

## ***Between Here and There***

The fire has always burned.

It crackles now, sending tendrils of grey spiralling upwards into the ever-dark sky. The flames twist and shimmer, the colours dancing and refusing to settle down, sometimes a vibrant gold, or a gentle azure, sometimes a hue I have no name for. I care for it, as I always have. The cobbled path passing by my feet is split by a jagged crack in the rock. Far into the distance, figures emerge from dimly lit caves, their shapes half-formed, made only of precious memories and unfulfilled dreams.

They pass by in silence.

Each one steps carefully on the mosaic ground, the stone catching flickers of light with every hesitant footfall. Their path leads them around my fire, and then beyond, to the translucent veil floating up from the flames. A shimmer, a thinning of the world's fabric, where smoke and sky become one. And through it, one by one, they all disappear.

I do not speak to them. It is not my place. I am merely the guardian of the path, tending to the eternal fire, ensuring the veil's immortality.

The stories say that this fire is older than the stars. That it was kindled when the first soul ever passed from life into the unknown. I do not know if they are true, and I have forgotten if I once did.

Time is different here– or maybe it doesn't exist at all.

Once, a long, long time ago, I thought this place was one of punishment, a lonely vigil at the edge of two worlds, part of neither. But now I see it for what it is: a threshold. A place *between* here and there, *between* what was and what could be. It is not life, nor death– it is the place of *stepping*.

And there is something beautiful in that.

Tonight, the fire burns a lovely shade of violet. The smoke curls into delicate threads, weaving patterns against the darkness. I glimpse a face in the embers, a young woman with stormy eyes. A child's laughter whispers faintly in the smoke. A soldier's parting words to his father. A broken promise, a name lost in the wind. Fragments of lives. Ghosts of meaning.

I watch as they pass.

I wonder what they see. If, in their final moments before crossing, they wonder about me. If they even notice me, the watcher of the flame. Some seem to pause, as though about to speak. But they never do.

It is not their burden to bear.

Once, a long, long time ago, a child lingered. She sat beside me, watching the flames. I remember her auburn hair glinting like copper in the firelight, her eyes sparkling despite the absence of life. The only one to ever speak to me, she asked if I was frightened of what lay beyond. I could not answer. Yet, to this day, I remember her. I do not know what happened to her after she passed; I do not know what waits on the other side of the veil. I am bound to this threshold, neither here nor there.

But in my millennia of guarding, I have learned this. Those who are afraid of passing are not haunted by the unknown, but by the act of leaving behind what they *have* known.

I could walk through that veil myself, right now, if I were brave enough, or if I so wished.

But in this place, there is peace. In this moment between the last breath and the first step, the soul sheds its burdens, regrets loosen their grip, and old wounds fade. Everything that matters is distilled into something simple— a name, a memory, a dream.

The fire reflects these images.

As dawn nears, the veil shimmers brighter. Another figure approaches. His steps are hesitant, weighed down by some sorrow that I can never truly know. The flames stir, forming shapes in the smoke above— a house by the beach, the warmth of a lover, the scent of rain on freshly mown grass.

I watch, as I always do.

He pauses at the fire. For a moment, he meets my gaze. His eyes are wide, but there is no fear in them, only a quiet sort of acceptance. He does not speak; he does not need to.

I watch him step through the veil, the smoke parting to receive him. Nothing is left of him, only the barest ripple in the air, a hint of fading warmth.

I turn my eyes back to the fire. The flames continue crackling softly. And above, the smoke continues to paint new stories against the sky.