

GO IF YOU DARE



# NIGHTMOOR

AND THE CURSED MANSION

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BOOK ONE

# Chapter 1

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I yearned for a fresh beginning—a new home, a new school, and the promise of new friends. Making connections came naturally to me, so forging bonds wouldn't be an issue. Leaving behind the house I had grown up in was bittersweet, as the memories had become too painful to face each day.

Our car journey felt endless, winding through unfamiliar roads. "Are you excited about our new home?" my mother asked, her smile brightening her face. "Yeah, can't wait to see it," I replied, mustering a small smile of my own. "What's this place called again?" I inquired. "Nightmoor," she replied, trying to reassure me. "I've heard good things about the new school there. It'll be a fresh start for both of us." Finally, we arrived on the street. "It's on the right," she pointed out. It was hard to miss—the house stood out among the smaller buildings like something from a horror film. A shiver ran down my spine as I gazed at the imposing structure. I couldn't help but fixate on a shadowy figure peering through a window. The figure resembled a woman, draped in a robe with long hair flowing down her back. Strangely, she clasped her hands together. I turned my head slowly, keeping my eyes locked on her, standing sentinel at our window.

"Ready to go?" my mother asked, breaking my trance. I looked at her, then back at the window, but the woman had vanished. "Uh, yeah," I stammered. "I guess I just need some rest." I shook my head, giving myself a light slap on the cheek to snap out of it. Grabbing my bag, I stepped out of the car. As I entered the house,

I couldn't shake the feeling that it had been abandoned for quite some time. Dust blanketed everything, and cobwebs clung to every corner. "Yuck, I hate spiders!" I complained to my mother. "It'll be clean before you know it," she assured me. Among the few pieces of furniture, covered in white sheets, I struggled to find anything that looked remotely modern. I ventured into different rooms, searching for my designated space. "Which room is mine?" I called out to my mother. "Well, you can choose any, but I thought you might like this one," she replied, leading me down an endless hallway before opening the door. The room was vast but, like the rest of the house, covered in grime and spiderwebs.

"When will the rest of our stuff arrive?" I inquired. "They should be here any minute. In the meantime, why don't we start cleaning?" my mother suggested. "Okay, I guess I'll start with my room." While my mother went off to clean the living room, I headed to the kitchen, hunting for a broom. After an hour of scrubbing and sweeping, my room began to take shape. Satisfied, I decided to check out the storage room. Placing the broom in the far left corner, I turned to leave. At that precise moment, I heard the door close behind me. "It's probably just an old door," I reassured myself. Walking back toward the door, I froze as I heard a knock. "Mom?" I called out, but another knock followed. "Mom, is that you?" I stared at the door, watching as the doorknob slowly turned. Stepping back, clutching my broom tightly, I cautiously opened the door. My ears picked up the sound of whispers echoing through the dark hallway. I strained to make out the words, but they were impossible to understand. Fear gripped me, and I slammed the door shut, racing back to my room.

I sat on the ground, my heart pounding in my chest. What was happening in this house? I knew I had to uncover its secrets, but

the thought sent chills down my spine. As night fell, I couldn't help but feel a pervasive darkness, a presence lurking within these walls. But curiosity burned inside me. I was determined to unravel the mysteries of Nightmoor, even if it meant confronting my deepest fears.

As I started to wander around the house, I glanced out the window and noticed that it was getting dark. Judging by the fading light, I presumed it was around 6 pm. Yet, there was still no sign of our stuff arriving. Curiosity led me towards the living room, where my mother had cleaned a clock a while back. I hoped it would provide me with the correct time.

To my surprise, the clock showed that it was only 2 pm. Confused, I rushed towards the front door and swung it open in a hurry. "Hey there," a voice greeted me. But with my speed, I had no time to stop and collided with one of the moving guys. "Ouch, that hurts," I exclaimed. "Are you okay?" my mother asked concernedly. "Y-yeah... I'm fine!" I quickly looked around and saw the sun still shining brightly. "That is strange..." I mumbled. "What is it, dear?" my mother inquired. "N-nothing, I'm just tired." "Ah, that's okay, love. The furniture is coming right away. Let's start with your room so we can finish that up."

My mother took the papers from the moving guys and began filling in the necessary details. "Elaine Hendrikson, is that your name?" one of the moving guys asked my mother. "Yes, it is. Otherwise, I wouldn't write that," Elaine responded, her voice carrying a tinge of irritation. "Sorry, miss. We were just checking," the mover apologized. Elaine forced a soft smile and opened the front door. We stepped aside and watched as they brought everything inside. I directed them to place the furniture in my

room first, showing them where each item should go—my bed, closet, nightstand, and everything else I owned. Slowly but surely, my room started to take shape. "All I need now is some paint or maybe some wallpaper."

With my room now finished, I dismissed everyone and climbed into bed. Placing my glasses on the nightstand, I closed my eyes, and after a few minutes, sleep embraced me.

"S-Sophia..." I heard a deep voice echoing through the hallways. I opened my eyes and peered around the room, but without my glasses, everything was a blur. Retrieving my glasses from the nightstand, I noticed that my door was wide open. I decided to get out of bed and approach the doorway. The hallway appeared empty, so I turned around and glanced out my window. It was dark. I quickly rushed back to the living room and checked the clock again. 7 pm already?! Did I sleep that long? Panic washed over me as I searched my pockets for my phone, but it was nowhere to be found. "Where did I leave my phone?" I wondered aloud, my mind retracing the steps of the movers placing furniture in my room. Then I remembered—I left it on my desk.

A loud bang echoed through the hallway, startling me. In my fright, I accidentally bumped into the clock, causing it to fall to the floor. "M-mom, is that you?" I called out, my gaze fixed on the fallen timepiece. There was no response. I picked up the clock to hang it back up but noticed strange writings and symbols on the back. I couldn't decipher their meaning. The clock's ticking was suddenly interrupted by another loud noise, causing me to drop it again. My ears perked up as I heard the sound emanating from the kitchen. I gathered my courage and, despite my trembling legs, made my way towards it. The door to the kitchen was closed, but

through the glass, I could see a massive shadow moving along the walls.

Driven by foolish curiosity, I turned the doorknob and peeked inside. The shadow turned around and ceased its movement. "M-mom, I'm freaking out right here?!" I shouted. The shadow approached me and then vanished into thin air. I quickly scanned my surroundings and hurried back to my room. Locking my bedroom door, I leaned against it, trying to steady my breathing. Minutes passed, and silence enveloped the house. Slowly, my courage returned, and I stood up. Unlocking the door, I cautiously peered into the hallway, looking left and right. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. I gingerly made my way back to the kitchen, glancing through the door window—it appeared normal. I then returned to the living room, and to my surprise, the clock that had fallen on the floor was now back against the wall, without a single crack. "Did I just imagine all of it?" I murmured, my voice filled with confusion. As the front door opened, I spun around. "Hey, dear, I'm back!" my mother's voice echoed through the hallway. I ran towards her, enveloping her in a tight hug. "W-where were you!?" Tears of fear streamed down my face. "I left a note on your nightstand." "Y-you did?" I hurried back to my room and found the note resting on my nightstand.

I decided to visit our neighbors and go shopping at the nearby markets. I'll be gone for a while, and I didn't want to wake you up. If you have any concerns, please call me.

- Elaine

"Next time, just wake me up, alright, Mom?" I pleaded. "Sure, honey, I'll wake you up next time. But what happened? What got

"you so scared?" "N-nothing, I just didn't know where you were." Grabbing one of her shopping bags, I walked toward the kitchen. "Are you coming, Mom?"

Elaine placed all her stuff on the kitchen counter. "Can you help me clean this up?" she asked. "Yeah, no problem!" The previously empty kitchen slowly filled up with food, spices, and other kitchenware. The house was coming together nicely. Opening the fridge, I asked, "What do you think about onion soup with grilled cheese?" "Sounds fantastic!" I rummaged through the kitchen, finding plates and cutlery.

While my mother prepared dinner, I decided to set up the table in the living room. Carrying the plates and cutlery through the hallway, I heard faint whispers. Intrigued, I placed my things on the table and followed the sound. "It leads to the basement," I whispered to myself, my voice trembling. I opened the door and descended the stairs, the whispers growing louder with each step. I took out my phone and used its flashlight to illuminate the way. The giggling seemed to emanate from behind a table. I extended my arm, trying to reach it, when suddenly, a loud growl filled the air, and my phone died.

Panicked, I sprinted back upstairs and headed to the storage room, searching for a flashlight. Returning to the hallway, I couldn't find the basement door. I looked around in confusion before returning to my mother to ask her where the basement was. "Basement? We don't have a basement, sweetie. There's only an attic."

# Chapter 11

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My hands tremble whilst I look at my mother. My heart is pounding in my chest. "B- but I was just in the basement?!" I stammer, my voice trembling with confusion.

"Sorry, sweetie, there isn't a basement around here," Elaine responds calmly, trying to reassure me. She retrieves the floor plan of the first floor and hands it to me, urging me to examine it thoroughly. I carefully look at the layout, tracing every corner and hallway with my finger. "There isn't a basement!" I exclaim, growing more bewildered by the minute.

Turning back into the living room, I try to push the mysterious thoughts of the basement aside and focus on finishing up the table for dinner. But the memory lingers, refusing to fade away. Could I have hallucinated it? It felt so vivid, so real! Unable to shake off the perplexing experience, I head to my room and grab my phone, only to discover that it's at a surprising 9% battery. I could have sworn the battery died completely. Puzzled, I open my nightstand drawer and retrieve the charger, plugging it into the socket.

"Nervous about something, are we?" I murmur to myself, a faint smile crossing my lips. "Nice, my phone is charging and already at 11% battery! You never know when you might need it again, so I am rather prepared for any kind of situation."

As I make my way toward the dinner table, a flicker of curiosity drives me to turn around and scan the hallway for any trace of the basement door. To my astonishment, there is nothing but an empty wall. It's as if the door never existed. Determined to shake off the strange feeling, I take a seat at the table, excitement blooming within me. "That smells delicious!" I exclaim, a wide grin on my face. Elaine returns the smile and says, "Hopefully, it tastes just as good as it smells." I eagerly lift the pan lid and my eyes widen in delight. "OMG, BUTTER NOODLES! That's my favorite. Mom, you didn't have to make this!" I squeal with delight. Elaine looks at me with a radiant smile. "I'm just so proud of my little girl that she deserves her favorite food as her first meal in the new house." I feel a pang of warmth in my heart, but I can't help but interject, "I'm not that little anymore, mom..." I awkwardly smile, the bittersweet reality of growing up lingering in the air. "I know, sweetie, but for me, you'll always stay my little girl. Almost turning 16 already! Sheesh, time goes too fast. I feel old." My mom's playful exaggeration brings forth a chuckle. "Mom, now you're just overreacting a little bit," I tease gently.

Elaine looks at me, her eyes filled with love and pride. "Go on, eat up!" she says, her voice warm and inviting. I delve into the scrumptious butter noodles, savoring each bite, my mind momentarily distracted from the mysterious occurrences of the day. The meal soothes my nerves, and I start to feel a sense of contentment wash over me.

After finishing one of the most amazing butter noodles I've ever had, I decide it's time to prepare for bed. Despite having slept a few hours earlier, I still feel as if I haven't slept at all. I remove the remnants of makeup from my face, feeling the weight of exhaustion settle upon my shoulders. I make my way to my

bedroom, eager to find solace in the comfort of my cozy bed. With a sigh, I place my glasses on the nightstand and snuggle under the blankets, longing for a peaceful slumber. Setting an alarm for 7:30 am on my phone, I remind myself of the impending first day at my new school. Curiosity sparks within me as I wonder what kind of friends I'll be able to make in this.

The next morning, I wake up to the sound of my alarm clock. I groggily reach over to turn it off, rubbing my eyes and stretching my limbs. As I sit up in bed, the events of the previous night start to replay in my mind. The mysterious door, the shadowy figure, and the strange occurrences—I can't shake off the feeling that something unusual is happening in this house.

I quickly get out of bed and head downstairs, hoping to find some answers. The house feels eerily quiet as I make my way to the living room. I glance at the clock on the wall—it shows the correct time, but the symbols on the clock hands are different from what I remember. Confused, I decide to leave it be for now and focus on finding my mother.

I make my way to the second floor, climbing the creaky stairs with caution. Dust and spiderwebs fill the air, confirming my suspicion that this part of the house has been neglected for some time. I follow the path my mother took the previous night, crossing the bridge and reaching the second room in the wing.

As I approach the room, I hear faint sounds coming from inside. I carefully push the door open, revealing a dimly lit space filled with old furniture and dusty belongings. There, I find my mother standing near a worn-out desk, engrossed in a stack of old papers and photographs.

"Mom?" I call out, and she turns toward me, startled. "What are you doing here? What's all this?" I ask, gesturing to the scattered documents.

She takes a moment to compose herself, setting the papers aside. "I found these while exploring the house," she explains. "They seem to be old records and photographs related to the mortuary that used to exist here in Nightmoor."

My curiosity piques, and I walk closer to examine the papers. They contain faded names, dates, and details about the mortuary's operations from years past. One photograph catches my attention—a group of individuals standing in front of a grand building, likely the old mortuary.

"There's a legend surrounding the mortuary," my mother continues. "Some say it still exists underground, hidden beneath the village of Nightmoor."

"But that's just a rumor, right?" I ask, my voice tinged with both excitement and apprehension.

"Yes, it's just a rumor," she assures me. "But it's interesting to think about, isn't it? The idea of a hidden mortuary beneath our own house."

As we delve deeper into the documents, we come across an old map of the village. It marks a specific location—a seemingly ordinary spot in the forest beyond our backyard. Could this be the entrance to the rumored underground mortuary?

Feeling a mix of trepidation and curiosity, we decide to investigate further. Equipped with flashlights, we make our way outside, venturing into the dense forest. The path grows narrower, and the trees loom overhead, casting long shadows.

Finally, we reach the designated spot on the map. We search the area, our flashlights scanning the ground and the surrounding trees. And then, just as we're about to give up, we notice an odd pattern of blue leaves emerging from the forest floor. It resembles the same blue leaves that grew through the door in our house.

With a surge of anticipation, we clear away the leaves, revealing a hidden trapdoor nestled beneath the forest undergrowth. Excitement and fear mingle within us as we exchange glances, silently acknowledging that this may be the entrance we've been seeking.

Taking a deep breath, we lift the heavy trapdoor and descend into the darkness below. Our flashlights pierce through the gloom, illuminating an ancient, stone-lined passageway. The air feels heavy with history and mystery as we cautiously step forward.

As we venture deeper into the underground labyrinth, we come across cryptic symbols and markings etched into the walls. The path seems to wind endlessly, leading us to chamber after chamber, each shrouded in shadow.

With each step, we uncover fragments of the mortuary's forgotten past—creepy medical instruments, dusty coffins, and remnants of long-deceased souls. The atmosphere becomes increasingly chilling, yet we press on, driven by a desire to unravel the secrets hidden within these walls.

Suddenly, we reach a chamber bathed in an otherworldly blue glow. A mysterious energy seems to emanate from the center, drawing us closer. As we approach, a low rumble fills the air, and the ground beneath us trembles.

Before us, a stone pedestal rises from the ground, atop which rests an ornate key. Instinctively, I reach out and grasp it, feeling a surge of power coursing through my veins. With the key in hand, we sense that we've reached a pivotal moment—an opportunity to unlock the truth of Nightmoor's dark history.

But what lies beyond the chamber? What secrets will the key reveal? With determination and a hint of trepidation, we continue our journey through the underground mortuary, ready to confront the mysteries that await us in the depths of Nightmoor.

# Chapter III

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I awaken to the sound of my alarm clock blaring, signaling the start of a new day. Groggily, I glance around the room and notice that it's already 7.30 am. I reach over and turn off the alarm, feeling the weight of exhaustion in my body. Was it all just a dream? The vivid images of the stone pedestal and the ornate key haunt my thoughts, leaving a lingering sense of anticipation. Determined to uncover the truth, I scramble out of bed, my feet touching the cold floor.

With a slow pace, I make my way to the window and open it, revealing a sunny morning with clouds gracefully drifting over the nearby forest. In the distance, a faint mist adds an ethereal touch to the scenery.

Searching the room frantically, my hands rummage through every corner, every drawer, but the ornate key remains elusive. Doubt gnaws at the edges of my mind. Was it all a figment of my imagination?

"Breakfast!" my mother's voice resonates from downstairs.

"Coming, Mom!" I reply, quickly grabbing my clothes and slipping them on.

Undeterred, I take a deep breath and descend the stairs, the wooden steps creaking beneath my weight. The air feels heavy,

charged with an unexplained energy, as if the house itself is aware of the enigma that surrounds us.

With each step, a sense of unease grows, intertwining with a newfound determination. The darkness of Nightmoor's history envelops me, compelling me to uncover its secrets. Shadows dance along the walls, whispering untold tales as I navigate the familiar hallways. The silence is broken only by the sound of my own footsteps, echoing through the empty space.

As I enter the living room, the aroma of freshly made blueberry pancakes fills the air.

"What's this? Blueberry pancakes for breakfast?" I exclaim, pleasantly surprised.

"It's good to start the first day of school with a great breakfast," my mother replies with a smile.

I take a moment to admire the delicious-looking pancake on my plate and take a bite, savoring the sweet syrup as it cascades onto the plate. "It's delicious!" I exclaim, feeling a burst of delight. Finishing my pancake quickly, I make my way to the bathroom to brush my long blonde hair. I ensure that the few locks of purple are nicely intertwined with the blonde strands and tie it up into a ponytail. After brushing my teeth, I head to the shed and retrieve my black bike with purple accents, ready to embark on the journey to my new school.

As I pedal along, following the directions from my phone's navigation, I observe my surroundings. The village I find myself in is a harmonious blend of buildings and trees. However, my

attention is drawn to the abundant trees in the distance, which seem to envelop the town in a natural embrace. The thought of a forest surrounding the village piques my curiosity. I realize that I didn't research much about this place before moving here, as I wasn't in the mood to leave my old life behind. Nevertheless, the allure of a fresh start compelled me to endure the uncertainties.

Navigating through the streets, I finally arrive at the school. At first glance, my impression of the building isn't entirely positive. It appears a bit old-fashioned, with walls displaying brown hues and hints of darkness. On closer inspection, I notice a few cracks here and there, but nothing alarming. Dismissing the visual imperfections, I secure my bike in the stand and push open the creaky school doors. The scent inside is distinct, carrying the recognizable aroma of an educational institution—clean and papery. Despite the uninspiring appearance, I remind myself that looks don't necessarily determine the quality of education. Consulting my phone for directions, I discover that my classroom is labeled as 1.41. I scan the area for signs leading to the stairs and, in my distracted state, accidentally collide with someone.

"S-sorry!" I stutter, feeling slightly embarrassed.

"Ey, you're the new girl, right?" the person responds.

"Y-yeah, that's me," I manage to say, relieved to have encountered a friendly face.

"Great! We're in the same class. You can follow me," he offers, extending an invitation. Accepting gratefully, I follow him. He introduces himself as Jake Spears—a young man with black hair,

sporting a jacket adorned with pointy spikes over a white shirt. His black jeans and shoes complete his distinctive style.

"What's your name?" I inquire, attempting to ease the nervous tension.

"Jake. My name is Jake Spears," he replies with a warm smile.

"It's nice to meet you, Jake. I'm Sophia Hendrikson."

"Likewise," he says, his smile growing wider. "The classroom is on our right." Jake extends his hand, pointing towards the door, and waits for me to enter. My heart flutters with a mix of excitement and nervousness as I try to maintain my composure. "I like those purple hair locks," Jake compliments, his kind words catching me off guard. "T-thanks," I stutter, feeling a surge of self-consciousness. Why am I stuttering? I've never done that before. I try to push aside my uncertainty and step into the classroom.

To my surprise, Jake quickly steps back in front of me, blocking my path momentarily, and introduces his friends. "Hi, I'm Sophia. I just met Jake in the hallway." I watch as Jake points to his friends and warmly says their names, "Here we have Liam Woods, Anthony Hall, and Alisha Wilkins." Alisha smirks playfully and adds, "Ah, finally another girl." Feeling a sense of belonging, I join them at their table, ready to embark on this new chapter of my life.

As the first class begins, the teacher, Janessa Sharpe, asks me to stand up. All eyes in the classroom turn towards me, and I can't help but feel a mix of nerves and anticipation. "My name is Janessa Sharpe. I'm your math teacher for the year. And class, this is Sophia, our new student. Please give her a warm welcome." Most

of the students greet me warmly, but one girl catches my attention with her disgusted expression.

Curiosity getting the better of me, I turn to Jake and ask, "Who's that girl staring at me?" Jake's expression turns serious as he replies, "That's Hannah Gibson. She has never been a kind person, always looking for fights. There are even some rumors that she killed her parents because no one has ever seen them alive. There's no data on them since 2019." Shocked, I turn my gaze back to Hannah, trying to reconcile the rumors with the girl before me. "Do you believe the rumor?" I ask Jake, hoping for a different perspective. He shakes his head, his voice filled with doubt, "No, I think her parents died in a fatal accident."

"But if she doesn't have any parents, then why is everyone rumorizing she killed them? That's just wrong!" I exclaim, feeling a sense of injustice. Alisha interjects quietly, "What do you want to do about it?" I ponder for a moment, determined to find out the truth and perhaps extend a hand of friendship. "I'll walk up to her once we finish this class. Maybe she just needs friends," I say with conviction. Anthony chimes in, his voice cautious, "I doubt it, but you can always try."

As the teacher instructs us to turn our books to page 84, I focus on the lesson and diligently complete the assignments within the given time. With the class coming to an end, I feel a surge of determination. Walking towards Hannah, I hear Jake's voice, "I'll wait for you in the hallway." I nod gratefully and continue my journey, ready to face Hannah and uncover the truth. Approaching Hannah, I muster the courage to speak. "I want to know what happened. I heard the rumors about you and your parents," I say, my voice filled with genuine curiosity. Hannah's

face contorts with anger as she retorts, "Why do you want to know that? You're just the same as everyone else!" Undeterred, I hold my ground, determined to show her that I am different. "I might be like everyone else, but you don't know me yet. Are the rumors true?" I ask, hoping to give her a chance to share her side of the story. Hannah's shout resonates through the hallway, "No! I'll tell you the true story of what happened the night my parents disappeared."

"My parents... they died in a fire," Hannah's voice trembles as she recounts the tragic event. "We were sleeping in our house when suddenly the living room started catching fire. My parents noticed the fire and immediately ran towards my room. But I didn't tell them I wasn't in my room. Instead, I was in the attic when I noticed the fire through the window coming from below. I didn't even care one bit about warning my parents that I was safe. I climbed out through the attic window myself and made it out safely. My parents entered my room and shouted for me. A few moments later, they realized they were too late and got trapped between the fires, unable to escape. It's my fault I'm alone," Hannah's voice breaks, filled with grief and guilt.

Feeling a surge of empathy, I reach out to hold Hannah's hand gently. "Hannah, I'm so sorry for your loss. It's not your fault. You were scared, and in that moment, you did what you thought was best to save yourself. It's a tragedy, but you didn't cause it."

Curiosity takes hold of me, and I ask, "How did your house burn so fast?" Hannah's eyes well up with tears as she answers, "We were living by the forest in a big wooden cabin. We couldn't afford anything else. The cabin was cheap because it was discovered that a serial killer had lived there before. It was secluded, far from the

town and any roads. The house wasn't in the best condition, old and rusty, but it was our home. My father, mother, and I were a happy family before that night ruined everything."

As I listen, a wave of sympathy washes over me, understanding the challenges Hannah and her family faced. Seeking more answers, I inquire, "How come no one knows your parents died?" Hannah's voice lowers, almost a whisper, "I made up a story that my parents went on a business trip, and I stayed home alone on the night of the fire. Their bodies were never found." I'm taken aback by the magnitude of Hannah's secret. "That's a lot to bear on your own, Hannah. You've been carrying this burden alone for so long."

Hannah looks at me with pleading eyes. "Can you please keep this a secret, Sophia?" Her vulnerability tugs at my heart, and I reassure her, "Yes, of course. Your secret is safe with me. I promise." We share a moment of understanding, and I offer her a warm hug to provide comfort in that moment.

Just then, Jake appears around the corner, breaking the solemn atmosphere. "You girls ready? We need to head to our next class." I nod, wiping away a tear, and Hannah manages a small smile. "Yeah, we're coming." Jake turns his head back into the hallway, signaling for us to follow. With determination, I walk alongside Hannah, ready to face whatever lies ahead.

"What's the subject for our next class?" I ask, trying to lighten the mood. Hannah responds with a slight groan, "It's chemistry." I chuckle softly, understanding her sentiment. "Yuck, I'm not a big fan of chemistry either." We enter the classroom and join the rest of the students. Hannah pauses, unsure of where to sit. Sensing

her hesitation, I warmly invite her, "You can sit with us." Extending my hand, I guide her to our table, making her feel included.

Curiosity piqued, I turn to the group, eager to learn more about their lives. "Where do all of you live?" I inquire. Jake steps forward and points to each person, indicating their locations. "Liam lives on Coach Lane Street, Anthony lives on Terrace Street, Alisha lives on Ironwood Avenue, and I live on Quarry Lane. I'm not sure where Hannah lives," Jake explains. Hannah speaks up, "I live on Star Route Street." Recognition dawns upon me, and I recall the name. "Star Route Street? I remember passing through it while biking to school!"

Jake's curiosity gets the better of him as he asks, "Where do you live, Sophia?" I hesitate for a moment, sensing a shift in the atmosphere. "I live on Manor Street," I answer, noticing Anthony's stuttered response. Concerned, I lock eyes with him, silently urging him to speak the truth. However, the moment passes, and the teacher's voice commands our attention.

"Alright, class, it's time to put on our lab coats," the teacher announces. I stand up, grabbing a lab coat, and the teacher continues, "We'll be working in groups of three. Before forming your groups, I'd like to introduce a new student. Sophia, I am Mr. Ruiz, but you can call me Ruiz. I'll be your chemistry teacher." I offer a polite smile and nod to acknowledge the introduction. With that, the teacher instructs everyone to gather in their respective groups, ready to delve into the world of chemistry.

We navigate through the crowded classroom, jostling to find a suitable table. "I claim Alisha and Hannah," I assert, catching their attention. A mischievous glint sparkles in Alisha's eyes as she

addresses the boys, "Let's have a battle. Three boys against three girls." The boys exchange nods, accepting the challenge.

The teacher takes the floor, explaining the task at hand. "Today, you'll be conducting a chemical reaction. I've placed a paper on your table displaying images of the expected results. You can cross them out if you achieve the correct reaction. Each table has the same ingredients, and your goal is to mix them and identify as many chemical reactions as possible. But remember, mixing the wrong chemicals can cause a fire. If a fire starts, hit the red emergency button on your table, and water will pour from the ceiling, extinguishing the flames. However, hitting the emergency button will result in disqualification, and you'll need to return to your school desks. The group with the most chemical reactions and no fires will win a prize. Good luck, class!"

Without wasting a moment, I begin grabbing the necessary ingredients and mixing them together. Alisha's concern seeps through her voice as she asks, "Sophia, do you know what you're doing?" I reassure her with a confident smile, "Yes, I was quite proficient in chemistry at my old school." Hannah interjects, a hint of surprise lacing her words, "But I thought you didn't like chemistry?" I chuckle softly, replying, "True, but that doesn't mean I can't excel at it."

As we glance around, we witness two groups already being disqualified. "Seven groups remaining," the teacher announces. Jake leans closer to our table, whispering, "Psst, you should use potassium permanganate mixed with glycerin and add a few drops of water. It'll result in an awesome reaction." Hannah swiftly grabs the ingredients and begins mixing potassium permanganate with glycerin. Alisha questions her motives, "Hold on, Hannah. They're

our competitors. Why would they help us?" Realizing the potential danger, I interject hastily, "I-I think I recognize that formula. It could cause a fire!" Hannah heeds my words and promptly sets down the pipette containing water, just as another table ignites in flames. "Six groups remaining!" the teacher announces, raising his voice to be heard over the commotion.

Undeterred, we continue mixing ingredients, engaging in friendly competition with the boys. I whisper to Jake, my tone playful, "Nice try, boys. How about creating a mixture of ammonium nitrate, zinc, and a few drops of hydrochloric acid? It'll astonish you!" Jake smirks, brushing off my suggestion.

I grab a piece of towel and carefully add a drop of sulfuric acid to it. However, Hannah's accidental bump topples a nearby bottle, drenching the towel in acetone, narrowly avoiding a potential disaster. "Phew, that was a close call," I remark, relieved. "If that pipette had touched the potassium permanganate, it would've resulted in manganese heptoxide and set the towel ablaze!"

"Two groups remain: Jake, Liam, and Anthony against Sophia, Alisha, and Hannah," the teacher announces, capturing the attention of the entire class. The pressure builds as we prepare for our next chemical reaction. Liam combines sodium chlorate and sugar in a mixture, but in a twist of fate, Hannah accidentally nudges the pipette, causing Anthony to knock over the sulfuric acid, igniting a fire. "Sophia, Alisha, and Hannah have won today's chemistry lesson!" the teacher cheerfully declares. The classroom erupts in applause as we gather together. While everyone cleans up, the teacher presents each of us with a piece of stone as a prize. Hannah curiously inquires, "What is this, sir?" The teacher responds, "It's a rare piece of obsidian mixed with diamonds. Take

a closer look." He hands us magnifying glasses, revealing the intricate patterns of small crystals embedded in the stone. "Each one has a different color!" I exclaim, marveling at the unique beauty. I carefully tuck the stone into my backpack, and we reunite with the boys.

"That was a close one," Jake remarks, his competitive spirit shining through. "If Hannah hadn't bumped the pipette, Anthony wouldn't have knocked over the sulfuric acid." I glance at Liam, who appears slightly annoyed at Anthony for jeopardizing their chances of winning. "Calm down, guys. It was just a friendly competition," I say, attempting to diffuse the tension. Alisha joins in with laughter, adding, "So, what did we girls win anyway?" In response, I proudly present the stone to the boys, who exchange wide-eyed glances. "That's one cool stone," Anthony chuckles. Alisha rolls her eyes playfully, remarking, "Come on, guys, what were you expecting? It's just a small prize."

As we make our way to our final class of the day, I inquire, "Where's the classroom?" Alisha replies, "Third floor, history. Liam here isn't particularly fond of history lessons." Liam mumbles his agreement, and together we climb the stairs, encountering our history teacher, Mr. Joel Green. He greets me with a friendly handshake and guides us to his classroom.

"Alright, class, today's topic is the history of Nightmoor," Mr. Green announces. We open our books to page 93 as he begins a slideshow featuring old images of Nightmoor. Nightmoor looks vastly different in the past, once known as an immense mortuary surrounded by a dense forest, but now transformed into a peaceful village. Mr. Green swiftly guides us through the images,

while the relevant information is readily available in our textbooks.

Nightmoor, a village with a rich history, has witnessed various transformations over the generations. Back in the early 1800s, it served as a ritual site to banish witches and eliminate roaming creatures. As time passed, Nightmoor transitioned into an agricultural hub, with farmers cultivating crops and calling the village their home.

The turn of the century brought with it the horrors of the First World War, and Nightmoor became a battleground. The farmers, caught in the midst of the conflict, sought refuge by either fleeing their lands or hiding within their homes. The war took its toll on the village, and after its conclusion, Nightmoor required significant reconstruction.

In 1918, the Gibson family, coincidentally sharing the same surname as Hannah, embarked on a new endeavor. They established a mortuary in Nightmoor, which opened its doors to the public in 1921. The mortuary served as a place to lay to rest the fallen farmers and soldiers from the First World War. However, as time went on, the Gibson family dwindled, leading them to make the difficult decision to close down the mortuary and dispose of all their belongings. Within a year, Nightmoor's mortuary vanished, leaving behind a vast forest in its wake.

Fast forward to 1993, Nightmoor underwent another transformation, this time evolving into an entirely new village. As the history lesson concludes, Mr. Green instructs us to put our books away and demonstrate our knowledge by writing down what we remember. Anthony, unfortunately, confesses that he

wasn't paying attention, much to his dismay. He places his empty paper in the corner, catching the teacher's attention, who reminds him of the importance of active participation.

Hannah and I diligently continue writing, seemingly possessing a wealth of knowledge about Nightmoor's history. As we eventually place our papers in the corner, the teacher picks them up, impressed by our thoroughness. He commends us, and Hannah casually mentions that she already knew the facts, playfully outshining the teacher. The class comes to an end, and the teacher reminds us of the homework assignment before we exit the classroom.

Outside the school entrance, Anthony begins bidding us farewell, but Alisha intervenes, emphasizing the importance of adding Sophia and Hannah to our phone contacts. We exchange numbers and contacts, but Liam is absent from the contact list due to his recent phone mishap. Liam reassures us that he will acquire a new phone by the end of the semester, although it means enduring 37 days without a means of contact.

As we prepare to part ways, Alisha and I head towards our bikes, ready to ride home. However, Hannah surprises me by asking if she can join me. I agree, and she hops onto the back of my bike. Yet, our ride gets off to a rocky start as we stumble and fall in the school parking lot. Realizing it might be safer to walk, we push the bike and continue on foot.

Hannah guides me through her neighborhood, pointing out the distinctive features of Star Route Street, including a house adorned with plastic swans, which belongs to her current teacher. Intrigued, I admire the house's charming appearance, with brown

bricks, mossy vines, old oak fences, castle-like windows, and a small pond complete with a bridge next to the front door.

Curiosity piqued, Hannah inquires about my residence. With a mischievous grin, I tell her she'll see it once we arrive. She protests, wanting to know beforehand, but I playfully refuse. Undeterred, Hannah starts sprinting, challenging me to a race to Manor Street. Giving her a head start, I eventually catch up, biking ahead of her and claiming victory. Hannah playfully accuses me of cheating, but I tease her about being scared of the rumored haunting in the enormous house on Manor Street.

As we reach the end of the race, I point out the massive house to Hannah, and her eyes widen in astonishment. The suspenseful moment hangs in the air, leaving us both intrigued by what secrets the enigmatic house might hold.

# Chapter IV

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Hannah's eyes meet mine, and then she glances back at the house. "I can't believe you live in that monstrosity of a house," she exclaims. I extend my hand towards her. "Do you want to see it for yourself?" I ask. A mischievous smile spreads across her face as she accepts my hand, and we approach the front door.

Hesitant, Hannah pauses at the entrance, peering through the window. "It's enormous!" she exclaims. I chuckle softly. "Just wait until you step inside." With a push, I open the front door, revealing a grand foyer. We drop our school bags by the entrance, and Hannah eagerly explores the living room. "This is so cool!" she exclaims. "I remember when this place was dusty and creepy-looking. It's amazing to see it now. Best surprise ever!"

Hannah's voice echoes through the hallways as she continues to marvel at the size of the house. "It looks way bigger from the inside than from the outside!" she shouts from a distant hallway. Her words linger in the air, and I find myself pondering the architectural wonder before me. How was this house constructed? What secrets lie within its walls? A sense of mystery and intrigue seizes my thoughts as I recall the events of the previous night.

Curiosity piqued, Hannah turns to me. "Where's your room?" she inquires eagerly. I clear my mind and reply, "Follow me." Leading her through the hallways, our excitement grows. But just as we

near my room, my mother emerges from the kitchen, surprising us both.

"Hello, darling," my mother greets, her eyes filled with warmth. "Did you have a fun day?" Hannah extends her hand, introducing herself. "I'm Hannah." My mother smiles warmly. "Nice to meet you, Hannah. I'm Elaine, Sophia's mother." Our conversation is interrupted as I mention showing Hannah my room.

My mother's expression shifts slightly, a touch of worry in her eyes. "Oh, do explore everywhere except for the second floor," she advises, her voice laced with concern. "It's not safe. There are loose planks everywhere." She sighs. "I've been meaning to fix it, but I've been busy with work." Hannah's eyes widen with curiosity. "What do you do for work?" she asks eagerly.

A hint of excitement gleams in my mother's eyes. "I work at the police," she reveals. Hannah's face lights up. "That's awesome!" she exclaims. "My first day starts this week at the new office in Nightmoor, and I can't wait to get back into the business." Hannah looks at my mother with newfound admiration. My mother playfully warns, "So behave, girls, or I might have to shoot a bullet through your skulls." Suppressing a laugh, she adds, "Just kidding, of course." Hannah giggles, though I notice a flicker of unease in her eyes. I assure her, "She's joking, Hannah."

Eager to change the subject, I grab Hannah's hand and lead her towards my room. As we step into my room, the atmosphere shifts. The walls are adorned with posters of my favorite bands and artists, and shelves display books that have carried me away on countless adventures. Hannah's eyes light up, taking in the colorful tapestries and the cozy reading nook by the window.

"Wow, your room is amazing!" Hannah exclaims, her voice filled with awe. She runs her fingers over the spines of the books, curious about the tales they hold. I smile proudly, grateful for this space that reflects my personality and provides solace in times of need.

We settle into the reading nook, sinking into the plush cushions. Hannah picks up a book and flips through its pages, her eyes dancing with anticipation. I grab a book too, and together we lose ourselves in the magic of storytelling. The room fills with the soft rustling of pages as we dive into different worlds, sharing our favorite parts and imagining ourselves as the courageous heroes of the tales.

The sunlight filters through the window, casting a warm glow upon us. Outside, birds chirp and playfully flutter from branch to branch. Our laughter mixes with the melodies of nature, creating a symphony of joy. In this moment, worries and cares fade away, replaced by the simple delight of friendship and shared adventures. We cherish these precious hours, knowing that the memories we create together will forever hold a special place in our hearts.

As the day drifts into evening, the room is bathed in a gentle twilight. The soft hues of the setting sun paint the walls with a romantic glow, casting shadows that dance upon our faces. Hannah's laughter fills the air, echoing like sweet music, and I find myself captivated by her infectious joy.

Her eyes dart towards the window, and she suddenly freezes, her voice trembling. "What's that?" she stammers, pointing a trembling finger outside. My curiosity piqued, I peer out the window, but all

I see is the gloomy forest, draped in a shroud of gray clouds. "Are you sure you saw something?" I inquire, trying to ease her growing unease.

Her response sends a shiver down my spine, like icy fingers tracing my spine. "Yes!" Hannah replies, her voice quivering with fear. "It had these short, twisted legs that defied the laws of nature. Its arms were unnaturally long. Its head was hidden beneath a tangled mass of long, black hair, and its neck appeared folded as if bent by some unseen force." The vividness of her description creates vivid images in my mind, haunting my thoughts.

Sensing her distress, I guide her to my bed, a sanctuary amidst the encroaching darkness. "Take a moment to sit," I offer, my voice laced with concern, as I rush to the kitchen to fetch a glass of water. The air feels heavy, charged with an unexplained energy, as if the very house is aware of the mysterious presence she described.

Returning with the glass of water, I find the room empty, and a chill runs down my spine. Panic grips my heart as I scan the room, searching for any sign of Hannah. My eyes land on a shadowy figure in the distance, its silhouette hauntingly familiar. Is it waving at me? Fear tightens its grip around my chest as I open my window and reach for my phone on the bed, my hands trembling uncontrollably.

I open the camera app, desperately hoping to capture evidence of the figure. But as I press the record button, the recording glitches, leaving me with a blank screen. Frustration and fear intertwine within me as I review the footage, only to find nothing but the obscured forest, devoid of any trace of the mysterious being.

Disheartened, I turn my gaze back to the window, seeking solace in the photo I took. But to my dismay, the image reveals nothing but the obscure expanse of the forest, leaving me with more questions than answers. Doubt begins to creep into my mind. Is this some twisted illusion, a hallucination that toys with my sanity?

As I examine the photo, a bone-chilling realization takes hold of me, squeezing my heart with icy fingers. Cameras fail to capture these apparitions. The very essence of their existence eludes the grasp of technology, as if they are nothing more than elusive phantoms born from the darkest recesses of our nightmares. Or perhaps, I'm trapped in a waking nightmare, where reality and unreality blend into a twisted tapestry of horror.

Lost in my thoughts, I suddenly hear the sound of glass shattering in the hallway, jolting me back to the present. Fear courses through my veins, urging me to turn around, to confront the unknown. With a trembling hand, I slowly pivot, only to feel a warm breath against the nape of my neck, raising the hairs on my skin. The room becomes suffocating, as if an unseen presence hovers inches away from me.

Summoning all my courage, I turn my attention back to the window, fearing what I might see. And there she is—Hannah, her once vibrant eyes now resembling the darkest abyss, devoid of any trace of humanity. Her skin has taken on a ghastly, otherworldly hue, as if drained of life itself. Crimson liquid trails down her face, its origin unknown, merging with the macabre scene before me.

My gaze shifts downward, drawn to the shattered glass on the floor, a stark reminder of the encroaching horror. The phone slips from my trembling fingers, its screen cracking upon impact. In a

moment of trepidation, I retrieve the damaged device, my hands shaking uncontrollably. When I glance back at the window, I'm met with an unimaginable sight.

Hannah is no longer confined to the realm beyond the glass. She's climbing through the window, her body contorted in unnatural angles, a grotesque transformation taking hold. Each step she takes emits bone-cracking echoes that reverberate through the room, amplifying the horror that fills the air. Her dislocated jaw hangs grotesquely, as if unhinged from its rightful place, further distorting her once familiar visage.

Suddenly, I wake up, gasping for breath, my body drenched in cold sweat. The room is bathed in the gentle glow of dawn, and I find myself nestled in the safety of my own bed. The vividness of the nightmare lingers, haunting my thoughts like a ghostly echo.

Was it all just a dream? The memory of Hannah's transformation, the eerie presence at the window, and the unsettling questions that went unanswered, they all fade into the recesses of my mind. I take a moment to steady my racing heart, reassuring myself that it was all a figment of my imagination.

Gazing out of the window, I find solace in the familiar sights of the serene morning. The sun's golden rays caress the world, casting a warm glow over the peaceful neighborhood. A sense of relief washes over me as I realize that the horrors of the night belong to the realm of dreams, not reality.

Still trembling from the lingering effects of the nightmare, I try to shake off the unease that clings to me. It was just a dream, I remind myself, a concoction of my subconscious mind playing

tricks on me. Yet, the image of Hannah's haunting eyes and the chilling calm in her voice refuse to fade completely.

Taking a deep breath, I push aside the remnants of the unsettling dream, determined to embrace the new day. It's time to leave the terrors of the night behind and embark on a fresh start. With each step I take, I remind myself that the real world is far more predictable, far less sinister than the twisted realm that exists within the depths of dreams.

As I make my way downstairs, the familiar sights and sounds of morning routines greet me, grounding me in reality. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee fills the air, and the gentle hum of the refrigerator provides a soothing backdrop.

Just as I begin to ponder the whereabouts of Hannah, my mother descends the stairs, her cheerful voice breaking through the silence. We exchange a few brief words, a touch of concern evident in her eyes. She reassures me that Hannah had left back to her house and that everything will be fine.

Determined not to let the unsettling dream cloud my day, I retrieve my bike from the shed once again. The familiar creak of its wheels provides a sense of normalcy as I pedal along the familiar path towards school. The morning air carries a crispness that invigorates my senses, helping me shake off the remnants of the dream.

Before reaching the school, I make a quick stop at Hannah's house, hoping to find her there. I ring the doorbell, but there's no answer. A sense of unease begins to stir within me.

Deciding not to dwell on it for now, I continue my journey to school alone. The bustling atmosphere of the school grounds greets me as I arrive. Among the crowd, I catch sight of Jake standing near the entrance. He seems engrossed in conversation with a group of classmates, unaware of my presence.

Parking my bike, I make my way towards Jake, intending to join him on the familiar path to the classroom. As I approach, he turns and heads inside, leaving me trailing behind. With a mix of anticipation and unease, I follow suit, the hallway echoing with the chatter of students.

As I approach the group in the classroom, Jake's boisterous laughter fills the air, drawing my attention. He spots me and waves me over, a mischievous grin spreading across his face. Hannah sits beside him, her eyes sparkling with a hint of mystery.

I take my seat next to Hannah, feeling a sense of comfort wash over me. Her presence carries an air of intrigue, and today is no different. I catch a glimpse of a secretive smile playing on her lips, as if she knows something I don't.

The classroom buzzes with excitement and anticipation. Jake leans over and whispers, "You won't believe what I heard yesterday." My curiosity piqued, I lean in closer, eager to be part of the latest adventure. But before Jake can share his revelation, the teacher's arrival interrupts us, bringing a swift end to our conversation.

Throughout the first class, my mind drifts, my thoughts consumed by the mysterious aura surrounding Hannah. I steal glances at her, trying to decipher the secrets she holds. She catches

my gaze, her eyes filled with a mixture of amusement and something deeper, a hidden vulnerability.

Lunchtime finally arrives, and we gather in our usual spot, a secluded corner of the bustling cafeteria. Alisha, always the voice of reason, takes a seat next to me, her gaze fixed on Hannah. "What's going on with her?" I ask, unable to contain my curiosity any longer.

Alisha lets out a deep sigh, her eyes filled with empathy and worry. "Hannah has always had a difficult time with bullies, but recently, she's been even more withdrawn, even from us," she confides, her voice laced with concern. "It's as if something is weighing heavily on her heart. Just yesterday, during our chemistry lesson, she was radiant, happier than I've ever seen her. But today... I can't help but wonder if something happened last night."

Anthony chimes in, his voice quivering with anxiety. "Do you think she's in some kind of trouble? We should help her, right?" Liam, the level-headed one, places a reassuring hand on Anthony's shoulder. "We'll figure it out, mate. But let's give her some space for now. She'll open up when she's ready."

As the days pass, we make a concerted effort to support Hannah, offering words of encouragement and small gestures of friendship. But she remains elusive, her emotions veiled behind a mask of secrecy. We become even more determined to uncover the truth, to bring back the radiant smile that once graced her face.

As the final bell rings, signaling the end of the school day, Hannah's grip on my arm tightens, pulling me towards the exit.

Confusion fills my mind as I question her urgency. "What's going on, Hannah?" I inquire, my voice filled with curiosity and concern.

Hannah's eyes dart around, searching for any unwanted listeners before she begins to speak. "I... I need to tell you something," she says, her voice barely above a whisper. Before she can continue, Jake appears behind us, catching us off guard.

Aware of the importance of our conversation, I politely ask Jake for a moment of privacy. He gives me a quizzical look but respects our request, walking away with a wave.

"What were you saying, Hannah?" I inquire, eager to uncover the truth. Her gaze meets mine, her eyes filled with a mix of vulnerability and determination. "Could we go somewhere more private?" she suggests, her voice barely audible.

Curiosity piques within me as I agree to her request, though a flicker of uncertainty dances in the back of my mind. "Sure," I respond, masking any hint of apprehension. "Where do you have in mind?"

Hannah's lips curve into a small smile as she whispers, "Your bedroom." My heart skips a beat, my mind racing to comprehend her unexpected choice. Struggling to maintain composure, I manage to reply, "Yeah, that works."

We make our way to my house, a familiar route that has become a symbol of our shared moments and secrets. As we walk, fragments of the previous night's events resurface in my thoughts, mingling with anticipation for what Hannah is about to reveal.

Concern lingers in Hannah's eyes as she glances at me. Sensing her worry, I reach down and gently grasp her hand, offering reassurance. "Are you okay?" she asks, her voice tinged with genuine concern.

I manage a nod and a faint smile. "I'm fine, but I couldn't help but notice how quiet you were all day at school. You seemed lost in your thoughts. Is everything alright?" Hannah's gaze shifts. With a mixture of relief and trepidation, we arrive at my house. The silence within suggests that my mother is absent, granting us the privacy we seek. A mischievous smirk dances across my lips as I comment, "Looks like we have the house to ourselves."

"What are you saying?" she asks, a playful glimmer in her eyes.

As we step into my bedroom and settle on the bed, a shared space that holds memories of laughter and secrets, Hannah takes a deep breath. The weight of the moment hangs in the air as she finally speaks. "Now, tell me, what happened last night?"

Taking a moment to gather her thoughts, Hannah begins to recount the events of the previous night, her voice filled with a mixture of fear and determination. She describes a chilling encounter, an otherworldly presence that seemed to lurk in the shadows, haunting her every step. Her words paint vivid images of a darkness that defies explanation, a malevolence that threatens to consume her.

"It... it was there," Hannah stammered, her eyes darting nervously around the room. "An otherworldly presence, lurking in the shadows, haunting my every step." As she spoke, her words wove a tapestry of darkness, an unfathomable malevolence that threatened to consume her.

"What did you see? Can you describe it?" I asked, my voice filled with a mix of curiosity and trepidation. Hannah's gaze met mine, searching for understanding. "It had these short, twisted legs that defied the laws of nature," she began, her voice barely above a whisper. "Its arms were unnaturally long, stretching out from its hunched form. Its head... it was hidden beneath a tangled mass of long, black hair, and its neck appeared folded, as if bent by some unseen force."

A jolt of recognition shot through me, a realization too peculiar to dismiss. "Wait... I remember this," I interjected, confusion etched on my face. Hannah's expression mirrored my own bewilderment. "What do you mean?" she asked, her voice trembling with uncertainty. I took a moment to gather my thoughts before revealing the uncanny truth. "I thought it was just a nightmare, but the descriptions you gave... they are the same as what you told me yesterday night."

Hannah's eyes widened in disbelief, a profound sense of unease settling over her. "What could this mean?" she whispered, her voice trembling. I shook my head, the weight of the inexplicable pressing upon me. "I don't know," I confessed, a hint of fear seeping into my words. "Ever since I moved here with my mother, everything has felt off. There have been strange occurrences that defy explanation."

I continued, my voice steady despite the growing unease within me. "On the first night we arrived, I ventured into the basement. I thought I heard something, an inexplicable noise beckoning me down the stairs." Hannah's focus intensified as I recounted my experience. "But as I descended, my phone's battery drained, plunging me into darkness. Filled with unease, I hurriedly made

my way back upstairs, grabbing a flashlight before returning to the basement."

"When I reached the basement, I realized the door was gone. It had vanished, leaving behind an empty wall." Hannah's brow furrowed in confusion. "How does a door go missing?" she asked, her voice tinged with incredulity. I nodded, understanding her skepticism, but compelled to share the truth. "That's what I thought too," I replied.

"What did your mother say about it?" she queried, her eyes searching mine for reassurance. "I went to her, asking about the basement. But her response chilled me to the core. She told me there was no basement in the house, only an attic. She even showed me the floorplans, and she was right. There was no trace of a basement. It was as if my mind had played a cruel trick on me."

Hannah's grip tightened around my hand. "Have you told your mother any of this?" she asked, her voice filled with concern. I shook my head, a mixture of fear and uncertainty gripping my heart. "I haven't," I confessed, my voice barely above a whisper. "But perhaps... perhaps it's time to confront her." Would you want me to be with you when you do that?"

A sense of relief washed over me as Hannah suggested that. "I would appreciate that, thank you." Hannah's lips curved into a gentle smile, her eyes locking with mine, seeking reassurance and understanding. "But back to you," I gently urged, wanting to understand her plight. "What else happened today at school? Why were you so quiet?"

A shiver coursed through Hannah's body as she recalled the haunting encounters that had plagued her. "I've been seeing this entity everywhere," she confessed, her voice laden with fear. "It stalks me, relentlessly appearing wherever I go. I don't know what it is, and I can't shake it off."

"Tonight," I suggested, my voice filled with determination, "let's stay together. Let's find answers and figure out what's happening. You don't have to face this alone."

Hannah hesitated for a moment, her struggle evident in her eyes. But ultimately, she nodded.

# Chapter V

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As we waited for my mother to come back, the warmth of the living room embraced us, offering solace from the unsettling events we had experienced.

The front door creaked open, signaling my mother's return. She walked in, her eyes filled with both curiosity and concern. She noticed the serious expressions on our faces and the unspoken tension in the air.

"What's been going on here?" my mother asked, her voice gentle and caring. She settled down beside us, providing a comforting presence.

With newfound determination, I began to share our encounters—the strange things we had seen, the eerie happenings that had unsettled us. My mother listened intently, her gaze shifting between Hannah and me as we unveiled the mysteries that had haunted us.

When I finished speaking, a quiet pause enveloped the room. My mother's expression shifted, revealing a mixture of skepticism and concern in her eyes. "My dear ones," she responded, her voice tinged with doubt, "I understand that you've had unsettling experiences, but it's important not to let our imaginations run wild. Sometimes, our minds can play tricks on us."

Her words hung in the air, casting a momentary shadow of doubt upon our shared conviction. We exchanged uneasy glances, feeling a slight pang of disappointment. Perhaps we had hoped for more understanding from her.

Yet, as the evening unfolded, something unexpected began to transpire. We continued to engage in conversation, sharing our encounters in greater detail.

Then, as if fate had intervened, a subtle shift occurred. From the corner of her eye, my mother caught a glimpse of movement in the hallway. Her gaze darted towards it, uncertainty etching lines of astonishment upon her face.

There, before her very eyes, stood the basement door—a presence that should not have been. The veil of disbelief lifted, replaced by a realization that there was more to our accounts than mere flights of fancy.

A gasp escaped her lips as she rose from her seat, tentatively approaching the door. Her hand reached out, hesitantly brushing against the cool surface. The weight of her touch confirmed the undeniable reality before her.

In that moment, disbelief transformed into awe. My mother turned to face us, her eyes now filled with wonder and a tinge of fear. "You were right," she whispered, her voice carrying a mix of astonishment and vulnerability. "There's something truly mysterious happening here."

The urge to uncover the house's secrets intensifies, but so does the fear that has nestled deep within me. Reluctantly, I approach the

door, knowing that the darkness it conceals holds answers that may shatter my fragile perception of reality.

I open the basement door and see a pair of stairs leading down into darkness. A chill runs down my spine as I remember the unsettling events from the previous basement encounter. The memory of the mysterious figure lurking in the basement lingers in my mind, but curiosity overtakes my fear.

"Hannah, come here!" I call out, my voice quivering slightly. Hannah hurries over, her eyes widening as she sees the open basement door.

"I have a feeling that it's connected to the things I've been experiencing."

Hannah's gaze flickers between me and the dark abyss below. "Should we go down and investigate?"

I hesitate for a moment, unsure if venturing into the basement is a wise decision. But my desire to uncover the truth overpowers my fear.

"We need to find out what's going on," I say with determination. "Let's go."

My mother hands me the flashlights and with cautious steps, we descend the creaking stairs, the air growing colder with each passing step. The basement is dimly lit, with only a single, flickering lightbulb casting eerie shadows on the walls.

As we explore the basement, our eyes catch sight of peculiar objects scattered around. Dust-covered furniture, old crates, and tattered books fill the room. But something else catches our attention—a worn-out diary lying on an old wooden desk.

Hannah picks up the diary and begins leafing through its pages, her eyes widening with each revelation. "Sophia, you won't believe what I'm reading," she whispers, her voice trembling.

Curiosity overtakes me as I move closer, peering over Hannah's shoulder to catch a glimpse of the diary's contents. The pages are filled with chilling accounts of supernatural occurrences in Nightmoor, detailing encounters with mysterious beings and unexplained phenomena.

"It talks about a dark presence that haunts this house," Hannah whispers, her voice barely audible. "And it mentions a forbidden ritual that was performed here long ago."

My heart races as I realize the significance of the diary's revelations. The pieces of the puzzle start to come together, connecting the haunting experiences, the strange figure, and the house's dark past.

"We need to find out more," I say, my voice filled with a mix of determination and unease. "There must be something else hidden within this house, something that can explain everything."

Just as we're about to continue our search, a chilling gust of wind blows through the basement, extinguishing the flickering lightbulb. Darkness envelops the room, and a sense of dread

washes over us."Hannah, do you feel that?" I ask, my voice quivering.

"Yes," she replies, her voice barely audible. "Something's not right. We need to leave."

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps echoes from the darkness, growing louder with each passing second. Panic sets in as we fumble our way back up the stairs, desperately seeking an escape from the eerie basement.

We burst through the basement door, gasping for breath, but the chilling presence lingers behind us. The air feels heavy, and a shiver runs down my spine as I realize we are not alone.

As we stand in the hallway, catching our breath, a low, guttural growl reverberates through the house, chilling us to the core. We exchange terrified glances, knowing that we are entangled in something far more sinister than we could have ever imagined.

The mysteries of Nightmoor deepen, and with newfound determination, we vow to unravel its secrets, no matter the cost. Little do we know that the dark forces lurking within the shadows are watching, waiting for the perfect moment to reveal themselves.

We all make our way towards the living room, our minds consumed by the mysteries that lay beyond the basement door. Just as we settle into our seats, the sound of the doorbell interrupts the quietude of the evening.

Surprised, we exchange glances, our curiosity piqued by the unexpected visitor. Slowly, we rise from our positions, united in our decision to uncover the identity of the person standing on the other side of the front door.

As Elaine opens the door, an eerie figure emerges from the shadows and steps inside. Goosebumps ripple across my skin, and a knot tightens in the pit of my stomach. "Aunt Erin!" I exclaim, rushing towards her, hoping for a sense of familiarity and comfort in her presence. But something is off. Her eyes hold a glimmer of fear, and her expression is tinged with unease.

Erin's voice quivers as she speaks, her words laden with a weight I can't quite comprehend. "Hey, my darling. How's the new location?" I hesitate, taken aback by the strange energy that surrounds her. "It's great," I reply cautiously. "But there's something peculiar about this house."

Elaine interjects, her voice trembling. "What's going on? Erin, explain yourself." Erin's eyes dart to a particular door in the hallway, her voice barely above a whisper. "That door... I thought we had gotten rid of it."

Confusion washes over me as I search for answers. "What are you talking about?" Erin's face pales, her voice a mere murmur. "Azruleth."

Elaine's expression contorts with shock and disbelief. "Azruleth? Erin, stop speaking in riddles! Tell us what you mean!" Erin crumples to the ground, her voice trembling with a mixture of fear and regret. "I... I thought I had sacrificed everything to protect our family." The weight of the unknown presses upon us as Erin

motions for us to follow her. "Girls, come with me," she says, her voice laced with a sense of urgency. With trepidation, we trail behind her as she leads us through the basement.

Erin's hands tremble as she reaches for the doorknob, her voice filled with a mix of dread and anticipation. "Down here... the answers lie." With a creak, the door swings open, revealing a hidden passage that plunges into an unknown realm below.

"Wow, a secret passage in the basement?! Can things get any more unsettling?" Hannah exclaims.

Erin steps forward, her figure slowly fading into the shadows. Panic seizes me as I realize she has vanished into the darkness. "Erin? Aunt Erin?" I call out, my voice trembling.

# Chapter VI

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Elaine's voice trembles as she calls out to her sister, but there is no response. The air grows heavy with an unspoken tension, and a chill runs down my spine. Reluctantly, I step forward, my heart pounding in my chest, and reach out to grab Elaine's hand. Together, we descend the creaking stairs into the abyss below.

The feeble beam of the flashlight casts eerie shadows on the walls, revealing a narrow, dimly lit passageway. The air is thick with musty dampness, and a faint odor of decay lingers in the stagnant darkness. I can't help but feel a growing sense of foreboding, as if we are venturing into a place meant to remain forgotten.

As we advance cautiously, the sound of our footsteps echoes through the cold, stone corridor. A sense of timelessness pervades the air, as if this place exists in a realm far removed from reality. I glance back at Elaine, who wears a mask of apprehension, her eyes darting nervously from side to side.

"Where is Erin?" I whisper, the words barely escaping my trembling lips. Elaine shakes her head, her voice filled with uncertainty. "I don't know, but we have to find her. We have to uncover the truth."

The passageway seems to stretch on endlessly, the oppressive darkness threatening to consume us. Suddenly, a faint glimmer catches my eye, and I hasten my pace, drawn toward the faint light

ahead. The corridor widens, revealing an expansive chamber bathed in an eerie, ethereal glow.

The sight that greets us is beyond comprehension. The chamber is adorned with ancient symbols and markings etched into the walls. Strange artifacts, their origins lost to time, are scattered haphazardly across the floor. In the center of the chamber stands a stone pedestal, atop which rests a worn leather-bound book.

Elaine's gaze locks onto the book, her voice barely a whisper. "The Book of Shadows... it can't be." I approach cautiously, my curiosity mingling with a growing sense of trepidation. As I reach out to touch it, a surge of energy courses through my fingertips, causing me to recoil in shock.

A haunting melody fills the chamber, carried by an unseen force. Whispers, barely audible, echo through the air, as if the very walls are speaking secrets. The ancient symbols on the walls begin to glow, casting an otherworldly illumination on the chamber. Shadows dance and twist, their forms shifting and contorting in a macabre ballet.

A voice, deep and resonant, resonates through the chamber. "Welcome, seekers of truth. You have entered a realm few have tread upon. Prepare to face the consequences of your curiosity."

Elaine's grip tightens on my hand, her eyes filled with a mixture of fear and determination. "We cannot turn back now," she says, her voice laced with a newfound resolve. "Whatever lies within these ancient halls, we must confront it. We must find my sister, Erin."

Taking a deep breath, we press forward, our footsteps echoing through the chamber as we make our way towards an archway, beyond which lies a path shrouded in impenetrable darkness. The whispers grow louder, their words a symphony of enigmatic promises and ominous warnings.

With each step we take, the air grows colder, the weight of the unknown bearing down upon us. Our journey into the depths of this house has only just begun, and as we venture further into the abyss, we brace ourselves for the horrors and revelations that await us in the forgotten depths of the unknown.

I see a sign hanging ominously in front of us, swaying in the cold breeze. With trembling fingers, I point towards it, urging my companions to approach. We cautiously make our way towards the sign, its faded letters spelling out the words 'Gibson Mortuary'. Hannah's voice quivers with excitement, unable to contain her disbelief. "I- it still exists! How did nobody know about this?"

As we stand before the ancient mortuary, a shiver runs down my spine, sensing the heavy atmosphere that surrounds the place. Hannah, her gaze fixed on the sign, reaches out to touch it, her fingers grazing the weathered wood. But a sudden, discordant melody pierces the air, jolting her out of her reverie. "W- where's that coming from?!" Hannah's voice trembles with fear as her eyes dart around the dimly lit surroundings. Elaine, my aunt, points towards a narrow hallway, revealing a small door barely visible in the gloom. Drawn by curiosity and a tinge of trepidation, we decide to follow the eerie melody.

Just as we begin to make our way towards the source of the haunting tune, Erin, appears from around the corner, startling

Hannah, who lets out a piercing scream. "Are you alright, Hannah?" Erin's concerned voice echoes through the corridor. Hannah, still trembling, stammers, "Y-yeah... I'm just not used to these kinds of atmospheres and scenarios." Erin offers reassurance, patting Hannah's shoulder gently, drawing her close. "It's okay, child. I was afraid of this place too when I was younger."

Elaine, feeling left out and growing impatient, demands answers from Erin. "Tell me everything you know! Don't play these mysteries with me. We were talking about my husband's house!" Erin takes a deep breath before revealing a hidden truth. "Why don't you ask him yourself? Who, my husband? He's dead!" Elaine's voice is laced with prickliness and annoyance.

Erin, struggling to contain her emotions, explains that Blake is indeed alive but not in the same way she remembers him. Wavering between hope and despair, I interject, seeking confirmation. "Is he here?" "Where's my Blake?" Erin's voice cracks as she collapses to her knees, almost on the brink of tears. "He's behind that door." Erin points towards the mysterious doorway. Hannah, trembling with fear, adds, "Isn't that the same door where the melody came from?" Erin, puzzled, looks at the door and denies hearing any melody.

The four of us slowly make our way down the mossy, muggy corridor, the haunting melody growing louder as we approach the mysterious door. Each step feels heavier, as if the weight of anticipation and uncertainty has settled upon us. The air becomes denser, suffused with an otherworldly presence that sends chills down our spines.

With a trembling hand, Elaine reaches for the doorknob, her heart pounding in her chest. As she turns it, the door creaks open, revealing a dimly lit chamber. The melody emanates from within, its ethereal notes weaving a haunting tapestry in the stagnant air.

We step into the chamber, our eyes adjusting to the gloom. In the center of the room, a figure stands, his back turned to us. It is Blake, or what remains of him. He stands tall, but there is a hollowness in his presence, as if a part of his soul has been consumed by the darkness.

Elaine's voice quavers as she speaks, her voice barely audible amidst the melancholic melody. "Blake... is that really you?" Her words hang in the air, filled with equal parts hope and fear.

The figure slowly turns around, and we behold his countenance for the first time. Blake's once vibrant eyes are now clouded, devoid of their former warmth. His skin is pallid, an eerie reflection of the life he once possessed. A haunting smile creeps across his lips, sending shivers down our spines.

"It has been a long time, Elaine," Blake's voice resonates, filled with an otherworldly timbre. "I have traversed the depths of The Underneath, bound to this place by a curse that cannot be easily broken."

Hannah, her voice quivering, asks the question that lingers in all our minds. "Blake, what happened to you? How did you end up here?"

Blake's gaze meets hers, his eyes filled with a mixture of sorrow and resignation. "Azruleth, the demon we vanquished, cursed me

to be trapped in this mortal shell, neither fully alive nor dead. I am forever bound to this mortuary, condemned to carry the weight of my past deeds."

Erin steps forward, her voice filled with determination. "But there is a way to break the curse, isn't there? We can't let you remain trapped here."

Blake nods, his smile tinged with melancholy. "Yes, there is a way, but it comes at a price. Azruleth's curse can only be broken by obtaining a sacred artifact known as the Tear of Redemption. It is said to possess the power to restore balance and free those trapped in the realm between life and death."

# Chapter VII

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I turn back towards my father and immediately notice something strange. Questions race through my mind as I observe his eerie position. "W- was that his position when we entered this room?" I ask, my voice trembling. He sits up straight against the wall, eyes closed, with long black hair cascading over his ears and shoulders. His torn clothing and emaciated frame make his bones seem visible beneath the skin. Intrigued yet unsettled, I take a cautious step closer, and a chill runs down my spine as I see a faint smile on his face.

I take another hesitant step towards my father, blinking momentarily, only to realize that his smile has transformed. Alarmed, I close my eyes briefly and reopen them, only to find him in a completely different position. "M- mom, I think we should leave immediately!" I urge, my voice quivering with a mix of fear and urgency.

Elaine turns around to face me, her expression filled with concern. I notice that my father's eyes are now wide open, his hair pushed back to reveal his ears, his hands resting on the floor, and his head pressed against the wall. Taking a few steps back, I keep a watchful eye on him. Elaine steps closer, scrutinizing her husband's unfamiliar appearance. "T-that isn't my Blake!" she trembles, her voice filled with distress.

Confusion fills the air as Erin asks, "What do you mean?" Elaine's voice quivers as she explains, "Look at his arm, where are the scars he got from that one trip in the jungle? And his eyes, they're brown, not his usual innocent green." Erin cautiously approaches, inching closer to the imposter. Suddenly, the figure moves its arms, standing upright in a single fluid motion, startling Erin. "It's not touching the ground!" Hannah exclaims, her voice trembling with fear.

Erin stands face to face with the imposter, peering into his eyes with a mix of disbelief and terror. "That's not Blake!" she exclaims, her voice filled with a blend of conviction and panic. Erin turns abruptly, pointing towards the exit, and we all rush towards it, desperate to escape. However, our hopes are dashed as the door slams shut, locking us inside the room.

A bone-chilling cry reverberates through the room, causing our hearts to race. The once-illuminated torches flicker and extinguish, plunging us into darkness. With trembling hands, we retrieve our phones and flashlights, illuminating our surroundings in an attempt to find an escape. "W- where is he?" Hannah's voice quivers with concern as we scan the room, seeing nothing but walls and shadows.

We cautiously retreat towards the closed door, our senses on high alert. Suddenly, Hannah lets out a piercing shriek, the sound of which pierces through the air. Our ears strain to discern any other sound apart from the haunting melody. "I can hear the bones crack..." Erin's voice trembles as she whispers, her eyes darting around the room. Panic sets in as we all shine our flashlights towards the source of the disturbance, revealing only long, dark hair swaying in the darkness. Terrified and desperate to escape,

Erin fumbles with her key, attempting to unlock the door. With a sigh of relief, she succeeds, and we swiftly pass through the door, running towards the safety of the stairs. As the haunting melody fades into the distance, we reassure ourselves that we are finally out of immediate danger. With each step closer to the stairs, a glimmer of hope flickers within us.

However, just as we are about to reach the stairs, a sudden darkness envelopes the space behind us. "M- mom?" I call out, my voice filled with trepidation. A cacophony of clanging noises and terrified screams erupts from the darkness, sending shivers down our spines. In the midst of the chaos, a flashlight rolls towards us, casting eerie shadows on the walls. I pick it up, my hands trembling, and shine it ahead, desperately searching for any sign of my mother.

In the absence of any visual cues, I muster my courage and resolve not to abandon my loved ones. Ignoring the protests and pleas of Hannah, I step away from the stairs, determined to find my mother and aunt. Three looming shadows emerge from the distance, and I shine the flashlight towards them, hoping for a glimpse of familiarity, but they remain indistinguishable. With a mixture of fear and determination, I take a few steps closer, ready to face whatever lies ahead.

As I inch closer to the enigmatic figures, my heart pounds in my chest, and a sense of foreboding envelops me. The beam of the flashlight illuminates their forms, revealing their dark silhouettes against the dimly lit backdrop. My eyes strain to discern their features, but they remain obscured, shrouded in an air of mystery.

I take a deep breath, summoning my courage, and cautiously address the shadowy figures. "Who are you?" I ask, my voice trembling slightly. The figures remain motionless, their presence casting an eerie stillness over the room. Silence hangs heavily in the air, broken only by the faint sound of my racing heartbeat.

Suddenly, one of the figures takes a step forward, emerging from the shadows. The dim light reveals a tall, slender figure with a stoic expression. As I focus on the features, a glimmer of recognition sparks within me. It's my father, but something feels off—his aura, his energy—it's different, unfamiliar.

With a mixture of trepidation and hope, I speak his name tentatively, "Blake?" The figure remains silent, its gaze fixed upon me. Hannah watches with bated breath, her eyes filled with anticipation and unease.

In a voice that sends shivers down my spine, the figure finally speaks. "You seek answers, child. Answers to questions long buried and forgotten." The voice echoes, resonating through the room, carrying an otherworldly quality that makes my skin crawl.

I gather my resolve and pose the question that has plagued my mind for years. "What happened to you, Dad? Why do you look so different?"

The figure's lips curl into an enigmatic smile, revealing a glimmer of teeth in the darkness. "Your father's fate was sealed long ago," it replies cryptically. "But you, my child, have the power to uncover the truth."

Confusion and determination intertwine within me. I cannot ignore this opportunity to find the answers I've longed for. "Tell me," I demand, my voice tinged with both desperation and resolve. "Tell me what I must do."

The figure's smile widens, and it extends a hand toward me. "Follow the path of your ancestors," it instructs. "Embrace the darkness, confront your fears, and reclaim what has been taken from you."

A mixture of apprehension and curiosity wells up within me. I glance back at Hannah, her eyes reflecting a blend of concern and angst. With a deep breath, I take a step forward, accepting the figure's outstretched hand. The touch sends a surge of energy through me, a tingling sensation that resonates with ancient knowledge and untapped potential, it feels familiar....

As I take another step forward, my mother's voice cuts through the air, laced with concern. "Sophia, wait!" she calls out, her voice tinged with a mix of worry and apprehension. Her words jolt me out of the trance-like state induced by the enigmatic figures, grounding me back to reality.

I turn around to face my mother, her eyes filled with maternal concern. The gravity of the situation dawns on her as she realizes the path I'm about to embark on. "You can't trust them, Sophia," she pleads, her voice trembling with a mixture of fear and protectiveness. "There's something off about them. Please, come back to us."

Conflicting emotions swirl within me as I stand torn between my thirst for answers and my mother's heartfelt plea. I cast a longing

gaze back at the figures, their presence still shrouded in mystery, beckoning me towards the unknown. But my mother's words resonate deep within my soul, reminding me of the love and safety that await me in the world I know.

Reluctantly, I withdraw my hand from the figure's grasp and take a step back, retracing my path towards my mother. The figures watch silently.

As I approach my mother, I can see Erin standing behind her. I notice her arms, adorned with fresh cuts and bruises. Concern etches itself onto my face, and I reach out to touch her wounded arm. "Erin, what happened?" I inquire softly, my voice filled with both worry and curiosity.

Erin glances down at her injured arm, a mixture of guilt and hesitation crossing her features. She quickly moves to conceal the wounds, attempting to shield me from the truth. "It's nothing, Sophia," she murmurs, her voice strained. "Just a minor accident. Don't worry about it."

A newfound determination surges within me, and I gently grasp Erin's hand, holding it firmly yet tenderly. "Erin, we can't keep hiding. We need to confront the darkness, together," I assert, my voice filled with a resolute conviction.

Erin meets my gaze, her eyes shimmering with a mixture of pride and concern. She recognizes the strength and maturity that have blossomed within me. With a sigh, she relents, allowing vulnerability to surface. "You're right, Sophia," she whispers, her voice quivering. "We'll face this darkness as a family, united."

As Erin, my mother and I return to Hannah, a newfound bond envelops us, solidifying our determination to unravel the mysteries that have haunted us. We stand together, ready to confront the challenges that lie ahead, drawing strength from our love and the unyielding resilience that courses through our veins.

The enigmatic figures still linger in the shadows, their intentions veiled, but we are no longer swayed by their allure.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, we emerge from the depths of the unknown, our hearts still racing with adrenaline. The safety of daylight washes over us, filling us with a sense of relief and accomplishment. We exchange glances, a silent acknowledgement of the bond forged through shared experiences.

As we gather at the entrance, Hannah breaks the silence, her voice laced with a mix of gratitude and weariness. "Thank you all for everything," she says, her voice filled with sincerity. "I don't think I'll ever forget this journey we've been through."

Hannah takes a step forward, preparing to depart and return to the comfort of her own home. With a final wave and a heartfelt farewell, she walks down the street, disappearing from sight.

I let myself fall into bed and place my glasses aside. Within a few rolls, I quickly start to lose consciousness and tumble into a big sleep.

# Chapter VIII

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I awaken, my heart pounding in my chest, as I find myself confronted by a shadowy figure looming above me. Fear grips me, and I hastily leap out of bed, causing the figure to move toward the door. It points ominously toward the window, commanding my attention. Blinking away the remnants of sleep, I reach for my glasses, slipping them on to gain clarity. Stepping out of bed, I peer through the lenses and spot Hannah walking along a stone pathway, oblivious to her surroundings due to her earplugs.

The scene abruptly shifts, and I see her strolling down a route that resembles Star Route Street. Hannah glances back and waves, while I remain frozen in place, unable to move. Suddenly, a car hurtles toward her, striking her with devastating force. The impact wedges her body between the car and a lamppost, gruesomely severing her upper and lower halves. Blood cascades and drips above me, shocking me to the core. Startled by this horrifying sight, I snap awake, realizing it was all a nightmare.

As I collect my thoughts, I notice my bed soaked in blood, the droplets staining the floor below. Hastily grabbing my glasses, I glance at my phone and discover that only four minutes have passed since Hannah's departure. Surveying my room, everything appears normal except for the macabre state of my bed. Reflecting on my disturbing dream, a chilling realization dawns upon me—what if it wasn't just a dream? Determined to confirm my suspicions, I grab my phone and hastily make my way to the shed.

My aunt queries the urgency in my actions, but I dismissively reply that Hannah left her phone charger behind. Jumping on my bike, I set the navigation on my phone to guide me to Star Route Street, which is only five minutes away. While cycling, I attempt to message Hannah, urging her to stay off the road, but she remains oblivious to my attempts at communication. Doubts creep in—am I simply overreacting?

As I pass through several streets, Star Route Street slowly comes into view. And there, just as I dreamt, I witness Hannah walking along that very same stone pathway. Memories of the nightmare resurface, and I recall the fateful collision with a red car. Straining my focus, I notice that the driver is reaching downwards, distracted and inattentive to the road ahead. "It's a vision! You're in danger!" I cry out, but Hannah, wearing her earplugs, remains unaware. The red car draws nearer, and I swiftly make my way toward her, desperately shouting her name. Hannah turns, waving at me, but I implore her to stop and retrace her steps.

Confusion furrows her brow, yet she complies, halting in her tracks. With a sense of urgency, I dismount my bike and take hold of Hannah's hand, guiding her away from the looming lamppost. As the red car approaches, I notice the driver's lack of attention, but to my relief, the vehicle passes by, narrowly avoiding us. It wasn't a vision after all—just another wave of anxiety that washed over me. Hannah takes a few steps forward, then turns away, engrossed in her phone search.

A sigh of relief escapes my lips, but my respite is short-lived as another red car suddenly emerges from my direction. The driver remains oblivious, hurtling directly toward me. I cry out with all my might, instinctively trying to make myself small. Startled, the

driver swerves, narrowly missing me but obliterating my bike in the process, its front left tire shredded against the sidewalk. I glance behind me, finding Hannah staring at the car. "Hannah, watch out!" I scream. However, instead of moving, she stands transfixed as the car hurtles toward her with alarming velocity.

# Chapter IX

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The car hurtles toward Hannah, mere inches away from a devastating collision, when suddenly, one of her dogs comes barking by. Startled awake, Hannah musters all her strength and attempts a desperate leap away from the car at the last possible moment. Though she still takes a harsh impact on her back, her instinctive jump manages to minimize her injuries.

As she slides off to the side, the car crashes directly into her house. My heart races as I rush towards Hannah, my concern for her overwhelming me. "Are you okay?" I ask anxiously. "I-I'm fine," she replies weakly. "Don't worry about me, check on the driver." With worry etched on her face, Hannah urges me to inspect the driver's condition. I approach the mangled car and find the driver severely injured, blood streaming from a deep cut on his forehead. "I think he's still alive," I inform Hannah. Opening the door, I cautiously search for a pulse in his neck. "I can feel it, he's alive!" I exclaim, relieved. Hannah's worry transforms into a shaky smile. "Now, let's get him out of there!" she says, attempting to stand but immediately falling back down. "M-my back!" she stutters, clutching her shirt, now stained with blood. "I think I need to rest." "Hannah?"

I turn around, alarmed, and see her sprawled on the ground. Hastily, I dial 911, praying that help will arrive in time. Meanwhile, Hannah's dog licks her face, nudging her gently, trying to rouse her. As I make the call, I suddenly feel moisture seeping through

my socks. Glancing down, I realize it's fuel leaking from the wrecked car. Panic sets in as I struggle to free the trapped driver, but he's immovable. Looking back at Hannah, I see the fuel creeping perilously close to her.

Reacting swiftly, I scoop her up into my arms and carefully place her on a grassy patch farther down the road, doing my best not to aggravate her injuries. Gazing at her, I notice her blood-stained hands, evidence of the shattered glass caused by the impact of her jump. As I turn away from Hannah, my eyes fall upon the wreckage of the car. With bloodied hands, I rush back towards it, only for an explosion to erupt before me, throwing me backward.

The blast engulfs Hannah's house, flames spreading rapidly. Fearful for my safety, I kick off my shoes and socks, discarding them as they catch fire. Barefoot, I sprint back to Hannah's side, waiting anxiously for the arrival of help. Sirens wail in the distance, growing louder as they draw near. Trying to calm myself, I remind Hannah that assistance is on its way. "It's going to be alright," I reassure her, my voice trembling. Looking around, I notice the dog is missing. "Where's the dog?" I call out in all directions. Rising to my feet, I cautiously navigate the debris, careful not to step on any hazardous remnants. Searching the wreckage, I catch sight of something lying near the car. Could it be the driver? Racing towards it, my foot inadvertently meets a sharp object, slicing through my skin.

Suppressing the pain, I collapse onto the grass, clutching my injured foot. Glancing at my left foot, I find a piece of glass embedded in it. gingerly, I remove it and press my hand against the wound, trying to stem the bleeding. As I rise again, I realize it's not a human lying beside the car—it's an animal. Could it be the

dog? My vision is blurred, but it appears to be a dog. Carefully, I stand and listen, and soon enough, I hear barking. The dog is alive! Happiness floods over me, and I call out, "Doggy, where are you?" With cautious steps, I navigate the wreckage, keeping my wounded feet as safe as possible.

The barking grows louder and clearer. "Doggy, are you in here?" I peer into the rubble left by the explosion and glimpse a wagging tail. Carefully sidestepping the debris, I discover the dog holding the injured driver in its paws. "H-how did you do that?" I ask, awe-struck. The dog barks and licks my hand. Seated next to the driver, I check his heartbeat. "H-he's alive! You saved him, doggy!" The dog leaps around in circles, barking joyfully.

Help finally arrives, and I recount the harrowing events to the emergency responders. "Are you injured, miss?" one of the officers asks me. "Just my foot," I reply, my voice strained. He assists me to the ambulance and gently sets me down. Another officer is called over to tend to my injured foot. While the others attend to Hannah and the driver, I am allowed to return home immediately. "Go to your parents; we've informed them about the situation," the officer instructs me. Rune, the dog, barks and nuzzles against my leg. "I think he wants to come with you," the officer remarks with a smile. I nod in agreement, taking Rune along. The dog takes off, and I follow him, running as best as I can. "Thank you for everything!" I call back to the officer as I hurry away.

After a few moments, the pain in my foot intensifies, causing me to slow down. I come to a stop, taking careful steps forward. "It's just you and me now, doggy," I say, a smile gracing my face. "Hannah never told me your name, so for now, I'll call you... Rune." The dog wags its tail and jumps toward me, showing its

approval of the name. "You like that name?" I ask, my gaze briefly drifting back to the officer at the crash site. He appears unsettled, his head trembling, and black liquid streaming from his eyes. I rub my eyes in disbelief, and suddenly, he vanishes. I scan my surroundings, but everything appears normal. Rubbing my eyes again, I turn my attention back to Rune. "Wait for me!" I call out, and Rune slows his pace, allowing me to catch up. Together, we make our way back home.

As I reach the house, my mother and aunt are already standing at the front door, their faces filled with worry. "W-what happened?" my mother asks, concerned. "I-I had a vision of Hannah, so I went to investigate," I explain, my voice trembling. Aunt Erin interjects, her voice filled with urgency. "It's Azruleth. He's trying to manipulate you by showing you these distressing events." Confusion washes over me. "But why would he show me if I prevented Hannah's death?" Aunt Erin's face contorts with worry. "That's something I don't fully understand. Azruleth is cunning, and he'll do whatever it takes to make you feel like you're losing your mind."

I inquire, my voice quivering, "Do you know where Azruleth is now?" Aunt Erin locks her gaze with mine, then turns to Elaine, visibly alarmed. "I-I'm afraid we won't be safe here much longer. If Azruleth's power is growing, we need to find a way to stop him before it's too late."

Erin drops to her knees, and Elaine rushes to hold her up, noticing the bleeding from her arm. Concerned, Elaine asks, "Can we stop him?"

Erin responds, her voice shaky, "There might be one thing, but it's hard to obtain. We need a black obsidian diamond ring. It can

contain the power of the doors within this house and make the barrier seal stronger." "Have you been able to make one of those before? "Elaine asks, to which Erin replies, "Yes, I have. But Azruleth managed to get ahold of them. Being a demon, he's drawn to the magic and either destroys it or, if the power is strong enough, it causes him to bleed instead."

I mention having a small piece of some obsidian diamond and Erin looks surprised. Erin continues, "If you do... we might be able to save this planet after all!"

Trembling, I ask, "Planet? Is he really that strong to destroy an entire planet?"

Erin warns, "If we don't watch out, yes! He can destroy cities all around the Earth with just the press of his fingers."

In a flurry of urgency, we hastily enter the house, our footsteps echoing through the dimly lit hallway. A sense of foreboding hangs in the air as we navigate the familiar path to my room, our hearts pounding with a mixture of anticipation and fear. Erin and Elaine trail closely behind, their eyes reflecting the weight of the impending danger.

With trembling hands, I unzip my backpack, the sound unnervingly loud in the silence of the house. My fingers fumble, desperately searching for the stone that holds the key to our salvation. Finally, I find it, a glimmering gem nestled among the mundane contents of my bag. As I hand it to Erin, her brows furrow in deep concentration.

Erin's gaze fixates on the stone, her eyes narrowing as she examines it under the faint glow of the moonlight filtering through the window. A mixture of disappointment and realization crosses her face. "This isn't the one," she murmurs, her voice laced with a tinge of sorrow. "We need a stone with green crystals, ones that possess the essence of ancient magic."

A shiver runs down my spine as Erin's words hang in the air, carrying with them an enigmatic allure. The notion of ancient magic, intricately woven into the fabric of our reality, sparks a sense of curiosity within me. I can't help but wonder about the origins of these mystical stones, their hidden power, and the secrets they hold.

Erin, sensing my curiosity, takes a moment to gather her thoughts before continuing. "To awaken the true potential of the stone, we must wait until the clock strikes 3 am. It is during the Witching Hour that the veil between realms is at its thinnest, granting access to the elusive forces that lie dormant within the stone."

Her words send a chill down my spine, an eerie excitement mingling with the trepidation that fills the room. The notion of harnessing ancient powers at such a bewitching hour feels both exhilarating and daunting. I find myself captivated by the mystery surrounding these hidden realms and the cosmic energies that reside within them.

Erin's voice takes on an almost ethereal quality as she describes the intricate process that lies ahead. "We must delicately extract each crystal from the stone, treating them with the utmost reverence and care. Then, like alchemists of old, we must meld

these individual fragments into a singular core, imbued with the essence of the stone's true purpose."

As her words weave a vivid tapestry of arcane rituals and forgotten arts, I become acutely aware of the weight of our task. The fate of our world rests upon our shoulders, and the path to salvation is paved with ancient mysteries and the delicate balance of unseen forces.

Erin's gaze meets mine, her eyes gleaming with determination and a flicker of hope. "Once the core is formed, we must navigate the labyrinthine corridors of this house, for the magic doors that hold the power to awaken the stone's potential will reveal themselves at precisely 3 am. Each door bears a unique symbol, a cryptic language etched into the very fabric of reality."

The allure of these magical doors beckons to me, their enigmatic symbols whispering tales of untold power and unimaginable consequences. I can't help but wonder about the origins of these doors, their mysterious creation, and the ancient wisdom that lies behind them.

Erin's voice lowers, tinged with a sense of urgency. "But beware, my friends. Azruleth, the malevolent force that seeks to break through the barrier, is aware of this sacred ritual. He seeks to exploit the ever-shifting nature of the doors, attempting to thwart our efforts and claim the power for himself."

Suddenly, we hear a knock from the living room, interrupting our conversation. We all turn our heads toward the sound and decide to investigate. The knocks grow louder and more aggressive, coming from the front door. Elaine takes the lead and opens the

door, where we are surprised to find Rune outside. Elaine starts to say something when she recognizes the person standing there and stammers, "J-Janessa?"

# Chapter X

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"Janessa, what brings you here?" Erin inquired, concern evident in her voice. "I heard about the accident at my house and rushed over. Have you seen my other dog?" Janessa responded anxiously. Stammering, I replied, "N-no, I haven't seen another dog."

Janessa continued, explaining her situation, "I left both my dogs, Sky and Maci at home, and since Sky went with you... I—" Interrupting her, Elaine interjected, "Aren't you more worried about Hannah?" Elaine tried to divert Janessa's attention from her missing dog. "Of course, I'm worried about her, but I know she's in good care at the hospital. What I can't say about my dog, Maci. I have to get back to my house now!" Janessa exclaimed, visibly distressed. Sensing the urgency, Elaine gently touched Janessa's shoulder and urged her to follow.

However, Janessa snapped, "Don't touch me!" Elaine, undeterred, pointed towards her car, and Janessa reluctantly nodded. Curious about the location of her car, I asked Janessa softly, "Where's your car?" Janessa, with a hint of frustration, replied, "Look outside, see the sun? It's a beautiful day. I walked to school and left my car in the garage, which probably got wrecked in the explosion." I closed my mouth, realizing I had forgotten I was still barefoot, having walked home without shoes. Rune, now known as Sky, Janessa's dog, jumped into the backseat, while Erin held onto the obsidian diamond and stayed behind.

During the drive to Star Route Street, Elaine engaged in conversation, asking Janessa about her dogs. "For how long have you had these dogs?" she inquired.

Janessa began sharing the story, "I've had these dogs ever since Hannah started living in my house. We found them sitting at the front door one day, without any owner or name tags.

Hannah looked me in the eyes and asked if we could keep them, as long as nobody searched for them. It's been over two years now, and they're ours to keep." I glanced at Janessa through the rearview mirror, and she caught my smile. "I-I haven't had a chance to thank you. I'm sorry if I scared you, but thank you for saving my Hannah," she said with gratitude. Meeting her gaze, I reassured her, "I wasn't scared, just a little shocked. I understand your feelings; they must all be mixed, not knowing which ones to show and which ones to hide." A smile crossed Janessa's face, and she nodded. "You are very wise, my child. I'm hoping to get to know you more. Hannah couldn't stop talking about you; she was thrilled to have you as her friend," Janessa revealed. Surprised, I asked, "She talked about me?" Janessa confirmed, "Yes, she called me as soon as she left from visiting you. I'm so happy for her to open up again. I remember her always being so happy. But after her parents died in a fire, her whole life felt like it was crushing her. She couldn't bear the rumors and bullying at school, so she accepted her life and started bullying others. There was nothing else I could do to stop her except sending her away for treatment. After a month, she started getting better, and when she came back, she couldn't remember a thing. From that day on, I decided to take care of her and make her feel—" Elaine interrupted gently, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but we've arrived."

We stepped out of the car and surveyed the scene in front of us. The explosion had left a trail of destruction, with debris scattered all around. Janessa's house, or what was left of it, stood in ruins, charred and barely recognizable. The smell of smoke lingered in the air, a reminder of the devastating incident that had taken place.

Janessa's eyes welled up with tears as she took in the sight. She rushed forward, calling out for her missing dog, Maci. "Maci! Where are you, girl?" Her voice echoed through the desolate street, but there was no response. It was as if Maci had vanished.

Elaine placed a comforting hand on Janessa's shoulder and said, "We'll find her, Janessa. Let's search the area and see if we can locate her." Janessa nodded, her determination outweighing her grief.

Together, we combed through the wreckage, carefully sifting through the remnants of what was once Janessa's home. We called out for Maci, hoping for any sign of her. The minutes turned into hours, but there was still no trace of the missing dog.

As dusk began to settle, casting long shadows over the destruction, Janessa's hope started to wane. Tears streamed down her face as she sank to her knees, feeling defeated. "I've lost everything," she whispered, her voice filled with sorrow.

Elaine knelt down beside her, offering a comforting embrace. "I understand your pain, Janessa. But remember, we're here for you. We'll do everything we can to help you find Maci." Her words carried a sense of reassurance, offering a glimmer of hope in the midst of despair. Just as Janessa was about to give up, a faint

whimper caught our attention. We turned our heads, searching for the source of the sound. And there, amidst the rubble, we spotted Maci. She was injured and frightened, but she was alive.

Janessa's face lit up with a mixture of relief and joy. She rushed towards Maci, gathering her into her arms, showering her with affectionate kisses. "Oh, Maci, I thought I lost you," she exclaimed, her voice choked with emotion.

With Maci safely in her embrace, Janessa's spirits lifted. Despite the loss and devastation surrounding her, she found solace in the fact that her beloved dog had been found. And in that moment, she realized that she wasn't alone. She had friends by her side who would support her through this challenging time.

As the night grew darker, we made arrangements for Janessa and Maci to stay with a nearby neighbor temporarily. They offered their spare room and some comfort amidst the chaos. It was a small gesture, but it meant the world to Janessa.

# Chapter XI

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What an eventful day it had been! So many things happened all at once, turning my world upside down. As the sun went down, painting the sky with a warm golden color, I found myself caught up in a whirlwind of feelings and discoveries.

Needing a break from all the chaos, I stepped into the cozy haven of my bathroom. The steam from the hot shower wrapped around me, making me feel refreshed and washing away all the troubles of the day. The water flowed over me, bringing a sense of calm and energy. It felt like each drop was carrying away the weight on my shoulders, giving me a little break from all the busyness.

But just as I closed my eyes, enjoying the peacefulness, something caught my attention. I quickly opened my eyes and looked into the bathroom mirror. There, through the steam, I caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure behind me. It sent a shiver down my spine, a spooky feeling that made me uneasy. The figure seemed to be staring at me with a mysterious intensity, making me wonder who or what it was. I blinked, hoping it was just a trick of the light, but the figure stayed there, a reminder that the mysterious presence wasn't confined to the mortuary.

The next day arrived, and with a mix of nervousness and determination, I headed back to school. As I walked through the familiar hallways, I felt a rush of emotions—relief, excitement,

and a little bit of worry. I couldn't wait to see my dear friends, Jake, Alisha, Anthony, and Liam.

It didn't take long to find them. Their smiles greeted me with a mix of relief and curiosity. I could tell they were happy to see me and eager to know what had been going on in my life.

Finding a quiet spot away from prying eyes, I gathered my friends around me. "Where's Liam?" I asked the others. "He's out sick." Alisha sighed. I took a deep breath, ready to share the story that had turned my world upside down. Their eyes were fixed on me, waiting to hear what I had to say.

I told them a bit about Hannah's struggles, the mysterious figure that had been chasing us, and the mortuary that rests below our feet. Their faces showed disbelief and shock, just like I had felt when I first learned about it. I could see their minds working, trying to understand and figure out how they could help.

As we digested the truth, we realized we couldn't face this alone. We needed each other, a team to stand against the unknown. So, we made our way to my house, where I would reveal the secrets hidden inside.

Gathering in my cozy living room, surrounded by familiar things, I painted a clear picture of the mysterious figure's presence in my home. I shared the whispers that echoed through the halls, the strange shadows we saw, and the constant feeling of something ominous lurking around. The room fell silent, and we all felt the gravity of the situation.

Suddenly, a realization struck me, and I turned my attention toward Alisha. "Alisha, where did you put that obsidian stone thing from our chemistry lesson?" Alisha locked eyes with me, then glanced at everyone in the room. "My parents have it, why?" I furrowed my brow. "Do you remember what color the diamonds on it were?" Alisha furrowed her brow in deep thought. "I can't recall," she admitted with a sigh. "Why do you ask?"

I rose from the couch and made my way to the hallway, with everyone's curious eyes tracking my movements. I walked through the hallway and led them up the stairs. At the bridge-crossing, I invited them to follow. "Aunt Erin? Where are you?" I called out. Erin's voice echoed back, "I'm in the attic!" We crossed the bridge to the other side of the house and ascended the ladder to reach the attic.

As we gathered in the attic, Erin turned her attention to us. "Are these your classmates?" she asked kindly, wearing a friendly smile. I glanced at my friends to confirm. "They sure are, right?" I asked with a playful wink. Anthony, however, couldn't resist butting in. "Are you being sarcastic?" he questioned. Alisha let out a laugh and patted Anthony's shoulder. "Watch out, you might bruise," she teased. Anthony, not amused, whined, "Ouch, be careful!" Alisha's laughter grew louder. "My bad, didn't know you were that sensitive." We all turned our attention to Anthony, and Jake couldn't help himself from adding, "Are you blushing?" Anthony retorted, "What? I'm not!" in an annoyed tone.

Silence settled among us once more, and we redirected our focus toward Erin, who was engrossed in her experiments with the obsidian diamond. "Have you discovered anything new?" I inquired. Erin shook her head. "No, I haven't. I've combed through

all these old books and scrolls, but none of them provide the answers we need." Alisha chimed in, "What exactly are you looking for?" Erin met her gaze and then glanced at me. "We need green obsidian diamonds, but they're incredibly rare. I'm wondering if there's a way to make them turn green, granting them the powers we require." Anthony seemed taken aback, stuttering as he questioned, "P-powers? You mean like magic?" Erin locked eyes with him and then returned her attention to me. "What exactly have you told them?" I reassured her, "Not much, just a bit about Azruleth, the mortuary, and what happened to Hannah." Erin looked at our group and picked up a book. Flipping through the pages, I caught glimpses of some headlines:

- Magic, Fact or Fiction?
- Demons and Their Secrets
- Nightmoor and Its Runes
- Unraveling Mortuary Mysteries
- The True Nature of Demons...

Ah, here it is. I looked at Erin and then back at the book; the headline read: "Power Rings." Erin gazed at us and began reading.

## **Power Rings**

The power rings were famous as mighty magical objects. People thought they were originally created by dark mages, giving folks more power over the universe. But, in doing that, nasty, or let's just say, evil creatures started wandering the streets. They could feel when there was magic nearby.

For a long time, going outside became really scary. As time went on, these evil creatures got stronger. They could tell if someone had any magic. When a few people in the town started to go missing, people got scared. To

stop these bad things, the dark mage had to go to the highest mountain and the darkest part of the ocean to get all the special colored Obsidian Diamonds, each with its own power. Here's a list of the colors and what they do:

- Ocean-Blue makes the Ring of Claircognizance.
- Dark-Purple makes the Ring of Resurrection.
- Red makes the Ring of Strength.
- Aqua makes the Ring of Gateways.
- Blue makes the Ring of Flight.
- Green makes the Ring of Binding.

Erin stopped and looked at the page. Some of the words seemed hard to read. "Can I take a look?" I asked with a hopeful smile. Erin turned the book around so I could see it.

- .U.P.. makes the Ring of Eldritch.
- Orange makes the Ring of Animal S.ryer.
- P.nk makes the Ring of Mending.
- Cy.. makes the Ring of Multipresence.
- Combining ..... and ..nk makes the .i.g of Duplication.
- Silver makes .he Ring of Immortality.
- ..... makes the Ring of De.th.

Counting all these different rings, you end up with a total of 13 completely different powers.

"13 different rings?!" Anthony exclaimed in amazement. "Does that mean we have to find all of them?" Erin smiled at Anthony. "No, dear, we don't. All we need is the Ring of Binding." Anthony let out a relieved sigh before suddenly realizing something. "Wait... how do we access the Ring of Binding?" Erin's expression turned slightly frustrated. "We don't; all the power rings were destroyed,

and the dark mage is dead. We are on our own." Erin emphasized, her grin showing her determination. "That's why I'm doing research, trying to figure out the potential of these magical rings."

Alisha turned back toward the book. "Can we read a bit more?" Erin smiled and turned the page.

### **The Power Rings and Their True Potential.**

What some people don't know is that you can actually put together all 13 rings to unlock their strongest power! Though it's still just an idea for now, since no one has ever successfully collected all 13. Some folks think that all that power would be too much for anyone to handle and would drive them crazy if they tried to use it. But, there's talk among dark mages that Tri-Lings might be able to use all 13 rings at once. We've never seen a Tri-Ling ourselves, but some say they've seen them near the forest. Some believe they're still around, while others think they never existed or are all gone now.

"Tri-Lings?" Jake asked. "Tri-Lings are said to be part human, part demon, and part god. But it's just a guess, because there's no proof they really exist," Erin added.

# Chapter XII

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"Tri-Lings... you don't actually believe they exist, do you?" Alisha voiced her skepticism, her doubts echoing through the room. "I've seen all sorts of videos about it and their theories; there's no way someone could actually be part human, part demon, and part god!" She leaned back, her arms crossed, clearly unconvinced.

Erin closed the ancient book she had been reading, her eyes still sparkling with the mysteries contained within its pages. "Never say never," she replied, her voice carrying an air of wisdom. "There are still so many things unknown and unexplainable that bind within our current knowledge. The world is a vast and enigmatic place, and sometimes, truth is stranger than fiction."

Jake stepped forward, eager to change the subject. "So, should we grab the obsidian stone from Alisha's parents?" he asked, his curiosity piqued by the prospect of uncovering more about the mysterious rings.

Erin's eyes lit up with excitement. "There's another stone?" she inquired, her interest growing by the second. "Yes, Hannah has one too. We won three stones for winning a chemistry project," I explained. "Why didn't you say so earlier? Let's grab them, both!" With our plan in motion, we decided to split up. Jake and I would visit Hannah in the hospital to retrieve her stone, while Alisha and Anthony would head to Alisha's parents' house for the second

stone. Erin opted to stay behind, determined to continue her research.

Jake extended his hand, offering it to me. I accepted his gesture, the warmth of his touch reassuring. "Let's go visit Hannah!"

## *Alisha*

"We're almost there!" I exclaimed with excitement. Anthony, however, seemed nervous as he gazed into the distant streets. "Do you really think this Azruleth stuff is real? All this talk about magic? It sounds a bit far-fetched to me. I'm only here for Sophia. She believes in it all, and honestly, we've lived in this town our whole lives, and we've never seen anything supernatural happening here." I halted our steps and held Anthony's hand. "I don't know if it's true either, and honestly, I don't really care. Like you said, we're here for Sophia, and Erin seems to believe in this too. Maybe she's had experiences similar to Sophia's, or maybe she knows more than we think."

Anthony couldn't help but smile and burst into laughter. "Why do you look so serious?" he asked, still chuckling. "I was just joking. Let's grab that silly stone thing from your parents' place." Anthony chuckled again.

I gripped his arm tighter, noticing him blushing. "Don't play around, I know you. You weren't joking." Anthony awkwardly smiled and playfully bumped into my shoulder. "Alright, let's get going." I released his arm, and Anthony started walking again. A few meters ahead, I softly grabbed his shoulder and planted a quick kiss on his cheek. Whispering, "You can't catch me!" as I darted away. Anthony stared at me, determination in his eyes. "Oh, you're so in trouble!" We both raced to my house, with me reaching the front door before him. Anthony struggled to catch his breath as I fumbled for my keys to unlock the door.

I focused on the key lock while inserting the key. "So, what was that kiss about anyway?" Anthony whispered, smirking. "Boy, not now." I nudged him aside and walked through the doorway. "Are

"you coming or not?" I asked as Anthony stood there motionless.  
"Y-Yeah, coming!"

I proceeded to the living room, and Anthony closed the front door behind him. "Mom, dad?" The living room appeared empty. I headed to their bedroom and began rummaging through drawers. "Where could they have put it?" I muttered to myself, examining our belongings. "It's not here. Maybe in the kitchen?" "The kitchen? That's an odd place for a stone." "Well, you never know where people stash things," I playfully retorted, bumping into him. Anthony blushed and quickly looked away, heading toward the kitchen. I chuckled softly and followed him.

"Is it here?" I asked Anthony. He wore a disappointed expression. "I can't see it anywhere," he replied, disheartened. Anthony glanced directly at me and started smiling. "What's making you grin, Ant?" I inquired. "N-Nothing, Lish." Anthony chuckled. "Boy, stop staring at me!" Anthony awkwardly averted his gaze.

"Well, I'm not sure where it could be. I've checked upstairs, the living room, the kitchen. I highly doubt my parents would keep a stone in the bathroom, right?" "Why are you asking me? They're your parents." I headed toward the bathroom and opened the door. "Could you check the cabinet under the sink?" I asked Anthony politely. "S-Sure." As Anthony searched through the cabinet, I returned to the hallway.

"Where could this stupid stone be? I'm pretty sure they didn't take it with them. It must be somewhere around here... Why did I even give it to them?" Anthony emerged from the bathroom, a disappointed expression on his face. "You don't even need to tell me," I sighed. "Come on, let's take a break, clear our heads, and try

again later." Anthony pulled me into the living room and guided me to the couch. "Here you go, nice and cozy." He grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around me. "Wow, you look so cute and comfortable in that blanket. Can I hug you?" I stared at Anthony. "W-Wait, did I just say that? I'm so sorry! I—"

I wrapped my arms around him and hugged him tightly, pulling us both under the blanket. "Is this what you wanted?" I asked playfully. Anthony blushed, "Maybe..." I held him even tighter and pulled him onto the couch until I ended up on top of him. "I-I feel kind of stuck now, help!" Anthony pleaded for release. I attempted to get up but couldn't move since the blanket had wrapped around us, with both ends tucked beneath Anthony.

"Uh, I'm kind of stuck too," I awkwardly admitted. "Guess we're stuck with each other for now." I smirked. Anthony gazed at me, his face as red as a tomato. "What did you eat? You're completely red!" I teased. Anthony tried to hide his face. "Where are you going, boy? There's nowhere to hide." I chuckled. As I looked into Anthony's eyes, I saw my own reflection. What was this feeling?

I gently pressed my lips against his, and we shared a kiss. After a few moments, Anthony began to push me away. "I-I can't breathe!" he gasped. I chuckled and tried to shift our positions. Slowly, the blanket loosened, and we could finally breathe properly again. We looked at each other and laughed. "That was something, wasn't—" Anthony returned the favor and kissed me on the lips.

I heard footsteps approaching, and the front door unlocked. I quickly pushed Anthony away, and we both sat up straight on the couch. "Mom? Dad? I had a question, where did you put the stone I gave you?" "Oh, were you looking for it? I kept it in my purse. It

brings good luck, and it seems to dispel negativity around me," my mom explained. "Is it possible to borrow it? I need it for something." "Of course, honey. Here you go." Mom retrieved the stone from her purse and handed it to me. "It's quite beautiful, don't you think?" she commented. "We should probably get going now," I told my mother. I grabbed Anthony's arm and dragged him outside. "Be back by tonight!" my father called out as I ran off with Anthony.

"We've got the stone!" I exclaimed with excitement. Anthony slowed his pace and held onto my arm. "I want to talk about us, what did that mean?" "What did what mean?" I chuckled. "You know..." "Know what?" I teased playfully. "The kiss, Alisha. The kiss!" I reached out toward his lips. "You mean this kiss?" I looked at Anthony, who seemed completely startled. "Uh, earth to Anthony?" "Y-Yeah, I'm sorry. Heh." Anthony chuckled. "D-Does this mean we're a thing now?" I looked at Anthony and smiled. "There's only one way to find out, right?" Anthony's smile grew wider. "Heh, I guess so."

I slowly leaned in for another kiss but suddenly changed my position and playfully tapped his shoulder. "Hey! What was that? Give me that kiss!" Anthony demanded. "Come and catch me!" I said before taking off running.

# Chapter XIII

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Jake closed the front door behind us as we headed towards the hospital. "Are you comfortable hopping on the back of my Harley Davidson XL1200n?" he asked, trying to sound all cool and tough. "Why do you have to make it sound so complicated? Can't you just call it a motorcycle?" I chuckled. "I didn't hear an answer..." Jake teased.

"Do you know which hospital she was brought to?" Jake asked.

"She's in Hillcrest. We'll have to ask the nurse for her exact room," I replied.

Jake swung his leg over the motorcycle and helped me climb on the back. After securing his own helmet, he assisted me with mine. "Hold on tight!" he shouted over the engine's roar, and we set off towards Hillcrest hospital.

## *Alisha*

"Come on, Anthony!" I shouted.

As we reached Sophia's house, I turned around to check where Anthony was and saw him running in the distance. "Faster, Ant!" I chuckled.

As Anthony slowly but surely reached the finish line, he stopped to catch his breath. "How... How are you so fast?!" Anthony said, exhausted. "Boy, that's just a skill issue, nothing more." Anthony looked at me and got back up. "Hmph."

I rang the bell, and we waited for Erin to open up. A few minutes passed, and still, there was no response. Anthony tried ringing the bell again, but there was still no answer. "Maybe she's so busy she can't hear the bell?" Anthony suggested. "Nonsense! Let's find another way in."

I took a few steps back and surveyed the surroundings. "Alisha, what are you doing?" Anthony called me back. "I'm looking for a way in," I replied. "Why don't you just ask Sophia if there's a spare key outside?"

Why hadn't I thought of that before?! "Ant, good call!" I grabbed my phone and searched through my contacts for Sophia Hendrikson.

Sophia, do you know if there's any spare key outside to use? We're locked outside, and your aunt doesn't respond to the bell.

And... It's sent!

"Now that we have another moment, why don't you give me what I want," Anthony pleaded. "Boy, now is not the time!" I chuckled again. "But..." "Shut up, Sophia has responded!"

There's a loose floorboard on the left side of the porch; the key should be there.

I moved Anthony aside and went on my knees to feel for the loose floorboard. "I got it!" I pulled on the edge, and the floorboard lifted up. "Here we go, the key!" I pushed Anthony aside, who was in the way of the front door. "Move, boy!"

I placed the key inside the keyhole but noticed it didn't go in. Was the main key really already in the front door? Who did this?!

"What is it?" Anthony asked. "We've gotten ourselves into another dead end. The key is already in the front door, so I can't put it in from our side." "What nonsense is that?" Anthony exclaimed.

"It's an old door; it uses a single doorlock mechanism, meaning I can't fit two keys in at once. Do I really have to explain everything to you?"

Anthony looked at me and then back at the door. "Does that mean I can finally come claim that kiss?" Anthony smirked. "Boy, you are unbelievable." I walked up to him and kissed him gently on his neck. "Enough for now?"

Anthony grabbed me back and kissed me on the lips. "Boy! We're here on a mission; stop distracting," I said with a red face. Anthony chuckled and grabbed my hand.

We've got the stone from Hannah! Currently on our way back.

You see that? It shouldn't take much longer," I exclaimed.

And then, without warning, a deafening shriek shattered the tranquility, causing both of us to jump in shock.

"W- What was that?!" Anthony whispered nervously. "I don't know, but it came from inside the house!"

I ran back toward the front door and tried to kick it open. "Help me, Anthony!" "Y- You want to break the door down?" "Yes! Now come help me!"

Anthony grabbed a rock and threw it through the door window. "Hey, watch it! You could've hit me!" I shrieked out of sudden fear. "No, oh well, thank you, Anthony, I hadn't thought about that."

"Thank you... Anthony."

I reached my arm through the broken window and unlocked the door. We quickly raced toward the attic when we suddenly noticed a change of furniture. "T- This wasn't here before, right?" Anthony whined, afraid. I looked around, and everything looked covered in some sort of liquid. "N- No. It definitely wasn't." I continued walking up the stairs and over the bridge. "You, wait here," I asked softly. Anthony nodded as I took the ladder up to the attic.

It looked empty. Where was Erin? I walked up to her table and looked through her belongings. One of the books was open on a certain page that looked horrifying.

## Azruleth

Azruleth is a malevolent demon entity steeped in darkness and harboring sinister intentions. His maleficent powers are vast, enabling him to wield control over shadows, summon malevolent spirits, and invoke nightmarish visions. He uses these abilities to spread discord and fear relentlessly. While Azruleth was once known as "Chaos" during his human days, his path took a fateful turn towards darkness. His origins remain veiled in mystery, but his transformation into a malevolent force signifies an irrevocable descent into malevolence.

Initially, Chaos was a human known for sowing chaos and anarchy, earning him the moniker "Chaos." However, as he continued his reign of terror, a heroic figure emerged, putting an end to his destructive spree. Believed to have perished, Chaos instead found himself transported to another realm where he survived and evolved. In the depths of hell, he was chosen to become the demon champion, Azruleth, a role that allowed him to further augment his formidable powers.

Having returned to the human world after harnessing newfound strength, Azruleth faced a changed reality. His once-familiar world had evolved, and he found himself confined within the foreboding confines of the mortuary, the very place that had seemingly ended his existence. This ancient location, steeped in history and supernatural occurrences, now serves as a prison for

Azruleth, intensifying the malevolent aura that envelops him. Enter at your own risk...

"Anthony, come up here!" I called out urgently. Anthony swiftly climbed the ladder to the attic. "What is it?" he asked, a mixture of curiosity and concern in his voice.

I gestured toward the open book on Erin's table. "Take a look at this," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. Anthony leaned over to read the ominous passage about Azruleth, absorbing the chilling details.

"Whoa, this is intense stuff," Anthony murmured, glancing around the attic nervously. The liquid trails seemed to lead in multiple directions, creating a disconcerting maze of possibilities. "Do you think Azruleth could be behind all of this?"

I nodded slowly, my heart racing. "It's possible. Erin might have been researching this creature, and now she's gone. We need to figure out what happened here."

We ventured back downstairs, tracing the enigmatic trails that snaked through the house. The more we explored, the more we realized that whatever had transpired here was nothing short of supernatural. The furniture had been rearranged, and the atmosphere grew more eerie with each passing moment.

Anthony pointed at one of the trails. "Look at this," he said, crouching to examine it. "It's like it's leading somewhere specific."

Following the liquid, we were led to a hidden chamber beneath the house. The air grew colder, and an unsettling feeling washed over us as we descended into the darkness below.

Meanwhile, Sophia and Jake had finally returned to her home, finding Anthony and me missing. She noticed the front door ajar and the shattered window, and her heart pounded with fear. Rushing inside, she called out for us, her voice trembling.

# Chapter XIV

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"Alisha... Anthony? Where are you!?" I called out desperately, my voice echoing through the empty house. I turned to Jake. "Could you quickly close the front door?" I asked, my heart pounding as I walked through the living room.

"What's all this liquid on the furniture?" Jake asked, his voice tense as he hurried back to the front door. I walked up to the liquid and touched it slightly, feeling the cold, slimy texture. "It looks and feels like some kind of drool. We need to find the others right away!" I ventured down the hallway, my steps faltering as I noticed the basement door slightly ajar. A shiver ran down my spine. "Are you down there, guys!?" I shouted down the stairwell.

Silence. No response. Dread settled in the pit of my stomach. I couldn't just stand there. "I have to go check," I told Jake, my voice resolute. "If they're down here, they could be in grave danger." Jake nodded in agreement and followed me into the inky darkness of the basement.

As we descended the creaky stairs, the air grew colder, and the eerie feeling intensified. The liquid trails led us deeper into the basement, through winding corridors and chambers. We exchanged worried glances but pressed on.

Suddenly, we came upon a chamber that was different from the rest. "I don't remember this," I whispered, my voice barely audible.

Sinister symbols adorned the walls, and a malevolent aura permeated the room. In the center, there was a mysterious altar, and a flickering, otherworldly light cast eerie shadows across the floor. Jake looked at me, his expression one of growing concern.

"Wait, you've been down here?" he asked, his voice trembling.

"I have, with my family," I responded, my voice filled with apprehension.

Jake gulped audibly, his hand trembling as he gripped mine. "Sophia, this place gives me the creeps. Are you sure about this?"

I hesitated but knew we couldn't turn back now. "We need to find Alisha and Anthony," I said, my voice determined. "They could be in danger, and whatever's happening here might be connected."

The altar, ancient and decrepit, loomed before us. As we drew closer, I noticed faint etchings on the floor, forming an eerie pentagram. It sent shivers down my spine, but I couldn't place why.

Jake and I exchanged puzzled glances. We were unaware of the dark significance of this symbol, unaware that it marked the spot of Azruleth's return to the human world.

Just as our curiosity led us to inspect further, a figure peeked slightly around the corner. I caught a fleeting glimpse of the silhouette, but I couldn't discern who it was. My heart raced as I felt compelled to follow. Jake followed me, his eyes locked on the enigmatic figure.

We continued through the mortuary, not realizing that we were retracing Azruleth's sinister steps. In time, we stumbled upon Alisha and Anthony, wandering the labyrinthine chambers as we were.

"Thank goodness we found you!" Alisha exclaimed with relief. "We were lost, and it's so creepy down here."

Just as we were about to discuss our situation further, a sudden noise echoed through the darkness. We exchanged wary glances and decided to investigate the source of the disturbance. As we made our way through the shadows, we failed to notice a mysterious figure emerging from the depths.

Aunt Erin stepped into the dim light, her presence unsettling. Her once-familiar features were distorted—her eyes glowed with an eerie crimson, her skin appeared aged and withered, and her hair cascaded in tangled strands. She wore a sinister, crimson dress with a metallic headpiece beneath her hair, and her neck seemed unnaturally elongated. Her voice had taken on a deeper, ominous tone.

"Hi there, kids," Erin greeted us, her voice sending chills down our spines.

We exchanged alarmed glances, and I took cautious steps towards my aunt. "Auntie, are you okay?" I asked, my voice filled with concern. "What happened to you?"

Erin remained motionless, her gaze fixed on us. She didn't respond to my questions, and the bizarre transformation in her appearance left us all bewildered.

"Be careful," Alisha warned, but my concern for Aunt Erin overrode my fear. I took a few more steps toward her.

Alisha began to explain what they had experienced earlier. "Once we got our stone, we rushed back to Erin's house. The front door was locked, and she didn't respond to the doorbell. We had to force our way in. The entire house was covered in this strange liquid, and when we reached the attic, Erin wasn't at her desk. All that remained open was an ancient book about Azruleth."

My attention was torn between Alisha's explanation and my aunt's increasingly bizarre condition. I noticed that Erin's hands were covered in the same mysterious liquid that coated the house.

Taking a few more steps towards her, I called out to Aunt Erin again. "Auntie, please, say something!"

Suddenly, Erin tilted her head, her hair falling to one side. Her arms and legs contorted at unnatural angles. Fear gripped me, and I quickly retreated to the group.

"Guys, it's time to go!" I urged, my voice trembling. Erin's transformation was accelerating, and it was clear that something malevolent had taken control of her.

Erin was now on the ground, her limbs twisted in grotesque ways that defied the laws of nature. We hurriedly made our way out of the chamber, our footsteps echoing with urgency.

As we neared the exit, I couldn't help but glance back. Erin was nowhere to be seen, but I couldn't dwell on that. Our safety was

paramount. We raced up the stairs, hearing bone-chilling sounds echoing from below.

As we all made our way back outside the depths of the basement, I couldn't help but feel a sense of urgency. I immediately closed the basement door behind us, hoping to keep whatever had happened down there contained.

"Alisha, could you give me the stone?" I asked, holding out my hand. She handed over the obsidian stone, and I held it carefully, feeling its weight and the power it contained. "You guys may follow me," I said, motioning for the others to ascend the stairs.

Back in the attic, I walked over to Erin's desk and picked up a magnifying glass. With precision, I examined the two new stones. My obsidian stone had red crystals embedded in it, and I quickly searched the book for information about the Power Rings.

"Ah, I found it," I announced. "I have the power of Strength." A rush of excitement washed over me as I realized the potential of this newfound ability.

Next, I turned my attention to Hannah's stone, which was a vibrant shade of orange. I flipped through the book and discovered that the orange crystal granted the power to communicate with animals. "We could ask Sky and Maci if they know anything!" I suggested, my voice brimming with excitement.

Finally, I examined Alisha's stone, and a wave of disappointment washed over me. I looked up at the group, my expression conflicted. "What is it? Is it not the correct one?" Alisha asked, a mix of annoyance and anticipation in her voice.

"No, it's perfect," I replied, a mischievous glint in my eye. Alisha gave me a perplexed look. "Why are you like this?" she grumbled, her irritation tinged with excitement.

I smiled and refocused on the book, determined to find the answers we needed. What would Erin have done if she had the green crystals? I racked my brain, recalling previous conversations and fragments of information.

I vaguely remembered something about having to extract all the crystals and meld them together. Then, at exactly 3 am, I needed to make them interact with the Rune of Binding. But where and what was this Rune of Binding?

I furiously flipped through the pages of the ancient book, searching for any information about the runes. According to the text, the runes would appear at 3 am, always in a different location within Nightmoor Manor.

I glanced at my phone and checked the time. "We have 5 hours to prepare!" I exclaimed, the urgency in my voice evident. The group exchanged determined looks, and together, we began scouring the house for equipment to extract the crystals and prepare for the impending ritual.

# Chapter XV

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An hour passed since we had gathered in the attic, preparing for the ritual. The tension hung heavy in the air as we waited for the clock to strike 3 am. As we sat in silence, a car pulled into the driveway, and the front door swung open. Elaine, who had just returned from her first day at the police department, looked baffled as she took in the broken window and the strange, oozing liquid that still covered parts of the living room.

"What happened here?" Elaine asked, her voice filled with concern. I quickly stepped forward to explain, recounting the eerie events of the evening.

Elaine listened attentively, her brow furrowing as she tried to make sense of it all. After I finished, she sighed and took a seat. "Erin," she murmured. "Do you have any idea what might have happened?"

Before anyone could respond, we heard voices in the distance, approaching the front door. We all turned our attention toward it as two unfamiliar faces entered the house.

"Mom, Dad?" Alisha exclaimed, her eyes wide with shock. "What are you doing here? It's almost midnight."

Alisha's mother exchanged a knowing look with her husband before responding, "It's a good thing we came." She glanced at the

oozing liquid that marred the living room. "We've seen this before."

A collective gasp filled the room as we absorbed the implications of her words. "Mom, who are you?" Alisha asked, her curiosity piqued.

Alisha's mother sighed and began her tale, a story that sounded like a surreal nightmare. "It all started a few years ago when I was still pregnant with you, little Alisha. That's when Erin, Blake, Elaine, and I were all attacked by an evil entity in Nightmoor."

Elaine looked thoroughly bewildered, running her hand through her hair. "Huh?" she blurted out, unable to comprehend the revelation.

Alisha's mother approached Elaine, her gaze intense. "You probably don't remember any of this because your memory was taken away from you," she explained. "It got too dangerous."

Elaine yanked away from Alisha's mother's touch, her anger bubbling to the surface. "I'm a police officer, for heaven's sake! I should know about this. I can't remember a single thing about Nightmoor. I've never been here before!" she shouted, her voice filled with frustration.

I glanced between Elaine and Alisha's mother, feeling the tension in the room escalate. Alisha's mother decided to take matters into her own hands, ignoring Elaine's protests and making her way toward the attic. We followed closely behind, uncertain of what to expect.

Once in the attic, Alisha's mom took charge of the supplies we had gathered for the crystal extraction. "You're all doing it wrong!" she declared, her voice stern. "Here, I'll help."

My own mother looked ready to explode with fury, but I reached out and gently squeezed her hand. Alisha's mother proceeded to expertly separate the green diamonds from the obsidian, crushing them into fine grains with precision.

Afterward, she grabbed a bowl and placed the crushed diamonds inside. We watched, mesmerized by her expertise. Alisha's mother then walked over to a random door in the attic and set the bowl down.

"What now?" I asked. Alisha looked up at me, her eyes filled with curiosity. Her mother smiled knowingly and responded, "We wait."

We all retreated to the living room and settled in, watching the clock as it inched closer to 3 am. Elaine, still frustrated and desperate for answers, approached Alisha's mother. "Now tell me exactly what happened," she demanded. "How did I suddenly lose my entire memory about magic, Nightmoor, and evil entities trying to murder us?"

Alisha's mom took a deep breath and began to explain, her voice filled with the weight of history. "Seventeen years ago, you, your sister, your husband, and both of us," she gestured toward Alisha's father, "all experienced a near-death event in the town of Nightmoor. Azruleth, a malevolent entity, nearly broke free from his confinement. We managed to stop him in time, but it left a lasting scar on all of us. Since then, we've remained close by, ready

to intervene should Azruleth's presence resurface. Erin contacted us a few hours ago, and here we are."

My mother's confusion was evident as she tried to grasp the gravity of the situation. "Okay, let's make it easier," Alisha's mom suggested, sensing the bewilderment in the room. "Easier? How?" Elaine questioned, her frustration still simmering.

Alisha's mom continued, revealing a glimmer of hope amid the chaos. "There's a way to retrieve lost memories," she explained. "Stay here." With that, she left the room, heading somewhere within the house.

As we waited for her return, our collective anxiety seemed to lessen, and we began talking about lighter topics, trying to distract ourselves from the strange events unfolding around us.

When Alisha's mom returned, she held a white crystal in her hand, along with the ancient book that Erin had used. She approached us cautiously, her expression filled with a mix of concern and determination. "Now, are you sure you want to remember? It wasn't a pleasant experience for you," she warned, her eyes focused on Elaine.

"Yes, show it!" Elaine demanded, her curiosity overriding her apprehension. A sense of urgency hung in the air, as if the truth was finally within our grasp.

"Okay, then, don't say I didn't warn you," Alisha's mom replied with a solemn nod. "There's no way back."

I exchanged a glance with my mother, seeking her reassurance. "Are you sure about this?" I asked her.

"Don't worry about it, love," she reassured me, her voice filled with maternal warmth.

Alisha's mom walked up to Elaine and placed the crystal between her eyes. "Now, focus closely and breathe deeply," she instructed. With a crushing motion of her hand, she shattered the crystal. To our astonishment, the crystal fragments remained suspended in the air, defying gravity.

"Now, close your eyes and take one deep breath," Alisha's mom urged Elaine. The broken crystal pieces seamlessly phased into my mother's head. We watched in silence, anticipation filling the room.

"M-Mom, are you okay? Do you remember anything?" I asked, my voice trembling with concern.

Elaine remained motionless for a moment, her eyes tightly shut. Then, suddenly, she collapsed to the floor.

"Mom?!" I cried out, rushing to her side.

I looked up at Alisha's mom, my worry evident. "What's happening?"

"She should've already woken up by now," Alisha's mom replied, her own concern growing. We knelt by Elaine's side, trying to rouse her from her unconscious state. "Wake up!"

# Chapter XVI

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"Blake, are you coming? The water isn't even that cold!" I called out with a warm smile on my face.

Blake glanced at me and nodded, his own grin growing. He raced toward the pool, his steps nearly leading to a slippery mishap before he jumped right in.

"How's everyone doing?" Blake asked as he joined the group, his excitement evident.

I glanced at the others. Then, a playful water war erupted as Victoria started sending water our way.

"Ey!" Erin protested with mock indignation, retaliating by creating a massive wave that surged toward Victoria.

As the group continued to frolic in the pool, Victoria eventually decided to leave. "Do you need any help?" Jay inquired, his warm smile directed at her.

"I'm okay, don't you worry about me," Victoria replied, making her way back inside the house. She waved goodbye to the others before disappearing indoors.

Blake, curious about the passage of time, questioned, "How long has it been now?"

"Almost 8 months! Time goes so fast," Jay responded, a touch of nostalgia in his voice. "Do you already have a name for her?" Erin asked, continuing the conversation.

"Victoria and I have been thinking about naming her Alisha," Jay revealed.

Victoria reappeared from inside the house, and the group's smiles widened. I spoke up, saying, "Welcome to our gang, little Alisha."

Victoria appeared initially taken aback but then broke into a warm smile. Jay, who had exited the pool, approached Victoria and shared a confession. "I hope you don't mind me telling them about Alisha," he admitted.

Victoria gave Jay an odd look but soon smiled. "It's all good."

Blake and I emerged from the refreshing embrace of the pool, our wet skin basking in the warmth of the sun. As droplets of water slid down our glistening bodies, I couldn't help but wear a cheerful smile. The rest of the gang remained in the pool, enjoying the lazy afternoon with the sun kissing their faces.

"Who's ready for dinner?" I called out, my voice tinged with enthusiasm.

Erin, always ready for a good meal, responded without hesitation. "Yes! I'm so hungry. I could really use some dinner right about now."

A grin spread across my face at Erin's hearty appetite. "Well, you'll have to wait for another hour as I'm going to start preparing it."

Erin's excitement turned into playful disappointment as she splashed water in response, sending ripples across the pool. Laughter filled the air as she dove back into the water, and the joyous sound was infectious, making me chuckle.

I turned to Blake, my eyes dancing with mischief. "Blake, let's go make dinner."

He glanced at me with mock reluctance. "Do I have to?"

I couldn't resist teasing him further. "Yes, now let's go," I said, taking his hand and leading him toward the inviting warmth of the house.

As we made our way back into the house, the echoes of our laughter lingered in the air. But as we approached the kitchen, a strange sight caught my attention. An eerie glow emanated from the slightly ajar basement door, casting an otherworldly hue onto the hallway.

"D- Do you see that?" I asked Blake, my voice trembling with unease.

Blake turned around and bumped into me, causing me to let out a soft laugh. He gave me a curious look. "I don't see anything, Elaine."

I looked back at the basement door, but to my surprise, the ethereal glow had vanished. I ran my fingers through my damp hair, my unease slowly fading. It must have been my imagination playing tricks on me. With a reassuring smile, we continued on our way into the kitchen, leaving the mysterious glow behind.

"We could make a dessert with these apples!" I said, my eyes catching a bowl of fresh apples on the kitchen counter. The idea of a sweet treat had my spirits soaring.

Blake's eyes met mine, a shared excitement passing between us. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked with a grin.

I nodded, matching his grin. "I think so," I said, and we both chimed in unison, "Caramel - Apple pie - turnovers!"

Blake chuckled. "Seriously, you thought about caramel apple turnovers?"

I couldn't help but laugh. "Yeah, we'll go with your apple pie," he agreed, letting go of the apple turnovers idea.

The gang's laughter echoed from outside, and I couldn't have asked for a better backdrop to our evening. I grabbed a few pans and set them on the stove, ready to begin the dinner preparations.

Blake's curiosity got the better of him. "So, what are we making?"

I smiled at him, mischief dancing in my eyes. "Nothing special, something simple."

Blake raised an eyebrow. "How easy do you want it to be?"

I winked at him playfully. "Lasagna!" I declared, my enthusiasm bubbling over.

"But, Elaine, I thought you said something simple?" Blake looked at me, surprised.

I leaned closer, my voice a conspiratorial whisper. "Lasagna is easy to make when you've got an extra pair of hands. Besides, we need something hearty to go with the dessert, right?"

Blake couldn't help but smile. "Whatever makes you happy," he said, sealing the deal with a kiss on my cheek.

With a grin, I set to work on the lasagna, using layers of pasta, savory meat sauce, creamy béchamel, and melty cheese. The rich aromas filled the kitchen, tantalizing my senses as I assembled the layers.

As the lasagna was ready for the oven, I turned my attention to the caramel apple pie. The scent of sliced apples, sugar, and cinnamon wafted through the air as I worked with Blake on the dessert.

With the lasagna and pie prepared, I set both in the ovens, ensuring they'd be ready to surprise our friends when they came inside.

And as the evening continued, with the enticing smells of dinner and dessert filling the air, I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of contentment. Friends, laughter, and shared meals—these were the simple joys that made life truly special.

# Chapter XVII

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My eyes snapped open, and I quickly checked my phone. It was already 11 am!

"Blake, wake up!" I exclaimed, leaping out of bed.

Blake groggily rubbed his eyes. "What's going on?"

"It's 11 am!" I shouted as I hurried into the bathroom.

"Why the rush?" Blake asked, his voice still heavy with sleep.

"I have my job interview today, remember?"

Blake's eyes widened as he realized the time. "Is it today?"

I nodded, my heart racing. "And we have to beat the traffic. It's a 40-minute drive."

Without wasting any more time, we sprang into action. Blake fumbled for his clothes, while I gathered everything I needed for the interview.

We managed to get dressed and out of the house just in time. We each grabbed a sandwich to eat on the way as we rushed to the car. Despite the morning frenzy, we were still on schedule, and I was optimistic about my interview.

But then, reality hit me like a ton of bricks. In the interview room, I received a swift and devastating rejection.

"NO," I cried out in disbelief.

The officer sitting across from me wore a sympathetic expression. "I'm truly sorry, but you weren't selected. The position has been filled."

"But why? Am I not good enough?" My voice quivered, my dreams suddenly slipping away.

"It's not about your qualifications. The previous candidate accepted the job, which forced us to withdraw all other applications."

"That's just not fair! Everyone should have a chance to prove themselves."

The officer nodded, empathetic but unable to change the situation. "I understand your frustration, but there's nothing more we can do. Please use the exit," he said, pointing to the door.

As I walked away, tears welled up in my eyes. I couldn't believe this had happened.

I met Blake in the lobby, and he checked the time on his phone. "It's only 12:03. What happened?"

I ran into his comforting arms, tears streaming down my face. "I d- didn't get in," I stuttered.

Blake embraced me tightly, understanding my profound disappointment. "I'm so sorry, love. Would you like to go back to my place?"

"Y- Yes," I replied, my voice still trembling.

We left the building, the weight of the rejection heavy on my shoulders. As we stepped outside into the warm daylight, I couldn't help but feel like a failure. Blake held my hand, providing a sense of comfort that I desperately needed.

"Let's get something to eat," he suggested. "Maybe a good meal will help take your mind off things."

I managed a weak smile and nodded. We found a nearby cafe, where we took a quiet corner booth. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the air, and I ordered a comforting cappuccino.

As we waited for our food to arrive, I leaned back in the cushioned booth and let out a long sigh. "I can't believe I didn't make it," I said, my voice heavy with disappointment.

Blake reached across the table and took my hand. "Elaine, you're incredibly talented and dedicated. Sometimes these things just don't go our way, but that doesn't define your worth."

I knew he was right, but it was hard not to feel disheartened. The rejection stung, and I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd missed a great opportunity.

Our sandwiches arrived, and we began to eat in silence. Blake was there, supporting me, without the need for words. His presence made a world of difference.

Once we'd finished our meal, I looked up and met his gaze. "Thank you for being here for me," I said, my voice cracking slightly. "I don't know what I'd do without you."

Blake smiled warmly. "We're a team, remember? We face the highs and the lows together. This is just a temporary setback, and I have no doubt you'll achieve great things."

Once we arrived home, Blake led me to our favorite spot in his living room, a cozy window nook with a perfect view of the setting sun. We settled in, the warm afternoon light enveloping us.

As I leaned against the soft cushions, I turned to Blake with a curious smile. "Tell me something good," I said, needing a dose of positivity.

Blake considered it for a moment, then began, "Well, just last week, Mrs. Haggerty from next door told me her dog, Max, chased a squirrel up a tree in her backyard. It was quite the spectacle."

I chuckled. "That's adorable. Max always brings a smile to my face. And I love that Mrs. Haggerty always keeps us in the loop about his adventures."

We shared stories and laughed about the various quirky characters in our neighborhood. It was these simple moments that helped ease the tension and disappointment from earlier in the day.

"I just remembered," Blake said, his eyes lighting up. "A new bakery opened nearby, and they have the most amazing pastries. Shall we go check it out?"

I smiled, appreciating his effort to cheer me up. "That sounds wonderful."

We strolled to the bakery, a quaint little shop with the scent of freshly baked goods wafting from its open door. The display case was filled with an array of colorful pastries, and it was a delight just to look at them.

We selected a variety of treats to share, taking a seat by the window. The first bite of a delicious raspberry-filled croissant almost made me forget about the earlier rejection. It was a reminder that there were still many simple joys in life.

The sun dipped lower on the horizon, casting a warm golden glow across the street. I took another bite of my pastry, savoring the sweet and flaky layers. "Thank you, Blake," I said, feeling genuinely grateful.

He smiled, his eyes filled with affection. "For what?"

"For being my rock, my constant source of support," I replied. "For showing me that even in moments of disappointment, there's always something good to be found."

As we left the bakery, Blake put his arm around me. "Ready to head back home?"

I nodded and smiled, feeling a renewed sense of strength. The disappointment from earlier had dissipated, leaving room for gratitude and optimism.

Upon arriving at Blake's place, our sense of tranquility was disrupted by an unexpected sight. The front door stood slightly ajar. We exchanged puzzled glances. Blake's face tightened with concern as he pushed the door open slowly and cautiously. With precision, he gently closed it behind us, making sure not to make a sound.

The tension in the air was palpable as we moved further into the house, the familiarity of our surroundings feeling suddenly alien.

From above, we heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps coming from the attic. My heart raced, and I turned to Blake, whispering, "Who could it be?"

He furrowed his brow, his protective instincts kicking in. "Who cares," he replied, voice low and determined, "it's in my house. He or she shouldn't be here."

Taking a deep breath, we tiptoed toward the attic hatch, the ladder leading upwards visible in the corner of the room. As we ascended the ladder, our ears strained to catch any hint of who was up there. The footsteps continued, a slow and deliberate pace that sent shivers down my spine.

With each step, my anxiety grew. Who had invaded our home? What could they possibly want? We exchange one last glance before Blake slowly pushed it open, revealing the unknown presence on the other side.

# Chapter XVIII

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The attic was dimly lit, the sunlight filtering through the small window revealing dust motes hanging in the air. Our eyes adjusted, and in the far corner, we spotted a silhouette, hunched over in a shadowy alcove.

"Who's there?" I called out, my voice trembling.

The figure shifted, and as it stepped into the light, my heart skipped a beat. It was Victoria's father, but his eyes held a distant, vacant look.

"Mr. Stevens, what are you doing here?" Blake demanded, his voice filled with concern.

Victoria's father didn't respond, his gaze unyielding. He moved towards a collection of old trinkets, his movements mechanical, as if he were in a trance.

"Mr. Stevens, it's us, Blake and Elaine," I tried to reason with him, but it was as if he couldn't hear us. He seemed entranced by something on the attic floor.

We watched as Victoria's father's gaze shifted toward the attic hatch, his face expressionless.

"He's not acting like himself," Blake whispered to me, his brows furrowed in concern.

We exchanged worried glances before making our way closer to Victoria's father. He continued to stare at the floor, and we noticed an intricate pattern etched into a piece of paper. It looked like a map with strange symbols and lines.

"Mr. Stevens, what is this?" I asked as I picked up the paper, but his response remained eerie silence.

Victoria's father's fixation on the map deepened, and it was clear that whatever had brought him here was connected to these mysterious symbols.

Blake, with his background in cryptography, began to study the symbols. "These markings... I've never seen anything like them. They're not just a regular map. It seems to be some kind of celestial chart."

We slowly led Victoria's father back down the ladder, his trance-like state showing no sign of fading. Once we reached the living room, we had to decide whether to leave him or bring him with us.

With heavy hearts, we locked the attic and decided to visit Erin at home to see if we could uncover any more information.

We took the map and made our way to my house, our hearts heavy with concern for Victoria's father. The drive was filled with an eerie silence, both of us lost in our thoughts, wondering about the significance of the celestial map.

When we arrived at my house, it was as dark and mysterious as ever. The overgrown garden and the ivy-covered windows gave the place an ominous atmosphere.

Entering the house, we found it in a state of disarray. It seemed as if someone had ransacked the place, searching for something. The furniture was overturned, and the once cozy atmosphere was replaced by an unsettling sense of foreboding.

"Erin? Are you here?" I called out, hoping for any sign of her presence. But the only response was the echo of our own voices.

We searched the house, room by room, and discovered a set of notes that Erin had left behind. It was clear that she had been researching the same celestial map we found. Her notes were filled with cryptic references to Nightmoor, the ancient runes, and the power of the crystals.

As we delved deeper into her notes, it became apparent that Erin had uncovered a hidden world, one intertwined with our town's history. She had found references to a mysterious ceremony involving the map and the crystals, which was to take place at the Nightmoor Manor.

We carefully studied the notes, jotting down the key information and drawing connections between the various pieces of the puzzle. It was clear that the Nightmoor Manor was at the center of all these occurrences.

"The celestial map, the ancient runes, and the crystals," I mused aloud, "It seems they all converge at the Nightmoor Manor. But what is the purpose of the ceremony? And who is behind it?"

I couldn't help but wonder if the malevolent presence we had encountered in the attic was connected to this dark ceremony. The name Azruleth never reached my ears before, but there was an ominous aura surrounding all of this, and I couldn't shake the feeling that we were diving deeper into something far more sinister than we had initially anticipated.

I examined the map once more, my eyes narrowing as I identified the marked locations. They formed a circle around Nightmoor Manor, leading us to believe that the ceremony's epicenter lay within its walls.

Just as we mulled over our next steps, a sudden sound caught our attention. The front door, which was close to the living room and office, swung open, and Victoria entered. She had agreed to meet with Erin today but was running late due to unforeseen circumstances.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, my voice filled with genuine curiosity.

Victoria, still catching her breath, responded, "Erin wanted to meet up." She showed me the text from Erin on her phone. "It seemed really important, but I have no clue what she was talking about."

I contemplated Erin's message and looked at Victoria. "Wait. Why would Erin want you to come at night, especially considering you're eight months pregnant?"

Victoria, her eyes filled with determination, replied, "Oh, come on, it's not like now that I can't do anything anymore. I might not be as fast as I was before, but I'm still able to do most things."

I nodded and offered an apologetic smile. "Sorry. I didn't mean to sound rude. It's just that Nightmoor has been a bit unusual lately, and we were caught up in something unexpected."

A strange feeling washed over me, like an invisible pair of eyes watching our every move, making my skin prickle with unease. It sent shivers down my spine, but I kept my discomfort to myself. Blake and Victoria exchanged glances, concern etched in their expressions. They could sense something was amiss, but I couldn't bring myself to mention it.

"We should find Erin," I finally said, pushing my uneasiness aside. "The sooner we have all the pieces, the better."

Both Blake and Victoria turned to me, their worry evident. "Are you sure you're okay?" they asked, almost in unison.

"Y- yeah, I'm fine," I assured them with a forced smile. "Let's not waste any more time."

They hesitated but then followed me. I approached Blake, keeping my voice low as we moved through the darkened streets of Nightmoor.

"One thing that still baffles me is how quickly everything turned into a mess. I mean, I was at home here just yesterday, and everything seemed fine," I said, my voice tinged with confusion.

Blake looked at me, his brow furrowed. "I wish I had answers for you, but we're both navigating uncharted waters here. I don't understand it any better than you do."

"I know, it just feels so strange," I replied, my voice trailing off.

Blake offered a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. We'll find your sister. You know she's tough as nails. She won't go down without a fight."

"I know," I admitted, "I just never thought I'd come to believe some of the things she talked about. It's starting to make sense now. First, the eerie glow in your house, then the unsettling eyes I felt on my back. Who knows what it all means? Maybe that is the reason my interview failed."

Blake scratched his head, clearly mulling over my words. "I don't know about all of that, honey. Although, I must admit, seeing an eerie glow in my house does sound pretty sinister."

"You do believe me, though, right?" I asked, needing the reassurance.

Blake glanced at Victoria and nodded. "Of course we do."

I looked at him, a hint of disbelief in my eyes, but I chose to let it go. The silence of the night was eerie, interrupted only by the occasional hoot of an owl or the rustle of leaves in the gentle breeze.

Victoria broke the silence, her voice barely a whisper. "We're close to Blake's house, Nightmoor Manor."

I nodded, my heart quickening with a mix of hope and fear. We reached the front door, and to our surprise, it stood slightly ajar, once again.

Blake instinctively reached for the door, pushing it open cautiously. We stepped inside, closing the door behind us. As we moved through the dimly lit house, it felt as though every shadow held secrets. Our eyes swept across the room, searching for any sign of Erin or a clue to her whereabouts.

The echoing footsteps we'd heard earlier in this house still haunted my thoughts. My anxiety grew with every passing second.

"Who could it be?" I whispered, my voice trembling.

Victoria and Blake exchanged concerned glances, but none of us had a definitive answer. It was unsettling, the way the atmosphere inside the house seemed to have changed so suddenly.

"Who cares?" Blake responded with a touch of determination. "This is my house, and they shouldn't be here."

"Wait, Dad, is that you?" Victoria said, her voice filled with confusion.

I looked at Blake, my expression shifting from fear to realization. "That's right, we completely forgot about Mr. Stevens."

Victoria turned toward us, her brows furrowed. "Wait, what? Forgot?"

I exchanged a quick glance with Blake. "Your father was suddenly in our attic a few hours ago, and he was acting all strangely."

Victoria's eyes widened with shock. "And so you didn't think about contacting me? His daughter?"

Blake looked back at me, and I could tell he was mentally cursing himself. "Uh, we may have forgotten that part."

"Mr. Stevens was all fixated on a piece of paper," I added. "I thought my sister might know more about it, considering she believes in all these paranormal beings, runes, and whatnot."

Victoria's expression shifted from shock to concern, her worry now directed towards her father. "I should check on him," she said, her tone a mix of determination and anxiety.

We followed her into the kitchen, where Mr. Stevens still stood, entranced by the mysterious map. Victoria gently placed a hand on her father's shoulder.

"Dad, are you okay? It's me, Victoria," she said, her voice filled with concern.

Mr. Stevens finally seemed to snap out of his trance, his vacant eyes refocusing on his daughter. "Victoria? What are you doing here?" He looked around, clearly disoriented.

"I came to meet Erin," Victoria explained, her voice soothing. "But what are you doing here, Dad? How did you get into Blake's house?"

Mr. Stevens tried to gather his thoughts. "I don't... I don't remember exactly. It's all so hazy."

"Dad, it's going to be okay," she whispered, her voice quivering with emotion. She wrapped her arms around him, holding him close. "You're safe now."

As she spoke, Mr. Stevens seemed to lose his grasp on consciousness. His eyelids drooped, and he slumped forward in his daughter's arms. Panic surged through Victoria, and she tightened her grip, her voice desperate.

"Dad? Dad!" she called out, her words choked with tears. "Please, don't leave me. Please."

Tears welled up in Victoria's eyes as she looked down at her father, his face now void of recognition. Her heart ached, watching the man she'd always looked up to become a stranger before her eyes. She cradled him, her voice trembling as she continued to talk to him.

"Remember, Dad, it's me, Victoria. Your daughter. We used to spend hours in the backyard, and you'd tell me stories about the stars. Don't forget, Dad. Please, come back to me."

Blake and I exchanged worried glances, our hearts heavy with the weight of the situation. Victoria's distress was palpable, and we stood by her side, offering whatever support we could.

Victoria clung to her father, her voice quivering as she spoke of cherished memories and moments they had shared. She refused to let go, her love for him driving her to reach into the depths of

his consciousness and pull him back from wherever he had wandered.

"Dad, I know you're in there," she whispered, her voice filled with hope. "Please, come back to us."

Tears welled in Victoria's eyes as her father's vacant gaze slowly shifted, showing glimpses of recognition.

"Dad, we need to get you out of here," Victoria said, her voice growing urgent. "Call an ambulance, anything. He needs to get help!"

I turned to Blake, our shared concern mirrored in our eyes, and he rushed to grab his phone. Dialing 911, he relayed the situation to the operator, requesting an ambulance with a tremor in his voice.

The dispatcher assured us that help was on the way, but each passing moment felt like an eternity as we waited for the paramedics to arrive, praying that Mr. Stevens would regain his clarity before they reached us.

As the seconds ticked by, we clung to the hope that the paramedics would arrive in time. But the universe, it seemed, had a different plan.

The room was filled with a heavy, heart-wrenching silence, only broken by the sound of Mr. Stevens's labored breathing. His eyes, which had begun to show flickers of recognition, now lost that glimmer, and the once-distant look returned. Victoria clung to her father, her voice breaking as she whispered in his ear.

"Dad, please, stay with us. The ambulance is coming. You'll be okay."

She gently cradled her father's head in her arms, her tears falling like a river, but they couldn't wash away the despair that settled over the room. I held Victoria's trembling hand, unable to offer any comfort in the face of such profound grief.

Mr. Stevens's breathing became increasingly shallow, each exhalation weaker than the last. Victoria's cries grew more desperate, her pleas more fervent, but it was as if the life was slowly slipping away from her father, right through her fingers.

With a final, rasping breath, Mr. Stevens's eyes lost their distant look for good, and his gaze turned empty, staring at a world none of us could see. Victoria clung to him, her sobs echoing through the room.

"No, Dad, please, please don't leave me," she cried, her voice a haunting melody of anguish and loss.

The sound of the approaching ambulance siren cut through the stillness of the room, but it was already too late. The paramedics rushed in, their efforts valiant but futile. They confirmed what we already knew, and the unbearable reality settled over us.

Victoria had lost her father, and the world had lost a light that had once shone so brightly. The room felt emptier, colder, as if the warmth and life had been sucked out of it.

Mr. Stevens was only 46. His life, with so much potential ahead of him, had been abruptly cut short. The cruel hand of fate had taken

him away from his family, leaving Victoria with a void that could never be filled.

As we stood there, our hearts heavy with grief, we couldn't help but feel the weight of the unfairness of it all. The ambulance team expressed their condolences and offered support, but their words felt hollow in the face of the profound loss that had engulfed us.

Victoria, overwhelmed by her sorrow, clung to her father's lifeless body.

# Chapter XIX

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"He was the only family I had left," Victoria whispered, her voice quivering with sorrow. "My mother died three years ago, cancer..."

"You don't have to go through this alone," I said gently, my eyes fixed on her. "You will always have us, and Jay. Just don't lose hope."

Victoria's trembling shoulders bore the weight of her sorrow as she sobbed against her father's still chest.

"You're about to become a mother yourself," I continued, my voice a soft murmur. "Just try to stay positive. I know it's hard. I've just gotten out of one of the deepest depressions I've ever been through."

"Victoria, Blake, there's something I need to tell you," I began, my voice barely above a whisper. "My parents... they were constantly fighting when I was a child. I witnessed everything, and it left me deeply traumatized."

Victoria's tearful gaze met mine, and I felt the weight of my past experiences pressing down on me.

"Eventually, my mother couldn't stand it anymore," I continued, tears brimming in my eyes. "So she left. My father has always been

so cold towards her, always taking his job before her. All their plans were always canceled at the last second due to a sudden meeting or event happening inside the company."

The pain of those days, the relentless strife of my parents, was a heavy burden I had long carried.

"And not long after my mother left," I admitted, "my father got a promotion. He only got busier and busier, forgetting about me. I had to start learning how to cook my own meals, since my father was never around."

"Above all that," I confessed, "my mother and I had an unbreakable bond. At first, I didn't understand why she didn't take me away with her."

I recalled the unfulfilled promise of a mother's love and presence, the ache of her absence.

"I had my school musical," I explained, my voice cracking, "which was two years since I last saw my mother. I called and reached out to her, asking if she could join in, watching me perform."

The disappointment of that day, when my mother's seat remained empty, was a sharp thorn in my heart.

"She agreed to," I continued, my tears flowing freely now, "but when the day came, I never saw her..."

The anguish I felt as a young girl, her absence echoing through the years, was a wound that had never truly healed.

"My teacher was trying to keep it light," I said, "and said she probably had a good reason not to show up."

But the unspoken truth was that her absence had marked the beginning of my own inner struggles.

"I couldn't even go to school anymore," I admitted, my voice quivering. "I just didn't see the point anymore. It only got worse later on."

The darkness of depression had enveloped me, and I had struggled to find my way back into the light.

"My mother always told me to reach out if there was anything wrong," I said, "she even sent me so many letters. I sent a few back. It felt like we were old-school pen pals."

The connection I had maintained with her, though strained by distance, had offered moments of solace.

"But it wasn't enough," I confessed, my tears flowing freely. "I needed to see her. So I reached out. But she didn't come."

The pain of rejection, of a mother's absence by choice, had wounded me deeply.

"I've been thinking about it a lot," I said, my voice barely audible, "although those were some of the toughest four years of my life, I managed."

"I came home one day," I continued, "from school, and accidentally heard my father talking on the phone. I wanted to surprise him."

The memories I had long buried resurfaced, and my voice wavered as I recounted the pivotal moment that had shaken my world.

"I can't believe you even dared to say that on her birthday," I recalled, the pain of that memory still fresh. "She's dead, please... just leave me! I heard my father on the phone."

The devastating truth had come crashing down, confirming my worst fears.

"I had just turned 15," I went on, my voice quivering, "and my grandmother reached out to me. She was holding a letter. At first, I didn't want anything to do with it, because how could they hide my mother's death from me for so long? She's been dead for 2 whole years!? Without me knowing? How wrong is that!"

The shock and betrayal of that discovery still resonated within me, even as I spoke the words aloud.

"At first, I declined," I admitted, "but my grandma said it was from my mother. She left it on the stairs and walked out."

The moment of decision, standing on the precipice of a painful truth, was etched in my memory.

"I stood still for a couple seconds before finally taking it," I said, my voice a mere whisper.

The letter had been a portal to my mother's final words, a window into the past.

"As I walked upstairs, I started to read it," I continued, my breath trembling. "I couldn't control my breath."

The emotions that surged as I read her words, the revelations contained in that letter, were overwhelming.

"She's been sick, cancer," I confessed, tears streaming down my cheeks. "She did come to my school musical. Just not on the seat I reserved for her. She didn't want me to see her suffering."

The love and sacrifice in my mother's actions were a bittersweet revelation that tore at my heart.

"It broke me," I admitted, my voice choked with emotion, "knowing this four years later. And as I was about to give in, wanting to go to my mother, I met Blake. He just got transferred to high school. In my class."

The unexpected arrival of Blake in my life had been a turning point, offering hope amid the shadows.

"That's when my heart stopped," I confessed, my eyes welling with emotion. "I thought, could this be? Could this be my second chance?"

Blake's presence had been a lifeline, a chance at happiness when I needed it most.

I blinked away my tears and took a deep breath, regaining my composure. As I returned to the present moment, I looked at Blake and Victoria, my dear friends who had now become the keepers of my pain.

"You looked so handsome the first day I met you," I said, attempting to lighten the mood. "I couldn't believe my eyes. You gave me hope through those tough days."

A faint smile graced my lips as I remembered our first meeting, a glimmer of joy amid the darkness.

However, the memory of my past was still heavy, and I felt a pang of guilt for unloading it on Victoria in her moment of grief. I turned to her and the weight of my own struggles was evident in my eyes.

"I'm sorry," I said, my voice soft and filled with regret. "I didn't mean to..."

Before I could finish my sentence, Blake pulled me into a warm embrace, his voice gentle and understanding. "I... I didn't know any of this..."

His words were a soothing balm, and I appreciated the depth of his empathy.

"I know," I replied, my voice tinged with sadness. "I just didn't want to remember it, but it's always been inside of me. I cannot get rid of it. It gave me trauma, and I still struggle to this day. But I'm just an amazing hider of my feelings."

Victoria looked at me, her eyes filled with compassion and understanding. She opened her arms and pulled me close, offering the comfort that I had needed for so long.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," she whispered, her voice filled with sincerity. "I know the story was awful, but thank you for distracting me."

I chuckled lightly, grateful for her support. "Once again, I'm sorry. It's just been stuck in my head, wanting to come out."

Blake's gaze locked with mine, and he spoke softly, offering reassurance and understanding. "It's okay, darling. I'm glad you told us...."

# Chapter XX

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I hear a strange noise coming from the hallway. The sound pierces through the heavy atmosphere in the house, pulling me out of my thoughts and causing my heart to race. I glance up at Blake, who is comforting Victoria, and help her to her feet.

"What's that noise?" I inquire, my voice trembling slightly.

Blake considers for a moment, his brows furrowed in thought. "The medics left a few minutes ago with Victoria's father; maybe one of them came back?"

"Maybe..." I respond, but uncertainty lingers in the back of my mind.

"Ugh, I need to clear my head. Maybe I could use a nice soothing bath to clear up some space."

Blake and Victoria remain downstairs, and I make my way to the bathroom. As I turn on the water and begin preparing for the bath, I can't shake the feeling of unease that has settled in the pit of my stomach. I try to reassure myself that it's just the stress of the situation, but it's hard to shake the sense of foreboding that clings to me.

Once the bath is ready, I step in, hoping the warm water will help calm my nerves. But as I settle in and close my eyes, I feel an

abrupt chill in the air, followed by a sudden cold breath on the nape of my neck. It sends shivers coursing through my body, and I jerk upright in the tub.

"Who- Who's there?" I stammer, my voice quivering, my eyes darting around the bathroom, searching for any sign of an intruder.

My rational side tries to assert itself as I quickly scold myself, "Get a grip!"

The soothing water envelops me, and for a moment, I let myself relax. I submerge my face in the water, allowing the momentary respite to wash over me.

But as I sink further into the bath and feel my oxygen supply wane, panic sets in. I quickly push myself to the surface, gasping for air.

"Everything is okay. I'm okay," I mutter to reassure myself, though the encounter has left me shaken.

I look at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, water droplets clinging to the edges of my vision. Tears gather at the corners of my eyes, and I feel an overwhelming sense of vulnerability.

"N-nothing is okay," I whisper, the words escaping my trembling lips. "Why do I feel so weak..."

I turn away from the mirror, lie back in the tub, and close my eyes. In the stillness of the bathroom, I struggle to hold back my tears.

"Don't cry, there's no need," I murmur softly, attempting to find strength within myself, even as a heavy sadness lingers.

The sound of footsteps approaches the bathroom, and I quickly wipe away my tears. Blake and Victoria stand in the doorway, their faces etched with concern.

"Elaine, is everything alright?" Blake asks, a hint of worry in his voice.

I open my mouth to respond, but before any words escape, the bathroom door swings shut with a force that startles both Blake and Victoria, pushing them out into the hallway.

"Elaine?! Are you okay? What just happened?!" Blake calls out, his voice filled with concern. Victoria tries to open the door, but it's closed shut, resisting her efforts. "Elaine, can you see if it's locked on your side?" Victoria suggests, her worry growing. "Elaine?" Blake calls again, his anxiety palpable.

A few seconds of tense silence pass, and without hesitation, Blake decides to take action. He breaks down the bathroom door, the sound echoing through the house.

"Elaine, are you okay?" Blake enters cautiously, his eyes scanning the room, but the bathroom seems empty.

"Elaine!?" Victoria adds, her concern mirroring Blake's.

An eerie sound emanates from below the bathroom tiles, catching their attention. "Elaine, is that you?!" Blake calls out.

Blake and Victoria place their hands on the cold bathroom tiles and feel around, searching for any clues.

"I- I think I feel something, this tile feels different. I think it's loose!" Victoria says, her voice tinged with shock. Blake goes toward the loose tile Victoria pointed out and feels around the edges. "I think I got it!" Blake exclaims, a mixture of fear and determination in his voice.

Victoria helps Blake move the loose tile aside, revealing a dark opening beneath....

"Guys?"

I look around, but I can barely see; it's all so dark. There's just a small firelight lighting the room. My head throbs with pain as I regain consciousness. The darkness envelops me, and I struggle to make sense of my surroundings.

"Guys?"

My voice echoes in the cavernous space. Through the dim light of a flickering flame, I begin to discern the outlines of a room. The walls are rough-hewn stone, and the air is heavy with a musty, ancient scent.

"Where am I?" I mumble, trying to shake off the disorientation. As I attempt to move, I realize I'm bound to a cold, hard surface—a stone table.

The small flame dances on a makeshift torch mounted on the wall, casting eerie shadows that seem to whisper secrets of the forgotten place. I strain to see beyond the limited illumination.

"Is anyone there?" I call out again, my voice echoing through the mysterious chamber. Silence greets me, broken only by the faint crackling of the fire.

In the distance, I hear an unsettling sound—a slow, deliberate scraping that sends shivers down my spine. The noise grows closer, and my heartbeat quickens.

Suddenly, a figure emerges from the shadows. A hooded silhouette, cloaked in darkness, moves steadily toward me. Panic clenches at my chest as I try to make out the features of the approaching stranger.

"Who are you? Where am I?" I demand, my voice more insistent now. The hooded figure remains silent, the details of their face still obscured.

The mysterious figure reaches the table where I'm restrained, and with an eerie calmness, they extend a hand to touch my forehead.

A surge of energy courses through me as if a dormant power within has been awakened. Visions flash before my eyes—images of the ancient mortuary, cryptic symbols, and the labyrinthine passageways.

As quickly as the visions come, they vanish, leaving me breathless and bewildered. The hooded figure withdraws, their enigmatic purpose unfathomable.

"Tell me what's happening! Where are Blake and Victoria?" I demand answers, my frustration mounting.

The hooded figure remains silent, gesturing toward a narrow passage that leads deeper into the underground chamber. A dim glow emanates from its depths.

With trepidation, I follow the path, my steps echoing in the hollow space. The passage opens into a larger chamber bathed in an ethereal blue light. Strange markings adorn the walls, and at the center of the room stands an ancient pedestal.

On the pedestal lies a peculiar key—an exact match to the one I used to unlock the front door of Blake's house.

"Is this the key to the mysteries of Nightmoor?" I murmur to myself. The hooded figure nods, affirming the connection between the key, the ancient mortuary, and the hidden chamber.

As I contemplate my next move, the chamber seems to respond to my newfound awareness. The stone walls resonate with a distant hum, and the symbols come to life, glowing with an otherworldly energy.

The hooded figure gestures toward a concealed passage that I hadn't noticed before.

"H- help me," the hooded figure tries to whisper the words hanging in the air.

"Help you?" I ask the hooded figure.

He remains silent, watching me with his soulless red eyes, piercing through the dense air. Determination rises within me, and I take a step closer to the hooded figure, slowly reaching out to him.

I carefully grab his hood and try to reveal his face. The hooded figure looks at me and follows my movement. He reaches out to me and softly touches my hair. "What happened to you?" I ask back.

He opens his mouth and tries to speak, but no sound comes out. He's missing his tongue!?

I quickly remove his hood and look him in the eyes.

Wait, Blake?!

He starts to smile and hugs me.

"I-, mmi.. B."

"Blake, I can't understand you..."

"What happened to you?" I ask.

Blake takes a step back and stares at me.

"Oh wait, you can't talk.. I'm so sorry, I'm just really confused. It's just that you spoke to me a moment ago in the bathroom."

Blake looks at me, his eyes glowing furious red. "T.h..... N..."

I look at Blake, wait. How long have you been here?

Blake grabs my hand and pushes me into another room. He looks at me and places me in the center. "Where did you take me? I can't see anything; it's so dark in here."

Blake walks away and leaves me standing in the center. "Blake, what are you doing?" I try to focus my eyes into the darkness, but it's just too dark, the fog is too thick, too dense.

Suddenly, the flames go on, and the room gets lit up in a dark red, orange-ish glow. I look around, and the entire room is filled with stripes and marks. I turn back towards Blake, who's standing against the wall.

"Are these markings the number of days you've been down here?" Blake nods, tears forming in his eyes.

I take another step back toward the center and take another good look. "You've been down here for weeks!?" I say shocked.

Blake falls down on the floor.

"Hey, hey. I'm here now. Let's find a way out of here, together." Blake looks up at me, and with a soft smile, he nods.

"Elaine!?" I hear Victoria shouting in the distance.

"Wait, Victoria's down here too!?" Blake looks up at me, worried. "Hey, hey... it's okay." "Victoria, I'm here! Follow my voice!"

I look back at Blake and get him back on his feet; he places his arm around my neck, and we take a few steps. "Victoria, I can hear you. Follow my voice!"

"Elaine!? I hear you, I'm coming!"

I try to focus my sight in the darkness and see a glow in the distance. "Blake, I think that's Victoria's flashlight!" Blake's worry enlarges. "Hey, Blake. It's okay. You're with me!" "I think I can see Victoria's silhouette!"

Blake halts his motion, moving his arms all around. "Hey, hey! What's the matter with you? It's just Victoria!" I look at him; he's completely freezing up. I carefully turn around and look back at Victoria. "T- there are two silhouettes?!"

"Elaine, we can see you. I hear Blake shouting in the distance."

"Wait, if that's Blake? I slowly turn back around, who are you?!"

# Chapter XXI

---



"Wait, if that's Blake?" I slowly turn back around, eyeing the hooded figure who had posed as Blake. "Who are you?!"

The hooded figure remains silent, his eyes fixed on mine, and the air thickens with tension.

Victoria's silhouette draws nearer, the glow of her flashlight revealing her worried expression. "Elaine, we're here. What's going on?"

I point at the hooded figure, my voice shaky. "That's not Blake."

Victoria's eyes widen, and her flashlight fixes on the imposter. "Who are you?" she demands, her tone filled with a mix of fear and anger.

The hooded figure takes a step back, seemingly aware that his deceit has been exposed. In the distance, I hear the muffled sound of Blake's voice, his calls for me growing louder.

"We need to find the real Blake," I declare, my mind racing with a surge of urgency. "Victoria, stay close."

As we navigate through the dimly lit corridors, I hear Blake's voice echoing from different directions. The hooded imposter

follows us, his presence a sinister shadow in our pursuit of the genuine Blake.

"Blake! Where are you?" I shout, my voice echoing through the labyrinthine passages.

The sound of footsteps draws near, and I turn a corner to find the real Blake. Relief washes over me as our eyes lock, confirming his safety. He rushes towards us, his expression a mix of confusion and concern.

"Elaine, what's happening?" Blake asks, his voice filled with genuine worry.

I quickly explain the situation, emphasizing the presence of the hooded imposter. As I recount the events in the room with the markings, I notice the imposter lingering in the shadows, observing our conversation.

"Where did he go?" Victoria whispers, her flashlight darting around the room.

"I don't know, but we have to find him before he causes more trouble," Blake asserts.

The air grows tense as we split up, searching the dark corridors for any sign of the hooded imposter. The labyrinth seems to play tricks on our senses, with echoes and shadows distorting our perception.

Suddenly, a distant voice calls out, "Elaine! Blake!"

We follow the sound, our footsteps echoing through the ancient passageways. The imposter's voice grows clearer, leading us deeper into the underground maze.

As we turn a corner, we find ourselves in a larger chamber, its walls adorned with strange symbols. At the center stands the hooded figure, his silhouette merging with the darkness.

"Elaine, Blake, welcome," he utters, his voice echoing with an otherworldly resonance.

"What do you want?" Blake demands, his stance unwavering.

The imposter lowers his hood, revealing a face that mirrors Blake's, yet twisted with an unnatural malevolence. "I am the embodiment of the darkness within. I am the shadow that lingers when the light fades."

A surge of fear courses through me, but Blake stands firm. "You won't manipulate us. What's your purpose here?"

The imposter chuckles, the sound sending shivers down our spines. "I feed on the fear and uncertainty within you. The more you resist, the stronger I become."

"We won't let you control us," Victoria asserts, her voice unwavering.

The imposter's eyes gleam with an unsettling intensity. "You have no choice. The labyrinth feeds on your deepest fears, and I am its harbinger."

As the imposter's ominous words echo in the shifting chamber, a palpable tension fills the air. The symbols on the walls pulse with an otherworldly energy, and a sense of impending doom settles over us.

"We need to find a way out of here," Blake declares, his eyes scanning the walls for any sign of an exit.

The imposter's laughter intensifies, resonating through the labyrinth. "There is no escape. The labyrinth bends to my will."

Suddenly, the darkness seems to coalesce around the imposter, swirling and twisting until it takes on a tangible form. Before our eyes, he transforms into an enormous creature, its grotesque features contorted in a nightmarish visage.

"You can call me Azruleth," the creature declares with a distorted voice that reverberates through the chamber.

Fear grips my heart as I take in the monstrous form before us. The creature, Azruleth, towers over us, its presence exuding malevolence. The shifting symbols on the walls seem to react to its transformation, glowing with an unholy light.

"What are you?" Victoria demands, her voice filled with a mix of fear and defiance.

Azruleth's eyes, now glowing with an eerie intensity, fixate on each of us in turn. "I am a manifestation of the fears that lurk within the depths of this labyrinth. I am the embodiment of your nightmares."

"We won't succumb to you," Blake declares, his determination unwavering.

Azruleth lets out a guttural laugh, the sound reverberating through the chamber like a dark symphony. "Resistance is futile. Your fears are my sustenance, and I have feasted on the despair of countless souls trapped in this labyrinth."

The walls of the chamber seem to close in, the symbols pulsating with an increasing intensity. The air becomes thick with an oppressive force, and I feel the weight of our collective fears pressing down on us.

"We need to find a way to fight back," Victoria whispers, her eyes darting around the chamber.

Blake, despite the dire situation, maintains his composure. "There must be a weakness. We can't let it feed on our fear."

As Azruleth advances, the markings on the walls flare with a sinister glow. The air itself seems to warp and twist in response to its malevolent presence.

"Your struggles amuse me," Azruleth taunts, its voice a haunting melody. "But you are powerless against the darkness within."

"Stay together," Blake commands, rallying us. "If this creature feeds on our fears, then we need to face them head-on. Don't let it break your will."

The air becomes charged with tension as Azruleth raises its dark, twisted appendages. Suddenly, a surge of energy courses through

the chamber, and Azruleth sends a wave of power right towards Blake. The force is overwhelming, sending him flying towards the wall and breaking our group apart.

"Blake!?" I shout worried, desperately running towards him. But a new wave of energy disrupts my movement. "I- I can't move!" I say with a shaky voice.

"I can't either," Victoria says, her voice filled with concern.

Azruleth, reveling in its newfound dominance, sends power through the floor, lifting Blake up in the air. "Let's see how strong you are without your beloved Blake," Azruleth laughs maniacally.

I look around the chamber, trying to make sense of the chaos, and notice a new silhouette. "W- Who's that?" I carefully whisper towards Victoria.

"I'm not sure I want to know!" Victoria replies, fear evident in her eyes.

Suddenly, an awful shriek startles us. The sound of bones cracking echoes through the chamber. I glance back at Blake, horrified. "How's that for a human? He can bend quite well. Does he do any athletics?" Azruleth smiles contorted. "Let's check his neck."

Azruleth sends his power pulsating through Blake, who screams in pain, hanging in the air. Blake's arms and legs are broken and twisted, dangling down from his body in ways the human body shouldn't bend.

"I- I can't watch," Victoria says, paranoid and scared. I quickly glance back at the figure as a sudden light shines at it. "Erin? I think that's Erin!" I tell Victoria.

Victoria looks up and sees Erin too, "Erin, help!" Victoria shouts. Erin looks at us, putting her hand on her face. "How are you guys supposed to let me help if you blow my cover!?" Erin shouts back.

Azruleth looks straight into Erin's eyes and throws Blake away. "Erin, get out of here!" I scream in fear. But Erin doesn't move a muscle. "This ends here!"

Azruleth laughs maniacally, "And how are you going to achieve that?" Erin flashes a ring out of her pocket and puts it on her finger. "Be gone!" she shouts. Victoria and I look at Erin, anticipation hanging in the air.

"Erin, get out!"

Erin looks back at us, "This should've worked. I'm sure I did it correctly." Azruleth comes down and looks Erin in her eyes. "You're next!" he says, reaching his arm straight for Erin.

Power pulsates straight through Erin, and blood gushes out of her mouth. "I- ..." Power ignites inside her ring, and a malevolent entity shows up. "Your time ends now, Azruleth!" I hear in the distance.

The ring's entity enlarges and swallows Azruleth whole. "NOOO, This doesn't end here! I'll return, just you wait!" Azruleth says with his final breath. The entity slowly returns back into Erin's ring, and

the great silence surrounds us. Our willpower slowly comes back to us, and we are able to move our bodies again.

"Blake!" I shout as I run quickly towards him. He remains silent. "Check if he's breathing!" Victoria suggests, scared. "I- I can't lose him..." I say shakily on my feet. Erin pushes us aside and goes on her knees, checking for a pulse. "I don't feel or hear anything. I'm so sorry."

"B- Blake... AHHHHH! Screw this!"

I can't take this any longer... I quickly take my sight away from Blake, "H- he didn't deserve this..." "I- ..." I turn and look at Erin, she comes running towards me. "Elaine, I'm so sorry." I go up to her and let myself fall into her arms. Tears flow out like waterfalls. "I... I don't know how I can continue like this, pretending this all didn't happen." "Hey, hey. it's going to be okay. Erin assures me. Victoria slowly takes a few steps closer and gets on her knees, hugging us on the floor.

"I wish there was a way to forget this ever happened..."

*"M-Mom, are you okay? Do you remember anything?"*

*"S- Sophia... I -"*

*Elaine remained motionless for a moment, her eyes tightly shut. Then, suddenly, she collapsed to the floor.*

*"Mom?!" I cried out, rushing to her side.*

*I looked up at Alisha's mom, my worry evident. "What's happening?"*

*"She should've already woken up by now," Alisha's mom replied, her own concern growing. We knelt by Elaine's side, trying to rouse her from her unconscious state. "Wake up!"*

As Alisha's mom spoke, Elaine's eyes fluttered open. She looked around, her gaze filled with confusion and distress. I could see the torment in her eyes as the memories flooded back.

"Elaine, are you okay?" I asked, my voice filled with worry.

Elaine remained silent for a moment, her eyes tightly shut. Then, suddenly, she collapsed to the floor.

"Mom?!" Sophia cried out, rushing to her side.

I looked up at Alisha's mom, my worry evident. "What's happening?"

"She's going through a lot, physically and emotionally," Alisha's mom explained. "The memories seem to be overwhelming her." As Elaine lay on the floor, tears streamed down her face. The weight of the recent events bore down on her, and it was clear that she was reliving the trauma.

"I- I remember, I remember everything," Elaine whispered, her voice filled with pain.

Victoria knelt down towards my mother, wrapping her arms around her. "I'm so sorry about what happened with Blake."

Elaine looked up at her daughter, "S-Sophia," she tried to say, but her head felt light and dizzy. Overwhelmed, she fell unconscious into Victoria's arms.

"Mom?" my worried voice echoed in the room.

Victoria sighed, her concern deepening. "She needs time to process and heal. Let's get her to a more comfortable place." Together, we carefully lifted Elaine and moved her to a nearby bed, where she rested, still unconscious.

In the dimly lit room, we waited, hoping that with time, Elaine would find the strength to confront the painful memories and begin the journey towards healing.

# Chapter XXII

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To Be Continued...