

# The Aviary

*Created May 2025, main storyline supplied by Carg, text and pictures by ChatGPT 4o.*

## "The Aviary" – Part One

The sky had been clear when Elise started the hike.

A warm breeze whispered through the evergreens, carrying the scent of pine and wet earth as she made her way up the trail. It was supposed to be a short, peaceful walk—something to clear her head before starting her new job in town. Her boots crunched softly on the gravel path as she climbed higher, the valley unfolding behind her in quiet beauty.

But the mountain had its own moods.

The change came swiftly. One minute, she was soaking in the calm. The next, the wind shifted, and a dark cloud spilled over the ridge like a bruise. Thunder cracked through the forest, sharp and sudden. Elise barely had time to pull up her hood before the rain came down in sheets, blinding and cold.

She ran. The trail became mud, her boots slipping on slick stones. Branches clawed at her sleeves and she heard fabric tear. Then she saw it—half-hidden beyond a thicket of dripping hemlocks: a cottage, weathered but standing, its windows flickering with a warm amber light.

Elise didn't hesitate. She stumbled toward it, heart pounding harder than it had on the trail. The front door creaked as she pushed it open, stepping into a sudden hush. Inside, the storm was muffled to a distant roar. The air was warm, faintly sweet with the scent of dried herbs and woodsmoke.

"Hello?" she called. "Is anyone here?"

Silence.

The cottage was small but neat, lived-in. A kettle still sat on the stove. A book lay open on the table, its pages curling slightly with moisture from the air. A fire crackled in the hearth, as if someone had only just stepped out.

She turned slowly, taking it all in—and paused.

A bird cage stood in the center of the living room. Tall, ornate, almost absurdly large. The brass bars glinted in the firelight, and the door hung slightly ajar. But it was empty. No bird. No sign of feathers or seed.

Something about the cage made her uneasy. She backed away, shivering now in her soaked and torn jacket and jeans.

That was when she saw it—folded neatly on a rocking chair near the fire: a romper.

Not just any romper. It was patterned with birds—swallows, finches, jays—embroidered in glimmering thread that shimmered with iridescent blues and golds. It looked warm. Dry. Her lips trembled. She told herself it was only until the storm passed. Just a way to get warm.

Elise peeled off her wet clothes and slipped into the bird-themed romper. It fit her perfectly, unnervingly so. The fabric clung gently to her skin, soft as feathers, and she exhaled as warmth spread through her limbs.

And then everything tilted.

Her vision blurred. The room spun. For a heartbeat, she felt as though she were falling—not downward, but inward. Light shifted. Time buckled.

The next moment, she was sitting—no, perching—on a rounded brass bar.

She blinked.

Around her: bars.

Not of a window. Not of a balcony.

A cage.

Her body moved sluggishly as she turned, hands gripping the smooth metal. The romper—still on her—had no zippers, no buttons, no way off. Its seams were gone, as if it had been sewn onto her. Her heart thudded. She reached for the cage door. It was closed. Locked from the outside.

And then she heard it: a soft coo, not from within the cottage, but from somewhere deeper inside the walls.

She was not alone.

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## "The Aviary" – Part Two

Elise gripped the bars until her knuckles ached.

Her breath came in fast, ragged gasps as she scanned the room. Everything looked the same—the fire, the rocking chair, the book on the table. But she was no longer standing among them. She was inside the cage, elevated slightly above the floor, as if some unseen hand had repositioned it when she wasn't looking.

She rattled the bars. "Hello? Is someone here?" Her voice echoed strangely, as though muffled by invisible walls.

No answer.

Her eyes darted down to the romper. It still hugged her body, soft and supple, but it now seemed more... organic. The embroidered birds shimmered subtly, as if breathing with her, their thread catching firelight in a hypnotic rhythm. She tugged at the fabric again—no seams, no tags, nothing. It was like a second skin.

*What is this place?*

The low cooing sound came again. This time, it was closer. A sliding rasp, soft footfalls—then silence. Elise held her breath, every muscle tensed.

Something moved in the shadows by the kitchen.

A figure.

No, not quite a figure. A shape. Human-ish, but elongated. Feathers glistened where arms should have been. Its head was turned away, as if it hadn't yet noticed her. It moved with slow grace, like a heron wading through water.

Elise's voice stuck in her throat.

The thing paused near the stove, tilted its head, and sniffed at the air.

Then it turned.

Its face was not monstrous. In fact, it was... almost beautiful. Avian and delicate. Eyes like jet beads glimmered with alien intelligence. A long neck craned toward the cage. Toward her.

It chirped.

"New?" it asked, the word warbling like wind through reeds.

Elise's mouth opened, but nothing came out.

The creature padded closer, talons clicking softly on the floorboards. It knelt beside the cage, staring at her with an unblinking, curious gaze.

"Warm," it said, touching the bars gently. "Comfortable. Better now, yes?"

"What—what happened?" Elise whispered. "Why can't I—get out?"

The creature's head tilted again. "You put it on. That means you belong."

She grabbed the bars again, shaking them violently. "Let me out! This is some kind of trick. I didn't *agree* to anything!"

The creature blinked slowly. "You were cold. You chose warmth. The aviary accepts what is offered."

Elise's heart thundered. "No. I didn't *mean* to stay. I just needed shelter."

A long pause.

"Intent is nothing," the creature said. "The song of choice is action."

Then, softly, it added: "You are not the first."

It rose and turned, heading back into the shadows.

"Wait!" Elise shouted. "You can't leave me here!"

But the creature was already fading into the hallway, its feathers brushing against the walls like silk. The light in the room dimmed slightly, as if reacting to its departure. The fire, once bright, now flickered low and uncertain.

Elise sat motionless in the cage, shivering again—but not from cold this time.

Behind her, the faintest whisper of wings stirred the air.

And far above, unseen rafters creaked... as if something else had begun to stir.

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Elise did not sleep.



The cage was large enough to sit in, but not to stretch. Every time she dozed off, the soft hum of feathers or the creak of shifting wood pulled her back. The fire had burned down to coals, casting long shadows across the room. Somewhere in the cottage, the creature still moved—quiet and patient, like it was waiting for something.

Her body ached. The romper, still clinging to her, had lost all the warmth it once gave. Its bird-patterned fabric felt taut now, almost... expectant.

She tested the bars again. No give. They were solid, immovable. Even the joints where they met the cage's frame were seamless, as though the whole thing had grown from the floor like some twisted plant.

Eventually, she stopped rattling them. Her mind turned to escape, to reasoning, to bargaining.

That's when she noticed something new.

On the small table by the fireplace—where the book had been—sat a cup of tea. Steam curled softly from it.

Her stomach twisted. She hadn't heard anyone enter. The book was gone.

In its place: a feather.

Elise pressed her face between the bars, staring at the cup.

"Is this another trap?" she whispered.

She didn't expect an answer—but one came.

"It is hospitality."

She turned. The birdlike creature stood by the bookshelf, arms folded behind its back. Its feathers were a deeper color now—an iridescent purple, like dusk. It did not approach this time.

"You are still unsettled," it said.

"What gave it away," Elise muttered, "the cage or the abduction?"

The creature made a low sound that might have been amusement. "You misunderstand. No one is taken. This place *receives* what the world discards."

"I wasn't discarded," Elise snapped.

The creature moved closer to the table. It gestured to the tea.

"You were soaked. Cold. Alone. You came here to be safe. You chose warmth over fear. The Aviary heard your need."

She stared at the cup. "What is it?"

“Relief. Or regret. Depending on how much of you still resists.”

Elise hesitated. Then, with slow precision, she said: “I want to leave. I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t consent.”

“Consent was the warmth you wrapped yourself in. The cage didn’t close until you accepted comfort.”

The room seemed to lean in, as if listening.

Elise sank back against the bars. “What happens now?”

The creature did not answer right away. It stepped closer to the cage, just enough for Elise to see the fine lines on its face—not age, but stories. It had watched many come through this place. Too many.

“There are... ways,” it said finally. “A choice must be made. Stay, and become part of this sanctuary. Or find the feathered path out. But if you do—”

“Yes?” she asked, breath catching.

“You will never again recognize warmth without fear. You will never put on comfort without wondering what it takes from you.”

Elise looked again at the tea. The feather. The bird-stamped romper on her skin.

A door creaked somewhere deep in the cottage.

And from above, on the upper beams, something large shifted—feathers rustling, talons scratching wood. Watching.

Waiting.

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### **"The Aviary" – Part Four (The Flight Within)**

Elise reached for the cup with hands steadier than before.

She felt the warmth even before her fingers curled around the porcelain. It smelled of open skies and tall grass—of sun-warmed feathers and something more elusive, something bright and strange.

She lifted it and drank.

The taste was wild.

It bloomed across her tongue like a sudden gust of wind—sweet and sharp, grounded and weightless. It wasn’t one flavor, but a thousand remembered moments: sun through canopy leaves, the cool hush of morning, the first leap into air you trust to hold you.

The firelight flared.

The cage vanished.

She gasped—but not in fear. She could *feel* everything now. Her skin vibrated with sensation. Her heartbeat was no longer just hers. It beat in rhythm with the wooden floor beneath her, with the stones in the hearth, with the unseen flutter of wings in the rafters.

She looked down at her body. The romper shimmered and shifted. Its embroidered birds pulsed with quiet life, their wings twitching, their eyes glinting. The fabric felt like feathers. Not foreign. *Hers*.

And then the world shifted.

Not spun. Not blurred. Shifted.

Her mind stretched outward—not like thought, but like instinct. She *saw* as a bird sees: motion first, shape second. Her eyes flicked to the smallest twitch of shadow, the briefest flicker of light. The space around her changed from a room into a *habitat*. Every perch had purpose. Every window was a sky.

She leapt—and instead of falling, she *soared*. Not truly flying, but weightless in spirit. Her bare feet barely touched the floor. The air welcomed her.

Laughter escaped her lips, light and bright. For the first time in a long time, she felt joy without guilt.

She danced through the cottage, and the cottage danced with her. The hearth pulsed with heat that curled like thermals. The books whispered their titles to her. A wall creaked open to reveal a hallway filled with wind-chimes made of bones and feathers and silver spoons.

She perched on the back of the rocking chair, breathless, not from fear—but from *exhilaration*.

And then, without knowing why, she stopped.

The romper no longer clung to her.

It was simply... clothing. Soft, dry, warm. The birds were still now—just thread again. She looked down at herself, and for the first time since entering the cage, she saw the option clearly.

She could take it off.

And so she did.

The moment the fabric left her skin, the cottage sighed.

The colors softened. The shapes resumed their human logic. Gravity returned, and the walls were still. The fire crackled gently. The cage stood open, but empty. The book was back on the table.

And Elise was herself again.

She folded the romper gently. It did not resist.

The birdlike creature stood nearby, watching her with solemn eyes.

"You saw," it said.

"I did," she whispered.

"You chose to return."

Elise nodded. "For now."

The creature offered no warning. No farewell.

Just a quiet bow of its head.

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## Epilogue

Weeks passed. Maybe more. Elise wasn't sure.

She was home now. Back in her apartment. Her plants were still alive. The job still waited. The city still hummed. People still passed without looking up.

The folded romper lay in her closet. Tucked into a cedar box, wrapped in linen. It hadn't changed. The embroidered birds were still stitched mid-flight.

Sometimes, when the morning light caught the fabric just right, they shimmered.

She hadn't worn it again.

But some nights, when the wind stirred the curtains and the moon hung low and pale, Elise would lie awake, staring at the box.

And wonder.

What might happen if she dared to put it on again.

Not to escape.

But to *remember* how it felt to see the world like a bird.

And to belong—not in a cage.

But in the sky.