

## THE FALL OF THE COVEN

(The Shattered Spire, a once-majestic tower of silver and starlight, now bleeds dark energy into the storm-choked sky. Grandmaster Orlantha, the last of the Twelve, stumbles backward, his robes singed, his staff splintered. Before him, the Black Knight ascends the steps, his Nether Flame blade carving molten scars into the stone with every step. The air itself recoils from his presence.)

ORLANTH (voice trembling with exhaustion, but not fear):

"You were the best of us once, Vaithus. The Starforged Blade you carried was sworn to protect the realms—not butcher them."

VEYTHUS (a hollow chuckle echoing inside his onyx-plated helm):

"Protect? The Coven cowered behind walls of magic while the world burned. Hades showed me the truth—power is the only shield. The only justice."

(Lightning splits the sky. For a second, the knight's visor flickers—revealing glowing crimson eyes, the last remnant of the man he was before the Nether Flame claimed him.)

ORLANTH (raising a shaking hand, golden light flickering):

"Then you are already dead. And I will not let you take our world with you."

(The old wizard slams his palm onto the Spire's core. A shockwave of Astral Energy erupted, but Veythus moved faster. His sword drinks the magic mid-air, the runes along the blade flaring hungrily. Before Orlantha can react—)

(CRACK. The Black Knight's gauntlet closes around the wizard's throat, lifting him off his feet.)

VEYTHUS (soft, mocking):

"Your light dies with you, old man."

(He plunges the sword through Orlantha's chest. The wizard's body didn't bleed—it shattered like stained glass, his essence dissolving into swirling embers that spiraled into Veythus' weapon. The Spire collapses inward, the sky tearing open like a weeping wound. Somewhere, in both worlds, every candle, every star, flickers out at once.)

(The Black Knight stands alone in the ruins, his blade now thrumming with stolen divinity. He tilts his head, as if listening to a whisper only he can hear.)

VEYTHUS (to the storm):

"Let them come. Let them all see what happens to those who stand in my way."

(Cut to: Our world. Tonight.)

(Chicago's south side, Garrison Auto Repair, 11:47 PM. Kael Mercer—lean, tousled dark hair, grease smeared across his cheek like war paint—wipes his hands on a rag, eyeing the busted carburetor like it personally insulted him.)

MACK (his boss, a grizzled ex-Marine with a permanent scowl):

"Quit Sulkin'. The engine's dead, kid. Not everything can be saved."

KAEL (grinning, despite the exhaustion in his bones):

"Says the guy who still uses a flip phone."

(Mack flips him off but tosses him a lukewarm soda. It's the closest thing to affection Kael's gotten in months. He pockets his meager pay, hops onto his rusty Yamaha, and guns it toward the Redline Shelter—the group home that stopped being "home" the day he turned eighteen. The streets blur. The wind smells like rain and exhaust. Normal. Safe.)

(Then—his wrist burns.)

(Kael hisses, nearly swerving into traffic. The crescent-shaped mark on his inner wrist—the one he's had since birth—is glowing faintly gold. He shakes his head. Hallucination. Exhaustion. Whatever.)

(At the shelter, his best (and only) friend Riley is hunched over their laptop, fingers flying across the keys. They don't look up when he enters.)

RILEY:

"You're late. Mrs. Chen said If you miss curfew again, she's changing the Wi-Fi password."

KAEL (collapsing onto the couch):

"Tell her I'll fix her microwave for free."

(Riley finally glances at him—then freezes. Their glasses reflect the flickering streetlight outside, but that's not what stops them. Kael follows their gaze to his still-glowing mark.)

RILEY (slowly):

"Uh. Dude. Are you... bioluminescent now?"

(Kael opens his mouth—)

(BOOM. The entire building shakes. Glass shatters. Somewhere, a car alarm wails. Kael's at the window before he can think. What he sees shouldn't exist.)

(A riptide of darkness is surging down the street, swallowing lamplights whole. At its center—a creature. Too many legs. Too many teeth. It shrieks, a sound that cracks the pavement.)

RILEY (voice thin with terror):

"What the actual—"

(Kael's mark erupts in pain. His vision whites out. For a heartbeat, he isn't in Chicago anymore—he's standing in a crumbling citadel, a dying wizard's hand on his shoulder, a voice in his skull: "Gatekeeper. The worlds need you. Wake up.")

(Then reality snaps back. The creature charges the shelter.)

(Kael moves. Not with thought. With instinct. He shoves Riley behind him as the thing crashes through the wall. Plaster rains down. The mark on his wrist burns hotter. His hands glow.)

KAEL (gritted teeth):

"I said—BACK OFF."

(A pulse of raw energy blasts from his palms. The creature screams, its form unraveling into smoke. The darkness recoils—then lunges for him like a living thing. Too fast. Too hungry.)

(The last thing Kael sees before the void swallows him whole is Riley's outstretched hand—and the golden crack in the world yawning open behind him.)

(Then—nothing.)

(Silence. Riley stared at the spot where Kael stood. The creature is gone. The mark on their wrist—a mirror to Kael's—flickers once, then fades.)

RILEY (whispering):

"Well. That's not good."

## CHAPTER 2

Kael's eyes snapped open to a sky that defied reason.

Above him, jagged islands of rock floated in the air, suspended by some unseen force, their undersides glowing with veins of luminous crystal. Waterfalls spilled from their edges, cascading into mist before vanishing into the abyss below. The grass beneath him shimmered like crushed emeralds, and the air itself hummed with energy—thick with the scent of ozone and something wild, something alive in a way Earth had never been.

"What the hell...?" He pushed himself up, his muscles aching, his head spinning. The last thing he remembered was the void swallowing him, Riley's outstretched hand, and the creature's shriek—

A rustle in the bushes.

Kael froze.

The foliage trembled—once, twice—before exploding outward in a blur of silver fur. A panther, sleek and massive, lunged at him with a snarl, its eyes burning like molten mercury. Kael barely had time to raise his arms before the beast slammed into him, knocking him flat on his back, its claws pricking his shoulders.

"Lirya, DOWN!"

The command rang out, sharp as a whip crack. The panther's ears twitched, and with a disgruntled chuff, it backed off, though its gaze never left Kael's throat.

A woman stepped into the clearing.

Tall and lithe, she moved like the wind itself had shaped her—her skin a deep umber, her hair a cascade of midnight braids threaded with silver charms. A bow was slung across her back, and the tattoos curling up her arms pulsed faintly as if reacting to Kael's presence.

"You're lucky she listens," the woman said, eyeing him with a mix of wariness and curiosity. "Lirya doesn't usually hesitate with intruders."

Kael swallowed; his throat dry. "Intruder? Lady, I didn't exactly ask to be here."

Her head is tilted. "You're not from Eldryth." It wasn't a question.

"Unless 'Eldryth' is a new theme park in Chicago, no."

A flicker of amusement crossed her face. "You're a long way from home, then." She extended a hand, pulling him to his feet with surprising strength. "I'm Nyssa of the Veilwardens. And this," she gestured to the panther, who now sat regally beside her, "is Lirya. She's... my shadow."

Lirya yawned, revealing fangs longer than Kael's fingers.

"Right," Kael muttered. "So, uh. Friendly shadow."

Nyssa smirked. "She likes you. Otherwise, you'd be missing an arm by now." She studied him again, her gaze lingering on the Aether Mark glowing faintly on his wrist. "You're marked. That's why the Veil spat you out here."

"Marked? Spat out—?" Kael shook his head. "Look, I just want to know how to get back. My friend—"

"It is probably safer where they are than you are here," Nyssa interrupted. "The Black Knight's hunters are everywhere. And a stranger with no magic, no armor, and no sense?" She snorted. "You'd last five minutes in the Wilds alone."

Kael bristled. "I can handle myself."

Lirya let out a sound suspiciously like a laugh.

Nyssa arched a brow. "Prove it. Keep up." Without another word, she turned and strode toward the tree line.

"Wait—where are we going?"

"To Aerilon," she called over her shoulder. "The City of Skyborn. If you want answers, that's where you'll find them."

Kael hesitated—then jogged after her, Lirya falling into step beside him with a predator's grace.

"So," he ventured, "this Aerilon place. Got, uh... food there?"

Nyssa's laughter was bright against the hum of the floating islands. "Oh, stranger. You're in for a very long day."

The City of Aerilon—The Skyborn Jewel—was nothing like Kael had ever seen.

Towers of white stone spiraled into the clouds, their peaks crowned with floating gardens where blossoms shimmered like stained glass. Bridges of woven light connected the districts, and above it all, skyships glided on currents of enchanted wind, their sails billowing with iridescent hues. The air buzzed with laughter, the clatter of market stalls, and the distant hum of spells being cast.

Kael couldn't stop staring.

Nyssa smirked beside him. "Try not to gawk. You look like a lost puppy."

Kael (grinning): "Yeah, well, where I'm from, buildings don't float unless they're about to collapse."

She snorted and nudged him forward.

Stalls sold levitating fruit, self-stirring potions, and jewelry that changed color with the wearer's mood. Kael nearly choked when a tiny dragon (more of a lizard, really) perched on his shoulder and demanded a cracker.

Massive vessels, some with sails made of captured lightning, others with hulls carved from ancient trees, bobbed in the air. Nyssa explained they traded with floating islands and even other realms.

A public square where musicians played instruments that responded to emotion. When Kael hesitated near one, the strings thrummed a low, homesick melody. Nyssa's gaze lingered on him a beat too long.

They stopped at a rooftop tavern where the tables hovered just above the edge, giving a dizzying view of the city below. The food? Unreal.

"Star Spice stew"—warm, rich, and somehow familiar, like something Kael's mom might've made (if his mom hadn't vanished when he was four).

"Mooberry wine"—a single sip made his fingertips tingle.

Lirya stole an entire roast bird when no one was looking.

Nyssa (leaning in): "So. You want to go back?"

Kael (poking his stew): "I have to. My friend—Riley—they're probably losing their mind right now."

Nyssa (frowning): "The Veil doesn't open easily. And with the Black Knight's corruption spreading..." She sighed. "But I can help you. Train you. Your Aether Mark isn't just a ticket here—it's a weapon. And right now, you're swinging it like a club."

Kael (raising a brow): "So you're saying I'm magically incompetent?"

Lirya (licking her chops): "Chuff." (Translation: "Obviously.")

Nyssa grinned. "Come on. Let's get you home."

The house was nestled in a quieter district, its walls covered in climbing starflowers. Inside, it was warm—lived-in. A fire crackled in the hearth, and the scent of herbs hung in the air.

A boy, no older than twelve, looked up from a book. "Nys! You brought a stray?"

Nyssa (rolling her eyes): "Kael, meet Talin, my annoying little brother. Tal, this is the guy who fell through the Veil."

Talin (immediately fascinated): "Whoa. Did you see the other side? Was it all metal and smokestacks like in the stories?"

Kael (laughing): "Uh. More like concrete and traffic jams."

A woman emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a patterned apron. Her eyes—the same gold-flecked green as Nyssa's—softened when she saw Kael.

Nyssa's Mother (Mira): "Ah. The lost one." She didn't sound surprised. "Sit. Eat. Then we'll talk about how to get you unlost."

Over honeyed tea, Mira studied Kael's mark.

Mira: "This is old magic. Gatekeeper magic. The last person who bore it..." She exchanged a glance with Nyssa. "Well. Let's just say Veythus didn't take kindly to them either."

Kael (tense): "So I'm a target."

Nyssa (leaning forward): "You're a key. And right now, the Black Knight's hunting every door you might open."

Talin (blunt): "You're gonna die if you don't learn to fight."

Mira (smacking his arm lightly): "Talin."

Kael (grim smile): "Kid's not wrong." He looked at Nyssa. "So. Training?"

Nyssa (grinning): "Dawn tomorrow. Try not to scream when Lirya pins you."

Lirya (licking her teeth): "Grrrn." (Translation: "Can't wait.")

As the firelight flickered, Kael stared out the window—at the floating city, the foreign stars.

Riley, hold on. I'm coming back.

## CHAPTER 3

Chicago, Redline Shelter

Mrs. Chen's knuckles rapped sharply against the doorframe, her brow furrowed. "Riley. Where is Kael?"

Riley, still reeling from the previous night's madness, straightened up from his laptop. "Uh. He, uh—went to see a friend. Out of town. Said he'd be back... eventually?"

Mrs. Chen crossed her arms. "Eventually?"

"Yeah. You know Kael. Spontaneous. Free spirit. Probably forgot to text." Riley forced a laugh.

Mrs. Chen wasn't buying it. "That boy doesn't have friends outside this building. Try again."

Riley swallowed. "Look, I don't know where he is, okay? One minute he was here, the next—" Poof. Gone. Eaten by a shadow monster. "—he was just... gone."

Mrs. Chen's expression softened slightly, but suspicion still lingered. "If he's in trouble, you tell me."

Riley nodded, but the second she left, he grabbed his hoodie and bolted.

Mack was elbow-deep in an engine when Riley burst into Garrison Auto Repair, breathless.

"Mack. We got a problem."

Mack didn't even look up. "If this is about Kael ditching work again, tell him he's fired."

"No, listen—" Riley leaned in, lowering their voice. "Something weird happened last night. Like, glowing cracks in the air, monster-dog from hell, Kael vanishing in a flash of light weird."

Mack finally paused, wiping grease off his hands. Then he burst out laughing.

"Kid, if you're going to lie, at least make it believable. What, he get abducted by aliens?"

Riley groaned. "I wish it was aliens. At least that'd make sense." He pulled out his phone, showing Mack the shattered wall in their apartment. "You think I did this for fun?"

Mack's smirk faded. The damage was real—jagged, unnatural, like something had clawed its way through.

"Okay," he muttered. "What the hell happened?"

Riley exhaled. "I don't know. But I'm gonna find out."

He pulled up a recording on his phone—security cam footage from last night. The screen showed Kael, the shadow, then—a light pulse. And then... nothing. Just space where Kael had been.

Mack's face went pale. "...Okay. New plan. You don't show that to anyone else."

Riley's phone buzzed—a notification—a news alert.

"Mysterious Blackouts Spread Across City—Authorities Baffled."

The photo showed a streetlight bent unnaturally, its metal warped like taffy.

Riley and Mack exchanged a look.

"This isn't over," Riley whispered.

Somewhere, in the shadows between worlds, something echoed.

Riley pushed through the heavy oak doors of the Blackwood Public Library, the scent of old paper and dust hitting them like a time machine. Normally, they'd beeline for the sci-fi section or the graphic novels, but today? Today was different.

He approached the front desk, where Ms. Hargrove, the head librarian—a woman in her late 60s with silver-streaked curls and glasses that magnified her sharp green eyes—peered over the rim of her spectacles.

Ms. Hargrove: "Riley Carter. Let me guess—Neuromancer again? Or are we finally branching out to Dune?"

Riley: "Actually..." He slid a crumpled list across the desk. "I need these."

Ms. Hargrove adjusted her glasses, scanning the titles:

"The Veil and Its Breaches: A History of Cross-Realm Phenomena"

"Astral Marks: Birthright or Curse?"

"Creatures of the In-Between"

"The Lost Coven: Guardians of the Threshold"

Her eyebrow arched. "That's quite the genre shift."

Riley: "Yeah, well. Research project."

Ms. Hargrove: "On... interdimensional travel?"

Riley hesitated. "Hypothetically."

A slow smile curled on the librarian's lips. "Hypothetically." She leaned in, lowering her voice. "You know, most people wouldn't even find these in our catalog. They're in the restricted section."

Riley blinked. "You have a restricted section?"

Ms. Hargrove: "Officially? No." She reached under the desk and pulled out a brass key. "But between you and me? The Blackwood family—this library's founders—had certain interests."

Ms. Hargrove led Riley through a nondescript door marked "Staff Only", down a narrow staircase, and into a dimly lit basement lined with ancient tomes. The air hummed with something other—like static electricity.

Riley: "Whoa."

Ms. Hargrove: "Careful with these. Some of them... react."

Riley reached for a leather-bound book titled "The Gatekeeper's Legacy"—and yelped as the cover shuddered under their touch, the pages rustling on their own.

Ms. Hargrove (smirking): "Told you."

Riley: "Okay, what the hell? How do you know about this stuff?"

The librarian's smile faded. "Because my grandmother was a Veilwarden—one of the last before the Black Knight purged them. She crossed over in 1943. Never came back."

Riley's pulse spiked. "You're saying this is real?"

Ms. Hargrove: "I'm saying if you're asking these questions, you've already seen something you can't explain." She tapped the book. "Start here. And Riley?" Her voice turned grave. "Don't let the shadows see you reading."

Hours later, Riley sat hunched in a corner, his laptop open beside a pile of notes. The texts confirmed it:

The Aether Mark was a beacon—a sign of the Gatekeeper's bloodline.

The Veil wasn't just thinning—it was tearing.

And most chilling of all: "When the last Gatekeeper falls, the worlds shall collapse into the Hollow."

Riley's phone buzzed. A message from Mack: >> Found something. Get back here. NOW.

He snapped the book shut—just as the library lights flickered.

A shadow moved in the stacks.

Not a person.

Something else.

Riley bolted.

Training Grounds – Dawn in Aerilon

The morning mist clung to the training yard behind Nyssa's home as Kael rolled his aching shoulders. Lirya circled him like a silver shadow, her tail flicking in amusement.

Nyssa tossed him a wooden practice sword. "First rule: Don't die."

Kael (catching it clumsily): "That's your training advice?"

Talin (grinning from the sidelines): "Second rule: Screaming is allowed."

Before Kael could retort, Lirya pounced.

Wood clashed against claws as Kael barely blocked her swipe, the impact rattling his teeth.

Nyssa (dodging their scuffle): "Your stance is garbage. Feet wider. Feel the ground."

Kael (gritting his teeth): "Easy for you to say—you're not fighting a panther—"

Lirya (knocking him flat with a smug chuff): "Grrn." (Translation: "Pathetic.")

By midday, Kael was bruised, sweating, and—finally—landing a few decent strikes.

Nyssa (nodding approval): "Huh. Maybe you're not hopeless."

Inside, Mira hummed as she pulled a steaming starfruit pie from the oven, its crust shimmering with caramelized magic.

Kael (sniffing the air): "That smells exactly like my foster mom's apple pie."

Mira (pausing): "...Interesting. Starfruit only mimics flavors tied to memory."

A heavy silence fell.

Talin (blunt): "So your real family's dead, right?"

Nyssa (smacking his arm): "TALIN."

Kael (quiet): "Yeah. I never knew them."

Mira set down her knife. "Perhaps we should look."

After lunch, Mira led them to a weathered chest in the attic. Inside lay a book bound in pale leather, its pages etched with silver runes.

Mira: "The Coven's Chronicle. It records every bloodline tied to the Astral Regulator."

She flipped to a page—and froze.

There, in faded ink, was a family tree. At its base: "House Darenth". And at its end...

A single name: Kael.

Nyssa (sharp inhale): "The Darenths? But—they were the Regulator's first guardians. Veythus slaughtered them all before he turned on the Coven."

Kael (staring at his name): "Then how...?"

Mira (soft): "Someone hid you. Sent you through the Veil to survive."

A memory flashed—Kael, age four, waking in a Chicago alley with no past, just a crescent mark burning on his wrist.

Talin (leaning in): "So you're, like, magic royalty?"

Lirya (bumping Kael's hand with her head): "Mrrp." (Translation: "Explains why you taste important.")

The Chronicle revealed more:

The Darenths weren't just protectors—they were the only ones who could reforge the Astral Regulator.

Veythus didn't just betray the Coven—he made a deal with Hades to erase their bloodline.

And the "war against the giants"? A lie. Veythus was harvesting their magic to break the Veil completely.

Kael (voice raw): "He's not just conquering Eldryth. He's unmaking it."

Nyssa (gripping her bow): "And you're the only one who can stop him."

Outside, the wind howled—like the world itself was waiting.

Garrison Auto Repair – Midnight

The garage was eerily quiet, the usual hum of machinery replaced by the low buzz of fluorescents. Riley pushed through the side door, their breath fogging in the cold air.

Mack stood over his workbench; his usual gruff demeanor replaced by something darker. Spread across the grease-stained wood were pieces of warped metal, a shattered phone, and—most unsettling—a single black feather, its edges shimmering with unnatural violet light.

Riley (eyeing the feather): "Okay. What is that?"

Mack (grim): "That's the damn question."

He tapped the phone—Riley's stomach dropped when they recognized Kael's cracked case.

Mack: "Found it three blocks from here. Near the old train yard."

Riley (reaching for it): "That's Kael's—"

Mack (grabbing their wrist): "Don't. Touch it."

Riley froze. Mack's grip was iron-tight, his eyes locked onto his.

Mack: "Something's wrong with it. Watch."

He nudged the phone with a screwdriver. The screen flickered to life—but instead of Kael's lock screen, it showed a shifting void, a glimpse of floating islands, and for one heart-stopping second

A shadowy figure in onyx armor, its crimson gaze burning through the static.

Then the screen went black again.

Riley (whispering): "That's him. The guy from the security footage."

Mack (rubbing his jaw): "Yeah. And I think he's looking for Kael."

Riley slumped into a chair, their mind racing.

Riley: "So you believe me now?"

Mack (grunting): "Kid, I've believed you since you showed me that wall. I just didn't wanna say it out loud." He picked up the feather, turning it in the light. "This ain't normal. None of it is."

Riley: "You're weirdly calm about interdimensional monsters."

Mack (snorting): "I served in '91. Saw things in the desert no one'd believe. This?"  
He gestured to the feather. "Just another Tuesday."

A beat. Then—

Mack: "But here's what's got me spooked."

He pulled out a folded newspaper clipping—a report from two days ago:

"Mysterious Blackouts Spread—Witnesses Report 'Shadow Figures' Near Affected Areas."

The photo showed a streetlight bent into a perfect spiral.

Mack: "This was before Kael vanished. Whatever's happening... it's getting worse."

Riley's blood ran cold.

Riley: "The Veil's tearing. And if it goes—"

Mack (finishing their thought): "—More monsters would be coming for world."

They sat in silence, the weight of it pressing down.

Then Mack reached under the counter and slid something across the table.

A holstered pistol.

Mack: "You're gonna need this."

Riley (blinking): "I—what? Why?"

Mack (dead serious): "Because if he—" (pointing at the phone) "—comes through before Kael does? You're the only one who can stop him."

Riley stared at the gun. Then, slowly, he took it.

Somewhere, in the distance, thunder rumbled—though the sky was clear.

The Training Yard – Aerilon

The morning sun blazed overhead as Kael wiped sweat from his brow, his muscles burning but his stance steady. Lirya crouched low, her silver fur rippling like liquid metal, her golden eyes locked onto him with predatory focus.

Nyssa (arms crossed, smirking): "Alright, Gatekeeper. Show me what you've got."

Kael exhaled, tightening his grip on the practice sword. This time, he was ready.

Lirya lunged—but Kael sidestepped, twisting his body in a fluid motion, and brought the flat of his blade down hard on her flank. The panther let out a surprised yowl as she skidded across the dirt.

Talin (grinning from the sidelines): "Whoa! Did you just—?"

Kael (breathless, grinning back): "Yeah. Yeah, I did."

Nyssa's smirk deepened. "Not bad. But let's see how you handle me."

She unsheathed her twin daggers, the blades glinting with enchanted runes.

They clashed in a flurry of strikes—wood against steel, Kael barely keeping up. But for the first time, he wasn't just surviving. He was adapting.

Nyssa (panting, impressed): "You're learning fast—"

Then it happened.

Kael parried a dagger swipe, but Nyssa fainted—her knee slammed into his ribs. Pain flared, and in that split second of desperation, something ignited inside him.

His Aether Mark blazed blue, and a shockwave of raw energy erupted from his palms.

The ground shattered.

Nyssa was thrown back, Talin yelped as he tumbled into the grass, and even Lirya screeched, her fur standing on end.

Kael collapsed to his knees, his vision swimming. The world around him warped—his eyes flooded with cobalt light, his veins glowing beneath his skin.

A pulse radiated outward, invisible but undeniable.

Across Aerilon, every enchanted lantern flickered.

In the distant Giants' Wastes, soldiers on both sides staggered as the earth trembled.

And deep in the obsidian fortress of Veythus the Hollow King, a shadowed figure slowly rose from his throne, his crimson eyes narrowing.

Veythus (soft, lethal): "So. The Regulator lives."

The glow faded, leaving Kael gasping on the ground. Nyssa was the first to reach him, her usual confidence replaced by something awed.

Nyssa (hoisting him up): "Damn, Darenth. You just announced yourself to the whole damn world."

Kael (dizzy, clutching his head): "I didn't mean to—what the hell was that?"

Talin (wide-eyed): "That was legacy."

Lirya prowled closer, sniffing Kael's hands warily before letting out a low, approving mrow.

Nyssa (sobering): "We need to get you to Orphiel. If anyone can teach you to control that power, it's her."

Kael (frowning): "Who's Orphiel?"

Nyssa (glancing toward the horizon): "The last living member of the original Coven. And the only person Veythus ever feared."

A gust of wind howled through the trees, carrying with it the faintest whisper—like the world itself was holding its breath.

In a crumbling tower at the edge of Aerilon, an ancient woman with milky-white eyes stood at her window, her gnarled fingers pressed to the glass.

Old Woman (whispering): "He's back. The true heir has awakened."

Behind her, a map of Eldryth burned with blue fire, tracing a path to Orphiel's hidden sanctuary.

Back in Chicago, Riley and Mack stumbled as the garage floor shook violently. Tools clattered from shelves, and the single lightbulb overhead shattered.

Riley (grabbing the workbench): "What the—? Earthquake?"

Mack (staring at Kael's phone, now glowing faintly blue): "No. That was him."

The screen flashed once—a symbol Kael had never seen before—before going dark again.

Riley (gripping the pistol tighter): "We're running out of time."

The morning air was crisp as Kael tightened the straps of his travel pack, glancing back at the small house that had become his temporary refuge. Mira stood in the doorway, her arms crossed, her expression unreadable.

Mira (holding out a wrapped bundle): "Dried starfruit, moonbread, and a flask of sunfire mead. Don't eat it all at once."

Kael (taking it with a grin): "Wouldn't dream of it."

Talin (scrambling forward, shoving a small dagger into Kael's hands): "Take this. It's not magic, but it's sharp."

Kael (raising a brow): "You're giving me a weapon?"

Talin (grinning): "Only 'cause Nyssa would kill me if you died."

Nyssa (already mounted on her chestnut mare, rolling her eyes): "Enough sentiment. We're burning daylight."

Lirya chuffed in agreement, nudging Kael toward his horse—a stubborn grey stallion named Ember who eyed him with clear skepticism.

Kael (patting Ember's neck nervously): "Uh. We're friends, right?"

Ember (snorting, flicking his ears): Translation: "Prove it."

With a final wave, they set off, the city's towering spires shrinking behind them.

The path wound through floating meadows, where flowers bloomed upside down and rivers defied gravity, curling like ribbons into the sky. As they neared the Sylvan Bazaar, a bustling market on the outskirts of elven territory, the air filled with music and laughter.

Elven performers danced atop a stage of woven light, their movements so fluid they seemed to bend time itself. One—a lithe figure with emerald hair—spun a blade of pure water into intricate shapes, earning cheers from the crowd.

Kael (watching, mesmerized): "How are they doing that?"

Nyssa (smirking): "Elves don't do tricks. They are the trick."

A vendor nearby offered them crystal sweets that melted into different flavors on the tongue. Kael nearly choked when he turned to "regret" (which tasted, inexplicably, like burnt toast and bad decisions).

Nyssa (laughing as he coughed): "Should've gone with victory. Tastes like honey and spite."

As they rode on, Kael grew quiet.

Kael: "Nys... What if I can't control this power? What if I'm not what Orphiel expects?"

Nyssa (softer now): "You won't control it. Not at first. But you're alive, Kael. After everything Veythus did to erase your bloodline, you're here. That's not an accident."

Liryra growled low in her throat, ears swiveling toward the eastern horizon.

Nyssa's smile faded. "We should move faster."

Far away, in the ashen ruins of the Giants' Wastes, Sir Veythus stood amidst the carnage of battle, his Netherflame blade dripping with molten blood. His lieutenants knelt before him, their armor scarred but unbroken.

Veythus (voice like grinding stone): "The Regulator has awakened. The boy lives."

A murmur rippled through the ranks.

Veythus (holding up a black compass, its needle spinning wildly before locking onto a distant point): "Five of you will go. Bring me his heart. The rest—burn the elves' southern villages. Let them see what happens to those who harbor traitors."

The chosen warriors bowed, their eyes gleaming with fanatical loyalty.

First Lieutenant (clenching his fist): "By your will, Hollow King."

The forest grew denser, the trees twisting into gnarled arches as they entered the Veilwood, a place where time moved slower. The air hummed with latent magic, and the ground beneath their feet pulsed like a heartbeat.

Suddenly, Lirya stiffened, her fur bristling.

Nyssa (dismounting, hand on her dagger): "We're close."

A voice, ancient and resonant, echoed from the trees:

"You are late, Darenth."

From the shadows stepped Orphiel.

Tall and gaunt, her silver hair floated as if suspended in water, and her eyes—pools of liquid starlight—locked onto Kael with terrifying intensity. She wore robes stitched from forgotten spells, and the air around her warped as if reality itself struggled to contain her.

Kael (swallowing hard): "You... know my name?"

Orphiel (lips curling into something not quite a smile): "I watched your cradle burn, boy. I felt the Veil scream when you were torn from it."

Then, to Nyssa's shock, Orphiel knelt, pressing her forehead to the earth in a gesture of deep reverence.

Orphiel: "The last heir of the Astral Regulator. The Coven's vengeance."

Kael's breath caught.

Orphiel (rising, her voice sharpening): "Now. Let us begin before the Hollow King's hounds find us."

Somewhere in the distance, a horn sounded—low, mournful, and dripping with malice.