

The firelight flickered gently over the clearing as laughter and conversation hummed like bees in spring. The women sat in half-circles around the blaze, hands gesturing in animated chatter. Children played in the background, their small feet stamping out tribal rhythms in the dust, spinning and shouting with delight to the strum of Brandon's lute.

But then something... shifted.

Debra noticed it first.

She turned toward the edge of the firelight, and her breath caught in her throat. There, just beyond the ring of warmth, stood her daughter—Emily.

Debra blinked. Was this what Stevy had told her about? At that moment he couldn't find words to describe?

Emily was no longer the shy, distant girl that the village pitied with kind smiles and lowered voices. She stood still, her face turned slightly upward, catching a melody no one else seemed to hear at first. Her two sticks—carved wooden lengths she had carried since childhood—rested loosely in her hands.

Then they moved.

One, then the other, slicing the air in perfect arcs.

The rhythm of Brandon's lute faded from her awareness. She danced not to the music the others heard, but to something older, something more elemental. It was as though her soul remembered a song older than time, and her body simply obeyed.

Her movements started gently, almost curiously. But they grew—faster, sharper. Her sticks were no longer sticks. In her hands they became blades, slicing through shadow and silence. Each movement was precise. Every step landed like it had been choreographed a thousand times in her bones.

The hem of her dress lifted with the motion of her limbs. Her bare feet struck the ground in perfect cadence—not wild, not chaotic, but purposeful and masterful. Her body spun, bowed, rose, and dove again, like water catching fire.

One by one, the conversations faded.

Women paused mid-sentence. A dropped cup lay unnoticed. Children ceased their dancing and stood watching with wide eyes and slack jaws.

Even the infants, previously fussy and wriggling, fell utterly silent.

The very air changed.

Then, the sound began.

It started as a chime—soft, crystalline, like dew falling onto a silver bell. But it grew richer, more layered. The sound was no longer a sound, it was presence. A song without words, one that pierced deep into the heart and filled the soul with longing and awe. It was the most beautiful melody any of them had ever heard, too beautiful. Unbearably beautiful.

Some women wept openly, tears sliding down their cheeks as if drawn by gravity and wonder alike.

And then the fire moved.

Though Emily stood a full fifteen feet from the bonfire, streaks of flame leapt from the heart of it like ribbons pulled from a child's gift. The flames did not burn or scorch. Instead, they danced—toward her, for her.

Debra's hand flew to her mouth—but not in horror.

It should have been terror. But it wasn't. It was rapture.

The fire met the invisible sphere that radiated around Emily, and in an instant it transformed. The streaks of orange and red twisted into arcs, circling her like solar rings. The colors shifted—amber, crimson, violet, indigo—changing again and again in impossible gradients. They spiraled around her, through her hair, down her arms, weaving in and out of her sticks as if the flames worshiped the dancer.

And Emily? She didn't flinch.

She moved with them—within them—as though she had summoned them not with force, but with purity. With grace. With love.

Her dance became flight. The air shimmered. Light and sound were no longer separate things. They merged into something alive.

From the distance, the men arrived—appearing from Hal's house like pilgrims drawn to sacred ground. First a few, then a stream, all walking in a trance, drawn not by will but by wonder.

They joined the silent circle around her. Not a voice was raised. Not a foot shuffled.

There was no more fear. No confusion. No pain.

Only reverence.

In the deep shadows beyond the clearing, the cloaked figure known to Lady Elizabeth as Malachi pressed a hand to the glowing brooch beneath his cloak.

This... was not just magic.

This was old magic.

Older than runes, older than wands or spells. This was magic woven into the first breath of creation. And it was radiating from this girl—not in anger, not in hunger, but in pure, unfiltered goodness.

And he—Malachi the Hidden, the Watcher of Secrets, the Blade in the Dark—could barely endure it.

His sacred talisman, forged in temples lost to time, pulsed against his chest like a forge. It protected him, barely, keeping the magic's effects from overwhelming his mind. But it didn't block it. Oh no. He could feel it. He felt everything.

He wanted to fall to his knees and worship.

He forced himself to turn away, his discipline holding fast. Observe. Remember. Report.

He scanned the area, and what he saw stole the breath from his lungs.

The dying orchard—once shriveled and gray—was now green and alive. Apples burst from branches in clusters. Flowers bloomed in moonlight. Vegetables ripened in the garden where dry vines had once curled. The livestock in the nearby pen moved with energy, their coats clean and eyes bright. The very air was thick with the scent of jasmine and honey clover.

And himself—

His body no longer ached. His fatigue had vanished. His stiff back, worn by years of crouching in shadow, felt like that of a youth. He knelt and ran his fingers through the grass—lush, thick, vibrant green where only dusty soil had been.

A wave of euphoria washed over him—like drinking too deeply of pain powder, but without the stupor. He trembled. His brooch now glowed white-hot, flooding the night around him like a second sun.

It's time to leave. His instincts screamed it. And yet, every part of him wanted to stay.

But duty overrode desire.

With a groan of effort, he turned and began to run.

Malachi didn't sneak through the trees. There was no hiding this light. He sprinted across open fields—directly toward Rienhold Keep.

He passed villagers along the way—men, women, even children—all walking slowly, blankly, toward the farm.

He was miles away now.

And still—still—the trees bloomed. Flowers unfurled as he passed. The very earth pulsed with renewal, with life.

“By the heavens,” he whispered. “This... this changes everything.”

He didn't stop.

Lady Elizabeth had to know.

The world had to know.