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# Chapter 1: The Invitation

The bell had rung ten minutes ago, but none of them had moved. Five friends, lazily sprawled across the back corner of Room 3B, were making the most of their break. The air buzzed with quiet chatter and the occasional crunch of chips. Outside the windows, winter sunlight flickered through rustling trees.

“Mrs. Kaul’s gone on her honeymoon,” said Jake, popping a biscuit in his mouth. “She’s not coming for a whole week.”

“Lucky her,” Jim muttered, head tilted back against the wall. “A week off, and someone to go with. Must be nice.”

(Jim’s cynicism hints at deeper isolation — a missing or estranged sibling he never talks about)

Kinsey rolled her eyes. “Must be nice to not have three GPS apps tracking your every move,” she said, flipping her phone over. “Even my ‘me time’ comes with a parental notification.”

(Reveals her frustration with controlling parents — her boldness masks a craving for independence)

Alisha giggled and tossed a pack of gummies onto the desk. “Well, at least we’re not on some high-speed treadmill of expectations. This? This is a win.”

(She’s trying to lighten the mood, a habit rooted in her anxiety — she overcompensates with food and cheer)

Jake slouched further. “You guys joke like you have curfews. I live off reheated pizza and FaceTime guilt. My mom's either working or remembering to text me after dinner.”

(He masks emotional neglect with humour, using jokes to deflect the loneliness of an unstable home life, his parents are divorced)

Jim said nothing for a moment, then muttered, “Disappearing isn’t that hard. No one notices unless you’re important.”

(This line lands heavy — shows Jim’s worldview is shaped by feeling overlooked or forgotten)

The others looked at him. He shrugged and looked away.

“I’d take an island right now,” said Jake, eyes half-closed. “No people, no teachers, just silence.”

For a second, the group went quiet — all five of them picturing that perfect escape. Then Alen’s voice cut in.

“My family has a place like that,” he said, like it was no big deal. “It’s a private island, kind of. We used to go when I was a kid. No one’s there this time of year.”

Alisha sat up. “Wait—are you serious?”

“Completely empty?” asked Jim.

“Basically. There’s an old cottage, a forest, a tiny beach… that’s about it.”

There was a beat of silence, and then Kinsey grinned. “Let’s go.”

Jake laughed. “You’re not serious.”

“Why not?” she shrugged. “We’re not doing anything this weekend. You said it yourself — we need an escape.”

Alen hesitated, but the others were already nodding, buzzing with that reckless excitement only teenagers can carry without shame. Plans were made in whispers and half-laughs, like a dare none of them expected to follow through with.

But they did.

Two days later, the five of them stepped off a creaking wooden boat and onto a narrow dock shrouded in sea mist. The island rose before them — grey rocks, tall trees, and a chill wind that carried the sharp smell of salt and pine.

The boatman, an older man with calloused hands and a knitted cap pulled low, eyed them with vague amusement. “Not many come out here these days,” he said, tying the boat.

“That’s kind of the point,” Jake replied with a grin, slinging his backpack over one shoulder.

The man didn’t smile back. Just nodded, climbed into his boat, and pushed off without another word.

They made their way inland, along a narrow trail carved between thick woods. The cottage came into view after ten minutes — a crooked structure with peeling paint and a sagging roof, but still standing strong.

“This is it,” Alen said. “Home for the weekend.”

They dropped their bags inside, kicked off their shoes, and wandered through the empty rooms, voices echoing off dusty walls. It felt like the kind of place where stories lived — the kind no one ever wrote down.

“Are we actually alone out here?” Alisha asked, peeking out the window.

“Pretty much,” Alen replied. “There’s an old monk who lives near the temple. We used to visit him as kids. He’d give us sweets.”

Kinsey raised a brow. “Like… an actual monk?”

“Yeah. He’s cool.”

After a quick meal of chips and energy drinks, curiosity pulled them back outside. The trail to the temple wound deeper into the forest, and the trees thickened around them. A few minutes in, Kinsey slowed down.

“Guys… what’s with these symbols?” she asked, pointing to a rough carving on a tree. “That’s the fifth one I’ve seen.”

Alen looked at it and replied. “Some weird game we used to play. I don’t really remember.”

But something in his voice shifted. Not fear — just a flicker of something he couldn’t place.

Then, around a bend, the trees parted slightly, and a forgotten treehouse came into view. It stood tilted to one side, but intact — like a memory frozen in time.

“Did you build that?” Jim asked.

Alen stared at it. “Me and my…”

His voice trailed off. For a second, his face went blank, like he’d just lost the thread of a thought that had always been there.

“Yeah,” he said eventually. “I guess I did. Looks better than I remember.”

(The blank space in his memory should worry him. It doesn’t — yet)

The temple was old, but peaceful — stone steps worn smooth by time, and prayer flags fluttering in the wind. A man stood at the entrance, sweeping fallen leaves into a corner. He looked up as they approached and smiled warmly.

“Hope you didn’t have any difficulty on the way,” he said, voice worn with age but gentle.

“Yeah, everything was fine,” Alen replied. He glanced up at the structure and blinked. “Just feels like the temple’s gotten taller.”

Everyone laughed.

“You lazy sloth,” Jim said, elbowing him.

Alen grinned, then stepped closer to the small stone altar near the entrance. Tucked into a shaded recess was a wooden box, old but polished smooth by years of touch. Beneath it hung a carved sign, faded but still legible:

"One name. One wish."

He picked up a yellowed slip of paper from the stack beside the box and scribbled something quickly. Then he folded it and dropped it in.

Jake raised an eyebrow. “What was that?”

Alen shrugged. “Ritual. You write your name and a wish, drop it in the box. Old island thing. They say it makes the island... remember you.”

Kinsey rolled her eyes. “That’s not creepy at all.”

But one by one, they followed suit — curiosity overriding skepticism. Each wrote a name and a wish. Laughter softened their voices as they debated whether it was superstition or just a charming tradition.

They spoke for a while after that. The monk’s presence was calm, almost too calm, and none of them really wanted to be the first to leave. But dusk was settling in.

As they turned to go, the monk called out behind them:

“Be careful not to lose your way.”

Alen laughed. “I’ve known this place since I was six. I think I’ll be alright.”

The monk’s smile didn’t waver.

“Sometimes,” he said softly, “it’s not you who forgets.”

They left the temple as dusk fell, the monk’s words echoing faintly in the trees.

They left the temple as dusk fell, the monk’s words still echoing softly behind them. The walk back was quiet, a little colder than it had been. No one spoke about the symbols on the trees, or the strange look Alen had when he stared at the treehouse — they just walked, surrounded by wind and the crunch of dry leaves.

By the time they reached the cottage, the sky had turned to velvet. A thousand stars blinked overhead. Out here, far from city lights, the night felt thick and close, like it was pressing in on the windows.

Inside, someone found an old deck of cards with water-stained edges. It passed a few minutes. Then Alisha — always the one to stir things up — suggested a game.

“Let’s play hide and seek,” she said, half-joking, half-serious.

“In the woods?” Jake raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah. We’ve got flashlights. No one goes too far. Cottage is base. We give it ten minutes.”

Alen grinned. “Sounds childish.”

“Exactly. That’s the point.”

The game started with laughter.

Jim was “it” first, counting loud enough for the trees to hear. The others scattered in all directions, lights darting between the trunks like fireflies.

Alen crouched behind a large boulder near the trail. Kinsey slipped between two trees and vanished. Jake ran way too far, judging by his fading footsteps.

It felt stupid, and yet — there was something freeing about it. They weren’t thinking about symbols or monks or ghostly treehouses. They were just five teens playing in the dark.

Ten minutes passed. Then fifteen. One by one, they trickled back to the cottage.

Except for Jake.

“Maybe he doubled back,” Kinsey said, frowning.

Alen walked the path again, calling his name. “Jake! Come on, game’s over.”

No answer. Just wind and the occasional distant owl.

It took them ten more minutes to find him — about twenty yards off the path, flashlight flickering, standing between two trees with a confused look on his face.

“There you are!” Alisha said, breathless. “Dude, you scared the hell out of us.”

“I wasn’t far,” Jake said, scratching his head. “I was walking back and… I don’t know. The trail felt different. I must’ve looped by accident.”

“You got lost in hide and seek?” Alen smirked.

“Shut up,” Jake muttered. “I swear it looked like the trail turned the wrong way.”

“The trail moved?” Jim laughed.

“No! I mean— It just… looked different.”

Everyone broke into laughter, even Jake after a second.

# Chapter 2: The Return

The island was already behind them, reduced to a smudge of green and grey on the horizon. The boat rocked gently beneath their feet, carving a path back toward the mainland. Waves lapped the sides, soft and rhythmic, and the wind had shifted — colder now, though no one mentioned it.

Alen sat near the front, hoodie pulled tight, earbuds in but no music playing. Kinsey and Alisha leaned against each other at the back, heads low in shared laughter about something stupid Jake had said. Jim stood by the railing, watching the clouds fold over each other like slow-moving ghosts.

It had been a good trip.  
Quiet. Easy.  
Almost too easy.

No strange noises in the night. No ghosts in the forest. No final girl running from something with teeth.

Just five friends and the sound of the sea.

Alen stepped off the boat with a yawn, stretching the stiffness from his legs. The dock smelled like wet rope and diesel. His dad wasn’t there to pick him up — as expected — so he waved goodbye to the others, slung his backpack over one shoulder, and headed toward the bus stop.

He felt… different. Not in a big, obvious way. Just slightly off, like waking up and realizing you’d been dreaming for longer than you thought.

The key turned smoothly in the lock. The door creaked open, same as always. Everything was still — the faint ticking of the clock in the hallway, the filtered light through dusty curtains.

“Mom?” he called, slipping his shoes off. “I’m back.”

No answer.

He peeked into the kitchen. Empty.  
Then the living room.  
And finally the study, where he found her — sitting in her usual chair, eyes fixed on the newspaper, cup of tea in hand.

Alen smiled and stepped forward. “Hey, I’m back. Did you miss me?”

She didn’t move. Didn’t blink.

“Mom?” he tried again, louder. “I called you just now.”

Still nothing.

He stepped closer, just a few feet away now. “Are you… messing with me?”

Nothing.

A cold drop slid down his spine.

He waved a hand in front of her face.

No reaction.

He stumbled back into the hallway, breath quickening. He grabbed his phone and dialed her number, pressing it to his ear.

From the other room, he heard her phone vibrate on the table. She didn’t even glance at it.

The next hour blurred. Alen left the house in a panic, trying to call Kinsey, Jim, anyone. Nobody picked up. He knocked on the neighbour’s door — old Mr. Verma. No answer. He waved at a woman walking her dog, shouting her name.

She didn’t look at him. Just walked right by.

Like he wasn’t there at all.

That night, Alen sat on a park bench, hood up, heart numb. The streetlamps flickered overhead.

Then a voice: “You too?”

He looked up.

Kinsey stood there, tears streaked down her face, hair windblown. She looked as wrecked as he felt.

“You can’t go home either?” she whispered.

“I did,” he said. “She was there. My mom. But… it was like I wasn’t.”

Footsteps. Jim appeared from the shadows. Then Alisha. Then Jake.

All of them pale. Quiet. Hollowed.

They stood together like survivors of something they couldn’t explain, shaking, uncertain, afraid to speak the thought they were all thinking.

And then—  
A voice from behind.

Rough. Male. Almost casual.

“You went to the island, didn’t you?”

They spun around.

A man stood in the dark, coat pulled tight, eyes sharp like broken glass.

Jake stepped forward, voice breaking. “You can see us?”

“And what does it have to do with the island?”

The man replied, “I will answer all your questions, but before… I think you all should come with me.”

The five of them exchanged glances. Alen’s hands trembled. Kinsey looked pale. Jake gave a helpless shrug.

“I don’t know what else to do,” Jim muttered.

So they followed.

By the way you can call me Reyan.

He led them down backstreets — through a rusted gate, past shuttered buildings, and finally, down a narrow flight of stairs that disappeared beneath the city. The door at the bottom was plain steel, unmarked.

He knocked once. Twice. A rhythm.

A clicking sound followed, then a deep creak as the door opened.

Inside, the world shifted again.

It wasn’t much — a wide, concrete chamber, lit by warm, buzzing ceiling lights and the hum of space heaters. But what made them stop cold was the people.

Dozens of them.

Some sat slouched on folding chairs, eyes ringed with sleeplessness. Others paced slowly, as if unsure whether they were still real. A few stared at nothing at all — not like they were lost, but like they had already stopped searching.

All of them had the same look. That same flicker in the eyes. Like something had gone dim inside and wouldn’t come back on.

Reyan gestured around them. “You’re not the only ones.”

Kinsey whispered, “They… they all came back invisible too?”

He nodded. “Different trips. Same outcome. All from the island.”

A silence fell. It felt heavier than the room itself.

“That’s not possible,” Alen said. “I’ve been going there since I was a kid. I’ve never seen anything like this. Never felt it. Not once.”

The silence thickened, pressing down on their chests like fog. Alen opened his mouth to ask another question, but a voice from the far corner beat him to it.

“Maybe,” the voice rasped, “maybe it’s because every time you went before… you came back.”

They all turned.

A man was slumped in a folding chair in the darkest corner of the room. Mid-twenties maybe, but he looked older. Pale skin, eyes sunken with sleep deprivation, fingers twitching nervously against his knees. He stared at Alen with a strange intensity — not unkind, but... hollow.

Reyan’s voice cut in sharply. “Grayson. Shut up.”

But Grayson leaned forward, elbows on knees, the flickering light above making shadows dance across his face.

“Have you ever wondered,” he continued, ignoring him, “why no one sees you? Why the world won’t answer back?”

The friends didn’t respond. No one moved.

“It’s not that they forgot us,” Grayson said, voice low, almost whispering. “It’s that maybe… maybe we don’t even exist anymore.”

“Enough!” Reyan snapped. “You’re not helping.”

Grayson just chuckled under his breath and leaned back again, staring at the ceiling with empty eyes.

From across the room, a woman rose from her seat and walked toward them. Her presence was warm but composed — like someone who had spent a lifetime holding things together.

“Don’t worry,” she said gently, voice calm and clear. “He’s been trying to figure out what happened to us for months. Barely sleeps. Barely eats. Sometimes he just talks like that. Not because it’s true — just because it’s what his fear wants to believe.”

She looked over at Grayson with a glance that said she'd heard this theory a hundred times before.

“I’m Claire,” she said. “And you’re not dead.”

Alisha couldn’t hold it in anymore. Tears streamed down her face as she gripped Kinsey’s hand tight.

“Are we really… dead?” she whispered, the question slipping out before she could stop it.

Claire knelt down in front of her and took her hand softly.

“No,” she said. “You’re here. You feel this?” She squeezed Alisha’s hand. “That means something. Dead things don’t cry.”

But her eyes, just for a moment, flicked toward Reyan.

And what she didn’t say… was louder than anything else in the room.

# Chapter 3: What Comes After Midnight

The silence in the chamber felt thicker than the concrete walls that held it.

Claire had moved to sit beside a woman with dark circles under her eyes, offering a thermos and a kind word. Reyan remained with the group, who sat huddled together on thin bedding. A few of the older strangers kept their distance, their eyes avoiding the five teens like they were reminders of something too painful to relive.

Reyan finally broke the silence.

“Everyone you see here… came back from the island like you.”

Alen frowned. “What do you mean, came back like us?”

Reyan folded his arms. “Invisible. Forgotten. Like you.”

Kinsey looked around the room again — at the twitchy man in the corner, the silent girl staring at the wall, the couple who hadn't spoken since they walked in.

“How long have they been here?” she asked.

“Some a week,” Reyan replied. “Some a month. Some… years.”

Jake's mouth parted, but no words came.

Jim leaned forward, his tone sharper than it needed to be. “What happens if we try to fix it?”

Reyan met his gaze. “The more we tried… the worse it—” He stopped mid-sentence.

Alisha blinked. “Worse what?”

Reyan just looked at her. “You’ll realize soon.”

They didn’t ask again.

That night, Claire gave them sleeping mats and bottled water. “Sleep while you can,” she said gently. “No dreams, if you're lucky.”

The group laid down close together. The sound of the city above was gone — not even a hum. Just the low groan of the building and the occasional cough from someone on the far end of the room.

Guess I should go too, Reyan said.

Claire didn’t blink. “Just make sure you don’t die.”

Jake opened his eyes and found himself standing.

The sky was gone — just black above him, no stars, no moon. The forest surrounded him on all sides. The same trees. The same path. But everything was… wrong.

The leaves were the colour of ash. The trunks looked slick, wet. The wind didn’t blow — and yet, the trees shifted like they breathed.

He looked down at himself — same clothes. Same shoes. His flashlight was gone.

“Hello?” he called out, voice small. “Is anyone here?”

No reply.

A sharp breath. Then—

A sound.

Not loud. Not a growl. Not even a footstep.

Just a presence. A low, humming noise that vibrated in her bones, like it came from inside the world itself.

He turned toward it, and that’s when he saw it.

A shape emerging from the shadows. Moving slow. Crawling low on limbs too long for its body. A creature — humanoid in posture, hunched like a gorilla, with deep, glowing blue eyes that burned against the darkness.

Its back was tangled with thick, pulsing root-like tendrils, dragging behind it like veins ripped from the earth.

Jake's breath caught in his throat.

He didn’t run.

He couldn’t.

His legs felt like stone. His heartbeat thundered in his ears, but his body stayed frozen.

The creature’s head tilted — too far, like it didn’t understand how necks worked. Its nostrils flared. Its limbs twitched, rising slightly off the ground.

It had seen him.

And just when his body remembered how to scream—

“Jake!” A voice tore through the silence. Hands grabbed hers.

It was Alisha.

She didn’t stop to explain. She just yanked him forward and ran.

They tore through the underbrush, ducking branches and stumbling over roots. The creature didn’t roar, didn’t shout — but it followed, silent and swift, like it was always a few feet behind.

Alisha’s lungs burned. But she held his wrist tight, dragging him forward.

“I saw it too,” she gasped. “Just don’t stop.”

They reached a clearing — wide, open space surrounded by trees. For a second, they paused, breathless.

Alisha turned behind them.

Nothing.

But they could feel it.

Jake slowly turned to her. “We’re not awake… are we?”

Before she could answer, a chill swept through the clearing.

The creature was there again — stepping out from behind a tree it shouldn’t have fit behind. No sound. No movement. It just stood. The creature didn’t lunge. It didn’t need to.

It just stood before them — then, without warning, surged forward with terrifying silence.

Jake pushed Alisha behind him.

“Run.”

“No—” she started, grabbing his sleeve, “I’m not leaving—”

But it was already on him.

Its arms wrapped around Jake’s torso, lifting him into the air like a child’s doll. The root-like tendrils on its back spread wide, writhing and pulsing, then began to pierce into Jake’s skin — not with force, but with a sickening slowness, as if absorbing him.

Jake’s body arched. His mouth opened in a silent scream. The creature’s blue eyes dimmed and pulsed with eerie rhythm — like it was drinking from him.

Alisha screamed.

She grabbed a rock. Threw it. It bounced off the creature’s side like paper. She ran forward and beat her fists against it, sobbing, yelling, doing anything she could.

The creature didn’t even flinch.

Then—

Whoosh.

A wooden torch lit up behind her, sudden and bright. The flame hissed and cracked in the dead air.

The creature shrieked — a high, bone-shaking sound — and dropped Jake. The tendrils snapped back like burned wires. The creature staggered, rearing back from the flame.

Alisha turned.

Reyan stepped forward from the tree line, holding the torch with both hands. His coat was torn, eyes wild, but focused.

He didn’t stop to explain. Just shoved the torch into Alisha’s hand and scooped Jake up over his shoulder.

“Run!” he barked.

They sprinted through the trees. The creature followed at a distance, but didn’t come close to the fire.

After a while, it stopped chasing — retreating into the shadows without another sound.

They didn’t stop running until they reached the edge of a hill. Reyan dropped Jake onto the grass and checked his pulse. Still breathing. Pale. Shaking.

Alisha collapsed beside them, panting. “What the hell was that?”

Reyan didn’t look at her. “Where are the others?”

“I—I don’t know.” Her voice cracked. “It was just me and Jake.”

“What is this place?” she asked. “Why does it feel like a dream? And what was that creature—?!”

“I’ll explain everything,” Reyan said, finally meeting her eyes. “But not now.”

He pulled something from his pocket — a silver lighter, battered and old — and handed it to her.

“Take this.”

She stared at it.

“If you see another creature like that,” he said, “just light something. Doesn’t have to be big. It hates fire. It won’t come near you if you’re holding flame.”

She held it tight in her palm like it was holy.

Reyan stood, cradling Jake again. “First, we find the others. Then I’ll tell you everything.”

Alisha nodded, wiping tears from her cheeks. Her hands were still shaking. Her legs ached. Her chest burned.

But she stood.

And followed.

The scream came first.

Then the cracking of branches.

Alen, Kinsey, and Jim had woken up not far from one another, the same sickening blackness of the forest swallowing their surroundings. None of them remembered falling asleep. None of them could tell how they’d even gotten here.

But now, they were running.

A creature — maybe the same one, or maybe worse — was crawling behind them on elongated arms, eyes flickering that same icy blue.

Alen held a broken branch in one hand. Useless. Jim kept shouting for them to go left, right, anywhere. Kinsey’s flashlight had already died.

They burst into a clearing.

Dead end.

The trees formed a wall of roots behind them, twisted like clenched fists.

“Perfect,” Jim muttered. “Freaking perfect.”

The creature emerged from the treeline — slow, deliberate.

Kinsey grabbed a stone. Alen raised the stick. Jim took one step in front of them both.

And then—

Thwack.

A burning arrow flew from the trees and hit the ground in front of the creature, erupting in flame. It hissed and reared back, shrieking into the sky.

From the shadows, a figure walked out. Leather boots. Long coat. Crossbow in hand.

Claire.

“Told you idiots I should’ve come,” she muttered, loading another bolt. “Reyan never did have a sense of timing.”

The creature retreated, screeching, and disappeared into the dark.

A few minutes later, the five friends stood together again — scratched, breathless, eyes wild. Claire and Reyan circled them, checking wounds, handing out small vials of bitter-tasting liquid “to keep the nausea down,” Claire said.

They were deep in a part of the forest they didn’t recognize — but something about it still felt… familiar.

Kinsey turned in a slow circle. “Wait… isn’t this the island?”

Alen squinted at the horizon. “It looks like it, but… different. Like it’s half-finished or something.”

Reyan nodded. “It is the island.”

Claire added, “Just not the one you remember.”

Jake, barely upright, leaned on a tree. “Then… where the hell are we?”

Alisha rubbed her arms. “And why do we keep ending up here? Is this a dream?”

Claire shook her head. “No. It’s not.”

Reyan crossed his arms. “It’s… somewhere between. Every time you fall asleep, you come here. Whether you want to or not.”

Jim scowled. “So we’re all dreaming the same thing?”

“No,” Claire said. “It’s not a dream whatever happens here happens in real too.”

“Then how do we get back?” Alen asked. “If we sleep here to get in, shouldn’t someone be able to wake us up?”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Reyan said, voice harder now.

Jake sat down, hands on his head. “Then how does it work?”

Well for that, you have to sleep here, Reyan replied.

Jim: (panicking)  
“Wait, sleep? You want us to sleep here?! In this place?!”

Reyan: (calmly, almost apologetic)  
“Well... forgive me for this.”

(Without warning, Reyan swings — a sharp, clean smack — and Jim crumples to the ground.)

Alen:  
“Dude! What the hell?!”

Reyan: (dusting off his hands)  
“That’s the only way to go back. You sleep here, you wake up there. And vice versa.”

\*(One by one, Reyan knocks them out — reluctant, but determined. Black screen.)

Jim: (rubbing his jaw)  
“Okay… that was sudden. And it still hurts.”

Reyan:  
“Told you. Everything that happens there... happens here, too.”

Jake:  
“That’s why everyone here looks like they haven’t slept in days.”

Kinsey: (rubbing her temples)  
“Yeah, I thought my eyes were going to fall out. No one wants to risk going back there.”

Claire: (low, serious tone)  
“Yeah… everyone’s scared. That if they get stuck there… they might never wake up.”

Jake: (shaken)  
“Wait, wait—what do you mean ‘never wake up’? Like… you get stuck?”

Claire: (quietly)  
“Come with me.”

(She leads them to a small room nearby. The door creaks open slowly. Inside: rows of old mattresses, dusty blankets, and people — about twenty of them — lying motionless. Breathing, but unresponsive.)

Alisha: (hushed)  
“Who… who are these people?”

Claire:  
“Some have been like this for a week. Others, a month. A few… over a year.”

Alen:  
“Are these the ones who got attacked? That… monster we saw in the forest?”

Claire: (shakes her head)  
“No. If the Shadowed One gets you — you’re dead. In both worlds. And become one of them there.”

(Pause. Everyone stiffens.)

Claire: (continues)  
“These were taken by something else. A spirit. Human-like. Looks like a girl… no face, just a glow. Her light hides her completely.” People call her “The Whisper girl”

Jim:  
“Then how do you know it’s a girl?”

Claire:  
“She speaks. Soft. Calm. Like she’s singing underwater.”

Kinsey: (whispers)  
“What happens if she touches you?”

Claire: (chilling tone)  
“If she touches you… and says your name… you vanish. Instantly. Not a scream. Not a trace.

And never wake up again here again”

Kinsey (whispers):

“So they’re… asleep?”  
Claire (quietly):  
“If you want to call it that.”

(A heavy silence falls. The wind brushes against the broken shutters like a sigh.)

Jake: (barely audible)  
“She says your name?”

Claire: (nods)  
“She knows all our names.”

Claire (half-smiling):

“I think it’s a lot for you all suddenly. It’s almost morning — how about a walk? Fresh air, even if it’s not really fresh.”

Alen, Jim, and Kinsey nod, grateful for the break.

Alisha stays seated.  
Jake hesitates, then crosses his arms.

Jake:

“Yeah, I’m not feeling it either. You guys go.”

The others file out quietly.

Jake sits down beside Alisha. The light from the barred window cuts across the concrete between them.

Jake (softly):

“You alright?”

Alisha gives a weak nod, hugging her knees.

Jake:

“Back there… thanks. I mean it. You probably saved my life.”

Alisha (shrugging, faint smile):

“Don’t make it weird. I’d do the same for any of you.”

Jake (grinning, mock betrayal):  
“Wow. Risked my life for a generic response. Brutal.”  
Alisha (laughs):  
“You knew the job was dangerous when you signed up.”  
(They share a glance. For once, the fear feels distant.)

They both laugh. The first real moment of lightness in hours. A beat of silence follows — the comfortable kind.

But then they hear something.

A faint rustle. A wall of paper crinkling.

They look across the chamber. In the far corner — Grayson.

Same chair. Same slouch. But now surrounded by drawings.  
Hundreds of them. Pages strung together by thread, like a madman’s web.  
Trees, symbols, faces half-erased, the glowing girl, the Shadowed One — sketched over and over in frantic repetition.

Jake and Alisha exchange a look, then approach slowly.

Jake:

“Hey… got anything yet?”

Grayson doesn’t even look up.

Grayson (dry):

“Yeah. That you two should get lost and let me work.”

Jake’s nostrils flare. He’s about to say something, but—

Alisha puts a gentle hand on his arm.  
A silent “let it go.” They begin to back off when—

Grayson (without turning):

“Wait.”

They stop.

Grayson (grudging):

“You’re not doing anything useful anyway. So if you're going to breathe this much in my space… make yourselves helpful.”

Jake raises a brow. Alisha leans forward, curious.

Jake:

“You’re asking us to help?”

Grayson finally looks up. His eyes are bloodshot. Hollow. But not cruel.

Grayson:

“No. I’m letting you. Big difference.”

He gestures to a small stack of unsorted papers near his feet.

Grayson (murmuring):

“Look for patterns. Anything that repeats. Faces. Words. Symbols. If this place follows rules, I’m going to break them.”

Alisha (softly):

“You really think it has rules?”

Grayson (still staring at the wall):

“Everything does. Even nightmares.”

Alisha crouched beside one of the pages, her brow furrowed. “These symbols… we saw the exact same ones carved into the trees back in the forest.”

Grayson, without looking up, finished the thought. “Yes.”

Alisha glanced at Jake, then back. “But… I don’t think they have anything to do with all this. Alen said they were part of some childhood game.”

Grayson’s pen stopped. His gaze lifted — cold, calculating.  
“You sure about that?” he asked.  
“Because as far as I can tell… these are the only trees that don’t move.”

Alisha’s eyes widened. “Wait—trees move?”

Jake, half-grinning, pointed a thumb at himself. “Told you. During hide and seek. I said the trail moved — nobody listened.”

Grayson leaned back, a little more serious now. “Look, I don’t know what your friend Alen told you. But this island? It messes with your head. Memory bends. Direction slips. You can’t even trust the stars anymore.”

He tapped a symbol on the page. It looked like a jagged shield, encircled by curling lines like wind.  
“But I do know… this tree? This one saved a group of us.”

Jake and Alisha leaned in.

Grayson continued. “Two weeks ago. There were four of us. Cornered by that forest crawler — the one with the spine like roots and no mouth. We yelled for help. And then—”

He paused, as if trying to convince himself it really happened.

“The tree above us started glowing. Faint green light, like mist through glass. And then it… opened.”

“Opened?” Alisha whispered.

He nodded slowly. “Split down the middle. And out came this figure — tall, humanoid, but all swirling energy and curved armor, no face, just this flowing, cape-like vapor coming off its back. It stood between us and the monster like it wasn’t even afraid.”

Jake’s voice dropped. “What did it do?”

“Shielded us. Like a wall. Nothing got through for ten minutes. Then—just vanished.”

They all stared at the drawing again.

Grayson traced the shield symbol with his finger. “That’s the one. So whatever these trees are — they’re not just trees.”

Grayson reached into the mess of papers spread across the floor, carefully pulling out five separate sketches — each drawn by hand, charcoal and ink bleeding into the edges of old parchment.

He laid them out, one by one, in front of Alisha and Jake.

“These are the ones that don’t move,” he said. “Same trees, same spots. Always.”

He spread the drawings wider on the floor, their edges curling like dried leaves. “There are five symbols total. Five kinds.”

He glanced up at them. “You said your friend Alen thought it was just some childhood game? Well… let me ask you something.”

His voice dropped.

“Do you remember how you met each other? In the real world?”

Jake blinked. “Yeah, we met… we—”

The words stalled. He frowned, blinking harder this time, like trying to see through fog.

Alisha looked over at him. “I… can’t remember it either.”

Grayson leaned back on his hands. “You see? This island doesn’t just trap you. It plays with your memory”

The room felt colder all of a sudden.

Jake and Alisha exchanged a glance — not fear, not yet, but the beginning of something like it.

Grayson’s voice returned to a calm, steady rhythm as he pointed to the first drawing:

A leaf, wide-veined and curled, with a single droplet falling from its tip.

The second: a tight ring of claw marks, clawed in a perfect circle like someone had scratched it over and over.

The third: two arrows, curving inward toward each other — symmetrical, precise, spiraling like a trap.

The fourth: a jagged shield, rough-edged, framed by swirling lines like gusts of air.

The fifth: a closed eye, perfectly round, split cleanly down the middle with a vertical line.

Grayson tapped a finger on the shield. “We saw this one glow once. Just once. Saved someone. That’s all I know.”

He looked up again, expression unreadable.

“Memorize these. If you see one in the forest, don’t ignore it. They’re not just decoration.”

The five symbols lay on the concrete floor like pieces of an ancient map. Jake, Alisha, and Grayson knelt around them, murmuring theories.

“What if they represent types of players?”  
“Or maybe pieces of a bigger puzzle?”  
“Could be locations. Or triggers…”

Nothing clicked. The meanings stayed locked in silence.

Jake leaned back, rubbing his face. “I don’t know… maybe we’re overthinking this.”

He glanced toward the entrance. “Maybe the answers are back on the island.”

Reyan, leaning against the far wall, straightened. His tone turned sharp. “I don’t think it’s safe out there.”

Jake raised an eyebrow. “You say that every time we try to do something.”

“Because I’ve seen what’s out there,” Reyan shot back, too quickly.

Grayson watched him. Quiet. Noticing.

What Reyan didn’t say — what he wouldn’t say….

Meanwhile, Alen, Jim, Kinsey and Claire wandered along the misty edge of the city. The sky glowed faint with morning light, yet the streets were ghost-still.

A dog rounded the corner, sniffing the ground. Jim, wide-eyed, veered immediately to the other side of the road.

Claire laughed. “Relax. He can’t see you, remember?”

Kinsey, walking quietly beside them, murmured almost to herself, “Yeah… it’s what we wanted, right? A break from everything. Peace. Isolation.”

She looked up, eyes dull.  
“Maybe the island just… gave us that.”

The others were silent.  
Even Alen — always the first to crack a joke — just looked away.

Claire clapped her hands suddenly. “Okay, no. Nope. This pity party? Over.”  
She spun around. “Come with me.”

EXT. SUPERMARKET – MOMENTS LATER

The sliding glass doors didn’t open. But Claire walked straight through.

“Perks of being invisible,” she said, grinning as the others hesitated.

Inside, the fluorescent lights buzzed faintly. Everything was untouched.  
Rows of snacks. Shelves of soda. Magazines. Clothes. Phones. Everything.

Jim gawked. “This feels illegal.”

Claire smirked. “As if you could even pay. Trust me — the register doesn’t care.”

They scattered like kids let loose in an empty theme park.

Jim grabbed a pack of chips, tossed it in the air, caught it one-handed.

Alen cranked the Bluetooth speaker on display. Pop music blared.

Kinsey, hesitant at first, slid on a pair of glittering sunglasses and laughed quietly.

Claire rode a shopping cart down an empty aisle, arms out like wings.

They played. For the first time in days — they let go.  
Laughed like nothing was broken.

Outside, on the sidewalk, the sun finally crept over the skyline.  
Alen leaned against a lamp post, sipping stolen soda. “You know… this isn’t the worst afterlife I’ve seen.”

Kinsey smiled faintly. “Still wish we could go home.”

Claire shrugged. “One thing at a time.”

INT. CHAMBER – LATER

The light mood evaporated as soon as they stepped back inside.

Jake was mid-shout, pacing in front of Reyan.

“We need to go to the island! Just sitting here isn’t solving anything!”

Reyan stood firm, arms crossed. “And walking straight into a death trap will?”

Claire raised an eyebrow. “Whoa, whoa — what happened?”

Grayson sat against the wall, watching quietly.  
And Alen, still holding his soda, looked toward the group… but his eyes flicked to Reyan.  
Just long enough to wonder:

What aren’t you telling us?

They stopped and explained the situation to them in detail. And after a while.

The group sat huddled around the faint glow of a gas heater, eyes drifting to the scattered symbol sketches on the floor.

Alen sat against the wall, shoulders tense, head in his hands.

“I thought… those carvings were just a game,” he murmured.

Jake looked over. “They weren’t?”

Alen shook his head. “That’s what I thought. That’s what I told you. We used to play around those trees as kids… But I don’t remember making those marks. Or why. Or with who.”

He paused. “It’s like a shadow over the memory. I know it’s there. But I can’t see it.”

He tapped his temple, frustrated. “Something’s wrong.”

Kinsey, sitting beside him, glanced away. The memory of the laughter outside — the brief moment of peace — tugged at her.

She didn’t want to break it.

Across the room, Claire had been watching Reyan.

“Okay,” she said suddenly, voice cutting through the murmur. “What is it?”

Reyan, seated near the chamber entrance, looked up slowly.

Claire took a step forward. “You’ve been holding something back since the beginning. I’ve seen it. You know more.”

The chamber fell quiet. Everyone looked up.

Reyan didn’t speak.

Instead, the silence pressed in harder — until a crack of a bottle being dropped in the background made several people flinch.

Then — chaos.

People in the crowd began muttering, then shouting.

“Are we just going to stay here forever?”  
“Don’t you get it?! This place is the trap!”  
“We should’ve left with the last group—”  
“They never came back!”  
“We’re next—!”

Someone screamed. Someone else shouted for them to shut up.

Panic rippled like a virus through the makeshift camp.

# Chapter 4: Return to the Island

Jake stepped forward, voice loud and cutting.

“Then we go.”

The room turned to him.

“There’s only one way to find out what’s going on — and that’s at the island.”

Alisha and Jim nodded beside him.

“We’ll go,” Jim said.

Jake looked around. “Whoever wants to come, come. If not — stay here.”

A heavy pause.

Kinsey looked at Claire.  
Alen looked down at his hands, guilt and hesitation gnawing at him.

At first, no one else moved.

Then—  
A sound from the entrance.

A figure leaned in the doorway. Bag on his back. Boots already laced. A half-smirk on his face.

Grayson.

“What?” he said. “We can’t go there empty-handed, right?”

Jake blinked. “You’re… coming?”

Grayson shrugged. “You’re the first ones I’ve seen who aren’t just hiding. So yeah. Might as well walk toward something.”

The room stirred again. A shift.

Claire stepped forward next, tying her hair back. “You’ll die out there without me.”

She turned to Reyan, who still hadn’t moved.

“You coming?”

He didn’t answer. Didn’t meet her eyes.

Claire’s voice softened. “We could use you.”

Reyan stared down. The shame sat heavy on his shoulders.

“I… can’t.”

Then, from the crowd, eight others stepped forward — slow, unsure, but determined.

Tobey – Heavyset, balding, maybe in his late 30s. Carries a backpack full of food and tools. Quiet but reliable. The kind who doesn’t talk unless it matters.

Nia – Lean, sharp-eyed, always in a hoodie. Could be 20, could be 30. She’s got the gait of someone who’s shoplifted her way through survival.

Koda – Shaggy-haired teen who hasn’t spoken more than ten words all week. Looks like he once slept in a scrapyard and liked it.

Milo – The nervous one. Wire-thin. Speaks too fast. Keeps an old journal he won’t let go of. “For recording the truth,” he says.

Ray – Ex-soldier vibes. Hard jaw. Scar on his cheek. You’d assume he’d be leading, but he’s always at the edge of the group, watching.

Hana – Small, intense, with a buzzcut and a camera she hasn’t used since they arrived. Used to be a war photographer. Doesn’t blink easily.

Bo – Towering. Quiet. Wears a patched-up mechanic’s jacket. Used to work in silence, now moves in it. Carries tools like they’re limbs.

Yvette – Barefoot. Soft-spoken. Doodles symbols in the dirt and hums old lullabies. She says she “dreamed of this place before she ever arrived.”

They said nothing. Just packed what little they had and joined Jake.

Jake looked around at them all — his friends, the strangers, the fire building in his chest.

“This is it then.”

They nodded.

As they started walking toward the entrance, Reyan looked up.

And Claire, for just a second, looked back.

But didn’t stop.

EXT. OPEN SEA – LATE AFTERNOON

The creaking of the old wooden boat was the only rhythm keeping time. Grey waves rolled calmly beneath, the sky above overcast but soft. The island loomed ahead — still faint in the mist.

Everyone sat scattered around the deck. Some huddled close; others stared at the horizon. But the silence didn’t last.

KINSEY (hugging her knees)

"You know what's weird? I used to hate long silences. Now... I kinda crave them."

JIM (half-grinning)

"Yeah, before all this, I couldn’t go five minutes without music in my ears. Now I’d trade my Spotify Premium for a heartbeat behind me."

TOBEY (deadpan)

"You still have Spotify in your head. I’ve got nothing. You hum, I’ll dance."

(A small chuckle from the group. Even Koda cracks a smile.)

NIA (to Milo)

"What’s in that notebook you always carry? You never let go of it."

MILO (nervous smile)

"It’s… just thoughts. Clues. What I see. What I dream. I think... I think something in here matters."

RAY (quiet, from the side)

"Hold on to it. Might be the only record left when we’re gone."

ALISHA (to Claire, softly)

“You ever wonder what you’d be doing right now… if this hadn’t happened?”

CLAIRE (after a pause)

“Probably arguing with a cab driver about the meter. Or falling asleep in a laundromat.”

JAKE

“Man, I was supposed to be in a football trial the weekend we came to the island.” (mocking himself)

“Instead I scored a haunted forest.”

ALEN (murmuring)

“I came looking for a break. Something quiet. And I found... everything I forgot.”

(Kinsey gently nudges his shoulder. Alen manages a small smile.)

(The boat rocks slightly. All the while, Grayson stands at the back, one hand gripping the railing. Silent. Watchful. Unmoved.)

CLAIRE (glancing over)

“He hasn’t said a word.”

ALISHA

“He’s listening. That counts.”

JAKE

“Guess we’ve got our own shadow now.” The boat creaked as it nudged against the rotted dock. Mist clung to the water, swallowing the horizon in silver. The island waited beyond — quiet. Still.

Claire stood first. Backpack slung, boots hitting the dock with familiar heaviness.

Claire (quietly, to herself):

"Still smells the same… like salt and secrets."

The others followed, their footsteps slow, reluctant. The chatter from the boat faded into silence.

Grayson stepped off last, gaze locked on the treeline. Still hadn’t said a word.

Jake (to no one in particular, adjusting his bag):

“Well. Looks exactly as horrifying as I remember.”

Alen scanned the trees. His expression was unreadable, but his eyes flicked toward a familiar bend in the trail.

Kinsey (softly):

"Do you think we’ll find them? The others who never woke up?"

Tobey (from behind):

“We better. Otherwise, what the hell was the point?”

Ray was already ahead, checking the path like muscle memory. Milo scribbled something in his journal before stepping forward.

Milo (murmuring):

"Entry 47: Return to point zero."

Alisha looked over at Jake, her voice light but edged with tension.

Alisha:

“Back to where it all started.”

Jake (mocking his own bravado):

"Yeah… great. Love a cursed forest reunion tour."

Everyone chuckled — even Claire gave a half-smile. But the tension remained, coiled beneath every breath.

They moved together, quiet, into the trees.

And Grayson — last to follow — paused at the edge of the forest.

He didn’t speak.

But his eyes burned like he’d seen this before.

And this time… he wasn’t planning to leave without answers…

They all headed straight to Alen’s vacation house. The windows were shut tight, the night thick beyond the glass. Inside, the room glowed faintly from a few scattered lanterns. Everyone was gathered — some sitting on the floor, others stretched out across old sofas. Backpacks had been tossed in corners. A kettle hissed softly on the stovetop.

Bo leaned near the window, arms crossed.  
“It’ll be dark in twenty. I say we don’t move tonight. Not until we know what’s out there.”

Claire:  
“Agreed. We rest, plan, move in daylight.”

There were nods all around.

Grayson, standing at the edge of the group, finally spoke. Eyes on Alen.

Grayson (measured):  
“So. You said you’ve been coming here since childhood?”

Alen blinked.  
“Yeah. A bunch of summers. This place was always peaceful. Quiet.”

Grayson:  
“Right. Then tell me… how did you escape last time?”

Alen sat up straighter, confused.  
“What? I told you — nothing like this ever happened before.”

Grayson (tilting his head, probing):  
“Okay. So you remember everything? Like how you met your friends? When?”

A pause.

Alen:  
“I— I don’t know. That’s different.”

Grayson (low, cutting):  
“Is it? This island makes you forget. Maybe… you escaped before. And it wiped the how. Left just enough to bring you back.”

Alen frowned, like the thought was digging under his skin.

Alen:  
“No. I’d remember something like that. I— I would.”

Grayson:  
“Would you? Can any of us trust what’s real anymore?”

That hit hard.

Alen’s breathing quickened. He clutched at his head, like his brain was splitting under pressure.

Alen (strained):  
“It’s right there. I can feel it. Like a wall I can’t—”

Claire quickly crossed over and crouched beside him, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Claire (soft, steady):  
“Hey. Easy. Some memories run when you chase them. Breathe.”

He nodded, slowly. The panic passed.

Kinsey (breaking the silence, awkwardly):  
“Well… that got heavy.”

Tobey, from the corner, cracked open a can of soda.  
“We should lighten the mood before someone passes out from existential dread.”

Hana already had a speaker out. She hit play.

A song — half-familiar, oddly upbeat — floated through the room.

Jake pulled Alisha to her feet with a mock bow.  
“May I have this awkward apocalypse dance?”

Alisha groaned but let him spin her anyway.

Jake (grinning):  
“See? Still got rhythm. Just needed some soul trauma first.”

Laughter broke out. Even Grayson smirked — briefly — before looking away.

Milo stood on a chair, holding his journal like a toast.  
“To the ones who fight shadows with music and sarcasm.”

Kinsey (grabbing a bottle):  
“And to making it till morning.”

Bo, not drinking, chuckled.  
“Just make sure no one actually passes out.”

Ray, dry as ever:  
“Because I hear the monsters out there love a cheap drunk.”

Everyone laughed — too loud, too fast. But it was better than fear.

Outside, the wind picked up.

INT. ALEN’S VACATION HOUSE – NIGHT

The party had softened into tired chatter. Cups half-full. Music low. Shadows long.

Milo was nodding off in the corner.

Yvette (gently, from across the room):  
“Don’t sleep. Not yet.”

Koda, standing near the window, suddenly tensed.  
He didn’t say much — but when he spoke, people listened.

Koda (whisper):  
“There’s something... wrong.”

Alen (reassuring):  
“It’s fine. We’re awake. They can’t touch us here.”

Grayson, sitting near the fire, opened his eyes.  
He didn’t raise his voice — he didn’t have to.

Grayson (quiet but firm):  
“Tell that to your brain when it forgets which world it’s in.”

Everyone froze.

Claire:  
“What do you mean?”

Grayson stood. Walked toward Milo, who was slumped forward, seconds from dozing off.

Grayson (crouching beside him):  
“If he falls asleep, and starts screaming in the dream, do you want to be the one holding him down... while you watch him vanish?”

He gently nudged Milo’s shoulder.

Grayson (softly):  
“Hey. Not here. Not now. You stay with us, alright?”

Milo blinked, trembling.

Milo:  
“I... I saw her. She was humming.”

The name wasn’t spoken. But everyone knew.

Grayson reached into his bag, pulled out crushed caffeine tablets, poured some into a bottle cap with water, and held it out to Milo.

Grayson (to the group):  
“You sleep when you’re ready. And you never sleep alone.”

Jim, eyes still wide:  
“I still don’t get it. How have you guys... survived? I mean, no one can stay awake forever.”

Claire:  
“We don’t. We sleep in shifts. Small groups. If we rest here... we have to survive there. The moment our bodies fall asleep, we’re back in that world. And in that world — we have each other’s backs.”

She looked around.

Claire (serious):  
“If something comes, we use fire. If the Whisper shows up — we knock the person out before she speaks their name. Wake them up.”

Kinsey:  
“So what now? We do that too?”

Claire (shaking her head):  
“Not tonight. Right now, we don’t have the numbers or trust to watch each other’s backs. The moment one of you dozes off and no one’s ready... it’s over.”

Grayson looked over his shoulder toward the windows — into the thick, sleeping forest beyond.

Grayson:  
“Don’t give the dark a reason to notice you.”

EXT. VACATION HOUSE – LATER THAT NIGHT

Claire found Grayson on the porch, eyes on the moonless dark.

Claire:  
“You don’t really sleep anymore, do you?”

Grayson (without turning):  
“Don’t see the point. Rest doesn’t mean safety here.”

She leaned in the doorway, arms crossed, watching him in the dim light.

Claire (soft):  
“I think they’re starting to follow you. Not just fear you. Trust you.”

Grayson (still watching the woods):  
“I don’t want followers.” (beat) “I want survivors.”

EXT. DEEP FOREST – DAY

The trees thickened as the group moved cautiously through the undergrowth. Dried leaves crunched under their boots. Mist clung low across the soil.

ALISHA (squinting ahead)  
“Wait a second…”

She slowed, veering off the trail.

ALISHA (pointing, confused)  
“This tree. I know this tree.”

JAKE  
“You’re sure? It’s a forest. They all look—”

ALISHA (cutting him off, already walking)  
“No, I mean it. This is where I saw that thing. The first time. It was here.”

She broke into a jog, weaving between two knotted trunks.

ALISHA  
“And then I ran… this way.”

The others followed her through a short incline. She stopped suddenly in a small clearing, breathing heavy, spinning slowly on the spot.

ALISHA (softly)  
“This is it. This is where I found Jake, dealing with the same monster. Where we started running.”

JAKE (nodding)  
“Yeah… I remember now.”

A pause. The wind rustled.

KINSEY (stepping forward)  
“Wait… hold on.”

She turned in a slow circle, looking at each of the trees surrounding them.

KINSEY  
“Is it just me, or does this… formation feel familiar?”

JIM (frowning)  
“What do you mean?”

KINSEY  
“Like we’ve stood like this before.”

ALISHA (brows furrowed)  
“Yeah, right before Reyan knocked us out… right before we woke up. Remember?”

She walked over to one tree and crouched. Sweeping aside some fallen leaves, her breath caught.

ALISHA  
“No way.”

She looked up at the group, eyes wide.

ALISHA  
“I marked this.”

CLAIRE (surprised)  
“You what?”

ALISHA  
“I was scared of getting lost, so I made a mark on the ground while we were out here — just a habit.”

She stepped aside, revealing a faint carved X etched into the dirt. Weathered, but still there.

KINSEY  
“So we were standing right where these trees are now.”

JIM  
“That can’t be right. Maybe a few feet off, but not exact.”

ALISHA (firm)  
“No. I remember this tree, this bend in the roots. I marked it.”

GRAYSON (stepping forward from behind)  
“She’s right.”

(Everyone turns, startled.)

GRAYSON  
“That’s why Reyan didn’t want you to come back here.”

KINSEY  
“What are you talking about?”

GRAYSON  
“These aren’t just trees. They’re… us. When we’re asleep, this is where our consciousness lands. These trees— they reflect where we are in the dream world.”

TOBEY (flat)  
“That’s insane.”

NIA  
“Then why do some of them move?”

GRAYSON  
“Because someone’s running for their life while their body’s here. That’s why.”

(A long silence.)

MILO  
“Wait… that means… we’re not in our bodies anymore?” (swallowing) “We’re these trees?”

GRAYSON (calm, matter-of-fact)  
“Pretty much.”

HANA  
“And that’s why people can’t see us. Because we don’t… exist anymore?”

GRAYSON  
“That’s what Reyan figured too. When he saw it, he panicked. Never came back. Chose to live with it instead of fighting it.”

JAKE (stepping forward, eyes narrowed)  
“So you knew. This whole time. You knew.”

GRAYSON (doesn’t flinch)  
“Yeah. Me and Reyan came here months ago. We found this. And after that, he gave up.”

JAKE (furious)  
“And you dragged us back here to finish your job? You pushed me, fed me clues, used my anger like a— like a damn tool.”

GRAYSON  
“Because you needed a reason to care.”

JAKE  
“Screw you, man. Who the hell do you think you are?”

GRAYSON (stepping closer)  
“The only one trying to get out of this nightmare. You want to be mad? Fine. But I’m not the one who walked away and called it survival.”

(He shoots a cold glance toward Claire, who meets it with quiet defiance.)

GRAYSON (to the group)  
“You think you’re safe being invisible? Living off scraps and pretending this is okay?”

(He gestures to the trees — the weight of it all pressing in.)

GRAYSON  
“This island’s not small. There’s no way I’m going to find the truth alone. So it’s up to you. Go back to pretending… or help me burn this thing to the ground.”

(The silence that follows isn’t fear. It’s choice.)

CLAIRE (dry, arms folded)  
“Before we go diving deeper into the madness, is there anything else we should know, Grayson?”  
(a beat)  
“Like a lurking monster we missed? Or maybe a cursed vending machine?”

GRAYSON (deadpan, not rising to the sarcasm)  
“You been to the treehouse yet?”

# Chapter 3: Forgotten Games

The group went still.  
ALEN shifted slightly — not from surprise, but discomfort. Something about the word treehouse sank beneath his skin.

ALEN (slowly)  
“Yeah. That’s… mine. From when I was a kid.”

Without another word, they climbed up.

INT. TREEHOUSE – MOMENTS LATER

It wasn’t what they expected.

Empty chip packets, plastic bottles, and candy wrappers littered the dusty floor. Some were crumpled, others weirdly intact — like the party ended just minutes before they arrived.

TOBEY (raising an eyebrow)  
“Well. Guess we weren’t the first ones back.”

MILO (poking at an empty bottle)  
“Looks like some kids were hanging out here.”

ALEN (defensively, trying to smile)  
“I told you... it was our play spot. Me and... some others.”

KODA (quietly, pointing)  
“What about that?”

In the far corner of the room sat an empty wooden scrollbox, its lid slightly cracked. It looked old — like it had waited here longer than the treehouse itself.

NIA (mocking grin)  
“Nice. What were you playing — ninja postman?”

ALEN (confused, shaking his head)  
“I don’t… I don’t remember that being here.”

GRAYSON (sharp, watching him)  
“Exactly. If it wasn’t important, you’d remember it.”

CLAIRE knelt by the box, inspecting it.

CLAIRE  
“Well, whatever it was… it’s empty now.”

GRAYSON (turning to the group)  
“Then it’s out there. And if it belonged here — maybe it’s part of this whole thing.”

CLAIRE (sighs)  
“Which means we’re splitting up again, huh?”

GRAYSON  
“We’ve got 15 people. Let’s make 4 teams. Sweep fast. Stick together. And if you find it — yell.”

GROUP ASSIGNMENTS

Team A – Jake, Alisha, Grayson

Team B – Claire, Kinsey, Koda, Tobey

Team C – Jim, Milo, Ray, Nia

Team D – Alen, Hana, Bo, Yvette

CLAIRE (to the group, serious)  
“Whistle. Yell. Throw a rock. Whatever. Just call the rest if you find anything.”

GRAYSON (to Jake and Alisha as they step down the ladder)  
“Let’s go, lovebirds. No dying on my watch.”

JAKE (grinning)  
“Can’t promise that if you keep calling us that.”

ALISHA (lightly)  
“You’re lucky we’re walking behind you.”

…. GROUP A – JAKE, ALISHA, GRAYSON

They followed a narrow deer trail through a thicket, stepping over exposed roots and ducking under low-hanging branches. The sunlight above filtered through the canopy like shards of gold on mossy stone. The air was cool, rich with pine and damp soil.

JAKE (pulling a twig from his hair):  
“Nature’s trying to scalp me, I swear.”

ALISHA (chuckling):  
“Maybe it’s just giving you a haircut. Finally.”

Grayson was ten steps ahead, silent as usual — eyes sharp, scanning the terrain like he expected the ground to whisper its secrets. He didn’t react. Just kept walking.

JAKE (lowering his voice):  
“He’s like a haunted vending machine. Might give you something useful… or just eat your quarter.”

ALISHA (amused):  
“He hasn’t eaten you yet.”

JAKE:  
“Yet. Key word.”

They walked in silence for a bit. The birds overhead had gone quiet, as if listening.

Grayson stopped suddenly at a bend in the trail. He crouched beside a rotted log and examined something — broken branches, maybe tracks. He didn’t say a word, but his stillness was loud.

ALISHA (watching him):  
“You always like this? Even before all this?”

GRAYSON (without turning):  
“No. I used to be worse.”

JAKE (raising a brow):  
“Worse how?”

GRAYSON:  
“Didn’t talk. Didn’t trust. Just moved through things. Like I was temporary.”

A beat passed. Leaves rustled somewhere far off.

ALISHA (softly):  
“So… what made you stay? With us, I mean.”

Grayson finally looked back. His expression didn’t soften, but something in his voice did.

GRAYSON:  
“You didn’t ask me to.”

That quiet landed like something heavy but not cruel.

GRAYSON (standing up again):  
“Most people run to survive. You ran toward each other. I noticed that.”

JAKE (quietly, glancing at Alisha):  
“Guess stupid loyalty’s our thing.”

Grayson nodded once.  
Not approval — just acknowledgment.

And then, just like that, he moved on.

….Group-B- Claire, Kinsey, Tobey, Koda

The trees here stood taller and closer together, their branches netting above like veined glass. Golden light filtered through gaps in the canopy, painting the trail in moving shadows.

Koda walked a few steps ahead, his steps light but confident. Tobey, silent as usual, carried a small crowbar looped into his belt. Kinsey kept looking up at the branches while Claire trailed slightly behind, head tilted, observing the forest as if waiting for it to speak first.

KINSEY (flicking a leaf off her shoulder):  
“This is so Blair Witch it’s not even funny.”

CLAIRE (dry):  
“I think we passed ‘funny’ about two nightmares ago.”

KINSEY:  
“Yeah, but… it’s kind of beautiful too, isn’t it?”

She glanced at Koda, who was crouched near a hollowed log, inspecting something.

KINSEY:  
“What do you think? Haunted or scenic?”

Koda shrugged, not looking up.

KODA (quiet):  
“Both.”

TOBEY (grunting slightly as he stepped over a log):  
“I’ll take scenic. Haunted doesn’t usually come with this much sunlight.”

CLAIRE:  
“That’s because it’s always calm before things go wrong.”

They kept walking, pine needles crunching beneath their boots. For a while, it was just the forest — the sound of distant birds, the faint creak of wind-strained branches.

Then—

KINSEY (quietly, to Claire):  
“Hey… earlier, when we were dancing… you seemed okay.”

CLAIRE (a beat):  
“That’s the trick. You fake it. Long enough, it becomes a shield.”

KINSEY:  
“You ever let it down?”

CLAIRE (without hesitation):  
“No. Not unless someone’s earned it.”

A silence.

KINSEY:  
“Did Reyan earn it?”

CLAIRE turned her head slightly, surprised at the question. Koda, who had paused again to tie his boot, didn’t react. Tobey was still ahead, oblivious.

CLAIRE (softly, after a long pause):  
“He did. Once.”

KINSEY (looking away):  
“Must be nice. Having someone like that.”

CLAIRE (nodding faintly):  
“It was. Until he gave up.”

The group walked on. After a while, Kinsey fell in step beside Tobey.

KINSEY:  
“You don’t talk much.”

TOBEY:  
“Don’t need to.”

KINSEY:  
“That’s mysterious as hell.”

TOBEY (glancing at her):  
“It’s not mystery. Just… economy.”

KINSEY (grinning):  
“So what’s your story, Mr. Economy?”

TOBEY:  
“Grew up fixing things. Quiet was normal. Noise meant someone was hurt.”

KINSEY blinked.

KINSEY:  
“…Damn.”

He shrugged, modestly. “That’s just life.”

Meanwhile, Koda had wandered slightly ahead again. Claire caught up, slowing as she walked beside him.

CLAIRE:  
“You’ve seen something. Haven’t you?”

Koda didn’t respond immediately. Then—

KODA:  
“Everyone sees something.”

CLAIRE:  
“But yours left a mark.”

Koda looked at her. Just for a second.

KODA:  
“She sang. The one with the humming voice.”

CLAIRE (eyes hardening):  
“You didn’t follow it?”

Koda (quiet):  
“No. I hid. In a rusted car. Didn't breathe.”

CLAIRE:  
“Smart.”

KODA:  
“Not really. I still hear it.”

They reached a glade where the trees thinned. Long moss hung from the branches like draped fabric.

KINSEY (exhaling):  
“This would be romantic if it wasn’t horrifying.”

CLAIRE (half-laughing):  
“Story of this island.”

TOBEY:  
“Still no scroll.”

CLAIRE:  
“Maybe that’s the point. Maybe it’s not about the scroll at all.”

KINSEY:  
“Then what is it about?”

CLAIRE:  
“Each other.” They paused. No one joked. No one disagreed.

GROUP C – JIM, MILO, RAY, NIA

EXT. STEEPER FOREST RIDGE – EARLY EVENING

The terrain here was uneven — rocky, damp, and shadowed under a thicker canopy. Slivers of light broke through like thin glass shards across the mossy floor. Group C picked their way up the slope, weaving between fallen trees and patches of overgrowth.

JIM (groaning slightly as he climbed):  
“Who even built a treehouse in this terrain? Some parkour-loving maniac?”

NIA (eyeing him sideways):  
“Maybe someone who wanted to make sure nobody found it.”

MILO was scribbling in his notebook with one hand while gripping a walking stick in the other. Ray, as always, took the rear — silent, observant, almost unnervingly so.

JIM (over his shoulder):  
“Hey Milo. You ever write about anything cheerful in there? Puppies? Ice cream?”

MILO (without looking up):  
“Chapter titles so far: ‘Descent Into Root Systems’, ‘Whispers in the Leaves’, and ‘Ray Probably Has a Body Count.’”

JIM (laughs):  
“See, that’s the kind of optimism I need in my life.”

NIA (smirking, to Milo):  
“You should add one more: ‘The guy who joked through a crisis until it wasn’t funny anymore.’”

JIM (mock offended):  
“Wow. Betrayed by my own search party.”

They reached a ridge where the ground evened out. Milo sat briefly on a boulder, flipping through his notes. His hand trembled slightly, but he kept writing.

NIA noticed.

NIA:  
“Why do you do that? Write like the world’s ending tomorrow?”

MILO (quietly):  
“Because it might.”

JIM:  
“You think this place is that bad?”

MILO (still scribbling):  
“It’s not about what it is now. It’s what we forget it used to be. If I don’t write it down, I wake up and pieces are missing. Places. Faces. Names. It’s like trying to keep sand in a closed fist.”

NIA (softly):  
“That ever help?”

MILO (pauses, then looks up):  
“No. But it’s the only thing that makes the forgetting feel… slower.”

A silence passed. Ray finally spoke from the back, voice low but clear.

RAY:  
“He’s not wrong. I lost my memories of my brother. When he was still with me and that whisper didn’t get him”

They turned to look at him — even Milo stopped writing.

JIM:  
“You’re kidding.”

RAY:  
“Wish I was.”

He walked forward, brushing his hand along the bark of a tree as they passed it.

RAY:  
“We think we’ll remember everything when we get out. But what if we don’t?”

NIA:  
“Then I guess… that’s why we’ve got Milo.”

MILO gave a small, surprised smile.

JIM:  
“Alright, team doom and gloom. Let’s lighten this before I start crying and nobody’s got tissues.”

NIA:  
“You carry a blade and a bottle of lighter fluid, but not tissues?”

JIM:  
“I pack for monsters, not emotional baggage.”

They laughed — briefly. The trees above swayed gently, casting mottled shadows across their faces.

RAY (finally):  
“If something comes… I take point.”

MILO:  
“You don’t have to—”

RAY:  
“I do.” And just like that, the joking was done. But the respect lingered longer than the silence.

….GROUP D – Alen, Hana, Bo, Yvette

EXT. OLD WOODLAND PATH – NEAR SUNSET

This side of the forest felt older — quieter. The trees leaned closer here, their branches woven overhead like ribs. Dried leaves crunched beneath their boots. A squirrel darted up a trunk. Somewhere far off, a bird shrieked and was answered by silence.

YVETTE was humming softly, drawing a swirl in the dirt with her toe as they paused near a crooked stump.

ALEN trailed slightly behind the others, lost in thought. He kept glancing at the trees — at the shadows — like they were watching him.

HANA (glancing at Alen):  
“You alright back there?”

ALEN (distracted):  
“Yeah… yeah. Just feels weird. Like the trees know something I don’t.”

BO (deadpan, wiping his brow):  
“Or maybe they’re just trees, man.”

YVETTE (still humming):  
“Not always.”

They all paused.

BO (eyebrow raised):  
“...What?”

YVETTE (softly, as if reciting):  
“Some trees grow from bones, some from buried names. And some… from things that were never meant to be remembered.”

ALEN looked at her like she’d said something he almost remembered.

HANA (half-joking):  
“Okay. Remind me never to camp with you.”

Yvette gave a sleepy smile and wandered a few paces ahead, fingers trailing along the bark of a low-hanging branch.

HANA turned to Alen, quieter now.

HANA:  
“You’ve been here before, right? This island?”

ALEN nodded slowly.

HANA:  
“Do you remember… anything from then? Anything that could help us?”

ALEN (frustrated):  
“Flashes. A treehouse. Games we played. But the more I try to grab it, the further it pulls.”

BO:  
“That’s how this place works. Memory’s just another kind of bait.”

ALEN:  
“I keep feeling like I should know something important. Like the answer’s right under my skin and I just can’t dig deep enough.”

They walked in silence for a while longer.

Then Bo knelt suddenly beside a fallen log.

BO (pointing):  
“Found something. Could be just trash, but…”

They all crouched beside him. Beneath the log, half-buried in dirt, was a strip of paper — frayed, water-stained, the ink nearly gone.

HANA pulled it out gently. It was blank.

YVETTE (staring at it):  
“Paper remembers too… sometimes.”

ALEN:  
“You think this could be part of the scroll?”

BO shook his head.

BO:  
“Doesn’t matter. Even if it’s not, it tells us something: we’re getting close to something old. Maybe broken. Maybe hidden.”

HANA:  
“Or maybe both.”

YVETTE looked up suddenly, eyes wide.

YVETTE:  
“...Did you hear that?”

They all froze.

Nothing. Just the breeze. But none of them moved for a long moment.

BO (finally, quietly):  
“Let’s keep walking.”

They rose again, quieter now. And as they walked deeper into the dusk-soaked forest, none of them spoke.

But Alen looked over his shoulder more than once…  
And Yvette stopped humming.

….Group-B

After hours of wandering they came across the temple… The old stone steps of the temple were warm underfoot, worn smooth by time. A wind moved gently through the prayer flags strung above, fluttering with a soft rustle that almost sounded like whispering.

CLAIRE (pausing near the entrance, turning to the others):  
“How about we have a look inside the temple?”

KODA gave a small nod. TOBEY shrugged, adjusting his pack. KINSEY hesitated, but followed.

INT. TEMPLE – CONTINUOUS

They moved silently past the threshold, the cool air inside a stark contrast to the humid forest. Stone walls were marked with faded murals. Candles flickered at a distant altar.

And then — a soft sweep.

The MONK stood at the far end, calmly brushing fallen leaves into a copper bowl. Same serene expression. Same slow rhythm.

CLAIRE (whispering, her voice tight):  
“Don’t you guys find it strange?”

KINSEY:  
“What?”

CLAIRE:  
“Him. The monk. He’s been here longer than anyone. We don’t even know how long. Yet all this—” (gestures outward) “—hasn’t touched him.”

TOBEY (softly):  
“Maybe he’s not really in the game.”

KINSEY:  
“But… he is a good person and he gave us sweets ..., maybe he is suspicious.”

CLAIRE:  
“There’s only one way to know. We keep eyes on him. Look for anything that doesn’t fit. Anything that gives him away.”

They all nodded — even KODA, whose usual silence gave weight to his agreement.

EXT. TEMPLE SIDE GROUNDS – LATER

The group fanned out, carefully circling the structure. TOBEY lingered near a rusted water pump. KINSEY scanned the walls, running her hand over the stone. KODA crouched low, inspecting old ash by the prayer circle.

CLAIRE was watching the monk through a gap in the temple wall when—

CRACK.

A sharp rustle from the bushes behind them. Instantly, everyone froze.

CLAIRE raised her hand — signaling them to stay low.

The underbrush rustled again.

Footsteps. Slow. Heavy.

TOBEY raised a rock, ready to throw. KODA tensed beside him.

Then —

BO stepped out of the trees, followed by ALEN, HANA, and YVETTE.

ALEN (raising both hands):  
“Whoa! Friendly. It’s us.”

KINSEY (exhaling hard):  
“Jesus. You nearly got hit with a rock.”

CLAIRE:  
“What are you doing here?”

BO (gruff):  
“Following the monk.”

YVETTE (softly, almost distant):  
“He doesn’t blink. Not like people blink.”

HANA:  
“We’ve been circling from the south side. Didn’t find anything… but he never leaves the grounds either. Just tends the temple. Like nothing outside matters.”

CLAIRE (glancing back toward the temple):  
“Same here. He doesn’t act like he sees us. Not really.”

KODA:  
“Or he sees too much.”

The two groups stood in the shade of the temple, the faint sound of sweeping echoing in the background like a metronome.

ALEN:  
“So what now?”

CLAIRE (tightening the strap on her bag):  
“We keep watching. Whatever this place is — he’s not just a bystander. Not anymore.”

EXT. DEEP FOREST – EVENING

Group A wandered deeper into the woods. The air grew colder. Light filtered through twisted branches in fractured beams, painting the trail in a patchwork of shifting shadows.

Leaves rustled like whispers overhead. The path narrowed, roots clawing up from the earth like bones.

JAKE (brushing aside a branch):  
“Anyone else feel like we’re just walking in circles?”

ALISHA (sighing):  
“Feels more like we’re walking inside someone’s forgotten dream.”

GRAYSON (dry):  
“Or nightmare. Keep your eyes sharp.”

They walked in staggered silence.

JAKE (half-muttering):  
“You ever think, maybe this scroll doesn’t even exist? That it’s just one of those cursed forest metaphors — like hope, or clean socks?”

ALISHA (chuckling):  
“I think the island’s messing with your brain. Next, you’ll start naming the trees.”

JAKE (grinning, tapping a thick trunk):  
“This one’s Doug. Seems dependable.”

He leaned his weight lazily against the tree.

CRACK.

Everyone turned. A low groan echoed as the tree beneath Jake’s hand jerked violently.

The bark began to bubble and splinter. Branches coiled inward, curling like clenched fists. Leaves turned black and fluttered down like ash. Within seconds, the once-mighty oak shriveled into a dry, dead husk.

JAKE (stumbling back):  
“Okay WHAT THE HELL?! Did I just... kill a tree?!”

ALISHA (eyes wide):  
“Jake—did you see that? It just... it died.”

GRAYSON stepped forward slowly, his gaze locked on the collapsed trunk. He didn’t blink.

GRAYSON (low, grim):  
“That wasn’t you.”

(beat)

GRAYSON (continued):  
“That tree was someone. Someone from the other world. Someone just died.”

JAKE (voice faltering):  
“What?!”

ALISHA (barely a whisper):  
“No... no way.”

Suddenly — a distant pop-crack.  
They turned as a second tree twisted violently and crumbled behind them.

Then a third.

A fourth.

The sound echoed across the forest like bones snapping in the wind. Tree after tree groaned, folded inwards, and withered — leaves shrieking as they fell like confetti at a funeral.

Seven. Eight.

The forest wasn’t still anymore. It was gasping.

ALISHA (panicked):  
“If each one is someone dying up there—? That’s... that’s not just bad. That’s a massacre.”

JAKE’s face had gone pale. He stared at the death around them.

JAKE (hollow):  
“This isn’t an attack. This is a collapse.”

GRAYSON (jaw tight, eyes darting):  
“Something happened. Back at the chamber. Something big.” He turned to the group, voice sharper now, cutting through the dread.

GRAYSON:  
“Forget methodical. We need to find that scroll. Now. Because if we don’t — we may not have anyone left to save.” He didn’t wait for a reply. He started walking faster, and this time, even Jake didn’t joke.

EXT. OUTSIDE ALEN’S VACATION HOUSE – NIGHTFALL

The sky had turned violet, clouds blushing with the last light. One by one, the four groups returned to the clearing, empty-handed and exhausted. No one spoke at first — just heavy footfalls and the sound of crickets humming through the trees.

CLAIRE (brushing pine needles off her coat):  
“Nothing. The whole perimeter. No sign of it.”

JIM:  
“Same here. Just dirt and weird vibes.”

KINSEY:  
“Maybe it’s a trick. Maybe there is no scroll.”

BO:  
“Then what do we do?”

The weight of failure settled on everyone’s shoulders.

TOBEY dropped his gear by the porch, face unreadable.

RAY (quiet):  
“If this is it — if there’s no way out…”

ALEN:  
“Don’t. Don’t say that.”

Grayson scanned the tree line once more, but even he looked uncertain now.

The lantern on the porch flickered as the wind picked up. Tired and speechless, the group shuffled toward the door of the vacation house.

# Chapter 6: The Scattering

INT. ALEN’S VACATION HOUSE – NIGHT

The door creaked open.

Darkness greeted them.

A few flashlight beams flicked on — sweeping over dusty furniture and quiet walls.

Then — a shape.

Slouched on the couch, back to the door. Motionless.

JAKE (whispering):  
“Is that... someone in there?”

ALISHA raised her light.

The silhouette sat perfectly still, like a shadow stitched into the fabric of the room.

KINSEY (stepping back):  
“Wait... is that—?”

The figure stirred. Slowly. Turned. And with a dry, raspy breath, spoke.

REYAN (voice cracked, faint):  
“Took you long enough.”

The room froze. Staring at a man they weren’t sure they’d ever see again. The group stepped into the house, shoes muddy, hearts heavier than before. The search had turned up nothing. Everyone looked drained — shoulders slumped, brows furrowed.

But then —  
A voice.

REYAN (from the couch)  
“Well, I was just getting some rest, that’s all. Don’t get any wild ideas.”

Everyone turned sharply.

There he was — casually sprawled on the dusty couch, arms behind his head, as if he’d never left. As if the forest hadn’t nearly eaten them alive.

KINSEY (blinking):  
“You’ve got to be kidding me…”

ALISHA (half-grinning):  
“I thought you weren’t coming.”

REYAN (grumbling):  
“I still think this is a terrible idea. But if we’re already knee-deep in this mess… might as well see it through.”

CLAIRE stepped forward, face softening in surprise — and something else beneath it. Relief.

CLAIRE (smiling, a little too fast):  
“I knew you’d show up.”

Reyan shrugged, but there was a flicker in his eyes — the kind that said he didn’t expect her to believe in him. He quickly looked away.

From the back of the group, Grayson’s eyes narrowed slightly, his hand still resting lightly on the doorframe. He didn’t move, but he was watching.

JAKE (to Alisha, quietly, under his breath):  
“Wasn’t he the one who called this plan suicide?”

ALISHA (whispering back):  
“Yeah… and now he’s just chilling like he never left? And just when he is back, we saw all those dying trees back in the forest, It definitely has to do something with his return.”

Grayson’s gaze flicked briefly toward them. He gave the faintest shake of his head — not to scold, but to signal: Not now. Keep watching.

JIM (collapsing on a nearby chair):  
“Alright, hero’s back. Now what?”

The group slowly spilled into the room — jackets tossed over chairs, boots unlaced. The lantern on the table flickered in the dimness, throwing the walls into restless shadows.

TOBEY (half-asleep already):  
“I don’t know about you guys, but I’d trade my soul for a nap right now.”

NIA (murmuring):  
“You’re not supposed to say that out loud here.”

A tired ripple of laughter spread.

ALEN:  
“We’ll figure it out in the morning. If morning even still exists.”

KODA (flatly):  
“You sleep. You risk your name.”

CLAIRE (to no one in particular):  
“Anyone who does — take a lighter. Keep it close.”

That’s when Grayson turned, slowly.

Something clicked behind his eyes. He stepped toward the center, voice calm — but sharp.

GRAYSON:  
“Wait…”

All heads turned.

GRAYSON (steady):  
“When we sleep, the lighter shows up in the dream world, right?”

Several nodded.

GRAYSON:  
“Then… anything we’re holding comes with us.”

The logic ignited in the room like a spark.

ALISHA (quietly):  
“You think… the scroll?”

JAKE:  
“If it matters — if it’s what triggered all of this — then maybe the island pulled it into the other world.”

(he hesitates)

“Maybe even with someone. Or… what if those five symbol trees aren’t just powers? What if they’re like us — players. And one of them has it?”

CLAIRE (barely above a whisper):  
“And we’ve been searching the wrong version of the island this whole time…”

Silence pressed tight.

For the first time in what felt like forever, there was something in the air.

Direction.

JIM (grim):  
“So we go back in.”

REYAN (low, but certain):  
“And this time… we look in hell.”

Grayson’s jaw flexed, still watching Reyan from the side — as if trying to see through him. Then he moved closer to the table, placing his lighter down like a marker.

GRAYSON:  
“We plan it right. No mistakes. Fire is our ally. Fear isn’t.”

CLAIRE:  
“The Guardian Tree’s the only one we trust. We start there.”

KINSEY:  
“And the others?”

REYAN (quickly):  
“Too risky. One safe bet is better than four unknowns.”

Grayson glanced at him subtly again. That’s convenient, his silence seemed to say.

TOBEY:  
“We move as one. No separate groups this time.”

RAY:  
“If we get split — we die.”

Everyone nodded.

JAKE:  
“And if she shows up?”

GRAYSON:  
“Scatter. Or knock yourselves out before she says your name.”

ALISHA:  
“We’ve done it before. We’ll do it again.”

HANA (checking her bag):  
“Still got a few flare rounds.”

BO:  
“Five liters of fuel. Enough to light a forest edge.”

MILO (flipping through pages):  
“Every tree. Every turn. We map it. No one gets lost.”

NIA:  
“We’re already lost. Just… maybe not dead yet.”

YVETTE (calm):  
“We walk in together. We walk out with truth.”

They prepped in silence — torches, bottles, caffeine, lighter stacks.

CLAIRE stood, tying her hair back.  
“Dawn. We move.”

And as everyone scattered to gear up or settle for short rest shifts, Grayson lingered by the door — eyes still not off Reyan.

ALISHA (noticing, quiet):  
“You don’t trust him?”

GRAYSON (without looking away):  
“I trust what people do. Not what they say.”

A pause.

GRAYSON (softly):  
“And sometimes… not even that.” So okay, “We go in at dawn. One group. Fuel, flares, lighters. No one wanders.”

CLAIRE:  
“We start at the Guardian Tree. Everything after that… we adapt.”

Suddenly—

A crackle. A WHUMP.

BO (jerking up):  
“Is that smoke?!”

RAY (at the window):  
“There’s fire—right outside the door!”

INTENSE RUSH.

Everyone jumped to their feet. Grayson kicked open the front door — a flash of flame nearly licked his face.

EXT. VACATION HOUSE – NIGHT

The front porch was ablaze.

Wood hissed, embers flew like fireflies on attack. The group burst into motion — grabbing bottles, canisters, whatever they could find.

CLAIRE:  
“Keep it from the roof! Bo — water line in the back!”

JAKE:  
“Where the hell did it come from?! There’s no one out there!”

ALISHA (coughing through the smoke):  
“Is it the monsters? The Whisper?”

GRAYSON (shouting):  
“This fire is for burning them — not us, dammit!”

They stomped it out. Smoke rolled into the trees like something breathing.

But it wasn’t over.

YVETTE (voice small):  
“Guys… look.”

She pointed to the forest edge.

A ring of trees — at least a dozen — were ablaze.

KINSEY (stumbling back):  
“No… no way. That wasn’t there a second ago.”

TOBEY:  
“They’re… surrounding us?”

The flames weren’t spreading wildly. They were placed. Almost like a wall.

A cage.

JIM:  
“Someone’s trying to trap us in…”

Then—

NIA (eyes going wide):  
“Guys… over here.” Her voice cracked. Shaking. Everyone ran to her. She didn’t move — just pointed down. Written in the dirt, across the clearing in smears of blood, were three words:

“KILL ME PLEASE.”

Silence fell like stone.

RAY (whisper):  
“That’s… human.”

KODA backed away, hands shaking.  
Claire turned pale. Even Grayson took a full second to breathe. Then his gaze snapped hard toward Reyan.

GRAYSON (cold fury):  
“Now would you like to explain what the hell is going on, Reyan?”

REYAN (frozen):  
“What?”

GRAYSON (stepping forward):  
“Don’t play dumb. First the trees start dying — one after another — while we’re searching.”

He glares.

“Then you suddenly return. Calm as ever. Right as that happens.”

Everyone turned to Reyan.

CLAIRE (softly):  
“Reyan…”

GRAYSON (voice cutting):  
“And now this — fire placed to trap us, blood begging for death outside. You're acting like it’s just another Tuesday.”

REYAN (shaking his head):  
“You think I caused this?”

GRAYSON (snapping):  
“I think you know something. And I’m done letting you stay quiet while the rest of us bleed for answers.”

The last of the flames hissed under the last thrown bucket of water.

Smoke lingered low, curling between boots and trembling knees.

Reyan stood in the center of the clearing, the firelight dancing over his face.

Everyone circled him now — not threatening, not yelling, but waiting. Heavy. Breathless.

CLAIRE (softly, almost breaking):  
“Reyan… please.”

REYAN:  
“I didn’t mean to lie. I just… didn’t know how to say it.”

His voice wasn’t defensive. It was hollow.

REYAN (continuing):  
“Back at the chamber… after you all left… people started asking questions. Pressing. Wanting answers.”

He glanced at Grayson, then at the scorched trees.

REYAN:  
“And I told them. I told them what we found. About the trees… about how we’re not really in our own bodies anymore. That maybe… we’re those things rooted out there.”

A beat. A shiver passed through the circle.

REYAN:  
“They didn’t believe me at first. But then they started remembering things. Fragments. Dreams. Seeing themselves from the outside... It cracked something open.”

His voice tightened.

REYAN:  
“One guy—Mark, I think—just snapped. Started screaming this wasn’t real. Said we were trapped in a dream and if we died here, we’d finally wake up.”

ALISHA (eyes wide):  
“No…”

REYAN (barely audible now):  
“He had a gun. I don’t know where he got it. But he used it.”

JAKE (stepping back):  
“You mean…?”

REYAN (nodding):  
“He opened fire. People started running. Screaming. Some tried to stop him — others started helping him. Said they wanted out. Wanted to wake up.”

He took a breath — or tried to. It caught halfway.

REYAN:  
“I ran. I… I couldn’t stop it. I couldn’t do anything. I just ran.”

No one spoke.

Just wind. The echo of trees.

GRAYSON (quietly):  
“Well, that explains you coming back.”

He looked around, jaw tightening.

GRAYSON:  
“But not this. Not the fire. Not the trees dying.”

A voice — uncertain, but steady — from behind them.

TOBEY:  
“Wait… what if some of them didn’t die instantly?”

Everyone turned.

TOBEY:  
“What if they just got knocked out? What if they crossed over… wounded?”

The silence cracked like ice.

KINSEY (breathless):  
“They’d end up in the dream world…”

BO (grim):  
“Alone. Bleeding. With monsters already sniffing them out.”

CLAIRE (a whisper, numb):  
“That’s why the trees were dying. It wasn’t random. It was them.”

She turned slowly, eyes fixed on the last smoking stump near the porch.

CLAIRE (almost to herself):  
“And the fires. They weren’t started here.”

RAY (low):  
“Someone out there’s still running. Still fighting. And screaming for help.”

They all looked at the words on the ground again. “KILL ME PLEASE.”

No one could say anything. Alen sank to the ground. Head in his hands. Shoulders heaving.

JAKE (voice shaking):  
“We didn’t even say goodbye. Not to any of them.”

REYAN (barely holding it together):  
“I didn’t want this. I tried—”

GRAYSON (firm, but not cruel):  
“You wanted to run. And we all did too. But you saw what happened when we stopped trying.” Claire walked over to Reyan. Not angry. Just there. She placed a hand on his arm.

CLAIRE (quietly):  
“You came back. That’s what matters.” Reyan nodded, but his face said otherwise. Guilt clung to him like sweat.

ALISHA (soft):  
“So what now?”

GRAYSON

We go there save as many as of our men we can, find that scroll and end this forever.

One by one, they emerged.

Alen, Jake, Alisha, Kinsey, Jim.  
Claire.  
Reyan.  
Grayson.

They appeared exactly where they had vanished — their breath fogging in the chill morning air. Dust still hung in shafts of grey light. The house was still standing… but something was off.

JIM (quietly):  
“We’re all here… right?” They counted — eyes locking, tension high. Then someone pointed.

KINSEY (hoarse):  
“There.”

Lying at the edge of the clearing, half-slumped against the wall of the house… was a body. What was left of one, at least. Shriveled. Blackened. As if every last drop of life had been drained. Skin drawn paper-thin. Mouth frozen mid-scream. No blood. No eyes.

CLAIRE stepped forward, slowly.

CLAIRE (softly):  
“Oh god…”

ALEN:  
“Can you tell who it was?”

REYAN (shaking his head):  
“Not anymore.”

The wind shifted.

From behind a broken crate, a whisper. Hoarse. Barely human.

???:  
“Stay… back…”

All heads turned.

Behind a pile of scorched timber — a survivor. Barely.  
Skin pale. Eyes wide. Legs mangled. Blood oozing from the side. He was the one who wrote it.

GRAYSON rushed forward.  
GRAYSON:  
“Hey—hey, it’s okay. You’re alive. We’re here now.” The man blinked up at him. His lips trembled.

SURVIVOR (weak):  
“No. No one’s alive. Not really. They… they changed. One by one.” He nodded toward the body.

SURVIVOR (gasping):  
“That one… he’s next. He’ll turn soon. You have to burn him. You have to—before it spreads.”

A beat. A breath.

SURVIVOR (crying now):  
“Please… I can’t take it. It hurts. Please… kill me. End it. Before I turn too.”

The group froze.

Even hardened faces faltered.

JIM stepped back.  
“No—no way…”

CLAIRE closed her eyes.

ALISHA looked away.

But Grayson didn’t. He didn’t ask. He didn’t wait. He drew the gun. Kneeling beside the man, he whispered something — quiet, meant for no one else.

GRAYSON (barely audible):  
“Rest easy, brother.” And pulled the trigger. POP. The sound echoed through the forest. The man slumped back, still. Silence. Thick. Smothering. Grayson stood slowly. He turned away from the group. And behind one raised shoulder — barely seen — A tear. It slipped free. Fell to the ground.  
He wiped it fast, but a few had seen. Claire stepped forward, picking up the bottle of fuel. Her voice hard.

CLAIRE:  
“Burn the other one. We’re not risking it.” She knelt. Doused the body. Struck a match. The flame bloomed with a hiss and crackle, the fire catching fast. Orange and red lit up their faces.

CLAIRE (straightening):  
“No more delays. We find that scroll. Now. Before we lose another name to this nightmare.” Everyone nodded. This time, there were no jokes. No sarcasm. Only the fire. And the resolve it lit in every one of them.

# Chapter 7: The Whisper

The group moved slowly, torches flickering, the air thick and unmoving. Every now and then… something shifted.

Not wind. Not wildlife. Just a sound — like breathing where there was no mouth.

CLAIRE (whispering):  
“Keep your eyes open. This place doesn’t like to be walked through quietly.”

KINSEY (nervous laugh):  
“I didn’t know trees could glare.” Far ahead, Bo halted mid-step, holding up a fist. The group froze. In the distance — something moved between the trees. Not toward them. Just… passing through. Gliding. Long-limbed. Quiet. One of the beasts. But this one didn’t stalk. It drifted. The group dropped low. The creature vanished behind a knotted thicket. They didn’t breathe until Bo nodded. Safe. For now.

FINALLY – THE FIRST TREE

It stood like a sentinel in the clearing — tall, wide, its bark marked with the jagged swirl of a shield, curved in weathered strokes like something carved by wind itself. They approached, not speaking at first — as if talking might wake something sleeping nearby.

CLAIRE (softly):  
“Guardian tree. It saved us once. Maybe it still can.” Everyone spread out, checking. Alisha climbed halfway up, fingers scraping old moss. Jake crouched at the roots.

JAKE:  
“What if it’s inside?”

GRAYSON (glancing around):  
“If it were… we’d already feel it.” He crouched, brushing aside the ash and rot. Nothing.

MILO (scribbling, low):  
“Still no trace of the scroll. That’s one down.” A long sigh passed through the group — not relief. Not disappointment. Something in between. They turned toward the trees again, deeper into shadow. Onward. The wind thickened as they pushed forward. It wasn’t loud, but it wasn’t still either — a constant rustle that felt almost... conversational. Like the forest was whispering to itself.

The torchlight flickered against bark and bone-dry leaves. They walked in a cluster, boots crunching underfoot. Milo kept jotting in his journal as he moved, muttering notes. Ray watched their rear in silence, ever alert.

MILO (murmuring, pen scratching):  
"Symbol two. Healer. Leaf holding a droplet. Wounds that vanish by morning. Or something worse that hides until dawn…”

KINSEY (overhearing, raising an eyebrow):  
“Do you always narrate your near-death experiences?”

MILO (shrugging):  
“Therapy’s expensive.” They reached the second tree.

SECOND TREE – Symbol: Leaf and Droplet

This one stood at the bend of a gully, its roots exposed and clawing into the dirt like ribs from the earth. The symbol was softer than the last — a single etched leaf cradling a drop of water. Peaceful. Out of place.

The group slowed. A hush fell again.

CLAIRE:  
“Same symbol. We saw it back at the safehouse. Girl with a broken leg.”

She placed her hand against the bark, as if expecting it to pulse or breathe.

BO (examining the trunk):  
“No scroll. No cavity.”

NIA (lifting the edges of roots):  
“Maybe it’s buried?”

She dug with her boot, flicking dirt. Nothing.

JAKE (quietly to Alisha):  
“You think these trees are really... people? Like, actual souls?”

ALISHA (low voice):  
“If they are… I hope whoever this is doesn’t mind us poking their kidneys.”

She half-smiled. Jake exhaled softly.

JAKE (teasing):  
“You know… you’re a lot easier to deal with when we’re facing death.”

ALISHA:  
“Yeah, you bring out the best in me. Just don’t die before I insult you properly.”

They shared a small glance — warm, but laced with that same ever-present uncertainty.

GRAYSON crouched nearby, running a blade lightly along the edges of the bark. Not to harm it, just to test depth. Nothing.

GRAYSON:  
“No pulse. No scroll. Two down.”

TOBEY (wiping his brow):  
“We're losing time. And fire.” As if summoned by his words, the wind shifted again — harsher now. The trees rustled louder, as if warning them. Then… a low screech. Not close. But not far enough.

CLAIRE (tense, looking up):  
“Eyes open. Let’s move.” They pressed forward — tighter now, quieter. Fear deepening but so was the trust. Each step, each breath, each nod — it mattered. Off in the trees, a dark shape moved between trunks. Just watching. And the hunt continued…

The third and fourth trees came and went.

One bore the familiar mirrored spiral — a Trickster’s mark etched like twin snakes chasing each other’s tails.  
The next, scarred by savage arcs — the clawed circle of something meant to repel or trap.

They scoured them as they had before. Checked every crevice. Searched the undergrowth, peeled back layers of bark, whispered jokes to mask growing dread. But there was nothing. Just wood and silence.

No scroll.

KINSEY (kicking at the ground):  
"Same as the others. Dead ends."

CLAIRE wiped sweat from her brow, breath short, eyes scanning ahead.  
She didn’t say anything. But her shoulders sagged slightly. Even she was starting to feel it.

GRAYSON, standing a few paces ahead, near a crooked arch of overgrowth, turned and gestured forward.

GRAYSON (dry, sarcastic):  
“Well. Our last hope is in front. Everybody excited?”

A few half-hearted chuckles rippled. But no one responded.

They pushed through the brush. And there it stood.

FIFTH TREE – Symbol: A single closed eye, slit by a faint glowing line

It was the tallest by far — bark blackened with age, roots embedded deep into stone.  
The symbol pulsed faintly on its side — like it breathed, slowly, with a rhythm not its own.

A heavy silence wrapped around the group.

JIM (quietly):  
“This one feels different.”

ALEN, eyes wide, stepped forward slightly.  
“I don’t know why… but it feels like I’ve been here before.”

MILO (from behind, scribbling fast):  
“One question. One answer. That’s the rumour.”

TOBEY:  
“What happens if we ask the wrong one?”

No one answered.

As the others hesitated, CLAIRE stepped forward.  
She placed her palm gently against the bark. It was warm.

Behind her, REYAN approached — slower than usual.

REYAN:  
“Be careful. This one’s... not just a tree.”

CLAIRE turned, surprised.  
“You believe that now?”

REYAN (soft):  
“I never stopped. I just didn’t want to believe what that meant.”

She looked at him — really looked. For the first time in a long while, the walls between them lowered just enough.

CLAIRE (with a sad smile):  
“You always shut down when things get hard.”

REYAN:  
“And you always run into the fire. That’s why you scare the hell out of me.”

Pause. A silence where even the forest leaned in.

CLAIRE (quietly):  
“We make a good team then.”

REYAN (almost a whisper):  
“Yeah. Maybe.”

Their eyes lingered.

Then JIM walked up beside Claire, resting his hand on her shoulder.

JIM (grinning, trying to lighten):  
“You’re not gonna kiss, right? Because I’m standing too close and it’ll be weird.”

CLAIRE laughed, shoving him gently.  
“Don’t flatter yourself.”

ALEN moved to the other side of the tree, gently running his fingers along the symbol. His face was unreadable.

ALEN:  
“I used to draw eyes like this as a kid. I didn’t know why.”

CLAIRE (watching him):  
“Maybe you did. Maybe something deep down always remembered.”

She moved closer to him — their bond unspoken, but present. She had been the one to keep him grounded when his mind cracked back in the house. And now, she stood beside him again.

JIM joined him too, placing his hand on the trunk.

JIM:  
“If this is the last one… let’s not screw it up.”

MILO (offering):  
“What if I ask the question? I have a list.”

GRAYSON (sharply):  
“Not yet.”

His voice cut through — firmer now, not sarcastic. He looked at each of them.

GRAYSON:  
“If this thing works, and it only gives one answer — it has to matter. Don’t waste it.”

They all nodded. No one wanted to be the one who ruined their only chance.

But the tree remained silent. No scroll. No opening. No sign. Just the weight of hope beginning to fray at the edges.

KINSEY sat on a nearby rock, head in her hands.  
“So we came all this way. Fought through hell. For nothing.”

NIA (low voice):  
“Not nothing. We know more than before.”

GRAYSON (gazing up at the branches):  
“We know where it isn’t. Sometimes that’s all the answer you get.”

The group sank into stillness again. Exhausted. Unsure.

Until MILO looked up suddenly, eyes wide.

MILO:  
“Wait…” But whatever idea he had — he didn’t get to say it. Because the air suddenly grew cold. And the wind… stopped. A sound like a slow, low hum began from deep within the trees — and something moved in the dark.

Milo opened his mouth.

MILO (whispering, eyes wide):  
“Wait… maybe the trees aren’t the only things the island—”

But before the sentence could land—

A faint melodic hum sliced through the woods. Not sung. Not spoken. But breathed. The Whisper. A flash of white in the dark — movement like fog. Then her hand, gentle and pale, settled on Milo’s shoulder. He barely had time to flinch.

WHISPER (softly):  
“Milo.” No scream. No gasp. Just gone. He collapsed inward — like his form folded into air. A shadow blinked out. The space he had stood in still hummed with silence.

NIA (screaming):  
“NO—!”

CHAOS.

Torches whirled, voices shouting. Grayson grabbed for his pack, but too late.

REYAN (shouting):  
“Scatter! NOW! We regroup at the south path marker — if you’re in danger, knock out immediately!” The group split — running in bursts, dodging trees, ducking low branches. The Whisper glided behind them for a moment, then vanished — swallowed into the black between breaths.

EXT. FOREST — HOURS LATER — NEAR THE SOUTH MARKER — EARLY MORNING

Pale light bled into the trees as they emerged one by one. Haggard. Burned. Shaken.

Claire checked each face as they arrived. Kinsey, limping but whole. Jake, bloodied knuckles. Alisha breathing hard. Grayson dragging a satchel of broken gear. Tobey, bruised but upright. Reyan — last, silent, eyes scanning.

CLAIRE (counting, then pausing):  
“Wait… where’s Ray?”

A hush fell.

Bo closed his eyes. Nia turned away.

JIM:  
“You don’t think…?”

CLAIRE (cutting in):  
“He’s strong. Maybe he made it out. Maybe he’s awake now. Let’s… let’s not assume the worst.” They fell silent. But the weight of another absence made the air heavier. Two gone. Still no answers.

EXT. CLEARING — SHORTLY AFTER

The group sat in a loose ring, hunched around their scattered gear. The forest stretched around them, indifferent.

Grayson stared at the dirt. His face unreadable.  
Then, slowly — like light rising behind clouds — he spoke.

GRAYSON (quiet):  
“Milo said something before he vanished.”

KINSEY:  
“What was it?”

GRAYSON:  
“That we — and the trees — might not be the only ones pulled to the island.”

That landed hard.

JIM (confused):  
“What’s that supposed to mean?”

CLAIRE pulled Milo’s journal from her pack. Flipped through pages. Handwritten notes — some wild, some poetic. All urgent.

CLAIRE (reading):  
“‘Dreams aren’t only doors… sometimes they’re mirrors. Things slip through both ways.’”  
(reading faster)  
“‘We see monsters because we think they’re hunting us. But what if… they’re lost too?’”

TOBEY:  
“You think Milo meant… people aren’t the only ones who crossed?”

REYAN (darkly):  
“He said we might not be the only ones. So what else could be trapped here?”

ALEN:  
“The scroll… If it came from the island’s magic, maybe it didn’t stay in the real world.”

CLAIRE (eyes lighting up):  
“If it crossed over when we did… maybe it’s not in the trees.”

KINSEY:  
“Then where the hell is it?”

A long silence.

Then Grayson stood — suddenly calm, focused.

GRAYSON:  
“Wherever it is, we have to start thinking bigger. The forest. The temple. The place this all started.”

He looked to the group — each face shadowed by fatigue, loss, but still burning with something stubborn.

GRAYSON (soft):  
“We’re not just looking for an object anymore. We’re looking for meaning. Milo saw that. Now we need to see it too.” The group sat clustered in a half-circle around a flickering flame. Tired. Broken. Grief sitting heavy in their throats after Milo. The silence buzzed until someone finally broke it:

“What if she’s one of us?”  
A few heads turned. “The Whisper. The way the monsters used to be people—what if she was, too?”

A hush fell again. Like even asking that was dangerous. “She doesn’t look like she’s suffering.”  
“Maybe she doesn’t have to. Maybe she did.” “She still speaks. She still remembers names. That’s more than most of us.” Grayson stood by the edge of the firelight, his shadow twitching with the flames. Reyan, quiet until now, stepped forward.

REYAN:  
“If there’s truth to that… then we’ve been searching the wrong places all along.” Someone turned sharply toward him.

“Wait—you think she has the scroll?”

REYAN (soft):  
“Maybe. Or maybe she brought it with her. Wherever she came from.” Claire crossed her arms, brow furrowed.

CLAIRE:  
“That still doesn’t tell us where she keeps it.” Koda, slouched against a rock, finally looked up — voice low but calm, eyes scanning the dirt.

KODA:  
“Let’s trace it. We found the box in the treehouse — empty. If it wasn’t with one of the marked ones… then whoever became the Whisper may have picked it up.”

“So she had it on her when she was pulled in?” “And if she’s not using it... maybe she left it where she entered from.” Ray would’ve whistled if he were still with them. “Then where’s that?”

The group collectively exhaled — realization sinking in.

“Only two places fit: the treehouse or the temple.”

Bo’s hand tightened on the torch.

“So, a 50/50 gamble. Great.”

Grayson straightened, stepping into the circle. “No more splitting. We check one place. If it’s not there — we run and knock out. Come back for the other.”

(Everyone turns, waiting.)

Grayson (continuing):  
“Yvette. You’ve felt things before any of us. Where do we go?” (Yvette is silent for a second, eyes drifting toward the blackened forest, fingers twitching slightly as if she’s hearing something no one else does.)

Yvette (quiet, sure):  
“Treehouse.”

Jake (half-whispered):  
“That’s a hell of a guess.”

Yvette (calm):  
“It’s not a guess.”

Grayson nodded once. “Then we go. All of us. Together.”

# Chapter 8: The Sacrifice

The group moved in fast silence through the thinning light, boots crunching over dead leaves. Shadows rippled around them like watching eyes. Every crack of twig made their breath catch.

NIA (nervously):  
“If so many people turned... why haven’t we seen more of those things?”

TOBEY (deadpan):  
“You really wanna jinx that?”

JAKE (low, strained chuckle):  
“Maybe they’re giving us a head start. How thoughtful.”

ALISHA (mutters):  
“Or maybe they’re gathering.”

The silence that followed was louder than anything.

Suddenly, Jake slowed, lagging slightly behind. Grayson noticed.

GRAYSON:  
“You good?” Jake didn’t answer at first. Then stopped, fists clenched.

JAKE (quiet, breaking):  
“I can’t— I mean… What if it’s me next? What if I’m the one that slows everyone down?” Grayson turned fully, placed a hand on his shoulder.

GRAYSON (steady):  
“You don’t slow us down, Jake. You anchor us. You move when it’s time, you fight when it counts. You’re not a burden.” Jake looked down, barely nodding.

JAKE (hoarse):  
“They just keep dying, man... and I’m scared I’m getting used to it.” Grayson pulled him into a quick, firm hug — no drama, just strength.

GRAYSON (soft):  
“Then don’t get used to it. Just survive it. And while I’m here—nothing touches you. That’s a promise.”

AHEAD – CLAIRE & KINSEY

Kinsey wiped at her eyes. Claire glanced sideways.

CLAIRE:  
“You okay?”

KINSEY (voice cracking):  
“I don’t want to lose anyone else.” Claire gently pulled her in.

CLAIRE (softly):  
“You’re not going to lose me. Not today.”

KINSEY:  
“But you always run toward danger—like it doesn’t scare you.” Claire gave a small smile.

CLAIRE:  
“It scares the hell out of me. I just do it anyway. That’s all bravery is, really.”

They crested the ridge, breaths heavy, legs burning from the uphill climb. Then everyone froze.

There it was — the old treehouse, silhouetted in fractured moonlight, its crooked slats wrapped in vines like veins under the skin of the forest. But that wasn’t what stopped them. It was what stood between them and it. Dozens of creatures — hunched, swaying, twitching. Their skin was like cracked bark, limbs impossibly long. Some crawled, others stood tall, heads cocked at broken angles, black pits for eyes. Silent. Watching nothing.

Then—  
KINSEY (uneasy, almost whispering):  
“Well someone was dying to meet them earlier?”

YVETTE (barely audible, dread growing):  
“They were waiting.”

RAY (grim):  
“Or guarding something.”

KODA (quietly):  
“Then the scroll’s in there. Has to be.”

HANA (whispers, tense):  
“They haven’t seen us yet… right?” One of the monsters twitched, like a wire plucked tight.

BO (under breath):  
“Not yet. But we breathe too loud — that changes fast.”

They dropped to a crouch.

NIA:  
“They’re positioned like a fence. Like they were... planted.”

JIM (shaking his head):  
“It’s a trap. A big, slow, terrifying trap.”

ALISHA (anxiously):  
“Then what do we do? We can’t go around them.”

CLAIRE (suddenly, urgent):  
“The Guardian Tree. It’s close. Less than fifty meters east.”

REYAN (nodding fast):  
“It can buy us ten minutes. That’s all.”

JAKE (quiet):  
“Ten minutes might be everything.”

GRAYSON (already standing):  
“Then move. Fast and quiet. No talking after this.” He unslung his torch.

GRAYSON (gruff, eyes locked ahead):  
“If any of them move, don’t wait for instructions. Run.”

EXT. GUARDIAN TREE – NIGHT

The group circled the tree — the shield-like symbol glowing faintly under their touch.

ALEN (pleading):  
“Help us. Just once more.”

The wind shifted.

A faint light pulsed from the bark.

Then — the green guardian spirit rose from the roots, slow and spectral. It looked at them without a face… and began to move.

They followed behind, breath tight, torches gripped, adrenaline coiled like wire.

EXT. TREEHOUSE BASE – MINUTES LATER

The guardian stepped between them and the beasts. The monsters stopped — twitching, snarling, but unable to pass.

The group sprinted for the treehouse.

GRAYSON (shouting):  
“GO! Clock’s ticking!”

INT. TREEHOUSE – UPPER LEVEL

They burst inside — but what awaited was a nightmare of tangled root-like vines, crawling across the wood like veins. No scroll in sight.

JAKE (stunned):  
“What the hell is this?”

KINSEY:  
“It’s like the tree’s... feeding on something.”

CLAIRE:  
“Start cutting.”

Axes, knives, even broken planks — they tore at the twisted mess, hacking through, breath ragged.

6 minutes left. The floorboards trembled beneath them, creaking under the weight of footsteps and urgency. Inside the treehouse, the thick web of twisting vine-like branches still choked the walls — tangled, clawed, half-alive. Half the room still looked like a nest of bark and bramble.

Below, through slits in the wood, they could see it — monsters circling, slinking, pacing just outside the ring of firelight like shadows starving for flame to die.

Claire, Kinsey, Bo, Hana, and Tobey were stationed around the edges, pouring fuel carefully into grooves around the base. The fire spat and hissed where it touched. The smell of smoke thickened the air. It wasn’t protection — it was delay.

Inside, Reyan’s arms swung faster, hacking at the trails with a sharp, rusted hatchet. His shirt clung to him with sweat. The others searched in frenzied silence — shoving broken planks, flipping dusty mats, tearing through the debris.

2 MINUTES LEFT.

Kinsey turned from the window, wiping ash from her cheek.

KINSEY (urgently):  
“Nothing yet?! We’re running out of time!”

CLAIRE (tight, scanning the door):  
“If that shield drops, we’re done. We need to move!”

Jake stood at the base of a thicket of bark, breath ragged, fingers bloody from yanking at thorns.

JAKE:  
“Still nothing! This place is eating us alive!”

1 MINUTE.

Reyan’s eyes caught something. A glint. A shimmer.

REYAN (shouting):  
“Wait—there! I see it! Behind the wall!”

He dropped the hatchet, grabbed a splintered chair leg, and began battering the bramble with pure panic. The vines seemed to push back, clutching the scroll like a dying secret.

Then —  
A crack of light outside vanished.

BO (yelling):  
“GUYS! The Guardian—it's gone!”

Everyone froze.

The blue shimmer that once stood between them and death had blinked out like a flame in wind.

REYAN (shouting, frantic):  
“Just a second more! HOLD THEM!”

Claire grabbed the remaining bottle of fuel and doused the edge of the floor.

HANA (lighting the match):  
“Buy time. Just buy time.”

And then —  
A howl.

A whisper.

The air dropped ten degrees. The fire crackled louder — terrified.

NIA (from the edge, eyes wide):  
“New problem. She’s here. The Whisper.”

The group turned toward the opening — and there she was. Pale. Gliding. No eyes. No mouth. Just a glowing blur of a face, her light soaking into the floor like poison.

ALEN (stepping forward, eyes burning):  
“No. Not now. We’re this close.”

He turned to Jake and Nia, pulse hammering.

ALEN (resolute):  
“Split. Now. Fast. We buy them time.”

Jake nodded once. Nia was already moving.

JAKE (yelling):  
“HEY, GLOWFACE! WANNA RACE?!”

They bolted into the woods, splitting like dropped marbles on a floor. The Whisper didn’t scream. She moved.

Fast. Liquid. Deadly.

Back at the treehouse, Kinsey, Tobey, and Yvette began lighting the last of the fuel trails. The treehouse became a ring of rising flame. The monsters paced outside, flickering in and out of the shadows — eyes gleaming, claws twitching.

Then—

REYAN (from inside, breathless):  
“I GOT IT!”

He stood in the centre of the treehouse, scroll in hand. Dust-coated. Edges frayed. But real.

CLAIRE (panting):  
“What does it say?!”

Reyan unrolled it, hands trembling. The words stared back at him:

“The Game of Choice”

And beneath it — the first rule.

REYAN (whispering):  
“It’s real. The game... this whole thing. It’s real.” Reyan barely had time to unroll the scroll. The words were just beginning to make sense when—

VOICE (from the side window, panicked):  
"Uh—guys… I think these monsters aren’t as dumb as we hoped!”

Heads turned.

BO (shouting):  
“They’re skipping the fire! Climbing through the trees!”

Outside, flickering in the firelight, shadows writhed across the branches — monsters leaping from canopy to canopy, bypassing the burning trail entirely. The air tightened, the crackling of fire now joined by the sound of claws on bark.

HANA (horrified):  
“They’re heading straight for us!”

THUMP.  
A monster landed hard on the roof above. The ceiling groaned. Wood splintered.

CLAIRE (snapping):  
“Roof—GET DOWN!”

Another crashed through a side panel — then another at the door.

RAY (near the window):  
“They’re surrounding us—front and back!”

JAKE:  
“We’re boxed in!”

They backed into a corner, fire-lit stick in Claire’s trembling hand the only thing keeping the advancing monsters at bay.

GRAYSON (voice calm but steel-edged):  
“Burn the treehouse.”

CLAIRE (startled, breath sharp):  
“What?! How do we get out after that?!”

GRAYSON (grim):  
“That question only matters if we make it out alive.”

Suddenly — a monster launched from behind the door and latched onto Reyan, its thorned trails curling around his limbs. He screamed, dragged halfway into the floorboards.

CLAIRE (screaming):  
“Reyan!”

She darted forward, torch raised, forgetting herself — the flame flickered wildly, leaving gaps.

Another creature lunged through the breach left in her defense. The line broke.

GRAYSON didn’t hesitate. He grabbed the stick from her dropped hand, ripped the last fuel canister from his pack, and ignited it, flames blooming across the far wall.

GRAYSON (shouting):  
“EVERYONE OUT! WINDOW! MOVE!”

The fire ROARED. Monsters reeled, hissing, shrinking back.

People scrambled — Kinsey, Hana, Bo, Tobey — one by one diving through the narrow window as flames licked the walls.

Grayson grabbed Claire by the arm. She had Reyan slung over her shoulder, barely conscious. His face was pale, veins darkening. She half-dragged, half-lifted him to the edge.

CLAIRE (gasping):  
“He’s still alive! We can’t leave him!”

GRAYSON (gruff):  
“Then MOVE!”

She jumped, landing hard outside, rolling with Reyan.

Grayson turned back—

And froze.

KINSEY (from the window, panicking):  
“THE SCROLL—IT’S STILL INSIDE!”

Her eyes locked on it — lying at the base of the wall, corner already curling from flame.

Without hesitation, Kinsey turned back, ducking under a beam, feet sliding through ash.

CLAIRE (screaming):  
“NO!”

But she didn’t stop.

A monster dropped from above — claws reaching for her.

GRAYSON SAW IT.

He launched across the flames, shoulder-first, tackling Kinsey out of the way.

MONSTER’S TRAILS COILED AROUND HIM.

Kinsey tumbled free, scroll clenched in her fist — but Grayson hit the floor hard, vines now embedded in his arms and legs, siphoning fast. The smoke curled, black and choking. Screams echoed through the collapsing beams. Grayson was already lost to the fire when Claire had tried to haul Reyan out through the window. She’d made it halfway. The fire was behind her, the monsters closing in, and Reyan still limp in her arms — barely breathing. That’s when it happened.

Another monster, one of the larger ones, slithered down through the burning rafters, its long spined limbs snaking across the floorboards. Claire turned just in time to see it launch, catching her leg and yanking her backward — hard. She lost grip of Reyan.

CLAIRE (screaming):  
“No! Let go!” Her nails scraped splinters off the wooden floor as she tried to crawl back toward Reyan’s unconscious body. Trails wrapped around her arms, coiling like thorns, dragging her back into the inferno. From outside, Kinsey had just helped pull Reyan to safety through the window when she turned back and saw—

Claire. Still inside. And just behind her—

Grayson. No longer moving. The monsters weren’t just dragging them now. They were feeding. Blackened, veined tendrils latched to their bodies — pulsing. Throbbing. Pulling.

KINSEY (screaming):  
“NO—NOOO!” She lunged toward the burning frame.

Kinsey (shouting through tears):  
“Claire! Grayson!” But a strong arm caught her mid-step. HANA, face pale, voice cracked with horror:

HANA:  
“You can’t! They’re gone—KINSEY—STOP!” Inside, Claire's eyes were still open. Fixed. And full of fire. She saw Kinsey. And she smiled. Just for a moment. As if saying “It’s okay.” Then her mouth opened in a silent scream as her back arched and the monster’s tendrils sank deeper, draining everything from her.

Grayson’s body, barely visible through the smoke, shrunk into itself — skin collapsing, limbs hollowing, face cracking and caving in as if every last ounce of moisture had been ripped away. The flames consumed the room.

The monsters retreated — not in defeat… but full.

# Chapter 9: Recollecting Pieces

TREEHOUSE – GROUND LEVEL – SECONDS LATER

The group was in chaos. Water was thrown. Dirt. Blankets. Anything to put out the fire. Everyone rushed forward, dragging the last burning plank off the base. But it was too late. When the flames finally sputtered out and they climbed up to see… There were two figures slumped in the corner — mummified, drained, skin gray and flaking like ash. No faces left. No names. Just shells.

ALISHA (whispers):  
“Claire…”

No one spoke. Not even the wind. The forest, the monsters — the whole island seemed to pause, breathing in the weight of what had been lost.

Then—

Reyan stirred.

Still half-conscious. Confused.

KINSEY (through tears):  
“You’re alive… You’re alive, because of them.” The fire had long collapsed into smoking ash. But the silence it left behind screamed louder than flames ever could. Everyone stood still. Hollowed. Empty. The survivors barely spoke — not because they had nothing to say, but because no word could fill the hole.

Kinsey stood near the blackened tree, arms wrapped tightly around herself. Her face was frozen — not in shock, but in something worse. Memory. Trauma. A death she couldn’t unsee. She was still holding the scroll. But her fingers had forgotten that.

A few others sat in the dirt. Nia, Jake and Alen were still out somewhere in the woods — distracting the Whisper.

Hana wiped blood from her cheek. Bo crouched beside the smoldering wood, jaw tight. Yvette watched Kinsey — but said nothing.

HANA (gently):  
“Where’s the scroll?” Kinsey didn’t respond. Her eyes were lost in another world.

REYAN (moving toward her slowly):  
“Kinsey. Hey… we need it.” No answer. He reached out. Carefully, like approaching a sleepwalker, he took the half-burned parchment from her hands. Kinsey didn’t resist. She just… blinked. Still trembling.

EXT. CIRCLE OF SURVIVORS – MOMENTS LATER

They gathered in a loose circle, lantern light flickering between them, smoke still curling around the ruined treehouse. Reyan unrolled the scroll carefully. Much of it had been destroyed — edges charred, ink smudged.

But three things remained. At the top, burned but legible in bold, old-styled letters:

THE GAME OF CHOICE

Then, faded beneath it, barely hanging on—

RULE I

To enter and remain in the game, one must submit their previous identity.  
A new identity — chosen or assigned — shall be their name in the world within.

The group shifted uneasily. They all remembered how Alen had once vanished — and how Mira had brought him back. It wasn’t just a game mechanic. It was the cheat code.

RULE II

Only souls may leave the game zone.  
Beasts and bound spirits may not follow.  
(Grayson’s words echoed in their heads: “That’s why no one can see us. We’re not in our own bodies anymore.”)

Claire’s voice, now only a memory, rang quietly in Alen’s ears:  
“We’re ghosts to the world we left behind.”

RULE III

Each soul shall play among chosen or assigned roles.  
Roles may offer help, harm, or hindrance.

And beneath it, scrawled like a codex:

The Guardian – Summons a protective spirit. Will defend anyone nearby for ten minutes. Cannot attack.

The Healer – Restores life slowly. Only one person per night. Requires full rest.

The Trickster – Swaps identities between two people. Only once per night.

The Oracle – Knows the answer to one question. But no second chances.

The Warden – A trap for beasts. Holds them back. But once triggered… it cannot be undone.

The Soul Catcher – Catches and traps the souls.

The Hunter – Eat the souls and turns them into one of a kind.

There was nothing else. The rest was ash.

BO (gruffly):  
“That’s it?”

KINSEY (soft, shaken):  
“So this is it… This nightmare has rules. This horror show… was a game all along.”

HANA:  
“A game no one remembers joining.”

BO (gritting his jaw):  
“Who the hell writes rules like this?”

NIA:  
“Someone who doesn’t expect to lose.”

ALEN (quietly, staring at the scroll):  
“Well… this explains why no one remember our real names. We gave them up.”

TOBEY:  
“And Rule II... about the souls being allowed to leave the game zone…”  
(glances toward the smoldering trees)  
“Guess that’s why we wake up… and those trees don’t.”

Eyes turned again — to the two still forms on the ground.

JIM (barely a whisper):  
“And the monsters… they’re Hunters. Just like the scroll says.” The weight of grief hung in the clearing.

YVETTE (pointing faintly at the scroll):  
“Look. The Healer. It says it can bring one back.” Heads snapped up.

REYAN (urgent):  
“Then we use it. Now. We save Claire.”

ALISHA (stepping forward):  
“No. We bring back Grayson.”

Tension tightened in the air instantly.

REYAN (shocked):  
“What? Claire just saved me. She held that fire back while I was unconscious! She—”

ALISHA (cutting him off, trembling):  
“Grayson jumped into the flames to pull Kinsey out. He gave us this scroll — he gave us this chance!”

KINSEY (in the middle, still shaken):  
“They both… they both did.”

REYAN:  
“She died for me. And I’m not going to let that mean nothing.”

ALISHA:  
“And what about Grayson? Jake needs him. We all need him. You weren’t the only one who lost something.”

TOBEY (stepping between):  
“Guys… the Healer only works once.”

CLAIRE’S NAME was a whisper on some lips. GRAYSON’S on others.

The group stood in a broken semi-circle, heavy with silence. Some stared at the ground. Others couldn’t tear their eyes from the Healer Tree in the distance, glowing faintly with its eerie pulse.

KINSEY (softly):  
“They can turn… any moment now.”

HANA (nodding):  
“Then we decide. Now.”

REYAN (resolute):  
“We vote.”

He looked around, eyes glassy but determined.

REYAN:  
“Everyone here gets one vote. Say the name you want back. That’s it.”

They nodded, solemnly. One by one, the names began to fall.

VOTING

TOBEY (quiet):  
“Grayson.”

HANA (without hesitation):  
“Claire.”

KODA (muttering):  
“Claire.”

BO (arms crossed, thinking hard):  
“…Grayson.”

YVETTE (gazing at the treehouse ruins):  
“Claire.”

JIM(after a pause):  
“Grayson.” We need him as a leader.

REYAN (firm):  
“Claire.”

ALISHA (eyes wet):  
“Grayson.”

A beat.

They looked at each other.  
Four votes Grayson. Four votes Claire.

All eyes turned to the last one standing still.

KINSEY.

She froze. She hadn’t spoken. She hadn’t moved since it happened. Her knuckles were white from gripping the half-burned scroll.

KINSEY (softly, breathless):  
“He… he saved me.”

A beat.

“But so did she.”

The group waited, each face drawn tight with the weight of her choice.

SCENE SWITCH – DEEP FOREST – NIGHT

ALEN, JAKE, and NIA stood panting behind a jagged tree outcropping. Dirt smeared across their faces. Branches in their hair. But they were alive.

JAKE (catching breath):  
“Okay… no more secret sprint races with death, got it?”

NIA (dryly):  
“I don’t know. I kind of liked outrunning a horror entity.”

ALEN (relieved):  
“She’s not following.”

A pause. The air still. No monsters. No whisper. Just wind through the trees.

JAKE:  
“We bought them time. That’s what matters.”

NIA:  
“You think they’ve made it back?”

ALEN (nods):  
“Let’s hope so.”

JAKE (sighs):  
“Well then, no point hanging around.”  
“See you on the other side.”

And in that moment—  
One by one—  
They dropped to the forest floor.

Out cold. Gone from the dream.  
Back to wherever this started…  
While one name still hung in the air,  
Waiting to be chosen.

Jake blinked awake, coughing softly as dust tickled the back of his throat. Cold air brushed against his skin—real, grounded, heavy with salt from the sea. Beside him, Alen and Nia stirred, blinking into the dawn. They were lying near the house—the same clearing where they’d last fallen asleep. Milo and Ray were still asleep.

But something else was wrong. The others were already awake… and dead quiet. Most were seated in a wide circle, bodies slouched, eyes glassy—not from sleep, but from something heavier. Something that had drained them from the inside out. Kinsey was curled against the porch steps, arms around her knees, face ghost-white. And there, at the centre of them all—  
Claire. Wrapped in a tattered blanket, she was trembling violently, knees pulled in, back hunched. She didn’t look up. Didn’t speak. Just shook. Alen stepped forward slowly, eyes scanning the frozen crowd.

ALEN  
(quiet, almost afraid)  
“What… happened here?” No one answered. But the silence was loud enough. Jake sat up, breath sharp. He scanned the circle, searching for one person. His voice cracked.

JAKE  
“…Where’s Grayson?” No response. No one even looked at him. Then, Alisha— Her hand covered her mouth. Shoulders tightened. She turned away as the first sob broke out of her. Jake’s stomach dropped. That sound… told him everything. He looked around once more, slower now, eyes wide with disbelief. Then… it hit him. The truth. He didn’t fall. He folded—like a house pulled apart at the centre. No tears. Not yet. Just silence.

Grayson was gone.

The fire had died. The lanterns had dimmed. But it wasn’t the dark that quieted them. It was absence. Jake sat alone in the corner of the living room, back against the wall, arms resting on his knees, face blank. No tears. No movement. Just stillness—like grief had hollowed him out from the inside. The rest of the group lingered in broken pieces around the room. Milo and Ray still hadn’t woken up—signs of the Whisper’s mark. Kinsey was crumpled by the fireplace, face buried in her hands, shaking like it was her fault. Like she’d pushed Grayson into the fire herself.

No one was talking about escape anymore.  
No one even brought it up. It didn’t matter.

Alisha walked quietly toward Jake. She didn’t speak. Didn’t offer comfort. Just sat down beside him. They sat in silence. Until—

JAKE  
(voice raw, like gravel dragged across concrete)  
“Just a night ago… we were here. Dancing.  
Kinsey was arguing with Tobey about what counted as real food.  
Claire was teaching Koda how to waltz on broken tiles.  
Grayson was leaning against that door frame… pretending he wasn’t listening.”

(he paused, voice thinner now)

“…And I remember thinking—God, this is the first time I’ve felt okay in weeks.  
And now…” His head dropped. Shoulders shook.

JAKE  
“I don’t even know if getting out means anything anymore.” Alisha didn’t try to answer. She just leaned into him, arms folding around his frame like she could hold him together with just that. And finally—

Jake broke. The sob hit like a crack in stone. Then another. Then another. Alisha held him tighter.

ALISHA  
(whispering)  
“No need to make it funny this time…  
You can cry.”

INT. SIDE ROOM – SAME TIME

Reyan sat across from Claire, who was tucked under a blanket, knees pulled into her chest. Her hands trembled against the fabric. Her eyes were open, but far. Distant.

REYAN  
(quiet, gentle)  
“They’re gone. The monsters are gone. You’re safe now.” She didn’t answer. She wasn’t crying. She was beyond crying.

REYAN  
“You saved me… again.  
You were the one person who always ran toward danger.” Still nothing. So he stayed there.  
No promises. No plans. Just presence. And in that silence—two people sat, both broken, both still breathing. But just barely.

The light was soft. Dust hung in the air like breath that hadn’t left.

Kinsey sat alone on the floor, her back against the wall, knees drawn to her chest. The scroll — now half-burned — lay beside her, untouched. She hadn’t moved in an hour. The weight on her chest wasn’t just grief. It was choice. It was the echo of a vote.

Then — footsteps.

JIM  
(grinning awkwardly, hands in pockets)  
“Well, look who we’ve got here. The one who risked her neck and saved the scroll.” Kinsey didn’t even glance up.

ALEN  
(sitting beside her)  
“Rumour says… she didn’t even hesitate.”

KINSEY  
(quietly)  
“And it still cost him. Grayson.” Her voice cracked. She looked away.  
“I chose. And now he’s gone.” A silence passed. Heavy, but not judgmental.

JIM  
(sincerely)  
“He would’ve been proud of you. We all are. You didn’t freeze. You acted.”

ALEN  
“And between us… we all know what mattered most to Grayson wasn’t saving himself. It was finding a way out. For all of us.” Kinsey blinked. Her breath caught.

JIM  
“And if he had to choose between him and Claire? C’mon. We both know who he’d pick.” Alen nodded.

ALEN  
“You just made the call he would’ve made. You honoured him, Kinsey. Don’t carry this like it’s a sin.” Kinsey didn’t answer. But her shoulders loosened just enough. She exhaled like she’d been holding her breath since the fire. That’s when Jake and Alisha stepped in — quiet, unsure. For a beat, the five of them just… looked at each other. Survivors. Barely. Then Kinsey stood. Her eyes met Jake’s.

KINSEY  
(voice low)  
“I’m sorry. I know he mattered to you.” Jake stared back, hollow but steady.

JAKE  
(soft)  
“You had to choose. And you did what you thought was right.  
No hard feelings.” (beat)

“But I want something. From all of you.” The room went still.

JAKE  
“Promise me… none of you die on me moving forward.” It wasn’t a joke. There was no smirk, no edge of sarcasm. Just a boy who had finally run out of people to lose. One by one — they nodded. Jim. Alen. Kinsey. Alisha. No promises in this world were safe. But this one was sacred. They stood together — not because the fear was gone. But because the bond was stronger. They had lost a protector. But they’d found each other...

Reyan stood in the centre of the room — lit only by a wavering lantern, faces around him dimmed in orange glow. But his voice, when it came, cut through like steel drawn in silence.

REYAN (steadier than ever)  
“I’ve spent too long watching from the side. Holding back. Hoping someone else would fix this. Hoping this nightmare would… end on its own.” His eyes met every face in the room — Kinsey’s guilt. Alisha’s grief. Jake’s hollow stare. “But this place doesn’t let you sit still. If you don’t fight — it takes. It turns you into one of those things… or worse, leaves you staring at the bodies of the ones who did.” A beat. He stepped forward.  
“Grayson died with his eyes open — fighting. Claire gave her life trying to pull someone else out of the fire. That’s what this place fears. Not fire. Not force.”

(he points at his chest)

“It fears people who refuse to give up. People who don’t run. People who stand. Together.” The room grew tighter, shoulders lifting, breath resetting. “We’re not victims anymore. We’re not just trying to survive. We’re ending this game.” His voice grew deeper. Stronger. Conviction wrapped in grief and flame. “So if you're tired of losing people… if you’re tired of being scared… if you’re tired of forgetting who you were — get up. Because the island's not giving us another chance.” He paused.

REYAN (softer now)  
“This is the last one. And I swear to you — if we move now… if we go back in with everything we’ve got… we don’t just escape.”

(he looks at the scorched scroll in his hands)  
“We win.”

KINSEY (softly)  
“So… what’s the plan?”

ALISHA  
“The scroll gave us some rules. Not all. But if this really is a game…”

JIM  
“Then someone built it. Designed it. Left rules.”

CLAIRE (nodding slowly)  
“And that oracle tree. The one with the eye symbol. It knows the truth. One question, right?”

TOBEY  
“Then that’s what we do. We ask the right one.”

BO (gruff)  
“But this time, we prepare. Real preparation. No more luck and lighters.”

HANA  
“I’ve got more fuel stockpiled in the woodshed. We can fill bottles.”

YVETTE  
“And I carved new flare markers. We’ll never get lost again.” Everyone began to move. Slowly. With purpose. They packed gear. Checked supplies. Layered with silence — not fear, but determination.

# Chapter 10: I Missed You

One by one they came back to the dream world and started their final arc. The group gathered beneath the ancient, gnarled limbs of the Oracle Tree — a towering figure of bark and age, its trunk etched with time itself. The leaves trembled with a hum, and as Alen placed his hand upon it, a low, echoing creak pulsed through the forest like the breath of a thousand-year-old titan.

Light flickered from its symbol — the closed eye, now glowing with a thin slit of gold — and a voice followed. Not spoken, not heard — felt. As if the tree whispered to every bone in their bodies.

ORACLE TREE (resonant, ancient):  
RULE IV – Death in the Dream World = Death in Reality

If a soul is killed in the game world, their real-world tree dies.

They cannot return. Some transform into hunters (monsters).

Permanent death.

A soul will remain safe in their assigned identities.

RULE V – The Whisper

The Whisper traps souls by touching them and saying their current identity.

Once caught, a soul is removed from the game world and locked.

RULE VI – Soul Recovery

“To release a trapped soul, you must reach them in the place they’re held…”

Say their in-game name aloud.

If done successfully, the soul is released back into the game world.

RULE VII – The Endgame

“The game ends only when:  
A) The Soul Catcher captures all souls.  
B) All souls reach the starting point and then return to their respected identities.”

As the final word echoed into silence, Alen clutched his head, stumbling backward.

ALEN (strained, gasping):  
“No—no, I… I remember…” His knees buckled. Claire caught him.

CLAIRE:  
“Alen? What is it?” But his breath was shallow. Wild. His eyes darted.

JIM:  
“What the hell is going on?”

NIA (quietly):  
“He’s remembering…” The others stood frozen as realization churned through the group.

TOBEY:  
“So… we’re souls. That thing — the Whisper — she’s the catcher. She takes names.”

HANA:  
“And the beasts. They’re the hunters. They finish what she starts.”

KINSEY (voice shaking):  
“And we — we’ve got to find the ones she caught… speak their names… and lead everyone back to the beginning.”

REYAN:  
“Only then does the game end.” A stillness followed — sharp, brittle. But before anyone could speak again, Alen stood up abruptly, eyes wide in panic. And then — he ran.

CLAIRE:  
“Alen! Wait—!”

REYAN:  
“Get him—he knows something!” The group burst into motion, sprinting after him. Just as they reached the forest’s edge — a growl thundered from behind. From the dark, the monsters emerged. Twisting. Hungry.

JIM:  
“Company—! We’ve got company!” Chaos exploded. Flames were lit. Bottles hurled. Yvette screamed as one lunged near her and Ray tackled it back. The group split in all directions — pure survival mode.

JAKE (to ALISHA):  
“Go! I’ll catch him—!”

ALISHA:  
“No—I’m coming too!” Together, they broke off after Alen — disappearing through the thickets. But then — a whistle. Low. Melodic. Cold. The Whisper stepped into view, ghost-like through the trees. She turned — and saw Jake and Alisha. For a moment, everything stopped. She moved like wind — silent, fast. Jake and Alisha stood frozen, just feet apart — the distance between them, nothing to her.

ALISHA (whispering):  
“Run.” They exchanged a glance. No fear. Just understanding.

JAKE:  
“Split. Now.”

Alisha tore through the trees — heart pounding, breath sharp. Branches scratched past her arms like claws in the dark. She didn’t stop — not until she realized: Silence. She turned. No footsteps. No shadows. No Whisper. She slowed, eyes scanning the trees behind her.

ALISHA (soft, confused):  
“…Jake?” Then — a touch. A hand — cold. Calm. Soft. Descending gently onto her shoulder. She froze.

WHISPER (just behind her ear):  
“Alisha…”

But nothing happened. She didn’t vanish. No fading. No pain. Just stillness. Alisha blinked — her breath fogging in the cold. She looked around… and then down. A faint mark on the forest floor. Twisted roots, almost knotted into a spiral. The Trickster Tree — where they’d made eye contact before splitting.

Both of them had touched it. Together. The identity swap. She inhaled sharply — realization hitting like lightning.

ALISHA (softly, to herself):  
“Somehow… her presence felt so comfortable. And… nice.” She looked up — but the Whisper was already gone. Gone like wind.

EXT. DEEPER WOODS – SAME TIME

The rest of the group was in full combat — torches swinging, fire circling, bottles cracking, ash and embers rising like stars from hell.

One of the beasts lunged toward Tobey — only to be knocked sideways by Bo’s makeshift spear. Hana blasted another back with a flare. Nia shouted a warning just as Koda rolled from under a creature’s lunge.

JIM (gritting teeth):  
“Where the hell are Jake and Alisha?!” Then — from the tree line — they appeared.

JAKE (panting):  
“Miss us?”

ALISHA (smirking):  
“Just had a little meet-and-greet with the Whisper.” Eyes widened. They were unharmed.

CLAIRE (relieved):  
“You okay?” They both nodded.

REYAN (serious):  
“Where’s Alen? Do you know where he went?”

JAKE (breathless):  
“Last we saw him, he was heading toward…”

ALISHA:  
“…the treehouse.” A tense silence. Then everyone turned.

REYAN (urgent):  
“Then what the hell are we waiting for?” They moved — fast. The treehouse loomed in the distance, smoke still curling faintly from its charred roof. But it wasn’t the flames that stopped them cold. It was the figure standing inside — alone. Alen. Frozen. Still. His back to them. Arms limp at his sides.

The group approached slowly — breaths ragged, boots crunching over ash. The treehouse, now a skeletal frame of its former self, stood in ghostly silence. Embers still smoldered along the edges. Inside it… stood Alen. Motionless. Framed by the half-burned window, his figure was silhouetted against the flickering orange glow behind him.

CLAIRE (hushed):  
“There he is…”

JIM (louder, panicked):  
“Alen!” No reply. He didn’t turn. Didn’t move. His eyes were fixed on something far away… across the blackened clearing. Then they saw it. A ripple in the air — slow, elegant. The Whisper. Gliding toward him. One mile. Maybe less.

REYAN (shouting):  
“ALEN! RUN!” Still nothing. Then — a single tear slipped down Alen’s cheek. He turned his head slightly. Just enough for the moonlight to catch the side of his face. And he smiled.

ALEN (quietly):  
“I’m sorry.” The Whisper was steps away now — reaching toward him. Her hand extended, fingers poised to brush his shoulder. But the moment they touched — Alen didn’t vanish. Instead — he spoke. Soft. Certain.

ALEN:  
“Alice.”

And in that instant —

The Whisper’s form trembled. Like a thread being pulled from silk. Her hand froze. Her eyes widened. She opened her mouth — but no sound came. And then — like smoke breaking apart in wind — she vanished. Gone. No scream. No burst. Just a silent, clean dissolve. Alen collapsed to his knees. Behind him, the group stood stunned, breathless — paralyzed by what they’d just witnessed.

ALISHA (whispers):  
“…What just happened?”

Smoke still clung to the wind. The moon bled pale light across the clearing. No one spoke. The silence was the loudest thing now.

Alen stood alone.

Tears slid quietly down his face. Not the kind born of panic — the kind that had waited years to fall. His shoulders trembled, not from cold… but from memory.

KINSEY (soft, breaking the stillness)  
“So… may we know whatever it is you’ve been holding back?” Alen didn’t respond right away. His voice came slow — like it had to be pulled from some deep, locked place inside him.

ALEN  
“Her name… was Alice.” He looked toward the woods where the Whisper had vanished.

ALEN (voice low, cracking)  
“She was my little sister.” Everyone froze. The forest suddenly seemed smaller — tighter — like it was listening.

ALEN  
“It was about seven, maybe eight years ago. We were just kids. A dozen of us — me, Alice, and some of our childhood friends. We’d come to this island for fun. Just like you did.” He pointed vaguely in the direction of the temple.

ALEN  
“We found this scroll. It was buried under the roots of an old tree in the temple garden. We thought it was a joke. A game. So we picked roles. I was a soul. Alice… she chose to be the Soul Catcher.” He swallowed hard.

ALEN  
“We followed the rules. Used the names from the scroll. Called each other like that for hours. Laughing. Playing. It was fun… until one of us vanished.” (beat) “Then another. And another.” Alen’s hands clenched into fists.

ALEN  
“I started disappearing too. But Alice… she figured it out. The first rule. To enter and REMAIN in the game… you must surrender your identity.” (voice cracks) “She said my real name. Out loud. And just like that… I got out of the game.” His eyes were wet, unfocused.

ALEN  
“But the game took her instead.”

(softly)  
“I forgot her. My own sister. She cried. She screamed my name… but I couldn’t remember her. I couldn’t even see her.” He looked up — toward the stars that looked too far away now.

ALEN  
“She became… that. The Whisper. And my friends — they didn’t die. Not really. They’re here. They’ve always been here.” He gestured around them — at the shadows, the twisted trees.

ALEN  
“We walk past them. Every day. Just like others walk past us.” No one breathed. Then Alen turned toward Jake, Alisha, Jim, Kinsey — his old friends.

ALEN (quietly)  
“I remember you now. All of you.” They didn’t speak — but in their eyes, something lit. Recognition. Belonging. A lifetime reawakened. But then — the silence turned heavy again. Alen lowered his gaze.

ALEN  
“But we’re not leaving. Not yet.” The others looked at him, startled.

ALEN (resolute)  
“Not with the rest of our family still trapped here.” One by one, they nodded. No words needed. They’d found what mattered most. And they knew what came next.

FADE TO BLACK.

EXT. NIGHT SKY – STARS MOVE QUIETLY

And they awoke — ready to return to the game. Alen’s eyes snapped open. Before anyone else could react—he was already running.

KINSEY  
“Alen?!”

JIM  
“Where the hell is he going?!”

They chased after him — feet pounding through fallen leaves, dodging low branches, brushing past the charred memories of what once stood. And then — they saw him.

INT. HALF-BURNED TREEHOUSE

Alen dropped to his knees. There she was. Curled up on the scorched wooden floor. Sleeping. Older now. Her frame still delicate. Her hair a tangled, faded memory of the girl she once was. Her face—peaceful.

ALEN (whispering, breathless)  
“Alice…” His voice cracked. Tears streamed down his face, unashamed.

ALEN  
“You’re here… You’re actually here.” He knelt beside her, hands trembling just inches away from her shoulder. She didn’t move. Couldn’t see him. Couldn’t hear him.

ALEN (whispering)  
“I’m so sorry I forgot you…” His fingers brushed her hair, like a ghost too afraid to be real.

ALEN (voice trembling)  
“I’m glad to have you back. But not like this.” The others had caught up now — standing quietly at the edge of the doorway, watching in still silence. Alen gently gathered her in his arms — like something sacred, something lost and finally found. He turned, nodded once — and walked.

EXT. TEMPLE – SHORTLY AFTER

The monk stood at the steps, sweeping the earth in long, slow strokes. He didn’t look up. But he paused when he heard the soft footsteps… and saw the girl lying outside the temple. To him, she was just a child. A girl who must’ve wandered from somewhere. Alone. Dazed. He stepped forward, gently took her into his arms — though he couldn’t see Alen standing nearby. Alen stepped back, watching.

ALEN (softly, to himself)  
“Take care of her… Just for a little while longer.” The monk guided Alice inside the temple. And Alen turned back to his friends. Eyes dried. Spine straight.

ALEN (firm).

# Chapter 11: Let’s Finish This.

The last lantern burned low as they all gathered in the living room — the floor scattered with empty food wrappers, weapons, broken sticks, and memories they didn’t ask for. The air was heavy with grief. And purpose.

REYAN stood at the center, pacing. Alen, distant, stared into the cold fireplace, his fingers curled tightly around the edge of the table.

REYAN  
(urgent)  
“If the scroll’s right… if the end needs every soul — we need answers. Fast.”

KINSEY sat in a corner, arms wrapped around her knees.

KINSEY  
“And we need names. All of them. Every soul she caught.”

ALISHA  
“How do we even know who’s left? Some people we didn’t even meet — they vanished before we woke up here.”

JAKE  
(rubbing his face)  
“If even one of them is missing when we end it… it won’t end.”

Silence. Until…

ALEN  
(quietly)  
“I remember where it started. The treehouse. That’s where we read the scroll the first time.”

Everyone turned. The weight of the truth sinking in.

REYAN  
“Then that’s the starting point.”

HANA  
(skeptical)  
“And what about the trapped ones? Where did you keep them — back then?”

ALEN  
(pained)  
“There was a place. Near the temple. We... we called it the Quiet Corner. We thought it was pretend. I think… it’s real.”

Before the conversation could continue—

FLASH.

A surge of cold. Blackness. Wind without air.

Suddenly, all of them were standing in the Dream World.

No warning. No sleep.

CLAIRE (softly):  
“...what the hell?”

The world shimmered around them — trees glowing with a faint silver mist, the ground humming like a heartbeat.

And then — they were back. In the real world. As if it hadn’t happened.

NIA  
(breathless)  
“That— that wasn’t sleep. We didn’t lie down.”

TOBEY  
(shaking)  
“Was it the game? Is it glitching or something?”

JIM  
“Is this in the rules? I didn’t see that in the scroll—”

ALISHA  
(quietly, half to herself)  
“No… there was nothing about this.”

Then the worst thought hit.

HANA  
(whispering)  
“What if… we’re stuck?” A pause.

YVETTE  
(soft, scared)  
“What if it’s starting to collapse? Like the game knows it’s invalid without the Soul Catcher… so it’s trying to force us in?”

REYAN  
“Or worse — maybe we’re no longer in control of when we enter. That means… any second, we could drop back in.”

KINSEY  
(panicked)  
“You mean— this could be permanent? We could get pulled in again and never come back?!”

JIM  
“Wait— so even when we’re awake, we’re not safe anymore?” The room spun with fear.

ALEN  
(quietly)  
“It always needed an exit. But now… maybe we broke the game when we freed the Catcher.”

REYAN  
(stepping forward, voice sharp, grounding them)  
“No. Then we fix it. That means no more waiting. No more mistakes.” His voice cut the fear like a blade.

REYAN (CONT'D):  
“Alen, you said the trap was near the temple?”

ALEN  
(nods)  
“Yeah. I think It was somewhere around there”

REYAN  
“Then we move. Now. If the game’s collapsing… we end it before it takes any more of us.”

NIA  
(flatly)  
“And if we fail?”

REYAN  
(steady, fearless)  
“Then we fail trying.” The forest was quieter than usual. Too quiet. The kind that made every twig snap feel like a scream. The group marched fast, nerves tight. Each face lit by cold torchlight, each mind on fire with fear and hope.

JIM (whispering):  
“So… anyone? Guesses where they might be held? The ones Whisper caught?”

BO:  
“Could be the caves below the temple. Or that half-buried prayer room?”

CLAIRE (shaking her head):  
“None of that made sense last time. We walked every inch. Nothing felt... wrong enough.”

ALISHA (voice tight):  
“Maybe that’s the point. Maybe it’s hidden in plain sight.”

REYAN (stopping the group):  
“Alright. Eyes on. We’ve got one shot.” He turned, looking at all of them.

REYAN (steady):  
“Here’s the plan. We split into two groups. One heads toward the temple. That’s the rescue crew. You find our people. You say their names. You free them.” A pause.

REYAN (continuing):  
“Group two heads to the Warden tree. You wait for the signal. Once we’ve freed everyone—we light it up. The Warden will trap the monsters. That gives us the window to end this.”

KINSEY (worried):  
“Hold on. Even if we find where they’re kept… we need to know everyone’s name. All of them.” A brief silence. Then realization struck.

JAKE (breathless):  
“Milo. His journal. He wrote everything down.” All heads turned to Claire.

CLAIRE (reaching into her bag):  
“I have it.” She pulled the battered, soot-smudged journal free. It trembled slightly in her grip.

CLAIRE (firm):  
“And he listed every single person that vanished.” Hope returned. Faint, fragile, but burning.

REYAN:  
“Good. That’s everything. Now we move.” They began dividing gear, lighting torches, syncing watches. Then— Reyan stopped Alen at the edge of the group.

REYAN (quietly):  
“Hey. If something happens… if this goes sideways... don’t be a hero. Just save your friends. You five — you’re rare.” A long look passed between them. Grief behind it. And trust.

ALEN (nods):  
“I know. You be careful too.”

REYAN (with a tired smile):  
“I always am. Just usually bad at it.” They slapped hands — firm, fast.

🌑 TEAM A – Temple Rescue Crew

(Goal: Find the trapped souls and free them)

Reyan (lead)

Claire

Alen

Kinsey

Bo

Hana

Jim

🔥 TEAM B – Distraction + Warden Activation Squad

(Goal: Lure and delay the beasts, then activate the Warden Tree once the rescue begins)

Jake (lead)

Alisha

Tobey

Koda

Yvette

Nia

EXT. TEMPLE PATH – NIGHT – TEAM A

Reyan’s group weaved through thick vines and crumbling prayer stones. The old temple loomed ahead — tall, dead silent, broken at the edges by age and rot.

BO (muttering):  
“Why does this feel too still?”

CLAIRE (hand on her blade):  
“Because it is.” Suddenly — a sharp clang from the right. They turned just as a beast hurled itself from the dark, colliding with Bo. It screeched, claws raking at his arm before Reyan shot a flare directly at its face.

REYAN:  
“Fall back! Tight formation!”

ALEN (panting):  
“Don’t stop. The others are counting on us.”

KINSEY (shaky but focused):  
“Right. Names. Say them when we find them. Say them loud.” They pressed deeper into the temple’s shadow.

EXT. FOREST EDGE – TEAM B

JAKE’S group reached the Warden Tree — an ancient, claw-marked oak surrounded by dead roots. The air was different here. Thicker. Expectant.

YVETTE (hushed):  
“It’s watching us.”

ALISHA (checking her lighter):  
“Good. Because we’re about to wake it up.” Suddenly — snapping branches to the east. Then screams. Not human.

KODA (wide-eyed):  
“They’re circling. Surrounding us.”

TOBEY (grim):  
“We don’t wait. We lure them now. Then we hold till they call us.” Jake took a deep breath. Raised his torch.

JAKE (shouting):  
“HEY! COME GET US YOU TREE-HUGGING DEMONS!” Three monsters burst through the trees. Flames lit the night. Screams met fire. And the group scattered—each member part of a deadly dance to survive just long enough.

ALISHA (to Jake):  
“You better hope they do call soon.”

INT. TEMPLE RUINS – NIGHT – TEAM A

The ancient temple groaned beneath the weight of time and pressure. Stones shifted. Somewhere far behind them, the Guardian Tree’s light flared against the dark—holding back the beasts clawing to reach them.

REYAN (checking watch):  
“We’ve got maybe six minutes. Move.” They fanned out. Claire, eyes scanning every sacred corner, whispered:

CLAIRE:  
“Anyone else feel like we’ve been here before?”

KINSEY (grim):  
“Déjà vu’s just trauma on repeat.”

CLAIRE (shaking her head):  
“No. Not just that. I remember standing here… scared. Like something started here.” They rushed through broken altars and crumbling passageways.

ALEN (panting, checking behind a statue):  
“Try saying names. Anywhere that feels wrong.” BO stepped into the centre chamber and called out:

BO (loudly):  
“Milo!” Silence. The shadows didn’t flinch.

HANA (from across the room):  
“Ray!” Still nothing. The clock ticked. The Guardian’s humming outside started to waver. And then — Claire froze. Her eyes locked on a dusty stone box, embedded near the altar.

CLAIRE (breath catching):  
“Wait…” She stepped closer, brushing ash off the lid.

CLAIRE (quietly):  
“This is where we dropped our wishes. That first day…”

REYAN:  
“Yeah. I remember. The monk called it a ritual.”

KINSEY (tilting her head):  
“To enter… one must submit their identity…”

ALEN (mind racing):  
“Which means… that was the moment we entered the game.” Everything clicked.

CLAIRE:  
“And that’s why the monk’s unaffected. He never played. Never submitted his name.”

REYAN (hope surging):  
“Then this—this box. This has to be it.” They all gathered close. Claire opened the box slowly. Inside — only dust, ashes, and fragments of paper — nearly all turned to time.

HANA (urgently):  
“Try the names. Call them.” They began:

CLAIRE:  
“Milo.”

KINSEY:  
“Ray.” The names echoed off the cold stone… But nothing happened. No pulse. No shimmer. No awakening. Just… silence.

KINSEY (stepping back, heart sinking):  
“No… this has to work.” A sharp howl cut the night. The Guardian’s glow flickered outside. Time was running out.

EXT. FOREST PERIMETER – NIGHT – GROUP B

The fire circle around Jake, Alisha, Nia, Tobey, and Yvette crackled low, no longer roaring—just breathing embers. Beyond the flickering glow, the soul-eaters stood in the dark, dozens of them, just waiting for the last flame to die.

JAKE (breathing hard):  
“This is it. Fire’s fading.”

NIA (loading her slingshot, grim):  
“No signal from the others. No flare, no sound. Nothing.”

TOBEY (clenching his jaw):  
“They’re either late… or dead.” A beat.

JAKE (quiet, urgent):  
“We can’t hold this line. Not like this.” He looked around at the thinning flames and exhausted faces.

JAKE (decisive):  
“We pull back. Stay close to the temple, just out of reach. When the signal comes, we sprint back. Got it?” They nodded. One by one, they doused the torches, moving like shadows into the trees.

INT. TEMPLE – NIGHT – GROUP A

The Guardian Tree’s light outside vanished like a dying star. And with it, the monsters began pouring in again, screeching and clawing their way through the cracks in the stone.

REYAN (gritting his teeth):  
“C’mon, THINK! Where are they kept?! We’re out of time!” They ran through the stone chambers in chaos.

REYAN (to Bo):  
“Move, man! No time for sloth-mode or you’ll be the next forest ornament!”

KINSEY (skidding to a stop, wide-eyed):  
“WAIT—THE STAIRS!” Everyone stopped.

HANA (panting):  
“What?!”

KINSEY (breathless, urgent):  
“The stairs of the temple. They’re... wrong. Remember, Alen said it felt higher than usual the first day? I felt it too. There’s something underneath!” The monsters let out another deafening roar, closing in.

REYAN (grabbing his knife):  
“Alright! Hana, Bo, Jim—you’re with me. We hold them.”

CLAIRE (stepping to Reyan):  
“You’re not dying today.” Without waiting, she leaned forward and kissed him. Fierce. Sharp. Real.

REYAN (softly, like a promise):  
“Save them.”

INT. TEMPLE – STAIRWELL – CLAIRE, KINSEY, ALEN

CLAIRE, Kinsey, and Alen sprinted down the staircase into darkness lit only by dying torchlight. At the base—a circular chamber with an echo that didn’t quite match reality.

CLAIRE:  
“This has to be it.”

KINSEY (pulling the scroll of names):  
“Let’s test it.” She stepped into the centre, her voice trembling—but strong.

KINSEY:  
“Milo!” A beat. Then—a pulse of light exploded from the ground.  
A figure began to reform in the glow—confused, gasping.

MILO (blinking):  
“Wha…?”

ALEN (realizing):  
“She’s right… This is it. The entry point. The game’s heartbeat.”

KINSEY (eyes shining):  
“She kept them all here…” Claire rushed over, helping Milo to his feet.

CLAIRE:  
“Good to have you back.” They flipped open Milo’s journal—names upon names written meticulously.

KINSEY:  
“Let’s bring them all back.” They moved fast. Speaking name after name. Each time—light pulsed. A soul reformed. Dozens.

KINSEY:  
“Forty-seven… forty-eight…”

ALEN (reading):  
“Ray!”

LIGHT.  
He gasped to life. One by one, nearly fifty souls returned, blinking into existence. Then—CLAIRE pulled out her sidearm.

CLAIRE:  
“Time to signal them.” She raised the pistol—fired straight up into the temple dome.  
The echo ripped through the woods like thunder. The forest burned gold as the sun dipped behind the trees. The group climbed the final ridge—silent, winded, and wary. The clearing where Reyan and the others had fought… was empty.

CLAIRE stepped forward slowly, scanning for signs — broken branches, tracks, anything. But there was nothing.

CLAIRE (softly, trembling):  
“…No…”  
KINSEY, pale and stiff, stood frozen behind her.

ALEN (suddenly):  
“They must’ve run. I know Reyan — he wouldn’t let them die here.”

MILO nodded, fists clenched.  
RAY wiped sweat and ash from his brow, whispering,  
“Then we end this for them. Wherever they are.”

CLAIRE turned, gathering them around.

CLAIRE:  
“We go to the treehouse. From there, we split to our own trees.” A pause.

KINSEY:  
“But… do we even remember which ones were ours?” The group exchanged nervous glances.

CLAIRE (reaching into her bag):  
“…Grayson did.”

She unfolded a ragged sheet — torn, burned at the edges, but unmistakably detailed. A map. Symbols marked the circle. Trees numbered. Initials. Names. The group leaned in slowly, hearts pounding.

KINSEY (a whisper):  
“Even the ones we lost…” They all stood still. The world went quiet for a moment.

JIM:  
“He was always five steps ahead.”

TOBEY:  
“Still keeping us alive even after…”

CLAIRE (shaking, but resolute):  
“Everyone, check your mark. Find your place.” They each silently pressed fingers to the map. Each circle. Each line. A silent vow to finish what was started. But the silence didn’t last.

A BRUTAL HOWL echoed through the trees. The ground quaked. Birds scattered. From the shadows — eyes. Dozens of them.

RAY (instinctive):  
“Beasts. They’re coming back.”

KINSEY(panicked):  
“Why?! Didn’t Jake activate the Warden?!”

CLAIRE (half-hope, half-dread):  
“Maybe… maybe they’re still stuck. Maybe they haven’t reached it yet.”

ALEN:  
“Or maybe they’re fighting for their lives just like we are.”

CLAIRE (suddenly fierce):  
“Then we run like they would. And we finish this. For Grayson. For every single person who didn’t make it.” The monsters howled louder. The group tightened, gritted teeth, held their weapons and lighters.

CLAIRE (commanding):  
“To the treehouse. Then your trees. Whatever happens—don’t stop.”

Tobey

Koda

Yvette

GROUP B  
Alisha, Jake, Nia, and the others scrambled through a maze of twisted roots, barely holding ground. The gunshot from Claire’s group had echoed moments earlier—  
and now every monster in the region was howling and closing in.

JAKE (swinging a torch):  
“They’re not retreating!”

NIA (panting, slashing through with a broken branch):  
“The shot must’ve drawn them toward Claire’s group!”

ALISHA (frustrated):  
“Warden tree’s past this ridge. If we don’t clear a path now—none of us make it.”

They didn’t wait. They fought.

But even now, their fire was thinning. Time… was almost gone.

EXT. CLEARING NEAR TREEHOUSE — SAME TIME

GROUP A — Claire, Alen, Kinsey, Milo, Yvette, Bo, Tobey, and the dozens of revived souls —  
were being driven backward. Twenty monsters. Maybe more.

They were everywhere — tearing through trees, lunging like rabid beasts, flanking from the shadows.

KINSEY (screaming):  
“Keep moving! We can’t stop now!”

They couldn’t reach the treehouse.

The beasts had blocked the route, tearing through anyone who came close. The fire — all but gone.

The last of the fuel had been spent. Wood sticks burned out in hands.  
Some players ran. Others dropped. Too many… were already gone.

ALEN, bloodied and out of breath, gripped Claire’s arm, voice hollow.

ALEN:  
“…I think Jake’s gone. I think they’re all gone.”

Claire said nothing.

They all stood there, in a broken semicircle — back to back — the last line between salvation and slaughter.

Eyes hollow. Fire gone.

# Chapter 12: The Final Choice

And then…

A burst of blazing light shattered the dark.

WHOOMPH.

A wave of fire surged down the tree line.

MONSTERS SCREECHED, recoiling in confusion.

Everyone turned, eyes wide.

From the mist behind them…

A silhouette emerged — robes ash-streaked, staff blazing at the tip.

THE MONK.

Yes. The silent man who never aged. Who always just watched.

Now — standing tall, fire in his eyes.

MONK (calmly, but loud enough to command the storm):  
“Hope I’m not too late.” They froze.

CLAIRE:  
“You?!”

But before they could process more—

FOOTSTEPS THUNDERED through the forest behind them.

And then—

REYAN burst through the treeline, a torch in one hand, dragging Bo with the other.

Behind them — Jim was swinging a heavy branch like a war axe, with Hana launching glass shards of lit fuel at the monsters chasing them.

Just behind—

JAKE, ALISHA, and NIA followed, breathless, scorched, but alive.

FLASHBACK MOMENT (quick montage intercut):

Jake’s group cornered by monsters near the Warden Tree.

Suddenly—Reyan’s group burst from the woods, fire in hand, tearing through the beasts.

BO (grunting):  
“You didn’t think we were gonna miss the final battle, did you?”

REYAN (firing a flare):  
“Light it up!”

They fought shoulder to shoulder, six against hell.

And then — the Warden Tree flared to life, pulsing with magic.

ALEN (tears in eyes):  
“Reyan… you’re alive.”

REYAN (grinning, nodding to Jake):  
“Thanks to your quarterback and his hell of a linebacker squad.”

JAKE (panting):  
“We lit that tree up like a Christmas miracle.”

NIA (checking her scorched jacket):  
“And I’m never wearing sleeves again.”

They all laughed — even for a moment — because survival felt real again.

JAKE (panting, eyes landing on the monk):  
“Is that...?”

ALISHA:  
“It’s him. It’s the freaking monk.”

MONK:  
“I found the girl. She remembered nothing. So I looked for the scroll and it was missing too.”  
(a beat)  
“So I thought someone had started the game.”  
(glancing at the fire-torn forest)  
“And I realized… maybe it wasn’t over. Not yet.”

The Warden Tree’s magic began to spread — monsters froze, snarling as their feet locked to the earth.

MONK (stepping beside Claire):  
“You’ve gathered them all?”

CLAIRE (with fire in her eyes):  
“We’re ready.”

MONK (nodding):  
“Let’s finish what was started.”

The group reformed — every soul left, every survivor still breathing. Now, behind fire and spell and hope… They moved toward the Treehouse — for the final step.

The moon split through the clouds like a blade of silver. The Treehouse stood tall, half-burnt, ghostly, yet proud — the beginning and now, the end.

The entire group — survivors, freed souls, friends who bled for each other — gathered at the base, some limping, some leaning on one another.

CLAIRE (firmly):  
“This is it. Everyone, go to your marked tree. You know your positions — get there fast.”

REYAN (eyes scanning the horizon):  
“The Warden Tree’s magic will hold them… for maybe a few more minutes.”

ALEN (tightening his grip on Milo’s journal):  
“Then let’s finish what we started.”

The group split fast — everyone running into the forest in different directions. A beautiful chaos of movement and purpose.

Each held a copy of Grayson’s hand-marked map, identifying their assigned tree locations. Some trees glowed faintly — old magic recognizing its soul.

INTERCUT – TREK TO THE TREES

Jake and Alisha dashed through low brush, dodging roots.

Kinsey clutched her stick, eyes darting.

Bo lifted a wounded survivor onto his back.

Ray and Hana helped Nia find her spot.

The trees began to respond — glowing with familiar pulses, as if welcoming them home.

BUT THEN — A HOWL.

BOOM.

The ground shook. The Warden Tree’s light flickered… and extinguished.

The beasts were free.

MONSTERS SHRIEKED from behind the treeline.

KINSEY (terrified):  
“Move! We’re almost there!”

They all sprinted — faster than their injuries should allow.

One monster pounced toward Jim, clawed hand outstretched — and just as it swiped—

Jim stepped into his assigned tree’s space.

WHOOSH.  
A radiant flash surrounded him.

The monster froze mid-air, howling in pain as it was repelled by the glowing sigil beneath Jim’s feet.

CLAIRE (from across the ridge):  
“They can’t touch us once we’re rooted! GO!”

More screams. More charges. But one by one, they each reached their trees, glowing, breathless.

The monsters thrashed just feet away—but couldn’t cross the invisible boundary.

ALEN (reaching his):  
“It’s working! The game… it’s ending!”

MONK (watching from the distance, softly):  
“They’re choosing.”

NIA (eyes wide, voice shaking):  
“What happens now?”

AND THEN… A STILLNESS.

No wind. No sound.

The forest held its breath.

One by one — the trees flashed with light — pulsing in sync like a giant beating heart.

And then—

A brilliant surge.

WHITE.

Everything went white. The world was different when they woke up.

Brighter.

Birdsong fluttered gently through the morning mist. The sky was painted in soft golds and blush pinks, as if the island itself had exhaled. The heaviness—the shadow of invisible death—was gone.

And this time... they were visible. Every one of them.

The symbol-bound children, now grown, stood blinking in awe—no longer frozen in time. The forest felt warmer. Realer. Human.

Alen didn’t wait.

He broke into a sprint toward the temple, boots kicking up dirt as tears blurred his vision.

ALEN (shouting, breathless):  
“Alice…!”

She stood near the temple archway—older now, like him. Her face turned slowly. Their eyes met.

And she saw him.

Truly saw him.

Alen’s voice broke as he wrapped his arms around her.

ALEN (weeping):  
“You’re back. You’re really back…”

ALICE (softly):  
“Yeah… but… do I know you?”

He froze.

Pulled back.

ALEN (faltering):  
“It’s me. Your brother. We played the game together, remember? Seven years ago? You saved me…”

Alice frowned gently, brows knitting.

ALICE (gently):  
“I… don’t have a brother.”

The world swayed beneath Alen’s feet. His heart sank into silence.

Behind them, the others arrived, their laughter and relief fading into confusion as they heard.

KINSEY (stepping forward, confused):  
“Wait. Can… anyone remember how we first met?”

Silence.

Everyone paused. Looked at one another. Their five friends—the ones who started it all—blinked.

Jake. Alisha. Kinsey. Claire. Alen.

They exchanged glances.

JIM:  
“Uh… this game?”

CLAIRE (eyes narrowing):  
“Yeah. That’s what I remember too.”

Kinsey turned back to the others.

KINSEY:  
“What about the rest of you?”

Heads shook.

Every memory before the game… gone.

Even Claire's voice dropped low, distant.

CLAIRE (softly):  
“Is it only me… or does anyone else not remember their real full name anymore?”

The realization washed through them like ice.

At first, they thought it was a side effect. A trick. A remnant.

But then they looked at each other again—and saw it.

They hadn't just played the game.

They had become it.

Once, they could remember who they were. At least to themselves. The names. The identities. The lives they'd lived before the island. The old world. But now… not even that remained. Not even inside. The shock was deafening. People looked at their hands. Their feet. Reached for something in the dark that no longer existed. Who had they been? What had they left behind?

Then—the monk stepped forward. Silent. Watchful. As he had always been. His eyes, older than they could fathom, studied the trembling group. And then he spoke, voice like wind through hollow trees.

MONK (calmly):  
“The Game of Choice…”

Everyone looked up.

He continued.

MONK:  
“Remember the last line. To end the game… every player must reach the starting point, then return to their respected identity.” A pause.

And then it clicked.

CLAIRE (whispering):  
“We had to choose.”

They’d made it to the treehouse—the starting point. But none of them had asked for their old names back. No one even thought to. The game had asked them to choose. They never realized. They never knew what they were giving up. And now…

REYAN (quietly):  
“But where… where were our original identities?”

Monk didn’t smile. He only said one thing.

MONK:  
“Right where you submitted them.”