heaving. “Zeon, what do we do?”

Kairo drew his sword, teeth bared. “We fight to the last breath.”

Kael’s eyes darted, frantic. “Against Templars? They’ll crush us. The only path left is—”

He stopped.

The heavy doors at the far end of the gallery opened. The chanting was silenced.

A figure entered — taller, slower, his armor radiant, every plate etched in gold scripture that pulsed with Divinity. His helm bore a single crest like a burning halo.

A Divine Knight.

Even the Templars bowed their heads.

“Bring them,” the Knight commanded, his voice low, like the grind of mountains.

The Templars surged forward. Kairo roared and swung, blade sparking against their shields, but he was driven back in seconds. Kael tried to summon Geist, but their scripture smothered it like a cage. Zebbie clawed at their gauntlets when they seized her wrists, kicking and screaming.

And then they turned to me.

A templar’s gauntlet slammed into my chest, pinning me against the wall. His grip was like iron. Another yanked my shirt down, exposing the brand over my heart. The lightning flower shimmered faintly, sparks twitching along its jagged petals.

The Divine Knight stepped closer, his shadow swallowing me whole.

“The mark,” he said. “Prove him.”

The Templars pressed harder, their voices rising in scripture.

The bells tolled.

And my brand erupted.

The lightning flower split apart, its petals tearing into streams of light that spiraled across my skin. The sparks bent inward, igniting into stars. A galaxy carved itself into my chest, infinite and burning, constellations spiraling out from my heart.

I screamed.

It wasn't power — it was torment. My body convulsed as if every bone were breaking, my veins burning with suns. Every star was a nail hammered into my flesh, every constellation a chain that bound tighter.

Zebbie shrieked, thrashing in her captor's grip. "Stop it! You're killing him!"

Kael fought to stand, shouting, "It's no Divinity! Can't you see? It's Geist—raw Geist twisting itself into form!"

But the templars only pressed harder, their chant grinding in my skull:

"Prove him. Prove him. Prove him."

The galaxy pulsed. Stars burst like shrapnel beneath my skin. I tasted blood, felt it trickle from my nose, my mouth. My storm raged inside me, but it couldn't save me — it was caged, shackled beneath the light.

And then, in the midst of the agony, a voice echoed inside me. Vast. Cold. Older than any god these walls honored.

*You are not mine. You are a storm, not sky. Heretic child.  
False star.*

The rejection crushed me harder than the templars' grip. The light flared, searing, until even they staggered back.

Zebbie tore free and threw herself onto me, clutching my face, sobbing. "Zeon! Stay with me! Don't you leave me!"

The galaxy shuddered — then collapsed, imploding back into the jagged lightning flower.

I collapsed in her arms, my chest a smoking ruin of light and blood.

The Templars froze. Even the Divine Knight lowered his head slightly, the scripture across his armor dimming.

"Not Divinar," one Templar muttered, shaken. "Not blessed. Something... else."

Kael's voice cracked like thunder as he lifted his staff. "Something you will never understand. MOVE!"

The floor split beneath his strike, smoke and rubble filling the gallery. Kairo wrenched me from the ground, half-dragging me, Zebbie still clinging tight.

The bells tolled again, shaking the cathedral's bones.

And I knew, even as the smoke hid us, the gods had seen me. And they had *rejected* me.

We staggered through the smoke, coughing, half-dragging, half-carrying one another. My chest still

blazed where the galaxy had burned itself into me. Every breath was fire, every step an eternity.

Kairo shoved me forward, his voice a low growl. "Move, damn you. If we stop, they'll pin us to the walls."

Kael limped beside me, clutching his staff. "No more Geist, Zeon. Do you hear me? Not a spark. Not a flicker. They'll trace it like a beacon."

"But—" My throat was raw, my voice shredded from screaming. "If I don't—"

Zebbie cut me off, her fingers laced through mine, gripping like iron. Her eyes were wide, wet, desperate. "You promised me. Don't you dare use it. Not after... after *that*."

Her voice broke on the word.

I looked at them all — Kael pale with fear, Kairo's jaw tight with resolve, Zebbie trembling but unyielding — and swallowed the storm clawing inside me. The brand pulsed faintly, angry and restless. I forced it down, choking it into silence.

We darted into the night, down alleys slick with rain, across bridges etched with scripture that glowed beneath our boots. Everywhere, bells tolled, the city awake and hunting.

"Keep low," Kairo hissed. "Shadows. Corners. No open streets."

But it didn't matter.

When we turned a corner, he was already there.

The Divine Knight.

He stood in the middle of the street as if the world itself had parted for him, armor radiant, scripture burning like fire across every plate. His helm's halo glowed brighter now, golden light spilling across the stones.

The Templars had not caught us. The *Knight* had.

My breath froze. Zebbie pressed against me, whispering, "Zeon... don't."

The Knight's voice rolled like thunder, slow and absolute.

"You carry a star not born of gods. You profane this holy city. You are mine to judge."

Kairo lifted his sword, though his hands shook. Kael raised his staff, whispering fragments of Geist under his breath. Zebbie clung to me, trembling but fierce.

But all I could feel was the storm pressing against my ribs, begging to be unleashed.

And the memory of their voices echoed in me — Kael's desperate warning, Kairo's order, Zebbie's plea.

*Don't use it. Not a spark. Not a flicker.*

I clenched my fists, teeth grinding, the lightning in me screaming for release.

The Knight took one step forward. The street seemed to bow beneath him.

"We run," Kairo hissed. "We cannot fight this."

But there was nowhere left to run.

The bells never stopped. They tolled across the Holy Kingdom like the heartbeat of a god, shaking the stones beneath our feet.

And there he was.

The Divine Knight blocked the street, armor radiant, a walking scripture. His helm glowed with its golden halo, the weight of it like a sun bearing down on us. Every templar was gone – there was no need for them. One Knight was enough.

Kairo stepped forward first, sword raised in defiance. “Go,” he hissed to us. “I’ll hold him.”

He charged. His blade crashed against the Knight’s gauntlet – and the steel shattered like brittle glass. The Knight swatted him aside with a single blow, sending Kairo’s body slamming into the wall. The stone cracked. Kairo didn’t rise.

Kael cried out and unleashed Geist, his staff flaring brighter than I’d ever seen. The air split with force, a torrent of raw power that bent the very street. But the Knight raised his shield, and every drop of power broke against it like waves against a cliff. The scripture carved into that shield flared bright – and then Kael’s staff snapped in half. He collapsed to his knees, blood spilling from his mouth.

Zebbie leapt in front of me, arms wide, as if her body could block a mountain. “Stay away from him!”

The Knight didn't even swing. His hand rose. She was flung aside as if caught in a gale, crashing against the gutter stones. She groaned, tried to rise, and fell again.

And then his shadow fell over me.

I clenched my fists, feeling the storm claw at my insides. Sparks raced along my arms, begging to be unleashed. One strike, one bolt, and maybe we could run.

But Kael's ragged voice echoed in my skull. *Not a spark. Not a flicker.*

Kairo's growl. *They'll trace it like a beacon.*

And Zebbie's desperate plea, still ringing in my ears.

*Don't you dare use it.*

I crushed the storm back down. Swallowed the thunder.

And the Knight seized me.

His gauntlet clamped around my throat, iron crushing flesh, and lifted me into the air. My boots scraped stone. Scripture crawled down his arm, glowing, and spread across my skin like brands.

"Heretic child," he said, his voice a low quake. "Show your true face."

My mark obeyed.

The lightning-flower burned, petals tearing into streams of raw light. They spiraled outward, forming stars, dozens, hundreds, until my chest became a galaxy — radiant and infinite, carved into me like fire.

The pain was beyond anything I'd known. Not just burning — *becoming*. My veins turned into chains of starlight, my bones constellations hammered into place. Every star was a spike driven into my marrow.

I screamed, back arching, body convulsing. My storm shrieked for release, but the Knight's scripture crushed it, forcing me to endure naked agony.

Kael tried to rise, staggering, his face pale as ash. "Stop! He's not Divinar—you'll destroy him!"

The Knight ignored him. His grip tightened. "If he is not god-born, then he is void-born. Either way, he dies."

Stars burst inside me, novas tearing through every nerve. I felt them burrow deep, branding not just flesh but soul. My vision fractured into galaxies, spinning, colliding, collapsing into light.

And in that light came the voice. Vast. Cold. Older than the bells, older than the gods.

*You are not mine. You are a storm, not sky. False star. False child.*

The rejection hit harder than the torture. My chest caved under the weight of it. Blood poured from my mouth, down my chin. My fingernails tore my own skin as I clawed at the gauntlet choking me.

Zebbie dragged herself up, staggering on shaking legs. She hurled herself at the Knight, beating her fists against his armor. "Stop it! Stop! Take me instead, take me—"

Her voice broke into sobs. She clung to my legs, screaming my name again and again, raw and broken. “Zeon! Zeon!”

The galaxy flared so bright it blinded the street. Even the Knight paused as the stars writhed, pulsing against his grip. For a moment, I thought it might tear him apart.

But it didn’t.

The light collapsed inward, the galaxy imploding into the jagged flower of lightning once more. My chest was a ruin — scorched flesh, blood, light leaking like smoke.

The Knight lowered me, but not to free me. His gauntlet slammed me down to the stones. My body hit hard, my breath bursting from me. The scripture bindings clamped down, pinning me spread-eagled against the street.

Kairo groaned weakly from the wall, dragging himself an inch before collapsing. Kael’s hand twitched, but he couldn’t lift it. Zebbie threw herself across me, sobbing, shielding my body with hers even as the Knight’s shadow engulfed us both.

The Knight raised his sword — a weapon longer than I was tall, etched with gold scripture, glowing like the sun.

“The Synod will see him broken,” he intoned. “He will be their lesson.”

I tried to scream, but no sound came. Only the echo of that voice inside me:

*False star. Heretic child.*

And then the Knight struck the flat of his blade against the stones beside me. The impact cracked the earth, rattled the air, a show of force.

But he didn't kill me.

Instead, he turned, his voice ringing across the street. "Bind him. Carry the others. The Synod waits."

The last thing I saw before darkness swallowed me was Zebbie's tear-streaked face, pressed against my chest, whispering my name over and over as if it could tether me here.

And the bells kept tolling.

The hall looked like something out of a fever dream — white marble veins glowing faintly, eight thrones looming like mountains, and incense smoke curling around chains carved with scripture. I was chained to the center slab, my shirt already torn open, my chest burning with the brand.

The Divine Knight shoved me forward. "Show the mark."

The chains yanked, my tunic ripped, and there it was: the flower of lightning on my chest. Only this time it wasn't a flower — it was already starting to twist, petals spinning like a miniature storm, stars flickering at its edges.

Gasps from the Synod.

“This is not Divinity.”

“A counterfeit.”

“Blasphemy.”

And then a voice popped into my head. Bright. Cheery. Totally inappropriate.

*“Wow, buddy, you sure know how to make an entrance. Nothing says ‘hi, judge me!’ like a galaxy tattoo exploding on your chest.”*

I blinked. “Oh... hey, star”

*“Don’t freak out. It’s me. Star. Yeah, hi! Long time no chat. I thought I’d pipe up before these robed weirdos start chanting.”*

The Synod stirred at my whisper. Kael hissed, “Zeon. What are you saying?”

*“Oh man, they can’t hear me. This is our secret channel. Channel Star FM! Broadcasting live from your sternum. Did you know these chains glow when you wiggle? Try it! No, wait, don’t. You’ll just hurt yourself.”*

The chains heated. I hissed, trying not to scream.

*“Ouch! Okay, okay, that’s... wow, that’s hot. On the plus side, now you’re medium-rare. I smell hero barbecue!”*

“Shut up,” I muttered under my breath.

The Synod’s central judge boomed, “He communes with an unknown power.”

*“Unknown power? Please. I’m the sword you’ve been swinging for months! These people need better intel. Should I introduce myself? No? Okay, your call.”*

Zebbie's voice cracked. "Zeon, please just stay quiet..."

*"Hey Zebbie! Love the cloak. Can we all talk about how dramatic this hall is? You could fit a dragon in here. Bet the echo is crazy. HELLOOO!"*

My teeth clenched. The mark on my chest began to twist harder, the flower peeling away into tiny constellations. Pain flared, sharp and electric.

I doubled over, groaning. "Stop—"

*"Sorry! Reflex. I narrate under stress. Look at you, though, sprouting a whole galaxy. That's... okay, yeah, that looks like it hurts. Yikes. Hang in there, champ. Breathe in, breathe out. Think of fluffy sheep. No? Okay, think of punching me later."*

The Synod's decree thundered. "At dawn, burn the heretic upon the Star-Pyre."

*"Star-Pyre? Wow, these guys love branding everything 'star.' Star this, star that. Next, it's going to be 'Star-Snacks' at the execution. Hoo boy."*

I clenched my fists, fighting to stay conscious, the star's chatter flickering between my thoughts like a mad radio DJ.

*"Listen, Zeon. Joke all I want, but you've got this. Don't let them see you break. We'll get out. Promise. You and me? We're a showstopper."*

For a moment, I almost laughed through the pain. The galaxy burned brighter, stars swirling faster under my skin, but the voice was steady now, ridiculous and weirdly comforting.

For once, the star went quiet. Then, softer than I'd ever heard it:

*"...And if you fall, I fall with you. Got it?"*

The galaxy under my ribs flared once more, blinding. The chains rattled. Darkness swallowed me whole.

(Yeah, I know—passing out mid pep talk isn't exactly heroic timing.)

When I woke, my wrists were tied high to a pole, the air thick with smoke and chanting. The Templars had already begun the ceremony.

Then everything went to chaos.

One of the Templars—iron-straight, perfect formation, holier-than-thou—slipped. Just a stumble, but enough. His torch clattered to the ground, rolling into the kindling stacked beneath the pyre. The oil-soaked wood went up like lightning striking dry grass.

Flames roared skyward. Smoke and sparks burst across the courtyard. The crowd gasped as order dissolved into shrieking chaos.

*"Oh-ho! And they said I was dramatic. Look at that guy—slips once and suddenly he's a walking fireworks display. Give him a medal. Or at least some better shoes."*

Heat seared my skin as the blaze spread. My bonds suddenly loosened—hands, quick and unseen, cutting through the rope. A figure leaned close, face hidden by the smoke. "Come with me if you want to live," they hissed.

I coughed through the ash. “That’s the cheesiest line I’ve ever heard.”

*I like this one already, Star cackled. Mysterious rescuer, cool one-liner... It’s like we’re in a play. I’m the funny sidekick, you’re the brooding lead, and they’re the shady supporting character with questionable fashion choices. What a cast!*

No time to argue. I staggered forward, clutching my chest, the galaxy-brand still pulsing beneath my ribs. Through the smoke I saw them—Zebbie, Kael, Kairo—pinned by guards in the confusion. My voice cracked as I shouted:

“Zebbie! Kael! Kairo! This way!”

They saw me, eyes wide with disbelief. Then the fire spread into the banners, the heat driving back even the Templars. My friends broke free in the mayhem, rushing toward me, their faces pale with smoke and sweat.

The rescuer pushed ahead, shoving through the panicked crowd. Behind us, the Synod screamed orders drowned by the firestorm, and armored men stumbled in the blaze.

*You know, Zeon, Star chimed, I’m starting to think this ‘execution’ wasn’t very well planned. Fire safety? Zero stars. Crowd control? Laughable. And you, tied up like a marshmallow? Honestly, kid, we’ve gotta work on your career choices.*

I almost laughed, even as we sprinted through the chaos. “Shut up, Star.”

*You love me.*

The flames roared higher, bells clanged in the distance,  
and for the first time that day, hope sparked in my  
chest.

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## The Forgotten are Found

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The world broke open.

The hidden passage had not been stone at all. It was skin—skin stretched across reality, thin and brittle. And now, under the rescuer's hand, it split.

We were swallowed.

Not by shadow, not by light. By both. By neither.

We fell.

Not down. Not up. Through.

Every heartbeat, I wasn't myself. For one breath, I was a soldier kneeling to the Synod; the next, a corpse beneath the Pyre; the next, a stranger with Zebbie's eyes but my voice. My body was a dozen selves, and each one screamed that it was the *true* Zeon.

The galaxy in my chest howled. Stars split, spiraled, died, and were born in every vein.

I almost tore apart.

But then—hands. Zebbie's. Kael's. Kairo's. Holding me steady. Pulling me through the storm.

We slammed into ground that wasn't ground. My knees hit a surface smoother than marble, colder than ice. I gasped, dragging air into lungs that weren't sure they were mine anymore.

And then I looked up.

The sky was an ocean of frozen rivers, pouring sideways in colors that shouldn't exist—crimson so deep it whispered, blue so sharp it stung the teeth. Between them hung shards of land, floating on nothing, bound together by chains of light. Cities clung to those shards: cathedrals inverted so their spires dug downward, bridges braided from memory made manifest, towers that bent into spirals which collapsed into themselves before reforming.

Everywhere, motion. Not people—*echoes*. Figures blurred between identities, flickering like film reels skipping frames. One woman walked past with six shadows trailing, each a different version of her. A child laughed and split into three, each voice overlapping. Some had no faces, only mirrors. Some walked upside-down on inverted rivers of sky.

And beneath it all was a hum. A resonance. Like the marrow of the world vibrating.

“...Oh, *wow*,” Star breathed, uncharacteristically reverent. *“This place... It’s like somebody shattered reality and then glued the pieces back together with nightmares and glitter. I’m not sure if I should clap or cry. Maybe both.”*

I couldn't answer. My tongue was stone.

The rescuer spread her arms, the silver scars on her face burning brighter. “Welcome, Zeon. Welcome, Zebbie. Welcome... to Eidolon.”

We walked. Or perhaps we were walking. Streets bent beneath our steps, carrying us toward some center. Every building was alive—walls rippling with veins of light, doors whispering as though gossiping about who entered. Bridges sighed beneath our weight.

We passed markets where merchants sold things that should not exist: bottles containing yesterday, masks that spoke with your voice when you wore them, cages with beasts that were not beasts but mistakes the world had erased.

We passed gardens where trees grew upside down, their roots flowering into blossoms of shadow. Children played beneath them, their games bending physics: one bounced a ball that landed before it was thrown, another skipped across the air like stepping stones.

We passed temples. Not to the Eight. Never to the Eight. Their walls bore runes of the Forgotten: A **Gigantic** chain, something that could hold a mountain, A mirror that showed all the possible selves, and a bleeding star. The worshipers there did not pray—they resonated, humming in strange polyphonic tones until the air itself warped.

And all the while, I felt my chest burn hotter, like the galaxy inside me was *home*.

At last, we stood before the Spire of Uniform. A tower so tall it bent the rivers of sky, piercing into something above. Its doors were mirrors, and as I looked, they did not show me—but every me. Thousands. Infinite. Each one whispering my name in unison.

The rescuer turned. Her eyes burned white. “Do you see? This is what has been hidden. Forgotten gods. Forgotten people. We do not inherit their power—we resonate with it. We are their echoes made flesh.”

Zebbie trembled. “I... I know this. I’ve heard it. In my dreams. The voices. The visions. I thought I was broken.”

“You are,” the woman said gently. “But broken things sing most beautifully.”

Her gaze fell to me. “And you, Zeon. You are not merely broken. You are impossible. You should not exist. Yet you do. That is why the Forgotten cling to you. That is why *he* whispers through your bones.”

Star chuckled nervously. “*Hey now, don’t put this on me. I’m just the backseat driver in your skull. Totally innocent. ...Okay, maybe not innocent, but definitely charming.*”

I swallowed. “...Why us?”

The woman’s smile was sad. “Because you have fallen through identity, through mana, through divinity. You resonate with all three. That is the Eidolon path. But it is also your curse.”

Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Every time you call on this, every time you burn the echo, you peel yourself away. Piece by piece. Until one day, Zeon... you will not know your face. You will not know your name. You will not know if you ever existed at all. That is an **identity break.**”

The hum of the city deepened. The mirrored doors trembled, and for a heartbeat, I saw myself reflected—only it wasn't me. It was a dozen me's, fractured, smiling differently, reaching for me.

Zebbie grabbed my hand. Her grip shook. Her lips moved, but no sound came. She was afraid she was next.

And for once, Star didn't joke. He whispered, soft as a prayer: *"...Don't break, kid. Please."*

The Spire doors opened.

The Spire doors did not open outward. They opened *inward*—not into space, but into selves. As they parted, reality peeled back like paper soaked in oil, and we stepped through into a world that wasn't just a place. It was a memory that remembered itself too loudly.

For a moment, I wasn't sure if I had walked forward or if forward had walked forward into me.

Inside, the Spire was infinite. The walls were mirrors that did not reflect you, but every version of you—taller, broken, monstrous, divine. They shimmered with whispers, each reflection leaning forward to breathe secrets against the glass.

At the center stretched a bridge of silver threads, suspended in nothing. Beneath it churned an abyss where timelines bled together: wars fought and unfought, loves lost and never met, deaths lived and deaths escaped. Whole histories spun and cracked like glass plates dropped in slow motion.

Zebbie clutched my hand so hard her nails cut my skin. Kael and Kairo stared with their mouths half-open, choking on awe.

And me? My galaxy burned. Every star inside me trembled like it wanted to leap free, scatter, and take root in this place.

*“Hooo boy,” Star whistled, his voice echoing in my skull. “This isn’t a building. This is a migraine given architecture. Ten out of ten for spectacle, though. Also, note to self: never take mushrooms in here, unless we want to meet the version of us who decided to become a professional juggler instead of fighting Templars.”*

We walked the bridge. Each step felt like choosing a version of myself. Each choice left ghosts behind.

At the far end waited the heart of Eidolon.

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The rescuer—whose name still hadn’t been given—led us along a spiral path. As we descended into the strata, she spoke:

“Eidolon is not a nation. It is not a faith. It is *a survival*. We are the remnants of gods erased. Their whispers remain, and we are the ones who listen. That listening changes us. Makes it impossible.”

She gestured toward a marketplace where mirrored children sold vials glowing with shifting starlight. “We are hybrid. Not Identity alone. Not Mana alone. Not Divinity alone. All three at once, fused by echo.”

“And for that reason, we are hated. The Eight call us heretics. The Arcanetics call us unstable. The

Aethergeists call us abominations. And perhaps we are all three.”

Star snorted. “Oh, good. *We’re unpopular in every social circle. Finally, I won’t have to sit through awkward parties pretending to like small talk.*”

Her gaze sharpened. “But do not mistake us. We are not merely wanderers. We are *custodians of forgetting*. The world forgets. We remember. That is our creed.”

In every stratum, their presence lingered.

**Velkhar the Bound Flame:** rebels wore chains as jewelry, fire in their veins never extinguishing.

**Ny’mira the Hollow Mother:** temples filled with statues of empty cradles; priests promised comfort, but never gave.

**Thessivar the Mirrorborn:** Every reflective surface is dangerous—sometimes your reflection steps out to speak.

**Izaneth the Bleeding Sky:** the very air sometimes rained with stars that never existed. Those caught in them saw flashes of lives they’d never lived.

**Cosmo the Infinite Pulse:** bridges that bent time so you could arrive before leaving; rivers that flowed both ways.

Each god was not worshipped but *embodied*. Their exiles wrote the culture.

And each god whispered still.

At last, the rescuer stopped before a well. No water filled it. Only reflections. And in those reflections—I saw myself, fracturing, splitting into dozens.

“This is the risk,” she said. “Every time you use resonance, you trade a piece of self for power. At first, you lose little things—your favorite food, your handwriting, the memory of a friend’s face. Then greater. Your name. Your voice. Until one day, you look into a mirror and see only echoes. That is an **identity break.**”

Her gaze burned through me. “Zeon, you have already drawn too deep. The Pyre should have killed you. Instead, you survived by resonance. Already you tremble. Already you are fraying.”

Zebbie whispered, voice cracking: “And me?”

The woman touched her cheek. “You are younger than it. But yes. You too. Your dreams were not dreams—they were bleeding. Your resonance has begun.”

Silence fell.

For once, Star didn’t mock. His voice was low, almost... fragile. “...*Kid... if she’s right, then every time you listen to me, you’re listening less to yourself. And if you break... then I’ll go with you. No jokes. No laughter. Just silence.*”

I stared into the well, into the thousand Zeons reaching out to drag me down.

And the city of Eidolon hummed louder, as though waiting for me to fall.

The Spire doors whispered shut behind us.

We stood before the well of reflections, my fractured selves still clawing at the surface, reaching, smiling with too many mouths.

The woman who had led us here—hooded, half-shadow, her silver scars glowing faintly—turned and finally lowered her cowl.

Her face caught the light of the abyss. It wasn't one face. It was a hundred, layered and shifting, each version of her flickering like a page in a flipbook. For a breath, she was older; then younger; then burned; then whole. Then, at last, the images settled into something stable. A woman with silver scars etched like constellations, eyes black with glowing pupils of white.

"My name," she said softly, "is **Serenya Vaelith**. In Eidolon, I am called a Witness. A keeper of echoes. A guide for those who should not exist."

Zebbie's breath caught. "A Witness..."

Kael swore under his breath, his hand hovering near his blade. Kairo just stared, eyes wide, caught between fear and awe.

Serenya's gaze fell to me. "Zeon. The galaxy inside you burns too brightly. Without an anchor, you will fracture. Without guidance, you will shatter. That is why I saved you. That is why I must walk beside you."

"*Hold up,*" Star interjected, his voice half-nervous, half-snark. "*We don't even know her! What if she's a time-*

*traveling cultist with a hobby for dramatic lighting and spooky one-liners?”*

Serenya’s head tilted slightly, her scars shifting faintly as though amused. “I am both those things, perhaps. And more. But without me, Star, you will not survive. Even you know that.”

For the first time, Star went silent.

I looked at her—this stranger who was no stranger, this Witness whose presence both steadied and unsettled me. The echoes of my fractured selves stilled, watching, waiting for my answer.

“Why us?” I rasped.

Her gaze softened, though it remained heavy with sorrow. “Because you and Zebbie are the rarest kind of Eidolon. You are impossible. Born resonant. You carry within you the voices of the Forgotten, and yet you live outside their memory. You should not exist, and yet you do. That makes you dangerous. And precious.”

Zebbie squeezed my hand. Her voice shook. “If we’re already doomed to break... why help us?”

Serenya stepped closer, her silver scars burning brighter. “Because I refuse to watch another impossible soul unravel. Because I have seen too many fall into the well of echoes and vanish. And because...” She paused, her throat tightening. “Because maybe saving you will save me, too.”

The Spire hummed. The reflections stirred.

I didn't know if I trusted her. I didn't know if I could. But I knew one thing: without her, I wouldn't last long in this city.

I nodded. "Then walk with us, Serenya Vaelith. For as long as you can."

She inclined her head in a gesture both regal and weary. "For as long as I can."

And just like that, the Witness of Eidolon joined our fractured, fragile, impossible little band.

The chamber wasn't built. It had grown. A dome of mirrored glass stretched above us, but none of the reflections matched. Every pane showed a different possibility: me with burned hands, Zebbie crowned in starlight, Kael lying dead, Kairo wielding power he shouldn't have.

Serenya stood at the center, her silver scars flickering like constellations rearranging themselves.

"This is where you will learn," she said. Her voice carried not as sound, but as resonance — vibrating in my bones. "The Spire does not forgive. It reflects. If you lose yourselves here, you will not come back."

"Cool, cool," Star muttered. "*No pressure. Just our entire existence on the line. My favorite kind of lesson.*"

Serenya ignored him. She raised her hand, and the mirrored panes rippled. A second later, a dozen versions of me stepped out, each wielding powers I hadn't mastered. They stared with empty eyes.

“Lesson one,” Serenya said calmly. Face yourself. Do not become them.”

The echoes rushed us.

One of my doubles slammed into me, its chest galaxy burning hotter, fiercer. Every punch rattled my ribs, and with each strike, I felt the pull — the temptation to let go, to burn brighter, to *outshine* it.

But Serenya’s voice cut through: “Do not *compete* with the echo. It is not your strength. It is your reflection.”

I gritted my teeth. My galaxy flared — but I pulled it inward, anchoring on Zebbie’s hand, on the memory of why I fought. The echo wavered, and for a moment, it blurred back into the mirror.

But then another took its place. Stronger. Angrier.

Zebbie screamed as her echoes swarmed her — not violent, but pleading. Each one whispered, “*Stay with us. Don’t leave. We are you. You are us.*”

She clutched her head, knees buckling. “I can’t—I don’t know which one is me!”

Serenya appeared beside her, moving without motion, her body flickering in and out like a half-remembered dream. She pressed her hand to Zebbie’s temple, scars glowing bright.

“Listen to me. The voice that trembles is yours. The voice that doubts is yours. Hold it.”

Zebbie gasped, forcing her breath steady. One by one, the echoes hissed and fell away, dissolving like mist.

But as soon as Zebbie found herself, my echoes grew wild. The galaxy in my chest burst outward, stars scattering across the chamber, tearing holes in the mirrored panes. I screamed — but it wasn't my scream. A dozen Zeons screamed with me.

The mirrors cracked. Reality bent.

Serenya blurred, splitting into four versions of herself. Each one stepped into a different shard of mirror and emerged around me, their voices overlapping like a chord:

“You are not the stars. You are not the flame. You are the one who *chooses*.”

Her hands closed around mine. The galaxy inside me steadied, compressed, like a sun being forced back into a cage. My echoes snarled, clawed, and then shattered back into their glass prisons.

Silence.

I fell to my knees, sweat soaking my skin. Zebbie collapsed beside me, trembling.

Serenya knelt, her touch light on my shoulder. Her eyes reflected not me, but all my other selves.

“This is only the beginning,” she whispered. “You touched the resonance, yes... but you nearly broke. Next time, the Spire may not give you back.”

Zebbie's lip trembled. “How do we survive this?”

Serenya looked away, her silver scars dimming. “You don't. Not unchanged. No Eidolon does.”

We sat in the broken training chamber, catching our breath. The mirrors still trembled from what I had unleashed. Zebbie leaned against my shoulder, trembling. Serenya watched me carefully, her silver scars faintly pulsing.

I wiped blood from my lip and exhaled. “Star saved me again. If he hadn’t pulled me back, I think I’d be gone.”

“*Damn right,*” Star said. “*Do I get a medal? Or at least a snack?*”

Serenya’s gaze sharpened. “You speak of this... voice as though it is alive.”

I met her eyes. “He is alive.”

For the first time since meeting her, Serenya’s composure cracked. Her voice wavered with disbelief. “Impossible. Resonance voices are fragments — echoes. Tools of power, not beings. If yours thinks... if it has humor, memory, choice... then it is not an echo. It is living resonance.”

“Living resonance,” Star repeated in my head, sounding uncharacteristically serious. “Well, that explains why I’m the funniest person here. Guess I’m literally one of a kind.”

Serenya whispered, almost reverent: “If what you claim is true... then your survival is not just rare. It is heresy made flesh.”

“*Heresy made flesh,*” Star snorted. “*Love that. Put it on a T-shirt.*”

That was when the forge opened.

Not a forge like we knew. This one burned with black fire, sparks falling upward instead of down. Out of the glow stepped a broad man with soot-streaked arms and a beard tied in silver rings. His eyes glowed faintly blue, like molten steel caught mid-cooling.

“Talking resonance, eh?” he said, voice gravelly but tinged with amusement. “Now that is a puzzle worth hammering.”

Serenya stiffened. “Arthur Grouder. The Black Eidolon.”

He chuckled, swinging a hammer the size of a child across his back. “Don’t go calling me titles. I’m just a smith. But if the boy’s voice is living resonance... then I can shape its echo. Not copy it, mind you — no one can forge another Star. But I can give your companions a taste of what it means to wield a soul-bound weapon.”

Kairo frowned, skeptical. “You mean... living weapons?”

Arther’s grin was firelit. “Aye. Sentient. Bound to their wielders. Whispering in their heads, just like that chatty one.”

“Ohhhh no,” Star groaned. *“Don’t tell me I’m about to get siblings. Last thing I need is a snarky scythe or an emo dagger cramping my style.”*

Arther only smirked. “Let’s see what the fire says.”

Over the next days, Arthur worked in his paradox forge. Each weapon was not hammered from metal alone, but drawn out of the wielders' selves — shaped by their resonance.

Rivka received a staff wound with threads of living flame. It hummed when she spoke, its voice low and resonant, offering guidance.  
“Great. She’s got a life coach now,” Star muttered.

Zebbie received a dagger with a shifting blade — sometimes obsidian, sometimes glass — that whispered in riddles, urging her to trust her instincts.  
“Yep. Called it. *Emo dagger*.”

Kairo received a scythe taller than he was, its blade etched with constellations. Its voice was grim, weighty, almost fatherly — a counter to his recklessness.  
“Oh, fantastic. He got *Dad-scythe*. Wait ‘til it starts telling him to clean his room.”

Serenya herself was gifted a set of silver-black strings, wound around her wrists like musical threads. When plucked, they sang with voices of forgotten selves, weaving her resonance into haunting melodies. Star shivered. “...Okay, hers is legitimately spooky. I feel like the strings know my secrets.”

When each weapon awakened, the chamber filled with murmurs — whispers of newborn sentiences stretching into the world.

Star whistled. “Well, would you look at that. I’ve gone from only child to babysitter overnight. Fantastic.”

Arther slammed his hammer down with finality. “They are not toys. Not tools. They are companions. Born of your echoes, tempered by your will. Treat them as you would treat kin.”

Serenya, still staring at the strings curled around her hands, looked up at me. “Do you realize what this means? The Eidolon have bent resonance into weapons before... but never this. This is creation, not imitation. A new branch of our path. And it began with you.”

For the first time, I saw awe in her eyes. And fear.

Because if living resonance was possible... then maybe identity break wasn’t an end at all. Maybe it was a transformation.

*“Transformation, huh?”* Star said softly. *“Sounds like trouble. My favorite kind.”*

The Spire reshaped itself again — this time into a wide amphitheater of broken mirrors, a place designed not to test our power but our bonds. The air hummed with new voices.

Rivka gripped her new staff, flame threads weaving around her like ribbons. When she faltered, the staff’s voice rumbled low and steady: *“Speak. The world listens.”*

She whispered a word, flame slicing her echo apart. The staff glowed warmly, approving.

I steadied her arm. “It isn’t just guiding you. It’s asking you to claim it.”

Rivka looked down at the ember-lit wood, lips trembling. "...Your name is **Solmere**. Because you make me brave enough to speak into the dark."

The staff pulsed, its fire folding close like an embrace.

"*Solmere, huh?*" Star muttered. "*Sounds classy. Hope it doesn't start charging us for lectures.*"

Zebbie's dagger flickered between obsidian and glass. Its voice whispered in riddles: "*To cut the false, trust the real.*"

She squeezed her eyes shut, chose an echo, and struck – shattering the false self into splinters.

Her breath hitched. She stared at the blade, then murmured: "You're not just a weapon. You're **Veilpiercer**. You tear through what lies, to what's true."

The blade settled into obsidian, humming with sharp pride.

Star groaned. "*Veilpiercer? Ugh, great. We've got ourselves a dramatic poet dagger.*"

Zebbie smirked faintly. "It fits."

Kairo swung the scythe too hard, nearly toppling. Its deep voice growled: "*Restrain. Or I will consume you.*"

He snarled but then slowed, moving steadily. The constellations on the blade steadied with him.

He exhaled, staring at the stars carved into the steel. "...Your name is **Gravemourn**. Because you carry the weight I can't ignore."

The scythe hummed low, constellations glowing like a sky at peace.

Star sniffed. *"Gravemourn. Oh, very metal. Bet it writes sad poetry at night."*

Kairo didn't rise to the bait — for once, he just smiled, faint and tired, but real.

Seryn's strings sang with too many voices, threatening to overwhelm her.

I pressed her wrist. "Choose the melody that's yours. Let the rest fall silent."

She plucked one mournful note. The chamber quieted, her strings curling softly around her hands.

Her eyes shimmered as she whispered, "Your name is **Elaris**. Because you remind me I am still myself — even among echoes."

The strings resonated in harmony, soft but haunting.

Star coughed. *"Okay, that's actually beautiful. Don't tell anyone I said that."*

Seryn shot me a startled look, then almost smiled.

And me? I had only Star. No new blade, no new gift. Just the voice who'd been with me since the beginning.

I glanced at my friends, each weapon bound, each name spoken. "Guess I should name you too, huh?"

Star laughed. *"Name me? I already named myself, genius. You're stuck with Star."*

I chuckled under my breath. "...Yeah. You're right. Star it is."

For once, he didn't quip back. He just said softly: *"Good. Then we're settled."*

The chamber went quiet, the newborn weapons' whispers still echoing faintly. Arther stepped forward, hammer resting against his shoulder, expression heavy.

"They're beautiful," he said gruffly. "But don't mistake 'beautiful' for perfect."

We all looked up.

Arther's eyes narrowed. "They are kind of... flawed. Unlike your Star, their voices aren't private. Anyone nearby can hear them — even without touch."

The silence broke into a chill.

Rivka clutched Solmere tighter. Zebbie glanced at Veilpiercer in alarm. Kairo's jaw clenched around Gravemourn's faint murmur. Seryn looked pale, the strings around her wrists still humming.

Star let out a low whistle. *"Well. That's awkward. Hope nobody minds eavesdroppers."*

Arther leaned close to the forge fire, eyes glowing blue. "Carry them carefully. A careless word may betray you. And a careless whisper... might doom you."

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## A Test of Strength

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The Spire was not still.  
Its mirrored bones shook as though the tower itself  
dreaded what it was about to summon. Cracks of light  
tore through the glass amphitheater until the world  
turned upside down – sky where the floor had been,  
stars bending where the walls once stood.

And then it came.

A *presence* pushed into existence, a weight older than  
the first flame. The chamber warped to hold it, but  
even infinite glass was too small.

The Elder of the Forgotten Gods stepped through.

It was not one shape but thousands overlapping – a  
titan of star-stitched limbs, a veil of mouths whispering  
in every tongue, eyes that blinked like galaxies dying.  
Where it walked, mirrors shattered to dust; where it  
breathed, whole constellations flickered and went dark.

We stood, weapons in hand, trembling. Not just from  
fear – but from the terrible truth.

This wasn't just a test. This was judgment.

Its mouth opened.  
Not words, but *meanings* poured out – grief, hunger,  
power. Each of us staggered under the weight.

Rivka gasped, gripping her staff. Zebbie clutched her chest. Kairo snarled like he was choking. Serenya's strings screeched discordantly.

And then — the weapons spoke.

**Solmere** boomed like a sun exploding:  
*"The flame does not bow. Speak louder, Rivka. Burn the silence."*

**Veilpiercer** hissed sharp as a blade across glass:  
*"Strike through illusion. Tear through lies. Truth cuts deepest."*

**Gravemourn** thundered like collapsing stars:  
*"Hold, Kairo. You are not the storm — you are the anchor."*

**Elaris** sang softly but endlessly, like an elegy echoing across lifetimes:  
*"Do not lose yourself, Serenya. A single melody can drown out a thousand screams."*

And then...

Star.

*"Zeon. You're not fighting this thing alone. Let's show it why you and I are a problem."*

Their voices weren't whispers. They filled the chamber, *audible to all*, overlapping with such force the Elder actually flinched — just slightly — as if hearing them was an insult to its dominion.

The Elder's first blow came as a sweep of its cosmic arm. Galaxies cracked from their knuckles, raining meteors of light down upon us.

“Move!” I shouted.

Rivka lifted **Solmere**, flames coiling skyward, meeting the falling stars with a barrier of fire that turned meteors to ash. She cried out, but the staff roared with her, amplifying her voice into a war song that shook the air.

Zebbie slipped into shadow, **Veilpiercer** guiding her hand. She slashed at the Elder’s veil of false faces — each strike breaking illusions, peeling away its many disguises until its true face, a skull of shifting constellations, burned through.

The Elder screamed — a thousand screams — and struck downward.

Kairo met it head-on. **Gravemourn** howled like an earthquake, its constellations flaring. He planted his feet, dragging the scythe across the ground. The weight of *stars themselves* anchored the Elder’s limb, pinning it against the mirrored floor. His arms bled from the strain, but he didn’t let go.

Seryn stepped into the center, her strings — **Elaris** — wrapping around each of us in shimmering threads of sound. A single note resonated, weaving our rhythms into one. Where the Elder’s whispers tried to tear our identities apart, Elaris’s song stitched us back together.

And me — I raised my hand, Star’s laughter blazing in my skull. Together, we pulled in the fragments of resonance around us, a storm of raw light.

“Now, Zeon!” Star yelled. “Make this god remember us!”

I drove the power forward.

The Elder shrieked, raising both arms to crush us. The chamber shattered — glass skies raining shards infinite as snow.

But this time, we weren't separated.

Rivka's flame surged. Zebbie's blade struck. Kairo's scythe held. Seryn's song rose. Star's resonance poured through me.

And together — our weapons roared.

**Solmere:** *"Burn!"*

**Veilpiercer:** *"Shatter!"*

**Gravemourn:** *"Bind!"*

**Elaris:** *"Resonate!"*

**Star:** *"Break it, Zeon!"*

We struck as one.

Flame engulfed its chest.

Truth cut its heart.

Gravity anchored its fall.

Song split its voice.

Resonance shattered its core.

The Elder convulsed, its constellation-flesh cracking apart into infinite shards of light. Its last roar carried through every mouth it had — rage, grief, *fear* — until it dissolved into dust that the Spire drank away.

Silence.

We stood there, gasping, cut and bloodied, weapons trembling in our hands, but still alive.

The mirrors steadied. The chamber quieted. The test was over.

Arther finally spoke from the shadows, voice gravel-deep.

“You lived through what would have unmade armies. That means you’re ready.”

I wiped blood from my lip, looking at my friends, at the weapons, at the fading dust of the Elder.

“Well...” I said, my voice low but steady, “We’re as powerful as we can be right now. And whatever’s coming—”

I tightened my fist, Star pulsing bright inside my mind.

**“I am ready.”**