

XAVIER WEVERS



NIGHTMOOR  
*As DARKNESS FALLS*



# Chapter 1

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I longed for a new beginning—a new home, a new school, and the promise of new friends. Making connections came naturally to me, so forming bonds wouldn't be a problem. Leaving the house I grew up in was bittersweet, as the memories had become too painful to face every day.

Our car ride felt endless, winding through unfamiliar roads. "Are you excited about our new home?" my mother asked, her smile lighting up her face. "Yes, I 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 calm me down. "I've heard good things about the new school there. It'll be a fresh start for both of us." We finally reached 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 out of a horror movie. A shiver ran down my spine as I gazed at the imposing structure. I couldn't help but notice 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 on her as she stood guard at our window.

"Ready to go?" my mother asked, breaking my trance. I looked at her, then back at the window, but the woman was gone. "Uh, yeah," I stammered. "I think I just need some rest." I shook my head and gave myself a light slap on the cheek to snap out of it. I grabbed my bag and got out of the car. As I entered the house, I couldn't help but feel that it had been abandoned for some

time. Dust covered 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, looking for my designated space. "Which room is mine?" I shouted to my mother. "Well, you can take any you want, but I thought you might like this one," she replied, leading me down an endless hallway before opening the door. The room was huge, but like the rest of the house, it was covered in dirt and cobwebs.

"When will the rest of our stuff arrive?" I asked. "It should be here any minute. Why don't we start cleaning in the meantime?" my mother suggested. "Okay, I guess I'll start with my room." While my mother went to clean the living room, I went to the kitchen to find a broom. After an hour of scrubbing and sweeping, my room began to take shape. Satisfied, I decided to check out the storage room. I placed the broom in the far left corner and turned to leave. Just then, I heard the door close behind me. "It's probably just an old door," I said to myself. Going back to the door, I froze when I heard a knock. "Mom?" I called out, but another knock followed. "Mom, is that you?" I stared at the door, watching the doorknob slowly turn. Stepping back, clutching my broom, I carefully opened the door. My ears caught 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 and ran back to my room.

I sat on the floor, my heart pounding in my chest. What was going on in this house? I knew I had to uncover its secrets, but the thought sent shivers down my spine. As night fell, I couldn't help but feel a pervasive darkness, a presence lurking within these walls. But curiosity burned within me. I was

determined to unlock the secrets of Nightmoor, even if it meant facing my deepest fears.

As I began to wander around the house, I looked out the window and noticed that it was getting dark. Judging by the fading light, I guessed it was around 6pm. Still, there was no sign of our stuff arriving. Curiosity led me to the living room where my mother had cleaned a clock some time ago. I hoped it would give me the correct time.

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

My mother took the papers from the movers and began to fill in the necessary information. "Elaine Hendrikson, is that your name?" one of the movers asked my mother. "Yes, it is. I wouldn't write it otherwise," Elaine replied, a hint of irritation in her voice. "Sorry, miss. We were just checking," the mover apologized. Elaine forced a small smile and opened the front door. We stepped aside and watched as they brought everything inside. I instructed them to place the furniture in my room first, showing them where each item should go - my bed, my closet, my nightstand, and everything else I owned. Slowly but surely, my room began to take shape. "All I need now is some paint or maybe some wallpaper."

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

"S-Sophia..." I heard a deep voice echo through the hallways. I opened my eyes and looked around the room, but without my glasses everything was a blur. I retrieved my glasses from the nightstand and noticed that my door was wide open. I decided to get out of bed and approach the doorway. The hallway seemed empty, so I turned and looked out my window. It was dark. I hurried back to the living room and checked the clock again. 7 pm already?! Had I slept 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 putting the 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, knocking it to the floor. "M-Mom, is that you?" I called out, my gaze fixed on the fallen clock. There was no answer. 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 ticking of the clock was suddenly interrupted by another loud noise, causing me to drop it again. My ears perked up when I heard the sound coming from the kitchen. I gathered my courage and made my way towards it, despite my trembling legs. The door to the kitchen was closed, but through the glass I could see a huge shadow moving along the walls.

Driven by foolish curiosity, I turned the doorknob and peered inside. The shadow turned and stopped moving. "M-mom, I'm freaking out right here!?" I yelled. The shadow approached me and then vanished into thin air. I quickly scanned my

surroundings and hurried back to my room. I locked my bedroom door and leaned against it, trying to calm my breathing. Minutes passed and the house was silent. 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 cautiously made my way back to the kitchen and looked through the door window—it appeared normal. I then returned to the living room, and to my surprise, the clock that had fallen to the floor was now back against the wall, without a single crack.

"Did I just imagine all of this?" I muttered, my voice filled with confusion. When the front door opened, I spun around. "Hey, honey, I'm home!" my mother's voice echoed down the hall. I ran to her and hugged her tightly. "W-where were you?" Tears of fear streamed down my face. "I left a note on your bedside table." "Y-you did?" I hurried back to my room and found the note 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. If you have any problems, please call me.

- Mom

"Next time, just wake me up, okay?" I pleaded. "Sure, honey, I'll wake you up next time. But what happened? What made you so scared?" "N-nothing, I just didn't know where you were." I grabbed one of her shopping bags and headed for the kitchen. "Are you coming, Mom?"

Elaine put all her things on the kitchen counter. "Can you help me clean this up?" she asked. "Yeah, no problem!" The previously empty kitchen began to fill with food, spices, and other kitchen items. The house was coming together nicely. I

opened the refrigerator and asked, "What do you think about onion soup with grilled cheese?" "Sounds fantastic!" I rummaged through the kitchen and found plates and cutlery.

While my mother prepared dinner, I decided to set the table in the living room. As I carried the plates and silverware down the hall, I heard a faint whisper. Intrigued, I put my things on the table and followed the sound. "It leads to the basement," I whispered to myself, my voice shaking. 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 light the way. The giggling seemed to be coming from behind a table. I stretched out my arm to reach it, when suddenly a loud growl filled the air and my phone died.

Panicking, I sprinted back upstairs and headed for the storage room to find a flashlight. When I returned 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, honey. There's just an attic."

# Chapter II

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

"Sorry, sweetie, there's no basement here," Elaine answers calmly, trying to calm me down. She pulls out the floor plan of the first floor and hands it to me, urging me to study it carefully. I look at the layout, tracing every corner and hallway with my finger. "There's no basement!" I exclaim, growing more confused by the minute.

Returning to the living room, I try to push the mysterious thoughts of the basement aside and concentrate on setting the table for dinner. But the memory lingers, refusing to go away. Could I have been hallucinating? It felt so vivid, so real! Unable to shake off the disorienting experience, I go to my room and grab my phone, only to find that it's at a surprising 9% battery life. I could have sworn the battery was completely dead. Confused, I open the drawer of my bedside table, pull out the charger, and plug it in.

"Nervous about something, are we?" I mutter to myself, a small smile crossing my lips. "Great, my phone is charged and already at 11% battery! You never know when you might need it again, so I am pretty prepared for any situation."

As I make my way to the dinner table, a flicker of curiosity causes me to turn and scan the hallway for any trace of the basement door. To my astonishment, there is nothing but a blank wall. It's as if the door never existed. Determined to

shake off the strange feeling, I take a seat at the table, excitement blossoming within me. "That smells delicious!" I exclaim, a broad grin on my face. Elaine smiles back and says, "I hope it tastes as good as it smells. I eagerly lift the lid of the pan and my eyes widen in delight. "NOODLES! That's my favorite. Mom, you didn't have to make this!" I squeal with delight. Elaine looks at me with a beaming smile. "I'm just so proud of my little girl that she deserves to have her favorite food as her first meal in the new house." I feel a warmth in my heart, but I can't help but interject, "I'm not that little anymore, Mom..." I smile awkwardly, the bittersweet reality of growing up hanging in the air. "I know, sweetie, but you'll always be my little girl to me. Almost 18 already! Sheesh, time goes too fast. I feel old." My mom's playful exaggeration brings 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 dive into the delicious butter noodles, savoring every bite, my mind momentarily distracted from the mysterious events of the day. The food calms my nerves and I begin 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 get ready for bed. Despite having slept a few hours earlier, I still feel like I haven't slept at all. I remove the remnants of makeup from my face, feeling the weight of exhaustion settle on 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 covers, longing for a peaceful slumber. I set the alarm on my phone for 7:30 am, reminding myself of my first day at my new school. Curiosity sparks within me as I wonder what kind of friends I'll be able to make there.

The next morning, I wake up to the sound of my alarm. I groggily reach over to turn it off, rub my eyes, and stretch my limbs. As I sit up in bed, the events of the previous night begin to replay in my mind. The mysterious door, the shadowy figure and the strange occurrences—I can't shake 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 is eerily quiet as I make my way to the living room. I look at the clock on the wall—it shows the correct time, but the symbols on the hands are different from what I remember. Confused, I decide to let it go for now and focus on finding my mother.

I make my way to the second floor, carefully climbing the creaky stairs. Dust and cobwebs fill the air, confirming my suspicion that this part of the house has been neglected for some time. Following the path my mother took the night before, I cross the bridge and reach the second room in the wing.

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

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

She takes a moment to compose herself and sets the papers aside. "I found these when I was 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 is piqued, and I move closer to examine the papers. They contain faded names, dates, and details of the mortuary's operations from years past. One photograph catches my eye—a group of people standing in front of a large building, presumably 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, isn't it?" I ask, my voice tinged with both excitement and fear.

"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 under 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 woods beyond our backyard. Could this be the entrance to the rumored underground mortuary?

Feeling a mixture of trepidation and curiosity, we decide to investigate further. Equipped with flashlights, we make our way outside and venture into the dense forest. The path became narrower and the trees towered over us, casting long shadows.

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

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

Taking a deep breath, we lift the heavy trapdoor and descend into the darkness below. Our flashlights pierce the darkness, 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 encounter cryptic symbols and markings etched into the walls. The path seems to wind endlessly, leading us to chamber after chamber, each one shrouded in shadow.

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

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

A stone pedestal rises from the ground in front of us, an ornate ring resting on it. Instinctively, I reach out and grab it, feeling a surge of power coursing through my veins....

# Chapter III

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I wake up to the sound of my alarm clock, signaling the start of a new day. Groggily, I look around the room and notice that it's already 7:30 in the morning. 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 ring haunt my thoughts, leaving a lingering sense of anticipation. Determined to uncover the truth, I crawl out of bed, my feet touching the cold floor.

Slowly, I make my way to the window and open it, revealing a sunny morning with clouds drifting gracefully 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 nook and drawer, but the ornate ring remains elusive. Doubt gnaws at the edges of my mind. Was it all just a figment of my imagination?

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

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

Undeterred, I take a deep breath and descend the stairs, the wooden steps creaking under my weight. The air feels heavy, charged with an unexplained energy, as if the house itself is aware of the mystery that surrounds us.

With each step, a sense of unease grows. The darkness of Nightmoor's history envelops me, forcing me to uncover its secrets. Shadows dance along the walls as I navigate the familiar corridors. The silence is broken only by the sound of my own footsteps echoing through the empty room.

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

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

"It's good to start the first day of school with a good 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 surge of joy. I quickly finish my pancake and make my way to the bathroom to brush my long blonde hair. Making sure that the few strands of purple are nicely intertwined with the blonde strands, I tie it into a ponytail. After brushing my teeth, I go to the shed and get my black bike with purple accents, ready to ride 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 abundance of trees in the distance, which seem to wrap the town in a natural embrace. The thought of a forest surrounding the village piques my curiosity. I realize that I didn't do much research about this place before moving here, as I wasn't in the mood to leave my old life behind. Nevertheless, the lure of a fresh start compelled me to endure the uncertainty.

Navigating the streets, I finally arrive at the school. At first glance, my impression of the building isn't entirely positive. It looks a bit old-fashioned, with brown tones and a hint of darkness on the walls. Upon closer inspection, I notice a few cracks here and there, but nothing alarming. Ignoring the visual imperfections, I secure my bike in the rack and push open the school's creaky doors. The smell inside is distinct, carrying the recognizable aroma of an educational institution—clean and papery. Despite the uninspiring appearance, I remind myself that appearance doesn't necessarily determine the quality of education. Consulting my phone for directions, I discover that my classroom is marked as 1.41. I scan the area for signs leading to the stairs and, in my distracted state, accidentally bump into someone.

"S-sorry!" I stammer, slightly embarrassed.

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

"Y-yeah, I am," I manage to say, relieved to have met a friendly face.

"Great! We're in the same class. You can follow me," he offers, extending an invitation. I gratefully accept and follow him. He introduces himself as Jake Spears—a young man with black hair, a sports jacket with spikes over a white shirt, and black jeans and shoes that complete his distinctive style.

"What's your name?" I ask, trying to ease the nervous tension.

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

"Nice to meet you, Jake. I'm Sophia Hendrikson."

"Likewise," he says, his smile getting wider. "The classroom is on the right." Jake holds out his hand, points to the door, and waits for me to enter. My heart flutters with a mixture of

excitement and nervousness as I try to keep my composure. "I like the purple curls," Jake compliments, his kind words catching me off guard. "T-thanks," I stammer, feeling a surge of self-consciousness. Why am I stuttering? I've never done this before. I try to push my insecurity aside and step into the classroom.

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

As the first class begins, the teacher, Janessa Sharpe, asks me to stand. All eyes in the classroom are on me, and I can't help but feel a mixture of nervousness and anticipation. "My name is Janessa Sharpe. I'll be your math teacher this year. And class, this is Sophia, our new student. Please welcome her." Most of the students greet me warmly, but one girl catches my attention with a look of disgust on her face.

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

"But if she doesn't have parents, then why is everyone saying she killed them? That's just wrong!" I exclaim, feeling a sense of injustice. Alisha quietly interjects, "What are you going to do about it?" I think for a moment, determined to find out the truth and perhaps extend a hand of friendship. "I'll go up to her as soon as 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 open our books to page 84, I concentrate on the lesson and diligently complete the assignments within the allotted time. As the class draws to a close, I feel a surge of determination. As I walk toward Hannah, I hear Jake's voice, "I'll meet you in the hallway." I nod gratefully and continue my journey, ready to face Hannah and uncover the truth.

As I approach Hannah, I notice that she is packing her bag and her eyes are distant. Instead of jumping into questions, I decide to start with a simple introduction. "Hey, I'm Sophia. I see we're in the same class." She looks up, a defensive look in her eyes. "What do you care?" I smile, trying to ease the tension. "Nothing, really. I just thought we could walk out together, maybe share some awkward first day of school vibes." She looks at me skeptically, but closes her bag, seemingly intrigued.

As we walk down the hall, I casually ask about her classes and share snippets of my own expectations for the year. We exchange small talk, and gradually her guarded demeanor softens. By the time we reach the lockers, she seems more at ease. That's when I decide to gently broach the subject. "You know, there's been a lot of talk about you, and I was curious if any of it was true." She raises an eyebrow, challenging me to elaborate. "I've heard rumors about your parents. People say you might have... you know, had something to do with it."

Her eyes narrow, but there's a flicker of vulnerability. "What do you care, nosy new girl?" I take a deep breath, choosing my words carefully. "It's nothing to me, really. But if there's more to your story, I'm here to listen. Sometimes it helps to share things with someone you don't know." She studies my face, looking for sincerity. After a moment of silence, she sighs, "All right, you want to know the truth? I'll tell you the real story of what happened the night my parents disappeared."

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

Feeling a surge of compassion, I reach out and gently take Hannah's hand. "Hannah, I am 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."

My curiosity is piqued and I ask, "How did your house burn down so quickly?" Hannah's eyes well up with tears as she answers, "We lived in a big wooden cabin by the woods. We couldn't afford anything else. The cabin was cheap because they said a serial killer had lived there before. It was secluded, far from the city and any roads. The house wasn't in the best

shape, old and rusty, but it was our home. My dad, mom and I were a happy family before that night ruined everything."

As I listen, a wave of compassion washes over me, understanding the challenges Hannah and her family faced. Wanting more answers, I ask, "How come no one knows your parents died?" Hannah's voice drops, almost to a whisper, "I made up a story that my parents were on a business trip and I was home alone the night of the fire. Their bodies were never found." I'm struck by the magnitude of Hannah's secret. "That's a lot to carry alone, Hannah. You've carried 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 assure 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 comfort her in this moment.

Just then, Jake appears around the corner, breaking the solemn atmosphere. "You girls ready? We have to go to our next class." I nod, wiping away a tear, and Hannah manages a small smile. "Yeah, we're coming." Jake turns his head, signaling for us to follow. With determination, I walk beside Hannah, ready to face whatever lies ahead. "What's the topic for our next lesson?" I ask, trying to lighten the mood. Hannah replies with a slight groan, "It's chemistry." I chuckle softly, understanding her feelings. "Yuck, I'm not a big fan of chemistry either."

We enter the classroom and join the rest of the students. Hannah pauses, unsure where to sit. Sensing her hesitation, I warmly invite her to join us. I extend my hand and lead her to our table, making her feel included.

I turn to the group and eagerly learn about their lives. "Where do you all live?" I ask. Jake steps forward and points to each

person, indicating their location. "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 chimes in, "I live on Star Route Street. Recognition dawns on me and I remember the name. "Star Route Street? I remember riding through there on my way to school."

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

"All right, class, it's time to put on our lab coats!" I stand up and grab a lab coat, and the teacher continues, "We will be working in groups of three. Before you form your groups, I'd like to introduce a new student. Sophia, my name is Mr. Ruiz, but you can call me Ruiz. I'll be your chemistry teacher. I smile politely and nod to acknowledge the introduction.

With that, the teacher instructs everyone to form their groups, ready to dive into the world of chemistry.

While navigating through the crowded classroom, to find a suitable table I see Alisha and Hannah and try catching their attention. A mischievous glint sparkles in Alisha's eyes as she addresses the boys, "Let's have a battle. Three boys versus three girls." The boys nod and accept the challenge.

The teacher takes the floor and explains the task. "Today, you are going to perform a chemical reaction. I've placed a sheet of paper on your table with pictures of the expected results. You can cross them out if you get the right 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..."

Without wasting a moment, I begin to grab the necessary ingredients and mix 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 pretty good at chemistry at my old school."

Hannah interjects, a hint of surprise in her words, "But I thought you didn't like chemistry?" I chuckle softly and reply, "True, but that doesn't mean I can't excel at it."

As we look around, we see three groups already disqualified. "Six groups left," the teacher announces. Jake leans closer to our table and whispers, "Psst, you should use potassium permanganate mixed with glycerin and add a few drops of water. You'll get a great reaction."

Hannah quickly grabs the ingredients and begins mixing potassium permanganate with glycerin. Alisha questions her motives, "Wait a minute, Hannah. They're our competitors. Why would they help us?"

Hannah promptly puts down the pipette of water just as another table goes up in flames. "Four groups left!" 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 a mixture of ammonium nitrate, zinc and a few drops of hydrochloric acid? It'll amaze you!" Jake smirks and brushes off my suggestion.

I grab a piece of towel and carefully add a drop of sulfuric acid. Just then, Hannah accidentally bumps into the table and knocks over a nearby bottle, narrowly averting a potential disaster. "Phew, that was a close call," I remark with relief. "If that pipette had touched the potassium permanganate, it would have made manganese heptoxide and set the towel on fire!"

"Two groups remain: Jake, Liam and Anthony vs. Sophia, Alisha and Hannah." The pressure builds as we prepare for our next chemical reaction. Anthony combines sodium chlorate and sugar in a mixture, but in a twist of fate, Hannah sneezes so incredibly loud that Anthony jumps in the air, knocking over the sulfuric acid and igniting a fire." Sophia, Alisha and Hannah have won today's chemistry class," the teacher happily announces, and the classroom erupts in applause.

While everyone cleans up, the teacher hands each of us a piece of rock as our prize. "What is this, sir?" Hannah asks. "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 is a different color." I marvel at its unique beauty and carefully tuck the stone into my backpack before rejoining the boys.

"That was close," Jake remarks, his competitive spirit shining through. "If Hannah hadn't sneezed so loudly, Anthony wouldn't have knocked over the sulfuric acid." I look at Liam, who seems slightly annoyed at Anthony for jeopardizing their chances of winning. "Calm down, guys. It was just a friendly competition," I say, trying to diffuse the tension.

"So what have we girls won anyway?" Alisha says, trying to change the subject. I proudly present the rock to the boys, who exchange wide-eyed glances. "It's just a rock," Anthony laughs.

Alisha rolls her eyes playfully and remarks, "Come on guys, what did you expect? It's just a little prize."

On our way to our last class of the day, we climb the stairs to the third floor and meet our history teacher, Mr. Joel Green. He greets me with a friendly handshake and leads us into his classroom.

"All right, class, today's topic is the history of Nightmoor. Nightmoor used to look very different, once known as a vast mortuary surrounded by a dense forest, but now transformed into a peaceful village.

In the early 1700s, it served as a ritual place to banish witches. Over time, Nightmoor became an agricultural center where farmers grew crops and called the village home.

The turn of the century brought the horrors of World War I, also known as the Great War, and Nightmoor became a battleground. The farmers, caught in the middle of the battle, either fled their land or sought refuge in their homes. The war took its toll on the village, and eventually Nightmoor required extensive rebuilding.

In 1918, a family named the Gibsons embarked on a new venture. They built a mortuary in Nightmoor, which opened its doors to the public in 1921. The mortuary served as a place to bury the fallen farmers and soldiers from the Great War. Over time, however, the Nightmoor Mortuary disappeared overnight, leaving a vast forest in its wake. To this day, it's a mystery what happened.

For a long time, no one dared go near the area until 1963, when a developer bought the land and turned the vast forest into a whole new village.

As the history lesson concludes, Mr. Green instructs us to grab a piece of paper and write down everything that he has just said. 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 continue to write diligently, seemingly possessing a wealth of knowledge about Nightmoor's history. When we finally put our papers in the corner, the teacher picks them up, impressed by our thoroughness.

"Don't forget to read page 93 for next class!" The teacher reminds us before we leave the classroom.

Outside the school entrance, Anthony waves goodbye, and Alisha asks for us to be put into her phone contacts. Alisha, Hannah and I exchange numbers and contacts, however Liam is absent from the group list due to dropping his phone whilst he was busy taking pictures from the rooftop of the school building.

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

Hannah takes me on a tour of her neighborhood, pointing out the features of Star Route Street, including a charming brown brick house with mossy vines, old oak fences, castle-like windows, and a small pond with stone garden swans and a bridge by the front door. Which happens to belong to the current math teacher, Janessa.

Hannah inquires about my residence. With a mischievous grin, I tell her she'll see it when we arrive. She protests, wanting to know beforehand, but I playfully refuse. Undeterred, Hannah starts sprinting and challenges me to a race to Manor Street. Giving her a head start, I eventually catch up, ride in front of her, and claim victory. Hannah playfully accuses me of cheating, but I tease her about being afraid of Manor Street.

As we walk through Manor Street, I point out the huge house to Hannah, and her eyes widen in amazement.

Xavier Wevers

# Chapter IV

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Hannah's eyes meet mine, then she looks back at the house. "I can't believe you live in this monstrosity," she exclaims.

I hold out my hand to her. "Would you like to see it for yourself?" I ask.

A smile spreads across her face as she takes my hand and we approach the front door. Hesitantly, Hannah pauses at the entrance and peers through the window. "It's huge!" she exclaims.

I chuckle softly. "Wait till you get inside."

With a push, I open the front door, revealing a large 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 scary. Now it's amazing. Best surprise ever!"

Her voice echoes through the halls as she marvels at the size of the house. "It looks a lot bigger on the inside than it does on the outside!" she shouts from a distant hallway.

Hannah's words linger in the air, and I find myself pondering the architectural wonder. How was this house built?

Hannah turns to me. "Where's your room?" she asks eagerly.

I clear my mind and reply, "Follow me."

As I lead her through the hallways, our excitement grows. But just as we approach my room, my mother comes out of the kitchen, surprising us both.

"Hello, darling," my mother says, her eyes filled with warmth. "Did you have a good day?"

Hannah holds out her hand and introduces herself. "I'm Hannah." My mother smiles warmly. "Nice to meet you, Hannah. I'm Elaine, Sophia's mom." Hannah's eyes widen with curiosity. "What do you do for a living?" she asks eagerly. A hint of excitement gleams in my mother's eyes. "I work for the police," she reveals. Hannah's face lights up. "That's awesome!"

"My first day at the new office in Nightmoor starts this week, and I can't wait to get back to work. So behave, girls, or I may have to arrest you," my mother warns playfully.

Hannah giggles, although I can see a flicker of unease in her eyes. "She's joking, Hannah."

Eager to change the subject, I grab Hannah's hand and lead her to my room. As we step inside, the atmosphere changes. The walls are covered with posters of my favorite bands and artists, and the shelves are filled with books that have taken me on countless adventures. Hannah's eyes light up as she takes 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 stories they hold.

I smile proudly, grateful for this space that reflects my personality and provides comfort in times of need. We settle into the reading nook, sinking into the plush cushions. Hannah picks up a book and flips through the 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 gentle rustle of pages as we enter different worlds, sharing our favorite parts and imagining ourselves as the brave heroes of the stories. Sunlight filters through the window, casting a warm glow on us. Outside, birds chirp and playfully flutter from branch to branch. Our laughter blends with the melodies of nature, creating a symphony of joy.

As the day fades 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 across our faces. Hannah's laughter fills the air, echoing like sweet music, and I find myself captivated by her infectious joy.

Her eyes dart to the window and she suddenly freezes, her voice shaking. "What's that?" she stammers, pointing a trembling finger outside.

I look out the window, but all I see is the dark forest, draped in a shroud of gray clouds. "Are you sure you saw something?" I ask, trying to ease her growing uneasiness.

"Yes!" Hannah replies, her voice shaking with fear. "It had these short, twisted legs. Its arms were unnaturally long. Its head was hidden beneath a tangled mass of long black hair, and its neck seemed bent as if by some unseen force."

Sensing her distress, I lead her to my bed. "Take a moment to sit down," I offer, my voice tinged with concern, as I rush to the kitchen to fetch a glass of water.

When I return with the glass of water, I find the room empty and a shiver runs down my spine. Panic grips my heart as I

scan the room for any sign of Hannah. My eyes land on a shadowy figure in the distance, its silhouette hauntingly familiar. Is she waving at me? Fear tightens its grip on my chest as I open the window and reach for my phone on the bed, my hands shaking uncontrollably.

I open the camera app, desperately hoping to capture some evidence of the figure. But when I press the record button, the recording fails. Frustration and fear intertwine as I review the footage, only to find nothing but the darkened forest, without any trace of the mysterious creature. Doubt begins to creep into my mind. Is this some twisted illusion, a hallucination playing with my mind?

Lost in my thoughts, I suddenly hear the sound of breaking glass in the hallway, bringing me back to the present. Fear runs through my veins, urging me to turn around and face the unknown. With a trembling hand, I slowly turn, only to feel a warm breath on the back of my neck, raising the hairs on my skin. The room becomes suffocating, as if an unseen presence is hovering inches away from me.

Summoning all my courage, I turn my attention back to the window, afraid of 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 runs down her face, its origin unknown, merging with the macabre scene before me.

The phone slips from my trembling fingers, its screen shattering on impact. In a moment of trepidation, I pick up the damaged device, my hands shaking uncontrollably. When I look back at the window, I'm confronted with an unimaginable sight.

Hannah is no longer confined to the realm beyond the glass. She's climbing through the window, her body contorted at unnatural angles. Her every step sends out bone-crunching echoes that reverberate through the room, amplifying the horror that fills the air.

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

Was it all just a dream? I take a moment to calm my racing heart and reassure myself that it was all a figment of my imagination. Looking out the window, I find comfort 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 playing tricks on me. But the image of Hannah's haunting eyes and the chilling calm in her voice refuse to go away.

Taking a deep breath, I push aside the remnants of the disturbing dream, determined to embrace the new day. 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 in the depths of dreams.

As I make my way downstairs, the familiar sights and sounds of the morning routine 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.

My mother comes down the stairs, her cheerful voice breaking the silence. "Good morning, sweetheart," she says, her eyes warm with concern. "I heard you were looking for Hannah. She left last night, saying she had to go home. She seemed in a bit of a hurry, but she assured me everything was fine. She said she'd see you at school."

I nod, processing the information. "Did she say why she left so suddenly?"

My mother shakes her head, a thoughtful look on her face. "No, she didn't. But she seemed fine, just a little preoccupied. You know how teenagers are, maybe she remembered something she had to do."

I try to shake off the lingering uneasiness of the dream. "Yeah, you're probably right. Thanks, Mom."

Elaine smiles gently and reaches out to squeeze my shoulder. "Don't worry too much, honey. Just keep an eye on her at school, okay? Sometimes people have things on their minds that they don't want to talk about right away. Give her some space, but be there for her if she needs you."

I nod again, feeling a little more reassured. "Thanks, Mom. I will."

Determined not to let the disturbing dream cloud my day, I retrieve my bike from the shed. The familiar creak of its wheels provides a sense of normalcy as I pedal along the familiar path to school.

The bustling atmosphere of the school grounds greets me as I arrive. In the crowd, I see Jake standing near the entrance. He seems to be deep in conversation with a group of classmates, unaware of my presence.

I park my bike and make my way toward Jake, intending to join him so we can walk to the classroom together. As I approach, he turns and heads inside, unaware of my presence. Feeling a mix of anticipation and apprehension, I follow him, the hallway echoing with the chatter of students.

As I approach the group in the classroom, Jake's boisterous laughter fills the air and catches my attention. He spots me and waves me over, a mischievous grin spreading across his face. Hannah sits next to him, her eyes sparkling with a hint of mystery. I take a seat next to her, feeling a sense of comfort wash over me. There is an air of intrigue about her presence, and today is no different. I catch a glimpse of a mysterious smile playing on her lips, as if she knows something I don't.

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

Throughout the first period, my mind drifts, my thoughts consumed by the mysterious aura that surrounds 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.

When lunchtime arrives, we gather in our usual spot, a secluded corner of the bustling cafeteria. Anthony takes a seat next to me, his eyes fixed on Hannah. "What's wrong with her?" I ask, unable to contain my curiosity.

Sensing the gravity of the situation, Alisha joins the conversation, her eyes reflecting both sympathy and concern. "Hannah's always had a hard time with bullies, but lately, she's been even more withdrawn, even from us," she confides, her

voice a mixture of worry. "It's like something is weighing on her heart. Just yesterday, during our chemistry class, she was beaming, happier than I've ever seen her. But today... I can't help but wonder if something happened last night."

Anthony, his anxiety evident, chimes in with concern. "Do you think she's in some kind of trouble? We should help her, right?" Liam puts a comforting hand on Anthony's shoulder. "We'll figure it out, buddy. But let's give her some space for now. She'll open up when she's ready."

The rest of the day passes in a blur of classes and hallway chatter, but I can't shake my concern for Hannah. As the final school bell rings, signaling the end of the day, Hannah's urgency becomes apparent as she tightens her grip on my arm and leads me toward the exit. Confused, I ask her, "What's going on, Hannah?" My voice reflects both curiosity and concern.

Hannah's eyes search for 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.

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

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

I agree to her request, a flicker of uncertainty dancing in my mind. "Sure," I answer, masking any hint of apprehension. "Where do you have in mind?"

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

As I navigate the familiar route to my house, fragments of last night's events resurface and mingle with anticipation of what Hannah is about to reveal. Concern lingers in her eyes, prompting me to reach down and gently take her hand for reassurance. "Are you okay?" she asks, her voice tinged with genuine concern.

I nod and smile, "I'm fine, but I couldn't help but notice how quiet you were all day at school. You seemed lost in thought. Is everything okay?" Hannah's gaze shifts. Arriving at my house, the silence within suggests my mother's absence, giving us the privacy we seek. In my bedroom, Hannah takes a deep breath. "So tell me, what happened last night?"

"It... it was there," Hannah stammers, her eyes darting nervously around the room. "An unearthly presence, lurking in the shadows, haunting my every move."

"What did you see? Can you describe it?" I ask, my voice a mixture of curiosity and fear. Hannah's eyes lock with mine, searching for understanding. "It had these short, twisted legs," she begins, her voice barely above a whisper. "Its arms were unnaturally long, reaching out from its hunched form. Its head... it was hidden beneath a tangled mass of long, black hair, and its neck looked broken, bent at an unnatural angle."

A jolt of recognition shoots through me. "Wait... I remember that," I interject, confusion etched into my face. Hannah's expression mirrors my confusion. "What do you mean?" she asks, her voice shaking. "I thought it was just a nightmare, but your description... it's exactly what you told me that night."

"What night?" she asks, her brow furrowed in confusion.

"The night in my nightmare," I answer, fear seeping into my words. "Ever since I moved here with my mother, everything has been wrong. There have been strange things that defy explanation."

The first night we arrived, I ventured into the basement. I thought I heard something, an inexplicable sound that beckoned me down the stairs. But as I descended, my phone's battery died, plunging me into darkness. Filled with anxiety, hurried back upstairs and grabbed a flashlight before returning to the basement.

When I reached the basement, I noticed that the door was gone. It had vanished, leaving an empty wall." Hannah's brow furrowed in confusion. "How does a door disappear?" she asks. I nod, understanding her skepticism. "That's what I thought."

"What did your mother say about it?" she asks, her eyes searching mine for reassurance. "I went to her and asked about the basement. But her answer chilled me to the bone. She told me there was no basement in the house, just an attic. She even showed me the floor plans, and she was right. There was no sign of a basement. It was as if my mind had played a cruel trick on me."

Hannah tightens her grip on my hand. "Have you told your mother any of this?" she asks, concern in her voice. "I haven't. But maybe... maybe it's time to confront her."

"Would you like me to be with you when you do?"

Relief washes over me as Hannah offers her support. "I would appreciate that, thank you." Her lips curve into a gentle smile, her eyes searching for reassurance and understanding. "But

back to you," I push gently, wanting to understand her plight. "What else happened at school today? Why were you so quiet?"

"I've been seeing this creature everywhere," she confesses, fear evident in her voice. "It has been following me, relentlessly appearing wherever I go. I don't know what it is, and I can't shake it."

"Tonight," I suggest with determination in my voice, "let's stay together. Let's find answers and find out what's going on. You don't have to face this alone."

# Chapter V

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The creaking of the front door signaled my mother's arrival. Her eyes, a mixture of curiosity and concern, took in our serious expressions and the palpable tension in the room. She paused, took a deep breath, and sat down beside us, ready to listen.

"What's going on?" Elaine asked, her voice calm but filled with concern. "You both look like you've seen a ghost."

"Mom," I began, glancing at Hannah before continuing, "we need to tell you something. Something really weird has happened."

Elaine's eyes widened slightly, but she nodded for me to continue.

"It started a few days ago," I said. "I've been seeing things, feeling things that aren't right. It all started when we moved here."

Hannah chimed in, her voice shaking slightly. "It's been more than just strange occurrences. There's something in this house, something we can't explain."

Elaine's brow furrowed in concern. "What do you mean? What did you see?"

I took a deep breath and told her about the first night we arrived. "When we first moved in, I heard something in the

basement. I went down to check it out, but my cell phone battery suddenly died, plunging me into darkness. I ran back upstairs to get a flashlight. But when I came back down, the basement door was gone. It had just vanished, leaving an empty wall."

Elaine looked skeptical, but she didn't interrupt. Her silence encouraged me to go on.

"I thought I was imagining things," I admitted. "But then I asked you about the basement, and you said there wasn't one. You even showed me the floor plans, and you were right. There was no basement. But I know what I saw, Mom."

Elaine's skepticism was obvious, but she listened intently. "My dears," she said, her voice soft, "I understand that these experiences have been disturbing, but we must not let our imaginations run wild. Our minds can play tricks on us."

Uneasy glances were exchanged, a slight sense of disappointment lingering. Perhaps we had hoped for more understanding, a confirmation of the mysteries we felt surrounded us.

But as if guided by fate, a subtle change unfolded. Out of the corner of her eye, my mother noticed movement in the hallway. Her gaze followed, astonishment etched on her face.

There, against all reason, stood the basement door—a presence that defied explanation. Disbelief gave way to the realization that our stories were more than just flights of fancy.

A gasp escaped her lips as she rose and tentatively approached the door. Her hand reached out, and hesitantly brushed its cool surface. The weight of her touch confirmed the

undeniable reality before her. In that moment, skepticism turned to awe. My mother turned to us, wonder and a hint of fear in her eyes. "You were right," she whispered, her voice filled with wonder and vulnerability. "Something truly mysterious is happening here."

The urge to uncover the secrets of the house grew, but so did the fear within me. Reluctantly, I approached the door, aware that the darkness beyond held answers that could shatter my fragile sense of reality.

The basement door opened, revealing a staircase leading down into the darkness. A shiver ran down my spine as memories of the disturbing events in the basement resurfaced. The memory of the mysterious figure remained, but curiosity overcame fear.

"I have a feeling it's connected to the things I experienced." Hannah's eyes flickered between me and the dark abyss. "Shall we go down and investigate?"

Elaine, her face a mask of concern. "Are you sure this is a good idea?" she asked, her voice calm but lined with worry.

I hesitated, unsure of the wisdom of venturing into the basement. But the desire to know the truth overwhelmed my fear. "We have to find out what's going on," I said with determination. "Let's go."

My mother handed us flashlights, and with cautious steps we descended the creaking stairs, the air growing colder with each step. The basement was dimly lit, a single flickering bulb casting eerie shadows.

As we explored, our eyes caught sight of strange objects—dust-covered furniture, old boxes, and a worn journal on an old wooden desk.

Hannah picked up the journal, its worn leather cover cracked and faded with age. I stepped closer, trying to catch a glimpse of the text. "What is it, Hannah?"

She swallowed hard and began to read aloud, her voice shaking. "October 12th, 1963. The shadows have grown in Nightmoor. There is something in this house, something ancient and malevolent. It watches from the corners, its eyes glowing with an eerie light. We have tried to ward it off with salt and prayer, but nothing seems to keep it at bay."

The entries were filled with detailed descriptions of eerie occurrences – doors opening and closing by themselves, ghostly whispers in the night, and shadowy figures glimpsed from the corner of the eye.

Hannah's voice quavered as she continued. "November 5th, 1963. The creature grows bolder with each passing night. Last night, it manifested before us in the drawing room, its form a swirling mass of darkness. It spoke in a language none of us could understand, its voice a low, guttural growl that shook the walls of the house. We are running out of options. The ritual must be performed, but the risks... the risks are great."

December 2nd, 1963. The Presence has grown stronger. Last night I saw it. A figure, tall and shrouded in darkness, with eyes that burned like coals. It reached out for me, its fingers long and twisted, and I felt a chill seep into my bones. We must find a way to stop it before it consumes us all."

Hannah paused, her breath catching in her throat. "December 20th, 1963. The ritual is our only hope. We have gathered the necessary items: the sacred herbs, the ancient tome, and the talisman. Tonight we will try to banish the creature once and for all. But there is a price to pay. The ritual requires a sacrifice, and I fear what that might mean. If we fail... if we fail, Nightmoor will be lost to darkness forever."

Hannah looked up at me, her eyes wide with fear. "Sophia, this isn't just a ghost story. These people were terrified."

"We need to find out more," I said with determination, despite the unease creeping up my spine. "There has to be something else hidden in this house, something that can explain everything."

Elaine, who had been quietly examining an old trunk in the corner, joined us. "This house has always had secrets," she said, her voice tinged with both curiosity and concern. "But I've never seen anything like this before."

As we prepared to continue our search, a chilling gust of wind blew through the basement, extinguishing the light bulb. Darkness enveloped the room and a sense of dread washed over us. "Mom, did you feel that?" I asked, my voice shaking.

"Yes," Elaine replied, her voice calm but tense. "Stay close, both of you."

Footsteps echoed from the darkness, getting louder. Panic set in as we fumbled our way to the stairs to escape the eerie basement. As we reached the top, I looked down, the darkness below seemed to pulse with a malevolent energy. We locked the door behind us and collapsed against it, breathing heavily.

"That was too close," Hannah said, her voice shaking.

"Agreed," Elaine replied, trying to calm her own nerves. "But we need to find out what's going on."

Suddenly we heard a low humming sound. It was coming from the old box Elaine had picked up. The humming grew louder, and a soft glow emanated from inside.

"Do you think it's safe to open it?" Hannah asked, her voice filled with a mixture of fear and curiosity.

"We have to," Elaine replied, feeling a strange sense of calm wash over her. "It may hold the answers we need."

Elaine carefully lifted the lid to reveal an assortment of ancient items: a small vial of dried herbs, a bundle of old letters, and a worn, leather-bound book covered in cryptic symbols. The glow came from the book itself, casting an eerie light on our faces.

"This must be related to the ritual mentioned in the journal," Hannah said, her voice filled with awe. "But we must be careful. This could be dangerous."

As we examined the items, we noticed that one of the letters was addressed to Elaine herself. My heart skipped a beat as I realized that my mother might have known about the house's secrets all along.

"Mom, did you know about this?" I asked, my voice a mixture of accusation and confusion.

Elaine looked troubled. "I suspected there was more to this house than meets the eye," she admitted. "But I never knew the full extent of it. This letter... it's from your father's

grandmother. She must have been involved in whatever happened here."

As we all reassembled in the living room, our minds swirling with the mysteries that lay beyond the basement door, and just as we settled down, the doorbell rang.

Surprised, we rose together, united in our decision to discover the identity of the unexpected visitor. As Elaine opened the door, an eerie figure appeared—a shiver ran down my spine. "Aunt Erin!" I exclaimed, rushing to comfort her. But something was wrong; there was fear in her eyes.

Erin's voice trembled, her words carrying an incomprehensible weight. "Hey, my love. How's the new place?" The confusion faded as I replied cautiously. "It's great, but there's something strange about this house."

Elaine demanded an explanation, and Erin's eyes went to the door in the hallway. "That door... I thought we got rid of it."

"What are you talking about?"

Erin's face paled, her voice a mere murmur. "Azruleth."

Elaine's face contorted in shock. "Azruleth? Erin, stop talking in riddles! Tell us what you mean!" Erin crumpled to the ground, her voice trembling with fear and regret. "I thought we sacrificed everything to protect the family." Erin motioned for us to follow her and led us through the basement.

Her hands trembled as she reached for the hidden doorknob, fear and anticipation in her voice. "Down here... are the answers." The door creaked open, revealing a hidden passage that led down to an unknown realm below.

"Wow, a secret passage in the basement?! Could it get any more unsettling?" Hannah exclaimed.

Erin stepped forward, her figure disappearing into the shadows. "Erin? Aunt Erin?" I called, my voice shaking.

We exchanged glances, determination battling fear. Flashlights in hand, we stepped into the unknown, the passageway closing behind us with a resounding thud.

Xavier Wevers

# Chapter VI

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Elaine's voice trembled as she called out to her sister, but the ominous silence swallowed her words. The air thickened with an unspoken tension as I cautiously stepped forward, my heart echoing in the cold, stone corridor. I reached for Elaine's trembling hand, a feeble attempt to calm her, and together, we descended the creaking stairs into the haunting abyss below.

The weak beam of the flashlight cast eerie shadows on the damp walls, revealing a narrow, dimly lit passageway. Musty dampness clung to the air, and the smell of decay lingered in the darkness, creating an unsettling atmosphere. It felt as if we were venturing into a realm meant to be forgotten.

As our footsteps echoed through the cold corridor, the sense of timelessness intensified, as if this place existed in a dimension far removed from reality. I glanced back at Elaine, whose eyes darted nervously from side to side, her expression etched with apprehension.

"Where is Erin?" I whispered, the words barely escaping my trembling lips. Elaine shook her head, uncertainty clouding her eyes. "I don't know, but we have to find her. We have to uncover the truth."

The corridor stretched endlessly, the oppressive darkness threatening to consume us. A faint glimmer caught my eye and I quickened my pace toward the dim light ahead. The corridor widened, revealing a vast chamber bathed in an eerie, ethereal glow.

The sight that greeted us was beyond comprehension. Ancient symbols and markings adorned the chamber walls, and strange artifacts, their origins lost to time, lay scattered across the floor. In the center of the room, a stone pedestal held a worn, leather-bound book.

Elaine's gaze was fixed on the book, her voice barely above a whisper. "The Book of Shadows..." I approached cautiously, curiosity mixed with trepidation. As my fingers touched the book, a surge of energy coursed through them, causing me to recoil in shock.

A haunting melody filled the chamber, whispers echoing through the air as if the walls themselves held ancient secrets. The symbols on the walls glowed, casting an otherworldly glow. Shadows danced in a macabre ballet, and a deep, resonant voice echoed through the chamber.

"Welcome, seekers of truth. You have entered a realm few have entered. Prepare to face the consequences of your curiosity."

Elaine's grip on my hand tightened, her eyes reflecting a mixture of fear and determination. "We cannot turn back now. Whatever lies in these ancient halls, we must face it. We must find my sister, Erin."

With a deep breath, we pushed forward, footsteps echoing through the chamber as we approached an archway that led to a path shrouded in impenetrable darkness. Whispers grew louder, promising riddles and warning of ominous consequences.

The air grew colder with each step, the weight of the unknown pressing down on us. A sign swayed ominously in front of us,

its faded letters spelling out 'Gibson Mortuary'. Hannah's voice quivered with excitement, unable to contain her disbelief. "It still exists! How did no one know about it?"

As we stood in front of the ancient mortuary, I felt a chill run down my spine as I sensed the heavy atmosphere surrounding the place. Hannah reached out to touch the sign, but a discordant melody pierced the air, jarring her from her reverie. "Where's that coming from?" she asked, shaking.

Elaine pointed down a narrow hallway, revealing a small door, barely visible in the darkness. Drawn by curiosity and trepidation, we followed the eerie melody.

Just as we approached the haunting melody, Erin appeared around the corner, startling Hannah, who let out a piercing scream. "Are you okay?" Erin's worried voice echoed. Still shaking, Hannah stammered, "Y-yeah... I'm just not used to these atmospheres and scenarios."

Erin reassured her, patting her shoulder gently. "It's okay, child. I was afraid of this place too when I was younger."

Elaine, growing impatient, demanded answers from Erin. "Tell me everything you know! Don't play these secrets with me. We were talking about my husband's house!"

Erin, struggling to control her emotions, revealed a hidden truth. "Why don't you ask him yourself?"

"Who, my husband? He's dead!" Elaine's voice was tinged with prickliness and annoyance.

Erin took a deep breath. "You trust me, don't you?"

Elaine sighed, her voice breaking as she fell to her knees on the verge of tears. "Is he here? Where's my Blake?"

"He's behind that door," Erin said, pointing to the mysterious doorway.

Hannah, trembling with fear, added, "Isn't that the same door the melody came from?"

Erin, confused, looked at the door and said, "I didn't hear any melody."

The four of us slowly made our way down the mossy, muggy hallway, the haunting melody growing louder as we approached the mysterious door. Each step felt heavier, as if the weight of anticipation and uncertainty had settled upon us. The air grew thicker, filled with an unearthly presence that sent shivers down our spines.

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

We stepped into the chamber, our eyes adjusting to the darkness. In the center of the room stood a figure with his back to us. It was Blake, or what was left of him. He stood tall, but there was a hollowness in his presence, as if a part of his soul had been consumed by the darkness.

Elaine's voice trembled as she spoke, her words barely audible over the melancholy melody. "Blake... is that really you?" Her words hung in the air, filled with equal parts hope and fear.

The figure slowly turned around and we saw his face for the first time. Blake's once vibrant eyes were now clouded, devoid of their former warmth. His skin was pale, an eerie reflection of the life he once possessed. A haunting smile crept across his lips, sending shivers down our spines.

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

Elaine, her voice trembling, asked the question that lingered in all of our minds. "Blake, what happened to you? How did you end up here?"

Blake's gaze met hers, his eyes filled with a mixture of grief and resignation. "Azruleth, the demon we defeated, cursed me. But it's not what you think. I'm not trapped; instead, I've become a vessel for something beyond our understanding."

Elaine stepped forward, her voice full of determination. "A vessel? What does that mean? Can you break free?"

Blake nodded, his smile tinged with both sadness and hope. "Yes, I can break free, but it will require the Ring of Creation, a sacred artifact that can sever the connection and banish the malevolent force that possesses me."

Elaine stepped closer, examining her husband's unfamiliar appearance. "So you're not completely lost to us?"

Blake reached out and gently touched Elaine's cheek. "No, not entirely. But time is running out and the darkness within me is growing stronger."

Suddenly the atmosphere in the room changed. The haunting melody turned into an eerie chant, resonating with an otherworldly power. Blake's eyes glowed with an intensity that mirrored the ethereal force that held him captive.

As Elaine continued to question Blake about his situation, a deep sense of foreboding filled the room. Blake's expression shifted, a flicker of discomfort crossing his features.

"I'm only half myself," Blake began, his voice strained. "Azruleth has a hold on my body and is making me do things without my permission. It can happen at any moment, and that's why I need you all to leave immediately before I lose control."

Elaine nodded, but before she decided to leave, unable to contain her curiosity and concern, she turned to Erin with a stern expression. "Erin, what is going on? Why didn't you tell me about Blake? He's been here all this time and you've kept it from me?" Elaine's voice trembled with a mixture of hurt and frustration.

Erin hesitated and looked at Blake, who had a pained expression on his face. "Elaine, I was trying to protect you. Blake made me promise not to tell you. He thought it would protect you."

Elaine's eyes widened in disbelief. "Protect me? From what? And for how long? Blake, you're my husband. How could you keep this from me?"

Blake lowered his eyes, the weight of guilt evident in his features. "Elaine, I thought it was best. The less you knew, the less danger you'd be in. I didn't want you to get caught up in this nightmare."

Tears welled in Elaine's eyes as she processed the revelation. "So all these years I was mourning you, thinking you were gone, while you were here, trapped in some curse?"

Erin reached out to comfort Elaine, but the atmosphere in the room changed again. Blake's eyes glowed with a disturbing intensity and he began to contort, his body twisting unnaturally. A dark presence seemed to envelop him, and his features morphed into something monstrous.

Elaine took a step back, her eyes widening in horror. "Blake?"

Blake's voice changed, deepening into a sinister growl. "My dears, did you really think I was Blake?" A chilling grin spread across his twisted face. "Azruleth!" Elaine gasped as the realization dawned.

Erin suddenly collapsed to the floor, her body convulsing. "Erin?" Elaine asked, rushing to her side.

Blake, now fully transformed into Azruleth, began to speak in a sinister voice. "Yes, Azruleth. And I have waited for this moment."

Erin snapped back to reality, her eyes wide with terror. "W-we have to get out of here!"

Elaine looked at her with a mixture of confusion and betrayal. "You're the one who brought us here!"

"Th-That wasn't me... Azruleth took control. We have to leave. Now!" Erin's voice was frantic.

Azruleth chuckled, a low, threatening sound. "How did it feel, Erin? To be out of control of your own body?"

"Enough!" Erin shouted, struggling to stand. "Kids, come on. We have to go, now!"

I looked up at Erin, fear gripping my heart, and ran quickly to her, Hannah close behind me. "Sister? I'm sorry for what happened, but you have to trust me!"

"I've trusted you my whole life and look where it got me... You left me when I needed you the most all those years ago!" Elaine's voice was full of pain and anger.

"I'm sorry, but you cannot take your anger out on me. You don't know the whole story here!"

"Whatever, let's get out of here..." Elaine's words were cut off as the ground beneath us shook. Azruleth's laughter filled the room.

"Enough!" Azruleth screeched, the floor beneath us shaking and freezing our feet in place. "Now it's time for you to do something for me."

Elaine turned, defiance in her eyes. "Are you talking to me?"

Azruleth grinned, and with a flick of his wrist, I felt myself thrown across the room. No, not just me. We were all thrown into the center of the chamber, the force of the impact knocking the wind out of me. As we struggled to stand, the room darkened and Azruleth's presence loomed over us, his power suffocating.

# Chapter VII

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"Ah, are you okay?" Erin asked worriedly. "M-my leg hurts," Hannah said in pain.

I stood up and grabbed my phone, lighting up the room. I scanned for Azruleth, but he was nowhere to be seen. I reached out to Hannah and helped her to her feet. As she leaned against me, I handed her my phone. "You light the way for us."

Elaine and Erin also stood up and grabbed their flashlights.

"W-where is he?" Hannah's voice trembled with concern as we scanned the room, seeing nothing but walls and shadows.

We retreated cautiously towards the closed door, our senses on high alert. Suddenly, Hannah let out a piercing scream. "I can hear the bones cracking..." Erin's voice quivered as she whispered, her eyes darting around the room.

Panic set in as we all shone our flashlights at the source of the disturbance, revealing only long dark hair swaying in the darkness. Terrified and desperate to escape, Erin fumbled with the doorknob, trying to open the door. With a sigh of relief, she succeeded and we quickly passed through the door and ran to the safety of the stairs. As the haunting melody faded into the distance, we reassured ourselves that we were finally out of immediate danger.

But just as we reached the stairs, a sudden darkness enveloped the room behind us. "M-Mom?" I called, my voice filled with fear. An uproar of clanging noises and terrified screams

erupted from the darkness, sending shivers down our spines. In the midst of the chaos, a flashlight rolled toward us, casting eerie shadows on the walls. I picked it up, hands shaking, and shone it forward, desperately searching for any sign of my mother or aunt.

In the absence of any visual clues, I gather my courage and resolve not to abandon my loved ones.

Ignoring Hannah's protests and pleas, 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 at 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 approach 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 make out their features, but they remain obscured, shrouded in an air of mystery.

Taking a deep breath, I gather my courage and cautiously address the shadowy figures. "Who are you?" The figures remain motionless, their presence casting an eerie silence over the room. The 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 is 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, his gaze fixed on 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 through the room, carrying an otherworldly quality that makes my skin crawl.

I gather my resolve and ask the question that has plagued my mind for years. "What happened to you, Dad?"

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 can't ignore this opportunity to find the answers I've longed for. "Tell me," I demand, my voice filled with both desperation and determination. "Tell me what to do."

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

A mixture of apprehension and curiosity wells up inside me. I look back at Hannah, her eyes reflecting a mixture of concern and fear. Taking a deep breath, I take a step forward and accept 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, tinged with concern. "Sophia, wait!" she calls out, her

voice filled with a mixture of worry and apprehension. Her words snap me out of the trance-like state induced by the enigmatic figures, grounding me back to reality.

I turn to face my mother, her eyes filled with maternal concern. "You can't trust them, Sophia," she pleads, her voice shaking with a mixture of fear and protectiveness. "There's something wrong with 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 glance back at the figures, their presence still shrouded in mystery, beckoning me into the unknown. But my mother's words resonate deep within my soul, reminding me of the love and safety that awaits me in the world I know.

Reluctantly, I remove my hand from the figure's grasp and take a step back, returning to my mother.

The figures watch in silence.

As I approach my mother, I see Erin standing behind her. I notice her arms, covered in fresh cuts and bruises. Concern etches itself on my face and I reach out to touch her wounded arm. "Erin, what happened?" I ask quietly, my voice filled with both concern and curiosity.

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

I gently take Erin's hand, holding it tightly but tenderly. "Erin, we can't keep hiding. We have to face the darkness together," I say, my voice filled with resolute conviction.

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

Finally, after what seems 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.

"I've been keeping a secret," Erin confessed, her eyes flickering with a mixture of guilt and determination. "It all started seventeen years ago, the night that changed our lives. At first, we were all living our lives happily. Our best friend Victoria was eight months pregnant with little Alisha. We nearly lost her that night. Azruleth, the demon that he is, had found a way to lure us into the mortuary to allow him to return once and for all. If it weren't for me, Azruleth would have succeeded. Blake sacrificed himself for all of us."

Elaine's gaze moved between Erin's eyes, absorbing the shocking details of a night she had been told to forget.

"Victoria and I thought it best to keep it a secret. We let you believe that Blake died in an accident. Azruleth is almost back to full strength. Now it's our job to stop him."

Elaine's emotions rose and she ran her hands through her hair. "Why did you lie? This is my husband we're talking about! I could've helped! Is that why you disappeared for weeks at a time?"

Erin nodded solemnly. "Sister, I know you may not be very fond of me right now, but please know that it was for your own

safety. Blake didn't want you to live your life in despair. He wanted you to raise Sophia and have a good life together."

Erin turned to me and gently touched my cheek. "And from the looks of it, you raised a wonderful daughter."

She looked back at Elaine and took her hands. "Can you forgive me, sister?"

Elaine, frustrated and torn, let out a deep sigh. "I can't forgive you, but you're still my sister. That's why I won't turn my back on you."

Erin nodded and hugged Elaine. "I'm so sorry for what I put you through."

As the emotional exchange unfolded, Hannah, who had been standing motionless, interrupted. "I think it's a good time for me to go home. My guardian should be almost finished with her work at the school, and in the meantime I can take my dogs for a short walk."

We all nodded, and I walked Hannah out. "I'm sorry for putting you in so much danger," I said, my eyes watering. Hannah smiled and hugged me. "Hey, it's okay. This is the most alive I've ever felt! Thanks for letting me be a part of it."

"Do you want me to walk you home?"

Hannah grinned, "I'll be fine. Just get some rest."

I nodded, watching her carefully as she walked down the street. "Get home safe!"

As she disappeared around the corner, a realization hit me. "Wait... didn't she say she was going to walk her dogs? With that

leg?!" I turned and ran after Hannah. "Wait for me!" I yelled with a grin on my face.

Xavier Wevers

# Chapter VIII

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The night air hangs heavy with an unspoken tension as I awaken from a fitful slumber. The bedroom is cast in an eerie half-light, the shadows playing tricks on my senses.

I sit up in bed, the sheets clinging to me like a shroud. The room feels different, charged with an energy that sets my nerves on edge. As my eyes adjust to the dimness, I discern a shadowy figure at the foot of the bed. Its presence is unsettling. The figure beckons me with a spectral hand, and I find myself compelled to follow. Fear and curiosity intermingle as I navigate the room, the floorboards creaking beneath my weight. The figure moves with an otherworldly grace, leading me to the window. Its form remains elusive, shrouded in the darkness.

As I peer through the glass, the scene outside transforms. The stone pathway that winds through the night appears both familiar and foreboding. My breath catches as I witness Hannah, her figure obscured by the shadows, walking along that very path.

The figure at the window gestures toward Hannah. With a jolt, I find myself standing on the stone pathway, the cold night air biting into my skin. Hannah walks with a carefree demeanor. A red car hurtles toward her, its driver distracted and indifferent. The collision, the impact, horrific. The scene plays out in agonizing detail, leaving an indelible mark on my consciousness.

I wake with a start, my heart pounding in my chest. The room is bathed in the soft glow of dawn, and a cold sweat clings to my skin. I reach for my glasses, the world coming into sharper focus, and make my way to the shed where the bikes are stored.

Aunt Erin, sensing the urgency in my actions, questions my haste. I fumble for an explanation, telling her that Hannah left her phone charger behind. The lie tastes bitter on my tongue, but revealing the truth seems impossible in the face of the supernatural forces at play.

I mount my bike, the wheels spinning in rhythm with my racing thoughts. The navigation on my phone guides me to Star Route Street. Cycling through the silent streets, I attempt to reach Hannah through messages.

As Star Route Street comes into view, my heart quickens. The stone pathway stretches before me, a surreal echo of the nightmare. And there, just as foreseen, I spot Hannah walking along the stone pathway. The nightmare and reality intertwine, blurring the lines between dream and waking nightmare. Memories of the impending collision flood my mind, and the dread tightens its grip.

The red car appears in the distance, its driver oblivious. Panic rises within me as I pedal faster, shouting Hannah's name. In a moment of sheer desperation, I reach her in time and pull her away. Hannah, confused by the sudden urgency, turns away from the near-collision, engrossed in her phone search. A sigh of relief escapes me, but the weight of the nightmare still clings to my soul. Was this a warning or a test of my ability to change fate?

I saw another red car, this time coming from my direction. The driver, out of control, barrels toward me. I scream, trying

to avoid the collision. The near miss shredded the front tire of my bike against the sidewalk, leaving me shaken.

As I glance behind me, I find Hannah staring at the approaching car. "Hannah, watch out!" I scream. However, instead of moving, she stands transfixed as the car hurtles toward her with alarming velocity.

In a desperate surge of adrenaline, Hannah pushes herself out of harm's way just in time. The red car speeds by, its tires screeching against the pavement.

Xavier Wevers

# Chapter IX

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**M**y heart pounds in my chest as I run to Hannah, concern etched into my face. "Are you okay?" I ask worriedly.

"I'm fine," she replies weakly, a brave smile trying to hide the pain. "Don't worry about me, check on the driver." Her concern for others, even in the face of her own injuries, is a testament to her resilience. I approach the mangled car, the reality of the situation sinking in.

The driver, blood pouring from a deep cut on his forehead, is still alive. Relief washes over me as I check for a pulse. "I can feel it, he's alive!" I exclaim. Hannah's worried expression changes to a shaky smile. "Now, let's get him out of there!" she insists, trying to stand but faltering immediately. "M-my back!" she stutters, clutching her shirt, now stained with blood. "I think I need to rest."

Concerned, I turn to find her sprawled on the ground. Urgency compels me to call 911, hoping that help will arrive quickly. Hannah's dog licks her face and nudges her gently to wake her up. As I place the call, I suddenly feel moisture seeping through my socks. Looking down, I realize it's fuel leaking from the wrecked car. Panic sets in as I struggle to free the trapped driver, but his immobility adds to the complexity.

Reacting quickly, I scoop Hannah into my arms and carefully place her on a patch of grass further down the road, doing my best not to aggravate her injuries. Looking at her, I notice her blood-stained hands, evidence of the broken glass. Turning away from Hannah, my eyes fall on the wreckage of the car.

With bloodied hands, I run back toward it, only to have an explosion erupt in front of me.

The explosion engulfs Hannah's house and the flames spread rapidly. Fearing for my safety, I kick off my shoes and socks, discarding them as they catch fire. Barefoot, I sprint back to Hannah's side and wait anxiously for help to arrive. Sirens wail in the distance, getting louder as they get closer. I try to calm Hannah, reminding her that help is on the way. "It's going to be okay," I assure her, my voice shaking.

Looking around, I notice that the dog is missing. "Where's the dog?" I call in all directions. Rising to my feet, I cautiously navigate the debris, careful not to step on any dangerous remnants. As I search the wreckage, I see something lying near the car. Could it be the driver? As I run toward it, my foot accidentally hits a sharp object, slicing through my skin.

Fighting the pain, I collapse to the grass, clutching my injured foot. Looking down at my left foot, I find a piece of glass embedded in it. I carefully remove it and press my hand against the wound, trying to stop the bleeding. As I get to my feet, I realize that it's not a person lying next to the car - it's an animal. Could it be the dog? My vision is blurred, but it seems to be a dog. Cautiously, I stand and listen, and soon I hear barking. The dog is alive! Happiness washes over me and I call out, "Doggy? With cautious steps I navigate the wreckage, keeping my wounded feet as safe as possible.

The barking gets louder and clearer. "Doggy, are you in here?" I peer into the rubble left by the explosion and see a wagging tail. Carefully dodging the debris, I spot the dog holding the injured driver in his paws. "H-how did you do that?" I ask in awe. The dog barks and licks my hand. Sitting next to the driver, I check his heartbeat. "H-he's alive! You saved him, doggie!" The dog jumps around in circles, barking happily.

Help finally arrives, and I recount the harrowing events to the emergency responders. "Are you hurt, miss?" one of the officers asks me. "Just my foot," I answer, my voice cracking. He helps 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 of the situation," the officer tells me. The dog barks and nuzzles my leg. "I think he wants to come with you," the officer says with a smile. I nod in agreement and take him with me. The dog takes off and I follow, running as fast as I can. "Thanks 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 and take cautious steps forward. "It's just you and me now, doggy," I say, a smile on my face. "Hannah never told me your name, so I'll call you... Rune." The dog wags his tail and jumps towards me, showing his approval of the name. "Do you like this name?" I ask, glancing back to the officer at the crash site. He seems unsettled, his head shaking and black liquid streaming from his eyes. I rub my eyes in disbelief and suddenly he disappears. I scan my surroundings, but everything seems normal. Rubbing my eyes again, I turn my attention back to Rune. "Wait for me!" I call, and Rune slows down so that I can catch up. Together we walk back home.

When I get to the house, my mother and aunt are already standing at the front door, their faces filled with worry. "W-what happened?" my mother asks worriedly. Aunt Erin interjects, her voice filled with urgency. "It's Azruleth. He's trying to manipulate you by showing you these disturbing events." Confusion washes over me. "But why would he show them to me if I prevented Hannah's death?" Aunt Erin's face contorts with concern. "I don't quite understand. Azruleth is

cunning, and he'll do anything to make you feel like you're losing your mind."

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

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

Erin replies, her voice shaking, "There may be one thing, but it's hard to come by. We need a black obsidian diamond ring. It can contain the power of the doors in this house and make the barrier seal stronger." "Have you ever been able to make one?" Elaine asks, to which Erin replies, "Yes, I have. But Azruleth managed to get his hands on it. Being a demon, he's attracted to magic and either destroys it or, if the power is strong enough, makes him bleed instead.

I mention that I have a small piece of an 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 it really powerful enough to destroy an entire planet?"

Erin warns, "If we're not careful, yes! He can destroy cities all over the world with a snap of his fingers."

With a sense of urgency, we hurry into 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 follow close behind, their eyes reflecting the weight of 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 shimmering gem nestled among the mundane contents of my backpack. As I hand it to Erin, her brow furrows in deep concentration.

Erin's gaze is fixed on the stone, her eyes narrowing as she examines it in 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 tinged with sadness. "We need a stone with green crystals, ones that hold the essence of ancient magic."

Sensing my curiosity, Erin takes a moment to gather her thoughts before continuing. "To awaken the stone's true potential, we must wait until the clock strikes 3 am. It is during the witching hour that the veil between realms is at its thinnest, allowing access to the elusive powers that lie dormant within the stone."

Her words send a shiver down my spine, an eerie excitement mingling with the trepidation that fills the room. The idea of harnessing ancient powers at such an enchanted 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 the alchemists

of old, we must fuse these individual fragments into a single core imbued with the essence of the stone's true purpose."

Erin's gaze meets mine, her eyes shining with determination and a flicker of hope. "Once the core is formed, we must navigate the labyrinthine corridors of this house, for at precisely 2:55 am, the magical doors that hold the power to awaken the stone's potential will reveal themselves. Each door bears a unique symbol, a cryptic language etched into the very fabric of reality.

Erin's voice drops, filled with a sense of urgency. "But beware, my friends. Azruleth, the malevolent force that seeks to breach the barrier, is aware of this sacred ritual. He seeks to exploit the ever-shifting nature of the doors 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 to the sound and decide to investigate. The knocking grew 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. "J-Janessa?"

# Chapter X

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"Janessa, what brings you here?" Erin asked, concern in her voice. "I heard about the accident at my house and rushed over. Have you seen my other dog?" Janessa replied 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—" Elaine interrupted, "Aren't you more concerned about Hannah?" Elaine tried to get Janessa's attention off her missing dog. "Of course I'm worried about her, but I know she's in good hands at the hospital. Which is more than I can say for my dog, Maci. I need to get back to my house now!" Janessa exclaimed in obvious distress. Sensing the urgency, Elaine gently touched Janessa's shoulder and urged her to follow.

But Janessa snapped, "Don't touch me!" Undeterred, Elaine pointed to her car and Janessa reluctantly nodded. Curious about the location of her car, I asked Janessa quietly, "Where is your car?" Janessa replied with a hint of frustration, "Look outside, it's a beautiful day. I walked to school and left my car in the garage, which was probably destroyed in the explosion." I quickly close my mouth and look at the dog. Rune, now known as Sky, Janessa's dog, jumped into the back seat while Erin held onto the obsidian diamond and stayed behind.

During the drive to Star Route Street, Elaine struck up a conversation and asked Janessa about her dogs. "How long have you had these dogs?" she asked.

"I've had these dogs since Hannah moved into my house. We found them sitting at the front door one day with no owner and no tags. Hannah looked me in the eye and asked if we could keep them as long as no one was looking for them. It's been over two years, and they're ours to keep. I looked at Janessa through the rearview mirror, and she caught my smile. "I-I didn't get a chance to thank you. I'm sorry if I scared you, but thank you for saving my Hannah," she said gratefully. Meeting her gaze, I reassured her, "I wasn't scared, just a little shocked. I understand your feelings; they must be all mixed up, 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 hope to get to know you better. Hannah couldn't stop talking about you; she was thrilled to have you as a friend," Janessa revealed.

Surprised, I asked, "She was talking about me?" Janessa confirmed, "Yes, she called me as soon as she got back from visiting you. I'm so glad she's opening up again. I remember she used to be so happy. But after her parents died in the fire, her whole life felt like it was crushing her. She couldn't stand the rumors and the bullying at school, so she accepted her life and started bullying others. There was nothing I could do to stop her except to send her away for treatment. After a month, she started to get better, and when she came back, she couldn't remember anything. 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 got out of the car and surveyed the scene before us. The explosion had left a trail of destruction, with debris scattered everywhere. Janessa's house, or what was left of it, lay in ruins, charred and barely recognizable. The smell of smoke lingered in the air, a reminder of the devastating event that had taken place.

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

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

Together we combed through the wreckage, carefully sifting through the remains of what had once been Janessa's home. We called out for Maci, hoping for any sign of her. Minutes turned into hours, but there was still no sign of the missing dog. Tears streamed down her face as she sank to her knees, feeling defeated. The scent of charred wood and remnants of memories lingered in the air.

Elaine knelt beside her and offered a comforting hug. "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. The devastation around us seemed almost surreal, a canvas painted with tragedy and loss.

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. The air felt heavy with anticipation as our eyes scanned the rubble. And there, we spotted Maci. Her fur was matted with soot, and her eyes reflected the fear and confusion of the night's events. She was injured, but alive.

Janessa's face changed from despair to elation. It was a moment of profound relief, the kind that washes over you when you've glimpsed hope in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. She rushed to Maci, her heart pounding

with a mix of emotions. Gathering the injured dog into her arms, Janessa showered her with affectionate kisses. "Oh, Maci, I thought I lost you," she cried, her voice choked with emotion.

With Maci safely in her arms, Janessa's spirits lifted. Despite the loss and devastation that surrounded her, she found solace in the fact that her beloved dog had been found.

As the night grew darker, the moon cast an ethereal glow over the scene of destruction. The once bustling neighborhood now stood as a silent witness to the upheaval that had taken place. We made arrangements for Janessa, Sky and Maci to temporarily stay with a nearby neighbor. They offered their spare room and some comfort in the midst of the chaos. It was a small gesture, but it meant the world to Janessa.

The atmosphere was charged with an otherworldly energy, and there was a palpable tension in the air. As we prepared to leave the remains of Janessa's house, a mysterious figure appeared at the edge of the rubble. Her silhouette was shrouded in darkness, and an eerie silence accompanied her presence.

Elaine, Janessa and I exchanged uncomfortable glances. The figure seemed to materialize from the shadows, its intentions unclear. The night was anything but quiet.

# Chapter XI

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As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting shades of orange and pink across the sky, I couldn't shake the sense of foreboding that hung in the air. The day's turmoil had only scratched the surface of a deeper mystery, and I found myself standing on the precipice of the unknown.

In need of a break from the chaos, I stepped into the comfort of my bathroom. The steam from the hot shower enveloped me, leaving me feeling refreshed and washing away all the worries of the day. The water flowed over me, bringing a sense of calm and energy. It felt as if each drop was taking the weight off my shoulders, giving me a little break from all the busyness.

But just as I closed my eyes and enjoyed the peacefulness, something caught my attention. I quickly opened my eyes and looked in the bathroom mirror. There, through the steam, I caught a glimpse of a shadowy figure behind me. It sent a shiver down my spine, an eerie 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 remained, a reminder that the mysterious presence wasn't confined to the mortuary.

The next day arrived, and with a mixture 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 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 mixture of relief and curiosity. I could tell they were happy to see me and eager to hear what was 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 little about Hannah's struggles, the mysterious figure that had been following us, and the mortuary that lay beneath our feet. Their faces showed disbelief and shock, just as I had felt when I first learned of it. I could see their minds working, trying to understand and figure out how to help.

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

Gathered 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 to Alisha. "Alisha, where did you put that obsidian stone thing from our chemistry class?" Alisha locked eyes with me, then looked around the room. "My parents have it, why?" I furrowed my brow. "Do you remember the color of the diamonds on it?" Alisha furrowed her brow in deep thought. "I don't remember," she admitted with a sigh. "Why do you ask?"

I got up from the couch and made my way to the hallway, everyone's curious eyes following my every move. I walked through the hallway and led her up the stairs. At the bridge, I invited them to follow me. "Aunt Erin? Where are you?" I called. Erin's voice echoed back, "I'm in the attic!" We crossed the bridge to the other side of the house and climbed the ladder to the attic.

As we gathered in the attic, Erin turned her attention to us. "Are these your classmates?" she asked with a friendly smile. I looked at my friends to confirm. "They are, right?" I asked with a playful wink. Anthony couldn't resist butting in. "Are you being sarcastic?" he asked. Alisha laughed and patted Anthony on the shoulder. "Careful, you might get a bruise," she teased. Anthony, not amused, whined, "Ouch, be careful!" Alisha's laughter grew louder. "My bad, I didn't know you were so sensitive." We all turned our attention to Anthony and Jake couldn't help but add, "Are you blushing?" Anthony replied, "What? I'm not!" in an annoyed tone.

Silence returned to the room and we turned our attention to Erin, who was engrossed in her experiments with the obsidian diamond. "Have you discovered anything new?" I asked. Erin shook her head. "No, I haven't. I've combed through all these old books and scrolls, but none of them give us the answers we need." Alisha interjected, "What exactly are you looking for?" Erin met her gaze and then looked at me. "We need green obsidian diamonds, but they're incredibly rare. I'm wondering if there's a way to make them green and give them the powers we need." Anthony seemed taken aback, stuttering as he asked, "P-powers? You mean like magic?" Erin locked eyes with him and then turned her attention back to me. "What exactly did you tell them?" I reassured her, "Not much, just a little 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 a glimpse of some headlines:

Magic, Fact or Fiction?

Demons and Their Secrets.

Nightmoor and its runes.

Unraveling the Mysteries of the Tombs.

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 looked at us and started to read.

### **Power Rings**

The Power Rings were known as powerful magical objects. People thought they were originally created by dark magicians to give people more power over the universe. But in the process, nasty, or let's just say evil, creatures started roaming the streets. They could sense when magic was nearby.

For a long time, it became really scary to go outside. As time passed, these evil creatures became stronger. They could tell if someone had magic. When some people in the city started to go missing, people got scared. To stop these bad things, the dark magician 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.

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

...U...P..... ...the ... of ....

... ... ... Ring of ... S...ryer.

P... ... the ... ... Mending.

...y... ...the ... ... ....

Combining ..... and ...nk ... ... i...g of ....

... ... ...he ... of ....

..... makes ... Ri... ... 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 them all?" Erin smiled at Anthony. "No, dear, we don't. All we need is the binding ring." Anthony let out a sigh of relief before suddenly realizing something. "Wait... how do we get the binding ring?" Erin's expression became slightly frustrated. "We don't; all the power rings have been destroyed and the dark mage is dead. We are on our own." Erin pointed out, her grin showing her determination. "That's why I'm doing research, trying to find out the potential of these magic rings."

Alisha turned back to the book. "Can we read a little 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 all 13 rings together to unleash their greatest power! It's still just an idea, though, since no one has ever successfully collected all 13. Some people 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 think they're still around, while others think they never existed or are all gone now.

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

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

Erin closed the ancient book she had been reading, her eyes still sparkling with the secrets contained within its pages. "Never say never," she replied, her voice filled with wisdom. "There are still so many things unknown and unexplained that are bound within our current knowledge. The world is a vast and mysterious place, and sometimes truth is stranger than fiction."

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

Erin's eyes lit up with excitement. "There's another stone?" she asked, 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 before? Let's grab them, both of them!"

With our plan in motion, we decided to split up. Jake and I would visit Hannah at the hospital to get her stone, while Alisha and Anthony would go to Alisha's parents' house to get the second stone. Erin decided to stay behind, determined to continue her research.

Jake held out his hand and offered it to me. I accepted his gesture, the warmth of his touch reassuring. "Let's go see Hannah!"

## *Alisha*

"We're almost there!" I shouted excitedly. Anthony, however, seemed nervous as he looked into the distant streets. "Do you really think this Azruleth stuff is real? All that talk about magic? It sounds a bit far-fetched to me. I'm only here because of Sophia. She believes in it all, and honestly, we've lived in this town all our lives and we've never seen anything supernatural happen here."

I stopped our footsteps and held Anthony's hand. "I don't know if it's true, and honestly, I don't care. Like you said, we're here for Sophia, and Erin seems to think so 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 out laughing. "Why are you looking so serious?" he asked, still laughing. "I was just kidding. Let's go get that stupid stone thing from your parents' house." Anthony chuckled again.

I gripped his arm tighter, noticing that he was blushing. "Don't play around, I know you. You weren't kidding." Anthony smiled awkwardly and bumped my shoulder playfully. "All right, let's go." I let go of his arm and Anthony started walking again. A few feet away, I gently grabbed his shoulder and planted a quick kiss on his cheek. I whispered, "You can't catch me," as I scampered away. Anthony stared at me with determination in his eyes. "Oh, you're in so much trouble!" We both ran 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 concentrated on the lock as I inserted the key. "So what was that kiss about?" Anthony whispered, grinning. "Boy, not now." I pushed him aside and walked through the door. "Are you

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

I walked into the living room and Anthony closed the front door behind him. "Mom, Dad?" The living room seemed empty. I went to their bedroom and started rifling through drawers. "Where could they have put the stone?" I muttered to myself as I examined our belongings. "It's not here. Maybe in the kitchen?" "The kitchen? That's an odd place to hide a stone." "Well, you never know where people hide things," I retorted playfully, bumping into him. Anthony blushed and quickly looked away, heading for the kitchen. I chuckled quietly and followed him.

"Is it here?" I asked Anthony. He had a disappointed look on his face. "I don't see it anywhere," he replied disheartened. Anthony looked directly at me and started to smile. "Why are you smiling, Ant?" I inquired. "N-Nothing, Lish." Anthony chuckled. "Boy, stop staring at me!" Anthony looked away awkwardly.

"Well, I don't know where it could be. I checked upstairs, the living room, the kitchen. I highly doubt my parents would keep a stone in the bathroom, would they?" "Why are you asking me? They're your parents." I went into the bathroom and opened the door. "Could you check the cabinet under the sink?" I asked Anthony politely. "S-Sure." While Anthony searched the cabinet, I returned to the hallway.

"Where could that stupid stone be? I'm pretty sure they didn't take it. It must be here somewhere... Why did I give it to them in the first place?" Anthony came out of the bathroom with a disappointed look on his face. "You don't even have 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 led me over to the couch. "There you go, nice and comfy." He

grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around me. "Wow, you look so cute and comfy in that blanket. Can I give you a hug?" 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..." Holding him even tighter, I pulled him onto the couch until I was on top of him. "I-I feel kind of stuck now, help!" Anthony begged for release. I tried to get up, but I couldn't move since the blanket had wrapped around us, with both ends tucked under Anthony.

"Uh, I'm kind of stuck too," I admitted awkwardly. "I guess we're stuck together for now." I grinned. Anthony looked at me, his face as red as a tomato. "What have you been eating? You're all red!" I teased. Anthony tried to cover 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 that feeling?

I gently pressed my lips to his and we shared a kiss. After a few moments, Anthony started to push me away. "I-I can't breathe!" he gasped. I giggled 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 it..." Anthony returned the favor and kissed me on the lips.

I heard footsteps approaching and the front door unlocking. 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 mother explained. "Can I borrow it? I need it for something." "Of course, honey. Here you go." Mom took the stone out of her purse and handed it to me. "It's pretty, don't

"you think?" she said. "We should probably go now," I said to my mother. I grabbed Anthony's arm and pulled him out. "Be back by nightfall!" my father yelled as I ran off with Anthony.

"We got the stone!" I shouted excitedly. Anthony slowed down and grabbed my arm. "I want to talk about us, what did that mean?" "What did what mean?" I chuckled. "You know..." "You know what?" I teased playfully. "The kiss, Alisha. The kiss!" I reached for 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 that mean we're a thing now?" I looked at Anthony and smiled. "There's only one way to find out, right?" Anthony's smile widened. "Heh, I guess so."

I slowly leaned in for another kiss, but suddenly changed my position and gave him a playful tap on the shoulder. "Hey! What was that? Give me that kiss!" Anthony demanded. "Come and get me!" I said before taking off running.

# Chapter XII

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Jake closed the front door behind us as we headed for the hospital. "Are you comfortable jumping on the back of my Harley Davidson XL1200n?" he asked, trying to sound 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 what hospital she was taken to?" Jake asked.

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

Jake swung his leg over the bike and helped me climb on the back. After securing his own helmet, he helped me secure mine. "Hang on tight," he yelled over the roar of the engine, and we headed toward Hillcrest Hospital.

As we rode through the city, the wind ruffled my hair and I clung to Jake, the rhythmic purr of the motorcycle beneath us. The ride was both exhilarating and unnerving. I couldn't shake the worry about Hannah, but being with Jake gave me a strange sense of comfort.

The roads passed in a blur, and soon we arrived at Hillcrest Hospital. Jake expertly maneuvered the motorcycle into a parking spot and we hurried inside. The antiseptic smell of the hospital greeted us as we approached the information desk.

"I'm looking for a patient named Hannah Gibson. Can you tell me what room she's in?" Jake asked the nurse at the desk.

The nurse checked her computer and then looked up with a warm smile. "Hannah Gibson is in room 214 on the second floor. Visiting hours are still open."

"Thank you," Jake nodded, and we made our way to the elevator. As the doors closed, I couldn't help but feel a mix of emotions - fear for Hannah, gratitude for Jake's support, and an underlying tension about what awaited us on the second floor.

The elevator dinged and we stepped into the quiet hallway of the second floor. Room 214 was just around the corner. We approached it cautiously, uncertainty in the air.

Taking a deep breath, Jake gently pushed the door open to reveal Hannah lying in the hospital bed. Wires and monitors surrounded her, creating an intricate web of medical support. A soft beep from the heart rate monitor filled the room.

Hannah looked pale, her eyes closed as if in a peaceful slumber. A sense of relief washed over me as I saw her relatively stable. Jake, however, wore a furrowed brow, concern etched into his face.

"Should we wake her?" I asked in a hushed tone.

Jake hesitated for a moment before speaking, "Let her rest for now, disturbing her might not be the best idea."

I nodded in agreement and we searched the room carefully.

## *Alisha*

"Come on, Anthony!" I yelled.

When we reached Sophia's house, I turned to see where Anthony was and saw him running in the distance. "Faster, Ant!" I laughed.

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

I rang the bell and we waited for Erin to open the door. A few minutes passed and still there was no answer. Anthony tried ringing the bell again, but there was still no answer. "Maybe she's too busy to hear the bell?" Anthony suggested. "Nonsense! Let's find another way in."

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

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

Sophia, do you know if there's a spare key outside we can use? We're locked out and your aunt doesn't answer the doorbell.

And... It's sent!

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

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

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

I put the key in the keyhole, but noticed that it didn't fit. Was the master key really already in the front door? Who did this?!

"What is it?" Anthony asked. "We've run 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 lock mechanism, which means I can't put two keys in at the same time. Do I really need to explain everything to you?"

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

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

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

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

And then, without warning, a deafening scream shattered the silence, causing us both 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 to the front door and tried to kick it open. "Help me, Anthony!" "Y- You want to break down the door?" "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 screamed in sudden fear. "No, thank you Anthony, I hadn't thought of that."

"Thanks... Anthony."

I reached my arm through the broken window and unlocked the door. "T- This wasn't here before, was it?" Anthony whined, scared. I looked around and everything seemed to be covered in some kind of liquid. "N- No. It definitely wasn't." I continued up the stairs and across the bridge. "You, wait here," I asked quietly. Anthony nodded as I took the ladder up to the attic.

It looked empty. Where was Erin? I walked over to her desk and looked through her things. One of the books was open to a certain page that looked horrible.

### Azruleth

Azruleth is a malevolent demonic being steeped in darkness and harboring sinister intentions. His malevolent powers are vast, allowing him to control shadows, summon malevolent spirits, and conjure nightmarish visions. He uses these abilities to relentlessly spread discord and fear. While Azruleth was once known as "Chaos" during his human days, his path took a fateful turn into darkness. His origins remain shrouded in mystery, but his transformation into a malevolent force marks an irrevocable descent into evil.

Initially, Chaos was a human known for sowing chaos and anarchy, earning him the nickname "Chaos". As he continued his reign of terror, however, a heroic figure emerged and put an end to his destructive ways. Thought to have perished, Chaos was instead 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 hone his formidable powers.

Returning to the human world after harnessing his newfound powers, Azruleth was faced with a changed reality. His once familiar world had evolved, and he found himself trapped within the foreboding confines of the Mortuary, the very location that had seemingly ended his existence. This ancient place, steeped in history and supernatural occurrences, now serves as a prison for Azruleth, adding to the malevolent aura that surrounds him. Enter at your own risk...

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

I pointed to 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.

"Wow, this is intense stuff," Anthony murmured, looking around the attic nervously. The liquid trails seemed to go in several directions, creating a disturbing maze of possibilities. "Do you think Azruleth could be behind all this?"

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

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

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

Xavier Wevers

# Chapter XII

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

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

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

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

Suddenly, we came to a chamber that was different from the others. "I don't remember this one," I whispered, my voice barely audible. Ominous symbols adorned the walls, and a malevolent aura permeated the room. A mysterious altar stood

in the center, and a flickering, otherworldly light cast eerie shadows across the floor. Jake looked at me, his expression one of growing concern.

"Wait, you were down here?" he asked, his voice shaking.

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

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

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

The altar, ancient and dilapidated, loomed before us. As we approached, I noticed faint etchings on the floor, forming an eerie pentagram.

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 investigate further, a figure peeked around the corner. I caught a glimpse of the silhouette, but couldn't make out who it was. My heart raced as I felt compelled to follow. Jake followed me, his eyes fixed on the enigmatic figure.

We continued through the mortuary, unaware that we were retracing Azruleth's sinister footsteps. In time, we stumbled upon Alisha and Anthony, who were also wandering through the labyrinthine chambers.

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

Just as we were about to discuss our situation further, a sudden noise echoed through the darkness. We exchanged suspicious 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 an eerie crimson, her skin appeared aged and withered, and her hair fell 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, more ominous tone.

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

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

Erin remained motionless, her gaze fixed on us. She didn't answer my questions, and the bizarre change in her appearance left us all confused.

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

Alisha began to explain what they had experienced earlier. "After we got our stone, we rushed back to Erin's house. The front door was locked and she didn't answer the doorbell. We had to force our way inside. The entire house was covered in this strange liquid, and when we reached the attic, Erin wasn't

at her desk. The only thing open was an ancient book on 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 covered the house.

I took a few more steps toward her and 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 twisted at unnatural angles. Fear gripped me and I quickly retreated to the group.

"Guys, it's time to go!" I urged, my voice shaking. 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 hurried out of the chamber, our footsteps echoing with urgency.

As we neared the exit, I couldn't help but look 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 out of 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 contain whatever had happened down there.

"Alisha, can you hand me that 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 held. "You may follow me," I said, motioning for the others to climb the stairs.

Back in the attic, I walked over to Erin's desk and took 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 on 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 bright 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 full of 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 right one?" Alisha asked, a mixture of annoyance and anticipation in her voice.

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

I smiled and turned my attention back to the book, determined to find the answers we needed. What would Erin have done if she had the green crystals? I racked my brain, remembering previous conversations and bits of information.

I vaguely remembered something about extracting all the crystals and fusing them together. Then, at exactly 3 am, I had to make them interact with the rune of binding. But where and what was this binding rune?

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 2:55 am, always at a different location within Nightmoor Manor.

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

Xavier Wevers

# Chapter XIV

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An hour had passed since we had gathered in the attic to prepare for the ritual. The tension hung heavy in the air as we waited for the clock to strike 2:55 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 station, looked stunned 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 intently, her brow furrowed as she tried to make sense of it all. When I finished, she sighed and sat down. "Erin," she murmured. "Do you have any idea what might have happened?"

Before anyone could answer, we heard voices in the distance approaching the front door. We all turned to look 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 replying, "It's a good thing we came." She glanced at the oozing liquid marring the living room. "We've seen this before."

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

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

Elaine looked confused and ran her hand through her hair. "I remember Erin saying something about it."

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

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

I looked between Elaine and Alisha's mother and felt 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 to the attic. We followed close behind, not knowing what to expect.

Once in the attic, Alisha's mother 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 you."

My own mother looked ready to explode with anger, 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.

She then grabbed a bowl and placed the crushed diamonds in it. We watched, mesmerized by her skill. Alisha's mother then walked 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 replied, "We wait."

We all retreated to the living room and settled in, watching the clock as it crept closer to 2:55 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 all my memories of magic, Nightmoor, and evil beings trying to murder us?"

Alisha's mother 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 the two of us," she gestured to Alisha's father, "experienced a near-death experience in the village 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. We've remained nearby ever since, ready to intervene should Azruleth's presence reappear. 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 this easier," Alisha's mother suggested, sensing the confusion in the room. "Easier? How?" Elaine asked, her frustration still simmering.

Alisha's mother continued, "there is a way to recover lost memories," she explained. "Stay here." With that, she left the room and went somewhere in the house.

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

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

"Yeah, show me!" Elaine demanded, her curiosity overriding her concern.

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

I exchanged glances with my mother, looking for reassurance. "Are you sure about this?" I asked her.

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

Alisha's mother walked over to Elaine and placed the crystal between her eyes. "Now concentrate hard and breathe deeply," she instructed. With a crushing motion of her hand, she shattered the crystal. To our amazement, the crystal fragments remained suspended in the air, defying gravity.

"Now close your eyes and take a deep breath," Alisha's mother urged Elaine. The shards of crystal seamlessly entered 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 shaking with worry.

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

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

I looked up at Alisha's mother, my concern obvious. "What happened?"

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

# Chapter XV

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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 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 XVI

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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 exchanged one last glance before Blake slowly pushed it open, revealing the unknown presence on the other side.

# Chapter XVII

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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.

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. 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.

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.

"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.

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 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.

Victoria, overwhelmed by her sorrow, clung to her father's lifeless body. The paramedics, though compassionate, could do little more than confirm the devastating reality that Mr.

Stevens had passed away. The weight of the unfairness of it all pressed upon us, creating a void in the room that mirrored the one in Victoria's heart.

As we stood there, grappling with the harsh truth, the paramedics offered condolences and began the necessary procedures. They needed to contact the authorities and prepare for the inevitable investigations that followed a sudden death. The once-promising day had twisted into a nightmare, and Nightmoor's already mysterious atmosphere seemed to intensify with an unsettling energy.

Blake and I shared a silent understanding that we had inadvertently walked into a realm beyond our understanding. The celestial map, the ancient runes, and now the sudden demise of Victoria's father — everything appeared intricately linked, yet the connections eluded us like elusive shadows in the dark.

Victoria, still clinging to her father, was caught in a whirlwind of emotions. Her grief was palpable, echoing through the now-silent house. We offered our support, but words seemed inadequate in the face of such profound loss.

"Dad, I..." Her voice broke, unable to articulate the immense pain she felt. The reality of the situation sank in deeper as Victoria slowly let go of her father, her eyes filled with a mixture of sorrow and disbelief.

The paramedics finished their procedures, expressing sympathy as they left the room.

Blake and I exchanged glances, acknowledging the helplessness that engulfed us. The room, once filled with warmth and life, now felt cold and desolate. Victoria's father

had been taken away from her, leaving behind memories and unanswered questions.

"We need to find Erin," I said, breaking the heavy silence. "She might have answers, connections we're missing. This can't be just a series of coincidences."

Blake nodded, his eyes reflecting determination mixed with concern for Victoria. "You're right. And we need to unravel this before more lives are affected."

Victoria, though still in shock, managed a nod, her eyes showing a spark of determination. "It's just... -"

# Chapter XVIII

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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..."

I reached out to gently touch her shoulder, offering support in the face of her overwhelming grief. "You don't have to go through this alone. 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 my chest. "But it feels like everything is falling apart," she cried. "How do you stay positive when everything seems so dark?"

I took a deep breath, my heart aching for her. "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 pulled back slightly, looking at me with tear-streaked eyes. "How did you do it?" she asked, her voice filled with desperation.

I hesitated for a moment, knowing that sharing my own pain could be a double-edged sword. But seeing Victoria in such despair made me realize that sometimes, hearing someone else's struggles can offer a glimmer of hope.

I took a deep breath, gathering my thoughts. "After my mother left, things got worse at home. My father was hardly ever there, and when he was, he was like a ghost. He would come home late, often drunk, and we barely spoke. I felt like I was living with a stranger."

Victoria's eyes widened with empathy. "That sounds so lonely."

"It was," I admitted. "I spent most of my time alone in my room, burying myself in books and music. Anything to escape the silence of the house. My sister was out of the house living her own life. So it was mostly just me and my father. When we would have dinner together, it was like we were in different worlds. He'd barely look at me, and when he did, his eyes were filled with this... emptiness."

I paused, trying to hold back the tears threatening to spill over. "One night, when I was about twelve, I overheard a phone call. My father was arguing with someone, shouting about my mother. He blamed her for everything—for his career setbacks, for his unhappiness. He said he wished she'd never come into his life."

Blake's hand tightened around mine, offering silent support. "That must have been devastating to hear."

"It was," I whispered. "I felt like I was losing both of my parents at once. My mother had physically left, and my father had emotionally abandoned me. I started having nightmares, reliving their fights, waking up in a cold sweat. School was no escape either. I became withdrawn, my grades slipped, and I started getting into trouble."

Victoria's eyes widened, brimming with understanding. "It must have been so hard to keep going."

"It was," I said softly. By the time I was fourteen, I was struggling with severe depression. I started cutting myself, just to feel something other than the numbness."

Blake's eyes filled with tears, and he pulled me closer. "I had no idea... I'm so sorry."

I nodded softly, "but it only got worse. Turning fifteen, my mother left us exactly three years ago. We always kept writing letters to each other. It felt like having a pen-pal, which was quite exciting, although I would've preferred my mother to just take care of me. But suddenly, these letters stopped. I didn't receive any back. Why did she break contact so suddenly?"

I went up to my dad, asking if anything had happened. He shook his head and closed the door. I thought it wasn't anything, since he's always been like this. I tried contacting my grandmother, but she was out of reach.

Another year passed. I was sixteen, and the cuts I gave myself... they started to become visible outside my clothes. My father noticed it during our oh-so-enjoyable dinner. He then picked up a knife and pointed it towards me. 'Is that how you think about your life!?' I looked up at my father, tears starting to form in my eyes. For once, my sister finally slammed the table and spoke up for me. 'No, you should be ashamed of yourself, look at how you're treating us!' my sister shouted, storming off. I quickly got up and followed close behind her. 'What are you doing?' I asked her. 'I'm getting out of here, immediately!' 'But what about me?' Erin looked at me, 'You've always been the tougher sister, you'll manage.'

The moment she said that, my emotions went out of control and I slammed her suitcase shut with her hands in between. ‘You little -’ she began.

I headed straight into my room, locked my door, and sat on my bed. A few minutes passed and I heard my sister start her scooter. I looked through the window as she faded down the street, out of vision.

I looked back at myself, moved my sweater up, and saw the scars on my body. ‘It’s time to leave this dumpster place too!’ I sneaked into my father’s room and grabbed his suitcase. I stuffed all my important items in it and sneaked out the window.

I took a few steps away from the house when I suddenly heard a heavy thump, followed by a large shout.

I sneaked back and peered through the window. He was talking on the phone again.

My curiosity got the better of me and I sneaked back through the window. I slowly made my way to the hallway and listened. ‘Leave me alone! She’s not here, stop bothering me!’

‘Who is he talking about?’ I took a few steps closer and sat on the floor.

‘Don’t you even dare to bring that up again!’ He slammed the phone onto the floor, steaming off into the kitchen.

I carefully decided to pick up the phone. ‘H- hello? Who’s this?’ I whispered. ‘Who am I talking to?’ the other person asked.

‘E- Elaine...’ I responded quietly. ‘Elaine! It’s me, your grandmother. I’ve tried to reach you but your father removed any contact possible.’

‘I- is there anything you wanted to tell me?’ I asked, scared. ‘It’s about your mother. This might be difficult to hear, so listen carefully. She adored you, she loved you with all her might. But the universe wasn’t as kind to her, she got sick. That’s why she left. This wasn’t about you, my child. She just had to get out.’

‘B- but why didn’t you do anything against my father?’

‘Your father is a very powerful man, he can do what he wants.’

I looked around, ‘I think he’s coming back!’ I quickly whispered back. ‘I’ll tell you this quickly, you have to know the reason why your mother stopped responding altogether...’ my father suddenly snatched the phone away from me, ‘Give that back!’ I said aggressively.

My father looked into my eyes, ‘Just get out of my sight.’ I quickly ran back into the hallway and pretended to enter my room by opening and closing the door. ‘Don’t contact us again, I do not want to hear another word out of you, do you hear me?’ he said, and he firmly hung up the phone, breaking the connection.

I carefully opened my door again, trying not to let my father know I was sneaking around. But he suddenly grabbed me by the waist. ‘You never learn now, do you?’ He locked me in the basement.”

Victoria looked at me with a disgusted expression. “What even is this childhood!? Who does something like this!” Blake stood up, “No! I cannot accept this, it’s not human!” I nodded

carefully. Victoria also stood up. “Where is he? He deserves what’s coming for him!” Blake smiled creepily and nodded. “Don’t worry guys, he’s dead,” I said with relief. “W- what happened to him?” Victoria asked.

I looked at them, we exchanged glances. “I killed him.”

Xavier Wevers

# Chapter XIX

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“**Y**ou killed him?” Blake asks, his voice filled with disbelief.

“As I was locked up in that basement for hours, Erin finally showed up and freed me. ‘What’s happening here?! I’ve been gone for only a few hours!’ I look at my sister and tears flow out of me like a waterfall. ‘Hey, don’t cry. I came back!’ I punched my sister lightly in her spine, ‘That’s for even leaving me in the first place!’ Erin smiles, ‘I deserved that. Now come with me, before father wakes up!’ I grabbed her hand and we sneaked by the kitchen. Erin quietly grabs a knife, ‘Just for protection,’ she added.

I looked into her eyes, filled with fury. ‘D- did you know something about our mother?’ I asked her. ‘No, why? Did she say something?’ I look at my hands, and then back at my sister. ‘Did you know she was sick?’

‘Where did you get this info?’ she asked me. ‘Grandma,’ I responded swiftly. ‘That’s why she left us!’ I nodded. ‘We have to go back to her; she might know what to do!’ I nodded again and smiled warmly. ‘Let’s go find Mom!’

As we opened the front door, Father suddenly came from behind and grasped Erin. She threw her knife straight into his flesh. ‘Y-you hurt me, child?’ Erin nodded and smiled wickedly. ‘It’s time we turn the tables, time for us to take back what’s ours!’ she said with a powerful voice. But with a sudden swift, Father grabbed the knife out of his stomach and placed it right into Erin’s—”

“Hold up! Your father did what?! H-how old was your sister?” Victoria looked at me, incredulous.

“19 years.”

“19 years?! And she was so mentally unstable as to leave her younger sister?!” Victoria exclaimed. “You have one crazy family!”

Blake snapped his arm at Victoria, “You’re going too far!” he said. Victoria, snapping back to reality, quickly apologized. “Ah, uh—sorry, I got a little too invested,” she said awkwardly.

I smiled it off. “You’re not wrong. My family was crazy! But my sister got better; she survived my father’s attack. She was quickly sent to the hospital not long after, due to her bleeding heavily.”

“But what happened to your father?” Victoria asked curiously. “You said you killed him, right?”

I looked up at Victoria, Blake listening silently. I remembered how Father knocked out Erin, stabbing her multiple times. She threw her body over to me and handed me the knife. ‘Now it’s time for you to act, though, start the final blow!’ he smiled maniacally. I hovered the knife over my sister’s body. ‘No!’

‘No?’ Father said, his eyes widening. He snatched the knife out of my hands and made a swift movement straight for my heart. Erin got up and took the hit. ‘R... ru... run!’

I refused and grabbed the knife out of Erin, pulling it out and pointing it towards my father. ‘No, this ends here!’

‘Ha, what are you supposed to be? The police officer that is trying to right my wrongs?’ I nodded and plunged the knife deep into his chest. I turned the blade and blood gushed out of his mouth. ‘How does that feel?!’

Victoria snapped back again. “Y-you really killed him with your bare hands?” I nodded.

After taking care of my father, I quickly attended to my sister, calling the ambulance. My grandmother arrived at the crime scene and did the talking for us.

After spending the day at the police station, I was let out, free of any charges. My grandmother told the whole story and took care of everyone who worked for my father. I thought nothing could ruin this day more. Until my grandmother waved with a letter in her hand as soon as we sat in the car.

‘This is what I’ve been meaning to get to you,’ she said, coughing loudly. ‘Grandma, are you feeling okay?’ I asked. ‘Nothing to worry about,’ she smiled. ‘It’s just my age kicking me in the back. Now go, read. It’s from your mother!’ she said with a smile. ‘It tells you everything you need to know.’

I quickly unfolded the letter, thinking it was some good news.

‘Hey my sweet child. You’re already turning 13, what a beautiful age that is! If you read this letter that means I’m no longer part of your journey. But don’t forget that I’ll always be with you, in your heart. I chose to separate from your father to get my guts back together. I wanted to come back for you and your sister. But by the time I wanted to return... your father, he already had different plans. I got sick not long after that, unable to do anything. I should’ve never left in the first place, I know that. I would’ve done anything to get back to you...’

Suddenly, 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.

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

"I didn't hear anything, did you Victoria?" Blake quickly responds.

"No, I didn't hear anything either."

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

Blake and Victoria nod. "Take your time, we'll be waiting downstairs." I smile and 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.

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....

# Chapter XX

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## "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.

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 months!?" 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?!"

Xavier Wevers

# Chapter XXI

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"Wait, if Blake's with Victoria?" 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?"

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.

He rushes towards us, his expression a mix of confusion and concern.

"Elaine, what's happening?" Blake asks, his voice filled with genuine worry.

"Where did he go?" Victoria whispers, her flashlight darting around the room.

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 merge around the imposter, swirling and twisting until it takes on a tangible form. Before our eyes, he transforms into an enormous creature, its 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.

*"M-Mom, are you okay? Do you remember anything?"*

"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."

*"S- Sophia... I -"*

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. "Your time ends now, Azruleth!" she says with a strong voice.

The ring's entity enlarges and swallows Azruleth whole. "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....

*Sophia looked up at Victoria, her worry evident. "What's happening?"*

*"She should've already woken up by now," Victoria replied, her own concern growing. "Wake up!"*

As Victoria 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, her head collapsed back to the floor.

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

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

"She's going through a lot, physically and emotionally," Victoria 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.

# Chapter XXII

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Time ticks by relentlessly, the silence of the night punctuated by the steady rhythm of the clock. Moonlight spills through the attic's small window, casting elongated shadows across the floor. We gather for the ritual at precisely 2:47 am, the air thick with anticipation. Victoria's eyes meet mine, a blend of determination and unease flickering within them.

"It's time," she announces, her voice steady but tinged with tension. Alisha and Anthony clasp hands, seeking solace in their connection. Jake reaches out to me, his hand warm and reassuring. I take it, finding a semblance of strength in his grip.

"Here's the plan," Victoria begins. "This powder will guide us to the correct rune. The closer we get, the brighter it will glow. When we touch the right rune, it will transform into a magical ring, granting the wearer the ability to cast protective spells."

A spark of excitement ignites within me at the mention of magic, but Victoria's stern expression swiftly extinguishes it.

"Magic isn't all enchantment and wonder, Sophia. It's what took your father from us."

The smile that had briefly touched my lips vanishes. "Where did he die? How old was I?"

Victoria's gaze softens for a moment, but she shakes her head. "Another time, Sophia. Right now, we need to focus."

I nod, feeling the weight of the mystical powder in my hand. The clock moves inexorably towards 3 am, the hour of our ritual. Victoria reiterates the importance of locating the Rune of Binding, her voice urgent.

As the minutes slip away, I sprint through the corridors, my heart pounding in rhythm with my footsteps. Time is slipping through our fingers, and the pressure mounts as the clock edges closer to 3 am. Doubt gnaws at me—what if we fail?

At 2:55 am, the doors begin to reveal their runes. I check each one meticulously, but the powder remains dormant. Anxiety tightens its grip on me as I glance at my phone—2:57 am.

"Alisha, any luck?" I call out. She shakes her head, her worry mirroring my own.

2:58 am.

"Everyone, I found it!" The declaration rings out, filling me with desperate hope. I race towards the voice. "You found it?" I ask, but am met with an eerie silence.

Approaching cautiously, the door beside me creaks open, revealing Aunt Erin. "Hi, niece," she says, her tone unnervingly sweet.

"Aunt Erin?" I whisper, relieved to see her. "Where have you been? We've been worried sick."

Erin smiles, her eyes softening. "Oh, you know, just taking care of a few things. There's so much going on, and I didn't want to burden you."

I try to mask my suspicion with casual conversation. "We could have helped. You don't have to do everything on your own."

Erin chuckles lightly, "I appreciate that, but some things are better handled alone. How have you been managing?"

"Stressed, mostly," I admit. "It's been chaos."

Her gaze is reassuring, but my eyes drift to her arm. The cuts look worse than when I first saw them, now red and swollen, oozing a sinister infection. "Erin, your arm... What happened? It looks terrible."

She glances at her wounds and shrugs. "It's nothing to worry about," she assures me, but I notice a faint red glow in her right eye. "Just a little mishap. It'll heal."

I watch her closely as she takes a few steps closer, tilting her head toward her wounded arm. Half of her body seems contorted, twisted by the infection. "Are you sure you're alright?" I ask again, my voice trembling.

Erin's smile widens, and she straightens up. Both her eyes suddenly glow a full, menacing red. The demon Azruleth speaks through her, his voice a chilling whisper that echoes through the hall. "Ah, dear Sophia, did you really think she was in control?"

My heart pounds as I take a step back. "What do you mean?"

Azruleth's laughter is a low, sinister rumble. "Poor, naive child. Erin has been my puppet, her body a mere vessel. You all fell right into my trap."

Fear surges through me as Erin's form contorts further, the infection spreading visibly beneath her skin. "What do you want from us?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

Azruleth's eyes glow brighter. "I want what has always been mine. The souls of the living, the power of the ancient runes, and the chaos that will reign when I am restored to full strength."

Without any time to react, Erin defies gravity, crawling up the wall and across the ceiling. I flee, the haunting image burned into my mind.

"I found the rune!" a voice calls out again, distant and desperate. Doubt gnaws at me. As I round a corner, Erin stands there, her smile twisted and malevolent. Panic propels me towards the stairs.

2:59 am.

I collide with Victoria at the bottom. "Did you find the rune?" I ask, breathless.

"No," she replies, frustration evident. "We'll try again tomorrow."

"It can't wait," I insist.

A chilling noise reverberates through the halls. I point upwards to where Erin crawls on the ceiling. Victoria's face pales. "Follow me!" she commands.

The clock strikes 3 am. "We're too late," I gasp.

Victoria's grip tightens on my hand. "We need to find a safe place," she says firmly.

"But the others?" I protest, fear lacing my voice.

"We'll come back for them. Right now, we need to get to safety before it's too late."

Victoria pulls me along. The echoes of our friends' voices and the malevolent presence of Aunt Erin haunt the corridors.

Xavier Wevers

## *Hannah*

As my eyes flutter open, the harsh hospital lighting stings, and I find myself surveying the unfamiliar room. The dull ache in my body serves as a grim reminder of the accident.

Reaching out for my phone, a gnawing worry prompts me to call Janessa, my guardian. The robotic voice echoes, "The number you have dialed has been disconnected or is no longer in service."

I persist, hoping it's a mistake, but the disheartening message repeats. Desperation creeps in as I scroll through my contacts, finding Sophia's name. Dialing her number, I hear her lively voicemail, a stark contrast to the disquiet in my surroundings.

Curiosity intertwines with concern. How long have I been confined to this sterile room? A glance at the phone's date assures me it's only been a day, but the eerie emptiness of the hospital raises unsettling questions.

Taking a deep breath, I shed the hospital attachments and step into the vacant hallway. "Hello? Is anyone here?" My voice echoes, swallowed by the silence.

The hospital, once a bustling hive of activity, now lies dormant, casting an unsettling stillness. Dialing Sophia again yields only voicemail, amplifying my disquiet. "Sophia, something's wrong. I just woke up, and the hospital feels deserted. Did something happen at Manor House? Please, call me back."

Growing uneasy, I search for signs leading to the exit. The walls provide guidance, but a sudden power outage plunges the hallway into darkness. Instinctively, my phone's flashlight pierces the black, casting long shadows on the sterile walls.

Fear intensifies as I navigate through the dimly lit corridor. "Stairs, I need to find the stairs," I murmur, my voice offering little reassurance. The digital glow of my phone reveals a sign pointing left, guiding my uncertain steps.

As I press forward in the dimly lit corridor, shadows dancing eerily, amplifying the unsettling quiet. The sterile scent of the hospital mingles with a newfound unease as my footsteps echo through the desolate halls.

My phone's glow flickers intermittently, a feeble beacon against the engulfing darkness. The sign pointing left beckons me toward the stairs, a glimmer of hope in this lonely journey.

Each step feels heavier, the silence more profound. My senses are on high alert, heightened by the ominous stillness that clings to the air. I can't shake the feeling that something is amiss, a subtle undercurrent of unease that tugs at the edges of my consciousness.

As I round a corner, the stairwell door emerges from the shadows. Pushing it open cautiously, a creak breaks the silence, resonating through the hollow space. The stairs descend into an abyss of uncertainty, but my only choice is to move forward.

Descending one step at a time, the echoes of my footsteps reverberate in the stairwell, creating an eerie symphony. The air grows colder as I venture further into the unknown, the stark contrast to the warmth of the hospital unsettling.

Reaching the ground floor, a faint glimmer of emergency lighting barely illuminates the vast emptiness before me. The once-familiar reception area now lies in disarray, devoid of life. Desolation paints a haunting picture, and a shiver runs down my spine.

The exit sign flickers weakly overhead, a distant beacon urging me forward. With each step, the atmosphere becomes increasingly oppressive, as if the very walls harbor secrets they're unwilling to share.

Pushing open the heavy glass door, I step into the predawn darkness outside. The cool night air bites at my skin, and I find myself standing on the threshold, caught between the unknown of the hospital and the mysteries awaiting beyond its walls.

I scan my surroundings, my breath visible in the cold night air. The streets appear as empty and abandoned as they always have in Nightmoor. The sense of desolation is unsettling, but nothing appears out of the ordinary for this peculiar town.

I consult my phone, punching in Manor House on the navigation. A 40-minute walk looms ahead. I let out a tired groan; the prospect of navigating the dark streets in the biting cold isn't appealing.

Turning to look back at the hospital building, I contemplate my options. The chill in the air prompts a change of heart, and I decide to head back inside. The hospital's dimly lit corridors offer a refuge from the wintry night.

As I re-enter the hospital, my footsteps echo through the empty halls. Retrieving my phone's flashlight, I scour the area for any signs of warmth. A nearby storage room catches my attention, and I cautiously push open the door. Inside, I find a stash of blankets and spare clothing. Grateful for the discovery, I layer myself in warmth.

"Ahh, this feels so, so much better!" I say excitedly to myself, reveling in the warmth of the newfound clothes. They're a little too big for me, but the oversized sweater still feels cozy and

comforting. I grab the jacket I spotted at the reception desk before heading back outside.

As I open the glass door, the cold winter air hits me anew, but now I'm better prepared. I activate the navigation towards Manor Street 8 on my phone, the glow illuminating my determined face.

"Time to walk for 40 minutes, yay..." I mutter sarcastically, taking the first steps into the deserted night. The hospital's glow fades behind me as I venture into the dark streets of Nightmoor.

The journey is eerie, with only the faint glow of streetlights guiding my way. The silence is palpable, broken only by the occasional rustle of leaves or distant creak of a door.

I pull the jacket tighter around me, shielding myself from the biting cold. The dimly lit streets stretch ahead like a winding maze, each turn leading me deeper into the enigmatic heart of Nightmoor.

As minutes pass, I find myself lost in thought, contemplating the strange events that brought me to this point. The hospital, the deserted streets, the peculiar nature of the town — it all weaves together into a tapestry of mysteries that refuse to unravel.

The imposing structure of Manor Street 8 looms ahead as I approach the dimly lit entrance. My hand reaches for the doorknob, but before I can make contact, the door swings open abruptly, crashing into me. Startled, I hear a familiar voice calling my name.

"Hannah?!"

I find myself on the ground, a bit disoriented from the unexpected collision. Opening my eyes, I see Sophia on my left, her concerned face hovering above me. A smile forms on my lips as I realize where I am.

"I feel something else..." I murmur, turning my gaze to the right. Alisha's mother, Victoria, stands there, her presence bringing a mix of relief and surprise.

Before I can fully comprehend the situation, Sophia and Victoria are helping me to my feet, their supportive arms steadyng me.

"Are you okay?" Sophia's worry is evident. "Yeah, you startled us, dear," Victoria adds with a chuckle.

"I'm fine, just a bit disoriented," I reply, attempting to sit up.

"How did you end up here?" Sophia questions, her forehead creased with concern.

"I woke up in the hospital. It was empty, and I didn't know what was happening. So, I decided to come here," I explain, my mind still foggy from the surreal experience.

"Well, you scared us half to death," Victoria says with a light chuckle. "Let's get inside and talk. It's freezing out here."

We enter Manor Street 8, and the familiar surroundings provide a sense of comfort. The dimly lit hallway feels more welcoming than the cold night outside.

"Did something happen in Nightmoor?" I ask, curiosity growing. Sophia shares a quick glance with Victoria before answering, "It's complicated. We'll explain everything, but let's get you warmed up first." Sophia gives Hannah a blanket to cover herself up in the warmth, while Victoria heads to the

kitchen to get us some tea. Hannah quickly notices that something is different inside the house; they're both acting strange.

As Sophia drapes the blanket over me, I shiver, partly from the residual cold and partly from the uncanny atmosphere that envelops the room. Sophia's eyes seem distant, and Victoria's movements toward the kitchen are deliberate yet oddly disconnected.

"Can you tell me what has happened since the day I was out?" I inquire, trying to make sense of the surreal ambiance.

Sophia scratches her head, her expression perplexed. "Day? It's been an entire year since I last saw you."

Shocked, I quickly grab my phone again to check the date, January 25th. I open the calendar app, my eyes unable to believe what I see... 2026?!

Victoria returns with a tray holding steaming cups of tea. "Here, drink this, dear," she says, offering me a cup.

"W- what happened? Where are the others?" I ask anxiously.

"Don't worry, love, you're safe now," Sophia reassures me, echoing Victoria's sentiments.

I look up at both Sophia and Victoria, desperation in my eyes. "I asked you a question. Can you please answer?"

Once again, they say, "Don't worry, love, you're safe now," in unison. Sophia grabs Victoria's arm, and they exchange an odd, knowing glance.

"Let us introduce you to someone new," they say with strangely contorted smiles.

With a growing sense of unease, I put the untouched tea on the table. A new figure emerges from around the corner, and my eyes widen in disbelief.

"Hello, dear."

My eyes cannot believe what I'm seeing. "M- mom?" I stammer, my voice barely audible.

The woman standing before me is an older version of my mother, but she carries an otherworldly glow. It's as if time has treated her kindly, leaving behind an ethereal beauty.

"It's me, Hannah. Your mother," she says, her voice filled with warmth.

I'm torn between skepticism and a profound desire for this to be true. Sophia and Victoria watch me closely, their expressions a mix of anticipation and something else, something I can't quite decipher.

"How is this possible?" I manage to utter, my mind struggling to comprehend the impossible.

Sophia and Victoria exchange glances again before Sophia speaks, "We found a way to bring her back, Hannah. A way to undo the past, to rewrite the timeline."

A surge of conflicting emotions washes over me—joy, disbelief, and a lingering sense of foreboding. My mother, or this apparition resembling her, reaches out to me, and I tentatively accept her touch.

"Come, dear. There's much to explain," she says, leading me further into the house.

**To Be Continued in "Nightmoor - The Darkening"**

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**Author's Note:**

Hi there,

Thank you for reading *Nightmoor: As Darkness Falls!* Your support means the world to me. I would greatly appreciate it if you could take a few minutes to fill out a short [feedback form](#). Your insights and opinions are appreciated and will help shape the future sequels of Nightmoor.

Thank you for being a part of this journey!

Best regards,

Xavier Wevers