

**To my daughter, may you find the courage,
friendship, and love found within these pages,
and within yourself.**

PROLOGUE

When I was a child, I thought the world ended at the edge of our garden.
I believed nothing existed beyond the stone wall my grandfather built by hand.
He used to tell me stories there — stories he should not have remembered.

As he grew older, his memories thinned like autumn leaves carried on the wind.
He forgot names, then faces.
He confused past with present.
But the stories remained, clinging to him long after everything else slipped away.
He carried his memories the way old trees carry scars — quietly, without asking anyone to understand them.

He spoke of wings made of fire, of a sky that cracked open, of a world that once touched ours.
At the time, I thought they were tales told by an old man trying to hold onto something bright.
Only much later did I realise he had been trying to warn me.

The first sign arrived when I was nine.
There was ash on my pillow —
not cold, but faintly warm, as if it remembered the fire that birthed it.
I brushed it away, thinking it was dust blown in through the window.
But each morning, more appeared.

My grandfather grew restless.
He would stand in the doorway at night, watching me sleep, his

brow furrowed as though searching for something just out of reach.

Sometimes I heard him mutter words in a language I did not know.

“It has started,” he whispered once, though I never understood what *it* was.
Not until much later.

He reached for my hand and pressed something into my palm — an ember-glow taking the shape of a feather, its edges smouldering like a memory trying to hold itself together, weightless as breath, impossibly warm. He could never give me the real feather — it had burned away the moment it chose its path.

“This story did not begin with me — I simply stepped into its path,” he said.

There was a time when humans walked beside Guardians, when the Realms were not divided, and the world had not forgotten its own heartbeat.

I did not understand.
I did not listen.
And the story opened anyway.

If I had known then what I know now, perhaps I would have run.
Perhaps I would have begged the world to close again.
But stories have their own hunger.
They find us when they choose to, not when we are ready.

Every story waits for the breath that decides its path.

What happened next was the moment the last ember before dawn finally chose which way it would fall.

CHAPTER 1 — A Quiet House

Human Earth

The house never made much noise on its own.

It creaked, because old houses did. The pipes clanked once in a while, and the wind sometimes pushed a loose bit of guttering into tapping against the wall. But there were no televisions blaring through thin plaster, no siblings shouting up the stairs, no music leaking under bedroom doors. The quiet was not absolute, but it was the sort that settled into corners and stayed there, like dust.

Alina woke into that quiet before the alarm went off.

For a moment, she lay still, staring at the faint pattern the curtains made where the morning light pushed through, pale and indecisive. The room smelled faintly of old paper and washing powder. Her school blazer hung from the back of the chair, one sleeve twisted. A stack of books leaned precariously on the bedside table, last night's mug of tea balanced too close to the edge.

She listened.

The house breathed in its usual way: a low hum from the fridge downstairs, the distant tick of the hall clock, the faint shifting of wood settling in the walls. Somewhere beyond the window, a bird tried out a few half-hearted notes and gave up.

No raised voices. No footsteps. No one is calling her name.

She exhaled, a slow breath she hadn't realised she was holding, and reached for the alarm clock just before it buzzed. She switched it off out of habit, rolled onto her back and stared at the ceiling.

Another ordinary day, then.

Her fingers brushed something gritty near her pillow. She paused, frowning, and brought her hand up to look.

Dust. Nothing more. A tiny smear of grey on her fingertips.

She rubbed it away on the duvet, not thinking about it. She was too used to the old house shedding little bits of itself into corners. Pulling back the curtain a fraction, she peered out at the garden.

The fence was still crooked, leaning slightly where the post had rotted at the base. Beyond it, the line of trees stood in their usual, unimpressed silence. The sky over them was a flat, undecided grey, the kind that could turn into rain or do nothing at all. The muddy path along the fence was more brown than green this time of year, trampled into familiarity.

All exactly where she had left it.

For some reason, that made her chest loosen a little more.

A blackbird hopped along the fence and, spotting her in the window, tilted its head. Most birds flew away when they noticed a face behind the glass. This one only stayed where it was, eyes bright, as if checking that she was where she was supposed to be. After a moment, it fluffed its feathers and carried on with whatever urgent business blackbirds had on dull mornings.

“You’re welcome,” Alina murmured, and let the curtain fall back into place.

She dressed quickly, pulling on socks that didn’t quite match and scraping her hair into a loose plait. There was no one here to tell her off for it. Grandad noticed things like that, but he rarely commented unless they involved safety, weather, or homework deadlines. Even then, his warnings came wrapped in stories, not orders.

She looped her schoolbag over one shoulder, checked she had her keys, phone and bus pass, and headed downstairs.

The smell of toast and weak tea met her halfway.

The kitchen was small, and the table was pushed close to the window to save space. Grandad was already seated, glasses low on his nose, a notebook open in front of him. The notebook was old and softened at the edges, its pages swollen from years of being carried in damp places.

His pen hovered over a line he'd written and then stopped midway, as if the thought had gone somewhere he couldn't quite follow.

"Morning," Alina said, nudging the door further open with her hip.

He blinked, looked up, and the distant expression in his eyes cleared. A smile settled into the wrinkles around his mouth.

"Morning, little star." He checked the clock on the wall. "You're up early. Voluntarily."

Should I be concerned?"

"Couldn't sleep," she said, which wasn't entirely true. She had slept, but it had felt thin, as if she were only lying very close to waking all night. "Figured I might as well get the day over with."

"Mm." He reached for the toaster, pressed the lever again when it popped up too pale. "Big test?"

"Just double maths," she said, grimacing. "So... yes."

"Ah. A worthy foe." He tapped the pen against his notebook, then closed it carefully and set it aside. "Eat first. Numerical battles go better on a full stomach."

She slid into the chair opposite him, the wood familiar under her hands, and pulled a plate of toast towards her. A jar of jam sat on the table, its label half-peeled. The knife had already been dipped once, and she could see the uneven, generous smear on his plate.

He always forgot how much he'd already put on.

“Did you sleep at all?” she asked, nodding towards the notebook.

“Some,” he said, which could mean anything from three hours to none. “The usual nonsense.

Old stones refusing to stay in the ground, that sort of thing.”

“Exciting,” she said. “Did they at least arrange themselves into a useful pattern this time?”

“Sadly, no. They remain stubbornly inconsiderate.” He poured tea into her mug from the pot.

It was the weak amber colour he preferred — water with opinions, Luma would have called it, if Luma had been here yet. “You?”

“Same,” she said, thinking of the way sleep had hovered just behind her eyes, unwilling to stay. “Nothing I remember. Just... restless.”

She didn’t tell him about the feeling that something had been watching her while she slept; not in a nightmare sense, nothing sharp or monstrous, just a quiet awareness that wasn’t entirely hers. It would sound childish spoken out loud, and he didn’t need more to worry about.

He studied her face for a moment longer than necessary, his gaze flicking to the faint shadows under her eyes.

“You’re not getting ill, are you?” he asked. “Headache? Sore throat? Sudden allergy to school?”

“Sadly, no,” she said. “I’d have used any of those.”

“Mm.” The corner of his mouth twitched. “If you start seeing double, we’ll negotiate a surrender. Until then... eat.”

They ate in companionable silence for a while. The clock ticked. A car passed outside, its tyres hissing on damp tarmac. Somewhere in the house, a floorboard settled with a soft groan.

Alina glanced up at the sound.

The ceiling above the kitchen was the floor of the small landing outside her room. She knew every squeak and protest of the staircase, every place you had to avoid if you didn't want to wake Grandad on the nights you were raiding the fridge. This creak had been none of those.

It had been small, almost polite, like a footstep that decided halfway through not to exist at all.

She waited for a second noise. Nothing came.

"House is talking to itself again," Grandad said, following her gaze, his tone light.

"It does that a lot," Alina replied.

"It's old." He took another bite of toast. "Old things creak. It's a sign they're still choosing to stand."

It was the kind of thing he said often: ordinary words that sounded almost like they were about something else. She could never tell if he meant them to.

"Is that from your book?" she asked.

"Mm?"

"The one you're secretly writing in that notebook." She tipped her chin towards it. "You know, the epic no one is allowed to read."

He laughed quietly.

"Field notes, not epic," he said. "Fragments. Half-thoughts. A map without a legend."

"You could write one," she said. "An actual book. People read stranger things than your stories."

"They're not mine," he said, almost too quickly. Then he hesitated, shoulders softening.

“Besides, some stories...” He trailed off, staring past her for a moment, the light from the window catching the lines around his eyes. “Some stories are better kept as warnings than entertainment.”

Alina drummed her fingers lightly against the side of her mug.

“Is that what they are?” she asked. “Warnings?”

“Depends who’s listening,” he said.

He reached for his tea, and Alina saw, just for a second, the slight tremor in his hand. It wasn’t the broad shake of someone losing control —more a small, stubborn rebellion at the edges of his grip. He noticed her noticing and shifted the cup to his other hand with studied casualness.

The kettle clicked as it cooled. The clock ticked on.

This was what a quiet morning looked like now: two people, one house, a table with too many empty chairs around it. Her parents’ faces lived in photographs on the wall and in the soft places of memory, not in the daily clutter of shoes by the door or voices upstairs. Grief had settled into the house a long time ago and faded from sharp pain into something woven into the carpets and stair rails.

Sometimes she missed them so suddenly it made her breath catch. Today, the feeling was softer, a familiar ache she knew how to live around.

She finished her toast, wiped a smear of jam from the plate with the last corner, and pushed her chair back.

“I should go,” she said. “Bus in twenty minutes. And my locker has decided it only opens if I sacrifice ten minutes of my life to swearing at it first.”

“Language,” he said mildly. “Swearing is a precious resource. Don’t use it all up on school infrastructure.”

She snorted.

“I’ll save some for maths.”

“That’s my girl.” He smiled, then his expression shifted, something more serious sliding in beneath the warmth. “Alina?”

She paused, hand on the strap of her bag.

“Mm?”

“If anything feels... wrong today,” he said slowly, as if choosing each word with care, “not frightening, necessarily, just not quite sitting right —you tell me. Even if you think it’s nothing. Especially then.”

The air in the kitchen felt a fraction tighter.

“Like what?” she asked, aiming for lightness and not entirely getting there.

He shook his head.

“I don’t know,” he said, which was the truth and not the whole of it. “Just humour an old man and promise.”

She studied his face for a moment —the tired eyes, the lines carved by years of worry and laughter, the quiet, stubborn set of his jaw.

“Fine,” she said. “I promise. If the world tilts, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Good.” He relaxed, just a little. “Off you go, then. Try not to start any revolutions before lunch.”

“No promises,” she said, and this time her smile came easier.

In the hallway, she pulled on her shoes, shrugged into her coat and checked her bag again.

The mirror above the small table by the door caught her reflection: a girl with hazel eyes, a plait that would be a mess by

the end of the day, and an expression that hovered between wary and hopeful.

Behind her, in the glass, the hallway looked exactly as it should. There was no lurking shadow, no strange figure at her shoulder. Just her and the narrow space and the scuffed front door.

Still, something in the back of her mind tightened when she met her own gaze. A brief flicker of déjà vu shivered through her—a sense of standing at a threshold she couldn't quite see.

She blinked, and the feeling dissolved.

“Door,” Grandad called from the kitchen. “Don’t forget to lock it this time. The neighbour’s cat is entirely too keen on exploring our cupboard space.”

“I won’t,” she called back.

She opened the door. Cool air slipped in, smelling faintly of damp leaves and distant exhaust.

The street was quiet: a row of houses much like theirs, a lamp post still humming as it decided whether to stay on or not, a bin someone had forgotten to bring in last night.

Alina stepped out, pulled the door gently until the latch clicked, and turned the key. For a moment, her hand rested on the wood, palm flat, as if she were promising the house she’d be back.

“Keep an eye on him for me,” she murmured under her breath, not sure who she was talking to.

The house, predictably, did not answer.

She slipped the keys into her pocket, squared her shoulders, and started down the path towards the bus stop, her breath a small cloud in the cool morning air.

Behind her, the quiet house watched her go.

It creaked once, very softly, as if adjusting to a weight she had not realised it carried.

CHAPTER 2 — The Old Man and the Notebook

Human Earth

By the time Alina got home, the sky had given up pretending it might clear.

Rain wasn't falling yet, but the clouds had settled low and heavy over the street, squeezing the colour out of everything. The houses looked flatter in that light, like someone had turned down the saturation on a screen. She stood for a moment at the front gate, fingers cold on the metal latch, and watched her breath mist in the air.

The house watched her back.

It was a ridiculous thought. She knew that. Bricks and glass, and old roof tiles did not watch anything. But the windows had that look — the faint, dull gleam of reflected sky over a darkness that was not quite empty. She pushed the feeling away, nudged the gate open with her hip and walked up the path.

The front door stuck, as it always did in damp weather. She shoved her shoulder into it, the swollen wood reluctantly giving way with a soft sigh.

"I'm home," she called, kicking her shoes off in the narrow hall.

"In here," Grandad's voice answered from the living room.

She shrugged off her coat, hung it on the nearest hook and dropped her bag by the stairs, promising herself she would take it up later and knowing she probably wouldn't. The carpet in the hall smelled faintly of dust and the lemon cleaner Grandad always used on Saturdays, whether it needed it or not.

The living room door was half open. Warm light spilt through the gap, a yellow rectangle on the hallway wall.

Grandad sat in his usual armchair by the window, the lamp beside him turned on despite the early hour. The notebook lay open on his lap, his pen resting against the page. He was staring past the paper, not writing, his eyes fixed on something that wasn't there.

For a heartbeat, he didn't seem to notice her.

The look on his face was not the distant distraction of someone lost in a crossword. It was sharper, thinner —like a man standing on the edge of a cliff in a fog, listening for a sound he didn't trust himself to recognise.

“Grandad?” she said, more softly than she'd meant to.

He blinked. His gaze jerked away from the empty space in front of him and snapped back into the room. The tension in his shoulders loosened, the lines around his mouth unbunching.

“Sorry,” he said, with a short breath that might have been a laugh if it had more strength.

“You moved quietly. Thought you were the post.”

“Do I sound like junk mail?” she asked, sliding onto the sofa with a tired thump.

“On a bad day, perhaps.” The corner of his mouth twitched. “How was the numerical war?”

“Survived with minor emotional damage,” she said. The cushions sagged familiarly under her. “The quadratic equations attempted an uprising, but I crushed them with pure panic and a borrowed calculator.”

“Excellent tactics,” he murmured. The pen rolled a fraction on the page, and he steadied it with his thumb.

She watched him for a moment.

“You were miles away,” she said. “Again.”

“Was I?” He glanced down at the notebook, as if expecting it to have written something on its own while he wasn’t looking. The page was filled with cramped handwriting in his neat, careful script. At the bottom, a sentence slid off into a jagged line, as though the thought had fallen and dragged the pen with it.

He frowned at that, then put the pen aside.

“Just woolgathering,” he said. “Occupational hazard of old archaeologists. We spend too long looking at ghosts in the ground; eventually, they start looking back.”

“Comforting,” she muttered.

He tilted his head, studying her.

“You really are tired,” he said. “You’ve got that look like you’ve been reading with your eyes shut all day.”

“That’s pretty accurate,” she said. “Maths, English, history. And Megan spent half of lunch period talking about some influencer’s eyebrows like they hold the key to enlightenment.”

“Do they?”

“Tragically, no.”

He smiled, faintly. The expression stayed a moment, then faded. His gaze slipped past her, unhooking from the present again. This time, instead of going blank, it sharpened —like he was listening to something just outside the range of normal hearing.

Alina followed his eyes.

There was nothing there.

Just the bookshelf, the curtained window, the thin line of damp creeping slowly up the corner of the wall where the plaster was old. The room was quiet, save for the ticking clock and the distant traffic outside.

“Grandad,” she said quietly.

He didn’t answer.

His pupils had widened a little, dark swallowing the hazel, as if the room had suddenly dimmed for him alone. His fingers tightened on the edge of the notebook, the tendons on the back of his hand standing out.

For an instant, the air in the room felt thicker, denser. Alina’s ears popped, as though pressure had changed in a plane cabin.

Then it was gone.

Grandad blinked, shoulders jerking. He inhaled sharply, as if he’d been holding his breath.

“Sorry,” he said again, a little too briskly. “What were we saying? Eyebrows?”

Alina sat back slowly.

“You did that thing again,” she said. “Like this morning. You just... stop. Like someone hit pause.”

“Occupational hazard,” he said lightly, but the humour didn’t quite reach his eyes this time.

“Brains get drafty at my age. Thoughts sneak out when you’re not looking.”

“That didn’t look like thoughts sneaking out,” she said. “It looked like you were listening to something.”

He hesitated.

“For what it’s worth, I hope I wasn’t,” he murmured.

“Listening, I mean.”

“That’s very reassuring,” she said. “You’re full of comfort today.”

He glanced at her, weighing something. Then he closed the notebook gently, sliding the pen into the spine.

“Come here a moment,” he said.

She raised an eyebrow. "I am here."

"Closer, you degenerate," he said fondly, patting the arm of his chair.

She rolled her eyes but got up from the sofa and crossed the room. The carpet was worn thin in a faint path between the door and the chair, the mark of years of ordinary walking. She perched on the arm, balancing carefully so she didn't tip him over.

He rested his hand over hers, his skin dry and warm.

"Humour me," he said. "Tell me, as precisely as you can, how the house felt when you came in."

Alina stared at him.

"Felt?"

"Yes."

"Like... a house." She gestured vaguely. "Cold door. Smelled of damp and laundry. The carpet trying to eat my shoes. The usual."

"Anything else?" he pressed. "Did you hesitate on the path? Check the windows? Listen before you opened the door?"

She opened her mouth to deny it, then closed it again.

"I... might have," she admitted. "It just looked... I don't know. Flat."

"Flat," he repeated.

"Like a picture," she said, searching for the words. "Like it was there, but not really... participating."

He nodded once, slowly, as if that confirmed something he hadn't wanted confirmed.

"And now?" he asked. "How does it feel now?"

She frowned, eyes scanning the room.

The living room looked exactly as it always did: the sagging sofa, the old curtains, the lamp with the slightly crooked shade, the mugs on coasters, the cluttered bookshelf. Familiar.

Ordinary.

But underneath that, if she paid close attention, there was something else. A faint tension in the plaster. The sense of walls leaning in a fraction, the way people lean when they're trying to catch a whisper.

"Like it's... listening," she said slowly. "Which is stupid."

"It's not stupid," he said. "Houses remember things. Not like we do. More... impressions.

Pressure. If enough of the wrong kind builds up, they creak in odd places."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?" she asked.

"No," he said honestly. "It's supposed to make you careful."

He let go of her hand, picked up the notebook and held it between them. The cover was scuffed leather, worn smooth where his thumb had rested over the years.

"You know what this is," he said.

"Your secret not-an-epic," she said. "Field notes. Half-maps. Mystical shopping list. Take your pick."

"Mm." He looked down at the blank half-page waiting for him. "Once upon a time, it was just dates and locations. Layers of soil. Broken pottery. Burn marks on stone. Little pieces of old stories that refused to stay buried."

He tapped the paper with the back of his pen.

"Then your grandmother died," he said quietly. "And about a year after that, I started noticing things in the corners of my notes that I didn't remember writing."

Alina felt her mouth go dry.

“Like what?” she asked.

He flipped the notebook open to a page halfway through. It was filled with neat, careful script, lines of observations and references. Between two paragraphs —so neatly it had taken a moment for her eyes to pick it out —someone had drawn a small feather in the margin. Not a doodle. It was too precise for that. Each barb and strand had been inked with patient attention.

She touched it with one fingertip.

“Did you draw this?” she asked.

“I don’t remember,” he said. “If I did, I don’t know why.”

He turned a few more pages. Another feather. Then, further on, a small curve of something that might have been a bird’s wing, half-formed and abandoned. Later still, a tiny ring of stones, shaded as if they were standing upright in water.

“These started turning up after certain dreams,” he said.

“Dreams I couldn’t remember properly. Just the feeling after — like waking from a nightmare you can’t hold onto, only to realise the fear isn’t what stayed with you. It’s the... absence.”

“Absence of what?” she whispered.

He shook his head.

“That’s the cruel part,” he said. “You never know. Just that something important is missing, and you’re the only one who notices the gap.”

A shiver crawled up the back of her neck.

“You’re scaring me,” she said, attempting a smile and not quite managing it.

“Good,” he said softly. “You should be a little scared. Not of the house. Not of shadows in the corners. Of silence. Of the things we stop talking about because they’re inconvenient.”

He closed the notebook again and rested his hand on the cover.

“Alina, listen to me.”

She did. The air felt very still.

“Strange dreams are one thing,” he said. “Weird creaks. Feelings you can shrug off. But if you ever start seeing the same symbols over and over —feathers, circles, doors that don’t lead where they should —you come to me. Immediately. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she said, throat tight.

“And if,” he added, voice dropping, “you ever dream of a man whose face you can’t quite see, who feels like a person and not... a story —someone who looks at you like he recognises you when you know he shouldn’t —that’s when we call Mara.”

The name landed between them with a weight out of proportion to its size.

“Mara?” Alina repeated. “As in weird -chalk -symbols -guest -from -last-year Mara?”

“That’s the one,” he said. “She reads houses better than I do these days. And forests. And other things. If I’m... slipping...” His gaze drifted for a second, then snapped back, as if he’d nearly walked into something in his own head. “If I’m not enough, she will know what to do.”

He was trying to make light of it, she could tell. But she could also see the thin thread of fear behind the words.

“Grandad,” she said quietly, “are you ill?”

He blinked, caught.

“Not in any way a doctor can label,” he said. “Just... old. And maybe a little too haunted by failed research projects.”

“That’s not funny,” she said.

“No,” he agreed. “It isn’t.”

The room seemed to press closer again. The lamp hummed faintly. Outside, the first drops of rain began to tick softly against the windowpane.

He sighed, rubbed his eyes with thumb and forefinger, then forced a smile.

“Enough of that,” he said. “You’ve got homework, I assume.”

“Always,” she said.

“Then go and do it. Let me argue with my notes in peace. If anything feels wrong, you know the rules.”

“Tell you,” she said. “And if it’s really wrong... we call Mara.”

“Good girl.” He squeezed her hand once more and released her.

She slipped off the arm of the chair, picked up nothing but her own weight this time, and headed for the door. Halfway into the hall, she glanced back.

He had opened the notebook again, pen in hand. The lamplight turned his hair into a halo of fine silver.

He was writing, but the pen kept pausing mid-stroke, hovering over the page as if waiting for permission to continue. His eyes were not on the words. They were fixed on some point just above the paper, unfocused and sharp all at once.

“Grandad?” she said.

He didn’t respond.

His mouth moved, just a fraction. No sound came out.

The hairs on her arms lifted.

“Grandad,” she said again, louder.

He jolted, as if she'd shaken him. The pen skidded, leaving a small ink blot.

"Sorry," he said, exhaling. "That was a particularly boring sentence. My brain staged a protest."

"You keep saying sorry," she said. "Maybe you should stop scaring me instead."

"Working on it," he said. "Off with you. I'll be up in a bit to nag you about dinner."

She lingered another heartbeat, then nodded and went upstairs.

The house felt closer on the way up. The staircase was narrow, the bannister smooth under her palm. Halfway, she glanced down the short hallway that led to the back door. For a moment, she thought she saw something perched on the newel post—a pale shape, a suggestion of wings folded tight.

She blinked, and it was gone.

"Get a grip," she muttered to herself, and went to her room.

Downstairs, Edmund sat very still.

The pen lay where he'd dropped it, a dark spot of ink blooming slowly on the page. He didn't see it. His gaze had drifted past the notebook, past the lamp, past the room itself.

He was standing somewhere else.

Not in body. That stayed in the chair, heartbeat steady, lungs moving air in and out. But his mind had stepped sideways, into the narrow, dimly lit corridor he had been visiting more and more often of late.

It was not a place he recognised, yet it felt as familiar as the taste of his own name.

The corridor had no clear walls, only a sense of enclosure, like being inside someone else's held breath. The floor was made

of nothing he could have described, but it supported his weight. The air shimmered, thick with the feeling of almost-remembered things.

“Not this,” he murmured, though the words didn’t reach his lips.

He knew, with the stubborn logic of dreams, that if he followed this corridor far enough, he would find the source of the unease that dogged his waking hours. He also knew that something waited there that he was not ready to see.

He was not alone.

Far down the corridor, a shape moved. At first, he took it for a trick of shadow. Then it resolved into a tall, thin figure standing with its back to him, just beyond the hazy range of clear sight. It was not monstrous. That would have been easier. It looked like a man, shoulders slightly hunched, head turned as if listening to something only he could hear.

Edmund’s chest tightened.

He had the sudden, unreasonable impression that if the man turned, if he saw his face, everything in his world would tilt. Not because of horror. Because of recognition.

He took an involuntary step back.

Something soft brushed his shoulder.

He froze.

Beside him, where there had been nothing, a second presence had appeared: tall as his chest, maybe a little higher, its outline limned in faint, blue-white light. Wings folded close. A head turning silently to look down the corridor.

An owl, he thought, absurdly. An owl made of moonlight.

He couldn't see its eyes clearly. They were too bright, reflecting not the corridor but something beyond it — shapes he couldn't hold, pieces of a sky he didn't remember standing under.

The pressure in his chest eased a fraction.

The owl shifted its weight, just enough that one wing brushed against his arm. The contact was not physical, exactly. More like a cool hand laid gently against a fevered forehead.

The corridor seemed to steady.

Up ahead, the man-shaped twitched, as if annoyed. The air around him darkened, edges fuzzing, his outline sinking slowly back into the deeper shadow at the far end of the passage.

Edmund felt an old, instinctive urge to follow, to demand explanations, to ask a hundred questions.

The owl's wing pressed more firmly.

Not yet, a feeling said —not words, but meaning, settling over his thoughts like a soft blanket.

He breathed out.

The corridor began to thin, its edges fraying. The sense of a floor under his feet dissolved gently into the familiar weight of the armchair, the pressure of his clothes, the whisper of the lamp.

When he blinked, he was back in the living room.

The notebook lay open on his knees. The ink blot had grown into an irregular, dark star. The pen rested against his thumb. The lamp hummed.

He ran a hand over his face.

"Too old for this," he muttered.

His hand came away smudged with the faintest hint of grey dust.

He stared at it for a moment, then wiped it on his trousers and reached for the pen again with hands that shook only a little.

On the page, without quite deciding to, he drew a small shape in the margin: a curve, a pointed tip, a line of feather-barbs. Next to it, almost as an afterthought, a circle of stones half-sketched, as if standing in shallow water.

He didn't know why.

Upstairs, a floorboard creaked softly above his head. The house shifted around him, old wood adjusting, walls listening.

Edmund glanced up at the ceiling.

"Aurynel," he whispered, the name surfacing from nowhere and dissolving on his tongue before he could taste it.

He shook his head.

"Drafty brain," he told the empty room. "That's all."

From somewhere far beyond Human Earth, in a space that was not a space at all, a pale owl glided along a different corridor, keeping watch.

And deeper still, in a place where nightmares pooled, and old hungers stirred, something resentful narrowed its attention.

Not yet a name.

Not yet a face.

Just a weight at the edge of dreams, waiting for the right heartbeat to lean on.

CHAPTER 3 — The Unwelcome Sleep

Human Earth — Night

Alina fell asleep faster than she meant to.

The day's heaviness pulled at her; by the time she plugged her phone in and pulled the duvet over her legs, exhaustion had already settled behind her eyes. The house was quiet. Too quiet, maybe, but she was too tired to pick at that. She curled on her side, breath slipping into rhythm, the kind of sleep that drops suddenly rather than drifts.

She expected nothing.

She got the Dreamwave instead.

It began with the sound of her own breath echoing back at her, just slightly off-timing, like a delay on a microphone.

Then the room around her changed.

Not suddenly. Not violently.

It tilted.

Her bed felt longer, as if someone had stretched it by an inch. The ceiling seemed a little

higher. The shadows under the desk breathed in and out with the slow patience of things that had all the time in the world. Her posters — those ordinary rectangles she'd walked past a thousand times — looked wrong for a heartbeat, slanting at an angle that didn't exist in real geometry.

Alina tried to shift, but her limbs were made of something thicker than sleep.

Her breath fogged in front of her, though the room wasn't cold.

Something was watching her.

Not from the hallway.

Not from the window.

From the air.

The darkness at the corners of the room rippled, like someone had dropped a stone into black water. Light bent inward, faint and curious. A soft, nearly inaudible hum tremored at the base of her skull. The sensation wasn't a presence entering her dream —it was a presence already waiting inside it.

Her pulse hammered against her ribs.

She tried to sit up.

Her body didn't respond.

She tried to call out for Grandad.

Her voice stuck behind her teeth.

The shadows thickened. Not into shapes —Dreamwave never reveals shapes this early —but into suggestions.

Half-thoughts.

Barely-formed silhouettes.

Something like fingers of darkness reaching through fabric, stopping just short of touching her.

The air pressed closer.

A low vibration rolled through the room —soundless, but heavy.

Alina's heartbeat stumbled.

Her bedroom door shivered on its hinges.

Something was leaning on the other side.

The handle dipped a fraction.

Not enough to open.

Just enough to show that something on the other side knew she was here.

Her mind reeled, panic ricocheting inside her skull.

The shadows pressed closer.

Her breath came too fast.

Her vision trembled.

Then —

A weight dropped into the dream.

Not onto her.

Into the space itself.

Everything stilled.

The shadows recoiled instinctively, as if something older and far larger had stepped between them and their prey. Pressure rippled outward in concentric rings, distorting the dream for a moment into a haze of pale-blue static.

Baku.

She didn't see him — Dreamwave rules would never allow that — but she felt the effect of him like the sudden, steadying hand on a child's back when the night gets too loud.

The darkness hissed — not a sound but a feeling — then folded into itself and slipped through the cracks of the dream, retreating in thin streams that dissolved into nothing.

Her bedroom snapped back into its familiar shape.

Walls stopped leaning.

Shadows stopped breathing.

Her breath hitched, then evened, like the air itself had been returned to her.

Alina jerked awake.

Her chest ached.

Sweat clung to her skin.

Her fingers were curled tight into the sheets.

The room looked normal.

Too normal.

Her eyes darted to the door.

Closed.

Still.

Untouched.

She swallowed hard and pushed herself upright, arms shaking. A thin curl of something greyish —dust? ash? —quivered on her pillow before drifting down into the crease of the linen.

The radiator hummed.

A car passed outside.

The house made one small, polite creak, nothing more.

But Alina sat very still, palms damp, heart still hammering in the echo of something she couldn't name.

She looked at the door again.

This time, she wasn't imagining it.

The door handle was trembling.

Barely —just a ghost of movement —but enough.

She held her breath.

It stilled.

She exhaled shakily and pressed the heel of her hand to her forehead.

It was just a dream.

Just a dream.

Just—

But she already knew that if she told Grandad about this in the morning, he would not say just anything.

She tried to tell herself she could still sleep. She even lay back down, pulling the duvet to her chin and willing her body to relax.

But the air felt too thin now, too stretched, as if the room had been tugged out of alignment and stitched back together wrong.

Minutes passed.

Or maybe only seconds.

Time felt warped in the dark.

Then the floorboard outside her room creaked.

Not the polite, settling kind from earlier.

A step.

Slow.

Careful.

Her breath hitched painfully.

The doorknob twitched again.

She pushed herself upright just as the corridor light flicked on in a narrow streak beneath the door. The shadow under the frame broke in half as someone halted outside.

“Alina?”

Grandad’s voice.

Soft.

Uneven.

She exhaled so sharply she almost collapsed.

“Yeah,” she whispered, throat too tight to speak normally.

“I’m awake.”

The door opened only a few centimetres —he had always been respectful about barging into rooms —but the glow from the hall stretched across her carpet like a lifeline.

His face appeared in the gap.

Concerned.

Pinched at the edges.

Older than it had looked this afternoon.

“I heard... something,” he said, eyes flicking past her, scanning the room like a man checking for broken glass. “Did you call out?”

“No,” she said. “Nightmare. I think.”

He stepped inside slowly, as if the air were thicker than usual. And something in him stilled.

It happened so subtly she might have missed it if she hadn’t lived with him long enough to recognise the signs. His jaw slackened a fraction. His breath slowed. His gaze slid sideways — towards the empty corner near her desk.

“Grandad?” she whispered.

He didn’t answer.

His pupils widened.

Just slightly.

As if he were listening to something underneath the quiet.

A faint pressure, almost like a ripple of cold air, shimmered across the room.

Dreamwave residue.

Baku’s leftover presence.

Grandad swayed.

“Grandad,” she said louder, scrambling out of bed.

He blinked.

The spell — whatever it was — cracked.

“Sorry,” he breathed, rubbing the back of his neck. “Dark room. Old brain. Bad combination.”

She stared at him, pulse still racing.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“I should be asking you that,” he said, but his voice was thin. “You look like you’ve run a marathon.”

“Just... a nightmare,” she said. “Nothing real.”

“Nightmares are never nothing,” he murmured, stepping closer. He brushed a strand of hair from her forehead the way he used to when she was smaller. “Did you see anything?”

“No,” she lied. Or half-lied. “Just... felt wrong.”

He nodded as if he’d expected that answer.

Then his gaze shifted again —this time to her pillow.

To the faint smear of grey dust.

He froze.

His expression did something strange —recognition, confusion, fear —all flickering too fast to name.

“What’s that?” she asked, quietly.

He tore his eyes away.

“Dust,” he said. Too quickly. “This house sheds more than I do. I’ll clean it tomorrow.”

But his hand trembled when he reached for the lamp.

He turned it on.

Warm light filled the room.

Shadows fled to the corners where they belonged.

The air felt normal again.

Real again.

Grandad stepped back.

“If you want,” he said gently, “I can sit in the chair for a bit until you fall asleep.”

She shook her head, though part of her didn’t want him to leave.

“I’ll be okay,” she said.

He hesitated —really hesitated —then nodded.

“Call me if it happens again,” he said. “Even if you think it’s nothing. Especially then.”

“I will.”

He lingered one more heartbeat, eyes scanning the room with that searching, haunted look she had started to dread. Then he slipped out, closing the door softly behind him.

The light under the door stayed for a moment.

Then clicked off.

Alina lay back down, exhausted but wide awake, staring at the ceiling.

The Dreamwave did not return.

But the house creaked once, faintly, as if adjusting to a weight she could no longer pretend wasn't there.

CHAPTER 4 — Luma Under the Leaves

Human Earth — Afternoon

By late afternoon, the house felt too full of breath.

Alina had done all the sensible things: homework finished, plates rinsed, a half-hearted attempt at tidying the pile of clothes on her chair. Grandad had retreated to his study with the notebook again, the steady tap of his pen drifting down the hall like rain that refused to turn into a storm.

The shadows in her room were ordinary. That should have helped.

It didn't.

The memory of last night's dream still clung to her — the feeling of running without moving, of something old and hungry watching from behind its own eyelids. She had told Grandad, stumbled through it while he listened with that quiet, weighted patience of his. He had believed her and not believed her at the same time. It wasn't his fault. She barely believed herself.

Her skin felt too tight.

Alina grabbed her hoodie from the back of the chair, shoved her arms through the sleeves and headed downstairs.

"I'm going out for a bit!" she called.

"Stay by the house," Edmund answered, too fast. "And take your phone."

She rolled her eyes where he couldn't see. "I'm not five."

"No," he said, softer. "You're not."

The pen stopped tapping for a moment as she stepped into the little back hall. The door glass showed her own reflection: brown hair dragged into a loose knot, dark crescents under her hazel eyes, the faint tightness around her mouth that hadn't been there a year ago.

She unlocked the back door and stepped out.

The garden wasn't large. A narrow rectangle of patchy grass, a line of stubborn rosebushes along the back fence, and the old oak that had been there long before the estate was built. The winter light was thin and tired, washing the world in grey.

Still, the air felt better out here. Wider. Less... listening.

Alina crossed the paving stones to the far end of the garden and dropped down under the oak, knees drawing up to her chest. Last autumn's leaves lay in layers, flattened and damp, smelling of earth and something green still clinging on beneath the rot. She dug her fingers into the leaf litter, letting the cold numb her skin.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Her heartbeat slowed from sprint to steady jog. She let her eyes close.

For a moment, there was nothing but the rustle of branches above and the distant hum of traffic.

Then the feeling arrived —soft as a fingertip pressed to the inside of her ribs.

Not the wrongness of the dream.

Not the cold, slick slide of shadow along the back of her thoughts.

Warmth.

Alina opened her eyes.

Something small pushed up through the leaf litter near her boot —moss-green fur, translucent wings, eyes like drops of

bright sap. A tiny creature wriggled free, leaves clinging to its back like a cloak.

It shook itself, scattering droplets of leaf-melt, and looked up at her.

Alina froze.

The creature blinked. Its ears twitched. Then, in a small but confident voice —young, lilting, almost musical —it said:

“...Hello?”

Alina made a sound halfway between a gasp and a squeak.

The creature held up both hands in a universal don't panic gesture.

“I come in peace! Mostly. Depending on the day.”

Alina stared.

“W-What are you?” she whispered.

The creature tilted its head. “Small. Obvious. And... cold. Your garden is rubbish for tiny people.”

“I— you— you're talking.”

“Yes! Congratulations, you're not losing your mind.”

It beamed proudly, tiny wings giving a pleased flutter.

“I'm very gifted. Phoenixfire, long story. Hi!”

Alina swallowed. Hard.

“You're... real.”

“Yes, but so are you, so let's both not freak out.”

The creature hopped lightly onto her boot.

“You look like you might faint, and you're — uh— quite tall. Please don't fall on me. I will die. Instantly. Very squishy bones.”

Despite herself, Alina let out a shaky, startled laugh.

It sounded like a laugh pulled from a deep well.

“Better,” the creature said, nodding firmly. “Laughing means you’re not about to scream in my face. Screaming is rude.”

Alina blinked at it. “Are you... dangerous?”

“Only to crumbs and unattended snacks.”

Its eyes sparkled.

“And sometimes trousers if the mood strikes. But you seem nice, so I’ll behave.”

She couldn’t tell if it was joking.

It... probably was?

The tiny being scrambled up her shin to her knee, then sat down, legs folded neatly.

“Okay. You’re shaking. Breathe. I’m not here to eat you. I’m not here to curse you. I’m not here to drag you into the shadows. I’m far too small for that. Shadows don’t take me seriously.”

Alina let out a trembling breath. “What are you?”

“Pixie,” it said proudly. “Luma, specifically.”

“...Luma?”

“Yes! Short for Lumaloria -Sunleaf -Twirlingspark -of-the-East-Moss -Ringleet.”

It puffed out its tiny chest.

“But humans take hours to say that, so Luma is fine.”

Alina stared at it again.

Luma leaned forward, peered up at her face, and poked her gently in the hoodie.

“You’re very loud.”

“I’m not talking loudly,” Alina whispered.

“Not your mouth. Your thoughts.”

Luma tapped her own temple.

“Big swirling storm up there. Weird dreams. Bad corners. Whole house sighing. I heard it.”

“You... heard my thoughts?”

“Not the words,” Luma said quickly. “Just the feelings. Pixie thing. Like... sensing the weather but inside people.”

She tapped Alina’s knee lightly.

“You felt scared. So I came.”

“...Why?”

“Because no one should shake alone,” Luma said simply.

Then her grin returned.

“And because you looked like someone who needed a tiny friend with excellent hair.”

Luma’s hair was, in fact, a mess of mossy curls and leaf-soft strands sticking out like a dandelion caught in static.

Alina gave a very small, incredulous smile.

“There it is!” Luma chirped. “A smile. Good start. Next step: convince you I don’t bite. Last step: snacks.”

“I don’t have snacks.”

Luma put a tiny hand on her heart.

“...I forgive you.”

Alina snorted. Actually snorted. The sound startled her.

Luma’s expression softened, losing some of its bravado.

“You’re sad,” she said quietly.

Alina stiffened. “No, I’m —”

“You’re sad,” Luma repeated gently. “But you’re also strong. So I’m going to sit right here and be tiny until you feel less... squished.”

The warmth of her presence spread like a small, bright lantern.

Alina’s chest loosened.

“Can I... touch you?” she asked softly.

“Yes! Gently. I bruise like a berry.”

Alina extended one finger, and Luma pressed her palm against it, warm and real.

Not a dream.

Not a nightmare.

Not a shadow.

Something good.

Something alive.

“You’re okay,” Luma murmured. “I promise. You’re okay.”

Alina believed her.

She didn’t know why.

But she did.

CHAPTER 5 — The Line Between Worlds

Human Earth — Evening

The garden light was fading when Alina let herself back inside.

She paused in the back hall to shake leaves from her hoodie. Luma clung to the hood like a very decorative brooch, wings folded tight, inspecting everything with the suspicion of a cat entering unfamiliar territory.

“You live here?” Luma whispered, peering past her shoulder. “It smells like old books and sadness.”

“It smells like lemon cleaner,” Alina muttered.

“Same thing,” Luma said gravely.

She was joking, but there was a tiny crease between her eyebrows — a subtle tension Alina recognised from only moments earlier, when the Pixie had stared into that dark corner of the garden.

The house made a faint creak above them.

Luma flinched.

“That was a floorboard,” Alina said softly. “Houses do that.”

“Houses also do other things,” Luma whispered. “Human houses pretend they don’t, but they absolutely do.”

Alina didn’t like the way she said that.

She pushed through the kitchen, trying to swallow the prickle that rose across her skin.

Somewhere in the house, a tap dripped in a slow, irregular rhythm. The sound echoed a little too long before settling.

Luma shifted nervously on her shoulder.

“Stop sensing things,” Alina hissed under her breath.

“I’m not!” Luma whispered back. Then, more honestly:
“Okay, I am. But I’m trying very hard not to.”

Alina forced a breath, squared her shoulders, and stepped into the living room.

Grandad was already looking up.

He didn’t startle — he simply watched her enter, eyes taking in more than he would ever admit aloud. His notebook lay open on the arm of the chair. The lamplight threw soft gold across his face, catching the faint tremor in his fingers.

“You’ve been out a while,” he said gently. “Everything all right?”

Alina hesitated.

She could lie.

She could pretend she had just needed air.

But Luma tensed on her shoulder in a silent, tiny flurry of wings, as if bracing for a fall.

“Yes,” Alina said finally. “I... just needed space.”

Grandad nodded, slow and thoughtful.

His gaze drifted up — and paused an inch above her shoulder.

For a moment, his pupils widened.

His breath caught.

His mind stepped half a toe into Dreamwave, sensing a presence that human senses should not have been able to detect.

“Grandad?” Alina said quickly.

The moment broke.

He blinked, adjusted his glasses.

“Sorry. Thought I saw a moth.”

Excuse me, Luma mouthed silently, deeply offended.

Alina almost choked trying not to laugh.

She crossed the room and sank onto the sofa. Luma scrambled down onto the armrest, sitting upright with exaggerated dignity, wings tucked and nose lifted.

Grandad watched the air above her shoulder again, then shook his head as if clearing old dust.

“Strange day,” he murmured.

“You have no idea,” Alina muttered.

His eyes flicked to hers.

Sharp. Searching.

“I worry about you,” he said quietly.

Before she could answer, the lamp flickered.

Not the casual, dying-bulb flicker of old wiring.

A pulse — as if something had leaned against the light from the inside.

Alina felt her chest seize.

Luma froze.

Grandad didn't move, but his eyes followed something invisible in the room.

Then the lamp steadied.

But the air did not.

For an instant, the room felt impossibly clean — stripped of warmth and dust, pared down to its bare lines, as if something delicate had brushed through and tested the shape of it.

The curtains lifted a fraction with no wind.

Dust motes drifted in a pattern too organised to be random, as though caught in invisible strands being gently tugged.

Luma straightened sharply, ears angled upward.

“That wasn't shadow,” she whispered.

“No slither. No hunger. That was... tidy.”

“Tidy?” Alina whispered back.

Luma nodded, eyes narrowed in concentration.

“Someone touched the air. Someone precise.”

Grandad glanced up, sensing the faint shift without understanding it.

His skin prickled, but he wrote it off as an old-house draft.

Then the air relaxed again, the room’s warmth returning as if nothing had happened.

Luma exhaled shakily.

“...And no thank you,” she added under her breath.

Grandad rubbed the back of his neck.

“That again,” he muttered.

Alina stiffened. “Again?”

He stopped.

Too late.

“What do you mean, again?” she pressed.

“I didn’t —” He hesitated, correcting himself. “Just... odd drafts. Bad wiring. This place is old.”

Luma leaned close to Alina’s ear.

“It’s not wiring,” she whispered. “It’s thin places.”

“Thin places?” Alina whispered back.

“Places where the world feels stretched,” Luma said. “Like skin pulled too tight. Something’s pressing from the other side.”

Alina’s heartbeat stumbled.

“Stop whispering into the sofa,” Grandad said mildly.

Alina jolted. “Wh — what?”

“You keep looking down and muttering,” he said. “Probably means you’re hungry.”

Everything means you’re hungry.”

She stared at him.

Had he heard Luma?

No. Impossible. His tone was too calm, too oblivious.

Luma, meanwhile, narrowed her eyes at the lamp.

“I don’t like this house,” she declared.

“You don’t know the house,” Alina muttered.

“I know how it feels,” Luma said. “And right now it feels like a big creature with a stomach-ache. And possibly ghosts.”

“No ghosts,” Alina whispered sharply.

“Fine. Pre-ghosts.”

“Luma.”

“What? I’m helping.”

Grandad frowned at Alina. “Who’s Luma?”

“Uh—” Alina froze. Panic flared.

Luma slapped her own forehead.

“Oh, brilliant,” she whispered. “Name your plants! Pretend Luma is a fern!”

“A song,” Alina blurted. “Luma is... a song. I was thinking of music.”

Grandad raised an eyebrow.

“A song named Luma.”

“Yes?”

He stared at her a moment longer than was comfortable.

Then sighed.

“Well, you always had strange taste.”

Luma folded her arms. “He likes me,” she whispered smugly.

“He can’t hear you,” Alina muttered.

“Well, he should. I am delightful.”

Grandad set his notebook aside.

“Alina,” he said softly, “has anything else happened? Since last night?”

She swallowed.

“No,” she lied.

Luma’s wings snapped open in scandalised fury.

“That is a terrible lie!” she hissed.

Grandad’s eyes narrowed.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m fine,” she said quickly. “Really.”

Grandad studied her for a long moment, then softened.

“Your mother used to lie like that when she didn’t want to worry me.”

Alina’s throat tightened.

“You don’t have to carry everything alone,” he said gently.

Luma scooted closer.

“He’s right, you know,” she whispered. “Humans crack if they hold too much tension. Like stale biscuits.”

Alina pressed her hands to her face.

Grandad pushed himself upright. “Tea?” he said. “Tea solves eighty percent of problems.”

“Not these,” Luma muttered.

He shuffled to the kitchen.

Alina let out a long breath.

Luma climbed onto her knee, hands warm against her sleeve.

“You’re scared,” Luma said softly.

“Aren’t you?” Alina whispered.

“Oh yes,” Luma said brightly. “But I’m very cute, so it doesn’t show.”

Alina laughed — weak but real.

Luma squeezed her finger.

“You’re not alone,” she said.

“As long as I’m here, you’re not alone.”

And for now... it was enough.

CHAPTER 6 — Chalk Eyes

Human Earth — Afternoon / Dusk

The eye appeared on the pavement before Mara did.

Alina spotted it from the living room window: a white shape on the grey of the front path, drawn just inside the garden gate. At first, she thought someone had dropped a sticker. Then she saw the texture of it — thin, grainy lines pressed into concrete.

An eye.

Simple.

Chalk -white against the dull stone.

A circle for the iris.

A ring around it.

Three short rays above, like the suggestion of lifted brows or light.

It was exactly the sort of symbol you were not supposed to see outside of a horror film or an old story told at sleepovers. Not detailed enough to be art. Not messy enough to be a child's doodle.

Just deliberate.

“That's not ominous at all,” Luma muttered from her perch on the curtain rail.

Alina folded her arms on the back of the sofa and leaned closer to the glass.

A woman stood at the gate, back turned, hair tied up in a knot that had started the day tidy and given up halfway through. She wore a long dark coat, heavy boots, and a scarf whose colour had faded from green to something indecisive. One hand held a piece of chalk.

She bent, pressed the chalk to the pavement, and drew a last careful line beneath the eye.

Then she stood, dusted her fingers, and looked up at the house.

Even from behind, Alina felt the focus in that gaze.

“Is that her?” Luma asked quietly. “The chalk lady?”

“Mara,” Alina said. “Yes.”

Luma made a sceptical noise. “She draws eyes on the ground before visiting people. That is not reassuring behaviour.”

Alina didn’t entirely disagree.

Mara lifted a hand and tapped the gatepost twice, knuckles rapping a simple rhythm. The sound travelled strangely — too clear for such a dull day, as if the air had carried it in cupped hands.

From the study, Edmund’s chair creaked. A moment later, his footsteps crossed the hall.

“Stay put if you like,” he called back to Alina. “She’ll only be a minute.”

Which meant she might be an hour. Mara never did short visits.

Luma flitted down from the curtain to Alina’s shoulder. “I don’t like her eye,” she whispered.

“It’s staring at the house, not the road.”

“That’s the idea, I think,” Alina said. “Last time she came, she drew one on the back door.”

“And did things get better?”

Alina thought about it. The dreams had eased for a while, back then. Or maybe that had just been a coincidence.

“Sort of,” she said. “For a bit.”

“Mrrr,” Luma said, unconvinced.

The front door opened. Cold air slid along the hallway carpet. Voices, low and familiar, drifted through — Edmund’s worn warmth and Mara’s sharper cadence, like flint knocked gently against stone.

A moment later, they stepped into the room.

Mara looked older than Alina remembered and exactly the same. Some people aged by softening at the edges; Mara aged by engraving new lines into the same unyielding expression. Her eyes were grey, the clear, assessing kind that made you feel like a set of notes being scanned.

“Alina,” she said, with a small nod that was almost a bow. “You grew.”

“That tends to happen,” Alina said.

Mara’s mouth twitched, just enough to admit the existence of humour. She shrugged out of her coat and draped it over the arm of a chair, revealing a jumper with chalk dust smudged across the sleeves.

Behind her, the hallway mirror darkened a fraction.

Not enough to be obvious. Only enough that the reflected lamplight seemed to withdraw, leaving more shadow than glass should reasonably contain.

Luma made a very small choking sound and flattened herself against Alina’s neck.

Mara’s eyes flicked towards the mirror.

Then away.

As if she had noted something and filed it under later.

Edmund rubbed his hands together as if they were cold, though the living room was warm.

“Tea?” he asked.

“In a bit,” Mara said. “Show me the corners first.”

He nodded and moved towards the doorway. Old habit; this was how it had gone the last time, and probably the time before that. Mara followed, unhurried, her gaze tracing the line of the ceiling, the skirting boards, the window frame, as if she were reading a very long sentence written in dust and paint.

Alina drifted after them.

“Stay out of her line of sight,” Luma hissed. “She’ll see me.”

“She can’t,” Alina murmured. “She’s human.”

“So are you, and you see too much,” Luma said. “Humans are unreliable like that.”

They started in the hallway.

Light from the open front door stretched in a rectangle across the floor, spilling over the chalk eye outside and into the house. Mara paused on the threshold, eyes tracking that line.

“The air’s different,” she said quietly. “Thinner than last time.”

“You remember last time?” Edmund asked.

“I remember feelings,” Mara said. “Not the details. The war made sure of that.” She smiled without warmth. “But old instincts complain when something’s wrong. They don’t need memory to do that.”

She stepped forward. Her boot heel landed just past the join where indoor light met outdoor grey.

For a heartbeat, the house seemed to lean.

The hallway walls tightened, then eased, like lungs reconsidering how much air to hold. The glass in the framed pictures gave a soft, almost inaudible creak. Reflections thickened — not darker, exactly, but more present.

Alina’s own face in the hall mirror looked back at her with an intensity that made her want to look away.

Mara's gaze slid over that mirror too. "There," she said. "That's new."

"What is?" Edmund asked.

"The way it listens," Mara said. "It wasn't paying this much attention last time."

"Mirrors don't pay attention," Edmund said mildly, but there was a strain around his eyes.

"That's the trouble with living things," Mara said. "They rarely behave like they're supposed to."

She moved deeper into the hall, pausing here and there to tap skirting boards with her

knuckles, to run her fingertips lightly over patches of wall, to frown at apparently empty corners.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, she stopped.

The air there felt different. Alina had felt it too, sometimes — a subtle resistance, as if she were moving through a strand of cobweb she couldn't find. Mara turned slowly, testing the space with her shoulders, like someone judging the width of a narrow doorway.

"This is where it thickens," she said.

"Where what thickens?" Alina asked.

"The edge," Mara said simply. "Where something that isn't this house keeps brushing against it."

Luma's fingers dug into Alina's collar.

"Shadow?" Edmund asked quietly.

Mara's eyes flicked to him. That word hung oddly in the air. Heavy. Familiar. Out of place.

"I don't know," she said. "I never do. That's part of the design." She tapped her temple. "You and I, we paid good coin to forget the specifics. We only got to keep the shivers."

Alina stared at them both. “You’re doing that thing where you talk in the middle of a sentence I’m not allowed to read.”

Mara huffed. “Fair point.” She looked at Alina more closely, and something in her expression shifted — a small, almost imperceptible softening. “You’re the one having the nightmares.”

“How did you —” Alina began.

“Because the house is worried about you,” Mara said. “It leans around you more than around him.”

“That’s not... a thing houses do,” Alina said weakly.

Mara’s mouth curved. “You’d be surprised.”

She climbed the stairs, her hand running lightly along the bannister. As her fingers passed, the wood gleamed a shade darker, like polished bone. The light on the landing dimmed and then flared back, as if something had looked out through the bulbs and then retreated.

Upstairs, they stopped outside Alina’s room.

The door was shut. Mara laid her palm flat against it.

Alina felt the prickling along her arms intensify. The memory of the Dreamwave pressing against that door, of the handle twitching, surged up like cold water.

Luma pushed her face into Alina’s hair. “I hate this bit,” she whispered.

“Bit?” Alina whispered back.

“The bit where adults poke the scary places and call it ‘checking,’” Luma said.

Mara listened with her hand on the wood for a long moment. Then she nodded to herself and opened the door.

The room looked ordinary. Bed. Desk. Posters. A mug with abandoned pens. The ghost of last night’s fear lingered at the

edges, but it was faint now, diluted by sunlight and Luma's earlier stubborn warmth.

Mara stepped inside, her eyes moving like searchlights.

Nothing in the room moved, exactly. But every reflective surface seemed to become more aware of itself.

The window glass deepened, swallowing more of the outside view than it should. The black screen of Alina's computer monitor looked less like a turned-off device and more like a dark mouth waiting to speak. The tiny mirror on the wardrobe door showed the three of them — Edmund, Mara, Alina — and, for a heartbeat, something else behind them.

Not a shape.

Not a face.

Just an extra depth, like the hint of a fourth person standing further back in the reflection than the room actually allowed.

Mara's eyes snapped to that mirror.

The depth vanished.

Luma trembled. "Noctyra," she breathed, barely audible.

"What?" Alina whispered.

"Shadow Realm," Luma said, voice so quiet it was almost a thought. "They like reflections.

They like wanting and fear. Your house is both right now."

Mara took the small piece of chalk from her pocket.

"Do you mind?" she asked Alina, nodding towards the wall above the headboard.

"I... what are you going to do?" Alina asked.

"Give the house a different direction to look in," Mara said. "At least for a while."

She stood on the edge of the bed, boots leaving faint marks on the duvet, and pressed the chalk to the wall. White dust

crumbled under her fingers as she drew with calm, practised strokes.

A smooth curve for the lower lid.

Another for the upper.

A circle in the centre.

A smaller ring.

Three straight lines above, like rays or raised brows.

The same eye as on the path.

The same stark simplicity.

When she stepped back down, the room changed.

The air tightened for a moment, as if everything inside the four walls had taken a deep breath in. The reflections darkened — then lightened again, their surfaces suddenly less hungry, more like ordinary glass.

The eye on the wall seemed to focus.

Not on Alina. Not on Mara.

On the space between them.

“Why an eye?” Alina asked, trying to ignore the way her skin crawled.

“Because things that watch rarely like being watched back,” Mara said. “This tells the house to look outwards. Not inwards.”

“That’s... creepy,” Alina said.

“Effective,” Mara said. “Creepy is a bonus.”

She brushed chalk dust from her fingers. Tiny grains drifted down, catching the light like pale ash.

“Will it stop the nightmares?” Alina asked.

Mara’s silence lasted a beat too long.

“It will make it harder,” she said. “For whatever is pressing against your walls to find the easiest way in.”

“That’s not the same as stopping,” Alina said.

“No,” Mara said quietly. “It isn’t.”

Edmund cleared his throat. “You said... last time, you thought it was just the house settling.

Old foundations. New grief.”

“I hoped,” Mara said.

“And now?”

“Now it’s not just this house,” Mara said. “It’s the air around it. The reflections. The way the street feels when you walk down it. Something is pulling at a line that runs through here, and it’s tugging harder than before.”

“Because of me?” Alina asked.

Mara looked at her.

Not unkindly.

Not pitying.

Just honestly.

“Because of where you are,” she said. “And because of who wants what you might become.”

A cold weight settled in Alina’s stomach.

Luma edged out from behind her hair and glared at Mara.

“You’re very blunt,” she said.

Mara’s brows twitched. “Is something... buzzing?” she asked, glancing around.

Alina coughed. “No. Nothing.”

Luma huffed. “She can feel me,” she muttered. “Not see. Not hear. But feel. I don’t like her. I also sort of like her. This is confusing.”

Mara stepped closer to the wall-eye and touched the chalk edge lightly.

“If the dreams worsen,” she said, “call me. If reflections start to hold shapes too long, call me. If you see a man whose face you can’t quite make out —”

“We call you,” Edmund finished, voice thinner than usual.

Mara nodded. “And you don’t say his name out loud. Not in this house. Not near any glass.”

Alina hugged her arms around herself. “Does he have a name?”

“Everything does,” Mara said. “But some names behave like open doors. For now, it’s enough that he’s watching.”

“From where?” Alina asked.

Mara looked at the mirror again.

Her eyes were steady, but her knuckles were white around the chalk.

“From the other side of the glass,” she said. “And from a place that isn’t quite here and isn’t quite anywhere else. Shadow likes in-between things.”

The room felt smaller.

Luma shifted, then planted her tiny hands on Alina’s shoulder. “He won’t get you,” she said quietly. “He can look all he likes. I’ll poke his reflection in the eye.”

Alina managed a thin smile. “I’d pay to see that.”

Mara studied her face, something like reluctant respect forming under the habitual frown.

“You’re handling this better than most adults I’ve had to talk to,” she said.

“I’ve had practice,” Alina said. “Nightmares are boring after a while.”

“They’re not,” Mara said. “But I appreciate the effort.”

She stepped back towards the door.

As she crossed the threshold, every reflective surface in the room seemed to deepen for a heartbeat, like the dark behind glass had drawn closer to listen.

The chalk eye on the wall flared pale in the dimming light.

The reflections eased.

Noctyra, still faceless and distant, slid back a fraction from its interest, thwarted but not gone.

Mara paused in the doorway, hand on the frame.

“Remember,” she said. “If anything changes —”

“I know,” Alina said. “Call you. Don’t say his name. Avoid mirrors.”

“Don’t avoid them,” Mara corrected. “Just... don’t trust them.”

She gave Edmund a long look that held too many unsaid things, then headed for the stairs.

When they were alone again, Luma sagged against Alina’s neck.

“I’m exhausted,” she announced. “Your chalk woman has the emotional weight of a boulder.”

“She’s trying to help,” Alina said.

“Yes,” Luma said grudgingly. “She is. I still don’t like her eyes. Or her eye -eyes. Or her chalk -eyes. Any of the eyes, really.”

Alina glanced up at the symbol on her wall.

It stared back, calm and unblinking.

For the first time in days, the space just beyond her door felt a little less like something waiting to exhale.

She wasn’t sure yet if she liked the eye.

But she liked that whatever was watching her now had something watching back.

CHAPTER 7 — The Thing Behind the Door

Human Earth — Night

Alina woke to the sound of breathing.

Not her own.

Not Grandad's.

Not the house's usual creaks and sighs.

A third breath.

Slow.

Measured.

Right outside her bedroom door.

She lay frozen, eyes wide open in the dark.

Even before the dream fully took shape around her, she knew she wasn't awake.

Her head felt too heavy.

The air too thick.

Her limbs too far away from where her mind insisted they were.

Dreamwave.

A deeper layer this time.

Her pulse thudded in her ears, but quietly —like it had been wrapped in cloth.

The door shuddered softly.

Not pushed.

Not shaken.

Exhaled upon.

As though something stood inches away on the other side, leaning close enough to fog the wood.

Alina's heartbeat stuttered.

She tried to sit up, but the bed seemed to lengthen beneath her, stretching into a corridor of tangled sheets that pulled her down like soft pockets of mud. The ceiling angled. Her cheek pressed sideways into the pillow without her meaning it to.

Her breath caught.

The Dreamwave was folding wrong tonight — not melting the room like before, but rearranging it, as though something else were trying to decide how her world should look.

A soft scrape rasped along the outside of the door.

A fingertip?

A nail?

A thought given shape?

Alina's throat tightened so sharply she couldn't even gasp.

The handle dipped.

Half a centimetre.

Just enough to prove that this was not imagination.

Shadows thickened around the crack beneath the door.

They didn't leak in.

They waited.

Something stood on the other side.

Not present.

Not fully formed.

Not allowed through.

But leaning.

Watching.

Learning the edges of her fear.

Alina squeezed her eyes shut —too late —because the Dreamwave never relied on eyes.

A cold pressure brushed the inside of her skull, tracing the shape of her thoughts as if considering which one to prise open.

Her pulse turned frantic.
The pressure coiled tighter.
The door handle dipped again — a slow, deliberate descent,
as though whatever stood there had all the time in the world.
The shadows pushed inward — not physically, but in the
way cold pushes into bone.
Her breath stuttered.
Her ribs locked.
Something in her chest tightened —
a burn,
a flare,
a pulse of heat like a spark landing on dry leaves.
Phoenixfire.
Not enough to save her.
Not enough to rise.
Just a flicker buried deep in her resonance,
a tiny juvenile warning,
a throb of instinct that said:
No.
The pressure paused.
Just a heartbeat.
Then the temperature in the room changed.
A weight dropped into the dream.
Not cold.
Not warm.
Old.
Vast.
Silent.
Baku.
He didn't appear —he never appeared —

But the Dreamwave buckled under his arrival like fabric pulled taut around a massive shape.

The shadows recoiled, shuddering as if slapped.

The door handle snapped upright.

The breath on the other side silenced.

A ripple of pale-blue static spread from the baseboards to the ceiling, erasing the shape pressing against the door, shearing off its grip on the dream.

Something hissed — the sound of a presence being pushed back through a crack it had no right to widen.

The shadows fled — and the door stopped moving.

Alina collapsed backwards as the bed reformed beneath her, the length shrinking to normal, the geometry settling. Her chest heaved. Her vision blurred with tears she hadn't realised were there.

Then —

Another dream brushed hers.

Light.

Soft.

Steady.

Not entering her dream, just passing close enough to graze it.

Aurynel.

A guardian's outline — wings unfurling like pale feathers caught in moonlight, wings folded behind a shape she couldn't fully see — walked across the far horizon of her dreamscape, weightless as a reflection in mist.

He did not look at her.

He did not intervene.

He only passed by.

But his presence steadied something inside the Dreamwave that had been trembling for days.

On the other side of reality's thin thread, Edmund's dream shifted.

Alina felt it vaguely — a warm pulse, a human mind soothed by a guardian it no longer remembered.

Aurynel brushed against Edmund's dream with the gentlest pressure, guiding him away from a memory he was never meant to touch anymore.

Then he was gone.

Baku remained only long enough to anchor the edges of Alina's dream, pushing the last shadow-tendrils back into the dark.

The pressure lifted.

The air loosened.

The temperature normalised.

The Dreamwave collapsed back into silence.

Alina woke.

For real this time.

The room was still.

The door closed.

The handle untouched.

But a thin smear of grey-blue dust — Dreamwave residue — lay on the floor beneath it.

Like ash.

She pressed her palm to her chest, feeling the faint echo of that heat — the tiny spark buried somewhere beneath bone and fear, flickering once like a heartbeat struggling to grow.

Luma stirred beside her pillow, curled in a tiny ball of mossy curls and soft wings. Her eyes fluttered open just long enough to see Alina's shaking breath.

"Bad one?" she whispered, voice thick with sleep.

Alina nodded.

Luma crawled onto her shoulder and pressed her forehead against Alina's cheek.

"I'm here," she murmured. "We're here."

Alina closed her eyes.

The house creaked softly, not with pressure now, but with recovery — as though the walls themselves were exhaling after holding something too heavy.

She did not sleep again.

CHAPTER 8 — When the World Split

Embera — The Liminal Crossing

Alina did not remember falling asleep.

One moment, she was lying in her room, Luma curled against her collar, the house finally quiet after days of leaning and listening.

The next —

The air thinned.

Not in a frightening way.

Not like the pressure of Shadow.

But like stepping from a tight room into an open field.

A softness spread through her chest, warm and distant, like someone had lit a lantern in the farthest corner of her ribs.

Luma stirred against her shoulder.

“Mm? Why does everything feel... floaty?”

Alina tried to answer, but her voice dissolved into the light blooming behind her eyelids.

The world tilted — and she fell through it.

Not fast.

Not violently.

But as though a gentle, unseen hand had taken hold of her and lowered her somewhere else, somewhere she had always been meant to reach.

The darkness peeled away.

A warm wind — not wind, but something older — curled around her, carrying the scent of ash, sap, and starlight caught in embers.

Luma blinked awake fully, clinging to Alina’s hoodie.

“Okay... we are not in the garden anymore.”

The ground rose to meet them.

Alina landed on her knees, the earth beneath her soft and warm, like stone that remembered being fire. She gasped and looked up — and the world unfurled.

EMBERA

A horizon of soft, rolling ashlands, glowing faintly with buried flame.

Emberflowers drifting in slow spirals through the air, shedding golden sparks that faded before touching the ground.

Veins of molten-red stone pulsing underfoot like sleeping hearts.

There was no sun.

There was only light — warm, gentle, everywhere.

The Realm was quiet.

Sacred.

Alive.

Something deep beneath the surface shifted.

A low resonance rolled through the ground, more like memory than sound.

Luma clutched Alina's sleeve.

“I don't like that noise. That's a big noise. Please tell me it's not a giant thing made of lava “—

And then she saw it.

THE EMBERBOUND COLOSSI

At first, Alina thought they were hills.

Then one of them moved.

A massive shape lifted itself from the ash, its surface a mosaic of emberstone and obsidian. A glowing line — like molten ore —

traced along its spine. The creature's movements were slow, ancient, deliberate, as if it had been resting for a century and resented being disturbed.

A second Colossus turned its head, ember-cracks glowing brighter, as though scenting something in the air.

A third shifted its weight, stone plates grinding softly.

None approached.

None threatened.

But every single one of them had turned toward Alina.

As if listening to a note only they could hear.

“What... are... those?” Alina whispered.

“Big,” Luma said bravely. “Too big. Much too big. I vote we go home.”

The Colossi did not advance.

They only watched.

They were not hostile.

They were not curious.

They were recognising something.

Something stirring at the heart of Embera that had been dormant too long.

The ground beneath Alina's hand warmed.

A pulse of Phoenixfire — faint, juvenile, instinctive — passed through the ash.

In the centre of the Realm, unseen, hidden deep within the Basin of Beginning —

Emberiel twitched in his sleep.

A shiver of light rippled across his feathers.

A flicker of gold cracked through the red of his juvenile plumage.

He did not wake.

But he felt her.
He felt something enter Embera.
Something that brushed against the old, buried ache of the
Phoenix's last tears.
He made a soft, confused croon in his sleep.
A small flare of heat trembled through Embera's heart.

THE REALMS REACT

AURENIX (FIRE REALM) — IGNIVAR

High above the Ember Spire, Ignivar's cloak of flame
tightened around him.

His head lifted sharply.

Something had disturbed the Phoenix's rhythm.

Not danger.

Not a threat.

A change.

His eyes narrowed.

"Phoenixfire... answers," he murmured.

"But to what?"

He felt nothing more.

But the unease stayed, curled beneath his ribs like an ember
refusing to cool.

MYRRHMAR- (WATER REALM) — LEVIATHAN

Deep within Myrrhmar Abyss, Leviathan uncoiled from his
resting place.

A whisper of warmth brushed the water.

Unnatural warmth.

He listened, ancient eyes half-lidded, feeling the tremor ripple across the Realmic lattice.

“An echo,” he rumbled to himself.

“Soft... but growing.”

Currents around him dimmed, then brightened, then dimmed again — the water unsure how to carry the shift.

SOLARETH- (LIFE REALM) — SYLATHERIONA

Far away, under a canopy of silver-leafed trees, Sylatheriona’s whiskers prickled.

A vitality shift.

Tiny.

Barely there.

But reaching across Realms like a heartbeat, she almost remembered.

She lifted her head, petals unfurling along her spine.

“...something new,” she whispered to the grove.

BACK IN EMBERA

Alina pushed herself up slowly.

The air shimmered.

Light pooled around her like water running uphill.

The Colossi rumbled — a soft, resonant acknowledgement — and then returned to stillness,

their bodies sinking slowly back into their resting poses.

They had recognised the change.

Confirmed it.

Accepted it.

And slept again.

Luma swallowed.

“Well. That was... horribly majestic.”

Alina stared at the glowing ash beneath her feet.

It pulsed faintly with each of her breaths.

As if the ground itself were matching her heartbeat.

“Luma,” she whispered. “Where are we?”

Luma stared around with wide eyes.

“Embera,” she said softly.

“The Phoenix’s Realm.”

She tugged Alina’s sleeve urgently.

“And I think it recognised us before we recognised it.”

Alina felt the warmth under her palm again — the soft flicker that wasn’t hers.

She swallowed.

Something inside her chest fluttered in response.

CHAPTER 9 — The Fall Into Flame

Transit - Embera to Aurenix

The second fall was sharper than the first.

Embera had caught Alina like warm hands, lowering her into a dream that finally made sense.

This time the world tilted without warning, and her stomach lurched as if the ground had been yanked sideways.

One moment, she was standing in soft ash, Luma still clinging to her sleeve, Colossi sinking back into their rest.

The next —

The ash dropped away.

Heat rose, fast and focused, like stepping from a dark room straight into the blast of an open furnace.

Luma yelped and buried her face in Alina's shoulder.

“Too hot, too hot, too hot —”

Alina tried to answer, but the light hit first.

It stabbed through her closed eyelids: not white, not yellow, but a deep molten orange, the colour of metal midway between solid and liquid. Lines of that light crawled across the darkness behind her eyes in straight, disciplined patterns, as if someone had taken the warmth of Embera and hammered it into shape.

Then her feet slammed against stone.

She staggered forward with a cry, hands shooting out for balance —and struck something solid and scorching -warm.

An arm.

Scaled, massive, bracing.

“Easy,” a voice rumbled. “Breathe.”

Wendryx.

Alina blinked, vision blurring, and the Fire Realm snapped into focus.

They stood on a broad, black stone platform, its surface veined with thin lines of dim emberlight. The air around them shimmered with heat, but it wasn't the wild, burning heat of an open flame. It was contained — tightly, deliberately — like the heat inside a kiln built by someone who respected fire too much to waste it.

Beyond the platform's edge, the ground dropped away into a wide, circular chasm. Rivers of slow-moving magma curled along its walls like glowing scars. Above, the sky was a deep, smoky bronze, lit from within by unseen furnaces rather than any visible sun.

Far in the distance, the Cinderforge Monolith towered from the chasm — a colossal mass of fused obsidian and emberstone. Its core pulsed with steady, disciplined fire, each glow a breath from the heart of Aurenix itself.

The sight punched the breath out of her chest.

"This..." Alina whispered. "This isn't possible."

Wendryx's arm eased away once he was sure she was steady. The dragon's scales shimmered with dull glow where the light hit them, ember motes drifting from the edges of his wings.

"Welcome to Aurenix," he said quietly. "The Fire Realm."

Luma very slowly peeled herself off Alina's neck and peered around.

Her wings drooped.

"Everything here looks like it wants to set me on fire," she said. "I object."

She squinted at the stone underfoot.

"It even smells responsible. Like fire with a job."

“That’s... not wrong,” another voice said.

Ryvarr stood a few paces away, paws braced, claws sunk into the stone. His fur — all ember-touched reds and smouldering browns — seemed to drink in the light and give it back in a muted glow. His eyes flicked from Alina to the horizon and back again, as if measuring threats only he could see.

He gave Alina a short, curt nod. Respectful. Wary.

“Stand close to Wendryx,” he said. “The Realm doesn’t know your pattern yet.”

“My what?” Alina asked.

“Your resonance,” Wendryx murmured. “Your... emotional print. Fire reads it. It will take time to decide what to do with you.”

“Decide what to —” she began.

The air changed.

No sound.

No visible shift.

But the heat deepened, becoming heavier, more focused, like the attention of something vast turning towards them.

Alina’s skin prickled.

The ember-veins in the stone brightened.

Even the air tightened, as if waiting for instructions.

Luma froze. “Alina,” she whispered. “Someone very big just looked this way.”

Wendryx stilled completely.

Ryvarr’s head dropped a fraction lower, ears angling back in instinctive deference.

The heat-pressure rolled over them — not hostile, not yet, but unsparing. It felt like being measured by a gaze that did not care about words or excuses, only truth and intent.

“What is that?” Alina whispered. “Who is that?”

“Fire,” Wendryx said softly. “Watching.”

He didn’t say the name. Ignivar did not need to be named for his authority to be felt.

The pressure lingered, considering.

Wendryx bowed his head — just slightly, just enough.

Ryvarr followed.

Luma stared at them, horrified. “We’re bowing to warm air now?”

“Shh,” Ryvarr hissed.

Alina’s heart hammered. The heat pressed against her chest, squeezing, searching for something she didn’t know how to hide.

Then that faint, hidden flicker inside her — the tiny Phoenixfire spark she could never name — answered.

It didn’t flare. It didn’t roar.

It simply tightened once, a small, startled pulse.

The pressure paused.

For a heartbeat, the Realm itself seemed to hold its breath.

The ember-veins flickered, out of sync with their previous rhythm. The air temperature shifted, a fraction hotter, then cooler, like someone adjusting a forge by instinct alone.

And then the weight lifted.

Not fully.

Fire never stopped watching.

But the sharp edge of judgement dulled, settling into something like wary acceptance.

Wendryx exhaled very slowly.

Ryvarr’s claws loosened their grip on the stone.

Luma sagged. “I hated that,” she announced. “We should never do that again.”

Wendryx's mouth curved in the ghost of a smile.

"You may have to," he said. "Ign —" He caught himself. "The one who watches Fire is not easy to avoid."

"The one who —" Luma began. "You people really need shorter titles."

Alina swallowed hard, trying to get her breathing under control.

"It felt like... like he was trying to decide if I should be here," she said.

"He was," Ryvarr said simply. "Fire tests what enters it. Especially now."

"Now?" she echoed.

Ryvarr's gaze flicked briefly to Wendryx. Something passed between them — a conversation without words.

"Later," Wendryx said. "For today, it is enough that you stand without burning."

"Yet," Luma muttered.

The Realm around them slowly resumed its normal rhythm.

Fire currents moved, threading through the platforms and bridges that laced the chasm. In the distance, ember-wings glided — small dragonkin shapes, or perhaps Firebirds, sweeping lazy arcs through the hot air. Shimmering heat-wisps coiled along the chasm walls, slipping in and out of crevices like semi-visible serpents.

The gateway platform itself was ringed by a low barrier of hardened glass-rock, its surface rippled and warped from old heat. Strange sigils had been etched into it — curved, flame-like glyphs that seemed to flicker at the edges of Alina's vision.

Luma climbed cautiously down onto Alina's shoulder and then onto Wendryx's forearm, using his scales as a shield against the nearest gust of hot air.

"Congratulations," she said. "You are now officially my fireproof wall."

Wendryx huffed a small plume of harmless smoke. "I have been called worse."

Ryvarr moved toward the edge of the platform and sniffed the air.

"No corruption scent," he said. "No Shadow bleed. Just... Fire."

"Just Fire," Luma repeated. "Spoken like someone who is far too comfortable living inside an oven."

"Better an honest oven than a lying mirror," Ryvarr said.

Alina flinched at the word mirror.

Wendryx caught the movement.

"You are safe from reflections here," he said. "Fire shows what it is. It does not copy."

Alina let out a slow, shaky breath she hadn't realised she was holding.

"I like that," she said faintly. "Things that don't copy."

The warmth under her ribs eased, matching the Realm's rhythm.

She glanced at the distant Monolith.

"So... what now?" she asked.

"Now we walk," Wendryx said.

He stepped towards the narrow bridge that extended from the platform's edge, its surface made of fused black glass, suspended over the chasm by pillars of cooled magma.

Ryvarr fell into position ahead, a living scout.

Wendryx moved slightly behind and to Alina's side — an unspoken promise that anything coming from that direction would reach him first.

Alina hesitated at the start of the bridge.

The drop was deep.

The heat rising from below made the air waver.

Luma fluttered back to her shoulder and leaned close. "If it helps," she whispered, "I have done a very thorough risk assessment."

"That doesn't help at all," Alina said through her teeth.

"Fine," Luma said. "New approach: If you fall, I will scream extremely loudly. That'll be helpful for... morale."

Despite everything, Alina let out a small, strangled laugh.

Her foot touched the glass-rock.

It was hot — almost too hot — but not unbearable. The bridge trembled slightly beneath them, not from weakness, but from the constant, slow movement of Fire far below.

The first few steps were the hardest.

After that, the rhythm took over.

Beneath them, rivers of molten stone flowed like glowing arteries. Occasionally, something moved within them — shapes too blurred by heat to make out.

"Are there... things in there?" Alina asked.

"Yes," Ryvarr said. "Do not fall."

"Excellent safety briefing," Luma said. "Very clear. Very concise."

Halfway across, the air trembled again.

Not judgment this time.

Not even attention.

More like a distant heartbeat syncing for a moment with Alina's own.

She stumbled, hand flying to her chest.

Wendryx steadied her. "What is it?"

"I don't know," she said. "It's like... like something big breathed in."

Wendryx's gaze shifted briefly toward the Cinderforge Monolith, then toward the Realm beyond.

"The Phoenix sleeps," he said. "Even in sleep, His fire answers shifts in His heart's Realm."

"You make that sound reassuring," Luma said. "It isn't."

The sensation faded.

The heat settled.

The last stretch of the bridge passed in a tense, focused silence.

On the far side, the path widened into a series of tiered platforms leading toward the Monolith. Buildings — if they could be called that — rose from the stone: tower-like outcroppings of obsidian and emberglass, their surfaces etched with more of those flickering sigils.

Guardians moved among them.

Some were quadrupeds with ember-touched fur like Ryvarr's. Others were scaled, horned, winged, or some combination of all three. All moved with the same contained, lethal grace.

A few turned their heads as Alina and her companions stepped onto the lower tier.

None approached.

Yet.

"Are they all... like you?" Alina asked Ryvarr quietly.

“No,” he said. “Some are worse.”

“That’s... comforting,” she said.

“On the contrary,” Luma murmured. “That is one of the least comforting things I’ve heard in days.”

“Fire is honest,” Wendryx said. “You will not be lied to here. Only judged.”

Alina looked up at the distant Monolith again.

A shiver crawled down her spine.

“By who?” she asked softly.

Wendryx’s gaze tracked the Monolith’s peak.

“When the time comes,” he said, “you will know.”

The Realm’s heat pressed in around them — not pushing, not burning, but insisting they stand or fall on what they were.

For the first time since the nightmares began, Alina realised:

On Earth, she had been hunted in the dark by something that refused to show its face.

Here, in Fire, whatever watched her would at least look her in the eyes.

She wasn’t sure that was better.

But it was honest.

And for now, that was enough.

CHAPTER 10 — Dragon of the Ember Spire

Aurenyx — Inner Approach to the Cinderforge Monolith

Heat shimmered across the tiers of Aurenyx, bending the air like warm glass.

Alina followed Wendryx up a broad, sloping path of black stone, each step carrying her deeper into the heart of the Fire Realm.

Behind her, Ryvarr's claws clicked softly against the fused rock.

Luma perched on Alina's shoulder, wings half-spread in protest every time a gust of hot wind flared.

"Why is everything here shaped like it wants to conduct heat directly into my soul?" she muttered, flattening herself against Alina's hair. "Who designed this Realm? A radiator?"

Wendryx glanced back.

"There is logic in Fire," he said. "Every surface here teaches something."

"Teaches what?" Luma shot back. "Heatstroke?"

Ryvarr snorted — a short, rough sound that might have been amusement.

Or might have been a cough.

Fire guardians were very hard to read.

The path angled upward toward a plateau from which the Cinderforge Monolith dominated the horizon.

Up close, it was even more overwhelming — a colossal pillar of obsidian and emberstone, its molten core pulsing behind the stone like a living, disciplined heart.

Every pulse seemed to thrum through Alina's ribs.

She pressed a hand to her chest.

The warmth there answered, a small, confused flutter.
Wendryx's head lifted slightly, a subtle reaction she wasn't meant to catch.

"Are you alright?" he asked, voice low and steady.

"I... think so," she said. "It's just... hot."

Ryvarr slowed his pace, coming level with her.

"It is not the heat," he said. "The Monolith is reading you."

Alina nearly tripped. "Reading me?"

"Your emotional pattern," Wendryx clarified. "Fire can feel it. Not perfectly. Not yet."

"Perfect," Luma whispered. "Fantastic. I'm sure I'll be judged on my emotional pattern soon."

That'll be fun. Ten out of ten for panic, I know that already."

Ryvarr's ears flicked.

"Panic is honest," he said. "Fire respects that more than false calm."

Luma stared at him. "I'm starting to like you, and that worries me."

They climbed another tier.

Here the heat deepened, but differently — not harsher, not more dangerous, only... truer.

Honest heat.

Heat with purpose.

Buildings rose in quiet rows along the path: natural pillars of emberglass fused into elongated structures, each one carved with flame-shaped sigils.

Some glowed faintly from within.

Others seemed dormant, waiting.

"This place is beautiful," Alina whispered.

Wendryx's gaze softened.

"Aurenyx is not meant to charm," he said. "Yet it is beautiful in its honesty."

Ryvarr moved a few steps ahead, posture sharpening.

Wendryx stiffened slightly, sensing the shift.

"Something wrong?" Alina asked.

"No threat," Ryvarr said. "A presence."

Luma instantly hid behind Alina's ear.

"What presence?"

Wendryx's wings angled subtly in a shielding posture.

"The Realm itself," he murmured. "It is... attentive."

As if in response, a slow ripple passed through the ember veins in the ground, brightening, dimming, brightening again — as though something ancient was breathing beneath the stone.

Alina's throat tightened.

Her heartbeat stumbled.

Luma pressed a small hand against Alina's cheek.

"Deep breaths. In. Out. Pretend the air isn't trying to roast your lungs."

Alina tried to laugh and made a noise somewhere between a snort and a choke.

Wendryx stepped closer, voice calm and grounding.

"You are safe," he said. "Fire does not harm without intention. It weighs. It decides. But it does not lash at the innocent."

"Are you sure?" Luma whispered.

Wendryx's gaze held hers.

"Yes."

Ryvarr added, "If Fire meant harm, Wendryx would already feel it."

Luma blinked. “That’s supposed to reassure me?”

“It should,” Ryvarr said simply.

A deeper rumble travelled through the ground — not a threat, not a warning, simply a reminder of the Realm’s enormous presence.

Alina felt it in her chest.

Not as pain.

More like recognition.

“Wendryx,” she murmured, “why does it feel like... something under the Monolith knows I’m here?”

Wendryx exhaled slowly.

“It feels all changes,” he said. “Aurenyx responds to shifts in its truth. You are new. You are... unexpected.”

Ryvarr’s tail flicked, ember sparks scattering harmlessly.

“And Fire hates surprises,” he said.

Luma tugged Alina’s ear.

“Let’s stop surprising it then. Tell it we’re boring. Say we’re here for tourism.”

“No,” Ryvarr said. “Do not lie to Fire.”

Luma froze. “...Okay, we’ll be interesting. Very interesting. Fire loves interesting.”

Wendryx turned his head slightly toward her.

“Little one.”

“Yes?”

“You are not helping.”

Luma nodded quickly.

“I will stop helping.”

They reached another plateau — larger, broader, with a straight view to the Monolith.

Here, the heat changed again.

It bent upward like the air was rising in greeting.

Wendryx stepped forward first.

When he did, the ember veins brightened in a perfect ring around him.

Alina stared.

“What... what was that?”

“Recognition,” Ryvarr said. “Wendryx is known to the Monolith.”

“And you?” she asked.

He stepped forward.

Another ring of light.

Sharper. Faster. More instinctive.

Ryvarr’s flame -touched fur rippled.

“Aurenix remembers predators,” he said. “Even loyal ones.”

Alina swallowed.

“What about me?” she whispered.

Wendryx looked at her with quiet, steady confidence.

“Step forward,” he said. “Slowly.”

Luma clung a little tighter.

“I hate this. Please do it anyway.”

Alina nodded and moved one foot toward the centre of the plateau.

The ember veins brightened — but not in a ring.

They glowed in a soft, uneven corona, pulsing in a rhythm that didn’t match Wendryx or Ryvarr.

It matched her heartbeat.

Wendryx inhaled sharply.

Ryvarr’s ears flattened, eyes widening with something like recognition — or alarm.

Alina froze.

“Is... is that bad?”

Wendryx shook his head slowly.

“No. Not bad.”

Ryvarr finished the thought:

“Just... new.”

Luma rubbed her temples.

“I would like the record to show that I am deeply unhappy with all of this.”

Wendryx stepped closer and lowered his wings in a sheltering arc.

“We will guide you,” he said. “If at any point you feel overwhelmed —”

“I’ll scream,” Luma said.

Wendryx blinked. “...Or that.”

Ryvarr took position ahead again.

Wendryx walked at Alina’s side.

The Monolith pulsed, slow and steady.

The Realm watched.

And Alina realised:

Whatever was waiting in Aurenyx,

whatever Ignivar was,

whatever judgement Fire held —

she wasn’t walking into it alone.

Wendryx’s wing brushed her shoulder, solid and steady.

Ryvarr’s tail flicked like a warning to anything that dared come close.

Luma muttered defiance into her ear.

And for the first time since Earth,

Alina felt safe.

Terrified,

overwhelmed,
sweating enough to count as a small indoor waterfall —
but safe.

CHAPTER 11 — Living Flame and Ancient Shapes

Aurenyx

The deeper they walked into Aurenyx, the more the heat changed.

It no longer pressed like a furnace or shimmered like glass.

It moved — with purpose, with rhythm, with the strange calm of fire that understood itself perfectly.

Alina sensed it long before she found the courage to name it:

Fire in this Realm wasn't wild.

It was alive.

And it was watching.

Wendryx guided them along a rising path carved directly from fused obsidian. The stone glowed faintly underfoot, ember-veins pulsing with each distant beat of the Cinderforge Monolith's molten core.

Luma peeked over Alina's collar.

"Is it just me," she whispered, "or is the floor breathing?"

Ryvarr, walking ahead, replied without looking back,

"It breathes when the Monolith breathes."

"That," Luma said, "is not comforting."

"It should be," Ryvarr added. "It means Fire is steady."

Luma buried her face in Alina's hair again. "Please stop trying to reassure me. It has the opposite effect."

THE FLAMEFORGED SHAPES

They rounded a bend — and the world opened.

A vast chamber lay ahead, carved naturally from fire-sculpted stone.

But it wasn't empty.

Shapes moved across the cavern's floor.

Not guardians.

Not animals.

Constructs of living flame.

One rose like a great cat made of slow-burning embers, its shoulders rolling with molten grace. Flickers of gold dripped from it like sparks falling from a blacksmith's hammer.

Another resembled a lean deer with antler-branches of red-hot emberglass.

It stepped delicately, leaving glowing prints that dimmed seconds later.

A third was a floating, shifting sphere of pale flame — no form at all, only intention, drifting like it was sniffing the air for truth.

Alina stopped in her tracks.

"They're beautiful," she murmured.

Wendryx nodded.

"The Flameforged. Created by Fire's memory and discipline. Not alive as you think of life.

But not dead either."

Ryvarr continued walking, unbothered.

"They ignore us," he said. "Unless we lie."

Luma flattened against Alina's neck.

"Oh, brilliant. Walking honesty tests. This Realm is exhausting."

One of the constructs — the embercat — turned its head toward them. Its eyes were empty space filled with flame, but somehow Alina felt it reading her.

Not her thoughts.

Her intent.

Her fear spiked for a second — and the cat-shaped flame softened, lowering its posture in quiet reassurance.

Wendryx watched carefully.

“It recognises uncertainty,” he said. “And it answers with steadiness.”

“Fire is nice?” Alina asked, surprised.

“No,” Wendryx replied gently.

“Fire is true.”

ANCIENT-LOOKING FORMS

They passed deeper into the cavern.

Here, shapes lay half-buried in stone — forms that looked ancient, though the Realm was barely a decade old:

- vast stone claws petrified and fused with obsidian
- ribcage arcs of creatures that seemed older than Mythics
- fractured plates of armour-like magma, long cooled
- enormous shadowed silhouettes frozen in the rock walls
- spirals of emberglass that curled like the remains of

unfathomable wings

Alina touched Wendryx’s arm.

“What... were these?”

“Not guardians,” Wendryx said quietly.

“Not Mythics.”

Ryvarr lowered his voice.

“These are... from the earliest hours of Aurenryx.”

Luma blinked rapidly. “Earliest hours?”

Before either answered — a deep, far-away tremor slid across the cavern.

Soft.

Liquid.
Emotional.
Wendryx froze.
Ryvarr stiffened, ears flicking back.
Luma grabbed a fistful of Alina's hair.
Alina's heart slammed once, hard, like something had
pressed a hand against her chest from the inside.
"What was that?" she gasped.
Wendryx's brow furrowed. "A... resonance."
Ryvarr's tail lashed once.
"The Tidewarden felt something."
Luma whispered, eyes widening,
"...Leviathan?"
Alina turned sharply.
"Who?"
Luma shook her head quickly. "A... very, very big Water
Mythic. You don't want to meet him when he's in a mood."
Ryvarr continued staring toward some invisible horizon.
"He senses emotional shifts before the Realms do."

THE FIRE RESPONSE

The instant that distant emotional tremor faded, the cavern's
flame constructs shifted.
The embercat lifted its head.
The ember-deer's antlers brightened.
The floating sphere tightened into a sharp point.
Fire was listening.
Waiting.
Protective.

Ryvarr stepped closer to Alina, positioning himself between her and the cavern's centre without conscious thought.

Wendryx lowered a wing subtly, enough to shield her without touching.

Luma whispered, "Please tell me that Water feeling wasn't about her."

"It was not," Wendryx said.

But something in his tone warned otherwise.

THE PATH FORWARD

The tremor faded.

The constructs settled.

Aurenyx steadied.

But Fire did not forget.

The ember veins across the floor glowed slightly brighter around Alina as she stepped forward — not warning, not threat, but acknowledgement.

Wendryx walked at her side.

Ryvarr ahead.

Luma whispering constant commentary into her ear.

The cavern narrowed into a high, sloped corridor of glowing stone leading toward the upper tiers of Aurenyx.

Alina glanced back once at the ancient-looking shapes embedded in the rock.

Wendryx followed her gaze.

"They are not dangerous now," he said gently. "They are echoes."

"What did they use to be?" she asked.

Ryvarr answered this time, and his voice was lower than she had ever heard it.

“Proof,” he said, “that even early fire had enemies.”

A shiver crawled through Alina’s spine.

She continued walking.

CHAPTER 12 — The Ember Sovereign

Watches

Aurenyx — The Approach to the Monolith

The climb to the upper tiers of Aurenyx grew steeper, the heat more focused, more disciplined. It felt less like warmth now and more like attention — as though the Realm itself waited for something to tip one way or another.

Luma tugged Alina's hair nervously.

"I don't like this silence. Too many rules in the air. It feels like we walked into someone's very tidy bedroom without knocking."

Wendryx said nothing.

He hadn't spoken for several minutes.

His wings were held tight, posture tall, stride measured.

Ryvarr mirrored him — head lowered, ears angled back, every movement too controlled to be natural.

"Wendryx?" Alina whispered. "What's wrong?"

He didn't answer immediately.

At last:

"Fire is... preparing."

"For what?" Luma squeaked.

Wendryx's throat tightened.

Ryvarr finished quietly.

"For judgment."

THE MONOLITH AWAKES

The path opened into a wide circular platform carved directly into the outer shelf of the Cinderforge Monolith.

Up close, the Monolith was terrifying.

Not because of its size — though it towered like a mountain sharpened into a blade — but because of its stillness.

Stone should not feel alive.

Heat should not feel aware.

Light should not feel... deliberate.

And yet —

As Alina stepped closer, the Monolith's inner glow pulsed once, slow and deep, like a heart acknowledging a pulse that didn't belong to it.

Luma grabbed Alina's ear and whispered urgently,

“We should leave. We should definitely, definitely leave. This is the kind of place where giant things wake up and demand paperwork.”

Ryvarr lowered his body slightly.

Wendryx stepped in front of Alina without seeming to move.

“Whatever happens,” Wendryx murmured, “stay behind me.”

Alina swallowed. “Why? What's happening?”

Ryvarr answered, voice hushed as a closing furnace door:

“He is coming.”

THE HEAT SHIFT

No footsteps.

No roar.

No dramatic burst of flame.

Fire would never be so undisciplined.

Instead, the heat changed.

It sharpened, straightened, aligned — as if every ember in the Realm stood to attention.

The air trembled.
A shadow broke the heat-haze above them.
Not a silhouette — Fire had no shadows — but a distortion,
a weight that made the light bend around it.
Luma squeaked and flattened against Alina’s cheek.
“Ohhhh no. Not this. Not now. Not him.”
Wendryx lowered his head.
Ryvarr bowed.
Alina froze.
Something enormous landed behind the Monolith.
There was no crash.
No explosion of sparks.
Just a deep, controlled exhale — like a forge sighing after
centuries of holding its breath.
The heat rolled across the platform in a single, perfect wave.
And then he stepped forward.

IGNIVAR — GENERAL OF FIRE

He was taller than Wendryx by twice his height.
A creature of embersteel muscle and disciplined flame, his
body shaped like a dragon forged by a god of order.
His wings were vast planes of controlled fire, every flame
precise, contained, obedient.
His horns curved back like blades of molten glass, their edges
glowing with quiet warning.
Heat radiated from him not in violence, but in judgment.
His eyes —
Alina met them for half a heartbeat.
They were gold.
Not bright.

Not blazing.
Just gold, steady and devastating, eyes that saw without
blinking, weighing every breath she drew.
Luma whimpered.
“Yep. That’s him. That’s Ignivar. King of Scary Fire Dads.”
“Silence,” Wendryx whispered urgently.
For once, Luma obeyed.
Ignivar’s gaze swept across the group.
First to Wendryx.
A long, slow exhale of recognition.
Then to Ryvarr.
A sharp narrowing — approval, perhaps, or
acknowledgement of a hunter’s discipline.
Then —
He looked at Alina.
Heat tightened around her ribs as if the Realm held its breath
with him.
She tried to look away.
She couldn’t.
Fire did not allow lies.
And so, for a heartbeat, she let herself be seen.
Not bravely.
Not proudly.
Just honestly.
Ignivar’s head tilted a fraction.
Not confusion.
Not anger.
Assessment.
He stepped forward.

Wendryx moved instantly, blocking Alina with his body, wings half-spread.

Ryvarr placed himself at her flank, posture dangerously low.

Ignivar stopped.

He looked at Wendryx, and for a moment the air itself flickered — as if Fire’s laws had been offended by Wendryx’s instinctive defiance.

“Wendryx,” Ignivar said.

His voice was deep, controlled, perfectly calm — yet it shook the stone under their feet.

“General,” Wendryx murmured, bowing deeply. “She is under my protection.”

Ignivar’s eyes did not soften.

“Protection,” he repeated, examining the word as though testing its weight.

He lowered his head until his muzzle was a hand’s breadth from Wendryx’s.

“And from what,” Ignivar asked quietly, “do you believe she needs protection?”

Wendryx’s wings tightened.

Ryvarr’s claws dug into the stone.

Alina felt Luma trembling so hard she thought the pixie might fall off her shoulder.

But Wendryx answered honestly.

“From being judged before she understands the laws she has already touched.”

Silence.

Heat gathered.

The Monolith pulsed.

Ignivar drew back a fraction, considering the statement as if it were a piece of ore he was weighing.

His gaze returned to Alina.

When he spoke again, his voice dropped to a softer, colder register.

“Child of Earth,” he said.

“You stand in a Realm that does not bend.”

Alina bit her lip. “I’m trying not to fall.”

A muscle in Ryvarr’s jaw twitched.

Wendryx inhaled sharply.

Luma made a strangled squeak of horror:

“She’s joking at the Fire Lord. She’s JOKING at the FIRE LORD —”

Ignivar’s eyes narrowed.

Then —

A breath.

Not a laugh.

Not approval.

A breath that released a fraction of heat from the air.

“You stand,” Ignivar said simply.

“Better than most.”

Alina blinked. “...Is that good?”

“No,” Ryvarr hissed.

“Yes,” Wendryx murmured.

Ignivar stepped past them, moving toward the Monolith.

Fire bowed to him in waves — every flame lowering, every ember dimming.

He paused only once, looking over his shoulder at Alina, something unreadable in his golden eyes.

“Do not lie in my Realm,” he said.

“And you may yet leave it whole.”

The heat swelled — and Ignivar rose smoothly into the air, wings carving silent arcs of disciplined flame, lifting him to the Monolith’s upper ledge until his figure became a silhouette of controlled fire against the molten heart of Aurenix.

Then he vanished over the ridge.

Wendryx exhaled shakily.

Ryvarr collapsed onto his haunches.

Luma let out the breath she’d been holding for at least three minutes.

Alina pressed a hand to her pounding heart.

“That,” she said faintly, “was terrifying.”

Wendryx nodded.

“That,” he said, “was respectful.”

Ryvarr added quietly, “He did not reject you.”

Luma tugged Alina’s ear.

“That means you get to stay alive,” she whispered. “Good news. Very good news.”

Alina didn’t know if she should laugh or cry.

So she did both, a small shaky sound that made Wendryx soften and Ryvarr look away so she wouldn’t see the flicker of sympathy in his eyes.

The heat finally eased.

Aurenix breathed again.

And for the first time since entering the Fire Realm, Alina felt a strange thing —

Not safety.

Not comfort.

Acceptance.

CHAPTER 13 — Toward the Sky Gate

Transit — Fire to Air

They left the Monolith behind, but the feeling of being watched did not quite leave with it.

Heat still curled around Alina's shoulders as they moved through the upper tiers of Aurenyx, but it had changed. It no longer weighed on her like a test she was about to fail. It felt more like a presence that had made its decision and was now... waiting to see what she would do with it.

Luma sat cross-legged on Wendryx's head, arms folded, wings drooping like wilted leaves.

"For the record," she muttered, "your Fire General is terrifying, and I would like to never speak to him again. Ever. Never ever. I vote for that as a long-term plan."

Wendryx's ear-frills twitched.

"Ignivar spoke gently," he said.

Luma gaped down at him. "Gently? He looked at us like we were unfiled paperwork."

"That is gentle," Ryvarr said.

Alina almost laughed, then didn't. Her chest still fluttered from Ignivar's gaze, from the way Fire itself had seemed to hold its breath around her.

She tried to focus on the path instead.

They were climbing toward the outer rim of Aurenyx now, where the stone shelves narrowed, and the molten rivers dropped out of sight. The air thinned slightly. Heat rose, but sharp gusts of cooler currents began to thread through it.

Wendryx's wings flexed.

Ryvarr lifted his head, nostrils flaring.

“Do you feel that?” Alina asked.

“Wind,” Wendryx said. “True wind. Not just heat -lift.”

Ryvarr’s fur ruffled along his spine.

“We are nearing the Sky Gate.”

THE SKY GATE

Alina expected a door. Or an arch. Or a circle of light.

Something clearly labelled You Are Now Leaving The Fire Realm.

There was nothing like that.

The path simply stopped.

Ahead, the stone shelf curved outward into a wide, shallow ledge that ended at nothing but open air. A pale haze hung beyond it — not mist, not smoke, but a shimmering veil where the colour of the world changed.

Behind them:

Fire — deep bronze sky, molten rivers, emberlight veins.

Ahead of them:

A paler vastness, faintly blue-silver, as though someone had painted sky over the edge of reality and forgotten to blend it properly.

Luma crawled back down to Alina’s shoulder and clung there, eyes huge.

“I hate edges,” she whispered. “Edges are where bad decisions live.”

Ryvarr stepped to the brink without hesitation.

The heat clung to his fur in waves, but his ears were turned forward, straining toward the thin, high whistle of wind cutting across the empty drop.

“Aelurien,” he murmured. “I can smell it.”

Alina joined him, cautiously.

The drop below was dizzying. Aurenix fell away in layers of black stone and molten light, until the details blurred into a haze of heat. Above, the bronze of Fire’s sky met the faint blue of something higher, clearer, colder.

Her stomach turned over.

“How do we... cross?” she asked. “Is there a bridge? Or a... some kind of... safe way?”

“No bridges,” Wendryx said. “Bridges belong to Earth.”

“No doors,” Ryvarr added. “Doors belong to Shadow.”

Luma nodded miserably. “And portals belong to no one, because they are trouble.”

Wendryx stepped close to the ledge, his wings folding and unfolding as he tested the currents.

“The Realms touch here,” he said. “Fire thins. Air gathers. The Phoenix set the crossing points where elements can bear each other without breaking.”

Alina stared at the empty space ahead.

“It doesn’t look like it can bear anything.”

“It can,” Wendryx said. “If we let it.”

FIRE LETS GO

A low rumble vibrated through the stone beneath their feet.

Not a warning.

A farewell.

Ember veins around the platform brightened once, then dimmed — in a pattern Alina had come to recognise. Fire was

acknowledging something, confirming something, accepting something.

“You feel that?” Ryvarr said quietly.

Wendryx inclined his head.

“Aurenyx releases us,” he said. “Fire yields its claim.”

“Yields it’s what?” Luma whispered.

“Resonance,” Wendryx said. “We walk with Fire’s echo on us. The Realm must let that echo be carried by Air.”

Alina pressed a hand to her chest.

The little spark buried there answered with a single, tight flutter, as if recognising Fire’s last touch.

Heat loosened.

Wind slipped in.

She felt it as a cool thread against her face, tugging at hair and clothes, lifting sweat from her skin, carrying the ash-scent of Fire away and replacing it with —

Nothing.

Not quite nothing.

A faint, clean nothingness.

Like breath taken on a high mountain before any weather forms.

Luma’s wings rustled.

“Oh,” she breathed. “That’s... that’s Air. Proper Air. The thinking kind.”

Alina frowned. “What does that even mean?”

“Aelurien doesn’t just blow,” Luma said. “It... listens. It organises. It makes thoughts stand in rows. I don’t like my thoughts in rows. They get ideas.”

“Pixies travel through the Dreamwave differently,” Wendryx said. “They feel what Realms do to minds.”

Ryvarr's gaze stayed on the pale haze ahead.
"Aelurien clarifies," he said. "That is both a blessing and a problem."

AIR REACHES BACK

A breeze curled across the ledge.

Light as a breath.

Gentle as a hand reaching out.

It slipped around Wendryx first, tracing his wings, reading the disciplined patterns of his flame. His emberglow dimmed a fraction as the wind calmed the edges of his heat.

It brushed Ryvarr's fur, smoothing the restless bristle along his spine, sifting through his instinctive alertness and filing it neatly into focus.

Then it touched Alina.

The moment it did, the world sharpened.

Colours edged themselves: the black of the stone, the bronze of Fire's sky, the faint blue of the haze ahead. Sounds separated cleanly: Luma's tiny breaths, Ryvarr's claws on stone, Wendryx's slow exhale.

Her thoughts followed.

They lined up, one after another — the nightmare, Luma under the leaves, chalk eyes on her bedroom wall, the thing behind the door, the breath on the other side.

And beneath all of them, the Phoenixfire flickers in her chest.

The wind found that too.

It didn't push it.

It didn't fan it.

It just... noted it.

Alina swayed.

“Careful,” Wendryx murmured, stepping closer. “Air is precise. It reads what Fire only senses.”

“Something’s... sorting me,” she muttered.

“Zephyra,” Luma whispered.

Alina looked at her. “What?”

“She’ll feel this,” Luma said, peering into the haze. “She always does. When minds shift.

When memories line up. When new patterns enter her sky.”

“Will she... be angry?” Alina asked.

“No,” Luma said. “Just very, very awake.”

Far above, in the unseen lattice of the Skyloom Citadel, a wind-woven gryphon opened her eyes.

Threads of memory and thought pulsed silver-blue across Aelurien Veil as Zephyra turned her head toward the distant tug of Fire’s release and Earth’s child moving between elements.

She did not move.

She did not speak.

She watched the pattern form.

A new thread.

Untidy.

Uncertain.

Bright.

“Noted,” she breathed into the currents — and let the winds keep doing their quiet work.

THE STEP

Back on the ledge, Wendryx spread his wings fully.

“We cross on my mark,” he said. “Air will hold you. But it will not coddle you. You must trust the currents.”

“Trust nothing I cannot see,” Luma said. “That is my rule.”

“Then close your eyes,” Ryvarr muttered.

He stepped to the very edge, claws gripping the last centimetre of Fire’s stone.

“This is a wind-crossing,” Wendryx said to Alina. “You must not fight it. Let it take your weight. It will feel like falling and rising at the same time.”

“That sounds horrible,” she said.

“It is,” he said. “And then it isn’t.”

She glanced back once.

The Monolith was a distant shape now, a dark line of disciplined fire against the bronze sky.

Somewhere within it, Ignivar watched his Realm.

Somewhere beneath it, the Phoenix slept.

She had the absurd urge to wave goodbye.

Instead, she faced the haze again.

Luma squeezed her ear. “If you die, I’m going back to Earth and haunting your school.”

“Comforting,” Alina muttered.

“On three,” Wendryx said. “One —”

Ryvarr stepped into nothing.

He didn’t fall.

He didn’t fly.

He dropped for a heartbeat, fur whipping up in the sudden rush of cooler air — and then an updraft caught him.

Wind curled under his paws and along his sides, lifting, holding, carrying. He moved forward as if walking on invisible glass, each step a negotiation between Fire’s last warmth and Air’s approaching clarity.

“Show-off,” Luma murmured.

“Two,” Wendryx said.

Alina’s pulse hammered.

“Is there a three?” she asked.

“Yes,” Wendryx said.

He stepped off the ledge.

The world vanished under him.

For one infinite heartbeat, Alina saw nothing but sky — bronze behind, pale blue ahead, a churning blur of space below.

Her stomach lurched. Her mind screamed.

Then the wind grabbed them.

It slammed into Wendryx’s wings, filling them, lifting them.

He dropped, then rose, then glided, carried by a current that knew exactly how much weight he placed on it.

Alina shrieked and clung to his neck ridge, eyes clamped shut.

Luma shrieked louder.

“This is a terrible idea!” she yelled. “I hate Realms! I hate height! I hate —oh no, this is actually quite smooth —no, I still hate it!”

“Breathe,” Wendryx said calmly. “The wind is reading your fear. You will confuse it.”

“How do you ‘confuse’ air?” Alina gasped.

“By panicking,” he said.

She tried to breathe.

The current beneath them steadied.

Her stomach settled half a centimetre closer to where it was supposed to live.

She cracked one eye open.

They were no longer above Fire.

The bronze tint had thinned to a pale, luminous blue. The heat lessened with every heartbeat, replaced by a coolness that sharpened her thoughts even as it stole the sweat from her skin.

A second current flowed in from the left, brushing past them — cooler, faster, more

inquisitive. It tugged at Alina's hair, played with Luma's wings, traced Wendryx's leading edge.

Ryvarr moved ahead on his invisible path, fur rippling in patterns that looked almost like ripples in grass under unseen wind.

Behind them, the edge of Aurenynx was shrinking. Ahead of them, a new world thickened out of the pale.

INTO AELURIEN

The shift, when it came, was not a wall.

It was a breath.

Fire's warmth exhaled.

Air's clarity inhaled.

The last hint of ember-scent vanished. Whispergrass and distant cloudwater replaced it, so faintly Alina caught them only as an idea of smells, not actual scents.

The light lost its bronze.

It became clear.

The Sky Gate was behind them.

They had crossed.

Luma risked a look down and squeaked.

They were no longer above rivers of lava.

They were above nothing at all.

Beneath them floated shelves of pale stone and cloud, hanging in the air like fragments of broken sky. Whispergrass bent in slow waves where the wind brushed it on those platforms.

Drifts of cloudwort bobbed lazily past like misplaced islands.

Above them, semi-solid cloud chambers drifted between invisible currents, their edges glowing softly where light dissolved into air.

Everything felt —

“High,” Alina whispered. “It feels... high.”

A soft wind slipped past her ear as if nodding.

Wendryx angled his wings, letting the Aelurien currents take more of his weight.

“Aelurien Veil,” he said. “The Realm of clarity.”

Ryvarr glanced back at Alina, assessing.

“Do not think too hard,” he said. “The Realm will try to help.”

“Isn’t that good?” she asked.

“Not if your thoughts are a mess,” Luma said.

“Mine are not a mess,” Alina protested, then immediately remembered nightmares, chalk eyes, doors, shadow-breath, Phoenixfire, Fire Generals, giant Colossi, and wind-gryphons she hadn’t yet met, judging her memories from very far away.

“...All right,” she admitted. “They might be a little messy.”

The wind around her thickened in interest.

“Stop listening!” she told it.

The currents swirled, amused.

Far above, Zephyra felt the little spike of chaotic thought and the Realm’s gentle attempt to line it up.

She did not intervene.

Clarity would come when it was needed.

Not before.

For now, she let the new thread drift a little deeper into her sky.

Ahead, the first of Aelurien's true paths came into view: narrow bands of denser air that shimmered faintly with memory-light, stretching between floating shelves like invisible bridges.

Ryvarr stepped onto one without hesitation, paws pressing into nothing that behaved like something.

Wendryx followed, wings adjusting, body settling.

Alina held on, heart beating too fast, mind full of thoughts that the wind would no doubt try to file and tidy and understand.

She glanced back one last time.

Fire was a distant glow behind them now.

Ahead, Air waited.

"Welcome to the sky," Luma said softly in her ear. "Try not to fall out of it."

Alina laughed once, shakily.

And the wind carried them onward.

CHAPTER 14 — The Mind's First Strike

Transit — Aelurien Veil

The paths of Aelurien were not roads.

They were agreements.

Invisible strands of denser air stretched between floating shelves, each one a promise the wind made to carry weight for as long as it chose. Ryvarr walked ahead on one of those strands as though it were a strip of stone, paws pressing into nothing that behaved like something. Wendryx followed with careful wing beats, letting the currents hold most of his mass.

Alina clung to the ridge of scales at the base of Wendryx's neck, trying not to look down.

It wasn't the height that bothered her now.

It was the clarity.

Everything was too sharp.

Every edge of every cloud-island, every blade of whispergrass on the nearest shelf, every glint on Ryvarr's ember-touched fur — all of it stood out with unsettling precision, as if the world had been redrawn with a thinner, harsher pen.

Luma crouched on her shoulder, wings tucked tight.

"I don't like how tidy the sky is here," she muttered. "It's like the wind made a list and put everything in order."

Alina managed a thin smile. "Isn't that better than chaos?"

"No," Luma said firmly. "Chaos can be charming."

The current under them rose and fell in gentle waves. A soft breeze curled past, cool fingers tracing Alina's face, sliding through her thoughts, nudging stray memories into neat rows.

Her house.

Grandad's notebook.

The chalk eye on her bedroom wall.

Luma under the leaves.

Fire's judgment.

All lined up. All too clear.

"Wendryx," she said quietly. "Does Air always do this?"

He tilted his head, feeling the currents.

"Aelurien seeks clarity," he replied. "It aligns what is scattered. It helps some minds. It troubles others."

"Guess which kind you have," Luma whispered.

Alina sighed. "The troubled one?"

"The crowded one," Wendryx corrected gently.

Ryvarr's ears flicked back.

"The wind is changeable today," he said. "Paths feel... thinner."

"In what way thinner?" Luma demanded. "Structural thinner? Moral thinner? I need specifics."

Ryvarr didn't answer.

That was the first sign.

THE FAULT IN THE WIND

The second sign came a few breaths later.

The sound of Ryvarr's claws on the invisible path stopped.

Alina looked up.

He was still there, several strides ahead — but for a heartbeat, it felt as if he were much farther away. The air between them stretched, not in distance but in perception, smearing him like a reflection in moving water.

She blinked.

He snapped back into place.

"Did you see that?" she whispered.

“See what?” Luma asked.

“Ryvarr just... stretched.”

Luma peered ahead. “He looks the same stretchiness as usual to me.”

The wind shifted.

Cold crept into it — not the natural cool of altitude, but a thin, clinical chill, like air that had never touched anything living.

Alina’s skin prickled.

“Wendryx?” she said.

“I feel it,” he murmured. His wings tightened fractionally. “Something is... misusing the currents.”

Misusing, not riding.

The third sign arrived without warning.

Ryvarr stepped forward —and vanished.

Not with a pop or a flare or a flash.

He was there one blink and gone the next, replaced by empty, shimmering air.

Alina jerked upright. “Ryvarr?”

Her voice hit the wind and came back wrong, echoing thin and flat, as if spoken in a small, glass room.

Luma dug her fingers into Alina’s collar. “Okay, no. No, I hate that. Bring back depth. Depth was lovely.”

“Ryvarr!” Wendryx barked.

No answer.

The current lurched under them.

For one agonising heartbeat, Alina was sure they were falling. Her stomach dropped, sky tilted, shelves swung wildly out of place —

Then everything snapped back.

Ryvarr stood exactly where he had been, head turned, eyes narrowed.

“I did not move,” he said.

“You were gone,” Alina gasped.

His gaze swept over her. “Not from here.”

Luma’s wings buzzed in agitation. “He was gone from us. That’s worse.”

The air around them quivered, not from turbulence but from something more precise — as if a careful hand were adjusting invisible strings, testing tension, measuring responses.

Wendryx’s pupils narrowed.

“Stay close,” he said. “Aelurien’s wind does not do this on its own.”

THE FIRST THREAD

It began small.

A thought that wasn’t hers.

Not a voice. Not words.

Just a cold, alien noticing.

This one.

Alina stiffened.

Her own thoughts scattered for a breath, then re-formed — sharper, forced into lines that didn’t feel like hers.

She saw Grandad at the kitchen table, ink on his fingers, notebook open.

Then the chalk eye on her bedroom wall.

Then Ignivar’s gaze.

Then the door in her dream.

They flicked past too neatly, too quickly, like pages turned by someone else’s hand.

“Stop,” she whispered.
The wind didn’t.
Instead, it added something.
The chalk eye blinked.
Only once.
A small, economical movement.
But the chalk never blinked in real life.
Luma felt Alina’s shoulders lock.
“You’re doing that thing where you freeze and pretend everything’s fine,” she said. “It’s not fine, is it?”
Alina tried to answer.
The words went nowhere.
They slid sideways, as if her mouth and mind were misaligned.
Light thinned around the edges of her vision. The Aelurien shelves blurred, and for a moment she saw something else layered over them —
A corridor of doors.
All closed.
All painted black.
Her heart hammered.
Too easy, something observed, cold and distant. Too messy.
Pressure formed at the back of her eyes.
Her memories shuffled again, this time more forcefully.
The door behind her dream.
The breath on her neck.
The voice that never quite spoke.
Wendryx’s voice broke through, low and sharp.
“Alina. Look at me.”
She tried.

His head was turned, eye catching hers.

For a heartbeat, she saw him clearly — firelight in his gaze, the steady emberglow of his scales.

Then the image fractured.

Lines ran through him like cracks in glass. His features broke into mirrored shards, sliding out of alignment, rearranging themselves into shapes that almost looked human, almost looked like —

No.

A hand, thin and pale, reaching through his face.

She flinched back with a strangled sound.

The hand vanished.

Wendryx was whole again.

“Shadow,” Ryvarr snarled.

The wind froze.

Not stopped — air could never stop — but every current around them held perfectly still, as though someone had taken hold of it and pinned it in place.

The silence was absolute.

“Something is on her mind,” Wendryx said. “Not in the air. Behind it.”

Alina’s breath came too fast.

The corridor of doors snapped back, closer now. One of them was half-open. Something cold pressed at the gap, trying to widen it.

What do you fear most? The not-voice asked nobody in particular.

It wasn’t curious.

It was cataloguing.

Luma shuddered. She couldn't see what Alina saw, but she could feel her.

“Get out of her head,” the pixie whispered.

The pressure increased.

THE DREAMWAVE STIRS

Far below thought and above breath, something ancient shifted.

The Dreamwave rolled.

It had rules.

It had boundaries.

It did not like being used without permission.

Beneath Aelurien's currents, the deep-blue field of shared dreaming flexed as a foreign pattern brushed its edge — cold, mirror-bright, surgical in its precision.

A fragment of Shadow tried to use its surface as a lens.

Baku felt it.

The Dreamkeeper did not rise, did not roar, did not speak.

He simply turned his attention toward the point of contact.

Pressure met pressure.

The cold thread testing Alina's memories hit a wall it had not accounted for — not Fire, not Air, not human resistance.

Something huge and unseen stepped between it and its target.

For a heartbeat, Alina felt it as a shape at her back — not touch, not warmth, just the sense of enormous weight leaning into the wind on her side of the line.

The chalk eye in her memory cracked.

The corridor of doors warped.

The half-open door slammed shut with a sound like glass locking back into place.

The cold observation flickered.

Not alone, it noted.

Irritation — faint, clinical — slid along the thread.

The pressure withdrew, not in panic but in calculation.

The wind twitched.

Currents flowed again.

AFTERMATH

Alina's vision cleared.

The Aelurien shelves snapped back into their rightful places. Ryvarr stood exactly where he should be. Wendryx's face was whole, his scales unfractured, his eyes steady.

Her head pounded.

She realised she was shaking only when Luma's tiny hands pressed against her cheek.

"Alina," Luma said, voice thin and high. "Say something. Anything. A rude word. I'll take anything."

"I'm... here," Alina managed.

It came out hoarse.

Wendryx's wings had closed in around her more tightly than she remembered. He must have drawn them while her mind was elsewhere. Ryvarr had turned, body angled protectively between her and the open air, lips pulled back from his teeth.

"What did you see?" Wendryx asked.

She swallowed.

"Doors," she said. "My memories. But... wrong. Like someone was flipping through them."

And there was a door I don't remember having open, and I think —”

Her voice broke.

Luma glared at the empty sky.

“Whoever that was,” she snapped, “I hope they stub every toe they have, forever.”

“It did not feel like a full incursion,” Wendryx said. “No full dream -snare. No emotional bleed. A test.”

Ryvarr's fur was still bristling.

“Shadow General work,” he growled. “Mind pattern. Cold. Clean. No scent of hunger. Just... interest.”

“Which one?” Luma asked.

“Does it matter?” Ryvarr shot back.

“Yes,” she said. “For the amount of panic I should be having.”

Wendryx shook his head.

“We will name it when we are sure,” he said. “For now, know this: something in Shadow has noticed her.”

Alina hugged her arms around herself.

“I felt like a... like a book someone picked up and put back,” she whispered.

Luma pressed her forehead against Alina's. “Then we will scribble all over the margins,” she said fiercely. “Make it harder to read.”

Despite herself, Alina let out a shaky laugh.

The wind softened.

ABOVE THE THREADS

High above, in the Skyloom Citadel, Zephyra stood very still.

The thought-currents of Aelurien Veil glowed around her in fine, silver lines — hundreds of tiny streams of memory and intention flowing through her Realm.

One of them had just kinked.

An unnatural ripple, like a clean cut through a page.

She traced it with her mind, following the echo of cold structure and forced clarity until it thinned and vanished.

“Shadow,” she murmured.

Her feathers ruffled once, then smoothed.

She considered intervening.

Chose not to.

For now.

Instead, she shifted her weight along the cloud-woven ledge and adjusted the Skyloom’s watching threads, tightening the weave around a single new line — a human thought-pattern, bright and stubborn, already pulling other currents toward it.

“Noted,” Zephyra said softly.

The winds obeyed.

Back on the path, Wendryx eased his wings.

“Aelurien has not rejected us,” he said. “We continue.”

“You say that as if it’s reassuring,” Luma muttered.

Ryvarr moved forward again, silent and tense.

Alina took a deep breath and forced her fingers to unclench from Wendryx’s scales.

Whatever had just touched her mind had retreated.

But somewhere in the cold spaces between Realms, in a chamber of mirrors that never reflected the same image twice, a tall, symmetrical figure adjusted an invisible pattern and turned its attention fully toward her.

Not with hunger.

Not with hatred.

With interest.

Now, it knew she existed.

And that, she suspected, was worse.

CHAPTER 15 — The Skywoven Path

Aelurien Veil — The upper currents

The wind was different now.

Before the illusion, Aelurien had felt organised — sharp, precise, like a sky that insisted on tidying every thought. But after the cold thread brushed Alina’s mind, the Realm had grown watchful. The currents still carried clarity, but gently now, softened at the edges as if something in the sky had taken her pulse and decided not to push too hard.

Luma leaned sideways on Alina’s shoulder, wings drooping, expression pinched.

“I liked the wind better when it didn’t know everything about us,” she muttered.

Alina managed a weak smile. “It doesn’t know everything.”

Luma gave her a look. “It sorted your thoughts by colour earlier.”

“That was one time.”

“That is too many times.”

Wendryx moved ahead of them on the shimmering air-path, wings half-open to balance against the crosscurrents. His body shifted constantly — small wing rotations, tail adjustments, a subtle flex of back muscles — each movement responding to invisible pressures.

“Aelurien is calmer now,” he said, without turning. “The winds were strained earlier.”

“Because of... what touched me?” Alina asked.

His silence was answer enough.

Ryvarr walked along the wind-strand with muted grace, paws sinking slightly into the denser currents. He had stopped

bristling, though the fur along his spine still twitched whenever a stray gust approached Alina too quickly.

“Wind carries thought,” he said. “Yours were loud.”

Luma slapped her tiny palm over Alina’s ear. “Don’t feel guilty. Loud thoughts are better than no thoughts. And yours are just... expressive.”

Alina snorted. “That sounds like an insult.”

“It is,” Luma said brightly. “But an affectionate one.”

THE SKYWEAVES

As they moved forward, the world shifted again.

The floating shelves of Aelurien thinned, replaced by long drifts of cloud-stone that undulated like soft dunes suspended in the sky. Translucent threads stretched between them — narrow bands of concentrated air forming bridges, ramps, spirals, and strange curling shapes like frozen ribbons of wind.

Ryvarr stepped onto one such ribbon; it sagged beneath his weight, then bounced upward lightly like a stretched bowstring.

Alina’s stomach twisted. “Is that... safe?”

“No,” Ryvarr said.

Luma squealed. “Why would you say that?!”

“It is safe enough,” Wendryx corrected calmly. “If you respect the weave.”

“And if we don’t?” Alina asked.

“The wind will correct you.”

“Sounds painful,” she muttered.

“It depends on the correction,” Wendryx said.

Luma groaned into her hands. “Why does every Realm have rules? I voted for a holiday Realm. Something with beaches.”

“This is a beach,” Ryvarr said. “Just one without ground.”
“That’s not how beaches work!” Luma shouted into the void.

The winds answered with a faint, amused swirl.

THE MEMORY -CURRENTS

A new current drifted across their path — cooler than the rest, threaded with faint, shimmering lines. It brushed past Alina, and for a moment she felt a flash of —

Her mother’s voice.

Not a word. Just the shape of a memory she barely held anymore.

She stumbled.

Wendryx turned instantly, wings flaring to catch her.

“Easy,” he murmured. “Aelurien pulled a memory. It is curious.”

“I don’t... like that,” she whispered.

“It was not hostile,” Wendryx said.

“Curiosity is the first step to kidnapping,” Luma muttered darkly.

Another breeze came — softer, swirling around Alina’s wrist.

She expected another memory.

Instead, it carried nothing but cool air.

Then another current followed, brushing her shoulder with equal gentleness.

Then another.

As if Aelurien Veil were apologising.

Wendryx noticed it too.

“Zephyra is adjusting the winds,” he said quietly. “She moderates what the Realm does not intend.”

Alina blinked. “She knows we’re here?”

“She knows when anything enters her sky,” he said.

Ryvarr shook out his fur. “She is watching. Not unkindly.”

Luma frowned. “How can you tell?”

“Because the wind keeps smoothing your panic,” Ryvarr replied.

Luma froze. “Is it obvious?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Yes,” all three said in unison.

Luma deflated. “Fine. I am fragile and adorable. Let me cope.”

FOLLOWING THE THREAD

They continued along a narrow ribbon of concentrated air. This one wound upward in a spiralling path, funnelling between drifting shelves lined with whispergrass that moved in perfect unison with the wind — every blade tilting to the same direction at the same moment, like thousands of tiny green clocks all ticking together.

“It’s so...” Alina searched for a word. “Disciplined.”

“Aelurien is an ordered Realm,” Wendryx said. “Where Fire tests, Air evaluates.”

“That sounds worse,” Luma said.

“It depends on your mind,” Wendryx replied.

Ryvarr glanced back. “Alina’s mind is adapting.”

“Because it has no choice,” Luma whispered.

Alina shot her a look.

“No offence!” Luma added quickly. “But Air is bossy.”

Another breeze curled around Alina's cheek, as if offended.
"Sorry," Luma told the wind. "You're lovely. Please don't sort me."

The current retreated politely.

THE SKY'S WARNING

The path curved toward a cluster of suspended stone arches — half-real structures formed by hardened wind, bending gravity in ways Alina did not want to think about.

As they approached, the wind sharpened.

Not dangerously — but intentionally.

Wendryx's wings twitched.

Ryvarr lowered his head.

"What is it?" Alina asked, heartbeat quickening.

"Aelurien Veil is adjusting again," Wendryx murmured.

"Preparing."

"For what?"

"For her."

He didn't need to say the name.

Zephyra.

The Wind Weaver.

The clarity of the Realm intensified around them — not harsh, but focused, as if drawing clean lines through the sky in preparation for something precise, something exacting.

Luma squeaked and hid behind Alina's hair.

"Nope. Don't want to be tidy again. I'm messy on purpose."

Ryvarr inhaled slowly, nostrils flaring.

"Intentional wind. Structured. She is near."

"Not here?" Alina whispered.

“Not yet,” Wendryx said. “But the Realm is aligning for her arrival.”

Luma perched on Alina’s shoulder like a trembling, mutinous leaf.

“Do we get a break from important people? Just for a day? A lunch break? A snack break?

Something?”

Alina snorted despite herself.

The wind swirled warmly, as if amused.

THE PATH CONTINUES

They reached the crest of the skywoven ribbon. A new platform drifted ahead — a stable floating shelf covered in soft whispergrass, its edges bound by wind-carved stone.

It looked like a place designed for waiting.

Aelurien’s light brightened around them.

Alina felt clarity settle over her thoughts like a veil — gentle, structured, honest.

Not overwhelming.

Not forceful.

Just... preparing.

Wendryx’s posture changed — a subtle shift into respect.

Ryvarr lowered into a steady crouch, tail flicking once.

Luma swallowed hard. “Is this where the big wind-lady appears?”

Alina exhaled slowly.

“I think so.”

“And you’re okay with that?” Luma asked.

“No,” Alina said honestly. “But this Realm doesn’t like lies.”

The wind curled around her ankle — approving.

CHAPTER 16 — The Wind Weaver’s Gaze

Aelurien Veil — The Sky Cradle

The wind changed before Zephyra appeared.

It wasn’t dramatic.

No sudden gust, no tearing force.

Just a gentle tightening of the air, like the sky drawing in a careful breath.

Wendryx halted first.

Ryvarr’s body dropped a fraction lower in instinctive respect.

Luma folded her wings and leaned against Alina’s neck.

“Don’t say anything clever,” she whispered. “Air Mythics don’t like clever.”

Alina opened her mouth to ask why — and the world exhaled.

A single silver-blue thread of wind unwound in front of them, hanging in the air like a drawn line of light. It twisted once, then flattened and broadened, weaving itself into a floating walkway made of compressed air, frost-light, and memory threads.

Wendryx bowed his head slightly.

“Follow,” he murmured.

They stepped onto the wind bridge. It flexed like something alive — neither stone nor cloud, but a promise from the Realm itself to hold their weight.

The bridge led them toward a suspended sphere in the open sky.

It hovered just ahead of them, perfectly still: a delicate chamber woven from mist threads, frost petals, and thin, prism-

bright lines of light. It looked like a dew drop caught between breaths, trembling on the edge of falling but never quite moving.

Luma's wings fluttered.

"Oh," she breathed. "It's like a soap bubble, but... bossy."

Wendryx inclined his head.

"The Sky Cradle," he said. "Where Aelurien wakes its Guardians."

Ryvarr's tail flicked once, restrained.

"Airborn only," he said quietly. "The others have their own."

Alina's throat tightened. "And we're... allowed in there?"

"Rarely," Wendryx said. "She permits it."

The bridge curved, drawing them closer.

As if summoned by the word she, a shape detached from the upper currents above the Cradle.

Zephyra descended without haste.

The wind did not buffet her. It carried her as if she were its thought made visible — a gryphon form woven of sky and clarity, feathers edged with fine lines of pale light, eyes the colour of cold air over mountains.

She did not land so much as arrive, the currents folding themselves into a resting place beneath her talons.

Her gaze moved first to Wendryx.

A small dip of her head: recognition.

Then to Ryvarr.

A sharper inclination: evaluation.

Then to Alina.

The air around Alina compressed slightly; for a moment, her thoughts lined up too neatly, like books pulled into a single, precise row.

Zephyra blinked once.

The pressure eased.

“You carry Fire’s echo,” Zephyra said, voice soft but resonant, as if spoken through every current at once. “And something older watches your steps. Yet you remain unbroken.”

Alina swallowed. “Is... is that good?”

“It is unusual,” Zephyra replied.

Luma muttered near Alina’s ear, “That means confusing. She thinks you’re confusing.”

Zephyra gave the pixie a long, unreadable look, then turned her head toward the sphere.

“Come,” she said. “See how your worlds keep balance.”

The wind-bridge adjusted beneath them, guiding them gently toward the Sky Cradle’s surface.

THE SKY CRADLE

Passing through the Cradle felt like stepping through a thin curtain of cool breath.

Inside, the chamber was larger than its delicate shell suggested. There were no walls in the usual sense — only curved flows of air, bands of denser wind arcing like ribs, threads of mist intertwining in shifting, deliberate patterns.

Frost petals drifted upward instead of down. Prism -light broke and reformed on transparent currents, painting faint, moving colours across Wendryx’s scales and Ryvarr’s fur.

Suspended throughout the chamber hung a half-dozen cradle types, each glowing faintly with Aelurien’s imprint:

1. Egg Chambers — rounded shells of hardened mist and light, cradling the forms of avian and reptile Guardians.

2. Womb Chambers — soft, pulsing spheres of air and frost, shaped for mammal Guardians.

3. Cocoon Chambers — tightened envelopes of silver thread for insect and arthropod Guardians.

4. Aquasphere Chambers — drifting globes of clear water and sky -light for fish and amphibians.

5. Fusion Chambers — rare, unstable structures that shifted in and out of shape, used to birth special Realm constructs, not true Guardians.

6. One last type hung half-veiled in light, its details blurred as if the wind itself discouraged attention.

Alina found herself whispering, “These are... all Air?”

“They are Aelurien’s versions,” Zephyra said. “But every Realm holds these six forms. Fire shapes them with heat and stone. Water with depth and pressure. Earth with roots and bedrock. Life with sap and bloom. Light with radiance. Shadow with reflection.”

“The structure is the same,” Wendryx added. “The Realm changes how it looks.”

Ryvarr’s ears turned toward a distant vibration only he could hear.

“And who it suits,” he said. “Guardians are born where their humans’ cores lean.”

“Some to Fire, some to Water, some to Air,” Zephyra said. “Each human pulse calls to one Realm first. The chambers answer.”

Alina stared at the shifting cradles, awed and unnerved.

“So... a fox in Fire would be in a Womb Chamber,” she said slowly, “but made of stone and heat?”

“Yes,” Wendryx said.

“And here,” Ryvarr added, “the same fox would wake in frost and sky-breath.”

Luma hugged herself, eyes wide.

“I feel very under-designed,” she muttered.

A subtle hum rippled through the chamber.

A BIRTH FOR AIR

Zephyra lifted one talon.

A fine thread of wind -light connected her to a single Womb Chamber — a small, pale sphere pulsing weakly at the edge of the Cradle.

“This one responds,” she said. “Earth stirs.”

Light trembled through the Cradle, a barely audible note passing along invisible strings.

Within the Air Womb Chamber, vapour thickened. The surface firmed, faintly outlined by curved lines of frost and softly glowing patterns like fur pressed against glass from within.

Alina stepped closer without meaning to.

Luma perched forward on her shoulder, both hands over her mouth.

“Oh, I hate this. Oh, I love this. Oh, I hate this.”

Zephyra’s tone remained calm, instructional and distant, like a teacher who had given this lesson a thousand times but never grown careless with it.

“When a human child takes its first breath on Earth,” she said, “the Phoenix does not interfere with the life that begins there. But the Realms listen.”

A stronger pulse ran through the chamber.

“The child’s first spark,” Zephyra continued, “leans toward one element more than the rest.

Fire, Water, Air, Earth, Life, Light or Shadow. That lean wakes a matching cradle here.”

The Womb Chamber contracted slightly.

“The Realm of birth,” Wendryx said, “follows that lean. The species follows the child’s instinct.”

Ryvarr watched the chamber intently.

“Airborne with quick minds often wake foxes,” he said.

“Sharp. Curious. Always listening.”

The chamber pulsed.

Cracks of light spidered across its surface.

Mist swirled inside — and then the shell split.

A small shape tumbled out, caught gently by a waiting current: a fox made of wind and frost-light, its body half-translucent, fur suggested rather than fully formed. Its eyes opened as two clear, sky-coloured points.

The Air Fox blinked once.

Alina forgot to breathe.

The fox turned its head, as if hearing something far, far away.

Zephyra’s eyes softened almost imperceptibly.

“It seeks its child,” she said. “It is aware of its human the instant it wakes.”

Not a stranger.

Not a master.

A counterpart.

Resonance shivered through the chamber, fragile but precise.

Alina felt it as a distant pulling, not toward her own chest but somewhere else entirely — a faint, invisible thread stretching out of Aelurien, crossing the spaces between Realms, reaching for a newborn heartbeat in the Human World.

The fox's form brightened briefly, as if it had found what it was seeking.

Then its edges loosened into curls of vapour. The little body unravelled into faint, luminous wind that drifted outward, following the unseen path of its thread toward the Realm where it would grow, waiting.

Alina watched the last traces fade, a sudden heaviness dropping into her stomach.

"If every human has a cradle," she whispered, "then... where is mine?"

The chamber quieted.

Zephyra's head turned slowly toward her, feathers shifting as the wind around her re-arranged like cautious thought.

"Not all threads begin in a cradle," she said gently.

Alina's fingers tightened around her own sleeve. "Is that bad?"

"Neither bad nor good," Zephyra replied. "Simply... uncommon."

The answer did not frighten Alina.

It made her feel very small beneath the endless sky — and, at the same time, very clearly seen.

"That was beautiful," she said softly.

"Balanced," Zephyra corrected, but without sharpness. "The Phoenix oversees. He does not touch. Life and death on Earth remain under their own laws. Only the echoes change."

Far from Aelurien, two beings felt the same pulse.

In Thornwild Expanse, the Stoneheart Stag lifted his crowned head, roots in his hooves humming with the faint reverberation of a new bond.

In Sylathen Grove, the Bloomcat stirred among blooming light, whiskers twitching to the same unseen rhythm.
For a moment, the Realms held a shared breath.
Then it passed.

PREPARATION

The glow in the Womb Chamber faded back to its resting state.

Zephyra folded her wings.

“You have seen enough,” she said. “You would not yet survive the deeper patterns.”

Luma tugged at Alina’s hair.

“Translation: your head would pop.”

Zephyra regarded the pixie for a long second.

“Your translation is crude,” she said. “But not entirely wrong.”

A faint ripple of amusement crossed the currents. Alina wasn’t sure if it came from Zephyra or the Realm itself.

Wind began to gather around them, curling into a slow, guiding current toward the Cradle’s exit.

“Shadow watches you now,” Zephyra said quietly. “Air will brace you as far as it can.”

Alina’s shoulders stiffened. “Shadow has been watching me for a while.”

“Before, it sniffed,” Ryvarr said. “Now it stares.”

“That is supposed to be reassuring?” Luma demanded.

“No,” Ryvarr answered.

Zephyra’s gaze stayed on Alina.

“You are not defenceless,” she said. “Fire has seen you. Air has weighed you. Others will follow. The pattern around you is... complicated.”

Alina gave a shaky laugh.

“That sounds like a polite way of saying ‘trouble’.”

Zephyra’s feathers rustled once.

“In the sky,” she said, “trouble is usually just another word for change.”

Wind wrapped more firmly around them, guiding them back toward the bridge.

“Is that bad?” Alina asked again.

Zephyra looked past her, through her, perhaps through all the paths that had not yet been walked.

“Not yet,” she answered.

And Aelurien Veil carried them onward.

CHAPTER 17 — Owl in the Drift

Dreamwave — Fractured

Edmund did not remember lying down.

One moment, he was at his desk, glasses abandoned on the open notebook, hand resting on a half-finished line about “patterns repeating across strata”. The next, the lamp’s circle of light folded inward, and the world became a long, narrow corridor made of nothing at all.

He knew this place. Not by sight —nothing in it stayed the same long enough —but in his bones.

Footsteps echoed that weren’t footsteps. Each hollow sound came back with a different memory wrapped around it: Alina laughing with chalk on her nose. The crack of stone in some forgotten excavation. The smell of ash he was sure belonged to a war he could not name.

He looked down, expecting to see the familiar scuffed shoes, the rug by his desk.

There was only a pale strip of floor that shimmered like water and glass and dust all at once, stretching away into a vanishing point that kept moving when he tried to focus on it.

“I’m dreaming,” he said —or thought he said.

The words did not reach his ears. They turned into a ripple in the air, became a faint ring of light that drifted upward and broke apart.

Panic rose before he could stop it. Not the clean, sharp sort he might have felt facing a collapsing tunnel, but a deeper, older fear: of forgetting; of things he ought to know slipping beyond reach.

As the fear tightened, the corridor reacted.

The pale strip under his feet narrowed, edges fraying into darkness. Walls tried to form on either side —a suggestion of bookcases, hospital curtains, train windows —never committing to any of them. Shadow gathered where corners should be and started to breathe.

He froze.

The shadow didn't move closer. It loomed, a negative space with no outline, waiting for something in him to crack.

Part of him, the part that had spent decades coaxing truth from fragments of pottery and rock, recognised it: not a thing, but an absence. A hole trying to pretend it was a shape.

His chest hurt. The corridor blurred. He felt very old and very small.

This is new, he thought, unmoored. Or I've been here before and lost it.

The strip beneath his feet broke.

It didn't shatter like glass or crumble like stone. It simply... unstuck, dissolving into a scatter of floating slabs of light, each no larger than a page. Whispers of sound came from them —

Alina's voice as a child, the hiss of desert wind, the roar of something like distant water —overlapping, tangling, pulling him in different directions.

Edmund flailed for balance in a place that had no gravity to obey.

The not-shadow quivered, sensing the opening.

It began to stretch along the empty space between the memory-slabs, thin tendrils reaching out—not touching, never quite touching, but pressing, testing, looking for a way through the noise.

Cold gathered behind his breastbone.

Something in the darkness seemed to lean closer, not with eyes, but with intent.

A low sound rolled across the corridor like distant thunder.

It was not a roar, not an explosion, not any sound he could name. It was weight. Pressure. A boundary being dropped into place.

The reaching tendrils of absence recoiled as if burned.

The shadow did not leave; it simply stopped at an invisible line and pushed, pressed, probed.

Edmund felt its frustration as a chill against his skin, like standing too close to an open cellar door at night.

The floating slabs of memory steadied.

They drew together of their own accord, re-forming a path beneath his feet —not straight this time, but gently curving, as though some unseen hand were guiding him away from the broken edge.

Edmund let out a shaky breath he didn't remember holding.

"Thank you," he tried to say, to whoever or whatever had closed the door.

The word turned to a warm puff of fog in front of his face and disappeared.

A soft light kindled ahead of him.

Not the harsh white of hospital fluorescents, nor the golden circle of his desk lamp. This light was feathered at the edges, pale and steady, with a hint of silver-blue threaded through it. It pulsed, once, in time with his heartbeat, then widened into the outline of something he recognised before he understood why.

An owl.

It hung in the air above the path, as if carved from quiet itself —wings half-spread, body composed of translucent glow and

faint, drifting lines, as though someone had drawn it in a single perfect stroke and then forgotten to give it weight.

Edmund had seen owls before. In old woodcuts, on night walks, in the dim corners of museum stonework. None of them felt like this.

This figure carried no predatory sharpness. Its presence settled over the corridor like a hand smoothing crumpled paper.

When its eyes met his, the panic simply... let go.

Not vanished —he could still feel it, like a memory of having been afraid —but it no longer ruled his breathing. His chest loosened. The darkness at the edges of the path retreated a little further, sulking.

“You again,” he thought, with sudden, aching certainty.

He did not know why he was certain. He did not remember the first meeting. Yet the sensation was as clear as recognising a friend in a crowd by the way they held their shoulders.

The owl beat its wings once.

Each feather-stroke sent a shimmer through the air, and the floating slabs of memory under his feet settled into a smoother, broader curve. The whispers quieted. The corridor became less like a collapsing tunnel and more like a gently turning river of light.

He took a step forward, then another.

The owl drifted ahead of him, never quite landing, never quite flying away. Wherever its light touched, the not-shadow thinned, held back by some rule it could not break.

Edmund’s thoughts tried to catch up.

Dream. This is a dream. You’re asleep. That’s all.

But another part of him —the part that had spent nights staring at the same nightmare fracturing each time differently —

knew this was something more than a simple dream. It felt structured in a way dreams rarely did. It felt watched.

He glanced to one side.

For a heartbeat, through a gap between two slabs of light, he saw another corridor. Parallel, but not identical: the same kind of shifting floor, the same dark pressing at the sides, but narrower, smaller, the light a fraction warmer.

A girl ran there.

Bare feet on nothing, hair a tangle of dark against the blurred not-sky. Her outline flickered at the edges, as though part of her wanted to be thirteen and another part four and another ancient and tired. She reached out toward something he could not see and stumbled as the path beneath her tried to split.

“Alina,” he breathed.

The name turned into a tremor that ran along the corridor between them.

The owl’s head snapped round.

For a moment, its gaze was not on him at all. It looked across, through, beyond —as if the paths were threads, and it had just felt two of them attempting to knot.

Then it moved.

It did not fly so much as shift, its body becoming a streak of light that folded through the space between corridors without crossing any distance Edmund could measure. One instant, it was above his path; the next, it hovered at the point where his world and the girl’s almost touched.

Its wings spread wider.

Feather-edge light spilled down into the gap, forming a thin arch of brightness that lasted only as long as a breath.

On the other side, the girl — Alina, surely Alina, even though she looked blurred and wrong, as dreams always made the familiar — felt the change.

Alina was falling again.

She knew this fall. She had fallen from the classroom steps in dreams, from the edge of Mara's chalk -circle, from Embera into Fire, from her own bedroom door into a darkness that had teeth — but this fall was quieter.

There was no wind. No rush. Only the sense of moving through layers of herself.

Images tried to form around her as she tumbled: the old house; the Feather; Luma's glow;

Wendryx's steady eyes; the strange, silent heights of Aelurien Veil. None of them held. Each slid away as she reached for it, dissolving into colour and sound.

I hate this bit, she thought, though she couldn't remember when she had decided there were 'bits' at all.

The falling slowed.

The space around her remembered that floors existed and did its best to oblige.

A strip of light unfurled beneath her feet, hardening just in time. She landed without impact, knees bending cleanly, as if someone had edited out the moment of pain.

The "floor" felt neither warm nor cold. It shimmered with water-reflections and sky -whiteness and the faint texture of the wooden boards in her room at home, all overlaid. When she glanced down, she saw not her own toes but faint reflections of other steps she had taken: following her grandfather down museum corridors, running along Embera's black shore, crossing a fire-lit bridge that did not exist outside dreams.

“Hello?” she called.

The sound came out wrong —too distant, as if it belonged to someone at the far end of a tunnel. The echo returned before the word had finished, layered over itself, until the corridor seemed full of voices that were all hers.

She swallowed.

Darkness leaned in from the sides, the same soft not-dark that had hovered behind the door in her Earth-bedroom, behind Mara’s chalk eyes, behind the edges of the Fire Realm gate. It did not lunge. It waited.

Alina felt it watching the places in her chest where she was weakest.

Fear prickled along her back.

This time, instead of cold teeth, something else moved first.

A line of light appeared ahead of her, thin as a feather-shaft.

It drew itself outward, sketching a curve in the air above the path, then another, until a pair of wings spread across her field of vision —too large to belong to any owl she had ever seen, yet too gentle to frighten her.

The shape that formed between those wings was made of glow and breath and memory. It flickered through several versions of itself —the barn owl on the old book in Edmund’s study, the white shapes she’d seen fleeing from the light of oncoming cars, the chalk outline she had drawn once and forgotten —but settled into something that felt right.

An owl hung in the air before her. Its body was almost transparent, edges soft, as though woven from Zephyra’s wind and the dust of a museum archive. Its eyes were not black; they were pools of muted sky, deep and steady.

The dark at the corridor’s edges hissed.

The owl's wings shifted, just once.

Light spilled outward, not bright enough to hurt, but true enough to make the darkness flinch.

The path beneath Alina's feet broadened. The sense of falling receded, replaced by the faint impression of standing on something that wanted to be solid for her sake.

Warmth brushed her cheek.

It felt like sitting under a blanket fresh from the radiator in winter. It felt like the moment before Edmund told her a story, when his voice was still just a promise. It felt like the glow that lived somewhere behind her ribs when Luma laughed too loudly and pretended not to be worried.

Her heartbeat, which had been stuttering in the strange silence, steadied.

"You're not... mine," she murmured into the echo-heavy air, staring up at the owl. "But you're not against me either, are you?"

The question did not expect an answer. Dreams rarely answered. But as the words spread through the space, the owl tilted its head in a gesture that was almost, almost a nod.

Behind it, just at the edge of her perception, she felt something else.

A pressure, like a thumb pressed lightly on the surface of still water. Not heavy enough to break through; just there, holding, guarding. The same warmth from before rose with it —stronger now, as if whatever it was recognised her and was fighting a little harder because of it.

The darkness along the corridor drew back another step, sulking into places where the light could not quite reach.

Alina let out a breath.

Her shoulders, which she had not realised were clutching up by her ears, dropped. Her fingers relaxed where they had curled into fists.

“It’s only a dream,” she told herself. “Just a weird one. An owl... because of Zephyra, maybe. Because of all the sky.”

She thought of the Air Realm, of thin bridges of wind and the feeling of standing too high with nothing but Zephyra’s unseen precision keeping her from tumbling into endless cloud.

Yes. Owls lived in sky-stories. Her mind was just mixing things up.

The idea settled into place with satisfying logic, even if some deeper part of her knew it was wrong.

The owl blinked slowly.

For a fraction of a second, her vision doubled.

Behind the owl, just for that heartbeat, she saw the outline of a man walking along another path of light —older, shoulders stooped, hair thinner than she remembered seeing it, his face turned toward something she couldn’t see.

“Grandad?” she whispered.

The image slipped away before the word fully formed. Her voice met only all the other voices she had spoken here before, returning as a murmur of don’t run/stay/wake up/help from a thousand nights.

The owl’s head turned, just as it had in that other corridor.

Its gaze swept the space between paths, as though tracking currents she could not see. The warm pressure at the very edge of awareness increased, then gentled again. Whatever else was here — whatever the dark had wanted—was being held back by rules she did not know.

Alina hugged herself.

“Thank you,” she said, without quite knowing to whom.

Her words floated upward and folded into the owl’s feathers like dust motes.

The light around it began to thin.

Not suddenly, not with the cruel sharpness of waking from a nightmare, but gradually, the way fireflies fade when dawn creeps in. Wings became lines, lines became a suggestion, a promise that this shape could form again if needed.

“You feel... familiar,” she tried to tell it, as everything blurred at the edges.

The owl did not answer.

It didn’t need to.

Somewhere far below the level of this drifting corridor, in a depth of the Dreamwave where she could not yet reach, something like a coal glowed.

It was not a flame; Dreamwave could not carry full Phoenixfire. It was the idea of fire, the first thought of heat before any spark, compact and stubborn.

That coal watched.

It felt the dark press against an invisible boundary and fail.

It felt the ancient weight that had set that boundary curl tighter around both human threads —old man and girl —and refused to move.

It would have moved itself if it could. It would have burned the shadow away entirely. But the rules here were older than its current body, and it was young, still, in this cycle. Its fire could only warm, resist, hold.

So it watched, and waited, and learned the shape of the girl’s fear.

It stored the sight of the translucent owl and the way her shoulders dropped when it appeared, filing the pattern away in the place where decisions would one day be made.

Above, on the fragile paths of dreams.

The memory-slabs beneath Edmund's feet straightened into a gentler arc. The floating whispers around him softened to a background murmur. The not-shadow lingered at the limits of allowed space, but did not cross.

The owl drifted back toward him, form growing clearer as it slipped from one corridor to the other without ever truly moving.

He felt his knees weaken with a tiredness that was more than physical.

"Who are you?" he tried to ask, voice barely more than thought.

What came back was not a word.

It was a feeling: the calm of turning pages in a quiet room; the hush of snow outside a window; the steady presence of another mind that existed only to stop you losing yourself.

The fear that had driven him stumbling at the beginning of the dream did not return.

Edmund's vision dimmed, not with terror, but with the heavy, ordinary weight of deeper sleep.

As he sank, he caught one last impression: feathers brushing the edge of his mind, not to erase anything, not to change, only to hold.

I must write this down, he thought weakly. In the morning. If I can remember.

The Dreamwave, which allowed no new memories but only rearranged old ones, tucked that thought in among many others just like it. Some had survived to waking before. Most had not.

This one lingered a little longer.

Alina woke to the sound of wind breathing.

Real wind, this time.

Fine strands of Zephyra's air curled around the High Cloud chamber where she slept, stroking the edges of the semi-solid floor, making the walls hum with a tone so soft she felt it in her bones more than heard it. The air tasted different here than in Fire —light and clean, with none of Ignivar's iron heat.

Luma was a faint glow at her shoulder, curled in on herself, wings folded like closed petals.

Wendryx slept coiled not far away, a grey stone shape with slow, deep breaths that barely stirred the air. Ryvarr was only a darker shadow near the chamber's open edge, ears pricked even in rest.

Everything was quiet.

Alina lay still, heart still beating a little too fast, and stared up at the shift of translucent ceiling.

An owl's outline hovered there in her memory, drawn in light and calm.

By the time she tried to fix the details —the exact shape of the wings, the colour of the eyes —it was already smudging, being eaten away by waking and logic.

"Sky and stress," she muttered under her breath, rolling onto her side. "Too much Zephyra.

Too much thinking."

It was easier to believe that.

Easier than thinking that something else had been there with her and her grandfather, in a place that wasn't quite a place at all.

Luma stirred, sensing the tail end of Alina's unease.

“You’re all scrunched,” the pixie mumbled, voice thick with sleep, glow brightening just enough to paint a soft circle on Alina’s cheek. “Bad dream again?”

Alina hesitated.

“Not as bad,” she said. “There was... an owl. It helped.”

Luma’s wings twitched.

“Owls are good,” she declared, as if announcing a universal law. “Wind things. They see what other things forget.”

She yawned, the sound tiny and fierce, and tucked herself closer to Alina’s neck, as if staking her own claim against any shadows that might think to creep back in.

The wind outside shifted.

For a moment, it whispered along the edges of the chamber in a pattern that sounded almost like feathers sweeping across stone.

Somewhere high above, beyond cloud and memory, Zephyra opened her eyes and tilted her head, feeling the faint disturbance in Dreamflow settle. An old owl’s echo and a girl’s fear had brushed her domain, but the currents were stabilised now. The Skyloom Citadel hummed softly, harmonic lines returning to balance.

The Dreamwave would not be so gentle next time.

But for this night, under the thin shelter of Air and the watch of unseen wings, Alina and Edmund both slept on — separated by Realms, joined by a single, drifting owl in the dark.

CHAPTER 18 — The Wolf Who Waited

Earth Realm / Life Boundary (Sylathen Grove → Thornwild Expanse)

The forest breathed slowly.

Not with wind —there was little of that here —but with the steady pulse of the Life Realm itself: a soft rise, a softer fall, as though ancient trees exhaled in perfect rhythm beneath a sky filtered through gold-green leaves.

Fenrael moved through this hush like a ghost made of light.

Every step was deliberate, noiseless. Flowers pushed up from the soil as his paws touched the ground —tiny blooms of pale green-gold that opened, glowed, and withered gently back into the earth behind him, leaving not a trace.

He was not hunting.

He was not patrolling.

He was listening.

Something in the Realms was wrong.

A hollow ache pulsed beneath his ribs —sharp, fleeting, then gone. Not pain. Not injury.

Something stranger. Something that should have been familiar but wasn't. Like remembering the shape of a wound he had never received.

Fenrael paused beneath a towering trunk veined with soft luminescence. Vines in his white -gold fur unfurled slightly, reacting to the disturbance only he seemed able to feel. His green eyes narrowed, tracing the shifting currents of Life-energy around him, reading the world the way others read wind or scent.

There.

A tremor.

Small. Fractured. Wrong.

He lowered his head, ears tilting, trying to follow the ripple...
but the sensation slipped from him like water through paws.

It came from no direction.

It came from every direction.

It came from too close.

The ache pulsed again.

Fenrael inhaled deeply. Not a breath for scent —Life Guardians did not rely on scent the way wolves of other Realms did —but for resonance. Earth resonances were steady, deep, anchoring. Life resonances were warm, gentle waves of renewal.

This was neither.

It felt like an echo of a heartbeat that did not exist.

A shadow of memory without memory.

A cry made of silence.

He straightened slowly.

The ache vanished.

His fur settled.

The flowers stopped blooming under his paws.

Fenrael exhaled through his nose in a long, low breath. The sound was barely audible, more a rumble of earth beneath stone, but it carried meaning: unease without fear, sorrow without cause.

He began walking again.

The edge of Sylathen Grove unfolded ahead of him, where Life's soft light met the deeper emerald stillness of Thornwild Expanse. Giant stone arches rose like the ribs of ancient creatures long turned to earth. Moss glowed faintly along root-pillars. The ground hummed gently with Earth's grounded pulse.

Fenrael had crossed this boundary countless times.

Today, Thornwild felt different.

The soil seemed to hold its breath.

The faint tremor -lines of distant Realmic emotion trembled in patterns that were not Thornwild's own.

Earth's quiet was too quiet.

Fenrael stepped into the Expanse.

The hum beneath his paws deepened. Earth recognised him —Life's highest Guardian, gentle thread between Realms —and offered its usual welcome: slow warmth rising from roots and stone.

But underneath that warmth... There was pressure.

Not external.

Internal.

A weight beneath the surface.

Fenrael froze mid-step, fur bristling just enough to lift the leaflines along his shoulders. His eyes sharpened, staring at a cluster of boulders half-wrapped in thick vine.

There was nothing there.

And yet —

The ache pulsed again.

Stronger this time.

Fenrael staggered —not physically, but emotionally, the way one flinches at a sound that hits an old scar. His tail lowered, body tensing to evaluate threat or memory.

Life energy surged in response, vines along his limbs coiling protectively. The Earth beneath him released a slow tremor —as if Thornwild itself sensed his disturbance and was trying to ground him.

Fenrael's breath came out in a shiver of light.

This was no enemy.

No corruption.
No creature he knew.
It was something else.
Something broken.
Something too close to him.
Something that hurt to sense.
He took one slow step forward.
The ache vanished again.

Fenrael lifted his head high, golden eyes scanning the still world between Life and Earth. No danger. No movement. No presence.

Only absence.

An absence that pressed on him harder than any threat ever had.

He let out a low, almost inaudible sound —half growl, half lament. A sound that even the wind in Aelurien Veil would not have recognised, for Fenrael's sorrow was not physical. It was the echo of something missing from the world.

And he did not know that its name was Fenrax .

A soft rustle came from behind him.

Fenrael turned, muscles relaxing at once.

The underbrush parted, and bioluminescent petals drifted like falling embers of spring. A gentle presence padded into the clearing, steps light as mist on leaves.

Sylatheriona, the Bloomcat, emerged.

Her petal-mane unfolded slightly at the sight of him, glowing warm green-gold in greeting.

Fenrael bowed his head deeply —respectful, calm.

The Mythic of Life leaned her forehead lightly to his, and the world brightened around that touch. Flowers bloomed in wider

circles. The tremor of Earth steadied. The ache in Fenrael's chest lessened —but did not leave.

Sylatheriona drew back, her luminous vine-tail brushing his shoulder. Her eyes were soft, questioning —not demanding explanation, only offering presence.

Fenrael turned his gaze toward the Thornwild horizon.

He did not understand the ache.

He did not know its origin.

But he knew it mattered.

He lifted his head, posture tall and steady again.

The Bloomcat watched him closely, her petals drooping in a nuance of quiet concern.

Fenrael gave her a slow, steady nod —Earth's equivalent of I will find the truth.

And without another sound, he stepped deeper into Thornwild Expanse.

Behind him, petals drifted softly onto the path he left behind, fading into soil within seconds.

Ahead, Earth's great stillness waited.

Fenrael would keep searching.

Not because Life required it.

Not because Thornwild trembled.

But because something in the Realms had cried out —

A cry shaped like a wolf

who was not whole,

who was not born of Life,

and who should not exist at all.

Fenrael did not know his Echo's name.

Not yet.

But he felt the wound in him.

And that wound had finally begun to bleed.

CHAPTER 19 — Echo on the Edge of Shadow

Earth Realm → Shadow Boundary

The forest ran out of colours before it ran out of trees.

Greens faded first, then browns, until everything ahead thinned toward grey — not the soft grey of mist, but the colour of something that had forgotten what light was supposed to do with it.

Fenrael walked toward that greyness in silence.

Behind him, the life-rich groves of the Life Realm of Sylathen had already been left far back; the soil here was thinner, the roots tangled and hesitant, as if Earth itself were considering whether it wanted to continue.

He did not hurry.

He rarely did.

But the ache under his ribs pushed him forward.

He had felt it before — briefly, like a distant bruise — while crossing the Thornwild boundary. Now it pressed harder, sharper, as though the wound beneath reality were closer to the surface.

He crested a low rise of stone.

The world ended.

It did not end on a cliff or a chasm.

It ended in a line.

Before him, the ground stopped being ground and became something else — a thin, quivering layer of dark, reflective matter that wasn't quite Shadow and wasn't quite Earth. Trees on his side grew twisted but recognisable. On the far side, silhouettes stretched wrong, angles bending inward, as if the forest were being pulled toward a centre it couldn't reach.

The boundary to Noctyra.

Fenrael halted, paws on soil, nose almost touching the thin place.

The ache in his chest flared.

He lowered his head, eyes narrowing, and let his senses extend — not forward, not outward, but sideways, along the emotional currents that flowed beneath and between all Realms.

There.

A presence.

Small.

Fractured.

Terrified.

It felt like a wolf's signature, but broken into pieces and stitched back together in the wrong order. The resonance shuddered, trying to be whole and failing with every pulse.

It should not exist.

Fenrael's breath shivered in his chest. A low, voiceless sound rolled through him — not a growl, not a whine, something heavier, more like a stone sinking into deep water.

Familiar.

That was the worst part.

Beneath the fear and fracture, beneath the wrongness, something in that Echo resonated along the same lines as his own soul.

Like hearing his reflection cry.

He stepped closer.

The thin place trembled.

Shadow tried to curl toward his paws, reaching, tasting, testing the edges of his Life -anchored presence. The ground beneath him protested with a faint, grinding sound, as if Earth itself were warning him not to push further.

Fenrael leaned in until his nose was almost against the boundary.

On the other side, nothing moved.

But he felt it.

The fractured Echo curled in on itself deeper in Noctyra's bleed, not yet strong enough to manifest, not yet stable enough to stand. It recoiled from every reflective surface, every attempt the Realm made to show it what it was.

His own heart clenched.

He could not see it.

He could not reach it.

He could only feel its fear.

The boundary flexed.

A thin crack of cold brushed along his whiskers — the edge of Shadow's refusal. This was not his Realm. This was not his domain. The laws Phoenix had set held firm; Life could not step into Shadow unbound.

Fenrael withdrew one paw from the very edge.

He could force it.

He knew he could.

But the cost —

Roots shifted uneasily beneath the surface. Trees behind him rustled without wind. A faint, tremoring protest ran through Thornwild and Sylathen both, warning him what would happen if he tried to break the balance for one Echo.

He did not move forward again.

Instead, he closed his eyes.

For a long, still moment, he simply stood there, letting his own calm press against the boundary without crossing it — not as intrusion, but as a quiet presence.

I know you are there.

I cannot reach you.

I will not tear the world apart trying.

The message wasn't words. It was shape, feeling, weight.

On the far side, the fractured resonance shivered. It did not answer. It didn't know how. But its panic dimmed a fraction, enough for the currents around it to settle from a wild thrash into a trembling, uneven rhythm.

Fenrael exhaled slowly.

The ache beneath his ribs did not ease.

He opened his eyes and stepped back from the thin place.

The boundary steadied.

The trees behind him relaxed.

The forest breathed again.

He turned away, head low, carrying a new sorrow with him — one with no name, no face, only the shape of a wolf that should not exist and yet somehow felt like a missing piece of himself.

Far below the surface of Myrrhmar Abyss, water shifted.

Leviathan uncoiled slightly from his resting spiral, one massive eye opening to the dark.

He felt it not as a picture, not as a thought, but as a tremor through the deep emotional currents that linked the Realms: a sharp, thin crack along a line that should have been whole.

Life's grief brushed his domain, and something like Shadow's chill threaded through it.

The great Mythic tasted the distortion in the water.

A warning.

Not for now.

For later.

He wound himself tighter again, tail curling around a distant pillar of stone, marking the fracture in his memory as a point the Realms would eventually have to answer.

In Sylathen Grove, petals fell out of season.

Sylatheriona, resting with her mane dimmed beneath the boughs of a luminescent tree, lifted her head.

A wave of sorrow had brushed the Life currents — not from death, not from decay, but from something incomplete. Something that should have been whole and was not.

Flowers nearest to Fenrael's path wilted and re-bloomed in a slow, aching rhythm, responding to the weight he carried back with him.

The Bloomcat rose to her feet, vines along her flanks tightening.

She did not know what had happened.

She only knew Fenrael's grief, and that it was tied to a place Life could not safely go.

She turned her gaze toward the distant line where Earth and Shadow pressed against each other under Phoenix's laws.

A tremor had begun there.

Sylatheriona marked it quietly in the living map of her mind.

Not for now.

For later.

Fenrael walked on, away from the thin place.

The ache beneath his ribs remained.

He did not know that the Echo he had felt would someday stand before him with his eyes and shape his fate.

He only knew that somewhere, too close to Shadow, something broken had cried like a wolf— and the Realms had heard it.

CHAPTER 20 — The Silent Echo

Noctyra – Shadow Realm

The first sound was breathing.

Not loud.

Not ragged.

Just a thin, trembling breath drawn through a throat not built for calm.

Fenrax crouched in the place where Shadow touched the living world without fully entering it — a boundary that flickered like a torn veil between two realms. Darkness pooled there like water in a cracked basin. It was not true Noctyra, but the space where its reflection bled into the edges of earth and air.

He was half-hidden behind a fallen arch of blackened stone, body pressed low, head twitching at every shift of wind and silence.

A wrongness moved inside him.

Not corruption.

Not hunger.

Something else.

Something he could not name.

His paws trembled against the cold stone.

He did not know why he stayed here.

Or how long he had been here.

Or what had pushed him toward this thin place.

Only that something pulled.

A faint thread.

A quiet direction.

Not a voice, but pressure — like being nudged from the inside.

He growled under his breath, a soft, broken sound.

It changed nothing.

The air around him shifted.

Shadow currents deepened, folding slightly as a presence passed through the reflection layer.

Fenrax froze completely, muscles locking. His fur lifted along the spine in jagged patterns.

Not danger.

Not safety.

Just... watching.

A silhouette flickered at the far edge of the boundary — almost-human, almost-wolf, almost-nothing. Its shape bent inward and outward like it didn't fit the world around it.

It watched him for one heartbeat.

Then vanished.

Fenrax's claws scraped lightly against the ground, instinct begging him to flee, but his body stayed rooted — trapped between fear and that constant, quiet pull behind his thoughts.

The pull that wouldn't let him run far.

He tried to focus.

The world around him was thin, colours drained into greys and muted blues. Sound rolled strangely here, echoing twice — once outside Shadow, once inside it. The boundary shimmered each time he breathed out, as though uncertain whether to let him through or keep him out.

Fenrax leaned over a puddle of dark, still water.

A mistake.

His reflection looked back at him — not steady, not whole.

Its eyes flickered like dim lamps in a storm, gold shifting to sickly ember, then to hollow dark. The shape glitched at the edges, as though pieces of him weren't sure where they belonged.

Something else flickered behind the reflection — a flash of a cavern, faint blue light, shadowed stone — Fenrax leapt back with a snarl, breath stuttering.

He hated reflections.

They showed too much.

Or not enough.

Or things that weren't him.

He squeezed his eyes shut until the reflection-field settled.

He felt it again.

The pull.

A faint warmth brushes the very back of his skull, directing him as gently and inexorably as a hand pushing a feather across a table.

He didn't know why it wanted him to move.

He didn't know where it wanted him to go.

Only that resisting hurt.

Fenrax whimpered softly — a sound no one was close enough to hear.

He wanted to turn away from this thin place.

He wanted to dig into earth and hide.

He wanted to sleep without seeing things in every surface.

He wanted silence.

But the pull continued.

He stepped forward, one clawed paw at a time, ears flat, tail low.

The boundary shimmered around him, reacting to his presence with faint ripples — not recognition, not welcome, just acknowledgement of something fractured passing close.

Somewhere beyond the thin place, far from Shadow's edge, a cluster of living resonances stirred — warm, bright, unfamiliar.

Fenrax paused.

The pull tightened, urging him toward that distant presence.

He turned his head slightly, listening.

Not understanding.

Not knowing.

Just compelled.

His breath trembled again.

Then he moved — slipping into the half-shadow, half-world path that led away from the thin boundary, following a direction he did not choose.

The fractured echo walked, silent and afraid.

And the Realm watched him go.

CHAPTER 21 — A Sixth Shadow in the Light

Solareth - Light Realm

The wind tightened.

Not loudly — just enough for Wendryx to stop mid-step, ears angling forward, breath shifting into a calm, anchoring rhythm. Ryvarr stepped in front of Alina with a sudden, sharp movement, a low, rumbling growl building in his chest.

Luma drifted closer to Alina's shoulder, wings slowing.

“What was that?” she whispered.

The answer came in the form of a shape stumbling out of the mist.

Fenrax emerged as if pushed through a curtain.

His paws scraped the cloudstone, claws dragging. His outline flickered — edges shimmering out of sync with his body, occasionally stuttering before snapping back into place. Dark residue clung to his fur like faint smoke.

He looked like a wolf assembled incorrectly.

One eye burned dim gold.

The other pulsed with a cracked ember-light that flickered unevenly.

His breathing came in broken bursts.

Ryvarr growled louder, flames brightening along his spine.

Wendryx slid in front of him with a controlled step, body angled low in a steadying gesture.

Luma pressed a hand to her mouth.

“Oh... he's so scared...”

Fenrax lowered himself flat to the ground, ears flattened, tail curled tightly beneath him. His entire body trembled.

No aggression.

Only terror.

A shiver ran across his left flank — a brief distortion where ribs and fur glitched half a second out of alignment. Cloudstone beneath him caught part of the shimmer like a broken reflection.

Luma winced.

Wendryx inhaled sharply through his nose — instinctive recognition of a resonance gone wrong.

Ryvarr's fire cracked along his shoulders.

Alina's fingers curled at her side.

“What happened to him...?”

Fenrax lifted his head for the smallest moment — and made the mistake of seeing his reflection in a polished patch of cloudstone.

His body convulsed.

The reflection lagged behind him, distorted, one eye brightening while the other dimmed. A faint cavern silhouette flickered behind his mirrored shape — something blue, something broken.

Fenrax recoiled with a panicked snarl, scrambling back until his paws shook uncontrollably.

“Don't let him see reflections,” Wendryx murmured. “It distresses him.”

Luma nodded quickly.

“Poor boy...”

Ryvarr answered only with a deep, sceptical rumble.

The air brightened.

Solareth's light brushed the clearing — a soft prism shimmer expanding under Fenrax's paws. Not threat. Not welcome. Simply acknowledgement:

Broken truth -pattern detected.

Wendryx dipped his head slightly, reading the Realm's response.

"It's not warning us," he said. "It just... sees him."

Ryvarr's flames sharpened along his spine, ears pinned back.

His eyes never left Fenrax.

Fenrax pressed closer to the stone under him, shrinking.

Luma moved first.

She floated forward slowly, wings dimming from bright gold to steady green. She stopped a safe distance away, small hands held in an open gesture.

"Hey... It's all right," she whispered.

Fenrax stared at her, unable to look away, trembling so hard his outline glitched again.

He didn't understand her words — but he understood softness.

Luma touched her own chest gently.

"We won't hurt you."

Fenrax's head dropped until it touched the ground — a fragile gesture of surrender born entirely from fear.

Wendryx stepped forward, paws silent, breath steady.

"If he follows alone," he said softly, "he will break."

Ryvarr growled low, torn between instinct and duty.

But he did not block Luma again.

Alina knelt slightly, keeping her movements slow.

"We can't leave him."

Wendryx nodded once.

"Yes."

Fenrax lifted his eyes.

They flickered — gold to ember to gold again — but behind the fear was something quieter, something uncertain, something almost hoping.

Luma extended one small hand.

“Come with us,” she murmured.

Fenrax rose unsteadily, legs shaking, edges shivering. He moved behind them, keeping distance, each step cautious, frightened, hesitant.

But... he followed.

The wind thinned as they moved toward the Light Realm boundary.

Solareth’s unseen radiance pulsed once overhead — soft, calm, acknowledging the presence of a sixth shadow among the group.

Not a threat.

Not an omen.

Just a fracture walking beside the light.

CHAPTER 22 — The General of Mirrors

Dreamwave — Mirrorreach

The air sharpened.

Not colder —just thinner, as though something was quietly pulling the edges of the world inward. Wendryx slowed first. His tail lowered, his body angled defensively, breath flattening into a slow, controlled cadence.

Ryvarr bristled, fire flashing along his spine in short, violent pulses.

Fenrax collapsed almost instantly —legs folding, head jerking sideways as if struck by a sound no one else could hear. His outline flickered, fractured, stuttering in and out of the cloudstone path.

Luma grabbed Alina's sleeve.

“Something's wrong. Something's very wrong.”

Alina nodded, voice tight.

“I feel it.”

Wendryx stepped ahead, his stance widening —Water guardian bracing for emotional distortion.

Then the world broke.

It began with a reflection that shouldn't exist.

Cloudstone didn't reflect, not in the Air-Luminance corridor between realms. Yet a thin sheet of silver shimmered across the ground, bending the light into a fractured shape.

A silhouette stood inside that wrong-light.

Tall.

Still.

Perfectly symmetrical.

His body seemed carved out of pale grey stone cracked with faint mirror lines. His eyes were smoked glass —dead, reflective, empty.

He did not move.

He did not breathe.

He did not exist in the physical world.

But the reflection did.

Luma shivered violently.

“That’s... that’s not real. That’s not supposed to be here.”

Wendryx’s voice was a whisper.

“Stay behind me.”

Fenrax whimpered, claws scraping as his body jittered, flickering with every shift of the silhouette’s presence. His fear rolled like static in the air.

Ryvarr growled deep and furious —fire flaring, but with an undercurrent of instinctive dread.

The silhouette turned its head.

But only in the reflection.

A voice drifted across the silver plane.

Flat.

Emotionless.

Soft enough to be mistaken for thought.

Not physical speech.

Illusion -speech.

Vaethyr’s domain.

“This one is fractured.”

Fenrax screamed silently —jaw open, no sound, entire body seizing as his outline distorting violently.

Alina stepped back.

“Wendryx —what is this?”

Wendryx's eyes narrowed.

"A construct. Shadow -born. Reflection-based."

Luma hugged Alina's arm tightly.

"He's looking straight at him..."

The reflection moved again —only the reflection —lifting one long, cracked hand toward Fenrax.

Fenrax collapsed fully, trembling uncontrollably.

Another illusion -voice whispered:

"Fear is the first truth."

The words slid under the skin rather than through the air.

Wendryx bared his teeth.

"Enough."

He slammed his paw into the cloudstone.

A ripple of Water resonance burst outward, cracking the reflective field. The illusion flickered.

The silhouette's head tilted slightly.

"Noted."

Ryvarr lunged.

Not at the reflection —at the space it occupied. Fire erupted from his jaws, a silent arc of flame smearing across the air.

The flame passed straight through.

The silhouette blurred, fragmenting into a thousand mirror shards —none physical —before stitching itself back together in perfect, unnatural symmetry.

Luma gasped.

"He doesn't even react..."

Alina leaned forward, voice tight.

"Can he hurt us?"

Wendryx answered immediately.

"Yes. Not physically. But he can break the mind."

Fenrax convulsed again, as though hearing every word.

The silhouette's eyes brightened slightly —smoke swirling like dark fog trapped behind glass.

Then it spoke one more illusion-phrase:

“The fractured one will lead me to them.”

Ryvarr snarled sharply.

Wendryx blocked him again.

Alina felt her heartbeat spike.

“Who is he talking about —?”

But the reflection dissolved before she finished.

Silver bled downward like melting glass.

The silhouette collapsed into streaks of shadow.

The air returned to normal.

Fenrax lay shivering on the ground, body twitching in small, terrified spasms.

Luma knelt beside him, hands trembling.

“He's... he's gone. Whoever that was... he's gone.”

Wendryx stared at the fading shimmer, breath slow and controlled.

“That was not a creature,” he said quietly.

“That was a General.”

Alina swallowed hard.

“A General of what?”

Wendryx's gaze shifted toward the darkening horizon.

“Shadow.”

Ryvarr growled low, pacing once before planting himself beside Alina protectively.

Fenrax pressed himself into the cloudstone, as small as he could make himself.

The world felt thinner.

And somewhere deep within the Shadow Realm, Vaethyr turned away from his mirror -plane — silent, analytical, and certain, the fractured Echo would lead him exactly where he wished.

CHAPTER 23 — Night Without Doors

Dreamwave

Alina did not remember lying down.

One moment, the group were resting against the curve of a wind-carved ledge, Luma dimmed to a soft candle-glow on her shoulder, Wendryx coiled nearby, Ryvarr a warm line of silent fire along her other side, Fenrax a shivering fragment at the edge of the circle.

Next, the world went quiet.

Not peaceful.

Quiet.

As if sound itself had taken a breath and forgotten to let it go.

She opened her eyes into someone else's room.

Her old bedroom on Earth.

Soft grey walls.

Desk by the window.

Books stacked too high in uneven piles.

The cracked poster she never quite managed to tape properly back up.

Night pressed against the glass outside.

No stars.

No streetlight glow.

Only thick blackness.

And the door —

The door wasn't there.

The wall where it should have been was simply smooth, unbroken paint.

Alina sat up slowly, heart already racing.

“Luma?” she whispered.

Silence answered.

The air felt wrong — too clean, too flat.

She swung her legs off the bed and stood.

The room remained perfectly still.

No floorboard creak.

No distant house sounds.

No hum of anything alive.

Only her breathing.

She moved to where the door should be and pressed her hand to the wall.

Cold.

Solid.

Wrong.

Her fingertips tingled, as if the wall were somehow listening.

Far away — or very close, depending on how Dreamwave chose to fold — Baku felt the tremor.

The boar’s massive shape stood at the centre of a dim, shifting corridor, heavy hooves planted on a floor that wasn’t made of anything real. Dreamwave currents flowed around him, brushing his sides, trying to reroute, trying to carry something sharp and cold deeper toward Alina’s path.

He lowered his head.

The currents struck his presence like water against rock and split, forced to find smaller lines, narrower channels.

Behind him, further in the layered dark, a small ember of Phoenixfire brightened. The juvenile Phoenix could not yet move fully through the Dreamwave, but light gathered around that core, thickening, pressing outward.

Not enough to fight.

Enough to glow.

Enough to be a centre, she could not be pulled away from entirely.

Back in the bedroom, Alina turned away from the vanished door.

Her schoolbag sat by the desk.

Her favourite mug lay on the table, half-full of some cold, forgotten drink.

It all looked right.

It didn't feel right.

“Luma?” she tried again, louder.

This time, the sound struck the air and bent —not echoing back, but folding sideways, as if someone had quietly caught it and turned it.

Illusion barriers.

She took a step.

The window blinked.

Just once.

For a heartbeat, there was no frame, no glass. Only a blank white plane where outside should be. Then it snapped back — curtain, sill, dark.

Her breath shortened.

This is not real.

Wendryx's training held: recognise, name, anchor.

“This isn't real,” she said aloud, to herself, to the silence.

The wall behind her changed texture very slightly.

As though the lie in the room disliked being called what it was.

Elsewhere along the same not-place, the companions were scattered.

Luma hovered in a corridor that seemed to stretch forever in both directions, every few metres broken by a door that led to nothing at all. She checked one —inside was a slice of sky, and nothing beneath it. Another —just a chair, facing a wall.

Her glow flickered.

“I hate this,” she muttered.

Every time she tried to fly up, the ceiling reappeared just above her head. Every time she tried to look too far down the corridor, the far distance blurred like smeared paint.

“Wendryx?” she called.

Her voice carried a short way, then slowed —as though something thick pressed against it.

Wrong. Wrong, wrong.

She closed her eyes for a moment, focusing on the way the air felt around her. Dreamwave currents usually flowed like rivers — confusing, yes, but natural.

These currents bent back on themselves, forming loops, traps, soft dead-ends.

Someone was rearranging them.

Wendryx knew that someone’s name.

He stood in a wide, empty plaza made of cracked mirror tiles, each one reflecting a different version of the sky overhead. None matched the soft, grey-blue he knew from Air.

None matched any sky he’d ever seen.

He could not see Alina, Luma, Ryvarr, or Fenrax —but he could feel them. Threads of emotional resonance stretching away into different angles of the same space, separated by something that did not exist in the waking world.

Illusion barriers.

His breath slowed, deepened, became a rhythm.

He did not waste effort attacking the reflections. He simply stood, watching the cracks, waiting for the moment they aligned enough to give him a path.

The air would shift.

It always did.

Vaethyr was subtle, but not perfect.

Fenrax lay on his side in a narrow corridor of black glass.

The walls rose high on either side, reflecting him over and over —crooked, delayed, wrong. In some, his eyes didn't match. In others, parts of him failed to appear at all.

Every reflection was out of step with the others.

His body shook.

He tried to squeeze his eyes shut, but even with his vision blocked, he could feel the reflections straining, tugging at pieces of him as though the glass wanted to pull him apart.

A faint, icy pattern slid into his mind.

Not words.

Pressure.

Something vast and distant and hungry reached along whatever invisible thread linked his fractured Echo to the Shadow that had forged him. A command formed —not as language, but as direction:

closer,

closer,

closer —

He didn't know to what.

Only that he should move the group toward it.

Pain raked through his skull.

Fenrax clawed at the floor, desperate to tear the pressure out. No sound came, but his body spasmed with each pulse.

The glass around him brightened, mirroring the spike of distress.

In one reflection —just one —another shape appeared behind him, tall and still and wrong.

He refused to look at it.

The pressure sharpened.

He curled into himself, shaking.

Above all of it, like a spider watching vibrations on threads of web, Vaethyr observed.

He did not stand in the Dreamwave as others did. He didn't need to. His mind inhabited the reflective planes, the places where images tried to decide whether to be real.

From there, he adjusted:

- a shift of corridor angle here
 - a delay on an echo there
 - a door removed, a window sealed, a path bent back on itself
- Alina's room tightened.

The corridor around Luma lengthened.

The mirror plaza beneath Wendryx's paws fractured further.

Vaethyr's presence was neither heat nor cold.

It was a calculation.

In Alina's bedroom, the bed disappeared.

She turned and found only empty carpet where it had been.

Her heart kicked.

She moved quickly to the desk —her notebook still lying open, a half-scribbled equation on the page, pen resting where she'd left it.

When she touched the pen, the ink changed.

Her writing blurred, lines sliding into each other. Letters rearranged themselves into nonsense symbols, then into shapes she almost recognised —flashes of Flameheart Lake, Luma’s laughing face, Edmund’s study —before dissolving back into black lines.

“No,” she whispered, fingers tightening. “These are mine.”

The shapes stuttered, trying to obey two truths at once.

Something pressed against the back of her skull, a cold prickle that felt like someone trying to open a door directly into her memory.

She clenched her jaw.

“You don’t get to rewrite this.”

The pressure increased, then —

Stopped.

Not by her strength.

By something else.

A great weight shifted somewhere outside the room, like a mountain putting its foot down.

Baku.

The boar slammed through a strand of twisted current, scattering it into harmless mist.

Dreamwave didn’t like straight lines; it hated bruises in its flow. Vaethyr’s inserted structures had edges that did not belong here.

Baku pushed them aside.

He could not evict Vaethyr completely —the General’s roots lay in Shadow, not in the

Dreamwave itself —but he could blunt, divert, dull.

He focused on all the threads that converged on the girl and broke as many as he could reach.

The juvenile Phoenix, further back, flared brighter. Light throbbed outward from that ember, wrapping Alina's corridor, thickening the space immediately around her thoughts.

Not enough to banish the assault.

Enough to make the cuts shallower.

In Edmund's corridor —parallel, distant, dangerously close to becoming a second entry point —the air rippled.

Edmund stood in a long, stone-lined hallway shaped from old memories of university basements and museum archives. Shelves lined the walls, filled with indistinct objects his dreaming mind had not bothered to fully render.

Something tugged at those shelves.

Tried to pull them out of alignment.

Tried to open gaps for Shadow.

A soft shape landed on the rail of the stairs ahead of him.

An owl, pale and faintly luminous, head tilted, eyes like twin lanterns in the dark.

Aurynel.

The guardian's wings stretched once. Light, gentle but unwavering, ran along the corridor, straightening the walls, sealing hairline cracks before they became doors.

Edmund frowned faintly, confused, then let out a breath he hadn't realised he was holding.

He had no idea what had just tried to reach him.

He also had no idea he'd been protected.

The owl blinked once, then vanished into the dark, leaving the corridor stable once more.

Luma's corridor changed.

The doors that had lined it began to close —not slamming, not violently, just... vanishing, one by one, sinking into the walls until there was nothing left but a single, straight path.

She swallowed.

“I really hate this.”

She tried to fly forward.

The air thickened like syrup, slowing her wings. The further she tried to go, the heavier it became, until she could barely keep herself airborne.

A flicker of silver appeared on the floor beneath her —thin, almost delicate.

A mirror line.

Her glow faltered.

“Vaethyr,” she whispered.

The name warped as it left her mouth, as if the corridor itself disliked hearing it.

The mirror line widened —

Then cracked.

A wave of invisible force rippled through the corridor, shattering the thin reflective layer before it could fully form. The ground returned to its previous, dull, non-reflective surface.

Luma almost laughed in relief.

“Whoever did that —thank you.”

She didn’t know it was Baku.

She only knew someone else was pushing back.

In the mirror plaza, Wendryx felt the same shock.

Cracks in the tiles shifted, their angles changing. For a moment, he saw through one —just a glimpse —into another space: Alina’s bedroom. She stood with her hand on a featureless wall, jaw set, eyes narrowed.

Not broken.

Not lost.

Anchored.

He took a breath, set his paw down hard on that particular crack, and pushed his emotional rhythm outward.

Calm.

Clarity.

Here. Now.

The illusion shifted.

The plaza folded in on itself like paper, edges curling away from him, resistance weakening under dual pressure: Baku stabilising the currents, Phoenix thickening the light around Alina, Wendryx anchoring the group.

Vaethyr felt it.

From his vantage point inside the reflective mesh, he watched:

- one corridor resisting him
- one boar deforming his paths
- one ember of Phoenixfire he could not reach

Cold calculation turned.

He withdrew from the larger weave and narrowed his attention to the weakest point:

Fenrax.

The black -glass corridor buckled.

Fenrax convulsed as the distant Shadow pressure shifted from a general direction to focused command. It didn't arrive as words. It arrived as a single, overwhelming compulsion that tore through his Echo like a hook:

move them.

draw them nearer.

serve the hunger.

He did not know who wanted this.

He did not know why.

He only knew that disobeying hurt.

His claws scored the floor as he tried to deny it. The conflicting pulls —toward the group, toward safety, toward light, and toward something dark and far away —ripped at him until his vision blurred.

At the far end of the corridor, a shape formed in the glass.

Vaethyr's silhouette, all sharp lines and empty eyes, watched without blinking.

Fenrax curled tighter, shaking.

He would not remember these details when he woke.

Only the ache.

Only the need to make the pain stop.

Only the sense that moving closer to something —he didn't know what —might ease it.

Vaethyr's presence retreated, satisfied with the planted compulsion.

No one seeing Fenrax later would know where it had come from.

The illusions frayed.

Bit by bit, the false room around Alina thinned —edges blurring, objects losing their outlines.

Her desk dissolved first, then the shelves, then the bed -that-wasn't -there.

Only the blank wall remained for a moment.

Then that, too, fell away.

The Dreamwave collapsed back into its usual, strange openness — currents moving in natural, if confusing, patterns. A faint warmth pulsed at her centre, like a small, stubborn sun.

Phoenix.

She let out a breath and shut her eyes.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

No answer came.

No voice. Just the steady, quiet presence of that ember.

Nearby, threads of familiar resonance brightened as the others drifted back toward her:

Luma’s quick flicker, Wendryx’s calm, Ryvarr’s heat, Fenrax’s broken, trembling line.

They would all wake with memories that didn’t quite make sense.

They would all feel tired, uneasy, watched.

None of them would know the name of the one who had turned their dreams into cages.

Not yet.

Night in the Dreamwave had passed — and left no doors behind.

CHAPTER 24 — The Net Tightens

Air Realm - Aelurien Veil

They woke like people dragged up from deep water.

Alina jolted upright first, heart hammering, the taste of the Dreamwave still in her mouth — that strange, flat nothing where her bedroom had been, the wall with no door, the feeling of being watched from behind glass.

Wind.

Real wind.

Cold and thin and moving.

Luma lay tucked against her shoulder, curled into a tight ball of light, wings folded. Ryvarr pressed close on Alina's other side, a warm line of fire and muscle, chest rising and falling in sharp, fast breaths. Wendryx stood a short distance away, perfectly still, eyes half-closed, measuring the air as if it might shift wrong at any moment.

Fenrax lay farther off, sprawled awkwardly on the cloudstone, outline flickering in small, involuntary glitches.

The Dreamwave was gone.

The unease remained.

Luma stirred with a tiny sound and sat up, rubbing her face with both hands.

"I had the worst night," she muttered.

Alina let out a shaky breath.

"Me too."

Luma drifted closer, wings trembling with the effort of staying brave.

"You're small, but stubborn," she murmured, nudging Alina's

shoulder with a tiny hand.

“Like a little potato.”

For a heartbeat, the fear loosened—just enough for Alina to breathe again.

Wendryx opened his eyes fully.

“We were targeted,” he said. “Subtly. Not to break us — to measure us.”

Ryvarr snarled under his breath, low and sharp.

Fenrax flinched at the sound, guilt pulsing off him in thin, jagged waves.

Luma pushed herself to her feet, wings flickering back to full brightness.

“Well, they can go measure themselves in a volcano,” she said. “I’m still here. We’re all still here. So they lost.”

She tried to sound brave.

The tremor in her voice betrayed her.

Wendryx glanced once at Fenrax, then at the empty sky.

“For now,” he murmured.

They began to move again.

Edmund sat at the dining table with Alina’s sketchbook open in front of him. He’d been turning the same page for hours, eyes following the faint graphite lines she had drawn without ever seeing the picture. The house was too still. Every silence felt like a question that had no answer.

He reached for the mug beside him and froze when his hand shook. He hadn’t noticed the tremor earlier. He pressed both palms flat against the table to steady his breathing.

He couldn’t explain the absence — not to himself, not to the police, not to the neighbours who kept calling. Something in his

chest refused the simple version of events. It wasn't denial. It was recognition without information.

A memory surfaced without permission: Alina, half-asleep in a blanket at the end of the sofa, telling him her dreams didn't belong to her anymore. He'd made her tea and changed the subject, pretending the right words would keep fear at bay.

He lowered his head and whispered to no one, voice paper-thin.

"I'm listening now. I'm here. I will not pretend again."

A rush of helplessness tightened his throat.

"If you can hear me — if any part of you is safe — just... hold on. Please hold on."

The quiet deepened. Several pages lifted slightly in a breeze that wasn't there. Edmund slid the sketchbook closed and placed his hand over it, as if the weight of that small gesture could keep her memory from thinning.

"I'm not letting go," he whispered.

Aelurien Veil stretched out around them in layered bands of cloudstone and open air, currents looping in elegant arcs above and below. Zephyra's patterns kept the Realm stable, turning chaos into flight-paths.

Today, something moved against those paths.

The winds ahead twisted, not wildly, but with unnatural precision — tight curls of pressure forming and unforming, like knots tied in invisible string.

Wendryx slowed.

His scaled shoulders shifted, plates along his spine tightening into a defensive ridge. His breath shortened, then steadied into a deliberate, controlled rhythm.

Ryvarr's fire flared in a narrow, bright line from skull to tail, hackles rising.

Fenrax's paws slipped; he dropped into a crouch, tremors running through his unstable outline.

Luma floated a little ahead of the group, mid-sentence about how she was definitely not letting anything mess with her dreams again.

She stopped.

"...Why did the wind just do that?"

Alina looked up.

The currents had stopped feeling like sky.

They felt like something else was pushing them.

A faint reflective silhouette appeared on a tilted shard of cloudstone to their left.

Just a flicker.

Human-shaped.

Thin.

Perfectly still.

It did not step toward them.

It did not raise a hand.

It did nothing at all.

It only watched.

Alina felt a cold line trace down her spine.

"Did you see that —?"

The silhouette vanished.

Gone as if it had never been.

Wendryx's voice dropped low.

"Do not trust anything you see in the next few moments."

Ryvarr's growl deepened.

Fenrax whimpered, dragging himself backwards from the reflective angle of the stone as if it burned him.

The wind tightened further.

The hum started softly.

At first, it could have been the normal song of air sliding past stone. But it sharpened with each heartbeat, layering on itself until it felt like a single note played from every direction at once.

Above them.

Below.

Behind.

Wendryx shifted outward, placing himself between the group and the open air.

“Close,” he said. “Now.”

Luma darted back toward Alina’s shoulder, wings beating faster.

“I really don’t like this...”

The hum climbed another, finer pitch.

Fenrax’s breathing broke apart.

His body jittered in sharp, unnatural flinches, as if something unseen were plucking at him from inside. One golden eye and one cracked ember eye snapped toward Luma —full of terror, not hunger.

Guilt clawed off him like smoke.

Luma froze mid-flight.

“Fen...?”

He flinched away from her look, his entire body recoiling, as though he blamed himself for something he didn’t understand and couldn’t stop.

Wendryx’s gaze hardened.

“Something is using him as a tether.”

The hum snapped into focus.

A mirror -slit opened beside Luma.

No warning.

No build-up.

One moment, the air was clear; the next, a vertical cut of silver hung there — a strip of impossible reflection, showing angles that didn't exist, catching Luma's image from a dozen directions at once.

She had time for one word.

“Wendryx —!”

A hand shot out of the slit.

Grey.

Cracked.

Glass -smooth.

Fingers like stone and mirror closed around her entire tiny body, snatching her out of the air with chilling precision.

She kicked, wings sparking, light flaring desperately.

“Let GO!”

Wendryx lunged.

His scales flared with cold light, and he hit the slit with full force, claws raking across the reflective plane —

His strike passed through.

The mirror -slice folded in on itself like a page being snapped shut, dragging Luma with it.

Her light streaked across the air and vanished.

Ryvarr slammed into the closing fissure, jaws spilling fire over nothing. Flames tore through the empty sky.

The slit sealed.

Silence.

Luma's voice cut off as if someone had simply stopped the world from hearing her.

Alina stumbled forward, reaching for where Luma had been.
"LUMA!"

There was no trace.

No glimmer.

No echo.

The air might as well have swallowed her whole.

Wendryx froze where he'd struck, talons gouging deep furrows in the cloudstone. His chest rose and fell fast, controlled only by sheer will. Rage rolled off him, tempered by discipline.

Ryvarr roared.

The sound tore out of him like ripping metal, fire erupting around his jaws. He spun once, hunting for a scent, a trail, anything he could burn.

There was nothing.

Fenrax crumpled.

His legs folded, and he hit the ground, outline glitching violently. Guilt and pain poured out of him in jagged waves. One eye squeezed shut; the other stared at the space where Luma had been, wide, horrified.

He knew.

He didn't know how he knew, or what he'd done, but he knew this was tied to the pull inside him, the pressure he couldn't fight, the command that hurt when he resisted.

Alina turned on him, eyes wide, voice cracking.

"Fenrax — what happened? Did you —?"

Wendryx's voice cut across hers.

"Alina."

Sharp. Steady. Unyielding.

“Stay close.”

His eyes swept the sky.

“That was not him. That was a General.”

High above them, on another angled shard of cloudstone, a faint silhouette reappeared.

The same reflective shape as before.

Still.

Thin.

Human -lean.

It did not speak.

It did not move.

It simply opened itself like a mirror and read.

Fear pouring out of Alina.

Rage burning through Ryvarr.

Controlled fury and calculation in Wendryx.

Broken guilt tearing Fenrax apart.

The silhouette’s edges wavered slightly, as if what it saw interested it.

Then it vanished again.

No sound.

No light.

Only the aftertaste of being judged by something that had never needed words.

A different pressure rolled in.

Colder.

Broader.

It did not arrive like a presence. It arrived like the awareness that somewhere far away, something had turned its attention toward them and found the distance irrelevant.

Wulfric.

No voice.

No phrase.

No clear thought.

Just a sense of hunger testing the lines Vaethyr had woven: the Dreamwave assault, the mirror field, the capture, the fractured Echo tethered to the group.

Wendryx's scales bristled, plates along his spine lifting into a defensive crest. His wings rose, partially unfurled, making himself larger between Alina and the empty sky.

"Move," he said. "Now. Away from any reflective surface."

Alina backed up, throat tight, eyes still on where Luma had vanished.

"We can't just leave her!"

Ryvarr moved to her side, body pressed close, fire still burning low and furious along his back.

Fenrax dragged himself up, legs shaking, outline flickering. Every step he took looked like it hurt.

He followed anyway.

Wendryx did not look back at the space where the mirror-slit had been.

"If we stay," he said, "he will take more."

They retreated into the thicker bands of wind and cloud — not a plan, not a solution, just motion away from the trap that had snapped shut under their feet.

Behind them, the air smoothed out, currents returning to Zephyra's natural patterns, as if nothing had happened at all.

But the net had closed.

Somewhere in Shadow's reach, a General held a struggling spark of Pixie-light in a constructed cage of mirrors and thought.

Somewhere deeper still, a corrupted will acknowledged what the General had learned — and smiled without needing a face.

Luma was gone.

And the Realms had just lost their smallest, brightest voice.

CHAPTER 25 — The Little Light, Nearly Broken

Shadow Pocket

The world came back in pieces.

Cold first.

Then darkness.

Then the sound of something distant and wet — like a slow drip echoing against stone.

Luma opened her eyes and found nothing.

No sky.

No colour.

Only a hollow darkness, shaped like a cavern but too smooth, too intentional, to be real.

A Shadow pocket.

She exhaled, and the sound fell flat, smothered by the thick pressure of the place.

“...Hello?”

Her voice trembled but carried.

No answer.

Only the drip.

She pushed herself up, wings flickering uncertainly. Her glow dimmed the walls just enough to see the edges: slick stone, veined with faint reflective cracks. The ground beneath her paws felt wrong — not physical, just a surface meant to mimic one.

Her breath hitched.

“Wendryx? Alina?”

A tiny spark of hope flared.

“...Ryvart?”

Nothing.

The silence pressed harder.
Above her, on the curved wall of the pocket, a reflection developed.
Not a girl.
Not a guardian.
Not the true wall.
A silhouette — faint, tall, thin — standing as if watching her through the wrong side of a mirror.
No movement.
No face.
Only a slight turn of the head, as though reading her fear like text on a page.
Luma's wings folded tight against her back.
She took one shaky step backwards.
"I'm not scared," she whispered.
A lie.
A hopeful one.
The silhouette lingered longer than before, studying her with cold curiosity — not hunting, not corrupting.
Understanding.
The air changed.
It thickened, like liquid shadow pulling itself into shape.
A second presence seeped into the pocket — colder, sharper, wrong in a way that scraped against the bones of the place. Not a voice, not a mind, just pressure twisting inward.
Vaethyr.
Luma cried out as a hook of illusion yanked through her chest, pulling her out of the air.
Light sputtered around her wings.
"N-no—!"

She hit the reflective ground and skidded, tiny hands clawing at the smooth surface. Her glow dimmed sharply.

The silhouette above did not move.

But the pocket responded — its walls rippling like disturbed water.

Cracks of mirror -light opened and closed around her, small, sharp, rhythmic.

Vaethyr's cruelty.

Testing.

Measuring.

Tightening.

Luma curled into herself, trembling.

“Stop —please stop —!”

The air pulsed again.

Another hook drove through the pocket — not aimed at her, but through her, as though she were the conduit for a deeper hunger reaching outward.

Wulfric.

Luma gasped, clutching her chest.

A cold longing — not her own — slid like a thread through the pocket and out toward the Realms.

A pull.

A claiming.

A distant, fractured desire.

She choked on a sob.

“Stop —stop—please —”

The pressure grew, twisting like a hand around her heart.

Far beyond the Shadow pocket, Fenrax jolted awake.

Pain exploded through his Echo, tearing him inward. His outline flickered in violent spasms.

Guilt rolled off him in jagged waves — not rational guilt, but instinctive, tethered guilt.

He saw nothing of the pocket.

He only felt the pull.

The hunger.

The command that hurt to resist.

And somewhere inside the pain:

Luma.

He whimpered, body collapsing beneath him.

Back in the pocket, the walls brightened.

Not with shadow.

Not with corruption.

With curiosity.

The reflective silhouette stepped forward — not physically, but as an adjustment of the pocket's perspective.

It stood almost above her now.

The faintest tilt of its head.

As though reading:

Fear.

Defiance.

Loneliness.

Hope.

Pain.

Love.

Her desires.

Her terrors.

Her small, shining heart.

The Shadow Queen did not try to corrupt her.

She simply observed.

Luma's wings dimmed further.

She sagged against the cold surface, blinking through exhaustion.

Her mind drifted — halfway between shock and surrender.

Warmth suddenly bloomed under her cheek.

Not in the pocket.

Not here.

Somewhere else.

A memory she had never lived.

A cavern lit by a soft, trembling glow.

Feathered wings brushing gently across the backs of frightened creatures.

A warm hum — soothing, steady, full of quiet courage.

Tiny motes of gold drifting from lantern-like wings, settling like comfort over trembling cubs.

Light in Shadow.

Seliara.

Luma didn't know her name.

She didn't know why the image came.

She didn't know why it felt like the softest promise she had ever been given.

But she felt it.

A presence that whispered without words:

It's dark, but you're not alone.

You matter.

Hold on.

Her glow brightened — one small spark against the crushing darkness.

The pocket reacted.

It shuddered once, walls tightening in irritation. The silhouette paused — as though the tiny surge of hope surprised it.

Vaethyr's influence pressed harder.
Shadow tightened.
Glass-lines cracked closer.
Light fluttered.
Luma bit down on a scream.
“Wendryx... Alina... anyone... please...”
Only silence answered.
The little pixie curled in on herself, wings trembling.
But even as the pressure closed around her, even as Vaethyr's
cruelty constricted the pocket like an iron cage, even as Wulfric's
distant hunger tested the lines, one thing remained:
That warm image in the dark.
A lantern-wing glowing gently in a Shadow cavern.
Comforting the frightened.
Holding back the dark.
Luma clung to it with everything she had left.
A spark.
A memory -that-wasn't.
A tiny anchor of hope.
She didn't know the creature's name.
She didn't know she would one day meet her.
She didn't know they would light each other's paths.
But she knew this:
She was not broken yet.
The pocket tightened.
Luma held on.

CHAPTER 26 — Wendryx's Fury

Air Realm — Aelurien Veil (deeper currents)

The wind cut sharply across the stone.

It wasn't the playful rush of Air currents she'd grown used to — this was thinner, harsher, like the Realm itself had tightened around them. Alina ran to keep up, lungs burning, every breath tasting like the last seconds before a storm.

Wendryx wasn't waiting.

He moved ahead with a precision she'd never seen before: each step exact, each wing-shift controlled. His scales lay tight along his body, the plates along his spine lifting into a rigid, defensive crest. His wings were half-furled, not for flight, but to make his silhouette larger, more imposing, more ready to meet whatever came.

It wasn't wild rage.

It was something worse.

Fury anchored in discipline.

Ryvarr stayed close to Alina's side, body radiating heat. Fire shimmered in a thin, constant line down his back; each low, rumbling growl sent little bursts of heat into the cold air.

Fenrax stumbled behind them, his outline flickering with every step. Sometimes his paw landed where it should; sometimes it blurred, snapping into place half a heartbeat late. One eye glowed gold. The other pulsed with cracked ember-light, spasming in time with some pain he couldn't articulate.

Alina's chest hurt.

"Wendryx... where are we going?" she called, breath ragged.

He didn't answer.

Didn't slow.

His voice, when it finally came, was low, steady, and heavy enough to weigh down the air.

“Somewhere we are harder to reach. We cannot let him strike like that again.”

The way he said it made the wind flinch.

Ryvarr’s fire sharpened, burning hotter.

Fenrax flinched so hard he tripped, skidding, then scrambled back up, guilt rolling off him in jagged waves.

Alina stopped running.

Her legs shook. Her throat tightened.

“No,” she said, voice cracking. “We need to talk. Now.”

The wind dropped for a heartbeat.

Wendryx halted.

Slowly, he turned his head back toward her.

His eyes were calm.

Too calm.

Something inside her cracked.

“Wendryx —Luma is gone,” she said. “She’s alone somewhere in —” The word caught in her throat. “—wherever they took her. We can’t just keep running without knowing what we’re dealing with.”

The wind tore at her words but couldn’t quite steal them.

Wendryx turned fully to face her.

“Alina.”

Her name sounded softer in his voice, but the fury didn’t leave his eyes.

“We will find her. But if we stop in the open, we make it easy for him.”

“Him?” she demanded.

“The thing that took her?”

Wendryx's jaw tensed.

"A General," he said. "Shadow's construct. Mirror and thought and cruelty."

Ryvarr's chest rumbled, fire licking close to his teeth.

Fenrax folded in on himself and dropped to his knees, outline glitching in frantic, frightened bursts.

Alina stared between them, then fixed on Fenrax.

"What is happening to him?" she whispered. "Why does he react like that every time —?"

She didn't finish.

A fresh shudder tore through Fenrax's body. His form fractured for a moment, edges breaking into jagged lines before snapping back together. One of his paws scraped blindly at the stone as though trying to pull something out of himself by force.

Wendryx stepped closer to him.

"He is tethered," the dragon said quietly.

Fenrax jerked as if struck.

The glitch in his Echo rippled outward, a thin shock of pain that even Alina could feel as a cold twist inside her ribs.

"Tethered to what?" she asked.

Wendryx's gaze didn't leave Fenrax.

"To Shadow," he said. "To the General. Possibly to the one who commands him."

Fenrax whimpered, pressing his forehead against the stone.

Alina's stomach lurched.

"Oh... Fen..."

Wendryx lowered his head until his eyes were level with Fenrax's.

"You feel the pull," he said. "When he moves, you feel it. When he hunts, you know. You cannot stop it."

Fenrax shivered, eyes flickering gold –ember –gold, guilt and terror warring in his expression.

He pressed himself harder against the ground, as if he could sink into it and disappear.

Ryvarr moved a step closer, heat radiating like a shield, but his posture was rigid, uncertain whether to drive the Echo away or protect the group from him.

“Is he dangerous?” Alina whispered.

“Yes,” Wendryx said, without delay.

Fenrax let out a broken, voiceless sound, body folding even tighter.

“But,” Wendryx added, “he is not malicious.”

Ryvarr’s growl deepened in protest.

Wendryx flicked his gaze toward the Fire guardian.

“He is used,” Wendryx continued, voice still low, still controlled. “Like a broken mirror. He reflects what is forced through him. The choice does not belong to him.”

Fenrax trembled.

Alina stepped forward, fighting the urge to reach out and touch him.

“Fenrax,” she said softly, “you didn’t do it on purpose.”

His shoulders shook harder.

He didn’t lift his head.

He didn’t stop shaking.

The guilt pouring off him was almost a physical thing.

Wendryx shifted slightly, placing his body between them.

“Not yet,” he murmured. “He cannot hold comfort now.”

Alina blinked, confused.

“Why not?”

Wendryx watched Fenrax for a long, quiet moment.

“Because guilt is the only thing leaning him away from the pull,” he said. “If we take it from him too early, Shadow will feel the gap.”

Alina’s breath caught in her throat.

She swallowed hard, then nodded, though it hurt.

Fenrax pressed his claws into the stone until they scraped.

Ryvarr looked away —not from contempt, but because the sight of such naked fear and shame made his fire boil uselessly.

Wendryx finally lifted his head, scanning the sky.

“When we stop, he feels us,” Wendryx said. “When we panic, he feels us. When Fenrax loses his balance, he feels us most. We must reduce his chances.”

Alina whispered, “We’re not safe anywhere, are we?”

Wendryx’s scales shifted, the ridge along his spine rising and falling like a slow breath.

“We will be,” he said.

“How?” she asked.

He turned his eyes on her.

“Because I am angry.”

The words weren’t loud, but the Realm reacted anyway.

The wind stuttered.

Even Ryvarr stilled.

Alina had never heard him sound like that — calm, measured, and terrifying. A dragon’s fury without fire, held inside iron discipline.

“I will not lose her,” Wendryx said.

It felt like a promise carved into stone.

Ryvarr’s flame pulsed in agreement.

Fenrax sobbed through another glitch, unable to stop.

Alina wiped her eyes on the back of her hand.

“Then... where do we go?” she asked.

Wendryx looked toward the pale band on the horizon where Aelurien’s high currents thinned — the direction that led, eventually, to places no Mirror General could easily twist.

“Shadow hunts us through reflection,” he said. “We must go where reflected lies break.”

Alina steadied herself.

“Who can do that?”

“Solaryn,” Wendryx replied.

She sucked in a breath.

“The Light Realm?”

“Yes.”

He spoke it as a decision more than a destination. “We pass through Embera’s veil. Quickly.

No hesitation. No stopping. The Realm will let us through if we carry no active Shadow corruption.”

Ryvarr’s fire dimmed, his stance tightening. Light was not his favourite place.

Fenrax shuddered violently — Embera’s purity would scrape at every crooked piece of his Echo.

Alina looked between them.

“Can he make it?” she whispered, eyes flicking to Fenrax.

Wendryx did not lie.

“It will hurt,” he said. “But staying here will hurt more.”

He turned, wings spreading slightly.

“Stay close,” he told them. “Do not look into anything that reflects. Not stone. Not ice. Not even each other’s eyes for too long. He will look back if he can.”

Alina swallowed and moved to his side.

Ryvarr shifted to her other flank, fire banked but ready.

Fenrax dragged himself upright, legs trembling, outline flickering — but he followed.

Wendryx faced the wind.

“Move,” he said.

And the dragon led them on, fury burning cold and bright beneath his calm as they began the path toward Embera’s veil — and the Light that wouldn’t bend.

CHAPTER 27 — The Light That Won't Bend

Air Realm → Embera Veil → Solareth Threshold

The sky thinned as they ran.

Currents that had once curled playfully around them began to straighten, drawn into long, pale bands that all flowed toward the same point on the horizon. Aelurien's layered grace narrowed into a single path.

Wendryx slowed.

"We're close," he said.

Alina staggered to a halt beside him, chest burning, legs trembling. Ryvarr hovered at her flank, hot and silent, fire dimmed to a low wash of heat. Fenrax hung further back, outline frayed, as if the air itself were pulling pieces off him.

"Close to what?" Alina managed.

Wendryx's gaze stayed on the horizon.

"Embera's veil."

The word felt heavier than the wind.

Ryvarr's fire flattened along his spine, not in fear, but in instinctive reverence. Fenrax made a small, broken sound and shrank further into himself, flickering viciously at the edges.

Alina swallowed.

"Is that... safe?"

"For us," Wendryx said. "Not for Shadow."

He turned his head slightly toward Fenrax.

"Or for anything carrying too much of it."

Fenrax jolted. His paws scraped against the cloudstone, body convulsing in a half-glitch, half-flinch. He couldn't form words — he had none — but the terror rolling off him was clear.

Alina's heart lurched.

“Will it... will it hurt him?”

“Yes,” Wendryx answered, without softening it. “But if we do not pass through, Vaethyr hunts us in every reflection. Here, we are easy to catch.”

He let the silence stand.

Then:

“Embera burns what should not be here. It will not purify him.” His eyes narrowed. “But it will make it harder for Shadow to hold him.”

Fenrax shivered, claws digging into the stone.

Ryvarr moved closer to Alina, pressing heat along her side. She put a hand on his shoulder and tried to steady her breathing.

“Tell me what to do,” she said quietly.

Wendryx drew in a slow breath, then exhaled.

“When we cross,” he said, “you do not stop. You do not look around. You do not reach for anything. Not a stone, not a flame, not a thought. You feel the warmth. You let it pass through. You keep moving.”

Alina nodded once.

“And if I don’t?”

He held her gaze.

“Then Embera will see too much.”

She didn’t ask what that meant.

She didn’t want to know.

The path narrowed until it felt like they were walking along the spine of the sky itself. The air grew warmer — not from Ryvarr, not from exertion, but from something ahead, deep and steady.

A glow rose on the horizon, low and gold, like the edge of a sun that never fully broke the surface.

Embera.

The Realm did not appear all at once.

It bled into Aelurien's edge, turning colour into ember-hazed silhouettes and softening hard angles into curves that looked almost molten. The cloudstone underfoot became darker, shot through with faint, glowing veins.

Alina's skin prickled.

The warmth sank into her chest, not like heat from a fire, but like standing close to a memory she didn't know she had. It held no words, no images — only a sense of something vast and watchful.

She caught herself imagining Edmund writing frantic notes about the colour of the winds, and the thought broke something small and private inside her.

"The veil," Wendryx murmured.

Ahead of them, reality thinned.

A vertical ripple of gold hung in the air, its edges trembling with contained heat. Beyond it, nothing could be seen clearly — only brightness, a suggestion of flame in slow motion.

Ryvarr slowed instinctively, lowering his head.

Fenrax nearly collapsed.

The closer they got, the more his outline stuttered. Light from the veil caught in his mismatched eyes, making the cracks in the ember-eye burn more brightly. His paws slipped once, twice, as if the ground didn't quite know where to put him.

Alina's hand tightened on Ryvarr's shoulder.

"Can he do this?" she whispered.

"He must," Wendryx replied. "We all must. Luma needs a place where they cannot reach her through mirrors. Light bends differently there."

He stepped toward the veil.

The air before it shimmered, testing. Wendryx's scaled paws touched the boundary, and gold light crawled up his legs, pausing, examining. For a breath, he shone from within — then the veil parted around him like warm mist.

He passed through.

Ryvarr went next, following without hesitation.

The veil rushed at him, tasting his fire with a surge of heat. Flames roared briefly along his back, then dimmed, tamed into a steady, clean glow. The boundary let him through.

Alina stood alone with Fenrax.

He trembled so hard his legs barely held him.

She took his shoulder gently.

“Come on,” she whispered. “We’re going together.”

He flinched at her touch — not away from her, but from the pain roaring through his Echo.

They stepped forward.

The veil hit them both.

For Alina, it was warmth.

Not pleasant. Not comfortable. Just pure. It poured through her chest, searching, weighing.

She felt small under it — not judged exactly, but seen too clearly.

For a sickening heartbeat, she was sure it would turn her away.

Then it passed.

The heat rolled off her, leaving a lingering ache, and she stumbled through into something brighter.

For Fenrax, it was agony.

The moment his paw touched the veil, the light tore through him like a blade through smoke.

His fractured outline blew apart into pieces.

Not visibly — his body stayed where it was — but inside, parts of his Echo jerked out of alignment, dragged toward the light, toward something cleaner, while the Shadow -tether yanked him the other way.

He screamed without sound.

Every glitch he'd ever held in his body fired at once — his edges shivered, eyes flickering gold-ember -gold in rapid, painful bursts.

The veil did not purify him.

It did not fix him.

It only burned away some of the fog around the chain in his chest.

For one heartbeat, the pull was clear.

He saw nothing of Wulfric.

Nothing of Vaethyr.

No faces. No names.

Only a direction.

If he followed it, it led straight to a point in the Realms where Alina's presence burned like vulnerable light.

Follow the pull → she dies.

The knowledge hit like a spike.

Then the veil let him go.

He stumbled through, legs buckling, crashing down on the other side.

Light took the sky.

Not like fire. Not like Embera.

Solareth did not burn.

It clarified.

The world sharpened into pale plains of stone that caught and bent light into prisms. Colours fractured and recombined in slow, shifting patterns. There were no shadows in the usual sense — only softer places where light curled back into itself.

Alina blinked hard.

The air felt... clean. Too clean. Every breath tasted like something had scrubbed her thoughts on the way in.

Ryvarr paced uneasily, fire along his back dim but tense, as if the Realm's radiance pressed on his flames like a hand.

Wendryx stood still, letting the light run over his scales. It traced each ridge, each plate, each scar, making him look carved from moving glass.

Fenrax lay where he'd fallen.

Light struck him and bent, refusing to reflect properly. His outline cast no clear echo on the ground. Where the others produced soft halos of colour, he produced only a blurred smudge.

He shook, exhausted.

The violence of the veil had passed, but its memory still tore through him.

Alina knelt beside him cautiously.

"Fenrax?"

He didn't move at first.

Then, slowly, he lifted his head.

His eyes were still mismatched. Still wrong.

But behind the fear, something new sat there:

A single, sharp shard of understanding.

He turned his gaze toward her, and for a heartbeat, for the first time, his look wasn't just terror and confusion.

It was choice.

He lowered his head again, pressing his face to the stone in a gesture that was part apology, part vow.

He had no words.

He didn't need them.

Wendryx watched silently.

"The tether hurt him," Alina said, voice shaking. "Embera... did something."

"It burned some of the Shadow's confusion away," Wendryx answered. "It did not change who controls the chain. But it showed him where it leads."

Alina's chest tightened.

"To us."

Wendryx didn't contradict her.

"He now knows more than he did," the dragon said quietly. "Enough to choose, when the time comes."

Ryvarr huffed, sending a little burst of steam into the bright air.

Fenrax trembled, but his body curled closer to them, not away.

They moved only a short distance into Solareth.

Wendryx chose a shallow hollow between two prism -ridges, where the light pooled softly instead of glaring. Here, reflections were diffused into coloured mist; nothing formed a clear mirror.

"Vaethyr cannot twist this place easily," Wendryx said. "Light here does not obey him. We rest."

Alina sank down, exhaustion finally crashing through the adrenaline.

"Can we really rest?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "For a while."

Ryvarr lay against her, warm and solid.

Fenrax dragged himself to the edge of the hollow and curled there, still shaking, but calmer, the worst of the agony dulled by Solaryn's steady glow.

The Light Realm didn't comfort.

It clarified.

Under its gaze, there was no room for lies — even the ones they told themselves.

Alina stared up at the sky, watching the slow spiral of colour.

“Do you think she's still alive?” she asked.

Wendryx didn't answer for a long time.

Then:

“Yes.”

She shut her eyes.

“Good,” she whispered.

The word trembled, but it was enough to let her body release its last reserves. Her thoughts drifted, sliding along the bright edges of Solareth's presence, then slipping past them into something softer, stranger.

Dreamwave felt different from here.

Less fog.

More clarity.

The currents that reached for her were thinner, but cleaner, like threads of light stretching from this Realm toward somewhere deeper.

Somewhere, a juvenile Phoenix burned, restless and frightened, watching the Realms through the patterns of their dreams.

Alina's breathing slowed.

Ryvarr's heat steadied her.

Wendryx settled into a half-watch, eyes half-closed, senses open.

Fenrax twitched once in his sleep, the chain in his chest tugging faintly, but the Light around them made the pull feel... further away.

Just for now.

Solareth held them in a clear, unbending gaze.

And as Alina slipped fully into Dreamwave's embrace, something else stirred far above the clouds — a small, unsteady flame, gathering itself for a single act that would change everything.

CHAPTER 28 — Tears of Fire

Dreamwave → Air Realm

Sleep took her like falling through warm light.

Not abruptly — gently, but with purpose, as though the Dreamwave had reached through Solareth's clarity to pull her toward something waiting beyond the veil of thought.

Alina drifted.

Colours bled away.

Sound softened.

The world thinned into a pale golden haze.

And then —

Warmth.

A warmth she knew without knowing how.

Not fire.

Not sunlight.

Not any Realm she had visited.

A warmth like the first breath she had ever taken.

The Dreamwave formed around her in slow spirals of gold and white, wrapping her in a cocoon of soft, drifting light. This Dreamwave was not the jagged nightmare Vaethyr had twisted before — this was cleaner, clearer, steadier.

Something small shimmered ahead of her.

A spark.

A trembling ember.

A little bird made of light and flame, its outline flickering like a candle caught between breaths. Downy feathers of gold. Wings barely formed. Eyes huge, frightened, and unbearably earnest.

The juvenile Phoenix.

He stood on a plane of soft white glow, talons barely touching the Dreamwave surface. His wings quivered, not with fear, but with something heavier — a desperate determination that seemed far too large for his tiny form.

He looked at her.

Alina's breath caught.

“Phoenix...?”

He didn't speak.

He couldn't.

But the Dreamwave carried his intent — soft, fragile, burning from the inside out.

He had felt her grief.

He had felt Luma's terror.

He had felt Fenrax's fracture, the tether coiling around him.

He had felt everything.

And he had decided.

The little Phoenix spread his trembling wings.

Light gathered at their tips — not blazing, not explosive, but pure, as though every ounce of hope he possessed collected into a single drop within his chest.

His body arched.

And one tear formed.

A bead of molten gold.

Too heavy for such a small creature to carry.

Too bright for his half-formed wings to bear.

The tear trembled —

and fell.

It crossed the Dreamwave like a falling star.

Alina reached for it, but the world curved the light away from her hand, steering it downward, downward, downward — toward a point far below.

A cry pierced the Dreamwave.

Luma.

Her voice rang like a cracked bell — weak, thin, almost lost. It came from somewhere deep beneath the layers of the dream, wrapped in pain and cold shadow.

The tear found her.

It struck the Shadow pocket not as fire, but as light folding inward, dissolving the reflection-chains Vaethyr had coiled around her. The pocket screamed in silence as the Phoenixfire sank into its surface, burning illusion without burning Luma.

Luma gasped.

Her tiny body arched.

Her wings flared.

Her glow expanded, trembling violently —

Then steadied.

Her eyes snapped open.

The tear dissolved into her chest, not healing everything, not erasing fear, but burning away the worst of the nightmare scars Vaethyr had left.

Breath returned to her in shaking bursts.

“I... I’m okay...” she whispered into the dark, though she didn’t know who she was speaking to.

Her light flickered — but it lived.

The tear did not fade completely.

Part of it broke off mid-fall, drifting sideways through the Dreamwave, pulled toward another tether—thin, jagged, full of pain.

Fenrax.

In the waking world, where he lay curled in Solareth's hollow, his eyes snapped open as the Dreamwave thread touched him. His body convulsed, as if light were trying to fit inside spaces Shadow had already claimed.

He didn't scream.

He couldn't.

But every line of him shook.

The tear didn't heal him.

It didn't purify him.

It didn't break the Shadow imprint Wulfric buried in his Echo.

It simply cut through the fog for one heartbeat.

And for that heartbeat — he saw it.

The chain in his chest.

The pull leading outward.

The direction it pointed.

The endpoint it sought.

If he followed it —

If he obeyed —

The line ended in Alina.

Her death.

Her light collapsing.

Broken.

The clarity seared him.

Fenrax choked on a silent sob, digging his claws into the stone.

No.

No.

No.

When the heartbeat passed, the clarity vanished —
swallowed again by Shadow confusion and fear.

But the seed remained.

A single thought:

I must not follow the pull.

The beginning of his future sacrifice.

The first spark of his right to reforging.

Across the Realms, others felt the shock.

Deep in Myrrhmar Abyss, Leviathan uncoiled, water
trembling around him as the sea itself had gasped.

He recognised Phoenixfire — ancient, impossible to ignore.
Light shivered down the trench walls as the great Mythic marked
the pulse.

Not now.

But soon.

In Sylathen Grove, Sylatheriona lifted her head sharply.

Life currents rippled through every root, petals shaking free
from branches in waves. The Bloomcat braced herself, sensing the
same shape Leviathan felt in water:

Something approaching.

Something inevitable.

Something that would test Life itself.

She steadied the currents.

Prepared for the coming strain.

In the Dreamwave, the juvenile Phoenix staggered.

The tear had cost him.

His wings folded, trembling, and his small body collapsed in
a shimmer of feathers and gold.

He breathed fast, frightened, exhausted, but unbroken.

Alina reached for him.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

He looked up at her — eyes huge, shimmering, innocent and ancient at once.

He couldn’t speak.

But she felt it.

Protect them.

Hold together.

I will come again.

The Dreamwave dimmed.

Light folded.

The little Phoenix vanished into a soft flare of gold.

Alina woke with tears on her cheeks.

Ryvarr lay pressed against her hip, hot and shaking with worry.

Wendryx watched her closely, calm but alert.

Fenrax curled nearby, trembling but... different.

Softer at the edges.

Unsure.

Thinking.

She sat up sharply.

“Luma,” she whispered.

Wendryx nodded once, a tight, controlled motion.

“She lives,” he said.

“How do you —?”

“I felt Phoenixfire,” Wendryx murmured. “All Water guardians feel it. Even the Realms shifted.”

Alina let out a shaky breath — half a sob, half a laugh.

“She’s alive,” she whispered.

Fenrax whined — not in fear this time, but in relief so raw it fractured him again for a moment.

Ryvarr pressed closer, flame purring like a heartbeat.

Wendryx stood.

“Rest is over,” he said.

“We move at first light.”

Alina looked at him.

“Where?”

He turned toward the horizon — toward a path none of them were ready for.

“Toward the place Luma fell.”

His scales glowed faintly with reflected Solareth light.

“Toward Shadow.”

CHAPTER 29 — One Heartbeat of Courage

Solareth — Alina’s Dream

Sleep came unevenly.

Alina drifted in and out of it, never quite sinking, never fully waking. Solareth lay quiet around her—soft stone, dim light, the steady rhythm of breath and heartbeat—but the calm would not hold. Something deeper tugged at her, pulling her beneath the surface of rest and into the familiar, shifting weight of the Dreamwave.

The world changed without warning.

She stood within a cavern that breathed with warmth and ember-light, though she knew—some distant part of her knew—that she was not truly there. Fire-glow traced the stone walls, and sparks drifted upward like slow, patient stars.

It felt real.

Too real.

Warm currents rose from cracks in the ground, lifting flecks of glowing dust into the air. The heat did not burn. It wrapped around her instead, steady and sheltering, as though the fire itself had decided to be kind.

“Luma?”

The name left her mouth before she realised she was speaking.

And there she was.

Perched on a smooth outcrop beside her, wings dim with exhaustion but glowing faintly at the edges, exactly as Alina remembered her—exactly as she feared she might never see her again. Luma blinked slowly, fighting sleep, her small form radiating a fragile warmth.

Alina's chest tightened.

"You're here," she whispered, even as doubt pressed in. "I thought I'd lost you."

Luma tilted her head, expression soft, uncertain. She did not answer at once. Instead, she reached out, her touch light against Alina's arm—warm, familiar, achingly gentle.

"I don't remember everything," Luma said at last, her voice quieter than Alina had ever heard it. "Just... the warmth."

The cavern seemed to hush around them.

Alina swallowed, emotion rising sharp and sudden. She wanted to pull Luma closer, to hold her there and refuse the waking world, but something held her still. This was not a place meant to be grasped.

Not burning.

Not twisting itself into malice.

Just... quiet.

For the first time since everything had begun to unravel, the world was not clawing at her.

Alina drew a slow breath. Even here, the air tasted faintly of ash and memory. She felt older in this place—smaller, too—balanced between what had been and what had been taken.

Luma shifted nearer, her wing brushing Alina's shoulder.

"They're scared," Luma murmured, gaze drifting to shapes Alina could not fully see. "Like we were."

"Yes," Alina said softly. "I know."

The words surprised her. They felt older than the moment, older than the dream itself.

She hesitated, then spoke again, unsure whether she was speaking to Luma, to herself, or to something listening beneath the Dreamwave.

“Do you want a story?”

Luma’s expression brightened, just a little.

Alina’s voice felt small as she began. “My grandfather used to tell me stories,” she said. “On nights when the dark felt heavier than I could manage.”

The cavern flickered, and for a moment the firelight felt like a hearth instead of a warning.

“He once told me about a tiny field mouse,” she continued. “One that was scared of everything—raindrops, falling leaves, shadows that moved when it blinked... even the sound of its own heartbeat.”

Luma smiled faintly, and the ache in Alina’s chest deepened.

“One night, the mouse wandered too far from home,” Alina said. “And the garden it knew suddenly felt enormous. Every sound sharper. Every shadow deeper.”

The warmth around them pulsed gently, as if listening.

“But then a firefly landed on the mouse’s head,” she whispered, voice catching, “and told him, ‘If you can’t be brave for a whole night... then be brave for one heartbeat.’”

The words settled into the air, heavy with memory.

“So the mouse tried,” Alina said. “One heartbeat. Then another. And another.”

She lifted her gaze, seeing not the cavern now but Edmund’s face, lined with age and kindness, his voice steady even when hers had shaken.

“And when the mouse finally looked up,” she finished softly, “morning had already found him.”

The fire dimmed.

Luma leaned against her, wings soft and still. For a moment—just a moment—Alina allowed herself to rest her cheek against Luma’s hair, breathing her in, memorising the feeling.

“I’ll find you,” Alina whispered. She did not know if Luma heard her. She needed to say it anyway.

The light faded. The cavern dissolved into warmth and shadow.

When Alina woke, Solareth lay quiet around her once more.

Her heart ached. Her eyes burned.

But beneath it all, something steady remained.

For one quiet heartbeat, courage felt possible.

CHAPTER 30 — Where the Wind Splits

Solareth Threshold → Air Realm Outer Currents

Solareth faded behind them like a memory reluctantly letting go.

The light did not vanish; it simply loosened its hold, allowing shadows to return in soft gradients rather than the sharp, prism-wrapped forms they had carried inside. Wendryx moved first through the boundary, each step precise. Ryvarr followed in a tight arc, unwilling to leave Alina's side. Fenrax lingered, twitching at the edge, unsure whether the Realm would allow him to leave.

It did.

Barely.

He slipped through with a small glitch, the light clinging to him like static before finally releasing him back to the wind.

Alina turned once, giving the faint horizon of Solareth a final look. She whispered under her breath:

“Thank you.”

No answer came — only a soft deepening of colour that felt like a blessing.

Then the wind took them.

The Air Realm was not as they left it.

Or rather, the currents were not.

Where Aelurien's pathways normally curled in smooth arcs, stable and predictable, the flows now ran broken and jagged, splitting like torn cloth. Thin streams of wind bent toward distant points and snapped back, creating eddies sharp enough to sting their skin.

Ryvarr growled low when one gust cut across his flank, heat flaring automatically in response.

Wendryx slowed.

“This is wrong,” he said quietly.

Alina nodded.

“Because Luma isn’t here.”

It wasn’t sentiment.

It was truth.

Luma was the wind’s favourite.

She spoke to the Realm more naturally than any of them, carried by currents as though Aelurien itself was guiding her flight. Wherever she flew, the wind brightened.

Without her?

Aelurien was grieving.

The currents twisted into two unnatural patterns — one pulling east, thin and high; one dragging west, low and heavy. Neither was natural.

Wendryx’s eyes tracked both directions.

“Vaethyr has split the wind,” he murmured. “He’s trying to funnel us.”

Alina tensed.

“To where?”

Ryvarr let out a burst of heat, frustrated and afraid.

Wendryx touched the ground, claws lightly brushing the cloudstone.

“Toward where Luma was taken.”

Fenrax convulsed.

The tether yanked at him like a hook in his chest. His claws slipped, scraping hard across the stone. He staggered sideways into the distorted wind and almost fell.

Alina moved fast.

She grabbed his shoulder — not to hold him still, but to anchor him where he stood.

“Fenrax —hey—look at me.”

He didn’t look.

He couldn’t.

Pain spiked down his spine, flickering his outline into broken shards.

But— he didn’t move toward the pull.

For the first time, he moved against it.

His body trembled violently with the effort.

Alina tightened her grip.

“You don’t have to go where it tells you.”

Fenrax shivered — a small, trembling nod of his head touching her hand.

Wendryx watched, silent.

Not approving.

Not disapproving.

Measuring.

He turned away and looked at the two diverging currents again.

“East is the safer route,” he said.

“It leads toward Zephyra’s high arcs. Harder for Vaethyr to reach us.”

Ryvarr moved toward that path instantly.

Wendryx didn’t follow him.

“West is where the pull leads.”

Alina felt her stomach drop.

“That’s where Luma is?”

“Yes.”

Fenrax made a small, strangled sound — part guilt, part fear.
Ryvarr snarled and paced back toward the westward split,
flame heating the air around him.

Alina looked between the two paths.

“Wendryx... which do we take?”

Wendryx breathed in slow, steady, deep.

When he spoke, it was not gentle.

“We choose the dangerous path.”

Ryvarr let out a sharp burst of flame in agreement.

Fenrax froze — the choice hitting him as hard as the pull
itself.

“But we do not walk it blindly,” Wendryx continued.

“Aelurien is wounded. Vaethyr is using the currents against us.
We move carefully.”

He looked at Alina.

“Stay between Ryvarr and me at all times.”

She swallowed and nodded.

“And Fenrax?” she asked quietly.

Wendryx looked at the Echo wolf for a long moment.

Then:

“He stays behind you. Never ahead.”

Fenrax’s head dropped.

A nod of obedience — and shame.

“No,” Alina said softly. “Not shame. Just stay close.”

He flickered in response, not understanding fully, but trying.

Wendryx turned back to the western currents.

“The wind splits here,” he said.

“Vaethyr wants us lost.”

Ryvarr stepped forward, fire brightening.

“So we choose the path he thinks we won’t survive.”

He lowered his wings, bracing against the jagged wind.

“Follow me.”

The first step into the broken current cut across them like a blade.

Wendryx held firm, pushing the worst of it aside with controlled sweeps of his wings. Ryvarr burned the sharpest gusts into harmless warm drafts. Alina ducked between them, heart pounding.

Fenrax shook violently, but he stayed behind her — and for the first time, when the tether pulled, he pulled back.

A tiny miracle.

A painful one.

But a miracle nonetheless.

The wind moaned around them, splitting into thinner lines, as if the Realm itself resisted the path they chose.

Ahead, the horizon darkened in a strange, unnatural way.

Not shadow.

Not storm.

A place where the wind itself seemed to be hiding something.

Wendryx narrowed his eyes.

“That is where the trap waits.”

Alina’s pulse quickened.

“And where will we find the way into Shadow?” she asked.

“No,” Wendryx said.

“We will find the place where Air breaks.”

He stepped forward.

“And where the General waits.”

CHAPTER 31 — The Path That Should Not

Exist

Aelurien Veil → Broken Wind Corridor (unmapped)

The wind did not want them here.

Alina could feel it with every step — the way the currents trembled, the way the air curled back on itself in tight, unnatural spirals, the way the cloudstone underfoot hummed with a low-pressure warning. Aelurien was a Realm of openness, of height and movement and distance.

But here?

Here, the sky felt narrow.

Compressed.

Like a lung half-filled and refusing to inhale.

Ryvarr snarled at the air, heat rolling across his body in uneven waves. His fire didn't like the pressure. It crawled up his spine and guttered in angry pulses.

Wendryx's wings were half-spread to break the sharper gusts, each sweep measured, each footstep deliberate. The ridges of his scales glinted under warped light.

"Stay tight," he said.

"Do not separate."

Fenrax shook violently at the back of the group, outline flickering with every pull of the tether. His paws scraped the stone in frantic little movements — not to run away, but to stay where he was.

The direction of the pull had changed.

It no longer tugged toward one place.

It tugged toward a line — a corridor of broken currents stretching ahead like a wound in the sky.

Wendryx stopped.

Ryvarr halted beside him.

Alina nearly ran into them before catching herself.

“What is it?” she whispered.

Wendryx didn’t answer immediately.

He scanned the horizon, nostrils flaring.

Then he spoke.

“This path is not natural.”

Ryvarr growled, low and sharp.

Fenrax whimpered.

Alina followed Wendryx’s gaze — and finally saw what he did.

The corridor wasn’t a path of cloudstone.

It wasn’t even a crack.

It was... an absence.

A long, dark channel through the air where wind refused to flow, like a river whose centre had been carved out by a blade.

A place the air itself avoided.

A place made.

“Vaethyr,” Alina whispered.

Wendryx nodded once.

“This is how he will reach us.”

They moved forward carefully.

Each step felt like entering deeper water — slow resistance, a subtle pressure on their chests, a faint ringing in their ears that pulsed with every shift of the broken currents. The stone here was darker, smoother, etched with faint silver lines that had never belonged to Air Realm.

Ryvarr’s fire dimmed to a faint glow.

He didn’t like it.

He kept glancing over his shoulder, tail flicking in restless arcs.

Wendryx's steps became even more controlled.

"Do not touch the ground with your hands," he warned.
"Only your feet."

Alina blinked.

"Why?"

"Because stone like this remembers," he said.

She didn't ask what it remembered.

She didn't want to.

Fenrax stretched his neck toward the stone, sniffing it uncertainly — and recoiled sharply, outline glitching as though struck.

Wendryx snapped his gaze to him.

"Do not —"

But Fenrax already understood.

He backed away, ears flattened, trembling.

They walked deeper.

The corridor narrowed until it felt like a throat closing around them. Air currents bent in harsh little snaps, like something unseen kept trying to fold the wind into a smaller space and failing.

Alina rubbed her arms against a sudden chill.

"Wendryx... is this still Air Realm?"

"Yes."

He didn't soften it.

"But its shape is being bent."

Ryvarr's heat flickered.

Fenrax pressed closer to Alina, not for comfort — for survival.

Then, abruptly —

The wind died.

Completely.

The silence hit like a wall.

Wendryx stopped so suddenly that Alina bumped into him.

“Don’t move,” he said.

Ryvarr froze mid-step.

Fenrax’s body flickered and then stilled.

The air ahead of them shifted.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

A faint shimmer formed along the broken corridor’s edge — a thin, reflective curve rising like a warped mirror. It stretched wider, catching stray light and distorting it into shapes that did not match the world around them.

Alina’s pulse hammered.

“Is that —?”

“Yes,” Wendryx said.

“Vaethyr.”

The reflective curve didn’t open like last time.

It didn’t slice into the world.

It simply watched.

A presence pressed through it without sound, without shape, without movement — like the cold attention of someone looking through glass.

And then —

The reflection bent.

Not toward them.

Around them.

Light warped.

Their own reflections appeared across the distorted surface — wrong, stretched, eyes too bright, mouths moving slightly too late. Alina’s breath hitched as she watched her distorted mirror-self turn its head before she did.

Ryvarr’s reflection snarled when he was still.

Wendryx’s reflection moved its wings in slow, predatory pulses.

Fenrax’s reflection —

Was not him.

It flickered between Fenrax and something else.

A wolf-shaped with too many edges.

Eyes like fractured mirrors.

A body built of cracks.

A presence he didn’t recognise — and feared instinctively.

Fenrax collapsed, keening silently, claws scraping against the stone.

Alina stepped toward him.

Wendryx blocked her with one wing.

“Do not step closer,” he said.

“This corridor is trying to separate us.”

“What do we do?” she whispered.

“Stay together,” Wendryx said.

“And walk.”

Ryvarr pressed in on her right.

Fenrax dragged himself up on her left, shaking so hard his outline flickered with every breath.

They advanced in a tight formation.

The reflections followed.

Twisted.

Delayed.

Hungry.

Watching.

Halfway through the corridor, the reflective curve brightened — dim silver rising into pale gold, as if absorbing the last remnants of Solareth's light that clung to them.

It hesitated.

Alina saw it.

Wendryx saw it.

Ryvarr's fire flared at that hesitation.

Fenrax —

Fenrax felt something else.

A surge of confusion through the tether.

A flick of hesitation.

A moment of disconnection — as if the Shadow pulling him lost track for a heartbeat.

The tear of Phoenixfire still clung faintly to him.

And Vaethyr felt it.

The corridor reacted immediately.

The reflective curve snapped into a razor-thin slit.

Alina gasped.

“Move!”

Wendryx lunged forward, shoving her and Ryvarr ahead as the air warped. Fenrax threw himself sideways — not away from her, but toward her — positioning his body between her and the forming slit.

The corridor screamed.

Wind tore.

Stone cracked.

Reflections shattered.

Vaethyr struck.

The General did not appear fully.

Not here.

Not yet.

But his presence cut along the edge of the corridor like a blade made of mirrored intent.

Alina felt it like cold running across her skin.

Ryvarr roared, fire flaring high enough to crack the sharp air pressure.

Fenrax convulsed, tether jerking him violently.

Wendryx slammed one wing down, creating a barrier of pressure that knocked the reflective slit off-course.

The slice of mirror-light scraped across the stone instead of flesh, showering them with sparks of broken illusion.

Wendryx hissed.

“RUN!”

Alina sprinted, Ryvarr at her side, Fenrax stumbling with every step, glitching from the pain of resisting the pull.

Another slit formed.

Then another.

Then a third.

Vaethyr was not aiming to kill.

He was funnelling them.

Driving them.

Forcing them toward a destination.

The corridor narrowed further, stone cracking under the pressure.

Alina looked ahead and gasped.

The path ended — not in stone, not in sky, but in a falling emptiness, a drop into swirling dark beneath the Realm.

Ryvarr snarled in panic.

Fenrax's body shivered violently.
Wendryx caught up to them, placing himself at the front
again.

He stared down into the emptiness.

And Alina realised —

This wasn't an end.

It was an entry point.

A tear in Aelurien's underside.

A crack between Realms.

A place where wind dropped straight into Shadow's reach.

Wendryx exhaled hard.

"This," he said quietly, "is where he wants us."

Ryvarr growled.

Fenrax collapsed, trembling uncontrollably.

Alina bit her lip hard.

"And... what do we do now?"

Wendryx closed his eyes once, steadying himself.

Then he opened them.

"We choose whether to jump."

CHAPTER 32 — The Descent of Four

Aelurien Veil — Fractured Drop -Point (Air → Shadow boundary)

The world thinned around them.

Wind peeled away from the corridor walls in harsh, jagged strips. The stone beneath their feet vibrated with the strain of holding two Realms apart. Alina felt the air grow heavier — not with heat, but with pressure, as if the sky itself were trying to push them back.

Wendryx stood at the edge of the drop, wings tight around his shoulders, eyes locked on the swirling dark below.

Ryvarr's fire rippled in rigid lines along his spine.

Fenrax trembled beside Alina, outline glitching with each pulse of the tether.

Alina stared at the drop.

It wasn't a hole.

It was a tear — an opening where Air had been stretched too far, pulled inward, scraped thin by something from the other side.

"Wendryx... can we survive that?" she whispered.

He didn't answer immediately.

Ryvarr growled.

Fenrax pressed against Alina's leg, not for comfort — for certainty. He needed to feel her anchor, or the tether would drag him forward on instinct alone.

Wendryx finally spoke.

"This is a forced boundary," he said.

"Air has been bent to touch Shadow. It should not exist."

Alina swallowed.

"Can we cross?"

Ryvarr's fire flared uneasily.

Fenrax shook harder.

Wendryx turned to her fully.

"Yes."

Alina blinked.

"Just... yes?"

"Yes," he said again.

"But we do not know what is waiting."

Ryvarr snarled, flame bursting from his jaws.

Fenrax whimpered — the pull hurting him more now that they were closer to its source.

Wendryx stepped toward him.

"Fenrax."

The wolf's head jerked up.

"You feel the path," Wendryx said.

"Show it."

Fenrax froze.

Then, after a moment of shaking, he stepped forward and lowered his head.

His chest jerked once — a painful flicker — and a pulse of broken Echo spread out across the stone.

It curved.

Downward.

Into the tear.

Alina felt her stomach twist.

"He's there," she whispered.

"Luma's down there."

"Yes," Wendryx said. "And the General."

Ryvarr snarled louder.

Fenrax collapsed, shaking, but with his head pointed toward the drop — as if he were giving them the direction, even while every part of him feared it.

Alina knelt beside him.

“You’re helping us,” she said softly.

“You’re choosing this.”

Fenrax shivered, but he didn’t pull away.

Wendryx looked at them — all three — and exhaled.

“We go,” he said.

Ryvarr stepped to the edge immediately.

Alina stood, heart pounding.

Her legs shook.

Her hands felt cold.

She looked at Wendryx.

“How?”

He studied the tear.

“We distrust Vaethyr’s shape,” he said. “So we do not enter as prey.”

Ryvarr huffed and stepped forward, tail lifting in defiance.

“We enter together.”

Wendryx continued.

“All four.”

Alina stared.

“Fenrax can’t —”

“He will,” Wendryx said.

“Because he chooses not to follow the chain.”

Fenrax’s body flickered again — the pull was almost unbearable now — but he dragged himself upright and pressed against her side.

Alina’s breath caught.

“Okay,” she whispered.

“But... Wendryx... how do we do it?”

The dragon turned his head slightly, eyes on the swirling dark below.

“We jump,” he said.

“But not into Shadow.”

Alina frowned.

“Then where?”

Wendryx opened his wings.

“We jump into Air.”

Ryvarr snarled — a fierce, ready sound.

Fenrax pressed close, trembling but determined.

And Alina understood.

Shadow wanted them to enter its side.

But Air could still choose to carry them.

If they jumped as one —

If they trusted Aelurien —

If they fell with the wind, not against it —

Air could deliver them to the edge of Noctyra without letting Shadow claim them mid-descent.

Wendryx stretched his wings fully.

“On my count,” he said.

“Stay close. Do not look behind you. Do not reach for the edges. Trust the fall.”

Alina stepped between Ryvarr and Fenrax.

Her heart hammered.

“Wendryx...” she whispered.

He looked at her.

“Yes?”

She swallowed.

“Will we make it?”

His answer was simple.

“We must.”

He stepped off the edge.

Ryvarr leapt after him in a burst of fire.

Alina gripped Fenrax’s shoulder.

He trembled once — then leapt with her.

All four fell —

together.

The wind roared around them.

Not natural wind.

Broken wind.

Angry wind — pushing them sideways, pulling them down, shoving them into paths that spiralled and corkscrewed in ways that defied physics.

Ryvarr’s flames bent backwards.

Wendryx fought the currents with razor -precise wing -beats.

Fenrax twisted in convulsions, the tether screaming inside him.

Alina clung to him with one hand and reached for Ryvarr with the other.

The world tore past them in sharp streaks of grey and violet. The wind screamed across her ears. Her stomach kept lurching — up, down, sideways — as the currents slammed them into unnatural paths.

They weren’t falling straight.

They were being dragged.

Wendryx roared — a sound of fury and command — and forced his wings to cut a path through the twisted air, shielding the others as much as he could.

Ryvarr flared fire above him, burning away the sharpest currents.

Fenrax jerked as if struck by lightning.

Alina gasped.

“Fen!”

He did not look at her.

He couldn't.

His entire body shook with the pull — Shadow dragging him down, Air dragging him sideways, his own will dragging him up toward the group.

But for the first time, he didn't break.

He held the line.

He held them.

Fenrax, the broken Echo, the tethered Wolf, the one who should have fallen first — did not fall away.

He stayed.

The wind shifted.

The tear widened below them.

Wendryx shouted:

“Now —!”

And all four broke through the final layer of the boundary.

The Air Realm vanished above them.

The Shadow border rose like a living horizon below.

CHAPTER 33 — The Edge Where Light

Trembles

Air → Shadow Boundary (Thin Place)

They fell —

—and then the wind caught them.

Not gently.

Not fully.

Just enough to break the worst of the descent.

Alina hit the ground hard on her knees, air ripped from her lungs. Stone cracked beneath her palms — cold, smooth, wrong. A surface that didn't feel like Aelurien's cloudstone or Noctyra's reflective obsidian.

It felt like both.

Like the world had forgotten which Realm it belonged to.

Ryvarr slammed down beside her, rolling in a burst of uncontrolled fire before skidding to a halt. He shook his head violently, flames bursting unevenly from his jaws.

Wendryx landed last.

He didn't stumble.

He didn't roll.

He hit the ground like a blade embedded into stone, wings snapping inward the moment he made contact. His chest heaved once, then steadied.

Fenrax collapsed in a flicker of broken light about two metres away.

His outline glitched violently — as if the air around him was trying to tear him apart.

Alina crawled toward him.

“Fenrax — Fenrax, look at me —”

He convulsed, paws scraping at the slick surface. His mismatched eyes flickered between gold and fractured ember faster than she'd ever seen. The tether yanked at him with a brutal surge.

Wendryx was there instantly, one wing sweeping in front of Alina.

“Do not touch him,” he ordered.

“But he —!”

“Shadow is pulling through him,” Wendryx said. “If you touch him now, you may feel the chain.”

Alina froze.

Fenrax let out a silent, broken cry and slammed his head against the stone as if trying to shove the pain out of himself.

Ryvarr snarled, pacing in tight circles, fire roaring uncontrollably before sputtering low again. He didn't know who to defend from what — the air twisted his instincts into knots.

Alina swallowed hard.

“Where... where are we?”

Wendryx lifted his head slowly.

“Here,” he said, “Air ends.”

Alina followed his gaze.

The horizon wasn't a line.

It wasn't even a place.

It was a trembling veil of shifting grey — tall as mountains, thin as mist, moving like breath.

The surface rippled with reflections that didn't match the world behind her. She saw Ryvarr in it — but he moved half a second too slow. She saw herself, but her eyes looked back before her head turned.

Shadow's boundary.

Noctyra's skin.

A wall of mirrored fog, rippling like something alive beneath it.

She felt her heart drop into her stomach.

"It's... alive."

"It watches," Wendryx corrected. "It waits."

Ryvarr's flame hissed as he stared at the veil. Every hair along his tail was lifted, fire spiking in sharp lines.

Fenrax choked again — this time a shudder that made his entire body contort sideways.

Alina pushed past Wendryx.

"I don't care what you say — he needs someone —"

She reached for Fenrax.

Wendryx didn't stop her.

He closed his eyes.

"Then do not pull," he said softly. "Only hold."

Alina wrapped both arms around Fenrax's shaking body.

The tether hit her instantly.

Cold.

Sharp.

A feeling like a hook dragging behind her sternum.

She gasped — but didn't let go.

Fenrax froze at her touch.

His eyes flickered more slowly.

The glitch -stutter softened.

His paws loosened their frantic scrape against the stone.

The pull didn't stop.

But it weakened.

Just a little.

Just enough for him to breathe.

Alina held her ground.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. “You’re not alone. You don’t have to go anywhere.”

Fenrax pressed his face against her shoulder — not in affection, not in instinct, but in pure, desperate need for an anchor.

Wendryx watched quietly.

Ryvarr moved closer, fire lowering, circling them protectively without taking his eyes from the veil.

The trembling wall of Dream -reflection pulsed once.

A shimmer ran across it.

A faint silhouette formed —
thin, still, human-shaped —
and vanished again.

Alina shuddered.

“Was that —?”

“Yes,” Wendryx murmured.

“The Queen watches the edges.”

“Should we —hide?”

“No.”

Wendryx looked at the trembling veil, eyes narrowing.

“She already knows we are here.”

Ryvarr snarled, flame searing the ground.

Fenrax whimpered but did not try to move away from Alina.

Wendryx lowered his head, listening to the wind — what little of it remained.

“There will be no safe path forward,” he said.

Alina swallowed.

“Then... how do we get Luma out?”

Wendryx turned his head slowly toward the veil.

“There is only one way,” he said.

Ryvarr stopped pacing.

Fenrax lifted his shaking head.

Alina felt her skin crawl.

“What way?”

Wendryx’s eyes gleamed with cold, steady fire — not anger this time, but acceptance.

“We do not wait for a door,” he said.

“The door will not open.”

He lifted one claw and pointed toward a point where the veil rippled inward, folding in on itself like a heartbeat.

“We force one.”

The veil pulsed again — as if reactively, defensively.

Ryvarr stepped closer, fire intensifying.

Fenrax whimpered softly — but pressed himself more tightly against Alina, trying to resist the chain.

The air thickened.

The reflection deepened.

The thin place trembled.

Wendryx spread his wings.

“Prepare yourselves,” he said quietly.

“Because once we touch that veil —”

His eyes hardened.

“Shadow will touch back.”

CHAPTER 34 — Where Shadow Reaches Out

Air Realm → Shadow Veil (Thin Place)

The veil trembled as they approached.

Not violently.

Not dramatically.

But with a disturbing, rhythmic pulse — like the breath of something conscious, listening, learning, waiting.

Alina tightened her grip on Fenrax, whose trembling had become sharp, painful spasms. His paws dug at the cracked stone beneath him, not to run but to stay rooted. The tether yanked at him in violent pulses, each one nearly lifting his body from the ground.

She wished Edmund could see this language of movement and silence; he would have recognised patterns she could only feel.

Ryvarr flared with heat, pacing in rigid arcs, tail thrashing, flame splintering into sparks.

Wendryx stepped forward until he stood only a metre from the veil.

The reflection rippled.

A faint human-shaped silhouette formed in its depth — thin, still, unnervingly calm — then dissolved.

Ryvarr growled.

Fenrax whimpered.

Alina's breath caught.

"She's watching," she whispered.

Wendryx did not turn.

"The Queen always watches the boundaries."

Alina swallowed.

"Why doesn't she attack?"

Wendryx's voice was steady.

"She is reading us."

The veil pulsed again — this time deeper.

Light bent inward around Wendryx's silhouette, warping him into unnerving shapes. The reflection caught his wings a fraction too slow. His claws dragged across the mirrored surface without touching it.

Ryvarr snarled and slammed a burst of fire toward the ground. The stone cracked beneath the heat. His eyes never left the veil.

Fenrax convulsed again, harder.

Alina held him tighter.

"What do we do?" she whispered.

Wendryx lowered his head.

"We push."

He placed both claws against the trembling veil.

The world reacted instantly.

A SOUND split the air — not a word, not a scream, but something between.

A pressure.

A tremor.

A vibrational swell that shook the thin place down to its bones.

Alina staggered back with Fenrax in her arms.

Ryvarr snarled and pressed to her side.

Wendryx's wings snapped wide, anchoring him against the force.

The veil rippled outward in concentric waves — each one like a shock beating against the edges of reality.

A crack of reflection tore across its surface.

Wendryx dug his claws deeper.

“Push!” he shouted.

Ryvarr roared, slammed his paws forward, and unleashed a sustained blast of fire into the veil. The flames bent, warped, stretched, distorted — but did not break.

The tether inside Fenrax went wild.

He screamed silently, body twisting in Alina’s arms like he was being pulled apart.

Alina cried out.

“Fenrax — hold on — please hold on —”

Wendryx pressed harder.

The veil split —

for half a heartbeat.

A slice of impossible dark, deeper than shadow, brighter than void.

Cold poured through the crack.

Not temperature cold — emotional cold.

Memory cold.

The kind that hollowed out the chest.

Alina’s breath hitched.

She saw Luma’s face for a flicker — terrified, trapped, small in a cage of mirror-light.

“LUMA!” Alina screamed.

The veil snapped shut.

She stumbled back.

The crack resealed instantly.

Wendryx staggered.

Ryvarr faltered, flame sputtering.

Fenrax collapsed in agony.

Alina fell to her knees, hands shaking.

“What happened —? What happened? Why did it close?”

Wendryx panted, chest heaving.

“Shadow is anchoring the other side,” he rasped.

“Vaethyr is bracing the veil. He won’t let it break at the boundary.”

Ryvarr’s fire dimmed dangerously low.

Fenrax —

Fenrax was motionless.

Too motionless.

“Fenrax?” Alina whispered, panic spiking.

He didn’t respond.

His chest rose shallowly, his outline flickering like a dying ember.

Alina grabbed him.

“Fenrax — Fenrax — look at me —”

Nothing.

Wendryx turned, eyes widening ever so slightly.

“The tether is overloading him,” he said.

“He is between commands.”

“Between — what does that mean —?”

“It means,” Wendryx said grimly, “Shadow is trying to drag him through the veil — while his loyalty to us is pulling him back.”

Alina felt her heart shatter.

“He’ll die,” she whispered.

Wendryx didn’t answer.

Ryvarr growled low — the sound of a guardian who knew the truth and hated it.

Fenrax twitched once — weak, broken.

The tether pulsed, jerking him sideways.

Alina held him with both arms, refusing to let go.

“Don’t you dare,” she whispered.

“Don’t you dare leave us.”

The veil pulsed again — this time focused on Fenrax.

Wendryx’s eyes snapped to it.

“He’s marked,” he said.

“They want him first.”

Ryvarr stepped forward, placing himself between Fenrax and the veil.

Fire flared along his spine.

He growled deep, resonant, protective.

Shadow pressed back.

The veil trembled, forming a faint shape — thin limbs, tall posture, reflective cracks spiralling outward like cold lightning.

A mimicry.

A warning.

A promise.

Alina whispered:

“Wendryx... what is that?”

He lowered his wings.

“That,” he said softly,

“Is Vaethyr showing us what he will send through next.”

The silhouette leaned forward.

The veil brightened.

Fenrax’s body jerked.

“No!” Alina cried.

Ryvarr roared.

Wendryx spread his wings in a full defensive posture.

The veil pulsed —

once.

Twice.
Then —
Everything stopped.
The silhouette froze.
The veil flickered.
The tether snapped backwards with a violent jolt, throwing
Fenrax into Alina's arms.
The sudden silence was deafening.
Wendryx's eyes narrowed.
“He's been called back,” he said.
Alina blinked.
“Called back? By who?”
Wendryx stepped forward, inspecting the trembling veil.
“Vaethyr,” he murmured.
“He cannot push further here. Not without exposing himself
to Air.”
The veil dimmed.
The silhouette vanished.
Alina held Fenrax tightly.
He breathed —
barely —
but he breathed.
Ryvarr pressed close, fire warming her side.
Wendryx finally spoke:
“We cannot break the veil here.”
Alina stared at him, horrified.
“But we have to!”
Wendryx met her eyes.
“And we will.
But not from Air.”

His wings folded.

“We must descend further.

Past the boundary.

Past the thin place.”

Alina’s breath caught.

“You mean —into Shadow?”

Wendryx’s answer was simple.

“We go under the veil.”

Ryvarr roared approval.

Fenrax, barely conscious, flickered in Alina’s arms — and she felt it:

He would follow.

Not because he was forced.

But because he chose to.

Wendryx turned to the trembling horizon.

“Prepare yourselves,” he said.

“Next step — Noctyra’s outer dark.”

CHAPTER 35 — The Stair Beneath the Wind

Air Realm → Shadow Underside (Outer Dark)

The veil behind them faded into a trembling silver shimmer. Ahead, there was no sky at all.

Only a sloping shelf of stone — dark, smooth, faintly reflective — descending into a depth where light thinned to nothing. It was neither Air nor Shadow. A place between. A realm's underside. A forgotten layer the Phoenix never meant anyone to cross.

Alina's skin prickled.

Every breath tasted metallic.

Every sound echoed too slowly, as if the air itself were reluctant to carry noise forward.

Ryvarr growled low, flame guttering along his spine in uneasy pulses.

Fenrax pressed against Alina, trembling weakly. His outline flickered in uneven beats — the tether tugging, then loosening, then tugging again.

Wendryx stood at the front.

"This path isn't natural," Alina whispered.

Wendryx nodded, wings folding tight against his body.

"Aelurien has been bent downward. Air should not have a floor."

Ryvarr snarled sharply at those words, reacting as if he'd been insulted by the very idea.

Fenrax whimpered.

Alina swallowed hard.

"If Air shouldn't have a floor... then where are we?"

Wendryx answered quietly.

“Between the breath of Air —
and the hunger of Shadow.”

The stone before them vibrated faintly. Thin silver cracks wound through it like veins — reflective, but not strongly enough to form images. Alina kept her gaze away from them anyway.

Ryvarr’s flame dulled, but his stance widened, protective.

Fenrax leaned heavily against Alina’s leg. Each breath he took came with a low whine, not of fear, but of pain — the tether scraping at him with every metre closer to Shadow.

Wendryx stepped forward.

“Stay close,” he said.

“And keep your eyes forward. This place will try to show you things.”

Alina stiffened.

“Like Vaethyr?”

“No,” Wendryx said.

“Older things. Fainter things. Echoes caught between
Realms.”

Ryvarr bristled.

Fenrax shivered violently.

Wendryx began to descend the slope.

They followed.

The further they walked, the darker it became.

Not in colour — there were no colours here — but in sensation.

Cold rose from the stone in thin waves, clinging to their steps. Light seemed to bleed away from them even though no darkness pressed in. Their breaths echoed in strange patterns:

Alina’s falling a heartbeat late, Ryvarr’s arriving a heartbeat early.

Fenrax's Echo flickered sharply with every step.

Alina tightened her hold on him.

"It's okay," she whispered.

"You're doing well."

Fenrax leaned more heavily into her — not resisting the tether, but resisting the fear of resistance.

Wendryx paused as they reached a place where the stone dipped into a narrow cleft.

"There," he said.

Ryvarr's fire spiked, crackling on the uneven ground.

Alina stared.

At the bottom of the slope, the stone opened into a jagged, vertical gap — a tear that led downward, deeper than she could see. Air flowed into it from behind them, vanishing into the dark without echo.

"This is how we go under," Wendryx said.

Alina shivered.

"I don't... see anything."

"You won't," he replied.

"Shadow hides its true shape until you're inside it."

The tether inside Fenrax pulled sharply.

His body jerked sideways, then forward, then twisted violently — as if he were being grabbed from beneath the stone.

Alina fell to her knees beside him.

"Fenrax — stay with me — stay with me —"

He wasn't collapsing.

He wasn't fleeing.

He was fighting.

Hard.

Wendryx watched him closely.

“He is close to breaking,” Wendryx murmured.

“Once we enter Shadow’s underside, the chain will tighten.”

Alina’s voice shook.

“Then we need to protect him.”

“No,” Wendryx said — gently but firmly.

“We need to protect you. Fenrax made his choice. He will follow it... if he can.”

Fenrax twitched violently — but pulled himself back to Alina’s side.

Wendryx exhaled.

“Good.”

Ryvarr stepped closer, pressing against Alina’s other side. His fire dimmed until it was only a faint glow — whatever was ahead wanted as little light as possible.

Alina steadied her breathing.

“Wendryx... once we go down there... can we come back?”

He looked into the dark cleft.

This was the only moment he hesitated — a tiny pause, barely long enough to be seen.

Then:

“Yes,” he said.

“But not the way we entered.”

Ryvarr growled deep.

Fenrax trembled, but did not step back.

Alina squared her shoulders.

“We go together.”

Wendryx lowered his head — not quite a bow, but a gesture of respect.

“Stay behind me,” he said quietly.

“Ryvarr beside you. Fenrax against your back.”

He looked into the dark once more.

“Shadow bends differently when it meets unity.”

Ryvarr snorted, approving.

Fenrax flickered weakly but held position.

Alina took a breath that hurt her chest.

“Okay,” she whispered.

“I’m ready.”

Wendryx stepped to the edge of the cleft.

The stone trembled beneath him.

“Do not look for light,” he said.

“Do not wait for sound. Do not reach for anything but each other.”

Ryvarr’s fire dimmed until it was barely an ember.

Fenrax leaned all his weight into Alina.

Wendryx looked back only once.

“Ready your courage,” he said.

Then he stepped into the dark.

Ryvarr followed with a low, furious growl.

Alina tightened her arms around Fenrax — and the two of them descended after the others into the place where wind no longer lived.

CHAPTER 36 — The Skin of Noctyra

Shadow Underside → Noctyra's Outer Skin (First Layer)

Descending was wrong.

Alina felt it instantly — the moment her foot left the stone's last solid edge. The world didn't go dark. It went thin. The air felt too light, as if it wasn't meant for lungs. Sound pressed inward instead of outward.

It was not absence.

It was inversion.

Ryvarr's fire dimmed into a faint crimson pulse, barely pushing back the surrounding grey.

The heat curled backwards, folding toward his own body instead of radiating outward.

Fenrax whimpered — a tiny, strangled sound — as his outline flickered like dying light through frosted glass. His paws scabbled against nothing, finding no purchase.

Wendryx was the only one who did not falter.

He stepped downward into the soft, shifting grey like he understood its rules.

“Stay close,” he said.

“The ground changes here.”

Ryvarr pressed himself to Alina's left. Fenrax leaned heavily into her back. Their warmth triangulated around her — one of flame, one of flicker.

Alina swallowed.

“What is this place?”

Wendryx lowered his head slightly.

“The skin of Noctyra. The outermost layer.”

She felt her breath tighten.

“It feels... wrong.”

“It should,” he said.

“It is not made for walking.”

The “ground” appeared slowly — not as stone, but as a smooth, shifting plane of pale reflection. It rippled with each step like water that had forgotten how to behave as liquid.

Alina stepped carefully.

The surface didn’t break.

It didn’t ripple under her weight.

It accepted her.

That scared her more.

Ryvarr snarled when his paw touched it, flame flaring instinctively. The surface darkened, absorbing the fire for a brief moment before releasing it as a faint shimmer.

Fenrax froze at the edge, trembling violently.

Alina reached back.

“Fen —”

His paw touched the surface — and the entire plane shuddered.

A crack of mirrored light spidered beneath him.

He collapsed against her with a weak, distressed cry.

Wendryx looked back sharply.

“Keep hold of him,” he said.

“The skin recognises tethered beings.”

Ryvarr bared his teeth.

Fenrax pressed so hard into Alina’s back that she could feel his heartbeat spiking against her spine.

She wrapped her arms around him.

“You’re okay,” she whispered.

“You’re okay. I’ve got you.”

His trembling slowed — not fully, but enough to keep him from collapsing again.

Wendryx examined the surface.

“We cannot stay in this layer long,” he said.

“It listens.”

Alina stiffened.

“Listens for what?”

Wendryx’s eyes hardened.

“For fear.”

Ryvarr snarled immediately, defiant.

Fenrax whimpered again — not fear of Shadow, but fear of being a danger.

Alina tightened her hold.

“Don’t worry. I’m here.”

The plane shifted.

A faint ripple.

A tremor.

A re-shaping.

The surface pulled Alina’s reflection upward.

Slowly.

Too slowly.

The reflected Alina blinked before she did.

Ryvarr’s reflection opened its mouth before he growled.

Fenrax’s reflection —

Was wrong.

It didn’t match his body at all.

It showed his outline —but shadowed, sharpened, eyes empty, chest glowing with a faint, unnatural ember where the tether anchored.

Alina gasped.

“Wendryx —!”

“I see it,” he said.

The surface shimmered.

A shape rose from it.

Not physical.

Not whole.

A faint humanoid silhouette — tall, thin, posture quiet, head tilted slightly in curiosity.

The same presence they saw twice before.

The Shadow Queen.

She did not move.

She did not lunge.

She did not react.

She only observed.

Wendryx spread his wings slightly, guarding the group.

Ryvarr stepped between Alina and the projection, tail raised, flame flickering dangerously low.

Fenrax pressed against her so hard she could barely breathe.

The silhouette leaned forward.

Alina felt something brush the edge of her mind — not entering, not touching her thoughts, but reading emotions:

Fear.

Courage.

Guilt.

Resolve.

Pain.

Loyalty.

The surface flickered.

Ryvarr growled, low and furious.

The silhouette turned its head —
and looked directly at Fenrax.
He whimpered, curling into Alina.
The tether pulsed violently.
Wendryx shifted his stance.
“Do not break formation,” he said sharply.
“She is not here to attack.”
“Then what is she doing?” Alina whispered.
“She is assessing us,” Wendryx murmured.
“And deciding whether the veil below will let us pass.”
The reflection shimmered.
The silhouette dissolved.
The surface rippled once more — and opened.
A vertical fracture appeared in the reflective skin, widening
downward, revealing a narrow descent of black stone beneath the
silver surface.
Wendryx inhaled.
“Shadow has made its decision.”
Ryvarr’s fire burned hotter, low and steady.
Fenrax pushed his head under Alina’s arm, terrified but
willing.
Alina tightened her grip on both wolves.
“What does that mean?” she asked softly.
Wendryx stepped toward the fracture.
“It means,” he said,
“We are permitted to descend.”
The fracture widened.
Wind died completely.
Light dimmed to a quiet, colourless glow.
Wendryx looked back only once.

“This is the true threshold,” he said.
“Once we step below... we are in Shadow.”
Alina’s heart beat hard enough to hurt.
“Then we stay together,” she whispered.
Ryvarr growled in agreement.
Fenrax flickered, but pressed close.
Wendryx nodded once.
“Then descend carefully.
And do not look at the walls.”
The fracture deepened.
Noctyra waited below.
And the path down had already begun to form a shape.

CHAPTER 37 — Into Noctyra’s Breath

The Shadow Descent → Noctyra Proper

The fracture swallowed the last sliver of silver light behind them.

Alina had expected darkness.

But Noctyra was not dark.

It was quiet.

Unnaturally so.

A silence so complete it felt like the world had forgotten sound existed. Her breath echoed unnervingly slow in her chest — delayed, muted, as if the air here needed time to remember how to carry it.

Wendryx descended first.

His claws clicked softly on stone that shifted under his paws as though deciding what shape it should take.

Ryvarr stayed glued to Alina’s right side, flame dimmed to a faint ember. Every exhale from him came out wrong, curling backwards into his throat before escaping.

Fenrax trembled at her left, leaning so heavily against her that she nearly staggered. His outline flickered constantly — thin patches of him blinking out for half-heartbeats before reappearing.

Wendryx raised one wing.

“Stop.”

Everyone froze instantly.

The stone under their feet pulsed once.

Alina’s heart seized.

“...Wendryx?” she whispered.

He didn’t look back.

“Do not move.”

Ryvarr’s flame stilled.

Fenrax whimpered.

Alina held her breath.

The stone pulsed again.

Wendryx lowered his head until his nose touched the surface.

“It is recognising us.”

Ryvarr snarled softly.

Alina’s throat tightened.

“Recognising?” she echoed.

“Shadow does not have soil,” Wendryx said quietly.

“It has memory.”

The stone pulsed again, slower this time —like a heartbeat testing its rhythm.

Alina’s hand tightened on Fenrax’s ruff.

“What happens if it... doesn’t like us?”

Wendryx finally turned his head.

“Then it will remember someone else in our place.”

Ryvarr’s flame spiked sharply.

Fenrax’s outline glitched in panic.

Alina swallowed.

“Wendryx... are we in danger right now?”

“Yes.”

He didn’t soften it.

“But we continue.”

The path widened as they moved forward.

Not naturally.

Not gradually.

It widened because it chose to, stretching smooth reflective stone beneath their feet in slow ripples.

Alina avoided looking at the reflections.

Ryvarr blocked any she might accidentally catch.

Fenrax squeezed closer whenever one rose too near.

Eventually, the slope flattened.

They stepped into a vast, curved expanse —an open chamber with no ceiling, its walls rising in slow arcs made of misted reflection. Light here wasn't true light; it was a pale glow, drifting like dust suspended in water.

Alina turned slowly.

"This is..."

She couldn't finish.

Wendryx spoke for her.

"Noctyra."

The word itself felt heavy.

Ryvarr's flame guttered.

Fenrax collapsed to his stomach with a broken whine, paws slipping on the too-smooth surface.

Alina dropped beside him.

"You're okay," she whispered.

"You're okay."

Fenrax twitched violently.

Wendryx approached him.

"Fenrax," he said softly.

"Breathe."

The wolf's outline flickered —
but slowed.

Wendryx lowered his head.

"The chain is loud here.

But you are louder.”

Fenrax whimpered and pressed his forehead against Alina’s leg.

Ryvarr circled them once, growling at every shifting ripple in the chamber.

Wendryx straightened.

“We must move quickly,” he said.

Alina looked up.

“Why?”

Wendryx scanned the chamber’s walls — and Alina saw it.

The reflections were forming shapes.

Shadow silhouettes.

Not Vaethyr.

Not the Queen.

Not anything she recognised.

These were echoes.

Fragments.

Fear-patterns caught in Noctyra’s skin.

Some humanoid.

Some beast-like.

Some impossible.

Alina’s breath froze.

“They’re watching us.”

“No,” Wendryx said.

“They’re learning us.”

Ryvarr snarled.

Fenrax buried his head under her arm.

Wendryx stepped forward, wings half-spread.

“Stay close.

Do not look at the walls.

Do not listen to anything that sounds like us.”

Alina stiffened.

“What does that mean?”

Wendryx’s eyes hardened.

“Noctyra will try to echo us. Words we didn’t say. Sounds we didn’t make. Steps we didn’t take.”

Ryvarr’s fire flared in disgust.

Fenrax whimpered, flickering.

Alina nodded shakily.

“Where do we go?”

Wendryx pointed with his snout toward a thin passage to the right, barely visible — just a narrow line where the reflections bent inward slightly less than elsewhere.

“The Queen will not block us yet,” Wendryx said.

“She wants us deeper.”

Alina swallowed.

“For what?”

Wendryx didn’t answer.

Because the answer wasn’t one she needed right now.

He simply said:

“For Luma.”

Ryvarr growled fiercely.

Fenrax, weak as he was, twitched in agreement.

Alina stood.

“Then lead the way.”

Wendryx did.

And all four stepped into the narrow passage — where reflections peeled away from the walls like shadows waking up.

CHAPTER 38 — The Hall of Echoed Steps

Noctyra Realm— Inner Reflection Corridor

The corridor narrowed until Alina could barely see the floor.

Not because it was dark — it wasn't.

Not because it was blocked — it wasn't.

But because the floor was moving.

Not physically.

Not shifting stone.

Reflections.

The smooth surface rippled with distorted versions of their own steps — feet landing too late, paws landing too early, heads turning before they actually turned.

Ryvarr stiffened, flame flickering in jagged bursts.

Wendryx slowed his gait deliberately.

“Do not match your reflection,” he said.

Alina frowned.

“What do you mean —?”

The surface beneath her flickered.

Her own reflection took a step forward before she did.

Her stomach twisted.

Ryvarr's reflection opened its jaws —

with no flame inside.

Fenrax's reflection wasn't him at all.

It was a black wolf-shape with hollow eyes and a glowing ember in its chest — the tether revealed in pure shadow-form.

Fenrax whimpered, stepping back into Alina so hard he nearly knocked her down.

She held him with both arms.

“I've got you,” she whispered.

“I’ve got you.”
The corridor listened.
The walls rippled faintly.
From far ahead — or maybe far behind — came a soft sound:
Alina...?
Her blood ran cold.
Ryvarr slammed his paws down and snarled at the sound,
fire flaring hot and wild.
Wendryx’s head snapped toward her.
“Do not answer it.”
Alina swallowed.
“It—it sounded like —”
“It was not her,” Wendryx said sharply.
“It was you.”
Fenrax convulsed — a violent glitch — as if the echo had
tugged at the tether inside him.
Another sound drifted through the corridor.
Help me...
—her own voice again, but strained, softer, trembling.
Alina clamped her jaw shut, heart hammering.
Ryvarr roared, the chamber shaking from the force.
Wendryx growled low.
“Noctyra is testing you,” he murmured.
“It wants to see who breaks first.”
Fenrax trembled harder.
The tether pulsed in jagged bursts — as if reacting to fear
instead of command.
Alina knelt beside him, touching his shoulder gently.
“Look at me,” she whispered.
“Not them. Me.”

Fenrax's mismatched eyes flickered gold –ember –gold,
settling —just barely —on her face.
The corridor rippled again.
This time, the footsteps came.
Slow.
Soft.
Wrong.
Alina heard them echo behind her.
When she turned —
nothing.
But the reflection on the left wall
showed a shadow walking toward them
with her shape.
Her posture.
Her movements —
but out of sync by half a second.
Ryvarr stepped in front of her, tail raised, fire pulsing in
sharp, rhythmic bursts.
Wendryx growled under his breath — a deeper sound than
she'd ever heard from him.
“That is not you,” he said.
The figure stepped closer in the reflection.
Alina's reflection stepped back.
Alina didn't.
Her breath stopped.
Fenrax collapsed in a violent convulsion — not because of
the echo, but because the tether surged with sudden clarity.
He jerked his head toward the right wall, eyes going wide.
Wendryx noticed instantly.
“What is it?” Alina whispered.

Fenrax lifted a trembling paw toward the rippling surface.

Not to the false reflection.

Not to the echo-creature.

To something else.

A pulse.

A warmth.

A brief, tiny flicker of Luma's light.

Alina gasped.

“Wendryx —!”

“I see it.”

The reflection corridor reacted violently to that moment of recognition.

The false Alina warped.

The walls trembled.

The floor brightened.

Dozens of new reflections slid into place, each one half-formed, half-mimic:

A dozen Ryvarrs —
without flame.

A dozen Wendryxes —
with wings bent at impossible angles.

A dozen Alinas —
eyes too dark.

A dozen Fenraxes —
with hollow chests.

Ryvarr roared with such force that the nearest reflection shattered into ripples.

Fenrax convulsed again, but this time tried to stand on shaking legs, still pointing toward the right wall.

Alina grabbed him, held him steady.

“Show us,” she whispered.
“We’re right here. Show us.”
The tether pulsed through his chest like a heartbeat.
And for a brief moment —
the wall’s reflection darkened —
and the faint echo of Luma’s glow appeared again, flickering
like a dying star behind warped glass.
Wendryx took a step forward.
“Down the right path,” he said.
“She is deeper.”
The reflection hissed.
Not sound.
Not language.
Just resistance.
The false Alina lunged from the wall —
a mimic shape trying to peel itself free of reflection.
Ryvarr threw himself between them, flame erupting.
The creature shattered upon contact with the fire —
rippling across the wall like ink dropped into water.
Alina staggered backwards, heart hammering.
“Wendryx — this place —”
“—is alive,” he finished.
“And we must move before it learns more.”
Fenrax collapsed again, exhausted, trembling violently.
Alina lifted him into her arms without hesitation.
Ryvarr pressed to her side.
Wendryx positioned himself at the front.
“Follow the Echo,” the dragon said.
“Quickly. Noctyra does not give us second chances.”
The corridor rippled again —

And all four turned toward the path where Luma's flicker had shone.

CHAPTER 39 — The Flicker Beneath Glass

Noctyra Realm— Lower Reflection Wells

The corridor narrowed until it became a single twisting channel of reflective stone — a place where the walls leaned inward like the closing ribs of some vast, sleeping creature.

Alina felt the pressure rise with every step.

Not weight.

Not heat.

Attention.

Something in the Realm knew they were here.

Ryvarr walked tight at her side, muscles coiled, flame trapped in thin pulses under his skin.

Every time the walls rippled, he snarled — a deep, warning sound that never quite left his throat.

Fenrax trembled and flickered behind her, paws scraping softly against the floor.

The tether clawed at him now, not pulling straight down, but sideways — as if it were trying to turn him toward the walls instead of the path.

He resisted.

Barely.

Alina kept one hand on his shoulder.

“You’re doing so well,” she whispered.

“Stay with me.”

His outline brightened for a moment — one breath of gold through the fractured lines — before dimming again.

Wendryx moved in silence ahead of them, wings folded tight, steps precise. The dragon’s eyes scanned every ripple, every shift, every distortion in the reflection-walls. His tail stayed low, cutting

just above the surface like a compass needle tracking unseen dangers.

Finally, he spoke.

“Slowly. The next turn will test us.”

Alina’s breath tightened.

“What do you mean?”

Wendryx didn’t look back.

“Noctyra changes shape around its prey.”

Ryvarr snarled at the word “prey.”

Fenrax collapsed briefly, his legs folding as if the ground itself had tugged at them.

Alina caught him, helped him up.

“It’s okay — keep going — I’m here —”

Wendryx paused at the turn ahead and waited until she had Fenrax steady again.

Then —

He stepped around the bend.

The world shifted.

The corridor opened into a wide chamber — empty, silent, circular. The walls curved upward in a perfect dome carved of mirrored stone, but the reflections inside it were wrong.

Very wrong.

Alina saw:

- Ryvarr twice — one real, one delayed
- Wendryx reflected from above, even though he was beside her
- Her own face was turning toward her from the opposite side of the chamber
- Fenrax in three forms — real, broken echo, and a third shape that hurt to look at

Ryvarr growled, flame bursting in uneven jets.

Fenrax whimpered and pressed himself beneath Alina's arm.

Wendryx exhaled slowly — his version of a warning.

“This chamber is a selection well.”

Alina stiffened.

“Selection — what does it select?”

“Fear,” Wendryx said quietly.

“It reads what you cannot hide.”

Ryvarr's flame dimmed to a dense, unstable glow.

Alina kept one hand on Fenrax, the other on Ryvarr.

“We move together,” she said.

“And we don't look at anything directly.”

Wendryx nodded once.

“Good.”

He stepped into the chamber.

The walls reacted.

The reflections twisted sharply, diving inward like hands reaching to grab them. Sound rippled — distant footfalls, distant breath, distant Alina whispering her own name back at her from too far away.

Ryvarr roared, flame finally bursting free in a violent arc across the nearest reflection.

It didn't shatter.

It bent, absorbing the fire, then returning it as a warped distortion of Ryvarr's shape.

Fenrax collapsed to his belly, claws scrabbling at the slick stone, tether ripping at him like hooks.

“Fen —!” Alina dropped beside him.

The tether pulsed again.

Another violent jerk.

He cried into her shoulder, outline breaking into shards.

Alina looked up at Wendryx, eyes desperate.

“He can’t take much more of this!”

Wendryx’s voice was low and hard.

“He does not need to endure it long.”

He stepped toward the far wall.

Because he saw it.

The chamber was full of false exits — walls pretended to open, reflections pretended to form doorways, corridors pretended to widen.

But one place — only one — remained constant.

A narrow-slit running from floor to ceiling.

Stable.

Unmoving.

Not reflective.

Not echoing.

The place where Noctyra had not been able to fully seal a fracture.

A real exit.

Alina’s breath caught.

“That’s where she is...”

Wendryx nodded.

“She is beneath this line.”

Ryvarr moved toward it, muscles rigid, tail high.

The chamber reacted instantly.

Reflections bent inward sharply, forming silhouettes of:

- false Alinas
- false Ryvarrs
- false Wendryxes
- and something that looked like Fenrax with too many eyes

All of them out of sync, all of them walking slightly wrong.
Alina grabbed Fenrax and held him tightly.
Wendryx's voice dropped to a command.
"Stay behind me.
And do not let go of each other."
He stepped forward.
The reflection -walls rippled in protest, the chamber's
surface flickering like a disturbed pool.
Ryvarr snarled and stepped beside him.
Fenrax whimpered but pressed his head into Alina's neck —
following the pull toward the slit, not the reflections.
Alina stood.
Her shaking had stopped.
Not because she wasn't afraid.
But because she knew Luma was below.
"We go," she whispered. The weight of memory made her
ache for Edmund's steady presence — not because he could save
her, but because he had always known how to breathe when she
could not.
Wendryx touched the fracture with one claw.
It widened.
Slowly.
Reluctantly.
As if the Realm hated the idea of letting them through.
Cold air rushed upward — a different kind of cold, deeper,
harsher, more intentional.
Fenrax shuddered violently, tether spasming.
Ryvarr growled.
Wendryx turned his head.
"This is the entrance to Vaethyr's pocket," he said.

Alina's chest tightened.

"And Luma?"

"Inside," Wendryx said.

"Waiting."

Ryvarr roared.

Fenrax tried to stand, collapsed, tried again.

Alina lifted him.

She stared into the widening fracture — at the swirling,
mirror-dark descent below.

Her voice trembled.

"Wendryx... when we step through... can he reach us?"

Wendryx lowered his head.

"Yes."

She swallowed.

"Then we step together."

Wendryx nodded once.

Ryvarr flared with fire.

Fenrax pressed against her heart.

The fracture opened fully.

The true path into Shadow's constructed prison — waited.

CHAPTER 40 — The General in Glass

Vaethyr's Shadow Pocket

The moment they crossed the fracture, the world changed.
Not gradually.

Not subtly.

It snapped inward.

The air became heavier, thicker — like stepping into a room where every breath had a weight. The ground beneath Alina's boots softened into smooth, reflective stone that never quite stayed the same shape. The walls curved in slow arcs, giving the feeling of being inside a hollow eye.

Ryvarr snarled immediately, fire bursting onto the stone in angry lashes. The flame bent upward, twisting like smoke in reverse.

Wendryx spread his wings, claws scraping across the shifting floor as he forced it into momentary solidity.

“Stay close,” he said.

“This pocket wants to separate us.”

Fenrax collapsed the moment he crossed the threshold.

He didn't stumble.

He didn't trip.

He fell as if his legs had simply vanished beneath him, outline fracturing into shards of flicker-light. His chest jerked in violent pulses — the tether pulling so hard that Alina thought it might drag him to pieces in front of her.

She dropped to her knees.

“Fenrax —no—no—stay with me —”

His body twisted in agony, paws slamming against the floor that wasn't a floor at all.

Ryvarr roared and threw himself between Alina and the nearest wall, fire blazing in a protective arc.

Wendryx turned sharply.

“It begins.”

Alina’s heart tightened.

“What begins —?”

The pocket answered for him.

A ripple of silver light tore upward from the centre of the chamber — a vertical cut of reflective energy, widening slowly, flexing like a breathing mouth.

And from within that slice —

Vaethyr stepped forward.

He did not emerge like a creature.

He emerged like a decision.

A tall figure carved from mirror-light, limbs cracked with thin lines of grey, face featureless except for the faintest indentation of eyes that watched without blinking.

He moved with impossible stillness — each step gliding, unreal, as if the world shifted to bring him forward rather than the other way around.

Alina felt her throat close.

Wendryx stepped in front of her instantly, wings spreading in a low, shielded arc.

Ryvarr’s fire roared so fiercely the stone beneath him glowed.

Fenrax convulsed again, a broken cry ripping from his throat.

And then —

A tiny sound.

A flicker of light.

“Alina...?”

Luma.

Her voice.

Small.

Weak.

But alive.

Alina's heart lurched.

She spun toward the sound —

And saw her.

Suspended in a thin cage of mirror-lines, hanging from nothing, curled in a trembling ball of soft glow. Her wings flickered weakly. Her light dimmed in and out, like a candle struggling in a storm.

“LUMA!” Alina screamed.

The pocket reacted instantly.

Vaethyr lifted one hand —

a simple motion soft

almost gentle —

And the mirror-cage pulsed, tightening around Luma's tiny body.

She cried out.

Wendryx snarled — a low, unnatural sound of grinding scale against fury.

Ryvarr lunged, only to be slammed sideways by a sudden wall of reflective force that rose from the ground. He hit it with a roar, flame splintering in every direction.

Wendryx moved to strike —

Vaethyr raised his other hand.

The Realm obeyed.

Mirrored tendrils rose from the floor, twisting in controlled arcs, forming a ring around Wendryx and Alina.

Not touching.

Just limiting.

Just marking.

A boundary.

A threat.

Alina shook from head to toe.

She forced herself to stand, even as her legs trembled violently.

“Let her go,” she whispered.

Vaethyr tilted his head slightly.

Not curious.

Not confused.

Simply observing.

His reflective eyes swept over her, down to the wolves at her sides, then up again — as if calculating variables.

Wendryx’s voice was low but sharp.

“Do not speak to him.

He listens differently.”

Ryvarr growled, flames flaring bright.

Fenrax convulsed — harder now — as though Vaethyr’s presence made the tether tighten with every breath.

Alina knelt beside him.

His eyes flickered wildly, chest spasming.

“Fenrax —look at me —look at me —”

He managed it.

Barely.

His gaze locked onto hers.

And she felt it.

Fear.

Pain.

Guilt.

And something new —
Resolve.
He pressed his forehead to her palm.
The tether pulsed.
He didn't move.
He didn't break.
He chose.
Vaethyr paused.
Not out of surprise.
Out of interest.
The pocket shifted.
The mirrored cage around Luma drifted downward,
lowering just enough for Alina to see her fully.
The little pixie's wings trembled, her glow flickering in sharp,
uneven pulses.
"A... Alina... don't... come closer —"
Her voice broke into a tiny sob.
Alina's tears burned her eyes.
"I'm here," she said, voice cracking.
"I'm here, Luma. We're all here."
Vaethyr moved.
Not toward Alina.
Not toward Luma.
Toward Fenrax.
The tether yanked at him so violently that his entire body
arched in pain.
Alina threw both arms around him.
"No!" she screamed.
Wendryx stepped between them and Vaethyr.

Ryvarr lunged with a burst of fire so hot it cracked the mirrored floor. The flame hit

Vaethyr —

And passed through.

No—

Not through.

It bent.

Redirected.

Split.

Broken into threads that dissipated into the air.

Ryvarr recoiled, snarling in disbelief.

Wendryx growled.

“General of Reflection,” he said.

“You will not take them.”

Vaethyr tilted his head.

Then —

He raised one hand.

A wave of mirror-shards rose behind him, swirling in a slow, horrifying spiral.

Alina’s breath froze.

“Wendryx... no...”

Wendryx lowered himself into a stance she had never seen — wings tight, claws ready, body angled to intercept.

Ryvarr took position beside him, flame roaring as high as it could go.

Fenrax pressed himself to Alina’s chest, trembling uncontrollably.

Vaethyr’s mirror -storm pulsed —

And the first shard streaked forward.

Not at Wendryx.

Not at Ryvarr.
At Alina.
Wendryx moved faster than sound.
His wing struck the shard mid-air—
shattering it, sending the fragments spinning into the walls,
where they liquefied into mirrored cracks.
The pocket trembled.
Vaethyr paused again.
Recalculating.
Luma screamed.
“Alina —help—!”
The mirror cage pulsed sharply.
Wendryx turned his head.
“Alina,” he said.
“This is a trap.
He wants you to step inside.”
Alina’s entire body trembled.
“I won’t leave her!”
Ryvarr roared in agreement.
Fenrax, through his agony, lifted his head —
and pointed his muzzle toward Luma’s cage.
The tether pulled.
But he pulled back.
Wendryx’s eyes widened by a fraction.
Something shifted.
Shadow twisted around Vaethyr’s limbs — not pulling, not
pushing, but preparing.
The pocket rippled around the boundary lines.
The chamber itself grew brighter, colder.
Noctyra was watching.

Waiting.

Alina stood.

Her hands shook.

Her breath came fast.

Her legs felt hollow.

But she stood.

“Wendryx,” she whispered.

“What do we do?”

The dragon lifted his wing, shielding her and Fenrax from
Vaethyr.

His voice was low.

Cold.

Controlled.

“We force an opening.”

Ryvarr snarled, flame bursting along the entire chamber.

Fenrax pressed himself into Alina, trembling in terror and
determination.

Alina clenched her fists.

“Then lead us.”

Vaethyr raised both hands.

The pocket screamed.

And the real battle began.

CHAPTER 41 — The Mirror Storm

Vaethyr's Shadow Pocket

Vaethyr's hands rose.

The chamber answered.

A hundred thin lines of silver peeled away from the floor and walls, curling upward like the ribs of some great mirrored beast. They hovered above the group — weightless, sharp, trembling with potential.

Wendryx stepped forward.

Wings flared.

Chest low.

Tail rigid.

Alina had seen him calm before.

She had seen him resolute.

She had seen him furious.

But she had never seen him like this.

Pure discipline.

Pure focus.

A living shield.

Ryvarr slammed beside him, fire bursting into a dense, controlled flame. His growl filled the chamber, low and resonant, vibrating the shifting stone.

Fenrax lay pressed against Alina, breathing in broken gasps, paws twitching with the pain of the tether pulling in every direction.

“Luma...” Alina whispered, eyes darting toward the suspended cage.

The tiny pixie hung limply in the mirrored lines, wings drooping, glow faint and trembling.

She lifted her head weakly.

“A... Alina... d -don’t... let him...”

Vaethyr moved.

He did not run.

He did not lunge.

He bent the world.

A wave of reflective force surged toward them — not light, not wind, not shadow. Something in between. Something that sliced through space itself like a blade made of absence.

Wendryx met it head-on.

He slammed both wings downward, creating a pressure wave that forced the distortion to bend around him. The floor cracked beneath his paws, the chamber walls flickering in protest.

Ryvarr’s flame whipped forward, curling into a spiralling arc that cut through the pressure wave — splitting it into harmless refracted streams.

Fenrax screamed silently — the tether slashing through him like fire-laced wire.

Alina threw both arms around him.

“I’ve got you — I’ve got you — hold on —”

Vaethyr tilted his head.

Interest.

He extended one finger.

A thin slice of mirror-light formed in the air — and shot straight toward Alina.

Wendryx roared.

He hurled himself between her and the attack, wing sweeping upward in a blinding arc. The shard struck his scales and shattered into a spray of reflective dust.

The dust swirled.

Reformed.

Became a perfect illusion of Alina —
eyes hollow, body slack —
sliding toward them.

Ryvarr lunged with a snarl, flames turning the false Alina
into liquified mirror-stone.

The real Alina trembled behind him.

“Wendryx — he’s — he’s aiming at me.”

“Yes,” Wendryx said.

“Because you are the only one he cannot predict.”

Ryvarr snarled with renewed fury.

Fenrax convulsed violently, tether jerking him toward
Vaethyr.

He resisted.

Alina held him tighter.

Wendryx lowered his stance.

“Alina,” he murmured, “do not let go of him.”

“I won’t.”

“Good. Then stay low.”

Vaethyr raised both arms.

The mirror storm erupted.

Hundreds of razor-thin shards launched forward at
impossible speed, curving unpredictably through the air. The
walls bent the trajectories, sending them ricocheting in fractal arcs.

Wendryx spun into the storm, wings slicing through dozens
of shards at once. Each impact sent ripples of force vibrating
through his limbs.

Ryvarr exploded into a whirlwind of flame, every strike
melting clusters of shards into dripping silver.

The chamber screamed —

not physically, but through pulsing shifts of light and pressure.

Fenrax's body jerked violently as the tether surged, nearly tearing him from Alina's grip.

She held him as her life depended on it.

"Fenrax —stay with me —stay with me —!"

The wolf flickered —

once, twice —

then steadied.

He looked at her.

Not with fear.

With determination.

And pushed himself upright.

Barely.

He could not stand.

But he could lift his head.

His eyes locked on Vaethyr.

Wendryx saw it.

"Fenrax!" he barked.

"Use it! Show us his pattern!"

Fenrax whimpered but forced his body into a half-crouch.

The tether jerked —

He jerked back.

His eyes flickered —

gold—

ember —

gold—

ember —

then—

His head snapped to the left.

Wendryx moved instantly.

“Ryvarr —left!”

The fire guardian lunged, unleashing a burst of flame that intercepted a massive distortion wave Vaethyr had been preparing.

The chamber shuddered violently.

Part of the ceiling fractured into spirals of broken reflection.

Vaethyr paused.

He had not expected that.

Fenrax collapsed again, shaking uncontrollably.

Alina held him.

“You did it,” she whispered.

“You did it —you showed them —”

Wendryx performed a rapid pivot, wings slicing multiple shards in a single sweep.

“He cannot anticipate Fenrax!” he realised.

“The tether confuses his mirror logic!”

Ryvarr’s flame surged with a triumphant hiss.

Vaethyr stepped backward — the first backward motion he had taken.

The mirror-cage around Luma flickered.

She opened her eyes.

“Al... Alina... he’s weakening...”

Alina felt hope like a spike through her chest.

“We’re coming!”

Vaethyr tilted his head again — slow, precise.

Then —

He turned his attention

fully on Alina.

Wendryx saw it.

Ryvarr saw it.

Fenrax felt it like a punch to the chest.

Alina froze.

Wendryx snarled, louder than she'd ever heard.

“ALINA —DOWN!”

She dropped just as a slicing wave of mirror-light ripped through the space where her head had been. It carved the air, distorting everything around it, bending sound itself.

Ryvarr threw himself over her, flame erupting in a protective shield.

Fenrax dragged himself between them, snapping at nothing, fighting the tether with every ounce of will he had.

Alina clutched both wolves, heart hammering.

Wendryx roared —

a sound of pure, disciplined fury —

and launched himself at Vaethyr.

The pocket reacted violently.

The ground split.

Shards swirled.

Walls rippled.

The chamber darkened.

Vaethyr gathered his storm.

Alina looked at Luma.

The little pixie pressed against the mirror lines, trembling.

“A... Alina...”

One thought filled Alina's mind.

I am not losing her.

She stood.

Ryvarr stood with her.

Fenrax pressed himself under her arm.

Wendryx did not look back — he trusted them to stand.

Alina's voice was quiet.

“Wendryx... tell me how to break that cage.”

The dragon's answer was a single word.

“Unity.”

And the chamber

shifted

again.

CHAPTER 42 — Cracks in the Cage

Vaethyr's Pocket — Inner Convergence Chamber

The storm of mirror-light gathered around Vaethyr like a living shroud, swirling in razor-thin arcs. The chamber pulsed with every movement he made, bending inward and outward in waves.

Luma cried out again, her glow flickering dangerously.

“Alina —hurry —!”

Alina clenched her fists.

She felt Fenrax shaking under her arm, felt Ryvarr's heat pressed along her side, felt

Wendryx's fury and discipline ahead of her.

Unity.

She stepped forward.

“Wendryx —what do we do?”

The dragon didn't turn.

His voice came low, controlled, deadly calm.

“We move as one.”

Ryvarr snarled and pressed closer.

Fenrax whimpered but leaned into her.

Luma weakly lifted her head in the cage.

Vaethyr moved.

A ripple of silver tore outward from him —
like a shockwave made of glass.

Wendryx braced.

“NOW!”

They charged.

Wendryx slammed into Vaethyr's storm head-on, wings slicing through reflective blades with precise, timed sweeps. Each

strike shattered lines of mirror-light into drifting shards that dissolved into the air.

Ryvarr flared flame in a tight, controlled jet, melting several incoming arcs before they could curve around him.

Fenrax stumbled forward —

body jerking —

the tether yanking —

pulling —

hurting —

But he refused to stop.

Alina stayed at his side, one hand on his shoulder, the other gripping Ryvarr's fur.

The unified motion of the four of them —

It confused the pocket.

The chamber stuttered.

The storm hesitated.

Vaethyr paused.

Not long.

Half a breath.

But enough.

Wendryx struck.

His wing came down with the weight of Aelurien behind it.

A pressure wave slammed into Vaethyr's chest, forcing the General backwards for the first time.

The mirror-cage around Luma flickered.

Alina saw it.

“THERE!”

Ryvarr roared, flame bursting forward.

Fenrax collapsed —but pointed with his snout through sheer will, showing the exact point where the cage's lines were thinnest.

Wendryx shouted:

“FIRE!”

Ryvarr obeyed.

A stream of flame blasted into the weak point — a narrow intersection of mirror-lines just below Luma’s left wing. The cage trembled, fracturing with a strange, musical chime like shattering frost.

Luma gasped as the pressure around her loosened.

“Again!” Alina shouted.

Ryvarr roared, attacking the fracture with another burst.

Wendryx pivoted and slammed the opposite side of the cage with a wing strike. Cracks shot across the mirrored lines.

Vaethyr reacted immediately.

The storm surged toward Alina.

Ryvarr threw himself in front of her.

Wendryx leapt across the chamber, intercepting the largest shard with his claws.

Fenrax lurched sideways, pulling her out of the storm’s direct path.

But the General was on them now —

fast—

impossibly fast —

like he flowed instead of moved.

A mirror-blade formed at Vaethyr’s fingertips.

It lengthened.

Bent.

Curved.

A spear of reflected void.

He brought it down toward Alina.

Fenrax moved.

Not forward.

Up.

His broken body launched upward in a glitching burst, intercepting the spear's arc with his shoulder. The Blade of Reflection sliced across him —not cutting his flesh, but cutting the tether.

He screamed silently, body twisting violently.

Alina caught him as he fell.

“FEN —!”

Wendryx saw the opening.

He slammed Vaethyr with a full-force shoulder strike, throwing the General back several metres.

Ryvarr blasted the cage again.

The cracks widened.

Luma reached out with a shaking hand.

“Please —!”

Alina lifted Fenrax's muzzle.

“Show us —just one more time —please —”

Fenrax couldn't stand.

Couldn't lift his body.

But he lifted his head.

His eyes flickered gold —

then ember —

then gold —

and locked onto the exact line that held the cage together.

Wendryx didn't hesitate.

He launched himself toward the fracture point, driving his wing through it with every ounce of controlled force he had.

The line snapped.

The cage imploded —

and Luma fell.

Alina dove forward.

She caught the pixie against her chest, cradling her small, trembling body.

“I’ve got you —I’ve got you —Luma —”

Luma burst into soft, broken sobs, curling into Alina’s collar.

Vaethyr rose.

The chamber shifted violently.

Wendryx snapped his wings open.

“Now we run.”

Vaethyr raised both hands.

The pocket screamed.

Ryvarr roared and moved to Alina’s flank.

Fenrax dragged himself upright, broken but moving.

Wendryx stepped backwards, protecting them.

“Alina,” he said without turning,

“Hold her tight.”

Alina clutched Luma close.

Luma whispered, tiny voice shaking:

“Run...”

Wendryx’s voice was steel.

“MOVE!”

CHAPTER 43 — The Shattering Path

Collapsing Shadow Pocket → Noctyra Deep Corridor

The moment the mirror-cage broke, the chamber screamed.
The sound wasn't noise.

It was pressure — the entire pocket convulsing around them as if Vaethyr's domain had been torn open.

Alina staggered as the floor lurched beneath her, clutching Luma tight against her chest. The pixie trembled violently, light flickering in uneven pulses.

“Alina — Alina — don't let go —”

“I won't,” she whispered.

“Stay with me, Luma. I've got you.”

Fenrax dragged himself upright beside her, body shaking so violently he almost fell again.

His outline flickered in jagged stabs — tether yanking, twisting, fighting him from every direction.

Ryvarr roared, flame erupting in a defensive arc.

Wendryx turned sharply.

“Move!”

The chamber walls split.

Not cracked.

Split.

Large fractures ripped upward from the ground, spiralling across the curved walls like lightning trapped in glass. Each fracture revealed a void beneath — too dark, too deep, too wrong.

Vaethyr raised one hand.

The fractures converged toward the group.

Wendryx slammed a wing down, creating a shockwave that forced the floor to hold shape for a heartbeat.

“This way!”

He shot toward the nearest intact corridor.

Ryvarr stayed glued to Alina’s flank, fire scattering Vaethyr’s mirror-shards as they launched from the collapsing walls.

Alina ran.

She didn’t think.

She didn’t plan.

She ran because Luma was sobbing into her collar, because Fenrax was barely standing, because Ryvarr’s fire crackled with restrained violence, because Wendryx’s wings beat with absolute urgency.

Behind them, Vaethyr did not run.

He glided.

Reflections formed beneath his feet with every step — the pocket bending reality to bring the ground to him rather than the other way around.

He raised his hands.

A storm of shards formed overhead.

Wendryx spun.

“Down!”

Alina dropped instantly, shielding Luma with her body. Ryvarr flared flame upward, intercepting the storm. The shards bent around the fire, curving in unnatural arcs.

Fenrax threw himself sideways, collapsing against Alina’s hip just as a blade of mirror-light split the air where he had been standing.

The chamber lurched again.

The floor tilted.

Ryvarr slid.

Fenrax tumbled.

Alina nearly lost her footing.

Wendryx slammed a wing against the ground to stabilise them.

“Keep moving! The pocket is folding!”

The corridor ahead narrowed sharply, walls pulling inward like ribs.

Alina squeezed through, Ryvarr on her right, Fenrax stumbling behind her. Wendryx forced the narrowing walls apart with a brutal snap of his wings.

Vaethyr glided closer.

He reached out with one hand —
and the corridor rippled.

The path ahead split into three mirror copies.

Each one identical.

Each one false.

Noctyra’s favourite trap.

Alina froze.

“Wendryx —!”

“Middle!” Wendryx barked.

“Do not stop!”

Alina plunged into the middle corridor.

She didn’t look left.

She didn’t look right.

The instant they crossed the threshold —
the two false corridors collapsed inward with violent force,
smashing together like jaws.

Ryvarr snarled in triumph.

Fenrax whimpered but kept moving.

Luma clung tighter, tiny fingers shaking.

Vaethyr did not react.

He simply advanced.

The corridor behind them warped, lengthening like stretched fabric, giving him more reach.

Wendryx's breathing quickened — the dragon finally showing strain.

“We're almost out of the pocket!”

Alina's chest tightened.

Almost was not enough.

The corridor shook.

A thick reflective spike erupted from the wall, aiming straight for Alina's side.

Ryvarr hurled himself into it, flame detonating outward. The spike dissolved into molten mirror-light.

Ryvarr snarled, fire licking across his snout.

Alina reached out and brushed his shoulder.

“Thank you —”

He growled, but stayed at her side.

Fenrax suddenly staggered violently, body jerking backwards.

The tether surged.

It was trying to drag him straight toward Vaethyr.

“No—NO—!”

Alina grabbed him.

His paws scraped across the floor, claws leaving trails of flicker-light.

Wendryx turned.

“ALINA, LET HIM —

Fenrax lunged forward.

Not away.

Forward.

He slammed his head against Alina's hip —

and shoved her ahead.

Just as a mirror-blade tore through the space she had been standing.

Ryvarr roared and blasted the blade with fire, melting it mid-air.

Fenrax collapsed, gasping, shaking so violently he could barely lift his head.

Alina dropped to her knees.

“Fenrax —!”

He pressed his head into her arm, whimpering.

Wendryx’s voice boomed:

“MOVE!”

The corridor opened —
into a vast drop.

A vertical shaft of reflective stone leading down into deeper shadow.

Wendryx leapt.

Ryvarr followed.

Alina clutched Fenrax with one arm, Luma with the other —
and jumped.

They fell through a column of fractured reality.

Reflections spiralled upward.

Shadow bent around them like smoke in reverse.

The pocket above collapsed inward, sealing behind Vaethyr.

He reached the edge —
watched —

but did not jump.

He simply lowered his head.

And the pocket imploded.

Wendryx spread his wings, slowing their fall.

Ryvarr landed in a burst of flame.

Alina hit the ground on her knees, clutching both Luma and Fen.

Fenrux convulsed but was breathing.

Luma sobbed in her arms.

Ryvarr roared at the sealed passage.

Wendryx stood tall, chest heaving.

Alina looked up at him, shaking.

“Wendryx... where are we now?”

He looked into the deep, colourless gloom ahead.

“Noctyra,” he said.

“The real one.”

CHAPTER 44 — Breathing in Shadow

Noctyra Proper — Hollow Reflection Basin

Alina landed hard, knees jarring against the cold stone.
The air was thinner here — not in oxygen, but in reality.
Her breath came delayed, echoing faintly before settling into
her chest.

She held Luma tight.

The pixie's glow pulsed with faint, trembling rhythm, like a
candle struggling in wind.

“A... Alina...” Luma whispered, voice barely audible.

“You came...”

Alina pulled her close, tears stinging her eyes.

“We're here. You're safe. I've got you.”

Luma's small hands clung to her shirt, shaking.

“I... I tried not to be scared... I tried...”

Alina pressed her forehead to Luma's.

“You were brave. So brave.”

Fenrax collapsed beside her, whole body shivering in spasms.
His outline flickered unevenly, pieces of him blinking out for half
a second before returning.

The tether inside him pulsed in fractured beats — not one
steady pull, but a dozen jagged tugs.

Alina placed her hand on his head.

“Fen...”

He whimpered, ashamed.

He turned his face away.

Not from pain

—but from guilt.

Wendryx knelt beside him, lowering his head to examine the resurgent flicker.

“It will stabilise,” he murmured.

“The pocket forced the tether to extremes. Here, it will settle.”

Fenrax whimpered again.

Wendryx nudged his muzzle gently — not affection, but acknowledgement.

“You resisted,” Wendryx said.

“You chose us.”

Fenrax’s breath hitched.

Ryvarr approached last.

Flame rippled across his spine but held in tight, controlled lines.

His growl was low, protective, and constant.

He sniffed Luma, then lowered his head until his snout touched her tiny foot.

A soft, gentle gesture.

Luma burst into tears and hugged his flaming muzzle, curling into his warmth.

“I w-wanted to come back... I did... I did...”

Ryvarr growled softly — an answering comfort.

Alina smiled through her shaking breath.

“That’s the nicest I’ve ever seen him act.”

Fenrax huffed weakly as if offended.

Ryvarr flicked his tail in smug superiority.

Even Wendryx’s eyes softened.

For a moment.

Then Wendryx looked up.

The chamber around them was enormous — a basin carved from semi-reflective stone, sloping gently downward. The walls curved into a dome that disappeared into a soft, misted darkness. Faint reflections drifted across the surface like distant, living shapes.

The silence pressed inward.

Alina shivered.

“Wendryx... where exactly are we?”

The dragon’s voice was quiet.

“Noctyra proper. The true Realm.”

Ryvarr bristled.

Fenrax flattened his ears.

Alina held Luma tighter.

“What does that mean?”

Wendryx turned slowly, gauging the chamber with every sense he had.

“No illusions. No constructed pockets. No boundaries shaped by Generals.”

He looked to the misted heights.

“Just Shadow.”

The word settled like frost.

Luma buried her face into Alina’s collar.

Fenrax curled closer, trembling.

Ryvarr snarled at the mist.

Alina swallowed.

“And the Queen...?”

Wendryx lowered his voice even more.

“She knows we are here.”

Alina’s breath hitched.

“Is she coming?”

“No.”

Wendryx shook his head.

“She observes. Nothing more.”

The Queen does not intervene unless Shadow is threatened...
or intrigued.”

Fenrax whimpered.

Alina felt a cold crawl up her spine.

Ryvarr stepped between her and the darkness, flame
brightening.

Wendryx continued, calm and steady:

“We are no longer Vaethyr’s prey.”

Alina exhaled.

“Good...”

“We are now Noctyra’s guests.”

Her breath froze.

Ryvarr roared into the mist, fire bursting outward, scattering
reflections.

They fled into the high walls like startled birds.

Silence returned.

Alina forced herself to breathe.

“Wendryx... how do we get out?”

The dragon drew a slow breath and looked down at the
basin’s far edge — a faint ripple in the stone like a descending
curve.

“There is a path,” he said.

“Always one path.”

Fenrax raised his trembling head.

Luma clutched Alina’s sleeve.

Ryvarr pressed closer.

Alina swallowed hard.

“Is it safe?”

“No,” Wendryx said.

Honest.

Unyielding.

“But it leads upward.

Back toward Air.

Back to Zephyra.”

Luma sobbed quietly.

Alina hugged her, whispering:

“We’re going home, Luma. I promise.”

Fenrax pushed his head gently against Alina’s knee.

Ryvarr snorted, flame steadying.

Wendryx stepped forward.

“Rest now,” he said.

“We move soon.”

Alina looked into the mist — the weight of the Realm
pressing into her bones.

“We’ll be ready.”

Above them, the mist swirled once —

forming the faintest shape of a tall, thin silhouette.

Watching.

Then it dissolved.

CHAPTER 45 — The Path That Watches

Noctyra Proper → Ascending Reflection Spine

The air was heavy.

Not with smoke, not with heat — with attention.

Alina felt it settling on her skin like cold dust, clinging to every breath.

Luma stirred weakly in her arms.

“A-Alina... we’re... still in Shadow, aren’t we...?”

Alina held her closer.

“Yes. But we’re out of Vaethyr’s pocket. That was the worst of it.”

Wendryx glanced back.

“That was the most violent. Not the worst.”

Ryvarr growled, flame rippling low along his spine.

Fenrax, still trembling but upright, pressed himself to Alina’s leg. His outline had stopped fracturing, but it flickered faintly with every breath — the tether trying to stabilise itself in Noctyra’s pressure.

Wendryx turned toward the vast, dim chamber stretching ahead.

“We move.”

Alina nodded.

They stepped forward onto the smooth, curved stone — not fully reflective, but reflective enough that shapes drifted beneath its surface like shadows looking up from deep water.

Ryvarr snarled at them, flame flaring.

Wendryx murmured:

“Ignore them. They cannot breach.”

Fenrax didn’t believe that.

Neither did Alina.

But they moved.

The chamber narrowed into a long ascending passage.

The walls rose high around them — bending inward, leaning, twisting — as if they were walking inside the ribcage of some ancient creature made of memory and cold breath.

With every step, the stone shifted underfoot:

- not sliding
- not cracking
- rearranging, like a surface deciding which shape it preferred.

Alina shivered.

“Wendryx... will it let us out?”

“Yes,” the dragon said.

“But not all at once. Shadow tests those who leave.”

Ryvarr bared his teeth.

Fenrax whimpered and pressed tighter.

Luma stirred in Alina’s hold and blinked at the walls.

“...it’s breathing...”

Alina froze.

“...what?”

“The walls...” Luma whispered, voice weak.

“They... breathe...”

Alina looked again.

And she saw it — the faintest pulse, a slow expansion and contraction in the stone, almost invisible unless you were small enough and close enough to feel it.

Ryvarr snarled in disgust.

Wendryx did not slow.

“That is normal,” he said.

“Normal?” Alina whispered fiercely.

“Yes,” Wendryx replied.

“Noctyra does not sleep. It only rests.”

The passage curved upward — not a ramp, but a tilted slope of shifting stone that forced them into a tighter formation.

Wendryx led.

Alina with Luma walked into the centre.

Ryvarr guarded her right.

Fenrax guarded her left, though every step cost him.

Halfway up the slope, the ceiling dipped.

Alina ducked on instinct —

and a faint whisper brushed her ear.

Not a voice.

Not words.

Just a soft exhale.

Her blood froze.

“...Wendryx...”

“I know,” the dragon said without turning.

“Do not acknowledge it.”

Ryvarr growled, flame erupting.

The glow pushed the whispering air back — it drifted like mist recoiling from heat.

Fenrax pressed close to Alina, trembling.

Luma hid against her collar.

“What was that?” Alina whispered.

“Shadow,” Wendryx said.

“Not a creature. Not an echo. Just Shadow.”

The passage opened into a larger space — a narrow spine of stone connecting several dark alcoves. Above them, the ceiling

dissolved into mist, drifting in shapes that almost looked like figures watching.

Ryvarr glared at them with murderous intensity.

Fenrax whimpered.

Wendryx finally stopped.

“This is where it begins,” he said.

Alina tightened her grip on Luma.

“...what begins?”

Wendryx turned his head slightly, eyes hard.

“The ascent. Shadow does not stop us. It only makes us walk the part of ourselves we fear.”

Alina exhaled shakily.

“...and what is that?”

Wendryx’s answer was soft, but unyielding.

“That you are not enough.”

The corridor ahead twisted at those words — subtle but unmistakable.

Ryvarr snarled.

Fenrax collapsed briefly before pushing himself upright again.

Luma’s glow flickered with fear.

Alina steadied herself.

“I’m not listening to it,” she said.

Wendryx nodded once.

“Good. Then follow me.”

He stepped onto the next part of the ascending spine.

It narrowed.

The walls leaned in.

The mist above whispered.

Shadows shifted beneath the stone like shapes preparing to rise.

Alina took a breath.

Held Luma close.

Placed a hand on each wolf.

And walked forward.

Into the part of Noctyra where Shadow waits for who you think you are.

CHAPTER 46 — The Corridor of Unspoken

Fears

Noctyra Proper — Ascending Reflection Spine

The spine narrowed again.

Here, the walls didn't breathe — they listened.

Alina felt it instantly:

a soft pull behind her ribs,

like something waiting to take her words

before she ever said them.

Wendryx slowed.

“This part is not dangerous,” he said.

“But it is unkind.”

Ryvarr's growl deepened.

Fenrax whimpered and pressed close.

Luma tightened her grip around Alina's collar.

“What does that mean?” Alina whispered.

Wendryx didn't answer.

He simply stepped forward.

The corridor changed.

Not visually —

emotionally.

A pressure fell upon them like invisible fingers sliding down their backs.

Alina's next breath came out wrong —

too loud,

too lonely,

too exposed.

Ryvarr stiffened, tail spiking, flame curling inward in retreat.

Fenrax's outline flickered in sharp, painful pulses.

Luma clung tighter, whispering,
“Alina... I don’t like this...”
Alina hugged her closer.
“I know. Stay with me.”
Wendryx kept moving.
“Shadow listens to doubt,” he murmured.
“That is why this corridor exists.”
The stone beneath them rippled —
but not physically.
Emotionally.
A soft vibration layered under each footstep, like a heartbeat
that wasn’t theirs.
Alina stepped onto a slightly raised stone —
And froze.
A shape rose on the wall ahead.
Her.
Back turned.
Alone.
Standing in darkness without wolves, without Luma,
without Wendryx.
She wasn’t speaking.
She was trembling.
Ryvarr snarled and stepped in front of Alina, teeth bared.
Fenrax whimpered, backing away.
Luma hid deeper into Alina’s neck.
Wendryx didn’t look back.
“Do not engage.”
Alina swallowed.
“What is it?”
“Not you,” Wendryx said.

“Just the part of you that believes you will fail.”

Her breath hitched.

Another shape rose beside the first.

This one was Fenrax —

but corrupted, eyes hollow, chest tether glowing like a wound.

Fenrax screamed silently and turned away, trying to bury himself under Alina’s arm.

“It’s not you,” she whispered, running a shaking hand over his head.

“It’s not you, Fen. Look at me.”

He didn’t.

He couldn’t.

Ryvarr butted him with his snout, a rough shove — but protective.

Fenrax steadied.

Barely.

The corridor pulsed again.

A third shape rose on the right wall.

Wendryx froze.

It was him.

But not the real him.

This Wendryx was bowed, wings cracked, flame-light dim in his chest, eyes dark with failure.

Wendryx exhaled — one controlled, deliberate breath.

Then he moved past it without a single flicker of reaction.

Alina admired him for it.

Even Shadow couldn’t shake him.

But then —

A fourth shape rose.

Ryvarr.

But not the proud, furious wolf beside her.

This Ryvarr was twisted —

flame extinguished,

spine bent,

eyes glimmering with cold, empty hunger.

Ryvarr erupted.

He charged the wall, flame exploding in a vicious blast. The wall rippled like water absorbing heat, the image dissolving into dust.

Alina grabbed him.

“Ryvarr —HEY —focus!”

He snarled, flame snapping at the air, breath shaking.

But he stayed.

Barely.

Wendryx’s voice was steady.

“Shadow never shows truth.

Only fear.”

The corridor tightened.

The walls leaned closer.

Shapes moved within the surface like fish drifting below ice.

Wendryx stepped forward again.

“Stay in my steps.

Do not look for meaning.

And do not listen to anything that sounds like —”

A voice whispered behind Alina.

“...mother...?”

Her blood froze.

Luma seized in terror.

Fenrax collapsed.

Ryvarr spun in a full circle, fire erupting.

Wendryx's voice cut through the panic.

“IGNORE IT.”

Alina clenched her teeth.

Her breath shook.

She looked forward.

Not back.

Forward.

They moved.

The corridor opened slightly, walls widening into a more spacious curve.

The oppressive pressure loosened — but did not vanish.

Luma finally spoke, voice small.

“Alina... why does it show that?”

Alina hesitated.

Wendryx answered instead.

“Because Shadow has no power of its own.

It uses what you bring with you.”

Alina looked down at Fenrax — weak, flickering, terrified, but still here.

At Ryvarr — furious, loyal, burning, shaking with barely controlled protective rage.

At Luma — trembling, clinging, but alive.

At Wendryx — steady, calm, unwavering.

She breathed.

“We're still together,” she whispered.

“That's the only thing that matters.”

Shadow pulsed as if dissatisfied.

Wendryx nodded once.

“Well said.”

At the far end of the corridor, a soft glow appeared —
pale, thin, gentle.
Not light.
Not fire.
A reflection of something not hostile.
Luma lifted her head.
“...Alina...”
“What is it?”
“It’s... a path. A real one. I can feel it.”
Wendryx confirmed with a glance.
“Yes.
Shadow is done listening.”
Ryvarr exhaled a hot plume of flame.
Fenrax steadied.
Alina held Luma close.
“Then let’s get out of here.”
And the group stepped toward the faint, waiting light —
Leaving their unspoken fears behind them.
For now.

CHAPTER 47 — The Tilt Beneath the Heart

Noctyra Proper → Lower Ascent Veins

The glow they moved toward wasn't warm.

It wasn't even light.

It was simply not Shadow — a thin boundary where the weight of Noctyra lessened, where breath came a fraction easier, and sound did not vanish into the walls.

Alina stepped onto the pale stone.

Luma exhaled shakily.

“...it's better here...”

Ryvarr growled low, but his flame steadied.

Fenrax finally managed to stand without collapsing, though every breath still shuddered through his chest.

Wendryx scanned the chamber with slow, deliberate movements.

“We are entering the Veins,” he said.

Alina blinked.

“The... what?”

“Noctyra's lower channels,” Wendryx explained.

“Rivers of pressure. They carry the Realm's pulse.”

Luma tightened her grip on Alina's collar.

“Rivers... that carry... pressure?”

“Yes,” Wendryx said.

“And they shift.”

Alina's stomach tightened.

“How shift?”

Wendryx's gaze sharpened.

“Unpredictably.”

Ryvarr snarled.

Fenrax whimpered.

Before Alina could ask more, the stone beneath them tilted.

Not a gentle incline.

A sudden, sharp lurch, as if the entire world had been tilted
by a giant hand.

Alina stumbled forward.

Ryvarr threw his body against her side to keep her upright.

Fenrax slid across the stone with a strangled cry —

Alina grabbed him by the ruff just in time.

His paws scrambled, claws scraping sparks against the
surface.

Wendryx dug his claws into the tilted ground.

“It has begun.”

Alina panted.

“What has?!”

“The Tilt,” Wendryx said.

“Noctyra is changing its direction.

It wants us to move.”

Luma trembled.

“Where?”

Wendryx pointed with his snout up the vein, toward a
narrow, rising corridor.

“There.”

Ryvarr looked at it and snarled harder than before.

Alina swallowed.

“That looks like a trap.”

Wendryx didn’t disagree.

“It is. But it is also the only way out.”

The Tilt intensified.

The ground angled further —

shifting from a slope
to a ramp
to something closer to a wall.

Alina felt her feet sliding.

Ryvarr planted his paws, claws clicking hard, practically glueing himself to the stone. He angled his body behind Fenrax, blocking him from sliding backwards.

Fenrax whined, tail tucked, paws scrambling uselessly.

Alina dropped to her knees, clutching both Luma and Fenrax. The Tilt pushed her downward, gravity dragging her toward the lower basin they'd just escaped.

Wendryx shouted:

“CLIMB! NOW!”

The order struck like thunder.

Ryvarr lunged upward, positioning himself under Alina to give her a boost.

Fenrax tried to move and failed —

Alina grabbed him again, arm hooked around his chest.

“I've got you!

Move with me!”

Fenrax whimpered, pushing with every ounce of strength left.

Luma buried her face in Alina's shoulder, tiny fingers digging into her shirt.

The Tilt grew worse.

Stone shifted beneath their feet —

becoming slippery, cold, angled.

Alina's boots skidded.

Ryvarr barked harshly, flame flaring around his paws, burning grip into the stone.

Wendryx braced his wings against the vein walls and leaned downward.

“Take my tail!” he shouted.

Alina reached with her free hand and grabbed it.

Wendryx began pulling them upward.

Ryvarr pushed from below.

Fenrax scrambled with shaking legs.

Luma clung to Alina like a heartbeat made of light.

Shadow pulsed around them —

a soft, watching exhale.

Alina bit down a cry.

“Don’t —let—go!”

Fenrax roared — not a wolf’s roar, not a sound of strength, but a sound of refusal.

He would not let the tether drag him back down.

Ryvarr growled in approval.

Wendryx pulled harder.

The Tilt eased.

The vein levelled.

They reached the plateau.

Alina collapsed onto solid stone, chest heaving, Luma still clutched in her arms.

Fenrax fell beside her, trembling uncontrollably, but alive.

Ryvarr curled around them like a blazing barrier, snarling at the darkness.

Wendryx paced in a tight circle, scanning the space.

Alina finally managed to speak.

“Wendryx... what was that?”

He stopped.

His wings were tight.

His breath was slow.
His voice was steady.
“Noctyra moved us.”
Luma peeked out weakly.
“W-why... would it... do that...?”
Wendryx looked toward the rising corridor ahead —
a narrow, sharp path carved into the reflective stone, leading
upward into deeper dark.
“Because we did not choose correctly.”
Alina blinked.
“So it chooses for us?”
“Yes.”
Ryvarr snarled in disgust.
Fenrax trembled.
Luma hid again.
Alina rubbed Fenrax’s head, grounding him.
“Do we... follow the path?”
Wendryx met her eyes.
“There is no other way.
And Shadow will tilt again if we delay.”
Ryvarr rose, stance rigid.
Fenrax slowly stood, leaning against Alina.
Luma whispered into her collar.
“I... trust you...”
Alina breathed.
“Wendryx... lead us.”
He stepped toward the narrow corridor.
“It will grow darker,” he warned.
Ryvarr growled.
Fenrax shivered.

Luma squeezed Alina's collar.
Alina straightened.
"Then we match it."
They stepped into the rising corridor —
And Noctyra pulsed behind them,
watching
and waiting.

CHAPTER 48 — The Throat of Shadow

Noctyra Proper → Upper Vein Corridor (Final Ascent)

The rising corridor narrowed so sharply that Alina could touch both walls with her fingertips.

The stone was cold — not icy, but empty, like touching something that had never been meant for warmth.

Ryvarr moved ahead, tail rigid, flame coiled tightly along his spine in a razor-thin line. Every few steps, he looked back, making sure Alina and Fenrax remained behind him.

Fenrax pressed into her left side, legs shaking, outline flickering in uneven pulses.

His breaths came short and fast — not panic, but the tether grinding against him like jagged metal.

Luma stirred in Alina's arms.

"...how much... higher...?"

"Not far," Alina whispered.

Wendryx confirmed with a low hum.

"The corridor of upper veins always leads upward.

Shadow allows no descent from here."

That statement brought Alina a strange comfort.

One direction was terrifying.

The other direction didn't exist.

Ryvarr stopped suddenly.

Wendryx extended one wing to block Alina's path.

"Do not move," the dragon said.

Alina froze.

Fenrax's trembling worsened.

Luma lifted her head a little.

"...what is it...?"

Wendryx's eyes narrowed.
"Shadow has placed a choice."
Alina looked past Ryvarr —
and saw it.
The corridor split ahead.
Not left versus right.
Not two paths.
Three identical corridors.
Same width.
Same depth.
Same walls.
Same faint shimmer of reflected light.
But only one was real.
Luma shivered.
"...it's... wrong..."
Wendryx nodded.
"The real path leads upward. The others lead back into
pressure traps."
Alina felt her chest tighten.
"How do we choose the right one?"
Wendryx didn't answer immediately.
He studied Fenrax.
The broken wolf lifted his head weakly, chest flickering,
tether pulsing in slow, painful beats.
Wendryx exhaled.
"He cannot see clearly... but he can feel the pull."
Fenrax whimpered.
Luma clutched Alina's sleeve.
"Shadow... pulls him... where it wants him.
Not where... we need to go."

Alina knelt beside Fen, touching her forehead to his.
“Fenrax... I know it hurts.
But... can you show us the wrong path?”
Fenrax’s eyes flickered gold –ember –gold.
He lifted one trembling paw —
toward the left corridor.
Wendryx nodded.
“Good. That one leads back down.”
Fenrax whimpered and pointed again, this time toward the
right corridor.
Ryvarr snarled.
“That one leads toward the hunger,” Wendryx said.
Alina took a breath.
“So the real path is...”
Fenrax dropped his paw, exhausted.
Alina looked to the middle corridor.
Wendryx inclined his head.
“Yes.”
The choice felt clean.
True.
Shadow had tested them — and they had answered.
The middle corridor grew steeper as they climbed.
The air tightened.
Echoes pulsed in the walls — not voices, not illusions, just
low thuds of pressure like distant heartbeats.
Fenrax stumbled.
Ryvarr caught him, nudging him back into formation.
Alina supported him with one arm, the other wrapped
around Luma.
“Stay with me... almost there...”

Luma whispered:

“Shadow... knows we’re leaving...”

Alina didn’t deny it.

She felt it too — a subtle tightening behind her ribs, like hands brushing her back as she walked.

Wendryx slowed.

“We are close.”

The corridor suddenly widened into a domed chamber — not large, but tall, its ceiling lost in swirling grey mist.

A faint glow pulsed at the far wall.

A Veil.

Not silver like the Air Realm.

This one was smoke -white, shifting, breathing, bending — the underside of Aelurien, where Shadow pushed against Wind.

Ryvarr snarled, flame flaring.

Fenrax pressed into Alina.

Luma gasped softly.

“...that’s... the exit...”

Wendryx nodded.

“Yes.

But we must reach it.”

Alina frowned.

“What do you mean? It’s right —”

The floor dropped.

Not physically.

Emotionally.

Every fear she’d carried through Shadow surged at once — failure, loss, helplessness, not being enough —

Her knees buckled.

Luma cried out.

Ryvarr roared.

Fenrax collapsed.

Wendryx braced against the pressure, wings spreading in a protective arc that rippled against the chamber walls.

“Noctyra is making its bid,” Wendryx said.

“This is the last pull.”

Ryvarr growled in defiance.

Luma clung to Alina’s neck.

Fenrax tried to stand and failed.

Alina forced her legs beneath her.

Shadow pressed harder.

Showing her a dozen shapes of herself —

lost, alone, broken, abandoned —

She closed her eyes.

“No.”

Her voice shook.

But it didn’t break.

“No.

I choose my steps.”

The pressure cracked.

Cracks of silver light shot through the dark.

Ryvarr pushed up beside her, flame roaring.

Fenrax dragged himself upright.

Luma whispered:

“...go...”

Wendryx lowered one wing over them like a shield.

“Now,” he said.

Together, the four of them moved.

Step by step.

Breath by breath.

Fear by fear.
Toward the Veil.
The pressure weakened —
The glow brightened —
And the Veil pulsed open like a breath of wind breaking
through darkness.
Wendryx turned his head.
“Alina,” he said quietly.
She met his gaze.
“You lead.”
She stepped forward.
And crossed into the light beneath Aelurien.

CHAPTER 49 — Wind That Remembers Pain

Aelurien Veil → Upper Windpath (Air Realm)

The moment Alina stepped through the Veil, the world breathed.

Fresh air filled her lungs — cool, pure, sharp enough to sting. She gasped, knees hitting the soft white stone as the pressure of Noctyra finally vanished from her chest.

Luma's glow brightened immediately, faint but steady.

“Haa... haa... A -Alina... the air... it's warm...”

Alina held her close, trembling.

Fenrax collapsed beside her with a soft, broken whine.

His outline steadied instantly — no flicker, no glitch — the tether recoiling like a wounded thing forced back behind a door.

Ryvarr stumbled out of the Veil, flame guttering, then reignited in a controlled burst.

He shook himself violently, sparks flying.

Wendryx emerged last, wings half-spread, breath deep and controlled.

The Veil closed behind them with a soft pulse.

And for the first time since entering Shadow —

Silence didn't feel threatening.

Wind curled around them, cool and light.

But the wind was not normal.

It moved in spirals — gentle, searching spirals — drifting around Alina, Luma, Fenrax, and Ryvarr like curious fingers.

Wendryx watched them closely.

“The wind remembers what crossed it.”

Alina exhaled shakily.

“Can it... see what happened?”

“No,” Wendryx said.

“But it feels the wounds.”

Fenrax whimpered.

The wind curled around him, then retreated — almost afraid of the tether’s echo.

Ryvarr nudged him firmly, forcing him to his feet.

Luma, still in Alina’s arms, looked around weakly.

“...the wind is worried...”

Alina blinked.

“You can feel that?”

“Yes... it’s like... the air is asking what we saw...”

Wendryx nodded.

“Air records emotion. Not memory.

Your fear... your pain... all of it lingers.”

Ryvarr snorted, flame pulsing in irritation.

Fenrax pressed into Alina’s leg, shivering.

The wind tightened around them again.

A voice drifted on it —

not speech,

not words,

just a familiar presence.

Zephyra.

She arrived as a swirl of silver and pale blue, condensing into a luminous shape on the ledge ahead.

Wings like translucent ribbons.

Eyes bright and sharp as frost.

She stepped forward, concern crossing her usually serene face.

“Wendryx... something has happened.”

Wendryx bowed his head slightly.

“Yes.”

Zephyra studied them — each one — without blinking.

Her gaze lingered longest on Fenrax’s trembling form, then on Luma’s dim glow.

She inhaled deeply.

“There is Shadow on your breath.”

Ryvarr growled softly.

Alina hugged Luma closer.

Zephyra approached, careful and slow, as if touching wounded birds.

“Child of light,” she murmured to Luma,

“What did the dark take from you?”

Luma closed her eyes.

“...time... and warmth... but not Alina...”

Zephyra’s expression softened.

She touched Luma’s head gently — wind curling around her in a soft pulse.

“Then it took nothing that cannot be returned.”

Alina let out a shaky sigh.

Zephyra turned to Wendryx.

“Shadow does not open its pocket without reason. Why was it watching?”

Wendryx’s wings tightened.

“It watched her.”

Zephyra’s eyes flicked to Alina.

Not suspicious.

Not startled.

Thoughtful.

Quiet.

The wind shifted with her.

Alina felt her stomach twist — not with guilt, not with fear
— with awareness.

Zephyra was intelligent enough to see patterns.

Intuitive enough to sense weight.

But she said nothing.

Instead, she looked upward, toward the distant sky where
Airpaths bent between Realms.

“Wendryx... the currents are strained.”

Wendryx nodded.

“I know.”

Alina frowned.

“Strained how?”

Zephyra raised a hand.

The wind rippled.

A current of air twisted unnaturally — a subtle kink in the
flow — like a knot tied in an invisible river.

“It is happening across the Veil lines,” Zephyra murmured.

“In Water.

In Light.

Even in Dreamwave.”

Luma shivered.

Fenrax stiffened.

Ryvart growled.

Wendryx lowered his head.

“It is beginning.”

Alina’s heart tightened.

“What is beginning?”

Zephyra looked at her — not with fear, not with distrust, but
with quiet, ancient sadness.

“The Realms are shifting.

Something in Water Realm is tilting the currents.”
The wind trembled.
Luma clung tighter.
Fenrax pressed into Alina.
Ryvarr’s flame dimmed.
Wendryx stood tall.
“We must reach the Dreamwave,” he said.
“Zephyra, prepare the Windpath.”
Zephyra nodded.
“It is open. But unstable.”
Alina swallowed.
“We’re going... to Dreamwave?”
Wendryx looked back at her, eyes calm and unshakeable.
“Yes.”
He stepped toward the rising windpath, a thin vein of
spiralling air that led upward into clouds shaped like a door.
“We must tell the child’s Dream.”
Ryvarr moved first.
Fenrax followed.
Luma whispered softly:
“...Alina... I think something is waking...”
Alina clutched her a little tighter.
Then she stepped into the wind.

CHAPTER 50 — The Dreamwave Disturbed

Windpath → Dreamwave Threshold → Dreamwave Proper

The Windpath rose like a coiling ribbon of pale blue air, wrapping upward into the clouds.

Alina felt her feet leave the stone as the current lifted them — gently at first, then with growing force.

Luma pressed into her collar, eyes half-closed.

“...it’s soft... but shaking...”

Fenrax whimpered at her feet, trembling as the Windpath carried him.

His outline remained unstable — not flickering, but vibrating faintly, as though Dreamwave itself couldn’t decide how to reflect him.

Ryvarr snarled, flame curling close to his skin.

He hated this part — wind that lifted but did not burn.

Wendryx hovered just ahead of them, wings angled into the rising current, guiding them with precision.

Zephyra ascended last, shaping the wind with elegant sweeps of her hands.

Her presence made the journey less violent — but not stable.

Alina felt it the higher they went:

The wind trembled around her.

Not from her weight.

Not from fear.

From something else.

Something far away.

Something huge.

“What’s... happening?” she asked the wind guardian.

Zephyra didn’t look back.

“A fracture,” she said quietly.
“Not here. Not in Shadow.
In Water.”
Alina’s pulse tightened.
“Water Realm is... breaking?”
“Not yet,” Zephyra murmured.
“But something stirs beneath Myrrhmar.
The currents feel fear.”
Luma whimpered, wings curling.
Alina held her closer.
Fenrax pressed against Alina’s leg, eyes wide and unfocused.
Ryvart paced in the air beside her, flame tightening to a
small, furious ember.
He felt the tremor too.
Wendryx raised his voice over the wind.
“Eyes forward. Dreamwave approaches.”
They broke the cloudline.
And Dreamwave met them like a tide of living light.
The sky folded into shimmering layers — rippling silvers,
soft blues, drifting golds — all moving like currents in a vast
celestial ocean.
Alina exhaled sharply.
Every time she saw Dreamwave, it felt like looking into a
world made of memory and hope.
But this time —
Something was wrong.
The Dreamwave wobbled.
The currents buckled, bending inward and outward in
violent tremors like heartbeat spikes.
Luma gasped.

“...it’s hurting...”

Fenrax collapsed to his stomach on the Windpath.

Ryvarr growled, tail bristling.

Wendryx steadied himself mid-air.

And Zephyra froze.

Her eyes widened.

Her wings flickered with sudden tension.

“This is worse than I thought.”

Alina looked at the Dreamwave, heart racing.

“What’s causing it?”

Zephyra answered with difficulty.

“Emotion.

Fear.

Pressure.

And something else...”

A deep shimmer pulsed through the Dreamwave —
not sound,

not light,

just a wave of raw feeling.

Alina staggered.

Luma whimpered.

Fenrax trembled violently.

Ryvarr snapped at the air, flame erupting in jagged bursts.

Wendryx landed on the shifting Dreamwave surface, claws
digging into the liquid-light floor.

“It knows,” he said quietly.

“Something is shifting in Water.

And the Dreamwave feels every heartbeat of it.”

Alina tried to steady her breath.

“What do we do?”

Wendryx turned to her.

“We deliver a warning.

We deliver truth.”

Zephyra touched the Dreamwave’s surface — it shuddered.

“Alina,” she whispered,

“Dreamwave is opening to you.”

The surface beneath them rippled in a spiral of gold and silver.

Luma’s glow brightened instinctively.

Fenrax’s outline steadied for one heartbeat.

Ryvarr snarled as if guarding her from the Realm itself.

And the Dreamwave responded to Alina’s presence.

Not with words.

Not with visions.

Just a single, pure pull.

A direction.

A place.

Wendryx inhaled.

“It calls you to the centre.

We must go.”

Alina swallowed hard.

“Why me?”

Zephyra didn’t answer immediately.

She studied Alina — the girl, the survivors around her, the trembling Dreamwave beneath their feet.

Then she spoke softly.

“Because Dreamwave answers the heart that trembles with it.”

No heir hint.

Not even close.

Just truth.
Luma curled closer.
Fenrax pressed against her leg.
Ryvarr stood like a wall of fire at her side.
And Alina stepped forward —
into the Dreamwave's waiting currents.

CHAPTER 51 — Quiet Before the Tide

Multi-Realm

The first sign came as a shiver.

Not in Dreamwave.

Not in Shadow.

In Water.

Deep beneath the glass-bright surface of Myrrhmar Abyss, the Water Realm breathed in long, slow currents of thought.

Structures of liquid crystal and suspended rivers thrummed with their usual calm rhythms, carrying emotional tides from above to below and back again.

Then something pulled.

A single current kinked, twisting against its own flow — as if the Realm had caught its breath.

High above, arches of liquid stone hummed with a note just out of tune.

Leviathan felt it.

Far below the visible depths, he lay coiled like a sleeping storm, wings folded against the vast sweep of his body, eyes closed. Water moved with him, through him, around him — every current a thought, every tide a slow, patient breath.

The wrongness reached him long before it touched anyone else.

Not a sound.

Not an image.

A weight.

A gathering pressure in the emotional tides flowing through Myrrhmar — too heavy, too sharp, threaded with fear from distant places and something darker beneath.

The Abyss pulsed.

Leviathan's tail flicked once.

The Realm shuddered in response.

Then he stilled again, listening.

The storm had not yet broken.

But its shape was forming.

In the Dreamwave, the disturbance arrived as a snag.

The great ocean of memory -light rippled as usual, carrying the drifting imprints of a thousand sleeping minds. Feathers of silver, strands of gold, tiny sparks of colour — all moving in wide, gentle currents.

And then, near a depth aligned with Myrrhmar, one current caught.

It jerked sideways, dragged by something heavy and unseen far below the surface.

The ripple shot outward.

Zephyra felt it where she hovered near one of the Dreamwave's higher arches, eyes half-closed, wind wrapped around her like a cloak.

A thread in the current stopped behaving like memory.

It moved like weight.

Wind spiralled tighter around her, instinct pulling every strand of air toward the disturbance.

She extended one hand into the Dreamwave.

The light touched her fingers —

And snagged.

A tiny hitch. A drag. A stutter in flow.

Not Shadow.

Not pure corruption.

Something pressing down on fear until it became almost unbearable.

Beneath Myrrhmar.

Zephyra drew back, wind curling sharply behind her.

The Dreamwave tried to smooth itself, currents re-threading — but the knot did not vanish.

She did not speak.

Her language here was pressure, not words.

Instead, she adjusted the Dream currents around the knot, trying to keep its tremors from rippling too violently into other Realms.

It worked.

A little.

At the very edge of Water Realm, where currents thinned into a liminal brink between Realms, a shadow moved against the flow.

Kaelen was exhausted long before he saw the entrance.

Every step felt like pushing his body through cold glue. Shadowed fur hung heavy with moisture. The corrupted eye burned, sending violet pulses of pain down the marked side of his face. His good eye blurred at the edges.

The water around him tried to help — cool threads soothing the ache, soft tides cradling his paws — but fear drove him onward.

Something was moving behind him in Noctyra.

Something that should not have stirred so loudly, so soon.

He had seen too many pits to mistake the signs.

Pressure.

Hunger.

Patterns in the dark that watched, then turned their heads toward Myrrhmar.

He reached the translucent threshold where Shadow bled into Water.

The boundary shimmered like a vertical lake turned on its side.

He pushed through.

For a heartbeat, the corruption in his eye flared — violet lines blazing, pain spiking, Shadow screaming against the crossing.

Then the Water Realm closed around him.

The burning eased, crushed back by a tidal hush.

Kaelen staggered forward.

Structures of suspended rivers and liquid bridges blurred around him. Guardians parted instinctively, sensing Shadow marks but no malice. Tiny fin-creatures darted away, then circled back with wary curiosity.

He could not speak.

But his body carried the message.

Every step wrote it.

Danger.

Coming.

From Noctyra.

Toward Myrrhmar.

He managed three more strides along the entrance causeway.

Then his legs folded.

The Shadow-fox crashed to the rippling ground with a deep, muffled thud. A wave of panic rolled outward through the Water guardians; they surged closer, then hesitated — instinct catching the scent of failed corruption and broken courage.

Memory fragments flickered in Kaelen's mind as
consciousness slithered away.

A tunnel of black rock.

Violet mouths opening in the dark.

A lean, scarred Shadow-wolf at his side — Varrik — teeth
bared, eyes bright with warning.

“Go,” said in the language of movement, not words; a
shoulder shove, a shove back, a decision.

Varrik's silhouette turned and leapt toward the pursuing
dark.

Kaelen ran in the opposite direction.

The fragments broke apart.

He lay still at the Realm's edge, chest rising and falling in
heavy, slow breaths.

Guardians circled him, uneasy.

No one knew yet what he had brought with him.

The Realm flowed on.

Far away, in Thornwild Expanse, the first tremor came
through the roots.

It was not dramatic.

The ground did not crack.

Trees did not fall.

Rivers did not surge.

The earth simply tightened.

Deep beneath the moss-soft surface, old stone clenched like a
fist. Roots pulled fractionally inward. Subterranean tunnels
paused their slow growth as if listening.

On a ridge above a quiet glade, the Stoneheart Stag lifted his
head.

The Stoneheart Stag's body was still as carved rock, antlers heavy with root-shaped branches, eyes steady. He felt the tremor travel through Thornwild's bones, carrying stories from other Realms.

Not words.

Not visions.

Weight.

He planted one hoof.

The shockwave that moved outward was gentle, stabilising — a grounding answer to the distant wrongness. Earth acknowledged, absorbed, made room.

Nearby, in a tangle of luminous vines and soft life-rich growth where Sylatheriona's influence brushed the Realm, petals quivered. The Life Mythic's presence pressed more firmly into the soil, sending quiet strength into budding roots.

Together, Earth and Life braced.

No panic.

No flurry of action.

Just preparation — the way trees lean ever so slightly before a storm.

In Solareth, Light noticed last.

Not because it was blind, but because it was precise.

Solaryn stood beneath an arc of living crystal, surrounded by maps of light suspended in the air — lines and lattices showing the Realms in shifting geometry. Every path of travel, every Veil, every stable corridor shimmered in quiet motion.

He studied them with calm, golden eyes.

For a long time, everything seemed normal.

Then one line bent.

Just a fraction.

A single route on the map — a distant connection touching
Water and Dreamwave — twisted out of true.

Solaryn narrowed his gaze.

The distortion was not dramatic.

No Veil had collapsed.

No corridor had shattered.

But the structure was wrong.

He tilted his head slightly, tracing the error through the
lattice:

from Myrrhmar's depths

up through disturbed currents

into a snag in Dreamwave

and out along shock -threads fanning toward other Realms.

Light does not panic.

It observes.

He watched the wrongness for a long time, tracking its edges.

He could have sounded an alarm.

He could have summoned guardians.

He could have tried to re-straighten the bent lines by force.

Instead, Solaryn folded extra light around the distortion,
marking it silently.

Not yet, he decided.

The pattern was still forming.

He would wait until it revealed its true shape.

Across all Realms, nothing seemed to happen.

Water guardians went about their routes, uneasy without
knowing why.

Dreamwave continued to shimmer, its snag hidden under
Zephyra's careful pressure.

Thornwild's beasts stamped the earth once, then returned to their slow work.

Solareth's halls of light shone as steady as ever.

Kaelen slept at the edge of Myrrhmar, chest rising and falling.

No one, yet, listened to what his broken journey meant.

But tension had entered the worlds — a coil beneath the surface, waiting for the moment it would be forced to snap.

The tide had not broken.

Not yet.

But the Realms were no longer still.

CHAPTER 52 — When Water Trembles

Water Realm (Primary), Multi-Realm Resonance

The first crack was silent.

No sound.

No quake.

No shatter.

Just a change in the way the water breathed.

Myrrhmar Abyss — Present

The crystal-smooth expanse of the Water Realm shifted, its perfectly aligned currents bending out of rhythm. Swells rose where no tide drove them. Ridges of liquid stone hummed with a deep, uneasy vibration.

Guardians paused mid-stride.

Tiny ripple-fish scattered into deeper pools.

Suspended rivers sagged and reformed with slower heartbeat-pulses.

They felt it.

None understood it.

Except one.

Beneath the Realm: Leviathan

Deep in the abyss, Leviathan stirred.

Not half-awake.

Not drifting.

Awake.

His wings unfurled in slow, enormous arcs, each movement sending massive pressure shifts through the entire Abyss. The Water Realm responded instantly — currents tightening, structures groaning, shoals scattering in spirals of panic.

Emotion crashed into him from every direction:

Fear.

Shadow.

A gathering weight from realms above.

A distant echo of a tear that had burned through

Dreamwave.

A young child's terror.

A Shadow tether snapping.

Myrrhmar being called by something not Water.

And beneath all of it —

the unmistakable pressure of Wulfric's pull.

A hunger threaded into Water's depths like a black hook
dragging the emotional tides inward.

Leviathan's eyes opened.

Blue light flooded the Abyss.

His tail coiled.

His wings pressed against the stone.

His chest expanded with a breath so deep it made the Realm
shudder.

The monsters of Myrrhmar —
the ancient things of the deep —
stirred in answer.

Draezhan lumbered in his sleep, a ripple of dark silver scales
rolling across his body.

It had begun.

DREAMWAVE

The snag that Zephyra had been holding together with
careful streams finally slipped from her control.

The Dreamwave buckled.

A tremor expanded outward, bending currents into spirals, colours bleeding into one another in sickening twists. Memory - threads snapped and reformed, tangled with emotional shards heavy from Water and Shadow.

A child's dream fluttered like a candle in stormwind.

Windpaths tightened along their spines, shrinking in response.

Zephyra raised her arms, palms open.

Wind swirled through her fingers.

She pushed her strength into the wave.

It didn't calm.

It recoiled.

Zephyra's eyes widened.

"...this is not fear," she whispered.

"This is... a warning."

Air Realm

Aelurien's windpaths twisted.

Currents that once moved in graceful arcs now kinked and snapped, forming sudden pockets of violent pressure. Storm - winds rose in spirals, confused, indecisive.

Wendryx felt it first.

Then Ryvarr, flame bursting in an instinctive flare.

Fenrax whimpered, sensing the emotional spikes like claws in his chest.

Luma clung to Alina, trembling with faint echoes of Water's grief.

The wind was frightened.

Not panicked.

Not screaming.

Frightened.

Alina turned toward Wendryx.

“...what does this mean?”

Wendryx didn't answer immediately.

The wind answered for him.

A low, rising moan.

The Realm exhaling in dread.

Thornwild Expanse — Earth

Roots twisted.

Rivers tightened.

Birdsong stopped.

In the valley below, the Stoneheart Stag raised his head sharply.

A tremor rolled through the soil — not physical, but emotional — like the ground remembering a fear it hadn't felt since the Great War.

Sylatheriona's vines pulsed with defensive light, petals shivering as Life braced for pain.

Earth and Life moved in tandem, silently warning each other.

Prepare.

Solareth — Light Realm

Solaryn's maps buckled.

Lines of perfect light bent sharply as pressure from Water knocked their geometry out of alignment. Veil -connections flickered. Several paths collapsed entirely before re-forming, thinner and more fragile.

Solaryn stepped back.

He had seen distortions before.

But never one that involved every single Realm at the same time.

He whispered to the light, almost reverently:
“...the structure is shifting.”
He wasn't speaking to anyone.
He was acknowledging a truth.
And Light does not lie.
Water Realm — The Breaking Moment
Kaelen awoke on the edge of Myrrhmar, gasping.
He jerked upright, eyes wild, corruption burning through
one side of his vision.
He felt it.
He knew this feeling.
The Abyss was moving.
No—
reacting.
Leviathan's massive form rose through the water like an
ascending storm, eyes blazing, pressure waves thundering outward
in expanding rings.
Guardians fled in every direction.
Stonefish howled.
Liquid arches cracked.
The surface of the Realm rippled in jagged bursts.
Kaelen staggered to his paws, chest heaving.
He wasn't too late.
But the warning —
Varrik's silhouette flashed across his broken memories:
Go.
Kaelen roared silently at the Realm around him.
Listen.
Please listen.
It's coming.

No one heard.

No one understood.

The Water Realm continued shifting as if its foundations were not moments away from cracking.

Above the Abyss, structures humming with internal pressure — something finally gave.

A single, deep, resonant boom rolled through the entire Realm.

Every guardian froze.

Every current paused.

Every structure thrummed like a plucked bowstring held just above breaking.

Leviathan's voice rumbled through the depths — an ancient warning echo felt, not heard.

The storm was coming.

Embera — A Feather Stirs

In the unborn quiet of Embera, where the Phoenix rested still in early growth, a flicker of gold shivered through the egg.

Not a cry.

Not a word.

Just certainty.

A tiny pulse.

The Heir lives.

And the storm is coming.

Water Realm — The Final Second

The Realm held its breath.

Then —

something roared in the Abyss.

Long.

Low.

Deep.
Not Draezhan.
Not Wulfric.
Something much, much older.
The water buckled.
Dreamwave snapped.
Air twisted.
Light bent.
Earth tightened.
Life braced.
Shadow listened.
Wendryx felt the tremor beneath his claws.
Zephyra's wings jolted.
Solaryn's lattice broke.
The Stoneheart Stag stamped once, hard.
Sylatheriona's vines flared in alarm.
Alina felt her heart drop.
Luma's glow flickered with fear.
Ryvarr barked sharply, flame rising.
Fenrax collapsed against her leg in dread.
And in the heart of Myrrhmar —
Leviathan opened his jaws
and answered the roar.
The attack began.

Book 1 ends.