

# Awakening in Alentejo



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Some things dear  
That I long for are few  
Just give me a sailboat  
In the moonlight and you

From *Sailboat in the Moonlight*  
by Billie Holiday



*To all those who embark on the brave adventure  
of truly living their lives*





# Prologue

## **Alentejo, Portugal Present (September 2023)**

“You’ve got to be kidding me?! Screw this!” As I looked up, I saw Herlinde leap up from her meditation cushion and storm out of the relaxation room, cursing profusely along the way. Her cushion seemed to glimpse an escape route as well and spun toward the door, following Herlinde’s trail as she bolted out like a madwoman. Here I was, among several other women - and one man, mind you - searching for a greater purpose and a sense of fulfillment in my life.

We had been invited to sit in a graceful lotus pose and were just starting an exercise to connect with our intuition. In what, for most of us, appeared to be a rather clumsy cross-legged position, we had attempted the inward journey toward the chalice of our womb, the center of our creativity. “Take a deep breath in... and breathe out. Close your eyes or fix a soft gaze on what’s in front of you,” Jenny, one of the retreat’s facilitators, had instructed us. Her long purple kaftan with orange flowers and the messy red bird’s nest on the top of her head perfectly suited the crunchy-granola vibe of the environment I found myself in.

And then came Herlinde’s outburst. Some of the women in the group exchanged glances and shrugged, while others expressed their disapproval with deep sighs. Jenny, however, remained composed and non-judgmental - perhaps there was some merit to this pursuit of inner peace after all - and gently guided us back to tranquility. She closed her eyes once more and continued her descent into her inner source, which was

probably a peacefully flowing stream. Mine felt more like a tumultuous tsunami, turbulent and unsettled.

The first evening of this yoga and mindfulness retreat had barely started, and I was already questioning whether this trip was such a good idea. Though the idyllic Portuguese surroundings and the gorgeous sunset certainly had their appeal, doubt began to creep in. The familiar voice in my head mocked me more with each passing minute as I sat on this annoyingly hard meditation cushion trying to find my inner chalice. The cry for attention from my rumbling stomach only strengthened my mind's resolve to distract me. It reminded me of the bean-based feast that lay ahead of us and served up a hilarious mental slideshow of myself twisting into yoga poses in awkward silence after a gas-inducing protein overdose. I could only hope this wasn't a true-to-life preview of the next ten days.

I took a deep breath and opened my eyes. Through floor-to-ceiling windows, I fixed my gaze upon the green valley filled with olive trees, veiled in a misty shroud. In no time, my left leg started to cramp up. A spasm originated in my hip and determinedly radiated to the outer edge of my foot, settling in comfortably. So far, I was not yet feeling the 'love and light' promised by the retreat's website.

Honestly, I could relate to Herlinde's refreshingly candid outburst. I found myself yearning to follow her lead, but I would never dare to explode like that, completely indifferent to the opinions of others. Nonetheless, I was battling what I could only imagine were very similar feelings: boredom, irritation, frustration, and a nagging sensation that didn't appear to stem solely from hunger. How could this uncomfortable silence possibly lead to any revelations? It wasn't even completely silent. The occasional awkward

cough, the sounds of restless fidgeting, and the rustling of the meditation cushions against the hardwood floors formed a discordant soundtrack. Meanwhile, outdoor sounds were also vying for my attention: the croaking of frogs, the chirping of crickets, and the melodious elongated trill of a nightingale.

Eventually prevailing was the sound of a car that carelessly skidded to a halt on the gravel of the small parking lot near the entrance of the ecological retreat. The car seemed oblivious to our desperate quest for inner peace. It led a simple existence, merely following the whims of its driver, who could clearly benefit from some relaxation as well.

While trying to ignore my rumbling stomach and tingling legs, I once again turned to my inner compass. If it had trouble locating that elusive inner peace, maybe it could just point me in the direction of the nearest vineyard. A glass of wine sure sounded like a welcome treat. After all, it was nearly eight p.m. It would be a great way to clear - or at the very least numb - my mind. I was well aware it was a coping mechanism, but in the gentle Portuguese warmth, a local rosé sounded like an appealing refuge. Unfortunately, that option wasn't available at this alcohol-free, eco-friendly vegan retreat. What had I gotten myself into? But even if there were other choices, I'd likely still be here, resigned to my uncomfortable meditation cushion. Perhaps I had to accept that this was simply who I was: compliant, well-mannered, and attentive to everyone else's wishes and opinions, even if it meant enduring a persistent, painful cramp.

# **That same morning**

## **Paris, France**

“Damn it!” I cursed my procrastination once again, as I hurried through the entrance hall of Charles de Gaulle Airport. There had been no affordable flights from Belgium to Lisbon at the last minute - or rather, at the last second. The budget flight I had booked from Paris was indeed a golden opportunity, but it came with a price. Late last night, I had to hastily catch the Eurostar to Paris and check into the Mercure hotel near the airport. I began to wonder if the overall bargain deal was truly advantageous.

This morning, I had left my cozy hotel bed at the very last moment. Thankfully, I had been proactive and checked in online beforehand. Slightly stressed, I made my way through the security check, where I was promptly halted by a burly security guard for a pat-down. It seemed that the underwire of my bra had triggered the alarm. I assured the imposing man there was no danger emanating from my bosom, but he didn't seem entirely convinced. It was absurd to think I might miss my flight because of this. As I mentally conjured up creative ways to eliminate the guard using only the sharp object in question, I anxiously asked, “Would you like me to take off my bra for you?” The security guard raised his eyebrows. His perplexed expression immediately indicated that I wouldn't have to follow through on what I now realized was quite the indecent proposal. After a thorough inspection by his stern-looking female colleague, I was allowed to continue my journey. Relieved, I grabbed my jewelry and mobile phone from the plastic tray and chaotically dragged my dark gray suitcase behind me.

Weaving through the other travelers, I sprinted through the terminal in search of the correct gate. When I finally managed to locate it, I realized that boarding hadn't yet begun. A long line of enthusiasts had already gathered at the Air France desk. I had never quite understood that concept. Why was anyone eager to be the first on an airplane that had to wait for everyone to board anyway? Completely out of breath, I sank into an uncomfortable gray seat. My head fell back, and I looked up at the enormous futuristic dome-shaped structure above me. Through the glass windows, I saw night giving way to the first light. This time of day always made me sentimental. This morning, I felt very lonely and utterly lost.

These past few weeks, I had impatiently searched for solutions, hoping to find a scenario that would reignite my enthusiasm for the future. A mindfulness retreat in Portugal had seemed like an oasis in the midst of an otherwise barren desert. I had impulsively booked this trip and only now dared to admit to myself that I hadn't thought beyond this point. Planning this journey had given me the peace of mind that I was taking action and was no longer stuck in my life, but was this really true? Was it merely a mirage after all? The realization that I had been fooling myself overwhelmed me. In my mind echoed that familiar merciless voice: "What are you thinking, Liv? Meditating with a bunch of strangers? When will you get back to work? Hasn't this gone on long enough? What's your next move? Applying at the Moulin Rouge? Let's face it: you were hardly the star of your childhood ballet class, so if you were hoping to make a living by dancing the Can-Can, you probably can't-can't!"

A familiar knot of despair tightened in my stomach, and I swallowed down my tears. To quell the restlessness, I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

*"Bonjour, Olivia! Comment ça va?"* I suddenly heard someone chirp enthusiastically next to me. Surprised to hear my name, I looked to my left and saw two women standing there, smiling kindly at me. As my awakening brain tried to figure out who these women were and how they knew my name, I stared at them dumbfoundedly.

"Oh, you don't speak French?" said the younger of the two slightly disapprovingly in broken English. She was small, with dark hair and dark eyes. Her intense gaze and tone immediately conveyed that I was dealing with a rather feisty personality.

"Hello Olivia, nice to meet you. I'm Belle, and this is Marion," said the slightly older woman, whom I guessed to be in her early forties. She spoke English flawlessly with a charming French accent, and I immediately felt she was likable. Belle was tall, slim, and had the kind of voluminous brown curls that I could only dream of. Self-consciously, I brushed back a lock of my wispy blonde hair.

"I hope you don't mind, but we recognized you from Facebook," she added. From the email exchange among the retreat participants, I remembered the three of us would be departing from Paris. *"Bien sûr, Belle et Marion. You're also going to the retreat in Portugal,"* it finally clicked. "My native language is Dutch, but I do speak French on a daily basis at my job in Brussels," I added somewhat defensively.

Marion was delighted with my response and immediately began chattering away in French about her hectic morning. Apparently, she had powered through with a copious amount of caffeine. Her frantic energy made me a little nervous. Marion and Belle were telling me they had just met and in their buzzing enthusiasm had come up with the idea to look me up on Facebook, when all of a sudden the line of passengers started moving. As I found it quite demanding to

keep up with the rapid pace of their French chatter, I was relieved to catch a break. I was painfully aware that in the first five minutes of this encounter, I hadn't dared to be entirely truthful. While I did speak French frequently at work, the truth was that I hadn't been there for almost two months.

During the flight, I sat a few rows behind Belle and Marion. I attempted to read *'The Alchemist'* by Paulo Coelho for the umpteenth time. It was one of my favorite books. Every time I tried to read a sentence, the words seemed to get lost on the way to my brain. This had been happening to me frequently lately. I put the book back into my oversized purse and gazed out the window instead. The sparkling sun reflecting on the wings of the airplane had a mesmerizing effect, and before long, I slipped into a sort of trance.

I was astounded when the pilot announced that we could fasten our seat belts again for the descent toward Lisbon. At Humberto Delgado Airport, we found the seven other members of the retreat group already waiting for us. Some had been there for a while and had clearly already made more extensive introductions, but for me, it was still a rather nerve-wracking moment. After all, these were the people I would be living with quite intensively for the next ten days. We briefly exchanged names, and fairly quickly, carpool groups seemed to form organically. Belle, Marion, and I picked up a fiery orange Renault Twingo adorned with white stickers from the car rental counter. The three of us barely managed to squeeze into the small car along with our luggage. From an outsider's perspective, it probably looked like we had been swallowed by a clownfish. I made a mental note to inform Pixar that they could call off the search party, since we had found Nemo.

Soon after departing Lisbon and heading east, we entered the Alentejo region. According to my quick touristic Google search, it was also known as the 'garden of Portugal'. The vast sloping fields and long avenues lined with cork oaks under the sunlit sky looked as picturesque as a postcard. During the drive, I quickly discovered the distinctly different personalities of Belle and Marion. Belle appeared to be reserved, kind, and gentle, while Marion was unrestrained and much more boisterous. She occasionally turned the volume of the radio up to sing along - loudly and mostly out of key - with any song she knew part of the lyrics to. After a little under an hour of driving, she suddenly announced that she needed a cigarette, unceremoniously parked the car and stepped out. With her phone to her ear and a cigarette in her mouth she paced back and forth. Occasionally, she gestured wildly, seemingly on the verge of tears.

Almost simultaneously, Belle and I decided to give Marion some privacy and turned to each other with a strained smile. "Are you from Paris?" I asked, realizing that with an opener like that, I wouldn't be winning any originality awards. "*Oui, originally,*" Belle politely replied, "but since my marriage, I live with my husband and children in Chateaufort." I nodded approvingly, but had to admit that I had no clue where that was exactly. Fortunately, Belle filled in the blanks for me. "It's a rural village close to Versailles, in the Yvelines department. Not far from Paris at all, but at times it's already a bit too far for this *Parisienne* at heart." Her dreamy gaze and wistful smile seemed to align with the nostalgia in her words. "I can relate to that..." I blurted out spontaneously. "I'm actually from Ghent, but I live about half an hour away in a place called Aalter. I bought an apartment there with my then-boyfriend, but I never truly felt happy there. I'm literally stuck between train tracks and a highway." Even though the



retreat hadn't officially started, I had already surprised myself with this heartfelt confession.

Marion abruptly swung open the door on the driver's side, breaking the fragile moment of connection. "*Merde alors,*" she snapped, turned the key in the ignition, and started the car before she had properly fastened her seatbelt. Any frustration Marion seemed to feel, she took out on the responsive gas throttle. Belle and I held back and opted to give her some space, but it soon became clear that she needed to vent. "Can you believe I've been out of the country for only a few hours, and she's already with another woman?" Marion ranted. "How dare she? Our bed isn't even cold yet!" Like a true mother hen, Belle immediately turned all her caring attention to Marion. "*Oh chérie, c'est terrible.* What's going on?"

Relationship problems weren't unfamiliar territory to me, but it felt a bit surreal being the confidant for a girl I had barely known a few hours. Unsolicited, I learned quite a bit about the open relationship between Marion and her girlfriend Milou, that seemed to be a little chaotic, to say the least. It was difficult to follow the French conversation from the back seat over the noisy blast of the air conditioning. Occasionally, like Belle, I tried to offer a comforting interjection, but I quickly noticed it had little effect. Marion seemed solely focused on venting her frustrations. Lately, I had become painfully aware of how much energy I wasted trying to please others. So, during the last part of the ride, I consciously let my attention drift off. Through spotlessly clean windows, I looked out at the rolling green landscape. It felt as if I had finally broken free from a concrete prison after years of solitary confinement. With a smile on my face, I felt myself take a deep invigorating breath despite the physical fatigue.

After her smoke break, Marion tried to make up for lost time by treating the obligated speed limits as mere suggestions. It seemed to be working quite well at first glance, but near São Teotônio, the built-in GPS of our rental car went haywire. Only a few miles from our destination, our mobile phones were no longer able to find a stable Wi-Fi connection. It had us circling in the vicinity of the retreat site like a hungry predator that could already smell its prey but hadn't managed to locate it yet. Just after five p.m. we finally pulled into the small parking lot of the retreat and found it quite crowded already. Kyle and Jenny, the retreat guides, were waiting for us in the main building, in a reception room that doubled as a dining space.

Kyle was a tall Australian in his mid-thirties with a blond man bun and a friendly look about him. On the website, I'd learned he would be our yoga instructor for the coming days, and Jenny - his girlfriend - would be our meditation guide. Despite her young age, the petite German girl in her late twenties exuded a powerful serenity. She hugged us sincerely. "Welcome, ladies, how wonderful that you're all here! We'll start our first meditation shortly, but if you still feel like having a snack, please help yourselves," she greeted us. She pointed to a half-emptied plate of vegan brownies on a long buffet table that looked plundered by a pack of hungry wolves.

The week's menu I had received in my inbox after signing up had raised some concerns for me. Over the years, I had discovered that a fully vegan diet was challenging due to all my food intolerances, but these chocolate crumbs looked pretty harmless. At least that's what my body was trying to convince me of right now. Since the gluten-free granola with oat yogurt at the hotel this morning, I hadn't eaten anything,

and my stomach immediately responded with a loud cry for attention. The sound was drowned out by Belle and Marion. "No thank you, we ate quite a bit on the plane. Those meals might not be a gastronomic feast, but they do fill you up!" they laughed, and I saw myself nearly missing out on the remaining brownie crumbs. "Leave your luggage here for now. Kyle will show you the meditation room so you can meet the rest of the group. I'll tidy up here first," Jenny explained.

Kyle graced us with an inviting smile and gestured for us to follow him. Belle and Marion trotted after him like a flock of hens to a rooster. Meanwhile, Jenny collected a stack of dirty dessert plates from the oak buffet table and walked through a set of wooden swinging doors into the kitchen, where a man and a woman were having an animated conversation. In that window of opportunity, I quickly snatched a few remaining pieces of brownie from the tray. As I walked out of the door into the garden, I greedily stuffed them into the corners of my mouth like a hamster preparing its winter stock. I immediately quickened my pace to catch up with the others. Kyle guided us along a shadowy path that seemed to cut through dense bushes. I had to make a conscious effort to lift my tired legs high enough so I wouldn't trip over the uneven flagstones. After a few minutes, we reached a second building. In the entrance hall, Kyle took off his well-worn Birkenstocks and placed them on a nearby shoe rack. In silence, he gestured for us to do the same. So far, he seemed to be a man of few words.

The soft light from the meditation room gleamed into the hallway. Although the sun wouldn't touch the horizon for another hour, the room was already dimly lit. Flames danced enthusiastically in several large selenite and rose quartz candle holders. Together with the orange and pink colors of

the setting sun, they cast a warm glow over the half-circle of retreat participants. There were no windows in the other three walls, only a window wall that overlooked an expansive green valley and framed it like a Van Gogh painting. Kyle settled onto an emerald green meditation cushion in front of it. Next to him lay a beautiful purple satin cushion with a gold-colored notebook waiting for Jenny. There was also a large crystal singing bowl that immediately intrigued me.

Belle and Marion made a beeline for two cushions that lay next to each other at the edge of the half-circle. Keeping my gaze on the ground, I made my way across the parquet floor on socked feet to the second-to-last free cushion and sat down self-consciously. A little awkwardly, I tried to find a comfortable position and looked at the rest of the group for inspiration. On my right sat a young blonde girl with closed eyes in a lotus position. I remembered from our short meeting at Lisbon airport that her name was Malin. Her hands rested palms up on top of her knees, and she pressed the tips of her index fingers and thumbs together. She already seemed deep in meditation. On my left sat a man with dark brown curls and stylish glasses, smiling, ready to catch my eye. Since he was the only man in the group, his name had stuck with me. Simon was sitting in a relaxed cross-legged position, which seemed ambitious enough for this first try at meditation. I nodded a greeting and crossed my legs in a similar fashion. His gaze promptly turned inquisitive, and he moved his hand to his mouth. "Chocolate," he whispered. I realized that my stolen snacks had left their mark. It seemed that in my haste, I had smeared half a brownie across my face. Embarrassed, I wiped my hand across my mouth and looked at him questioningly. "Much better, darling," he whispered softly in a friendly manner. Grateful for his gallant intervention, I smiled broadly back at him, earnestly hoping that the other half of the brownie wasn't lodged between my teeth. I trusted that Simon would be honest enough to tell me

if that were the case. Since he only gave me a conspiratory wink, I felt reassured.

With a soft click of the door closing behind her, Jenny entered the room. Composedly she walked to her spot, sat down on the cushion next to Kyle and closed her eyes briefly. She took a deep breath in and out, then looked at each of us one by one with a welcoming smile. She took her time to make her way around the half-circle. When she finally reached me, I immediately felt myself grow calmer. Without realizing, I had started mirroring her deep belly breathing. As she shifted her attention to Simon - the last one in the circle - I looked at the other participants and noticed that not everyone was a fan of the mindful greeting. A woman with wild blonde hair opposite me was clearly already quite irritated and rolled her eyes. I also noticed Belle and Marion exchanging an uneasy glance.

“*Namasté*, beautiful souls,” Jenny began. “Or loosely translated: the light in me honors the light in you. Today, our paths meet at a crossroad. We have all come a long way, and in the coming days, we will walk a small part of the road together.” She smiled at each of us again. “It’s inevitable that we will also be confronted with our shadow sides. These moments offer opportunities for growth, although you may sometimes feel like running away from them. We are embarking on this journey together and are here for each other. I hope that we can create a safe space to share those difficult moments.” She paused. “I genuinely look forward to getting to know your unique light better. Let’s start with a short introduction round.” Invitingly, she looked at the blonde woman at the beginning of the half-circle, whose irritation now only seemed to have heightened. I estimated her to be in her late forties. She certainly didn’t seem to be melting under Jenny’s soft gaze. Her annoyed expression

spoke volumes. "I am Herlinde from Holland, and I hope this introduction is enough, because my light is almost out! I've had quite the journey today, not only figuratively!" She snapped at Jenny. Herlinde already seemed to have no problem unapologetically sharing her difficult moments, clearly not caring about the impact on the rest of the group. While most of us could probably relate to her need for rest, her passive-aggressive and very direct communication had thrown most of the group off. Jenny, however, didn't seem to take it personally. She continued to breathe calmly and smiled understandingly. Belle and Marion, who were next in line, kept it brief and only shared their names and nationalities. The four women next to them followed suit.

"Anna from Germany."

"Gabriella from Italy."

"Aisling from Ireland."

"Shanty from The Netherlands."

Only when "Ling from The Netherlands" took her turn, things faltered for a moment.

"Well, actually from China, but I live in the Netherlands with my husband," the young woman explained. "Not that it matters," she stammered apologetically in the direction of a visibly agitated Herlinde, and promptly turned to the next person in the circle. After "Malin from Sweden" it was my turn: "Liv from Belgium."

I didn't dare to break the pattern and left it at that. Surprisingly, Simon also turned out to be Belgian. We exchanged a brief nod of recognition.

After the eventful welcome ceremony, there was little enthusiasm for extensive introductions. Like a ravenous beast, I attacked the buffet of onion tarts, spicy couscous with sweet potatoes, and a delicious Moroccan carrot-chickpea salad. I exchanged only pleasantries with Gabriella, an Italian woman who sat next to me. During dinner, Jenny posted the

room assignments on the central bulletin board next to the reception desk in the lounge. When I went to check the list to find out which room I was in, Belle and Marion already stood there like teenage girls at summer camp, chatting animatedly. Behind the reception desk, a dark-haired man looked up from a computer screen, somewhat annoyed by the giggling women. Next to him, a young woman unsuccessfully tried to draw his attention to her cleavage, while the ponytail dangling from her pink cap cheerfully swayed back and forth. “You’re my hero, Vinny!” she flirtatiously exclaimed, but he immediately refocused his gaze on the screen. From the bulletin board, Belle called out to me with a radiant smile: “Looks like we’re on the same team again, Liv.”

“We are going to need to stick together to tame that fiery Dutchwoman,” Marion whispered with a conspiratorial look. Our fourth roommate indeed turned out to be Herlinde. Simon approached me and raised his eyebrows, clearly noticing the undeniable tension in the air. “May the odds be ever in your favor,” he whispered, as if we were not on a peaceful retreat but in the midst of the cutthroat world of The Hunger Games. The tone had obviously been set.





# The Initiation



# Day 1

## Alentejo, Portugal

Completely disoriented, I woke up in a dark room, startled by a loud beeping sound coming from somewhere on the other side of the room. “*Merde,*” I heard someone whisper loudly. There was a rustling of blankets. Pillows were being tossed around in an evidently futile search for the blaring alarm clock. “*Jezusmina,*” came the voice from my left in Dutch, followed by the sound of a blanket being thrown off a bed. Someone irritably navigated the room, roughly pulling open the curtains as the alarm was finally being silenced. “What a fucking delightful way to start the day, Marion. I’m feeling so peaceful already!” Herlinde sneered, her face expressing fury. As the last moonlight fell in through the window, the young Frenchwoman didn’t hesitate to defend herself. With an exasperated sigh, I closed my eyes and pulled the blanket over my head. Once again, Herlinde was generously sprinkling around curse words like fairy dust, albeit the poisonous kind. She stormed into the bathroom and slammed shut the wooden door behind her. Apparently she thought her cranky morning mood was a good excuse to stake her claim to the bathroom without consulting the rest of us. I cursed internally. After the brownies - which I had later discovered were made from black beans - and the lavish meal from last night, my rumbling bowels were eager to call dibs on the toilet.

It started to dawn on me that there was a sunrise yoga session scheduled for six a.m. this morning. I heard Belle’s voice muffled through my blanket. She was attempting to defuse the situation by thanking Marion in French for waking us up so we could join in. Only when everyone else had left the room, did I finally emerge from my cocoon. A glance at

the clock told me I had to hurry. I quickly freshened up, pulled my hair into a messy bun, and slipped into a simple pair of black leggings. I grabbed a loose, tie-dyed T-shirt with a prominent peace sign from my suitcase. It had lain crumpled in a cobwebbed corner of my wardrobe since the late nineties. While I was packing, this shirt had seemed appropriate, but now I felt a bit uncertain about the cliché. The Woodstock-like atmosphere that I had somewhat naively expected to find here, was nowhere to be seen for now. So much for 'peace and love'.

By the time the sun cast its rays over the new day, I was already quietly groaning in a 'downward dog' pose. According to Kyle, this was a resting pose in the sequence of the sun salutation, but my breath caught as my hamstrings were subjected to a challenging and rather painful stretch. "Keep breathing," Kyle repeated as if he could see right through me. At the beginning of the class, he had recommended that we use yoga blocks as props whenever the sequence became too challenging or if we experienced any pain.

"Pain is a no-go," he had said. Arrogantly, I had ignored the suggested blocks. I had plenty of experience with yoga and didn't expect to need any support during this sequence. Now, as my hands hovered over the rubber mat, I cursed my foolish pride. Meanwhile, Kyle walked around the room, checking everyone's posture and correcting where necessary. He stopped next to me with two cork yoga blocks.

"Slide these under your hands, Liv. They'll help you get into the pose better," he whispered. "Shall I assist you?" I nodded and grimaced in pain. He gently pressed his hand against my back to straighten it.

"Thank you," I whispered, while my bruised ego tried to recover.

“Listen to your intuition. Don’t compare yourself to others,” Kyle said aloud as he returned to his place at the front. “Your body is your temple. Feel, and above all, give your body what it needs.” His advice wasn’t directed at anyone in particular, but it resonated with me. After a series of fluid movements, we ended up in the prayer position once again. “*Namasté.*” Kyle rewarded each of us with his radiant Colgate smile. After ending the session, we silently cleaned our mats with a natural product, rolled them up and put them back where we had found them.

“That Kyle is such a hottie!” Herlinde exclaimed loudly as we left the room. “He can bend me into some challenging poses anytime he pleases,” she winked at Belle and me. Belle looked behind her in alarm, checking to see if Kyle had heard the bold remark, but to her obvious relief, the doors had already fallen shut. The others had dispersed as well. Only Gabriella and Ling had caught on to Herlinde’s bluntness and walked on giggling, clearly sharing a similar fantasy.

“Shall we go for a drink, then?” Belle said with a somewhat scolding tone.

“Sure,” I replied, “you go ahead, I want to discuss something with Kyle first.”

“Okay, in that case, we’ll see you later,” Belle said. I watched as she and Herlinde walked down the path to the main building.

“I think Liv might be eager for some private lessons,” I faintly heard Herlinde say.

A few minutes later, Kyle walked through the double doors. “Hey, Liv, was there something you wanted to ask me?” He turned the key in the lock.

“I really wasn’t sure if I should tell you, but now I feel like I should,” I began cryptically. Kyle looked at me kindly, patiently waiting for me to continue.

"I'm in the middle of a burnout," I blurted out.

"That's unfortunate to hear. How long has this been going on?"

"I've been home from work since June."

Immediately, I felt lighter, as if I could finally unload a heavy burden.

"Then you should probably take it easy and gradually rebuild your strength, right?"

"Yes, I'm discovering that firsthand," I admitted.

"The 'yin', 'restorative', and 'nidra' evening sessions might be more suitable for you. Feel free to skip these more intense morning sessions. See what works best for you."

"It's really great that you understand," I blushed.

"It's good that you entrusted me with this, Liv. I sense you feel ashamed, but there really is no need for that."

I wanted to thank him, but I felt a lump form in my throat. Kyle filled the silence.

"Six years ago, I went through a burnout myself. One day, you'll see it as an opportunity for growth, but that takes some time." He reassured me. "You'll get through this. In the meantime, try to surrender to the process."

Silently, we walked down the path together. Eventually, I managed to croak out a quiet "thank you" as Kyle made his way in the opposite direction.

After a revitalizing drink, the first meditation session had taken place. Despite the fantastic panoramic view, the meditation had felt quite stifling. I hadn't managed to find peace at any point and tame my - as Jenny beautifully referred to it - monkey mind. The social interaction during lunch hour was a welcome breath of fresh air. I picked out a vegan seaweed falafel wrap with garlic hummus from the generous buffet. I filled the rest of my plate with a green salad mixed with colorful edible flowers. I went to the table with carafes of infused water and poured myself a glass of