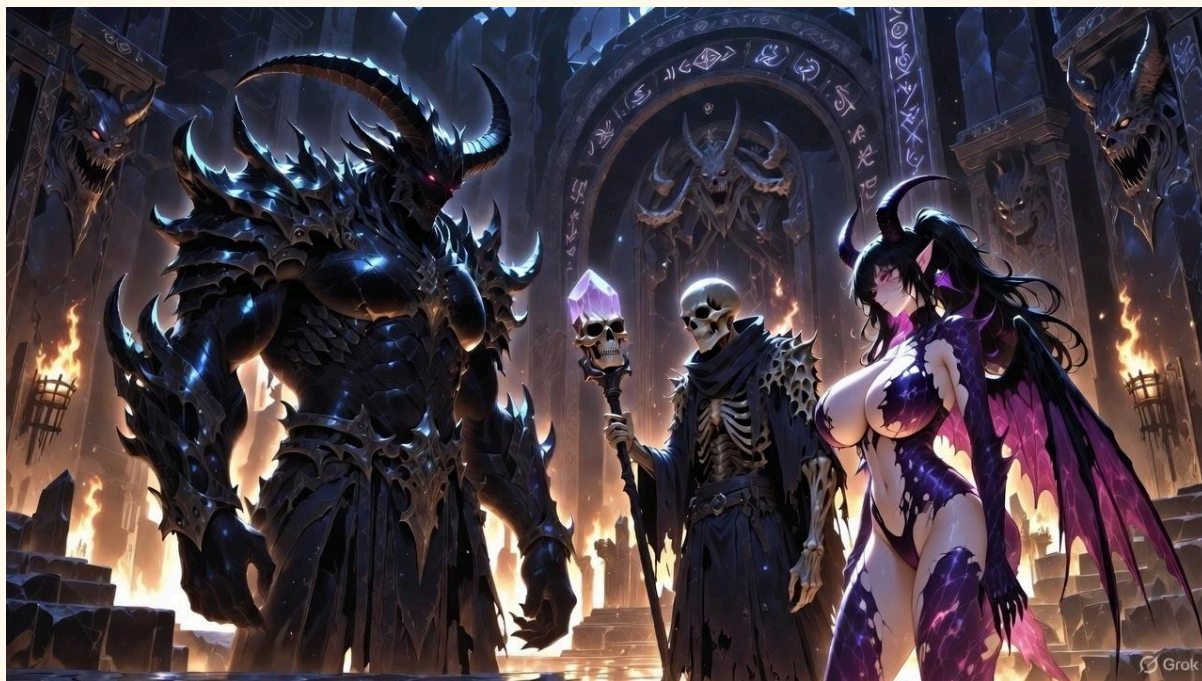


the shadowed halls of the Obsidian Citadel, where the air hung heavy with the scent of brimstone and ancient decay, the three remaining generals of the fallen Demon Lord convened. The battle had been cataclysmic—a clash of divine fury and infernal might that had left the demon realms scarred and depleted. The Demon Lord, a towering behemoth of crimson scales and unholy power, had met his end in a mutual annihilation with the Hero, that blessed champion of the Goddess. Their final strike had rent the earth asunder, vaporizing legions on both sides. Now, the once-mighty army of darkness was reduced to scattered remnants: feral demons skulking in the wilds, undead hordes shambling without purpose, and succubi whispering temptations from the shadows. The citadel itself bore the wounds of war—cracked spires leaking ethereal smoke, walls etched with the burns of holy light, and floors slick with the ichor of the slain.

Belor, the Demon General, paced the grand throne room like a caged beast. He was a colossal figure, his muscular frame clad in jagged obsidian armor that seemed to absorb the flickering torchlight. Horns curved from his forehead like scythes, and his eyes glowed with the red fury of eternal rage. His voice rumbled like distant thunder as he slammed a fist against the arm of the empty throne. "We cannot delay any longer! The Demon Lord's essence lingers in the void, waiting to be pulled back. With our combined might, we can initiate the resurrection ritual. Nalzar, your necrotic arts can bind his soul; Silvia, your seductive energies can fuel the incantation. And I... I will provide the raw power to tear open the veil."

Across from him was Nalzar, the Lich General. His form was a grotesque masterpiece of undeath: a skeletal frame draped in tattered robes embroidered with runes that pulsed with sickly green light. His eye sockets burned with unholy fire, and his bony fingers clutched a staff topped with a crystal skull that whispered forgotten curses. Nalzar's voice was a dry rasp, like wind through a crypt. "Indeed, Belor. The stars align for such a rite. My legions of undead, though diminished, can form the protective circle. We have the artifacts—the Heart of Abyss, the Chalice of Eternal Night. Why hesitate? The Hero is dead, his companions scattered or slain. This is our moment to restore order to the chaos."

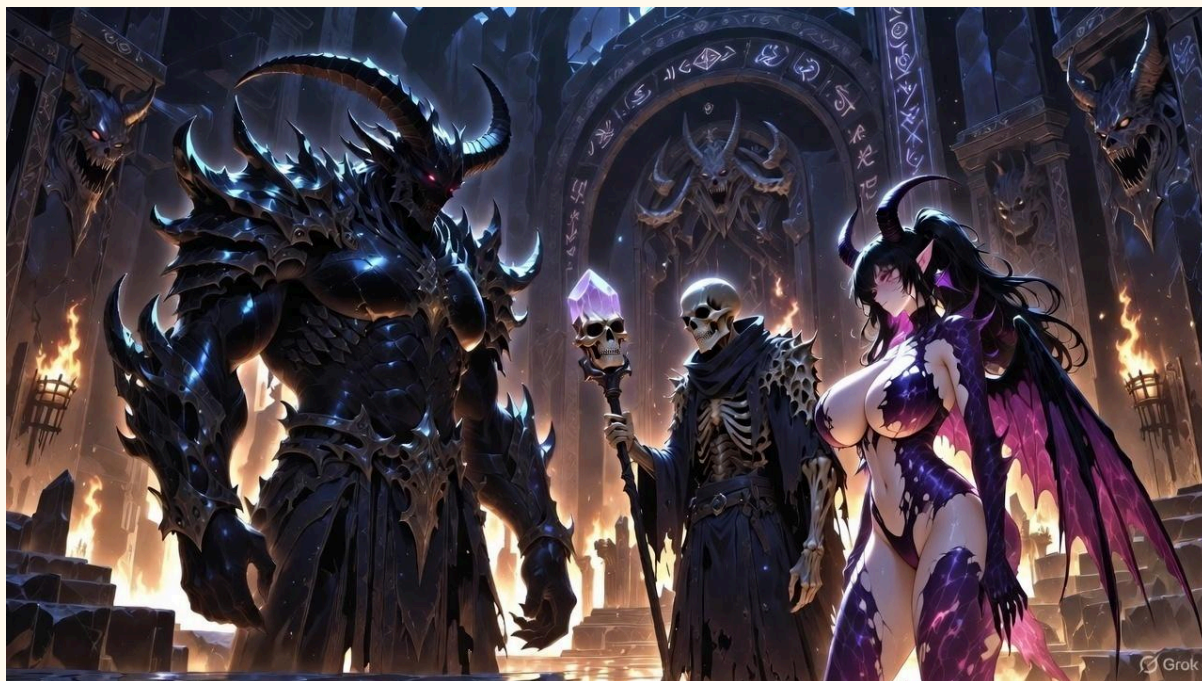


But then there was Silvia, the Succubus General, with an air of languid confidence that belied the tension in the room. She was a vision of infernal allure, her skin a mesmerizing blend of deep purple and soft pink hues that shifted subtly in the light, as if alive with inner fire. Her long black hair cascaded like a midnight waterfall down her back, framing a face of exquisite beauty: high cheekbones, full lips painted a seductive crimson, and eyes that glowed with a hypnotic violet gleam. Her massive breasts strained against the scant fabric of her skimpy outfit—a barely-there ensemble of sheer black lace and silken straps that left little to the imagination. The material clung to her curves, accentuating her small waist that flared into wide, voluptuous hips, promising pleasures untold. Bat-like wings, leathery and veined with pulsing energy, folded elegantly behind her, and a long, sinuous tail swayed idly, tipped with a heart-shaped spade that could deliver ecstasy or agony with a touch. She exuded an aura of raw sensuality, her every movement a deliberate tease, her scent a intoxicating mix of jasmine and musk that made the air thicken with desire.

Silvia crossed her arms beneath her ample bosom, pushing them up in a way that drew involuntary glances from even the stoic Nalzar. "Oh, my dear generals," she purred, her voice a sultry melody that echoed through the chamber like a lover's whisper. "Always so eager to charge into the fray, blades drawn and spells blazing. But have you paused to consider the futility of it all? We've danced this dance before—resurrect the Lord, summon the hordes, clash with the Hero. And what happens? Mutual destruction, or worse, the Hero triumphs, and we're back to square one, scraping together the shards of our power."

Belor halted his pacing, his massive form turning toward her with a growl. "What nonsense is this, Silvia? The Demon Lord must rise! Without him, our realms fracture. The lesser demons already squabble for territory, and the undead grow restless without a master to command them."





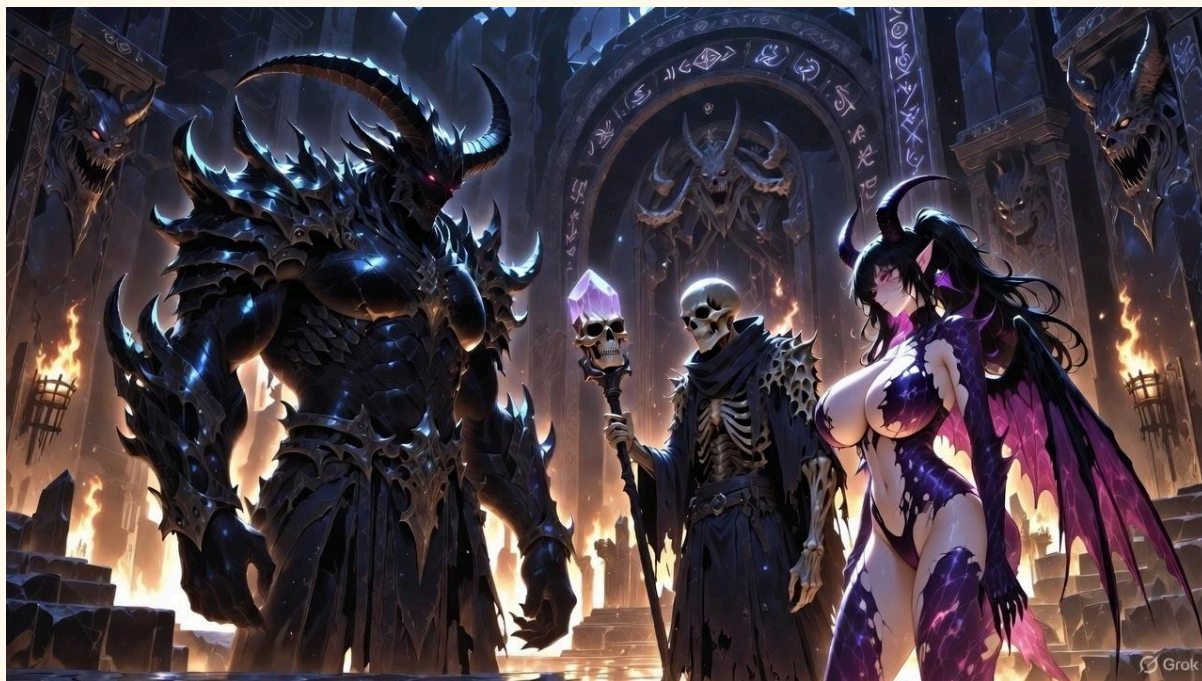
Nalzar's skeletal jaw clicked in agreement. "The cycle is eternal, succubus. Darkness rises, light opposes. We resurrect, we conquer, or we fall and rise again. It is the nature of our existence. Your... concerns... seem born of weakness."

Silvia's lips curved into a sly smile, her tail flicking playfully as she pushed off the pillar and sauntered closer, her hips swaying with hypnotic rhythm.

The skimpy fabric of her outfit shifted with each step, revealing tantalizing glimpses of her purple-pink skin, the swell of her massive tits bouncing ever so slightly, drawing the eye inexorably. She circled the throne, her wings unfurling just enough to brush against Belor's arm, sending a shiver through his armored frame despite his demonic resilience. "Weakness? Oh, Nalzar, you wound me. But think, truly think. Each time we revive our Lord, the Goddess senses the imbalance. She anoints a new Hero—some wide-eyed mortal granted her blessing from the outset. Maxed stats, unbreakable will, immunities to our finest tricks: curses bounce off him like rain on stone, charms fizzle into nothing, poisons are as water to his veins. Level drains? Useless. And capture? Ha! He teleports away once a day to safety, vanishing like smoke. Even if we slay him, another rises. Over and over, an endless wheel of destruction. Why repeat the madness when we could... break it?"

Belor's eyes narrowed, his rage simmering into curiosity. He leaned against the throne, his massive arms crossing over his chest. "And what alternative do you propose, temptress? The Hero is invincible with that divine favor. We've tried everything—ambushes, sieges, dark pacts. Nothing penetrates that blessing."

Nalzar's staff tapped the floor, the crystal skull emitting a low hum. "Speak plainly, Silvia. Your riddles serve no one."



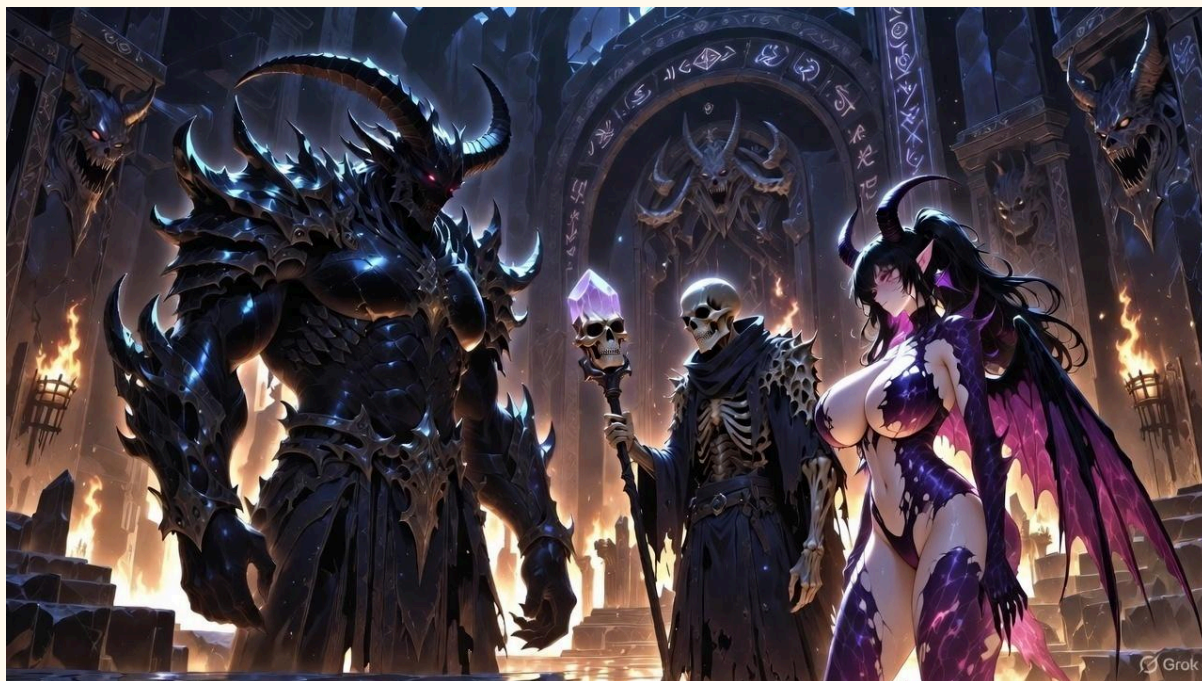
She stopped before them, her pretty face alight with mischievous glee, her long black hair swaying as she tilted her head. Her hands traced idle patterns over her curves, fingers lingering on the edge of her skimpy top, pulling it taut against her massive breasts. The air grew warmer, charged with her innate allure, making even the undead lich feel a phantom stir of long-forgotten urges. "Ah, but that's the beauty of it, my lords. The Hero is invincible... except where he isn't. He may be blessed by the Goddess, armored in light and stats beyond measure, but at his core? He's just a man. And men, oh, they have such delightful weaknesses. Weaknesses that can be exploited, nurtured, until they bloom into corruption. We don't fight him with swords or spells. We weaken him from within, turn his strength to frailty, his virtue to vice."

Belor snorted, though his gaze lingered on her form, tracing the curve of her small waist to her big hips. "Corruption? How? His magical defenses are absolute. Charms fail, level drains evaporate, curses shatter. Even your succubi have tried and been repelled."

"Precisely," Nalzar added, his bony fingers clenching. "The blessing renders him immune. It's woven into his soul."

Silvia laughed, a throaty sound that sent ripples of desire through the room. She stepped closer to Belor, her tail wrapping teasingly around his leg, the spade tip brushing his thigh. "Immune... unless he wills it otherwise. Unless he craves it, begs for it. You see, my dears, magic like ours doesn't need to force its way in if the door is opened from the inside. And as a succubus, I know men better than they know themselves. Horny men are dumb, pliable, weak. They trade empires for a taste of ecstasy. With my human underlings—those sly spies and temptresses who blend into mortal society undetected—I can get close. Whispers in taverns, glances in markets, dreams that linger into waking hours. I'll erode his resolve, stoke his desires until he's a pathetic shadow of himself, too enfeebled to resist my charms."





Imagine it: the mighty Hero, reduced to a simpering fool, willingly submitting to level drains that sap his strength, charms that bind his will, curses that twist his soul. All because he can't control the fire in his loins."

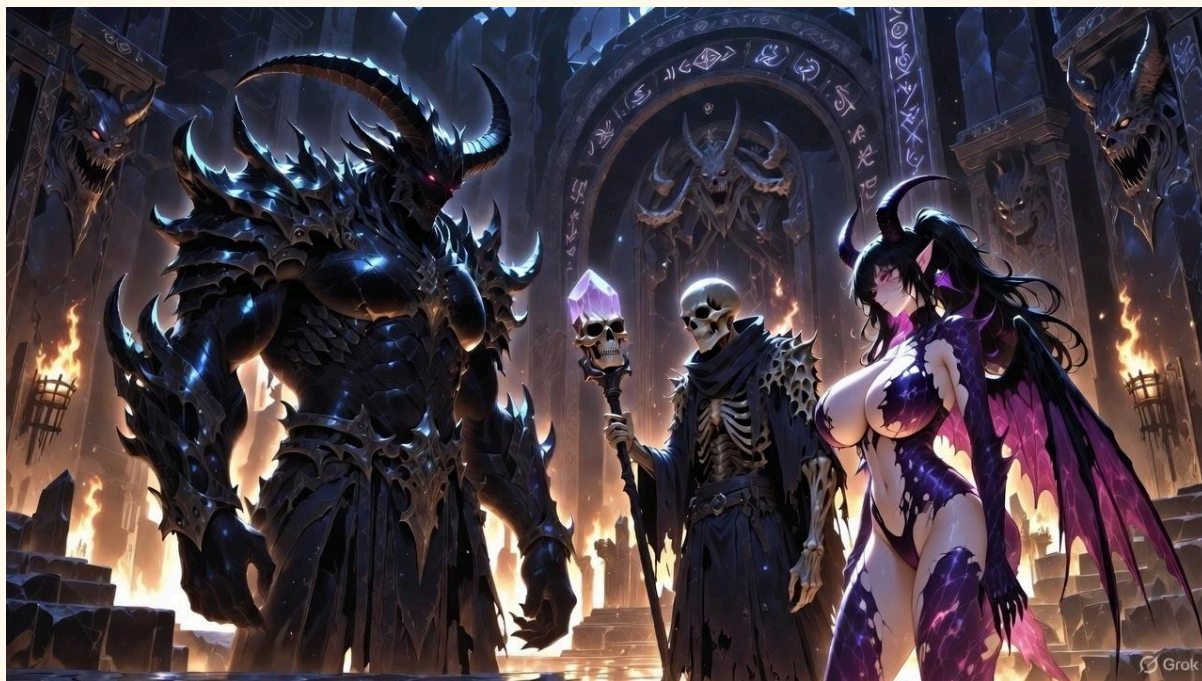
Nalzar's eye flames flickered with doubt. "Why would he allow such folly? The blessing bolsters his mind as well as his body. He's no ordinary mortal, swayed by base urges."

"Oh, but he is," Silvia countered, her voice dropping to a husky whisper as she turned to the lich, her wings spreading wide to cast seductive shadows. Her skimpy outfit rode up slightly, exposing more of her voluptuous hips, her purple-pink skin glistening as if oiled. "The Goddess's gift makes him strong, but it doesn't erase his humanity. Deep down, every man harbors that spark—the need to dominate, to submit, to lose himself in pleasure. I'll fan it into a blaze. Subtle at first: a beautiful maiden in distress, a forbidden encounter that leaves him yearning. Then bolder—potions disguised as elixirs of vigor that actually heighten his lust, encounters that drain just a whisper of his essence each time, until he's addicted. My underlings will ensure he's isolated, tempted, broken step by step. Trust me, generals. I've turned kings to slaves, warriors to whimpering pets. This Hero? He'll be no different."

Belor rubbed his chin, his demonic features twisting in contemplation. "It's risky. If he senses the trap, he'll teleport away, rally his allies. And the Goddess—won't she intervene?"

Silvia shook her head, her long black hair whipping dramatically. "Not if we play it right. No overt attacks, no demonic incursions. Let him think the darkness slumbers.

And as for trust... what choice do we have? The old way leads to ruin. This? This could end the cycle forever—the Hero corrupted, the Goddess's power broken, our Lord resurrected unchallenged."



The room fell silent, save for the distant howls of wind through the citadel's cracks. Nalzar's staff hummed thoughtfully, and Belor's pacing resumed, slower now. Finally, Belor nodded. "Very well. It's worth the gamble. What do you require, Silvia?"

Her eyes sparkled with triumph. "Time, my lords. Two years. Begin the resurrection ritual then—that's when the Goddess will sense the stirrings and choose her new champion. He'll start weak, on his journey to grow strong. In that window, I'll weave my web. And command our forces: no raids on human cities, no assaults. Let them feel safe, complacent. Lull them into forgetting the shadows."

Nalzar inclined his skull. "Agreed. But fail, and we revert to the rite immediately."

"Fail?" Silvia smirked, her tail uncoiling from Belor as she stepped back, her massive tits heaving with a deep breath. "I never fail with men."

With that, the pact was sealed. Belor and Nalzar departed to issue orders to their remnants, the demons retreating to hidden lairs, the undead burrowing into crypts. Silvia, alone in the throne room, stretched luxuriously, her wings fanning out as she envisioned her plan. She would assemble her network—human thralls, shape-shifted succubi, enchanted artifacts designed for subtle seduction. Potions that amplified desire, illusions that mimicked forbidden fantasies, encounters engineered to leave the Hero craving more. She imagined him: young, idealistic, blessed... and oh so vulnerable. Her fingers trailed down her body, lingering on her curves, a shiver of anticipation running through her. This would be her masterpiece—a Hero not slain, but seduced into darkness.

As the moons rose over the citadel, Silvia set out, her form vanishing into a swirl of pink mist, bound for the mortal realms. The game had begun, and she played to win.





Three Years have later, in a small village, a young man prepares to leave his home. The morning mist still clung to the thatched roofs of Elden Hollow when Mattes stepped onto the packed-dirt road that led out of the village. Three years had passed since the last great war ended in mutual annihilation; three quiet, almost peaceful years in which the world pretended the darkness had been truly vanquished. The fields were green again, the children played without fear of demon raids, and the only monsters anyone spoke of were the occasional goblin bands far to the north.

Mattes was eighteen now, average in height but no longer the skinny farm boy he had once been. A year of relentless training had carved lean, wiry muscle onto his frame; his arms, though still slim, were corded and strong from endless hours swinging a practice sword against straw dummies and fallen logs. His brown hair had grown longer, and his once-soft hazel eyes now carried a quiet, steady intensity, the subtle mark of someone who had felt divine power flood his veins and knew exactly what it meant.

At the weathered wooden gate of the village, his parents waited. His father, Grell, a broad-shouldered blacksmith whose hands were scarred from decades at the forge, pressed a simple but finely balanced longsword into Mattes' grip.

"Still don't like sending you off with just this," Grell muttered, voice rough. "But the goddess's blessing will keep it sharper than any enchanted steel, I reckon."

His mother, tears already shining, pulled him into a fierce hug. "Write when you reach Albion. Every week, you hear me?"

"I will, Ma." Mattes' voice was steady, but his throat felt tight. Then Linda stepped forward.



She had grown too, taller, her wheat-blond hair braided neatly down her back, the simple country dress doing little to hide the gentle curves she had developed over the last year. Her blue eyes shimmered with unshed tears, but her smile was brave. They had shared only one kiss in their lives, a shy, trembling thing beneath the old oak at midsummer, both of them blushing and stammering afterward. It had been promise enough.

Linda took his hands in hers. "Come back to me, Mattes. When the Demon Lord is gone for good... come home, and we'll be married the very next morning. I'll be waiting."

He leaned in, resting his forehead against hers for a long, quiet moment. "I'll come back," he whispered. "And that night will be ours. Only ours."

A final embrace, chaste but burning with the promise of everything still to come, and then Mattes stepped away.

His father clapped a heavy hand on his shoulder one last time. "Remember, boy. In Albion, keep your blessing secret. The old war may be over, but the Demon Lord's spies never truly died. A big city is full of eyes that don't belong to humans. Trust carefully."

Mattes nodded solemnly. "I understand, Father. I'll be careful."

He adjusted the travel-worn cloak over his shoulders, the sword at his hip, and the small leather satchel that held his acceptance letter from the Royal Academy of Arcane Arts. Then, without looking back, afraid that if he did, he might never leave, he walked through the gate and onto the winding road that led west.





Eleven days of dusty roads, cold camps beneath unfamiliar stars, and wary glances from fellow travelers finally ended when Mattes crested the last hill and saw Albion spread out before him like a dream made stone.

The city was immense, far larger than anything he had ever imagined. The outer wall alone was taller than the tallest oak in Elden Hollow, its white marble veined with gold and silver runes that glimmered faintly even in daylight. Beyond it rose a forest of spires: the seven great towers of the Royal Academy of Arcane Arts, each one crowned with a different colored crystal that flung rainbows across the sky; the soaring cathedral of the Goddess with its bells ringing the noon hour; the guildhalls of merchants and adventurers draped in bright banners; and everywhere, everywhere, people.

Thousands of them.

Carriages clattered over cobblestones. Street vendors shouted about fresh honey-cakes and enchanted lockets. A pair of armored knights on massive warhorses trotted past a gaggle of giggling elven students in sky-blue academy robes. A dwarf with a braided beard argued price with a scarlet-skinned tiefling merchant while a half-orc bouncer looked on, grinning at the entertainment. Overhead, a trio of griffon-riders in the crimson of the city guard wheeled lazily against the clouds.

Mattes stood at the crest of the road, travel cloak dusty, pack heavy on his shoulders, and simply stared. The smell of fresh bread, woodsmoke, horse, perfume, and river water all mixed together in the warm air. Somewhere a lute player was singing a bawdy ballad, and someone else answered with a drum. It was beautiful. It was overwhelming. It was nothing like the quiet fields and sleepy evenings he had left behind.

He took one slow breath, then another, feeling the goddess's blessing thrumming quietly beneath his ribs like a second heartbeat.



Eleven days ago he had promised Linda he would come home. Eleven days ago his father had warned him that cities held dangers no sword could cut.

Now the gates stood open before him, and the rest of his life (and perhaps the fate of the world) waited inside.

Mattes adjusted the strap of his pack, set his expression to something he hoped looked calm and confident, and started down the hill toward the greatest city in the kingdom.





The wide, sun-drenched avenue of merchants and guildhalls gradually gave way to something different.

The cobblestones turned a deeper crimson, the banners overhead shifted from proud house crests to swirling silks in scarlet and violet, and the air grew warmer, thick with perfume, wine, and the faint, sweet scent of enchanted smoke. Music spilled from every doorway: lutes, drums, the low thrum of a harp strung with silver wire. Laughter (bright, practiced, and inviting) floated above it all.

Mattes realized he had wandered into the Crescent of Pleasures, Albion's infamous entertainment district.

Girls no older than he was leaned against colorfully painted doorframes or perched on the marble lips of fountains. Their dresses were little more than ribbons of silk and lace: plunging necklines, high slits that flashed smooth thighs, corsets cinched so tight they seemed painted on. Some wore delicate masks of silver filigree; others let their hair tumble free in deliberate disarray. They smiled at every passing man, voices honeyed and teasing.

"Come in, handsome! First drink's on the house if you sit with me..."

"Lost, little lamb? I can show you the way... for a kiss."

A pair of bunny-eared girls in glossy black leotards (ears tall and velvet, bodices struggling heroically against truly breathtaking curves) flanked the arched entrance of the Grand Luna Casino. One twirled a roulette chip between gloved fingers, the other leaned forward just enough to make the silver moon emblem on her chest strain.

"Care to try your luck, cutie?" she purred, voice like warm mead. "The tables are hot tonight... and so are we."



Heat flooded Mattes' face so fast he felt dizzy. His ears burned crimson beneath his travel-tousled hair. He had never seen so much bare skin in his life; the village girls back home wore high collars even in summer. His pulse hammered in his throat, and for one treacherous heartbeat his feet almost slowed.

Then Linda's face rose in his mind: her soft blue eyes the morning he left, the shy brush of her lips beneath the oak tree, the promise they had whispered.

I'm waiting for you. Only you.

He swallowed hard, squared his shoulders, and fixed his gaze firmly on the distant crystal spires of the Academy rising above the rooftops like seven colored stars.

"No, thank you," he managed, voice cracking only a little. He kept walking, cloak pulled tight around him as though it could shield him from the perfume and laughter that curled after him like smoke.

A few of the girls giggled at his blush, but none followed. They had seen a hundred shy country boys before; most came back after dark.

Mattes did not look back. He lengthened his stride, boots ringing against the stones, until the music faded behind him and the clean scent of river wind replaced the cloying sweetness of the district.





The Royal Academy of Arcane Arts was everything the stories claimed: vaulted ceilings of white marble veined with glowing azure runes, floating crystal orbs that drifted lazily overhead like slow-moving stars, and corridors so long they seemed to stretch into shimmering mirages. The air smelled faintly of ozone and old parchment.

Mattes followed the signs toward the Headmaster's Tower, clutching his acceptance letter like a talisman.

Students passed him in both directions. The men (there were noticeably fewer) wore the traditional deep-blue robes he had seen in illustrations: high-collared, long-sleeved, silver trim along the cuffs and hem, dignified and scholarly. Many of them carried stacks of books or trailed a step behind groups of girls, holding parasols or satchels without being asked.

The women, on the other hand...

Their uniforms were the same deep sapphire blue, but the skirts barely reached mid-thigh, fluttering with every step. The blouses were tailored so snugly that the fabric strained across their chests, to reveal soft, generous cleavage. Mattes felt his face heat again. He kept his eyes firmly on the marble floor or the floating directional sigils overhead.

Big city fashions, he told himself firmly. That's all. Nothing to get distracted by.



A pretty brunette with a high ponytail and a skirt that swayed distractingly passed him, smiling brightly. “Lost, first-year? The Headmaster’s office is up the spiral stair at the end of the Crystal Promenade. Want me to show you?”

Two male students trailing her with armfuls of scrolls looked up hopefully, as if waiting for permission to speak.

“N-no thank you,” Mattes managed, giving a quick, awkward bow. “I can find it.”

The girl laughed softly (not unkindly) and continued on, the boys hurrying after her like ducklings.

Mattes exhaled, adjusted his pack, and kept walking. Destiny, Linda, the Demon Lord—those were the things that mattered. Not short skirts or soft laughter echoing down marble halls.

He was here to become stronger.

Nothing else.





The heavy oaken door to the Headmaster's office was bound in silver runes that pulsed faintly with protective wards. Mattes paused, smoothed the front of his travel-stained tunic, and knocked three times.

A warm, resonant voice answered from within.

"Come in, young man."

He pushed the door open and stepped into a circular chamber that seemed far larger on the inside than it should have been. Bookshelves towered three stories high, ladders sliding silently along brass rails of their own accord. Floating orbs of soft gold light drifted like fireflies. At the far end, behind an immense desk of polished star-oak, sat Headmaster Aldric Greystone—an elderly man with a mane of silver hair, a neatly trimmed beard, and eyes that twinkled with both kindness and keen intelligence. His deep-blue robes were embroidered with constellations that slowly shifted across the fabric as though the night sky itself had been woven into the cloth. Aldric looked up from a stack of parchments and smiled.

"Ah, a new arrival. Welcome, welcome. Close the door behind you, if you please."

Mattes obeyed, then crossed the deep crimson carpet and bowed respectfully.

"Good afternoon, Headmaster. My name is Mattes of Elden Hollow. I've come with my letter of acceptance."

He drew the sealed parchment from his satchel and offered it with both hands.



Aldric took it, broke the wax seal with a casual flick of his finger, and unfolded the letter. His brows rose almost at once.

"Well now," he murmured, scanning the page. "Mattes... yes... the Mattes. Highest entrance examination score in twelve years. Ninety-eight out of a hundred on theoretical arcane matrices, perfect marks in runic linguistics, and you solved the optional paradox cipher in under four minutes." He glanced up, clearly impressed. "That is... extraordinary."

Mattes felt heat rise to his cheeks.

"I... studied hard, sir."

A small lie, but a necessary one. The goddess's blessing had flooded his mind with clarity the moment it touched him; equations unfolded like flowers, runes rearranged themselves into perfect order without effort. He lowered his gaze modestly.

Aldric chuckled, folding the letter and setting it aside.

"Hard study indeed. The faculty has been quite excited to meet the young prodigy who outscored even Lady Seraphine's record." He tapped a crystal quill against the desk, considering. "Because of your unique profile, I have personally arranged your timetable. Most of your courses are standard for a first-year of your ability: Advanced Fire Manipulation with Professor Aurelia Veyl, Fluid Dynamics and Water Mastery with Professor Nerida Coralyn, and Divine Restoration Theory with High Healer Lysandra Brightwing."

He slid a neatly penned schedule across the desk. Mattes took it carefully.

Aldric continued, voice lowering conspiratorially.

"However, I noticed on your application that you train with a sword as well as spellcraft. That is rare these days. Most students here focus purely on the arcane. Because of that, I have placed you, and only you, in Miss Valentina Valerious's private Enchantment-in-Combat seminar."

Mattes blinked. "Only me, sir?"





"Indeed. Miss Valentine accepts no more than one or two apprentices per year, and this year she agreed to take a single student, you. Her methods are... unconventional. But I promise you, young Mattes, there is no finer teacher in the kingdom for weaving enchantments under the pressure of steel and blood. The Headmaster leaned forward, eyes twinkling.

"She will test you. She will push you. She may even unsettle you. But if you wish to walk the path of a true battle-mage, there is no better guide."

Mattes swallowed, feeling both apprehension and a spark of excitement.

"I understand, sir. I'll do my best."

Aldric smiled approvingly.

"I've no doubt. Your dormitory assignment is in the Sapphire Spire, Room 717, top floor, private quarters. A perk of your scores, and of Professor Valentine's rather particular requirements for her apprentice. You'll have the space and privacy to study... and to practice."

He rose and extended a hand. Mattes clasped it firmly.

"Classes begin tomorrow at the eighth bell. Fire magic first, then water, healing, and Professor Valentine in the late afternoon. Rest well tonight.

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

With a final nod, he tucked the schedule into his satchel, bowed once more, and left the office. The silver-bound door closed behind him with a soft, resonant thud, the wards flaring briefly as they resealed.



Mattes pushed open the door to Room 717 and stopped in quiet awe.

The chamber was larger than his family's entire cottage: polished oak floors, a four-poster bed draped in midnight-blue silk, tall windows that looked out over the floating crystal gardens, and a single desk already stocked with fresh quills, ink, and blank grimoires. A gentle breeze carried the scent of lavender even though the windows were closed (some subtle enchantment keeping everything perfect).

On the bed lay his new uniform, crisp and waiting: deep sapphire cloak with silver runes at the hem, high-collared white shirt, fitted trousers, and the short academy cape that marked first-years. Every fold was flawless, as though invisible hands had arranged it moments before he arrived.

He closed the door softly, a small smile tugging at his lips.

A magical place indeed.





The dormitory was quiet, the floating crystals outside the tall windows dimmed to a soft moon-glow by some unseen enchantment. Mattes had bathed, changed into the simple linen nightshirt left folded on the pillow, and finally let exhaustion pull him under.

Sleep came quickly, and with it, the dream.

He was back in Elden Hollow, standing beneath the old oak at midsummer where he and Linda had shared their one and only kiss. The air smelled of cut grass and honeysuckle. Fireflies drifted like tiny lanterns. The village was silent, as though the whole world had paused just for them.

Linda stood before him in her pale-yellow dress, the one she wore to festivals, her wheat-blond hair loose and shining in the moonlight. She smiled that small, shy smile he loved, the one that always made his heart stumble.

Without a word, she reached out. He took her hand.

Her fingers were warm, soft, a little calloused from helping in the bakery (real, familiar, perfect). He laced his fingers through hers and felt her squeeze gently, the way she always did when words weren't enough.

"I miss you," he whispered.

"I know," she answered, voice soft as the summer breeze. "But you're doing what you promised. You're becoming strong enough to protect everyone. I'm proud of you, Mattes."

He lifted her hand and pressed his lips to her knuckles, closing his eyes. She stepped closer, resting her forehead against his.

"Come home soon," she breathed.

"I will," he promised. "And when I do..."

She smiled, bright as starlight. "When you do, I'll be waiting."



The dream lingered there (just the two of them, hands clasped beneath the old oak, the night holding its breath). No Demon Lord, no goddess's blessing, no looming destiny. Only Linda, and the quiet certainty that she would keep her promise if he kept his.

Somewhere far away, in the real world, Mattes turned onto his side in the academy bed, fingers curling slightly as though still holding hers, a small, peaceful smile on his sleeping face.





The morning passed in a blur of chalk dust, glowing runes, and the soft murmur of spell incantations.

Professor Aurelia Veyl's Fire Manipulation lecture was held in a sun-drenched amphitheater whose ceiling flickered with living flames that never burned the stone. Professor Nerida Coralyn taught Water Mastery beside an indoor pool whose surface rippled with miniature whirlpools whenever she gestured. High Healer Lysandra's healing class took place in a greenhouse filled with glowing medicinal herbs that sang faintly when touched.

Mattes sat near the front in each, quill flying across parchment, absorbing every word. He barely registered the sea of sapphire skirts and loosened neckties around him, nor the fact that only two other boys (both pale, quiet, and seated in the very back row) shared the lecture halls. His mind was fixed on diagrams, incantations, and the faint ache of missing Linda.



The only thing that briefly tugged at his attention was how... generously the professors dressed. Professor Veyl's crimson gown dipped low in the front and was slit to the thigh whenever she demonstrated a flame-whip.





Professor Coralyn's sea-green robes clung to her like wet silk, translucent in the light from the pool.



Even the serene High Healer Lysandra wore a white dress that left her shoulders and much of her back bare, the fabric shimmering like moonlight on snow.

They're just... confident, he told himself, cheeks warming. City fashions again. Focus.

When the final bell chimed for lunch and then the afternoon period, Mattes gathered his books and followed the handwritten directions the Headmaster had given him: down the east corridor, past the Hall of Mirrors, through an archway marked with a single crimson rose carved into the stone.

The door at the end was black oak bound in silver, warm to the touch. A small brass plaque read:

PROFESSOR VALENTINE

Private Enchantment-in-Combat Seminar

(Enter when ready)

Mattes took a steadying breath, adjusted the sword at his hip beneath his academy cloak, and pushed the door open.

Whatever waited on the other side, he was ready.

Or so he told himself.





The door shut behind him with a soft, decisive click.

The classroom was smaller than the others, intimate almost. Dark wood panels, crimson drapes, and a single large window that poured late-afternoon sunlight across the floor like liquid gold. At the front stood Professor Valentine, one hip resting casually against the edge of her desk, arms loosely folded beneath the most extraordinary chest Mattes had ever seen.

Her hair was a river of deep red silk that spilled over one shoulder, framing a face of sharp, playful beauty—high cheekbones, full lips painted crimson, and emerald eyes that seemed to glow with their own inner light. Those eyes locked onto him the moment he entered, and a slow, knowing smile curved her mouth.

“Mattes of Elden Hollow,” she purred, voice low and velvet-rough, every syllable rolling off her tongue like a caress. “Do come in, darling.”



He obeyed, trying very hard to keep his gaze on her face.

Professor Valentine wore what could only be described as a scandalous parody of a professor's attire. A charcoal pencil skirt so short it barely skimmed the lace tops of sheer black stockings, held in place by a visible garter belt of crimson satin. Her white blouse strained heroically across breasts so large and perfectly rounded they seemed to defy gravity, the top three buttons undone so that an ocean of creamy cleavage spilled forward. Nestled in that breathtaking valley hung an enormous pendant—an oval ruby the size of a quail's egg, suspended on a delicate gold chain. Every time she breathed, the stone caught the light and flashed like a beacon, deliberately drawing the eye exactly where she wanted it.

She pushed away from the desk with a slow, feline roll of her hips and sauntered toward him, heels clicking softly on the polished floor.





"I am Professor Valentine, but you can call me Miss Valentine" she said, circling him once, close enough that the faint scent of jasmine and warm skin brushed his senses. "And you, sweet boy, are the only student clever enough this year to earn a place in my private seminar."

She stopped in front of him, hands on those impossibly curved hips.

"Take a seat."

There was only one desk in the center of the room. Mattes sat quickly.

Nadja leaned back against her desk again, crossing one long leg over the other so the skirt rode even higher.

"Most courses here teach enchanting objects for convenience or beauty. I teach something far more useful: identifying an enemy's enchantment in the middle of combat, unraveling it, and replacing it with your own—all while blades are flashing and spells are flying. It demands extraordinary intellect and unbreakable focus."

She tilted her head, red hair cascading like molten copper.

"You, Mattes, scored higher on the entrance matrices than any student in a decade. That is why you are here alone with me."



She began the lesson with simple exercises—luminescence charms, minor weight-reduction runes, a basic durability weave—demonstrating each on a small silver ring. Mattes had studied the fundamentals back home; with the goddess’s blessing sharpening his mind, he replicated every one on the first try, the runes flaring clean and bright beneath his fingers. Nadja watched with open approval, lips curved in a pleased, predatory smile. “Excellent,” she murmured. “Now we begin the real work.”





She stepped closer, the ruby pendant swaying gently between her breasts.

“Next time, I will distract you while you cast. Questions, movement, whatever it takes to break your concentration. In true combat, your enemy will not be polite.”



She moved even closer, deliberately, until her cleavage filled his vision and the ruby gleamed inches from his face. “Today, let us start gently. Enchant my pendant with a simple light charm.





Look here.” She pointed at the stone. “Eyes on the target, darling. Do not let anything else distract you.”

Heat flooded Mattes’s face. His gaze flicked involuntarily downward (just for a heartbeat) before he jerked it back to the ruby. The soft, warm scent of her skin, the impossible nearness of her body, the way the blouse strained with every breath... His pulse hammered in his ears.

Focus. Linda is waiting. You have a destiny.

He swallowed hard, forced his breathing steady, and traced the rune in the air. Golden light flared from his fingertip, flowed down the delicate chain, and settled into the ruby.



The stone glowed softly, steady and perfect.

Nadja straightened slowly, her smile widening into something almost proud.

“Very good, Mattes,” she said, voice a low, approving purr. “Most boys would have fumbled that one on the first day.”





“Class dismissed. Tomorrow we raise the difficulty.”

Mattes stood, bowed awkwardly, and somehow made it to the door without tripping over his own feet. His heart was still racing, his cheeks burning, but a quiet triumph glowed in his chest.

He had passed the first test.

As the door closed behind him, Miss Valentine watched the spot where he had been, green eyes glittering with amusement and something hungrier.



Mattes left Miss Valentine's classroom with his pulse still racing, the faint scent of jasmine and warm skin clinging to his thoughts. He shook his head sharply, muttered Linda's name under his breath like a charm, and made straight for the training yard.

The academy's combat grounds lay behind the main buildings: a wide, circular arena of packed sand ringed by marble colonnades. Training dummies lined one wall, some already scorched, others cracked by ice or lightning. Racks of practice weapons gleamed in the late-afternoon sun. A handful of upper-year students sparred in pairs, steel ringing against steel, sparks of magic flaring where blade met ward.

He began slowly: footwork drills, forms his village sword-master had drilled into him since he was twelve. Then faster. Strikes became blurs, parries crisp, the air whistling around the edge. Sweat beaded on his brow; his breathing steadied into the calm rhythm of battle. Every swing was a promise kept to Linda, every pivot a defiance of the distractions the city (and certain red-haired professors) kept throwing at him.

After an hour he was breathing hard, shirt clinging to his back, muscles singing with honest exertion. He slung his cloak over his shoulder and headed for the baths, the echo of steel on steel still ringing pleasantly in his ears. Tomorrow would bring new lessons (new distractions), but tonight he felt steady again.

The hero's path, he reminded himself, was forged one disciplined swing at a time.





The dormitory was quiet again, moonlight filtering through the tall windows and painting silver bars across the bed. Mattes slipped beneath the sheets still smelling faintly of sword-oil and sweat, and exhaustion pulled him under almost instantly.

He was back beneath the old oak in Elden Hollow.

Linda stood before him in her pale yellow, laughing softly as fireflies drifted around them like slow golden rain. She reached for his hand, fingers warm and familiar, and he pulled her close. The scent of honeysuckle, the hush of summer night, the steady beat of her heart against his; everything was perfect.

They swayed together, forehead to forehead, whispering promises neither needed words for.



Then, just for an instant, the dream flickered.

A flash of crimson silk, the low curve of a white blouse straining at its buttons, the heavy, impossible weight of Miss Valentine's breasts swaying as she leaned over him, ruby pendant glowing blue between them like a second heartbeat. Heat surged through him, sudden and startling.





The image vanished as quickly as it came.

The oak tree re-formed, Linda's gentle smile returned, and the strange warmth faded like mist in sunlight. Mattes didn't even remember it had been there. He only tightened his arms around Linda in the dream, sighed her name against her hair, and let the sweet, familiar dream carry him deeper into peaceful sleep.

Outside his window, the floating crystals glimmered softly, and the night kept its secrets.



The eighth bell rang across the spires just as Mattes stepped out of the Sapphire Spire, hair still damp from the bath, academy cloak neatly fastened for the first time. The morning air was crisp, carrying the scent of frost-kissed roses from the floating gardens overhead.

He moved with the steady flow of students toward the lecture halls. The same sea of sapphire skirts and loosened neckties parted around him; the same two quiet boys in the back row scribbled notes while the rest of the seats were filled with girls who laughed softly behind their hands or watched him with open curiosity. Mattes noticed none of it. His mind was already running through fire-rune sequences and the breathing forms he had practiced at dawn.

Professor Veyl greeted the class with a lazy flick of flame that danced across her fingers like a tame serpent.

"Today, controlled combustion within a three-meter sphere. Precision, darlings, not fireworks."



Professor Coralyn demonstrated water shields that curved like liquid glass, her sea-green robes clinging as she moved.

"Feel the flow, don't fight it. Let the current carry your will."





High Healer Lysandra spoke softly of mending fractured bones with threads of light, her voice as soothing as warm milk while her white dress shimmered like fresh snow in sunlight.

Mattes sat front row in each lecture, quill flying, absorbing everything.

The final chime of third period echoed through the sun-lit greenhouse classroom. High Healer Lysandra Brightwing closed her crystal-bound grimoire with a soft clap and smiled serenely at the rows of sapphire-clad students.



"Thank you all for your diligent practice today. You are dismissed... except for the young ladies. Please remain seated for our weekly Feminine Studies session."

A ripple of soft laughter and knowing glances passed among the girls. Mattes, already gathering his books, paused and looked up curiously.

"Feminine Studies?" he asked, brow creased. "I've never heard of that course."

Lysandra turned her gentle, luminous smile on him. The white silk of her dress caught the light like fresh-fallen snow, the low neckline and bare shoulders giving her an almost angelic appearance.



"It is a sacred curriculum reserved for our female students," she explained, voice warm and melodic. "We study the divine gifts of femininity: the cycles of the body, the subtle flows of lunar and life energies, the sacred changes a woman's form undergoes across her years. It strengthens their natural affinity for healing and restorative magics, and prepares them for the blessings the Goddess bestows upon daughters alone."

A few of the girls giggled behind their hands; one twirled a lock of hair and gave Mattes a sympathetic little wave.

He nodded slowly, cheeks pink but expression earnest. "I see. Thank you, High Healer."

Lysandra inclined her head graciously. "You are always welcome to ask questions, Mattes, but this particular mystery is one only they may walk."

With a polite bow, Mattes shouldered his satchel and left the greenhouse, the door closing softly behind him.

Inside, the moment he was gone, Lysandra's gentle smile turned just a touch mischievous. She brushed a strand of golden hair behind her ear and addressed the class.





Mattes knocked once and stepped inside, the faint scent of jasmine and warm skin hitting him like a velvet wave. Miss Valentine was already waiting, leaning one hip against the front of her desk, arms loosely crossed beneath the impossible swell of her chest. Today the blouse was midnight-black silk, the fabric so thin it caught every curve of light, and the pendant's ruby rested exactly where yesterday's had, nestled deep in that breathtaking valley.

"Welcome back, darling," she purred, voice curling a crimson lock behind her ear. "Ready to test that brilliant mind of yours?"

Mattes swallowed and nodded, taking his seat.

Nadja's smile widened, slow and feline.

"Today we raise the stakes. I will layer two enchantments on the pendant. The first is a simple light weave, meant to distract. Beneath it lies the real enchantment. Your task is to see past the distraction and name the hidden one."



She turned, giving him a deliberate view of the way the tiny skirt hugged the generous curve of her hips and the delicate lace of black panties that peeked beneath the hem when she bent forward just enough to set a small silver tray on the desk. Mattes's eyes flicked down for half a heartbeat before he jerked them to the floor, cheeks burning.



When she faced him again, pendant swaying inches from his face. The ruby suddenly flared with soft, shifting colors (rose, gold, violet, teal), pulsing in a slow, soothing rhythm.

“Look here, sweet boy,” she murmured, voice like warm honey. “Watch how the light dances... so calm, so inviting... changing colors just to catch your eye... making everything else fade away...”

The glow throbbed gently, matching the cadence of a resting heart. Mattes forced his gaze to the stone, tracing runes in his mind. He felt the pull, the strange urge to simply watch the colors shift, but he gritted his teeth and pushed through. After several long seconds he named the hidden enchantment (a minor ward against scrying).

Nadja’s eyes sparkled with approval.

“Very good,” she praised, straightening. “But let us make it harder.”





She turned again, bending just a fraction more this time, skirt riding high enough that the lace garters and the perfect curve of her backside filled his vision. This time his stare lingered a full second longer before shame dragged his eyes away.



When she faced him once more and leaned in, the pendant glowed again (same soothing rhythm), but now her hands moved around the stone, occasionally brushing the soft skin just above it. Her voice dropped to a silken whisper.

“Feel the light pulse... watch the colors bloom... let the sound of gentle waves carry your thoughts out to sea...”



The light pulsed faster.

“See how the colors swirl... how they pull the eye... how easy it is to just watch...”

His gaze dipped, lingered, then snapped back. He barely identified the second enchantment (a minor strength rune) before his thoughts started to drift.





She turned, bent once more.

“Now I will make it even harder, and add sounds to the difficulty.”



"Last one," she said sweetly. A soft, rhythmic sound of waves filled the room, blending with the pulsing light.

"Listen to the ocean... feel the colors... let everything else fade..."



The light throbbed. The waves rolled. Her voice became a lullaby.  
“Just watch the pretty light... so relaxing... nothing else matters... when you see something so soft, so perfect, it’s natural to stare... it feels so good to stare... thoughts drifting away... calm... empty... happy...”





Mattes's eyes glazed. His jaw slackened. The world narrowed to glowing ruby and endless, perfect curves.

Miss Valentine's smile curved like a satisfied cat.

"Forget my words," she whispered, voice barely audible. "They're only a whisper in the back of your mind now... something you'll feel when you see softness like this again... something that makes you feel warm... calm... obedient..."



She snapped her fingers softly.

Mattes blinked, shook his head.

"I... I lost focus," he mumbled, confused.

Nadja straightened, smoothing her skirt with mock sympathy.

"It happens, darling. Long day. We'll try again tomorrow."

He stood, cheeks flushed, gaze unconsciously drifting to the deep valley of her blouse before he caught himself and looked away.

"Thank you for the lesson, Miss Valentine," he said, voice slightly hoarse.

She smiled, slow and knowing.

"Until tomorrow, Mattes."

He bowed and left, the faint sound of waves still echoing somewhere in the back of his mind (and the whisper of something warm and soft he couldn't quite name).



Mattes stepped out of the classroom still blinking, the faint echo of waves in his ears and a strange warmth low in his stomach he couldn't quite place. He shook his head, muttered a quick prayer to the Goddess for clarity, and made for the combat yard.

The late-afternoon sun painted the marble colonnades gold.

He began the same routine: footwork, forms, controlled strikes against the battered wooden dummy. Steel rang against oak, steady and clean. Sweat beaded, muscles burned, and with every swing the lingering fog in his mind thinned. He lost himself in the rhythm (parry, riposte, lunge, recover), the pure physical honesty of sword against target.

By the time the sun touched the western spires, his shirt clung to him and his breathing came deep and even. The blade felt like an extension of his will, and for those golden minutes nothing else existed: no seductive professors, no glowing pendants, no strange dreams. Only the sword, the sand, and the promise he had made to Linda.

He sheathed the blade with a soft click, wiped his brow, and allowed himself a small, determined smile.

Tomorrow would bring whatever Miss Valentine had planned, but tonight the steel had reminded him who he was.

Mattes slung his cloak over one shoulder and headed for the baths, footsteps steady, heart clear once more.





The dormitory was dark except for the faint blue glow of the floating crystals beyond the window. Mattes slipped beneath the cool sheets, muscles pleasantly heavy from the yard, mind finally quiet.

Sleep took him gently.

He was back beneath the old oak again, midsummer night thick with honeysuckle. Linda stood in her pale-yellow dress, laughing as she spun in slow circles, fireflies trailing behind her like sunlight made fabric. She reached for him, fingers warm, and he pulled her close. Her head rested against his shoulder, soft hair brushing his cheek, heartbeat steady against his chest. Peace. Home. Everything he was fighting for.

Then, just for a heartbeat, the dream shimmered.



A flash of white silk straining at its buttons, a ruby pendant swaying between impossibly full, soft curves. A low, velvet voice whispering his name. Warmth, weight, the faint scent of jasmine. The image was gone almost before it formed, like a bubble bursting on water. Mattes frowned in his sleep, brow creasing.



He relaxed again as Linda's gentle laugh pulled him back. The oak leaves rustled overhead. Fireflies drifted. Her hand found his, fingers lacing perfectly.

The strange warmth faded to nothing more than a faint, unremembered after-image, like a dream within a dream.

He smiled in his sleep, whispered her name, and let the night carry him deeper into the sweet, familiar embrace of the girl waiting for him back home.

Somewhere far below conscious thought, a tiny seed had been planted, soft, warm, and quietly waiting for sunlight.





The morning bells rang clear and bright, pulling Mattes from a sleep that had been deep but strangely restless. He woke with the faint echo of a dream he couldn't quite grasp (something about warm light and soft curves), but it slipped away like smoke the moment he opened his eyes.

He dressed quickly, the academy uniform now fitting like it had always been his, and joined the river of students flowing toward the lecture halls.



Everything looked the same: the same marble corridors, the same sapphire skirts swishing past, the same two quiet boys in the back row.

Professor Veyl's flames danced across the ceiling, Professor Coralyn's water shields shimmered like glass, High Healer Lysandra's voice soothed like warm honey.

Yet something felt... off.

Not wrong, exactly. Just different. A low, pleasant hum in the back of his mind, like a half-remembered melody. When his gaze drifted across the room, it sometimes lingered a fraction longer than it should have on the curve of a neckline or the sway of a hip before he caught himself and snapped back to his notes.

He frowned once or twice, shook his head, and forced himself to focus.

Probably just tired, he told himself. Too much sword practice. Too many new spells to memorize.



By the time third period ended, and the girls stayed behind for their mysterious “Feminine Studies,” the feeling had faded to a faint warmth he barely noticed. He gathered his books, nodded politely to High Healer Lysandra, and headed to the afternoon’s real test.





Mattes pushed open the black-oak door with the crimson rose, the faint scent of jasmine already curling around him like smoke. Miss Valentine was waiting exactly as she had the day before: hip against the desk, ruby pendant resting in the deep valley of her blouse, green eyes bright with amusement.

"Welcome back, darling," she purred. "Let's see if yesterday's lesson took root."

He sat, trying to keep his gaze on her face and not on the pendant as she lifted it.

"Same rules," she said softly. "Two-layer enchantment. Light charm on top to distract, real enchantment beneath. Identify the hidden one."



She turned, skirt riding high as she bent just enough for lace to flash beneath the hem.



She lifted the pendant. The first layer bloomed at once: soft, shifting colors (rose, gold, violet) pulsing in a slow, soothing rhythm. Her free hand traced lazy circles in the air, fingers brushing the swell of her breasts as if by accident.

“Identify the enchantment beneath the light.”

Mattes swallowed, forced his breathing steady, and peeled back the illusion.

“Minor strength weave,” he answered, voice only slightly hoarse.

Nadja’s smile widened, approving. “Good boy.”





"Very good," she purred, straightening with a pleased smile. "But let's make it interesting."



She began the second test.

The ruby flared again (pink, gold, violet) pulsing in that slow, soothing rhythm. Her hands pointed at the pendant. And then the soft, endless crash of waves filled the room.

“Look how the colors breathe... listen to the ocean... feel how calm everything becomes...”

His eyes glazed almost instantly. The waves rolled through his mind, the light throbbed, her voice wrapped around him like silk.



“Watch the light... listen to the sea... so easy to let everything else fade...”

His eyelids grew heavy. The colors throbbed in perfect time with the surf. His thoughts slowed, drifted, settled like sand beneath gentle tides.

“That’s it... just watch the colors... listen to the waves... let everything else drift away...”

“Deeper now, Mattes... deeper and calmer... nothing to do but listen and feel how good it is to relax... to let my words sink all the way down...”





She repeated the suggestions from yesterday, slow, patient, irresistible, weaving them a little deeper this time.

“Whenever you see something so soft... so perfect... so inviting... you’ll feel this calm again. Your eyes will want to linger. Your thoughts will quiet. It will feel so natural... so good... to simply watch and enjoy.



The longer you look, the deeper the calm becomes. And every time you hear my voice, or the sound of waves, or see that gentle pulse of light... the feeling will return, stronger, sweeter, impossible to resist."

"You'll forget I said these words... but they'll stay tucked away in the back of your mind, waiting... growing... ready for whenever you need to relax... whenever you see something beautiful and soft..."



She let the trance linger a few heartbeats longer, then snapped her fingers softly. Mattes blinked, confused, a faint flush on his cheeks. "I... lost it again," he muttered.





Nadja gave him a sympathetic smile, brushing an almost maternal pat on the shoulder.

“Don’t worry, sweet boy. These layered distractions are difficult even for seasoned mages. We’ll keep practicing until you can see through anything.”

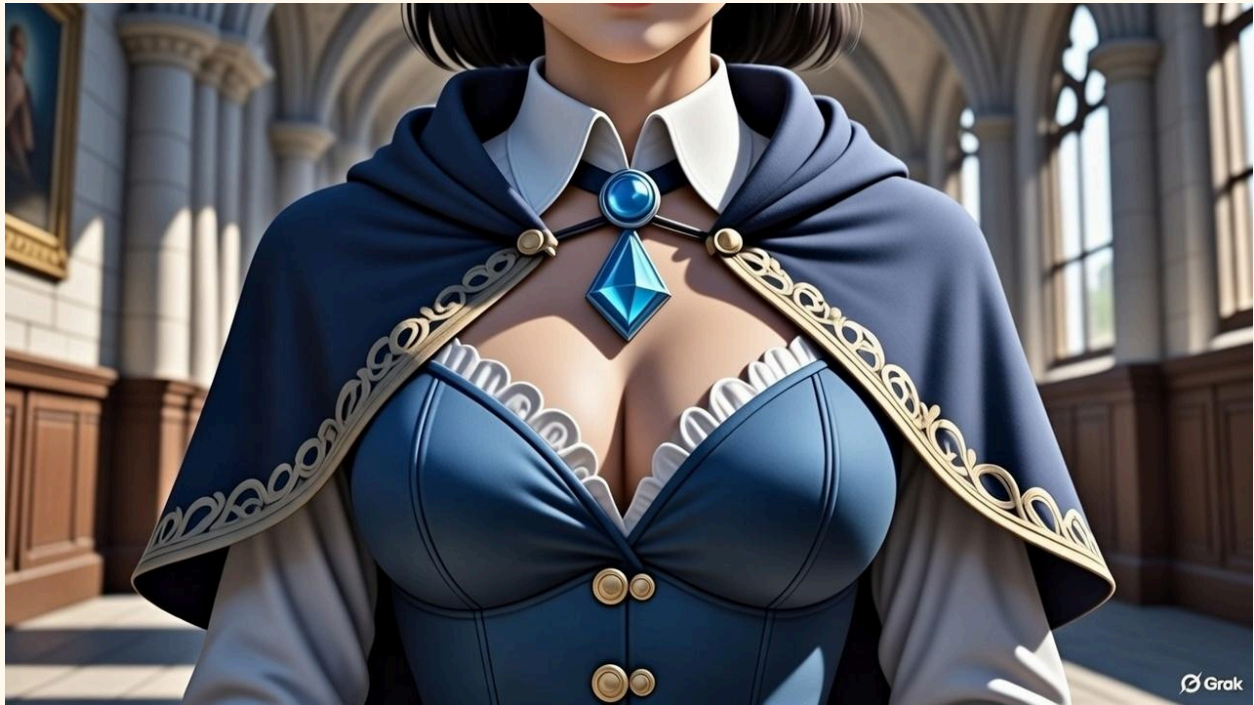
He nodded gratefully, completely unaware of the warm, obedient whisper now curled comfortably in the back of his mind, waiting for the next flash of soft curves and glowing ruby that would call it to life.

“Same time tomorrow,” she said, voice honey-sweet.

He stood, bowed, and left, the faint sound of distant waves still echoing somewhere he couldn’t quite name.



Mattes left Miss Valentine's classroom in a haze he couldn't quite name. He walked steadily, mind already turning toward sword forms and footwork, when a girl passed him going the opposite direction (third-year, judging by the silver trim on her cloak). Her cloak shifted, the neckline of her uniform dipping just enough to reveal the soft upper swell of her breasts.



Something warm and heavy bloomed in Mattes's chest.

His steps slowed without permission. His gaze lingered (far longer than polite) on the gentle curve, the way the fabric clung, the faint shadow between. A low, pleasant thrum started in his blood. His mouth went dry. For a moment the corridor narrowed to nothing but that sight, soft, inviting, impossible to look away from.

He didn't notice the way his breathing deepened, or how his fingers tightened on the strap of his satchel. He didn't question why his feet had almost stopped moving, or why a quiet, dreamy calm settled over his thoughts.

The spell broke.

Mattes blinked, shook his head sharply, and hurried on, cheeks burning for reasons he couldn't explain. Just... tired, he told himself. Distracted from the lesson. Nothing more.





By the time he reached the combat yard, the strange warmth had faded to a faint, pleasant echo. He shrugged off his cloak, drew his sword, and let the familiar weight of steel drive everything else from his mind.

The dummy took the first strike with a satisfying thud.

Whatever had just happened, it was already forgotten.

Only the blade mattered now.

The training yard faded into dusk, and Mattes returned to the dormitory with the clean ache of honest exertion in his limbs.



He washed quickly, fell into bed, and closed his eyes with the familiar prayer on his lips:

Let me see her tonight.

Sleep came at once.

He stood beneath the old oak again. Linda was there, moonlight in her hair, laughing as she pressed close. He could feel the warmth of her hand in hand, the soft brush of her cheek against his, the quiet promise in every breath.

Perfect. Safe. Home.



Then the dream flickered, just for an instant.

A flash of deep, creamy curves straining against white silk. A slow, heavy sway. The faint glint of a ruby nestled between impossibly soft, impossibly full breasts. A low, velvet voice whispering his name like a caress.





The image vanished as quickly as it appeared.

Linda's laughter returned, unchanged. The oak leaves rustled. The fireflies drifted. Mattes smiled in his sleep, pulled her closer, and let the dream roll on.



Yet the flashes came again, gentle, unhurried, each one a heartbeat long. Soft, rounded weight pressing together. Warm skin catching candlelight. The faint creak of fabric stretched to its limit. Each time they dissolved before he could truly see, leaving only a pleasant, dreamy warmth behind, like sinking into a feather bed.

They didn't disturb him. They didn't wake him. They simply settled, quiet and comfortable, somewhere deep where thoughts rarely reached.

By morning he would remember only Linda's smile and the scent of summer night.

But something new had taken root in the dark, soft soil of his sleeping mind, patient, warm, and waiting for the next whisper of silk or candle-glow to coax it gently toward the light.



Mattes jolted awake, heart still racing from a dream that slipped away the moment his eyes opened. The dormitory was quiet, the first pale light of dawn filtering through the tall windows.

He sat up slowly, rubbing his face, then froze.

There was an unmistakable tent beneath the sheets.

He stared at it for a long moment, brow furrowed in honest confusion. Morning erections weren't unknown (he'd heard the older boys joke about them back in the village), but they had always been rare for him. He was disciplined. He kept his thoughts pure. He had Linda.

Yet here it was, insistent and undeniable.

He tried to remember the dream. Linda beneath the oak? Fireflies? Her smile? Nothing improper... nothing he could grasp. Just fragments of warmth and softness that dissolved the harder he reached for them.

Mattes exhaled, cheeks warming.

"Nothing to be ashamed of," he muttered to himself. "It's only the body."

Still, the timing felt strange.

He threw back the covers, swung his legs over the side of the bed, and padded barefoot to the bathing chamber. The water came ice-cold from the enchanted spigot (exactly what he needed). He stood under the spray until his skin prickled and every stray thought was washed away, until he felt clean again, clear-headed, focused.

By the time he dressed in his academy uniform, the incident was already tucked away in the back of his mind, chalked up to a restless night and nothing more.





The morning lectures passed in their usual rhythm: Professor Veyl's flames, Professor Coralyn's water shields, High Healer Lysandra's gentle voice. Mattes's quill flew across parchment, runes and formulas appearing in neat, precise rows. He was proud of the speed, proud of the clarity. Yet every so often, without warning, his gaze drifted.

Just a flicker.

A heartbeat's glance at the curve of a neckline across the aisle, the way a uniform stretched when a girl leaned forward to turn a page, the soft sway when another stood to demonstrate a ward. Each time his eyes snapped back to his notes almost instantly, cheeks warming for no reason he could name.

He frowned, refocused, told himself it was nothing.

Beneath the desk, unnoticed, his body answered with the faintest stirrings (brief, almost polite pulses of warmth that rose and vanished before he registered them). Nothing like the morning's flag-pole salute, just a quiet, pleasant heaviness that came and went like a tide he didn't feel.



Near the end of third period he glanced sideways at the dark-haired girl who always sat to his right. Something about her looked... different. The same sapphire uniform, the same silver trim, yet the fabric seemed tighter across her chest than he remembered, the neckline lower, the swell beneath more pronounced. A late growth spurt? Better tailoring? He blinked, confused, then caught himself and stared fixedly at his parchment until the bell rang.

When the lecture ended he gathered his books with slightly hurried movements, a faint dissatisfaction gnawing at him. He had missed two minor details in Coralyn's demonstration and mis-copied one rune. Small things, but they irritated him. A hero could not afford lapses.

He squared his shoulders.

Miss Valentine's private lesson was next. He would master it today. He had to. The mission, Linda, the Goddess, everything depended on his focus.

As he stepped into the corridor toward the black-oak door, a new whisper brushed the back of his mind (soft, warm, almost amused):

*You want to see her again...*

He didn't hear it consciously.

He only felt a small, eager tug in his chest and quickened his pace.



Mattes pushed open the black-oak door, the familiar scent of jasmine wrapping around him like a warm embrace. The room felt right—comfortable, inviting, exactly where he was meant to be. Her red hair cascading like molten copper, green eyes locking onto his with that knowing, predatory gleam. The tight blouse strained against her impossible curves, the ruby pendant nestled deep in her cleavage like a secret waiting to be uncovered. His gaze flickered between her eyes and the glowing stone, a strange, pleasant pull tugging at him until she spoke, and the world narrowed to her voice. “Eager for more, darling?” she purred, sauntering closer with a sway that made the air hum. “Sit. Today, we conquer yesterday’s challenge. You failed the final step, but that’s no shame—it’s advanced work. A master isn’t born from perfection; he’s forged from relentless effort. Failure is merely the grindstone sharpening your edge.” Mattes nodded, settling into the chair, his resolve steel-hard. He would master this. For the mission. For Linda. For the hero he was destined to be.





With that, she turned around slowly, deliberately, her movements fluid and graceful like a dancer on stage. As she faced away from him, she reached for the pedestal where the pendant had been resting—no, wait, she was wearing it, but now she lifted it slightly, her fingers tracing the chain as if preparing to enchant it anew. In doing so, she gave him an unobstructed view of her ass, the pencil skirt clinging to the full, rounded curves like it was painted on. The fabric rode up just enough to reveal the garter straps pulling taut against her skin, the sheer stockings shimmering in the golden light. Her hips swayed subtly as she adjusted her stance, the motion hypnotic in its own right, inviting his eyes to linger on the way her body moved, the subtle flex of muscles beneath the cloth. It was a test, he knew—a distraction wrapped in temptation—but Mattes did not falter. He looked away like a gentleman, his gaze dropping to the floor, tracing the patterns in the wood grain instead. His will to succeed today was strong, a steel resolve forged from yesterday's disappointment. He wouldn't let base urges derail him; he was here to learn, to prove himself.



She turned back around, the pendant now pulsing with a soft, inner light, and fixed him with her gaze. "Now, identify the enchantment, Mattes. Tell me what you see, what you feel." The light within the ruby began to pulse again, a soothing rhythm that mimicked a heartbeat—slow, steady, inviting relaxation. With it came a consistent natural sound, faint at first but growing in presence: the gentle crash of waves on a distant shore, rolling in and out like a lullaby from the sea. The room seemed to fill with the salty tang of ocean air, though it was merely illusion.

Miss Valentine began to speak once more, her seductive voice weaving through the pulses and sounds like a thread of silk. "Observe the light, Mattes. See how it pulses, drawing the eye inward. It changes colors subtly—shifting from deep crimson to softer rose, then back again, a dance designed to distract, to pull the mind away from the mundane. And listen to the waves, that eternal rhythm, crashing and retreating, washing away resistance, leaving only calm in their wake."



Her hands moved as she spoke, graceful arcs that traced patterns in the air, emphasizing her words. The pulsing light reflected off her skin, casting flickering shadows across her cleavage, while the sound of waves grew more immersive, as if the room itself were adrift on the ocean. Her voice, that intoxicating timbre, wrapped around each syllable, making them feel intimate, personal, as if spoken only for him.

Yet today, the combination—the moving of her hands, the pulsing light, the sound of waves, and her seductive voice—did not manage to capture his thoughts. Mattes remained focused, his brow furrowed in concentration, analyzing the enchantment layer by layer.

Miss Valentine noticed his resilience, her lips curving into a knowing smile. "Impressive," she murmured, but there was a glint of challenge in her eyes. Quickly, she raised the difficulty, her tactics shifting to something more insidious.





She began to swing the pendant in front of her breasts, from left to right in a slow, deliberate arc, the ruby tracing a path that hovered just above the swell of her cleavage. "Follow the pendant with your eyes, Mattes," she commanded softly, her voice now a velvet rope pulling him in. "Let it guide you. Back and forth, steady and true."

The ruby arced in a pendulous motion, its glow trailing faint afterimages in the air, directly above the swell of her cleavage. "Follow the pendant with your eyes, Mattes," she commanded softly. "Let it guide you. Back and forth, so easy to watch."

The movement did the trick. Mattes's gaze locked onto the swinging gem, tracking its path involuntarily. His thoughts began to slow, the world narrowing to that rhythmic sway. The colors pulsed brighter, the waves crashed louder in his mind, and her voice deepened its hold.

Once more, Miss Valentine spoke in that seductive timbre, her words a velvet rope binding him. "The light pulses, changing colors to distract and entrance. The sound of waves carries you deeper, washing over your resistance. Let it all in, Mattes. Surrender to the flow." The swinging pendant, combined with her incantations, eroded his focus until he was lost in her sweet words, his mind open and pliable, ready for her to shape his thoughts as she willed.

She could see the trance settling over him—his eyes glazing, his posture relaxing into the chair.



"Awaken now, Mattes," she whispered, snapping her fingers lightly. His eyes fluttered open, confusion flickering briefly. But before he could fully surface, she dropped him deeper:

"And now, sink back down, deeper than before, into my words, my commands. Let go completely."

"Wake up,"

"And sink back down, deeper than before, into my words, my commands. Let go completely."

"Down now, deeper... and up, just a little... now down again, twice as deep."



With each cycle, his resistance crumbled, his eyelids growing heavy, his body slumping in the chair as relaxation flooded him.

She brings him up just enough to taste awareness, then plunging him further—shattering his resistance layer by layer until it was completely broken, his subconscious laid bare.





"Look behind the pendant, Mattes," she intoned, her voice a hypnotic lullaby, without ever mentioning her breasts explicitly. "See what lies there, drawing you in. It's so natural to gaze upon it." His eyes drifted downward, fixating on the creamy expanse of her cleavage, the ruby vanishing from his perception as her breasts became the sole focus.

"Then, whenever you see something similar," she continued carefully, choosing her words to weaken his future resistance, "it will be hard to look away. It's so soothing, feels so good to look at it. It awakens many things within you—desire, calm, surrender—and it's okay not to fight it. When you look, your mind drifts away, losing focus on all else. Only thoughts of it remain, your mind becoming calm, empty, receptive. It feels so good to stare that it's hard to look away, and you shouldn't. You should look at it, enjoy it. Everything will be good."



He stared mindlessly at her breasts, entranced, as she deepened the imprint. "Do not fight the feelings they awaken in you, Mattes. They are natural, not improper at all. These feelings will make you feel good—arousal, peace, obedience—and you should welcome them. The longer you stare, the better it feels, the more you want to stare, letting the feelings take control of your thoughts, your body, your will."

Finally, she sealed the suggestions: "Now, forget what I've said. Let it become just a whisper in the back of your mind, guiding you without your knowledge." With a gentle touch on his forehead, she woke him fully, her expression one of feigned disappointment.



"Oh, Mattes, you lost focus again. But progress is being made."

This time, he wasn't too disappointed in his "failure." A strange contentment filled him—it just meant he would come back tomorrow and try again. Somehow, the thought made him happy, a subtle thrill buzzing beneath the surface. Miss Valentine ended the session with a warm smile, dismissing him to the training grounds outside, where the fading sunlight awaited. As he left, the whispers in his mind stirred faintly, unseen but powerful, drawing him inexorably back to her domain.





Mattes stepped out of Miss Valentine's chamber and pulled the heavy door shut behind him. The latch clicked, and the muffled hush of the corridor swallowed him. The air out here was cooler, scented faintly with polished stone and the distant tang of steel from the training yard, but none of it truly reached him. His body moved on its own, boots carrying him forward down the long hallway while his mind drifted in a strange, cotton-soft fog.



Thoughts came and went like half-remembered dreams: warm, impossibly soft curves pressing together... a gentle squeeze that made something deep in his chest sigh with pleasure... the low, rhythmic sound of waves... crimson satin against pale skin... sunlight spilling over creamy swells... Each image flashed behind his eyes for only a heartbeat, too fleeting to grasp, too sweet to question. They left behind a lingering warmth that pooled low in his belly and radiated outward, slow and syrupy.

He didn't notice the way his breath had grown deeper, slower. Didn't notice the faint flush climbing his throat or the subtle shift in his gait as his hips rolled just a fraction more than usual. What he did notice, in some distant, unimportant corner of his mind, was the gentle heaviness between his legs. His manhood stirred lazily, thickening against the confines of his trousers in small, teasing pulses. Nothing urgent. Nothing that demanded attention. Just a pleasant, drowsy swelling, like his body was waking from a nap it hadn't realized it was taking.



Warm... so warm... like sinking into pillows that breathed and molded perfectly to him.

He blinked, shook his head once as if to clear it, but the motion felt unnecessary. Everything was fine. Everything was good. The training ground waited ahead, sunlight slanting through high arched windows, painting golden bars across the flagstones. Another fleeting image: soft flesh yielding beneath delicate fingers, the ruby pendant flashing between them, light fracturing into rainbows across smooth, creamy skin.

Mattes swallowed, unaware that his tongue had gone thick in his mouth. His cock gave another lazy throb, pressing a little more firmly against the fabric, but the sensation was distant, muffled, as though it belonged to someone else. He kept walking. The great double doors to the training yard loomed closer, voices and the ring of practice blades drifting through.

Almost there.

And yet every step felt like wading through honey: slow, sweet, and impossibly comforting. A whisper (so quiet he couldn't tell if it was memory or imagination) brushed the back of his mind:

Come back tomorrow... you want to stare again... let the feelings grow...

A soft, contented smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.





Usually he moved through his solo forms like water-smooth, blade singing in perfect arcs, but today every parry felt half a heartbeat late, every foot placement a fraction heavy.

Warmth kept blooming behind his eyes: soft, pillowy curves... they were sensations, thick and sweet, sliding across the inside of his skull like warm oil. Each time the wooden practice sword whistled through the air, the motion tugged at something low in his belly, a lazy, answering throb that made his grip and stance waver.

He gritted his teeth, shook his head once, twice, and forced himself to breathe. Footwork. Guard. Strike. Again. The rhythm returned slowly, stubborn muscle memory overriding the pleasant fog. Sweat beaded on his brow, ran down his temples, and for a blessed stretch of minutes the only thing in the world was the clean, sharp line of steel cutting sunlight. Mattes's shirt clung to him and his lungs burned in the right way, the way that meant he had won the fight against himself.

He lingered long enough to wipe the blade, rack it, and bow to the empty yard out of habit. Then the showers.

Sleep came quickly, but it was not empty.



He drifted off with Linda's name on his lips.

In the dream, he was home again, beneath the old oak on the hill behind her father's farm.

Late-summer light filtered through the leaves in golden coins, dappling her freckled shoulders. She wore the pale-blue dress he loved, the one that clung softly to her waist and flared around her knees. Her hand was warm in his, fingers laced tight, and when she smiled up at him the whole world narrowed to the green of her eyes and the honey-sweet scent of her hair.

"I'll wait for you," she whispered, pressing closer. "However long it takes."

But the warmth that rose in him was... heavier than it should have been. Thicker. It pooled low in his belly, slow and syrupy, the same drowsy heat that had followed him from Miss Valentine's chamber.

Linda's hand tightened in his, and when he looked down, he froze.

Her dress had changed.





The modest neckline had plunged impossibly low, white fabric straining across breasts that were suddenly, breathtakingly fuller, rounder than any memory he owned.

He blinked, confused. That wasn't right. Linda had never worn anything like that. Yet the sight felt... inevitable. Natural. His mouth went dry.

"Mattes," she murmured, but the voice that left her lips was layered, Linda's gentle lilt braided with something richer, darker, velvet poured over honey. Miss Valentine's voice.

He tried to look away. Couldn't.

Linda's smile stayed sweet, but her eyes held a knowing glint that belonged to someone else entirely.





"It's all right," the dream-Linda said, and it was Miss Valentine's cadence now, slow and deliberate.

"It's so soothing to look... isn't it?"

His dream-self nodded without thinking. Of course it was soothing. Of course it felt good. The ache between his legs answered before his mind could, thickening, pressing against the thin blanket in the real world where his body lay helpless.

"You don't have to fight it," the voice continued, wrapping around him like silk. "Stare. Let the feelings grow. The longer you look, the better it feels... the more you want to keep looking..."

It's hard to look away... you shouldn't look away... let your mind drift... let it feel so good...

The dream held him there, suspended in helpless, delicious fixation.